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Ulrika Dahl

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# SEXIST: A FEMME-INIST PERSPECTIVE

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*Ulrika Dahl*

**Abstract** This experimental essay offers an auto-ethnography of sexism. Six stories are woven around considering sexism as an ontology, a theory of reality and being for feminists. Based on experiences of feminist training in the US and working in gender studies in Sweden, it discusses how (academic) sexism can become a career, a heritage and an expectation, but also how it gets below the surface and becomes sensational, often through (sexual) shame. Engaging the work of Marilyn Frye, Julia Serrano, Cherrie Moraga and Audre Lorde it aims to put 'sex', as in sexuality, back into sexism. It also outlines how feminism can reproduce sexism by making femininity a problem.

**Keywords** sexism, femininity, femme, academia, ontology, Marilyn Frye, Julia Serrano.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexism is a concept with an entrance. The standard dictionary definition is double; on the one hand as Wikipedia puts it: 'prejudice or discrimination based on sex; especially discrimination against women' and on the other, 'behaviour, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex'. Sexism is thus also a concept with an inheritance. As a container of a brief (Western) history of the second sex, it describes acts that *especially* affect women. There is a potential 'we' in its object; a 'we' who presumably experience it regularly and thus must make sexism a subject, again and again. The second definition erases this specificity, that of women and femininity and more importantly, any hierarchy between the 'sexes'. It makes 'sex' (as in gender, a social construction) itself the problem. While the first tells us that sexism lies in views and actions, the second suggests that its explanation is cultural or ideological; it lies in 'roles' and 'stereotypes', attributions of bodies that are learned and thus, presumably, like any 'role' are not 'real'. As a diagnosis, offered mostly by feminists on behalf of 'us' who object to prejudice and discrimination based on sex, sexism has certainly made an entrance. It has travelled widely as an optic, and a feminist 'we' has been constituted and undone through it. The concept's ability to move, take on meaning and become a tool remains shaped, like all travel, by relations of power historical and contemporary: its various meanings and implications are localised and embedded in cultural practices; its power lost or strengthened by gaps and divides in knowledge formations.<sup>1</sup>

Fighting sexism, Marilyn Frye once argued, must begin with making sexism *perceptible*, and this she and others contend, always involves struggle.<sup>2</sup>

1. See Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, 'Race, class and gender: reclaiming baggage in fast travelling theories', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2005, 12(3), pp249–265. Knapp's arguments are influenced by Edward Said, see 'Traveling Theory', *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1983.

2. Marilyn Frye, 'Sexism' in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Crossing Press, New York 1983, p258. Hereafter *Sexism*.

On the one hand, feminists are repeatedly expected to prove that sexism is a problem that is not over by showing that sexism injures, and how. This is challenging, in part because sexism itself seems perceptive; it absorbs critique and mutates, always it seems, retaining a changing but persistent proximity to something called a natural order. After all, a range of worldly phenomena, including capitalism, colonialism, heterosexuality and reproduction have strong investments in sexism, it is a powerful fuel. At the same time, what and whom exactly sexism diagnoses and what its cure or solution is can be challenging to agree upon, including among feminists. Part of the struggle of perception concerns how to describe what we mean by 'women', or by something being 'based on sex', or by 'discrimination', where and how.

My brazen blonde femme ambition in this essay begins in sexism as auto-ethnography and aims to consider sexism as *ontology*, a theory of reality and being.<sup>3</sup> I begin inside feminism, and with the assumption that sexism, despite its inherent complexities and shifting meaning and implications, is the main subject of feminist work, and it is indeed my line of work. It is what I do, as a teacher and researcher in gender studies, a field itself founded on a critique of (academic) sexism, the sexism of science and knowledge. It is also an attribution; I am often charged with fighting sexism simply being the position I have at work, arriving in or maintaining a room in the Ivory Tower. My disciplinary belonging, if not my public feminist voice, is at times enough to be appointed the task of pointing it out, when my presence is not seen as proof of its (ongoing) elimination and as itself reproducing sexism in its concentration of 'women'. I am interested in how, in this setting, sexism can become a reality, a way of making sense of the world. What happens when fighting sexism is not only the objective of one's life work but its foundational history, the very architecture for one's shape, form and orientation? How can we bring it into view when it is *the* point of view? Sexism can be more than an obstacle, it can be a form of attachment, something we invest in and that becomes constitutive of our bodies of flesh and knowledge.

If we feel that making sexism perceptible in the world at large should be our primary priority, that other questions are 'secondary', then this approach may be triggering, offensive even; a kind of evidence of elitism. But I want to insist that feminist worlds are meaningful worlds for those of us who make meaning in them and like many others, I care about the conversations we have among ourselves. Because feminism is my culture, I want to stay with the trouble that comes with investing in sexism as a kind of ontology, becoming more than perceptible; habitual.

In critiquing what enables me and what I also love, I am inspired by Cherrie Moraga, who on the subject of families, (hetero)-sexism in Chicano culture, racism in feminism, and other interrelated phenomena writes:

to be critical of one's culture is not to betray that culture. We tend to be very righteous in our criticism and indictment of the dominant culture...

3. Throughout this essay, my understanding of ontology draws on a basic understanding of ontology as a theory of being and reality. It is also influenced by how Liz Stanley & Sue Wise use the term in *Breaking Out Again: Feminist epistemology and ontology*. Taylor & Francis, London 2002.

4. Cherrie Moraga, 'From a long line of Vendidas', *Loving in the War Years*, South End Press, Boston 1983, p108.

5. Donna Haraway 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' *Feminist Studies* 14(3), 1988, p587. Hereafter *Situated Knowledges*.

there is little room to criticize those aspects from within our oppressed culture which oppress us.<sup>4</sup>

This essay offers situated stories, a view from *somewhere*, which as Donna Haraway teaches us, 'implies accountability for our enabling practices'.<sup>5</sup> I am located in a feminist institution, enabled and inspired by a feminist legacy, and I build on the work of Marilyn Frye, Sara Ahmed and Julia Serrano, as well as that of Audre Lorde, Dorothy Allison, Cherrie Moraga, and bell hooks. As a femminist, my focus on sexism as an ontology is related to femininity's continued subordination and the tendency to cast feminine sexuality as a problem, even within feminism. Working in Sweden, a nation so often held up as a bastion and expert of (gender) equality, but where sexism as a concept often recedes from view, I hone in on the 'sex' of sexism. In Swedish sex is also the word for the number six; these are six situated stories on sexism and its (academic, feminist) relationship to sex(iness) and Swedishness, extended in friendship.

