QUEER SOCIALITY AND OTHER SEXUAL FANTASIES

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By now we know the scene. Violence is implicated everywhere in our lives; the United States is engaged in two seemingly endless wars; vitriolic racist discourse proliferates under the guise of national debate; African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and other poor people are deported into jails and across the borders of civil society; the economy is in ruins; and any sense of the future is tied discursively to a moment of current sacrifice, a perpetual spiral that spins us back to a present moment of further repression, discipline, and control. Meanwhile, the mainstream LGBT community is enmeshed in expensive political machinations to secure the rights of gay and lesbian marriage through a media campaign that sanitizes our lives in order to make us palatable subjects worthy of the rights of citizenship, as it fails to recognize the multiple vectors of violence and injustice that also constitute our lives as queer subjects. This is our "situated contemporaneous horizon of meanings and intentions," the overarching political ambiance in which we enact the queer bonds that constitute our lives.[1] So what might it mean to think about sex right now, when so much violence, injustice, and cruelty surround our lives?

In 1984 Gayle Rubin wrote: "It is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality."[2] It should not surprise us that the political landscape seems eerily similar to what it was when Rubin penned her now canonical text "Thinking Sex." Then, as now, there are those for whom "sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation."[3] Sex is always amenable to diverse discursive uses in trying times, always something about which to get "dangerously crazy," or something too frivolous to

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merit critical engagement. Today the Right deploys a rhetoric of perverse sexuality to silence, censure, and criminalize sexualized and racialized subjects, and the mainstream gay and lesbian movement responds by disavowing these same subjects and projecting an image of hypernormative domesticity worthy of political respect and validation. Into this politicized space of meaning, queer theory inserts itself to offer theoretical interventions that ask us to consider the role of queer social bonds, community futures, and the relevance of sex at this precise historical moment, a moment where the demands of neoliberalism emphasize individual exchange and benefit absent of an analysis of differentiated social relationships to power.[4]

Queer theory has recently seemed enmeshed in an ongoing ruckus about sociality. On one side we have an antisocial position exemplified by scholars like Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman that posits queer as inevitably wedded to antisociality. On the other side, José Esteban Muñoz counters the antisocial impetus with a queer articulation of utopia that is always on the horizon and decidedly committed to "an understanding of queerness as collectivity."[5] While decidedly different in both tone and archive, Edelman and Bersani see queer as what always, and in their minds *must* always, stand outside any formulation of collectivity. Bersani famously remarks on "a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known."[6] And while Bersani leaves open the possibility of potentially reconstituting sociality through a "curative collapsing of social difference," this "collapsing of social difference" serves as neither a satisfying critique nor as a desired color-blind, gender-blind future.[7] For while Bersani "prefers the possibilities of the future to the determinations of the past" his accounts of sexual exchange rest on a "universal relatedness grounded in the absence of relations, in the felicitous erasure of people as persons."[8] In contrast, Edelman's position is decidedly more dismissive and patronizing of any attempts to reimagine the possibilities of the social, or of futurity. The antisocial position he espouses that asks us to fuck the future can only refuse potential, refuse possibilities, in the name of defiance against reproductive futurity *and* in the service of sexual license.[9] The queer sociality that I am trying to conjure is at its core an attempt at recognition. It is a utopian space that both performs a critique of existing social relations of difference and enacts a commitment to the creative critical work of imagining collective possibilities. And because recognition always risks failure, queer sociality also remains stubbornly attached to deploying failure as an opportunity for new critical interventions.

Racialized Collectivities and Their Discontents

Unsurprisingly, many queer of color scholars have evolved other understandings of these connections. Jafari Sinclaire Allen joins Muñoz to suggest sociality as a cultural imperative for queers of color, a matter of psychic, social, and political survival, even as he embraces the need for the critical potential of refusal.[10] In fact, a politics of refusal has a long history in feminist of color scholarship and should not be equated with the rejection of futurity, much less sociality. On Audre Lorde's and Chela Sandoval's notion of difference/differential in relation to Derrida, Norma Alarcón writes:

> The drive behind the "not yet/that's not it" position in Sandoval's work is termed "differential consciousness," in Lorde's work, "difference," and in Derrida's work *différance*. Yet each invokes dissimilarly located circuits of signification codified by the context of the site of emergence, which nevertheless does not obviate their agreement on the "not yet," which points toward a future.[11]

Through an insistence on critique that nevertheless points to a "not yet" of possibilities, refusal remains an operative mode of analysis that demands, rather than forecloses, futurity. Indeed, following the work of Ernst Bloch, Muñoz reminds us that the work of utopia must always be both a casting of possibilities and a tireless critique of the present. Thus both Muñoz and Allen are more than willing to recognize the radical potential in Edelman's critique of mainstream LGBT movements that demand assimilation in the service of reproductive futurity, but refuse his call to abandon futurity. Futurity has never been given to queers of color, children of color, or other marginalized communities that live under the violence of state and social erasure, a violence whose daily injustices exceed the register of a politics organized solely around sexuality, even as they are enmeshed within a logic of sexuality that is always already racialized through an imagined ideal of citizen-subject.