## SEXISM AS STORIES

The subject of sexism is difficult, like so much feminist work, is difficult in part because it concerns the relationship between the personal, experiential and the structural. Sexism describes something so close to 'reality' and 'common sense' that it easily recedes from view. It takes the shape of ordinariness. Discomforts so familiar they shape your movements, your desires, your understanding of the world, some pains institutionalised. Descending into writing, I quickly drown in anecdotal notes, retrospectives, more perceptible from a distance: scribbled scenes that are sensational rather than scenic as in easily perceptible. Self-diagnosis can be painful: a pen that picks at a scab, that might open up wounds long held together by the safety pin of feminism, its responsive raised fists.

The supporting structures of both sexism and feminism are not always perceptible in the moment when one's body of flesh and knowledge becomes singled out, at fault; memories can be shameful, as in inward turning, restrictive. *I should have known better*. More importantly, there are many reasons for me to acknowledge that which enables my movements, my privileges, to acknowledge and use my status rather than to focus on what stops me. Sexism as an injustice is often more easily perceptible when it is directed at or experienced through other bodies. As a national outrage, it belongs 'elsewhere' and is used to signal distance. In a feminist world it takes different forms; from surveys of harassment and feminine students negotiating advancements from male professors who are one's own colleagues, to colleagues of colour explaining the need to dress up in order to be read as teachers or authorities, reduced to difference where white colleagues can be 'casual', to trans\* students wrongly addressed or dismissed in classrooms and texts, the list goes on.

If fighting sexism begins in making it perceptible then it matters from where we see what we see. The word 'theory' comes from the Greek word 'theoria' which means an everyday looking at, viewing, beholding. The *visible*, as in tangible, expressions of sexism are often those we focus on; figures, images, bodies counted in a room, we need them to make an argument, and we need people to see what we see. Feminists make theory by making sense of our perceptions of everyday life, by comparing notes and by mapping what we know so far. For writing to count as theoretical requires invocation of canonical concepts, the reproduction of a patriarchal line through the citation of a canon. The tools of canon-formation so easily become the tools of sexism; an argument about sexism can be discredited as unscientific, partly due to how it invokes perception. If feminist theory centrally addresses and begins from the experience of sexism, and yet reproduces it on the level of citation in theorizing, we need to consider perception.

If fighting sexism requires 'perception' (of prejudice and discrimination), which both needs and turns into description (of roles and stereotypes), then it matters what we perceive and how. As Cathy Hannabach has put it: 'perception is just as constructed as gender, but the norms governing what counts as an embodied experience naturalise themselves through erasing such constructions'.<sup>6</sup> Perception can be an angle from a point, a bodily feeling or an accumulation but it always has a story, an inheritance; it comes from somewhere. Or to put it another way, drawing on Donna Haraway, vision is always partial, as in situated knowledges, it is never only abstract, always embodied but we can still aim to theorise. Feminism teaches us that accounts of sexism can be forms of counter-theorising. With perception blurred by age and hopefully matured with some wisdom, I am guided by Haraway's idea that 'feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of object and subject. In this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see' (*Situated Knowledges*, p53).

6. Cathy Hannabach 'Anxious Embodiment, Disability, and Sexuality: A Response to Margrit Shildrick', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 2007, 8:3, 253-261, p255.

## SEXISM AND (WHITE) SWEDISHNESS: A CAREER

If sexism requires an angle of perception, my perceptive argument(s) are those of a white Swedish queer femme, a tenured lesbian feminist scholar working in gender studies. I arrived in the academy at a time when what is variously called women's/gender/ feminist studies was getting established as a (somewhat) legitimate field of study, an endeavour with a history. My field emerged from a movement and was as a direct response to (academic) sexism, textual and corporeal, and still persists in the face of continued sexism; despite its professionalisation it is still barely considered 'proper', more political than theoretical.

I have worked with feminists since my first day of college in the United States. To arrive into a movement already in motion, into an institution

7. I am indebted in this and so many other endeavours to the groundbreaking work of Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga (eds), *This Bridge called my back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Persephone Press, London 1981.

8. Candice Bradley and Ulrika Dahl, 'Gender Differences in Careers', *Anthropology Newsletter*, 1993, 34(7):35.

9. Visweswaran, Kamala 1997 'Histories of Feminist Ethnography' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26: pp591-621

already in place, is to not be alone, but to be one of many. To someone who can expect these bodies of flesh and knowledge to resemble largely one's own, it might feel familiar and welcoming, homely even. An army gives armour. As a feminist of a certain geo-temporal location, generation, others have had my back, the backs of others' have been my bridge.<sup>7</sup> It is an immense privilege to be trained and been surrounded by feminist teachers, mentors, colleagues, chairs, deans and even college presidents for most of the past twenty years. To dwell in a place to which many (other) feminists may come to breathe only to be forced to return to fields where they are prey, pariah, pushed to the side, is to see structure in the structure and learn from this insight and benefit from it. I can easily ignore the 'canon' balls, cite nothing but other feminist scholars in my own field and still be called a (feminist) scientist. I know this is far from everyone's experience but I also know I am not alone; it is sexism as legacy, present and futurity. A career.

As a feminist academic, I am not only shaped by but also indebted to sexism; it has given my (academic) life a purpose and a home. Writing about sexism, as in this essay, is my job. Sexism gave me my first paid academic job; an exercise in mapping academic sexism, even if it was cast as a survey to investigate the status of women in anthropology ordered by a special committee of a professional organisation.<sup>8</sup> As the undergraduate research assistant to a feminist anthropologist, I not only realised I wanted to be like her when I grew up; a feminist researcher and teacher, someone committed to making feminism and the livelihood of the feminised matter.

During my first research experience, sexism gave me an orientation, a shape to my future aspiration. In choosing an academic path, I knew what to expect (sexism) and had a purpose (fighting it). What my professor, trained in statistics and quantitative analysis, and I made perceptible to the world with this data was of course nothing new, but we offered facts, lodged between the lines of a stack of CVs. It took women anthropologists in the US longer to finish PhDs and get tenure. If they had children especially, they would lag significantly behind their male peers in career development and their work was less likely to appear in high status journals or to be cited by anyone other than other women - especially if their work happened to concern 'women' - or questions of family, gender and sexuality of any kind. Interestingly, sexism as a term was already cast off; 'status' its replacement.

As an anthropology student, I learned that academia was structured by family-like ties, academic fields had founding father figures and our lineages were not only important but could be traced patrilineally. As Kamala Visweswaran has noted, it was women anthropologists who introduced gender as a category of analysis (often relying on Victorian ideas of sexual difference) into anthropology and they were, with some notable exceptions, such as Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston, often the wives of prominent male anthropologists.<sup>9</sup> If there was one thing I knew early on, it was that I would be no man's wife.

Soon I realised that what the data we found, and the articles I read, described was something more specific, namely heterosexism. Gender was understood through binary, heterosexual oppositions. The expectations that heterosexuality and reproduction place on women, seem to make academic life, and theorising, if not impossible then at least challenging. Between the lines I learned that getting ahead, or anywhere, in a sexist world meant living as a man, preferably with a wife who assumed the duties of reproducing me as a worker; no worries in the world aside from my own work. A world where women may put women first and for whom feminism was more than the question of how to make it possible to live with men became a place of relief for myself as it had for so many women before me.

For the past ten years I have worked in my native country Sweden, a nation that prides itself on being one of the most gender equal countries in the world, a paradise of LGBTQ rights, and where feminist scholars are understood to be crucial to a project often cast as common sense. Certainly, I am made to feel that I am a rightful heir to this legacy; a citizen, white, able to make a career of sexism in gender studies. This is a setting in which sexism as a concept, a term, is largely absent, even from public debate; where critiques of sexism have been transformed into state-sanctioned work for gender equality. It is as if the very term sexism itself is understood as a term of a (radical) past, a diagnosis better cured with a sensible policy, a crude description of hierarchy softened by the 'inclusive' idea of 'equality'. Equality, unlike sexism, is understood as a shared project, a part of national identity, a concept to export, a university decree. Paradoxically, it is also often seen as either already achieved or, 'in the top most gender equal countries', or it is to be an inevitable outcome of a rational, socially engineered path in the direction of progress. Sweden is simultaneously a nation that understands itself not to have a (historic) relationship to or role in colonialism or racism, where pointing out that whiteness is a privilege remains hard work and is unevenly distributed. Black Swedish feminist Ylva Habel, along with many others, has called this national self-image of denial 'Swedish exceptionalism'.<sup>10</sup>

For the past 25 years, the charge of making sexism perceptible has in a way given me rage, energy, meaning, motivation, community and purpose. It has fuelled me in both (activist and late night) streets and between the sheets of both fucking and writing. Sexism is my job because it is not over and also because others have made a priority and created paths, opened doors, supported me, provided me with a genealogy of concepts, theories, tools and a platform to stand on. As a feminist I have learned that a different academic kinship model is possible; one that traces a feminist line and genealogy, one often made without the security that now (sometimes) comes with being an academic feminist. I have learned that working on sexism can be a refuge from sexism; a place where one presumably does not have to be fatigued by it every day, even if it does not save me, or any of us from being measured against the ideal type of an academic. When sexism is not only a matter we

10. Ylva Habel, 'Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism? Teaching While Black', in Kassie Freeman and Ethan Johnson, eds. *Education in the Black Diaspora: Perspectives, Challenges, Prospects*. Routledge, London 2011, pp99-128.

need to make perceptible in the world as it permeates our bodies of flesh and knowledge, but rather is the very starting point and orientation device for our life work, at the same time as the aim of our work is to work for and imagine its elimination, sexism can be a contradiction. If one wishes to focus one's perception on what happens when commodities are among themselves, to use Luce Irigaray's phrase, other support stockings for sexism come into view.

11. This is borrowed from Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*. Cornell University Press, New York 1986.

#### SEXISM AND THE SEX WHICH IS NOT ONE<sup>11</sup>

Marilyn Frye defines as sexist the 'cultural and economic structures which create and enforce the elaborate and rigid patterns of sex-marking and sex-announcing which divide the species, along lines of sex, into dominators and subordinates' (*Sexism*, p264). This tells us that sexism is more than an isolated incident, simple misunderstanding or singular case; it is a material structure upheld and reproduced by cultural beliefs, and it insists on dividing species, humanity and others, into two categories, sexes, and furthermore, it enforces a system of domination and submission and calls it a natural order. It can certainly come as a relief, to get a description of an unjust world, especially when what has felt like a lone experience turns out to be felt by a number of others.

Frye's definition takes its point of departure in assigned anatomical sex and is concerned above all with the learned gender presentations we create and perceive as a result. Frye tellingly uses the example of 'Pat'; a person whose sex is unclear and the confusion they engender, to make the insistence on the division of the sexes so central to sexism perceptible (p259). After the work of Judith Butler it is difficult to imagine anatomical sex as a foundation for gender, at least for feminists.<sup>12</sup> And in a way we could argue that Butler extends Marilyn Frye's observation about the reproduction of sex works through approximation and correction. Indeed, and anticipating a queer critique, Frye's definition of sexism could also be a definition of heterosexuality; the eroticisation of difference and hierarchy and a definition of heteronormativity, as a system that presents itself as given and natural. What Cherrie Moraga defined as heterosexism, or 'the view that heterosexuality is the "norm" for all social/sexual relationships and as such the heterosexist imposes this model on all individuals' certainly permeates many discussions of sexism.<sup>13</sup>

Feminism is a response to this structure and in a range of settings sexism has been acknowledged as a problem and policies have been developed in order to counter sexism and ensure gender equality. If Frye's discussion of sexism contains the seed to such an approach, hers and Moraga's also point to what Latina transfem(me)inist Julia Serrano calls oppositional sexism, namely that which 'targets those who do not conform to oppositional gender norms'.<sup>14</sup>

As a term of perception, however, sexism describes a gendered order in

12. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge, New York 1990.

13. Cherrie Moraga, 'From a long line of Vendidas', *Loving in the War Years*, South End Press, Boston 1983, p105.

14. Julia Serrano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press, San Francisco 2007. Hereafter *Whipping Girl*.