The inability to recognize the alternative sexual practices, intimacies, logics, and politics that exist outside the sightlines of cosmopolitan gay white male urban culture is never benign. Instead, this denial colludes with a neoliberal rescripting of identity politics that animates political agendas based on individual grievances against the state, as it obfuscates regimes of visibility that leave some bodies, practices, and violations unmarked. Queer of color critique, a term coined by Roderick Ferguson, intervenes in the logic of discrete optics to point out the

urgency of theorizing the ways race and sexuality are mutually constitutive.[12] As a scholarly posture, it gestures toward a methodological practice — available to anyone — in which social and embodied differences are understood as always implicated in the production, circulation, and articulation of knowledge. Furthermore, it insists on calling out those moments where these confluences are ignored or minimized, as moments (intentional or otherwise) that work to perpetuate a political investment in liberal ideology intent on maintaining disconnected categories of analysis. Therefore, it is precisely how these scholarly debates on the relationship between queer sexuality and sociality remain inextricably tied to consideration of race, gender, and embodiment that needs to be unpacked. As Ferguson points out, these critiques have a long, sustained history in scholarship produced by those who live under the sign "women of color," and in recent years this work has been forcefully generative and expansive. Karen Tongson has written persuasively about how the spatial logics that organize a queer political imagination erase "sub-urban" sociabilities, privileging the experiences of cosmopolitan gay men who then serve as the referent for what comprises queer culture.[13] In the process she points to how the sex and sexuality of the countless suburban dykes who fill karaoke bars and softball fields become sites unseen and thus untheorized by much of queer theory. Similarly, in her project of locating a queer South Asian diasporic subject, Gayatri Gopinath exposes the "illegibility and unrepresentability of a non-heteronormative female subject" when a radical queer sexuality is continually written as existing only outside the space of the domestic. Gopinath demonstrates how articulations of nonnormative sexualities located within the home or outside the spaces of cosmopolitan urban centers disappear within existing formulations of queer.[14] Adding to this analysis, Robert McRuer forcefully delineates how "able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things," pointing us yet again to how unmarked categories continue to produce their own forms of political erasure.[15] These scholars expose the multiple and overlapping ways that the disciplinary power of embodied and racially gendered normativity functions. Curiously (or not), the failure to recognize these shared political investments ultimately performs the very same antirelational sociality that it espouses, crushing possibilities of radical social engagement.

While all of this is queerly fascinating as a way to articulate the decades-long fissures along dimensions of difference in queer studies, the part of this debate that interests me most is how sex has been deployed to construct these academic postures. For both Bersani and Edelman, antisociality is what is needed to keep sex viable and, dare I say, "hot" in queer life. This is a sexual hotness that

appears as the exclusive prerogative of able-bodied gay white men, in which queer men of color exist only in relation to white male pleasure, and women of all colors do not exist at all. On the other hand, Muñoz, in his elegant treatise *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, does engage the utopian possibility of radical sexualized sociality, but he does so through a reading of the public waterfront orgies that Samuel Delany describes and John Giorno's anonymous sexual encounters in the public toilets of New York City, public sexual spaces that seem available only to men in urban centers.[16] Neither Edelman's nor Muñoz's position even attempts to imagine sexual possibilities for female of color subjects, a subject position that remains vacated of erotic impulses, or nonnormatively-abled bodies of all genders that are likewise imagined as always already asexual or simply undesirable.

Ann Pelligrini teases out the relationship between commodity capitalism and homosexuality as "alternative lifestyle" to suggest that the capitalist demands of wage labor and the imaginaries of mass-media representation interpellate gay men and lesbians as different sorts of bodily commodities, and thus as different sorts of sexual subjects of neoliberal demands.