which some of us more than others, are the subordinates. When sexism became perceptible to me, I learned that my troubles with embodying femininity, the restrictions it placed on me, was a learned role. It taught me that it was not me that didn't fit in the structures; it was the structure that diminished me. At times a vision-centred analysis, an emphasis on perception with regards to sexism, can make a term that describes a situation or an order, into an instrument, something to look at and measure the world with, an approach that sees patterns. In so doing, sexism can suggest that there is a 'we' that experiences sexism and more importantly, that sexism can be understood as a shared experience. We know this: as a political project feminism departs from the radical idea that 'women' have something in common, among other ways, via how 'we' experience sexism, as that which is directed primarily at women; a treatment of us that is structural, that suggests that we share a position of being judged by our gender rather than by any other dimension of who we are. Yet, since at least the speech by Sojourner Truth at the women's rights convention in Ohio in 1851, and through the early feminist Marxist work of Alexandra Kollontai and others, through the work of black (and) lesbian feminists, a wide range of work has challenged definitions of sexism as only concerned with gender segregation and hierarchy and pointed to the cultural, economic, sexual, and certainly racialised specificity of such a perception and its very definition of 'womanhood'.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, as black, Chicana, postcolonial and queer feminists have repeatedly demonstrated, gender hierarchies and binaries can never be disentangled from the material and bodily structures they are embedded in, which makes race, class, sexuality, age, ability and a range of other factors significant to both our perceptions and experiences of sexism. In *A Long Line of Vendidas*, Cherrie Moraga critiques radical feminist ideas of dominance and submission and argues that they stem from and are tied to heterosexual white women's experiences and that as such, they also reproduce a hegemonic understanding of power which obscures hierarchies between women. More importantly, Moraga contends that it is heterosexism (putting men first) that makes women, as 'sisters', turn our backs on one another. Audre Lorde, who focuses a great deal of her work on relations between feminists and women, calls sexism 'the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and there by the right to dominance' whereas heterosexism is 'the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance'.<sup>16</sup> The naturalisation of heterosexuality and the superiority of hetero *love* (and its reproductive effects) over all other forms of love (relations) is embedded in a strategy where men remain both the problem and the solution of sexism. (Privileged) feminists, it seems, primarily want to make sexism perceptible to men, because they want pleasant, equal relations with men, want their respect, their recognition and their company. As Norma Alarcon has incisively argued, Anglo-American feminists have propagated for a 'common denominator' and insisted on above all claiming the rights of

15. <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/sojour.htm>

16. Audre Lorde 'Scratching the surface: Some notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,' *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, Berkeley 2013, p45.

17. Norma Alarcon, 'The Theoretical Subjects of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism' from *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology*. Hector Calderon and Jose David Saldivar (eds), Duke University Press, Durham 1991, p357

18. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center*. South End Press, Boston 2015, p33. Hereafter *Feminist Theory*.

man, from the perspective of 'an autonomous, self-making, self-determining subject who first precedes according to the logic of identification with regard to the subject of consciousness'.<sup>17</sup> Differently put, difference, including feminine difference is disavowed. If, as bell hooks proposes feminism is a movement that 'compels us to centralise the experiences and the social predicaments of women who bear the brunt of sexist oppression as a way to understand the collective social status of women', it is clearly not white middle class women who are bearing that brunt of oppression where I am located.<sup>18</sup> Are they/we the ones to describe a problem and propose its cure? Sexism: not in my name.

If sexism is a word that describes a social order (over)determined by gender segregation and hierarchy, if ever changing, through its lengthy and extensive (feminist) travels, the concept of sexism has acquired a certain presumed universality. It is clear that in a cis- and heteronormative world, its basis is in sex; anatomically speaking, and in prejudice or discrimination that has its basis in this 'fact.' Without the addendum that it emphasises discrimination against women, or on the basis of femininity, such a broad definition of prejudice can work against a feminist project, for instance when increasing numbers of women in certain disciplines of the academy can turn the head count of sex into an instrument for hiring more men, presumably according to a similar logic.

Interestingly, in its classic definition (one that Marilyn Frye also shares) gender arrives on the level of stereotype; ideas of behaviours, conditions, or attitudes which are 'based on sex.' Stressing that anatomical sex may not be as simple and straight forward as one might think, making diversity perceptible, is one route that Frye takes to argue against sex-marking. Here I'd like to propose another route to dealing with the differing ways that we understand and experience sexism: returning to the question of the inferiority not only of women but of femininity as both embodied experience and subject of inquiry. The dictionary definition of sexism certainly highlights the centrality of one sex's subordination to the other but it also tells us that gender is a stereotype. Discussions of sexism that are rooted in certain understandings of sex often fail to see nuances or complexities in power linked to different kinds of femininities and remain inscribed in certain gender ideals. Julia Serrano extends Frye's and other feminists' discussions of sexism and notes that the very term sexism 'is rooted in the presumption that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive, 'opposite' sexes, each possessing a unique and non-overlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires' (*Whipping Girl*, p13). This means that lesbians, queers and trans\* bodies are the targets of oppositional sexism in different ways and Serrano places a range of categories of sexism, e.g., transphobia, homophobia and cissexism fall under the umbrella of oppositional sexism. However, femme theorist Serrano notes that discussions of oppositional sexism are often spearheaded by trans\* men, that cisgendered women tend to be more welcoming to trans\* men than to trans\* women and

that the contempt for femininity is not left at the feminist door.

We could argue that in its attempts to get over sexism, the term itself and those who use it, run the risk of reproducing sexism and especially, the idea of femininity as inferior. While trans\* bodies, like many queer bodies, both challenge and reproduce such a discourse, Serrano attends to the specificity of the subordination of (trans) femininity and also to what she calls traditional sexism which ‘targets those who are female as well as those who are feminine (regardless of their sex)’. Serrano, who like me, is keen to put the feminine back in feminism, reminds us that above all, ‘sexism is rooted in the presumption that femaleness and femininity are inferior to (and only exist for the sexual benefit of) maleness and masculinity’ (*Whipping Girl*, p14). With queer theory and the work of feminists of colour, we can point out that perhaps the meaning of sex is more complex; that the racialised power relations of sexuality and diverse forms of femininity should be at the centre of an analysis of traditional sexism as dominance and submission: hierarchy. Accepting femininity, in both men and women seems difficult as it connotes weakness, vulnerability, superficiality, fragility. It can and should be eradicated, and solely serves the purpose of subordination. In striving for gender equality as the response to sexism, we might bear in mind Marilyn Monroe’s alleged comment that women who wish to be equal to men lack ambition.<sup>19</sup>

## SEXISM AND SEXINESS

Identifying with and desiring to embody femininity can mean a lot of things, among them that you may learn early that your world is restricted; your world restricts you; you are a problem. Or femininity may feel right to you, fundamentally, you just don’t know how to perform it right. You are told that as a girl you are vulnerable, precious and in need of protection. Your everyday experience in the world as a girl is shaped by touch and gaze, assessment and demand. This may come into view as your body changes or as your context shifts or you encounter new or different bodies. As you age, your skin and class privilege may become shields of protection against some effects of sexism and yet, as you move ‘up’ other demands become clear; your clothes or appearance may seem out of both place and date. Femininity in all its forms seems intricately and inevitably bound up with its presumed objective; being, performing desirable sexual object in a heterosexist order or failing at it.

I’d like to focus not on the normative understanding of sexism as *gender* discrimination and segregation but on the part of sexism that connotes sex and thus to ask what is sexy. In Swedish translation, sexism sounds, and also sometimes seems, sexier than it does in English and by sexier I mean more attached to the regulation of sexual conduct. In Swedish sex loses its obvious connection to oppositional sexism or sexual difference, insofar as the term connotes the (sexual) act (*sex*) rather than an (sex) organ (*kön*), even though

19. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/marilynmon498602.html>

the dictionary definition of sexism is in fact imbued with understandings of gender discrimination and prejudice cis- and heteronormatively implicit. To someone whose feminist politics for the past twenty-five years have been constituted bilingually and in-between languages and conceptual frameworks, putting sexy at the centre of sexism, makes some objects and subjects of sexism rather than others come into view.

In Sweden there is a tendency to prefer describing gendered power relations or inequality and for something to be called sexist, or racist, is to some to invoke strong, confrontational language and should be reserved for 'extreme' cases. Perhaps this has to do with an unwillingness to understand gendered relations outside of the presumed attraction between the sexes. Working on my dissertation, in which I studied how people understood and worked with enhancing gender equality, I learned that there was the tendency to see this naturalized erotic desire between the sexes as both the problem and the solution to gender segregation and discrimination.<sup>20</sup> For instance, one equality promoting brochure contended:

Women and men produce better results together than they do separately. When we combine our different experiences new perspectives and opportunities are opened up. A more even distribution of power and responsibility can lead to a better life for women and men.

Here we learn that a mixture of men and women in a workplace is not only a question of equality but positive and productivity-enhancing. Furthermore, there is no conflict, no struggle, only positive outcomes to expect; indeed, (gender) 'difference' produces better results.<sup>21</sup> Desire between men and women was presented as a problem when it resulted in violent, non-consensual or exploitative relations, the prevention of which, it was often argued, was fostering mutual respect, shared values and a commitment to undoing the presumed inherent power of the dominant position, not by undoing the subordination but by agreeing not to exploit it.

At the same time, in the early 2000s, white feminists involved in gender equality work repeatedly brought up certain cultural practices as especially problematic, including the particular performances of femininity that they understood migrant and racialised women to embody. The problem of feminine sexuality was often attached to specific bodies whose status as young, queer, of colour, of a different profession, and so on, suggested vulnerability. At the same time, among white, heterosexual middle class women, cultural practices such as taking saunas became highly gender segregated and symbolic of inequality. In Sweden, it was argued, important decisions and networks are made while sweating in a sauna and while women were invited to the sauna with men, they expressed vulnerability and lack of safety in such settings which resulted in being excluded from the realms of power. The idea that a sauna can be either an erotic or an 'unsafe' place to people presumed to

20. Ulrika Dahl, *Progressive Women, Traditional Men: The politics of 'Knowledge' and Gendered Stories of 'Development in the northern Periphery of the EU*. PhD Dissertation in Anthropology and Women's Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz 2004.

21. Quote drawn from a brochure on gender equality in the Swedish county of Jämtland. See further Ulrika Dahl 'Scener ur ett äktenskap: Jämställdhet och heteronormativitet', Don Kulick, ed. *QueerSverige*. Natur och kultur, Stockholm 2005.

have the same gender, that it can be uncomfortable those whose bodies do not conform to (gender) ideals or are not socialised into public nudity of any kind, was never present in these discussions.

To have an investment in femininity as sexiness is to take a risk, to navigate that complex line. If one, as a member of the second sex, cannot remember a time that was not shaped, limited or constituted by sexism, how does it become perceptible? Even writing about sexism as sexy or concerned with sexiness feels shameful; especially since what comes to mind is sex and thus it involves things that are 'based on sex' which are so often wrapped up in (sexual) shame, in part because there has to be interest for it to become shameful. If comments, gestures, gazes and forms of intimate contact literally shape bodies and movements, they can also turn queer; make us turn the other way. Queer femininity can be a reclaiming of femininity. If traditional sexism is at least in part a question of bodily and sexual shame, learning to take on or deny blame, a femme form orientated towards butch rather than man can be a way to heal in that it both relies on and reworks sexism in both hierarchical and oppositional forms. As an orientation, femme is a way to be recognised while at the same time the sexism of the larger world can recede to the background. Placing the focus on lesbianism and other forms of queerly gendered relations and their sexual dimensions may change the effects of the sexy in sexism. At the same time: if lesbianism is women-loving, and if women as well as our relations to one another remain shaped by our place in a sexy economy of sexism, focusing on femininity makes some forms of sexism and not others come into view.

## SURFACE

Sexism: an education, an institution, and a family secret. From the comment 'What did you do - sit on the professor's lap? How else would a blonde Swedish communist feminazi anthropologist get an A in historiography?' in college, to living the past ten years as a queer femme academic encountering sexism in the form of being a feminine body often out of place in a sexist academy; ranging from being cast as a student on my first day of teaching, a secretary on my first meeting in a prestigious research seminar, a bimbo in my first chair's committee with the dean, to being someone whose outfits are more interesting than her arguments or whose arguments can be reduced to her identity - hierarchical sexism has shaped how I have been read as an academic and it has also shaped how I have been read as a feminist. *Can a feminist look like you?* Yes and she can look like many of my PhD students; those who share stories of unwanted sexual attention from male colleagues and beg that we, as their mentors do not breach their trust. She can look like what postcolonial film maker and theorist Pratibha Parmar (2008) was once called, a 'pocket size venus', an Asian femme who is told she is 'oozing with sexuality' and to tone it down.<sup>22</sup> Sexism has a direction; often aimed at particular understandings

22. Pratibha Parmar, 'Pocket sized Venus', in Del LaGrace Volcano & Ulrika Dahl, *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities*, Serpent's Tail, London 2008, pp91-96.

of bloneness or brownness, of dress, of youth, and of skin, cleavage, form. It is tied to being misread, dismissed by or getting unwanted attention (from male professors or colleagues, even other feminists) in ways that have to do with surface representations of one's body of flesh and knowledge. Sexism in its sexually explicit forms is directed and attributed to, to the surfaces of certain bodies; it sticks to bodies read as sexy in heterosexist and racist academic institutions.

Returning to Frye we note that for her surface and presentation are central to what is perceptible. She notes: 'we announce our sexes in a thousand ways. We deck ourselves from head to toe with garments and decorations which serve like badges and buttons to announce our sexes. For every type of occasion there are distinct clothes, gear and accessories, hair-dos, cosmetics and scents, labelled as ladies or men's, labelling us' (*Sexism*, p260). Like many other feminists, Frye seems to consider femininity itself a patriarchal construct, because 'as feminists have been saying for two hundred years or so, ladies' clothing is generally restrictive, binding, burdening and frail; it threatens to fall apart and/or to uncover something that is supposed to be covered if you bend, reach, kick, punch or run' (p263).