> Whose is the face of perverse public sexuality? The alleged perversity of gay male sexuality means that it is always and only too public by far. But what of lesbian sexuality? Is it seen as any sexuality at all? And, where it is, sexuality for whom, pleasure for whom? We need to think at the intersections of sexuality and gender if we are to make sense of the paradoxical scene of lesbianism . . .[17]

What implications does this logic of the sexual economy of perversity, in which the alleged sexual excesses of gay men are deemed nefarious, nonnormative, dangerous, queer, have for queer studies? Is scholarship on lesbians and gender-queer female-bodied subjects a less valued academic commodity because it seems somehow less transgressive or sexy?

Access to erotic pleasure and sexual determination has implications for those sexual subjects that have been thought to be outside the real and imagined spheres of radical sexual sociality. As evidenced in the archives of law, psychiatry, medicine, and anthropology, it has historically been the sexual practices and nonreproductive pleasures of female-bodied subjects and the disabled that have borne the brunt of eugenicist discourses and the pathologizing practices of sexual domination. Female subjectivity is often simply unintelligible when divorced from cultural logics that define sexuality as either solely reproductive—

where pleasure is nonexistent and always already sacrificed in the service of family and nation — or wholly carnal, unrestrained, and dangerous — where lascivious bodies transport cultural contaminants across racially demarcated sexual borders. While the language used to make the sexuality of disabled subjects unintelligible, illegitimate, or unseemly differs in significant ways from racialist discourse, the common effects nevertheless "underscore the importance of disability as a site on which to deconstruct social ideologies of perversion, victimization, and protection."[18] Thus it has been racialized women and the disabled, along with indigenous populations, slave societies, immigrant groups, welfare recipients, prisoners, gender-queer subjects, and other bodies marked as deviant that have been affected most forcefully by pernicious ideologies of "perversion, victimization and protection" and punished most viciously for seeking out the pleasures of perverse sexual license.

Feminized racial subjects have acutely suffered the tyranny of collectivities that demand sacrificing pleasure to serve communal respectability and the common good. Feminist scholarship has repeatedly demonstrated how the category of woman has been called forth to represent a sexual morality that serves the interests of a larger political agenda of social liberation.[19] Invariably this need to "represent" is used to betray the sexual agency and pleasure of certain classes of racialized female sexual subjects while elevating others to the status of worthy role models for the nation. Women and people of color have been hailed by these discourses of liberation through sexual sacrifice, disciplined through public shame and censure and the disciplinary power of pathology and criminalization, even as we have symbolically occupied the image of national heroines or beneficiaries of these same repressive tactics. On a more intimate level, racially gendered feminine subjects also know about the forces of sexual discipline that surround us through our participation in the social spaces of family and community. In a myriad of ways, we have been instructed that to enter the fold of collectivity, be it familial or revolutionary, we must first be liberated of our sexual deviance, our politically incorrect desires.

While much of this sounds reminiscent of the feminist sex wars of decades past, the extent to which the anxieties of sexual representation continue to haunt the current political moment should not be underestimated. And when the power dynamics of racial representation come onto the sexual scene, things get even trickier. Hoang Tan Nguyen reads a new wave of queer Asian documentary beginning in the 1990s that actively aims to work against dominant pornographic stereotypes of submissive Asian gay men obsessed with performing the role of sexual bottom for dominant white male tops.[20] He reads these films as an attempt to move

away from sexual scripts based on socially stratified positions of power in order to embrace egalitarian sexual practices that emphasize sexual nurturing and reciprocity. In his analysis of these films, including his own short film *7 Steps to Sticky Heaven*, Nguyen identifies an attempt to re-educate queer Asian desires to conform to a more politically palatable model of sexual longing and behavior, namely, egalitarian, reciprocal sexual practices with other gay Asian men.[21]

Like the disciplinary function of the feminist identity politics of an earlier era that required a public denunciation of butch and femme, bisexuality, nonmonogamy, fantasy play, S/M, and the eroticization of power, Nguyen chronicles how sexual anxieties about race, representation, and colonial sexual postures animate what he sees in the gay Asian cinematic archive. In both earlier feminist movements and the contemporary queer Asian contexts Nguyen describes, these efforts at reeducation are carried out under the banner of decolonizing our sexual psyches, unchaining us from the oppressive pornographic narratives of racist patriarchy, and reeducating our deviant desires to conform to those of proper feminist racialized subjects. Ultimately Nguyen concludes something quite different about the ineffable pleasures based on "racial [and sexual] objectification and abjection."[22] He contends "that this politically correct lesson fails to account for desires and identifications that cannot be so easily disciplined, especially those desires that embrace bottomhood and femininity" (4).