Masculinity is freedom, femininity is a prison. Indeed, she says, 'the details of feminine manners and postures also serve to bind and restrict. To be feminine is to take up little space, to defer to others, to be silent or affirming of others, etc (p264).'<sup>23</sup> To a femme-inist who has spent ten years working on the problem of femininity in feminism and who has done extensive research on (queer) femininities this view of femininity raises a lot of questions. Feminists do not, however, where I am at least, usually take up little space, they seem increasingly uninterested in deferring to others and more in winning the publishing or stardom race, and they are very rarely silent but rather quite specific in who and what they affirm.

The emphasis on the battle of the sexes, between Mars and Venus; dominators and subordinates, also means that the emphasis is on the two categories rather than on how femininity is treated or on relations between femininities. The contempt for and lack of attention to femininity, I would argue, reflects a kind of feminist sexism, which in turn is a brand of a larger brand of academic sexism. It seems to me that the very idea that there are hierarchies of urgency in sexism is an effect of sexism itself. That feminism retains sexism as its ontology is perhaps not surprising. If sexiness is one of the demands made on women and if, in turn, what counts as sexy relates to an index of the status of femininity then making sexism an orientation device and an ontology must inevitably mean making *femininity* perceptible. One way of looking at how sexism works in the academy is attending specifically to the work that femininity does and the lack of work *on* femininity in the academy and to stay with the trouble of femininity more specifically. Let's hone in on our understandings of academic (dress) code in bodies of flesh and knowledge.

23. A similar line of reasoning to Frye's aim to render perceptible the ways that women are subordinated through their femininity is Susan Brownmiller's. In her widely circulated work on *Femininity* she argued that "to care about feminine fashion, and do it well, is to be obsessively involved in *inconsequential* details on a serious basis." *Femininity*. Linden Press/Simon & Schuster London 1984, p81.

I know that when I go to feminist conferences comments about my outfits may far outnumber comments on the content of my work; a femme experience that is not unique to me and that at times can be a site of bonding. Swedish feminist literary scholar Annelie Bränström Öhman has pondered whether there is an academic dress code for gender scholars, and especially whether the suit is an unavoidable or a conscious strategy.<sup>24</sup> She proposes that Swedish gender research has a masculinized and middle class dress code and argues that this has to do with the homogeneity of academic space; dominated as it is by white middle class subjects. It is clear that there is a whole range of looks and garments that still do not signal academic status, but rather, that are attributed to youth or to a different labour category. Embodying femininity in the academy is challenging, bringing femininity as a subject into feminist space can also, surprisingly enough, be challenging. So often it is the young, the racialized, the queer bodies who are understood to embody or endorse the 'wrong' kind of femininity, as in high femme, brazen, heeled and lipsticked.

Comments about dress can come close to sexist ideas about femininity: to wear pretty things is to engage in a game of 'I want to be popular', to not be serious, to be too much body. Markers of femininity are sticky; they conjure up competition and popularity, sometimes also privilege. As surface and superficial it can in turn, get attributed to the person who embodies and problematises it, and one then becomes the sell-out, traitor, *la vendida*, to use Cherrie Moraga's term. Bringing up the negative connotations of femininity one is often charged with forgetting those who 'fail' who are not 'feminine enough' and the suffering of a sexism where femininity becomes a demand. Such discussions of sexism, reveal how sexism is present as a sore point and a struggle *within* feminism and gender studies; a struggle that makes femininity as such, and especially when it is linked to consumption, popular culture and above all sexuality, either less important or as a problem that takes us off a more important path. If feminism is perception, perhaps we need another term for a sexism that is both traditional and oppositional and more hierarchical. The trouble of femininity is key to our relations to one another and to our feminist legacies.

Some who travel under the sign of woman are more likely than others to become the sites of (hetero)sexist attacks; or sore points and points of distress. We also have different coping strategies depending on how and where we fit. Some of us, no matter how queer we appear, can assume that an institution will take our (white) shape, even if we walk into a meeting wearing Marilyn Monroesque blonde locks, fishnets and a miniskirt, feeling more than a little out of place. If we are tenured, the comfort in that can be an armour when we are presumed to be a secretary, a lost student. If we are lesbians it might mean that if the men in the room pay attention, even if it is not the right kind of attention, we can use it or ignore it. Along with feminists of colour, femmes in particular, I use these experiences as insights into developing a critique of a feminist body of flesh and knowledge that makes white bourgeois

24. Bränström-Öhman, Annelie, "Klädsel Kavaj"? Reflexioner kring den Svenska Genusforskningens 'Dress Code'. In Johansson, Anna, ed. *svensk Genusforskning I Världen: Globala Perspektiv I svensk Genusforskning och svensk Genusforskning i ett Globalt Perspektiv*, nationella Sekretariatet för Genusforskning, Göteborg 2001, pp157-165.

femininity the core problem from which to articulate an analysis and form a strategy for feminism.

To me, queer femme-ininity can (but doesn't always) share affinities and express solidarities with Asian femininities that are read as 'less liberated' or more in need of 'protection' and with Black femininities that are read as 'angry' or 'unfeminine'. While my encounters with sexism are marked by the privilege of whiteness and the specific connotations that hair, clothes, and appearance have with profession, class, age and respectability and while I can assume that these are rooms that have my shape, refusing to conform to an academic and feminist dress code is a wilful act; a Femme-inist killjoy kills the feminist joy that is so often focused on dismissing femininity and that far more readily defends female masculinity.<sup>25</sup> As Dorothy Allison writes:

25. For a discussion of feminist killjoys who kill feminist joy, see Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, Durham 2010, p67.

What I know for sure is that class, gender, sexual preference, and prejudice - racial, ethnic, and religious - form an intricate lattice that restricts and shapes our lives, and that resistance to hatred is not a simple act. Claiming your identity in the cauldron of hatred and resistance to hatred is infinitely complicated, and worse, almost unexplainable.<sup>26</sup>

26. Dorothy Allison, 'A question of class', *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature*. Firebrand Books, Ithaca 1994.

Feminist sexism reproduces itself through surfaces, styles and citations both with regards to outfits and arguments.

## SEXISM AS ONTOLOGY

I have been arguing here that sexism as career has given me and many other feminist students and researchers jobs, even meaningful lives and worlds and that it has limitations. Considering the persistence of sexism despite its thirty-some year process of becoming perceptible, perhaps we need other ways to describe that world and those relations than those that the term sexism set out to describe. In a time and place where gender equality (understood as a world free of sexism) is simultaneously presented as both an ideal, a norm and against the natural order; a project that is deeply enmeshed in the reproduction of the nation state, the labour force and reproductive futurity this is a particularly urgent problem.

The approach taken so far, at least where I am located, can certainly get paradoxical results. In neoliberal times, gender equality as the advancement of women is an idea easily appropriated when there is a need for flexible bodies and docile workers; when some women's equality with men is made on the backs of other women.<sup>27</sup> Understood locally, practicing equality transformed into body-counting policies as the response to sexism can also, despite its original aim to ensure women seats at the academic table end up giving few men a great impact, especially in fields where their commitment to fighting sexism as a problem directed at the sex which is not one has resulted in more women than men taking an interest. Retaining a masculine ideal for bodies of

27. For an insightful discussion of this point in the context of the UK, see Angela McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism', *New Formations*, 80-81, 2013, pp119-132.



flesh and knowledge and developing a commitment to relativising the state of (hegemonic) masculinity, gender studies has also given much more attention to masculinity than to femininities and far too often focused on femininity as a problem. Sexism: having your work against it be pushed against you.

A standard definition of sexism as unjust prejudice and discrimination provides an explanatory framework that enables us to see that our own experiences are not isolated, but rather reflective of a larger structure, can be redeeming and enraging, especially as a shared perception. Yet, it seems to me that it is not enough to understand sexism as an 'ideology' that can be replaced by another, or as a social pathology curable through social engineering, enlightenment or patience while we await the unfoldings of inevitable progress; when sexism will become obsolete. I want stories that move beyond sexism as surface, as a form of perception, something that we will see once we get the right glasses on and that we can wipe off easily, like make up or learning a part.

Can sexism be understood as a form of ontology, both for gender and for feminism? Invoking such a term when talking about a phenomenon like sexism may well seem strange to readers invested in gender theories that can be grouped under social constructionism and 'anti-essentialism', especially in contexts where (social) constructionism is the only existing truth (with a capital T). If sexism is a charge, a misjudgement, a denigration of your body, that can be made perceptible and changed calling it an ontology may suggest that I think sexism is part of what is commonly understood as a 'natural' order, that what I will charge is either 'get over it' or 'get used to it.' Yet if ontology at its broadest refers to something that describes and studies the nature of the becoming, existence and reality of 'order,' and one is interested in categories, differences and hierarchies, then ontology is about power.

Calling sexism an ontology, drawing on how sexism has shaped my life and body, beginning as a member of the second sex in my (bodily) situation, I am immediately unsure of I have 'mastered' the term or perhaps need to read more books, recite more canonical work. I can think of few academic disciplines with a more sexist history, a more (white) male ontology than philosophy, its conceptual home. In Sweden at least, gender theory is presumed to be derivative of philosophy and yet philosophy is canonically almost entirely devoid of gender, and certainly of attention to sexism. Wearing their patriarchal pedigrees (at times with the 'wives' as a side reading, of biographic and literary significance perhaps), and civilized modern canons like armour, one can expect to be judged by philosophers less by the relevance of one's argument, than by one's recitation of great works. Sexism: a cause for separation, for separatism.

Feminism can be sexist when it uses a reproductive technology of advancing knowledge whereby we are encouraged to tell stories about what is 'new' by tracing patriarchal conceptual lines; lines where the existence of sexism is ignored. It is a particular form of academic sexism that expresses itself in the

reproduction of masculinist ideals of knowledge production; conforming to form, reciting a male genealogy of genius. The persistent lack of citations of feminists by male academics, the lack of feminist texts in conventional courses, the lack of acknowledgement of the contributions of feminist interventions to particular fields of knowledge are, as many have repeatedly argued, crucial evidence for the reproduction of sexism in the academy. Oriented primarily towards feminists and other others, I do not really care what 'they' think. Since I am not primarily aiming to make interventions in other fields but rather busy considering feminist worlds as meaningful worlds, I want to ask what a feminist politics of citation does for understandings of sexism.

In *Why Stories Matter*, Clare Hemmings argues how we tell the stories of feminism's recent past, whether they are stories of progress, loss or return, are matters of citation and storytelling.<sup>28</sup> Part of making sexism perceptible involves reflecting on how certain genealogies and contributions, often those of feminists of colour are erased, including in discussions of intersectionality and that those of feminists working in areas now presented as 'new' are erased in favour of male theorists. Feminist citation can be a powerful technology of reproducing queerly if we consider how we use it, for instance I by challenging the idea of who is a theorist.

If concepts work as orientation devices, we need to pay attention to whose understanding of sexism we use. With Julia Serrano we can see that traditional definitions of sexism pose a problem for feminine bodies of flesh and knowledge in their subordination of femininity. If we depart not (only) from Frye as she is reworked by Butler or Serrano but also from bell hooks definition where feminism is 'a movement to end sexist oppression (that) directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression' - in other words, to an understanding of sexism as always already entwined with other systems of domination, we can also approach the question of relations between femininities and femininity as a problem for feminism (*Feminist Theory*, p33). Seeing sexism as ontology means acknowledging its investments in a structure of thinking that presumes a binary gendered logic, between femininity and masculinity, self and body, where the meaning of femininity may change but its subordinated status rarely does. It also means acknowledging that it takes more than perception and analysis to undo; it is embodied in our flesh and knowledge, our will to power, and the directions of desire.

#### AFTERWORD: SEXISM IS SICKENING

Some years ago, I accepted an invitation to write about my eating-disorderliness (*ätstördhet*). As boxes of diaries in my closet evidence, it was the one topic that I dedicated the most amount of intellectual, creative, emotional and visual energy to from the time I was not even twelve, growing up in an

28. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Duke University Press, Durham 2010.

almost entirely white middle/lower middle class suburb of a northern Swedish town, until I was in my late twenties, a budding lesbian and a graduate student in a much more queer and diverse part of northern California. I have never before attempted to describe this phenomenological experience.

The reason was shame; the sad truth that no matter how much I loved my studies, my friends, my lovers, my novels or anything else I was known to be passionate about in life, no matter how many theoretical tools I developed and how much critical awareness of my privileges and my subordination I gained, my food/body image/gain struggles were always there, a setting, constitutive outside, something that seemed to exceed analysis; an embodied lens through which I saw and experienced the world and myself in it, my logic. I measured my constant excess and hunger, not to mention lust and grief against an ideal of healthy and appropriate disciplined natural body that I saw around me. I seemed to be living a life-long prison sentence, a straight-jacket; while hard to accept, I could not imagine life without it. Until one day, waking up in what was then beginning to feel like normal; a mostly lesbian feminist queer community, and I realized I could not remember the last time I had thought about what I ate, when, how, or about how disgusting and out of place my body felt. It was the most astonishing insight; I was breathing, living, sensing, seeing a different kind of world, I felt the closest to 'free' I could possibly imagine. And yet, the 'archive of feelings'<sup>29</sup> stored in my boxes of journals remain embedded in shame.