> Instead of advocating for an "equal-time," reversible S/M scopic and sexual play or to legislate meaningful sex acts with partners of the "right" race, a more radical lesson would be to endorse a politics that enables a multiplicity of desires and identifications, including those that insist on fixity rather than mobility. For certain subjects, dwelling in the abject space of bottomhood and femininity can be a mode of critical resistance. (5)

Nguyen refuses efforts at reeducation, electing instead to imagine a politicized sociality through "bottomhood and femininity," just as earlier feminists reoccupied the subject position of whore, *puta*, bitch, and pervert as potential sites for critical resistance. In the process he exposes the sticky attachments of race and colonial memory to embodied queer erotics.

A queer of color critique allows us to read the feminized and culturally inflected sexual position Nguyen offers as an expression of sexual agency that, far from erasing racial dynamics, deploys them as an opportunity for sexual gratification.[23] Similarly a social and sexual position that takes pleasure in being attentive to the needs of others cannot, and should not, be read as an unconscious adapta-

tion of the social sacrifice demanded by reproductive futurity. In relation to both sex and sociality, we must learn to read submission and service differently. In Spanish to say someone is "servicial" ("servile" or "of service") is not to dismiss him or her as being weak, or devoid of desires or agency; instead, it most often is a compliment that recognizes that person's willingness to acknowledge and respond to the needs and desires of another. Similarly, the ubiquitous phrase so particular to Mexicans, *Mande usted* (you, command) is a statement not of naturalized servitude but of a generosity of spirit that exists through service to others, a social valorization of what can be interpreted as a feminized sexual posture. Moreover, it functions as a linguistic imperative that orders the transfer of power—from the bottom. As a grammatical construction, it commands the recipient to issue a command. Likewise, in the musical language of boleros, *entrega total* (total surrender) is what comes to define the epitome of sexual and romantic ecstasy. What might it mean to read sex and sociality through this culturally inflected reading, through a Latina femme understanding of servitude and submission?

Imagining Queer Bonds Otherwise

That so often we fuck with social bodies that exist outside the logic of gendered, racial, and embodied normativity produces a performative abyss that the social bonds offered through sex can step into and resignify.[24] Whether through a reworking of individual sexual histories of violence, or the rescripting of tired tropes of racialized sexual abjection, the touch of sex and its potential for recognition offers the possibility of exceeding the constraints of the quotidian in which recognition and intelligibility are not forthcoming. As with all attempts at recognition, in sex we always risk failure. Recognition, and the social bonds it creates, remains another site of affective vulnerability, a vulnerability we can refuse, but never contain. Yet through our real and imagined sexual encounters, queers enact the possibility of disentangling bodies and acts from preassigned meanings, of creating meaning and pleasure anew from the recycled scraps of dominant cultures. Through eroticization and pleasure, we are thus presented with the possibility of remarking and remaking the pain and refusal of social intelligibility that constitute our daily lives, and sometimes the promise is enough.

Elizabeth Freeman has used the term *erotohistoriography* to name the radical potential of sex outside a politics that sees it as solely concerned with individual pleasure predicated on social disengagement, insisting instead on a queer sociality that defies space and time. Defining erotohistoriography as "a politics of unpredictable, deeply embodied pleasures that counter the logic of development,"

she writes: "Against pain and loss, erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times."[25] The sexual practices and fantasies of our perverse imaginations create a place and time of elsewhere, a utopian nexus of critique and potentiality, available to anyone, where sex and recognition touch and cum together.

That sexual acts can be repeated in similar ways across bodies that mark themselves as different references the many ways that pleasures can be imagined, sensed, and formed. My own repeated refrain of *Ay papi, métemelo* brings me into a discursive collectivity across spatial and temporal registers, a coming together in sex that creates its own perverse sociality. Recognizing that sexual moments and movements belong to no one and can be accessed on multiple registers of meaning speaks to the impossibility of linking sexual practices to identity formations. To claim that feelings, acts, and words might be shared is not to say that they are the same—the distinction functions in the interplay between context, actions, imagination, and the contours of our own sexual archives. But to ask the question of what *could* be shared across bodies that touch through language, memory, trace, or gesture is already to reach for a queer sociality that borders on utopian longing.

The challenge becomes finding ways to politicize these differentiated sexual postures and write them into new forms of social bonds that recognize and engage, rather than deny or pathologize, the untamed erotics of multiply inflected power relations. For what is sex if not sociality of the most intense order—a place where bodies not only touch but are pushed and pulled into one another, a coming undone predicated on a coming together? Perhaps for some, a sexual schema that does not suppose "the felicitous erasure of people as persons" ceases to satisfy. But even in a scenario where one partner demands sexual labor with a complete disregard for the pleasure of their sexual servant, one would hope that they could recognize their servant as a person who relishes that disregard. Is that already too much to ask for in the name of queer sociality? Perhaps another way to figure the question is to ask what kind of sex can do away with any regard for the social? At the most basic level, these questions articulate the challenge of creating a sexual politics, utopian or otherwise, we might actually want to live with.