Over the years, as the shame of what I have come to see as a form of self-harm has faded and I have placed it in a range of contexts, I have often and casually mentioned my eating-disorderliness as a powerful and life-shaping, but past experience. At times, and for kicks, I have even argued that (lesbian and queer) feminism cured me. I have remained deeply engaged with the body as a theoretical, political, and experiential question; committed to working against sizeism in its articulations with a range of other oppressive regimes.

Like so many feminists, I have found and developed my arguments in rooms where this experience has been shared; in theory, in analysis, in working to undo it. As a structural, visual problem, impossible beauty ideals are relatively easy to address and be outraged about. My heart breaks every time I meet girls who are learning to measure themselves as inherently deficient, not good enough, in need of change; diminishing.

When I agreed to write about my own eating-disorderliness for a Swedish queer feminist anthology, I wanted to make it perceptible through description. I did not realize that I would open up a wound; that its power over me would almost pull me back in.<sup>30</sup> Descending into writing, I could feel the stretch of my tummy from binge eating, I could taste vomit in my throat, I felt the deep angst and panic I had lived in for then almost half my life and I cried myself to sleep remembering the sheer terror and loneliness I felt. Most of all I feared that bottomless pit again, the weight of it all, that it was not going to go away, that I was still stuck there, on the brink of despair, questioning what was real.

29. Term borrowed from Ann Cvetkovich *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality and Public Culture*. Duke University Press, Durham 2003.

30. The term eatingdisorderliness aims to queer the diagnosis of eating disorder as a kind of medical condition and deviance from a presumed norm and instead point to its phenomenological and disruptive, disorderly dimensions. See further Ulrika Dahl, "Finn Femme Fel" in *Ätstört: En antologi om ätstörningar, fett, mat och makt*. ETC, 2012.

31. See the dust jacket of Katharine Stockton, *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Duke University Press, Durham 2009.

Accepting an invitation to write about sexism felt much the same way; easy at first, after all, it is my job as a feminist scholar to describe, explain and even try to change a world organized by such a structure. As I began writing, it seemed to open a wound of a constitutive kind. Like the queer bulimic girl I suppose I will always be, I set out with an unrealistic (writing) goal in mind, aiming to conform to a disciplined (intellectual) ideal, but my writing, my body of flesh and knowledge began growing sideways, what Kathryn Stockton has called 'irregular growth involving odd lingerings, wayward paths, and fertile delays' that characterizes the queer child.<sup>31</sup> What (more) is there to say about this topic? Aiming to describe sexism as an ontology, a theory of reality and being, has like describing eating-disorderliness, made for a bumpy rather than smooth curve of an argument. It has taken me down the path of desire and into the dark, muddled alleyways, where the line between pain and pleasure, insult and compliment, dominance and submission, freedom and imprisonment are not so easily drawn. Sexism: a stumbling block.

Yet, writing about eating-disorderliness relieved some pain, I felt its roots in (sexual) shame; the self-harm in attempting to make myself fit into an image of the (white) skinny, pretty, modest, popular, successful heterosexual girl, the guilty pleasures in seeking pleasure, secretly, in all the wrong places. With the insight of retrospection, middle age professional achievements and above all, through having inhabited a different body politic and world for over fifteen years reliving is confronting fears and I could remember its intimate entanglements with desire; with becoming girl and becoming sexual in a world that offered me very few options. My hunger for life, experience, intimacy, flirting, always too much it seemed. Curiously, in eating-disorderliness I found some parts of the origins of my own version of femme; a queer brazen loud dominant vulnerable high strung non-breeding amazon in and through eating-disorderliness. What then felt like failure to be disciplined now feels like a bodily form of resistance, what felt like a command now feels like deep grief over the restrictions that normativity, based in racist heterosexism places on girls. Interestingly, agonising over how to write this essay about sexism as ontological, has revealed both lessons and freedoms from sexism.

Sexism: a singular experience that at times becomes a shared story, a career, an investment. We need more (than) data to describe the discomfort, fragility, and disempowerment that sexism causes and to foster recognition: we need ways to understand and challenge structures, that make experiences neither universal nor strictly individual even they are so often deeply personal. We need to see its diversity of shapes and temporalities. The 'we' that is the differential subject of sexism is only a 'we' when it is made perceptible.

I want to end this essay with a conviction; while our stories are rarely the same, we can certainly learn from one another's. We can identify common threads and stay with the trouble of disagreement and difference; moments of privilege and defeat, grief and triumph. I do think that there are ways of living with sexism and rewriting its wounding. Shame does not have to be

avoided, it can be lived queerly; as central to making us who we are, without being reduced to restriction. Perhaps one way to make understanding sexism a creative, as in life-affirming project is re-inhabiting both grief and desire, pleasure and pain. Sexism certainly is not over, so we cannot be over it.

My lesbian overcoming of eating-disorderliness did not turn into a story about gay as in happy, but rather into a kind of queer as in ‘fuck you’. I am not in that prison; I am not repeatedly scarred by it or brought down by it, and I have learned to say ‘fuck you’ to sexism by living and writing queerly, by choosing women and femininity over men and masculinity. If not happy, then hopeful as in engaged; I remain convinced that we can rewrite stories and, perhaps, one day wake up and find ourselves living in other bodies and worlds. With Juana María Rodríguez’ Latina femme vision of sexual futures in which desire and sex can be inhabited and imagined, in spite of the persistence of racism, sexism, ageism and ableism, and with the contradictory queer logic within which one’s aesthetic and sexual pleasures are unavoidably formed by the very structure one opposes, I believe sexism does more than injure.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to the narrative of progress that suggests that things are, or will be getting better, sexism has not ceased, only mutated and reproduced itself in new and ever-shifting ways for different bodies in different places. Re-writing sexism can be an on-going creative, as in life-generating project. As a perception, an ontology, an investment, a repetition of the problems of femininity; we must keep making sexism an entrance.

32. Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. NYU Press, New York 2014.

**Ulrika Dahl** is a cultural anthropologist and associate professor of Gender Studies at Södertörn University in Sweden, where she currently leads the research project “Queer(y)ing Kinship in the Baltic Region”. Among her publications are *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (with Del Lagrace Volcano, Serpent’s Tail 2007) and *Skamgrepp: Femme-inistiska essäer* (Leopard, 2014), along with a number of articles on gender equality, femme-inist methodology and theory, formations of gender studies, among other things. She wrote the foreword to *Vithetens Hegemoni* (Tankekraft, 2011), a collection of Sara Ahmed’s writings translated into Swedish.