In "Thinking Sex," the essay with which I began, Gayle Rubin tries to do just that, to write a sexual politics that stands against the charmed circle of respectable sexuality, straight or otherwise, in which sex is private, monogamous, intragenerational, and free from the taint of toys, tricks, and tops. Her response is a sexual manifesto that works at the juncture between individual pleasure and what she terms "a democratic morality," which "should judge sexual acts by

the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide."[26]

The "mutual consideration" that Rubin proposes is not an attempt to inoculate sex from the gritty power plays that engulf it; instead, it recognizes that sex always implies social negotiation in a field of power. The problem of course is that coercion is rarely absolute—in fact, most of the sexual contracts we enter have everything to do with various forms of coercion mandated by the social bonds we inhabit. Whether with a partner, date, trick, or wife, sex can become a social obligation that is offered in exchange for dinner, domestic harmony, rent, safety, or our own sexual pleasure. This negotiation can happen in a glance and include, and take pleasure in, playing with forms of abjection, violence, and coercion, both real and imagined. Whether in overt commercial exchanges, casual anonymous encounters, or intimate relations structured around love and care, sex functions as a kind of trade. Elizabeth Povinelli offers a critique of love that likewise marks the messiness of consent:

> One of the major distinguishing features of modern intimacy is an expectation of a blurring of choice and compulsion in the context of love, of a dynamic among self-risk and self-elaboration, personal transcendence, and the fall back onto the self. Indeed, *love* thematizes and indicates the affective site where choice and compulsion are blurred.[27]

Through our understanding of neoliberal models of "free trade," we know that there are differentially marked benefits, rewards, and risks in negotiating sexual and affective contracts. Perhaps it is precisely these complicated instantiations of recognition that Rubin gestures toward in her essay that can offer a compelling rethinking of what might constitute the terms for political projects of recognition. How might a democratic morality function as a way to rethink the relationship between national bodies, one that considers how partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide?

Without a doubt, desires for democratic morality on any scale can exist only as utopian longings, desires for something that always exists beyond the edges of what we dare to hope for. Even when they fail, and fail they must, the utopian yearnings they represent are always sexual in the best and most queer of ways: nonreproductive, perverse, multisensory, asynchronic, and full of possibility in ways that illuminate what Butler terms the "critical promise of fantasy."

> The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.[28]

For many subjects who see the sexual possibilities of the anonymous sexual encounters described by Bersani and Muñoz alike as life-threatening, inaccessible, or uninteresting, fantasy becomes a way to bring the imagined elsewhere of a radical sexual sociality home. Nevertheless, many dykes, transmen, butches, disabled people, and queer, straight, and trans- women have ventured outside the sphere of fantasy; they have bravely entered, or stealthily crept, into the available male domains of public sexual exploration and have found pleasure there. And others have gone farther to create alternative underground sexual spaces where our bodies are marked as legible subjects of sexual play. Yet even these options, still only available to some, can at times seem to reproduce rather than reconfigure the imaginative potential of radical queer sexual and social practices. Fantasy, on the other hand, offers a venue for exploration and pleasure that is available to anyone who dares. Taking the critical promise of fantasy seriously, however, requires another kind of meaning-making that journeys beyond rationality into the warm, dark abyss of the lived and sensed. And while Butler's engagement with fantasy remains on the level of the abstract, the sexual fantasies I am trying to index are soiled, messy encounters brimming with social and psychic abjection, domination, and pain, even as they open a space for ecstasy and possibility.

Sexual Fantasies, the Remix

In our sexual fantasies, we can occupy a space of our own creation, devise our own tactile, visual, and auditory codes, assign queer meanings to gestures and utterances that have preceded our entrance onto the sexual stages we inhabit.[29] In fantasy we can rewrite scripts of sexualized objectification, subjection, and racialized violence. Through sexual fantasy we can name our bodies and their parts anything we want—thick brown cocks and tight little pussies are available to anyone who wants them, without need for state licensing agencies. In our fantasies and in our sexual play we can make familial shame sexy and state discipline erotic. In fantasy, being stopped at the border, strip-searched, and forced to kneel at the altar of militarized American masculinity can seem just the right antidote after a long

day butching it up in front of yet another academic committee that wants to make racial difference disappear.

The world outside fantasy, however, also has a way of pushing back to assert its penetrating power on our psychic lives, reminding us of the sticky substances that cling to our intimate sexual practices, returning us to forms of sociality that have constructed us as perverse racialized sexual subjects. I am writing in the wake of the passage of Arizona's racial profiling law (SB 1070) and while the violence of the U.S.-Mexico border is nothing new, its discursive production as "news" forces it back into consciousness. Curiously, while some feminists and queers (but certainly not all or even most) may seem quite accustomed to speaking aloud reinscriptions of rape and incest through fantasy, language, and intimate play, the inclusion of racial tropes continues to complicate the *jouissance* of sexual fantasy. And even as we insist that "daddy play" does not condone, engender, or map easily onto actual accounts of coercive incestuous relations, playing with the border patrol can generate another sort of visceral repulsion in the face of the lived violations and cruelties that also happen everyday. But the wide range of sexual appropriations that constitute the fantasy lives of queers and others, even those that seem more benign, are rarely devoid of their own racial markers — lesbian prison fantasies, the colonial harem, and the ubiquitous trope of the prostitute also reveal an intimacy with sexual objectification that is intrinsically linked to racialized and classed narratives of the coercive deployment of power. And core to the understanding and practice of communities of sexual play — including queer of color S/M communities — is the dialectic of master and slave, a racialized violation that retains its erotic charge regardless of the embodiment of its defined players.[30] Even the romantic fantasy of love, marriage, and domestic bliss (whether hetero or homo) does not extricate us from the uneven power dynamics dependent on the racialized articulations of sameness and difference that sustain and service the material conditions of those real and imagined domestic lives.

So how do we begin to make sense of our politically incorrect erotic desires? More to the point, what kind of sense is even desirable or possible? Karmen MacKendrick suggests that sexual play with power not only undoes the stability of identity categories but also disrupts the very edges of subjectivity, as "counterpleasures" may be "a starting point for a more radical disruption of any subjectivity at all."[31] In a way, MacKendrick brings us back to a kind of queer theoretical communion with Bersani. The sexual subjects that she describes are not simply "shattered" in the manner Bersani describes, however, since for MacKendrick subjectivity is both disrupted and thought anew, through relationality: "The effects of this subversion will ripple beyond the no longer individual; at a minimum they

affect intersubjective relations. This is not the defiance of repression but the joy of power" (122). On the dynamics between bottoms and tops, she writes:

> Howevermuch the participants may feel together they do not feel the same. The joy of these practices belongs neither to the bottom alone nor solely to the top, nor is it wholly true that each has her own power—rather the power being relational, begins in the relation, the space between these two (or more) subjects, a space between boundaries that this movement of power will rupture. (130)

Perhaps it is this desire to rupture, traverse, disrupt, or refute the power of race that is being acted out in racialized sexual fantasies and play. These imagined moves of power are neither subversive nor staid, but for racialized subjects they present an occasion to stare into the face of racialized erotics and pain in a gesture of critique and imagination that attempts to unravel both individual subjectivity and the existing social relations that surround us.

To deny our fantasies because they are too complicated, too painful, or too perverse, to erase their presence or censor their articulation in public life, constitutes a particular kind of insidious violence that threatens to undermine our ability to explore the contours of our psychic lives, and the imaginary possibilities of the social worlds in which we exist. For Butler:

> Fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable. The struggle to survive is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy, and the foreclosure of fantasy—though censorship, degradation, or other means—is one strategy for providing for the social death of persons. Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside.[32]

Fantasy, even in its most painful and dystopic forms, is thus inherently embedded in queer understanding of utopian longings.

Racialized female subjects have articulated these deeply perverse and prohibited imagined sexual scenarios in multiple contexts and genres. Consider, for example, the 2007 show of performance artist La Chica Boom, the stage persona of the Chicana burlesque performance artist Xandra Ibarra.[33] A performative reenactment of the violent erotics of the U.S.-Mexico border, the piece begins with a border patrol agent, played by the Chippewa performer Sheu Sheu leHaure, using

a pair of oversized binoculars to search through the audience to the soundtrack of the *Dragnet* theme song. While racial ambiguity and the place of the theater work to construct leHaure as the embodiment of a white state, her identity as a Native person and the context of a burlesque organized around people of color also correctly mirrors the pervasive presence of people of color as border agents, thus casting this as a brown-on-brown interface of erotic power. The music then shifts to the oldies classic by James and Bobby Purify, "I'm Your Puppet," as Ibarra enters the stage as a campy version of a Mexican marionette and quickly pulls out a small American flag, ready to wave it in order to gain access to the other side. Ibarra is thus revealed as a puppet of both the U.S. state and of discursive regimes that demand assimilation and submission. The border patrol agent then yanks the flag off of its tiny handle, and Ibarra kneels to polish his shoes; as she bends over, the agent slaps her ass, and Ibarra's face evinces the pain of feminine capitulation to masculinized state control. As the piece proceeds, the border patrol agent forcefully removes Ibarra's clothing piece by piece, violating the burlesque expectation of feminine agency that conditions the traditional strip-tease. The audience at this point is at a loss, not knowing whether to cheer for her increasing exposure or boo the staged violation. Each time our Mexican marionette is relieved of an item of clothing, she attempts once again to cross the threshold of the door frame that serves as the border, being stopped each time, until almost nude she is finally able to cross to the other side. Once across the threshold, she is nevertheless detained and led off stage by the agent, suggesting that even acquiescence to sexual violence does not ensure unrestrained entry.

For Ibarra, the context of a performance space that would consist primarily of people of color was absolutely necessary for her to attempt the piece publicly.[34] Yet she also recounts that the audience reaction, including the outpouring of racialized pain and repulsion, has made her hesitant to stage the piece again. Repulsion and outrage, however, were not the only reactions she noted; other Latina audience members also confessed the explosive erotic power of the piece, including their desires to reenact the scene privately as either the border patrol agent or Mexican doll. As a burlesque artist Ibarra is an attentive dominatrix, and the implied consent of what she terms a "knowing audience" becomes one of the many layers of power she negotiates within her performances, even as she delights in pushing viewers into treacherous affective territories that challenge their own understanding of sexual safety. These performances, like others that we witness and in which we take part on the stages and screens of the everyday, attempt to make meaning out of the scenes that etch their ways into our psychic imaginaries, that slither their ways into our most perverse fantasies. And as in other consensual

sexual play, context is everything, informing and exceeding every attempt to register meaning, a context that is, at its most fundamental level, a space of sociality.

Reenacting these sexual violations and the fantasies that give them their erotic charge exposes the violence with which I began, picking at our wounds as embodied racialized sexual subjects. Trying to explain these unruly thoughts through recourse to psychoanalytic formulations of casual relationships — as a response to the trauma of a primal scene — never fully satisfies; everyday trauma constitutes our lives. Likewise, attempts to understand these reenactments as a type of cure miss the point. The very language of a therapeutic cure upholds those pathologizing discourses that mark the psychic and material lives of queer racialized feminine subjects as perverse and diseased, in a hegemonic discourse that sees sickness and perversity as that which must be contained or destroyed. Instead, these scenes of polymorphous eroticism enacted in language, in fantasy, in film, on stage, and in sexual play work to make queer sense of our lives as the subjects of power, a sense that begins to become comprehensible only within the frames of queer sociality. Yet it is a sense that is never fully legible or knowable, even to ourselves, a sense that is always just a sense, a gesture toward a way of knowing that betrays its own desire for futurity.

Notes

I wish to extend my thanks to those readers who helped me untangle the messiness of my theoretical desires in this essay: Rosío, Julia Chang, Cathy Hannabach, Hoang Tan Nguyen, and the astute and attentive editors of this special issue.

1. Norma Alarcón, "Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism," in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 137.
2. Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Michèle Aina Barale, Henry Abelove, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1984), 3–4.
3. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 3.
4. For journals that have chronicled these debates, see "Forum: Conference Debates," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 819–36. This issue printed summaries of the 2005 MLA conference session "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," December 27, 2005, Washington, DC, which included Robert L. Caserio, Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz. See also *GLQ* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007), a special issue devoted to queer temporalities; a special double issue of *Social Text*, nos. 85–86 (2005) titled "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," a special issue of *South*

Atlantic Quarterly 106 (2007), "After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory," and *GLQ* 17, no. 1 (2011), a special issue entitled "Rethinking Sex."

5. José Esteban Muñoz, "Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 825.
6. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76.
7. Bersani, *Homos*, 177.
8. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), viii, 38. Although the present essay takes issue with Bersani's articulation of sociality, in the service of more generative and generous queer bonds, it bears noting my indebtedness to his work. His seminal 1987 essay, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," opened up the legitimacy and urgency of theorizing the dynamics of embodied sexual practices. The historical situatedness of that work, amid the crisis and grief of the AIDS pandemic and the subsequent pressure within some elements of the gay community to conform to normative sexual models, seems particularly noteworthy, and places that piece within the political landscape of Rubin's 1984 essay "Thinking Sex." See Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197–222. For an alternate and much more detailed reading of the possibilities of sociality offered by Bersani, see Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Homosexual," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 826–28, and his more recent "Sex and the Aesthetics of Existence," *PMLA* 125 (2010): 387–92. Dean, the most incisive reader of the larger trajectory of Bersani's work, argues that in Bersani, "self-shattering" is but a necessary precursor to the production of new forms of sociality.
9. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
10. See Jafari Sinclaire Allen, "For 'the Children' Dancing the Beloved Community," *Souls* 11 (2009): 311-26.
11. Alarcón, "Conjugating Subjects," 129.
12. See Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
13. Karen Tongson, "The Light That Never Goes Out: Butch Intimacies and Sub-Urban Sociabilities in 'Lesser Los Angeles,'" in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 355–76.
14. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 16.
15. McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 1.
16. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
17. Ann Pelligrini, "Consuming Lifestyle: Commodity Capitalism and Transformations in Gay Identity," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*,

ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 143.

18. Robert McRuer and Abby L. Wilkerson, "Introduction," Special Issue: "Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies," *GLQ* 9, nos. 1–2 (2003): 8. For a more sustained theorization of how disability studies informs sex and sexuality, and its intersections with other vectors of analysis, see this special issue. See also the special issue of *NWSA Journal* 14 (2002), titled "Feminist Disability Studies," specifically the essay by Abby Wilkerson, "Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency," 33–57.
19. For example, the Harlem Renaissance produced both the "Race Woman" and the bawdy blues diva against which the former was positioned; the lesbian feminist movements of the 1970s imagined both a Lesbian Nation and a strict sexual code of conduct (and desire) for participation in that imagined citizenship; Caribbean postcolonial nations criminalized and disciplined queers, prostitutes, and other feminized sexual subjects into submission by "revolutionary" postcolonial forces. For the most iconic scholarly accounts of these periods, see Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Cleis, 2003); and Jacqui M. Alexander, "Not Just (Any)Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas," *Feminist Review* 48 (1994): 5–22.
20. See Hoang Tan Nguyen, "I Got This Way from Eating Rice: Gay Asian Documentary and the Re-education of Desire," unpublished typescript, from "A View from the Bottom: Gay Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2009). This analysis of interracial sexual dynamics echoes previous articulations written by black gay men, most notably in the 1980s and 1990s. For especially pointed and daring readings of Joseph Beam and Marlon Riggs, see Darieck Scott, "Jungle Fever? Black Identity Politics, White Dick, and the Utopian Bedroom," *GLQ* 1 (1994): 299–321.
21. This reeducation calls to mind the Cuban government's early attempts to bring sexual deviants such as prostitutes and homosexuals into the political fold of the nation through reeducation efforts aimed at teaching gender normativity.
22. Nguyen "I Got This Way," 14.
23. Nguyen enacts these theoretical moves both as an academic and as a filmmaker. For a reading of the visual logics of social bonds that require a temporal dislocation in Nguyen's film *K.I.P*, see Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or Erotohistoriography," *Social Text*, no. 23 (2005): 57–68. For a reading of diasporic desire in his film *Pirated!* see Mimi Nguyen, "'In the Arms of Pirates, under the Bodies of Sailors': Diaspora, Desire, and Danger in Nguyen Tan Hoang's *Pirated!*" in *Charlie Don't Surf: 4 Vietnamese American Artists*, ed. Viet Le and Alice Ming Wai Jin (Vancouver: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2005), 66–75.

24. Despite my attempts to write sex as a practice—imaginary, embodied, or otherwise—that can exist in seemingly endless forms, I also want to allow a space for the radical queer potential of asexuality, the refusal of sex, and indeed of desire. While I may argue that sex and sociality are linked, I, of course, recognize endless other ways to access queer sociality in nonsexual forms.
25. Freeman, "Time Binds," 59.
26. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 15.
27. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 228–29.
28. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.
29. See Juana María Rodríguez, "Gesture and Utterance: Fragments from a Butch-Femme Archive," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggarty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 282–91.
30. See specifically Isaac Julian's film *The Attendant* (1992), which stages a tableau of slavery in which a black body is whipped by a white master, and then reverses the optics to have the white man whipped by the black man.
31. Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 96.
32. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.
33. "Kaleidoscope, the First Annual National People of Color Cabaret," Columbia City Theater, Seattle, WA, September 1, 2007.
34. Xandra Ibarra, phone conversation with author, May 11, 2010.