

# Interview with Sally R Munt, Sexualities journal

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## Abstract

Part of a series of interviews with ground-breaking theorists of sexuality for the journal *Sexualities: Studies in Culture and Society*. Previous contributors include Judith Butler, Esther Newton and Zygmunt Bauman.

## Keywords

Interview theorists, Queer Studies, academic cultures

## The majority of your work focuses on aspects of queer life, particularly lesbian experiences. What drew you to this field?

Well, after growing up as a Christian tomboy, in my late teens/early 20s I was sort of a nun, a member of a religious community, having a closet affair with my pastoral mentor, a woman who ended up being a vicar. This community was part of a 1970s anarcho-Christian, Left-wing, contemplative, social change advocacy movement that emerged from a conflation of Latin American Liberation Theology and the Civil Rights Movement. I did not know this at the time, but as I am descended from Protestant Anabaptist martyrs burned at the stake under Tudor Queen Mary, these beliefs are in my blood. Nevertheless, the Christians chucked me out, because of the affair (although no-one actually mentioned it, it was the unspoken reason). So I went off to college in Weymouth and spent a lonely summer in 1983 on a Dorset beach, avidly reading the entire backlist of Virago Press and The Womens' Press for company. I was a lonely (and probably a bit odd) child, and reading had always been my

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friend. I still had a Spiritual Director at that time, and when I mentioned my reading, her response was to rebuke me firmly that ‘the trouble with feminism is that it’s full of lesbians’, so I thought, ‘I must find those lesbians’. I dumped Christianity and moved to Brighton.

In those days, Brighton was notoriously lesbian feminist. There was a shadowy backstreet pub known to be butch/femme, but this was much frowned upon by middle class university types, and their main dyke activity was at The Long Branch Club – which was actually also run by an older b/f couple. During the mid-1980s, I remember a woman’s arts benefit in the Pavilion Theatre in which a student from Sussex University showed her music video of Police’s ‘Every Breath You Take’. It was a parody of stalking, and the whole place of maybe 200 women seemed to explode into rage, I could not understand why. The filmmaker became distraught. I had no clue what was going on, people were just screaming and getting hysterical. I went on holiday to Greece for a fortnight and when I came back no-one was talking to each other and neither would anyone explain, a veil of silence descended. That moment was the symbolic end of collective feminist activism in Brighton, and I was left to surmise that realism was the only permissible genre for feminists to work in, and that any whiff of irony or parody would mean instant excommunication. It was like living with the nuns, but worse, because I could not understand the codes; I used to joke that I had swapped one religious sect for another. It was awful, but at the same time it was intensely exciting. So, like 90% of academics, I got into this field because it was All About Me.

### **How do you think the field of sexualities studies has changed since you first started researching this area?**

I could only find Bonnie Zimmerman’s pioneering literary criticism *The Safe Sea of Women* when I was a PhD student in the 1980s, so I edited a new collection of lesbian literary criticism myself; it was the only time I made any money out of publishing, because that book *New Lesbian Criticism* sold tens of thousands of copies, I was poor and I needed it. At that time, I was a lesbian feminist which meant it was a political label as well as a sexual one; ‘queer’ did not come along until several years later. My second book was my PhD in cultural politics, and it was still basically pre-queer, on feminist crime fiction. In my third book *Lesbian and Gay Studies*, I was still not feeling it, and it was not until books four and five (*Heroic Desire*, which was my love letter to lesbian identity, and *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* which was a book I did just for fun) – that I started doing what we now call queer studies, which coincided with the period in my 30s and 40s in which I identified as butch myself. Queer in the 1990s came with a backlash against identity politics, in the heady rush of the postmodern academy. Postmodernism’s energy was utopian, sort of how José Esteban Muñoz described it: it really was a desire for new sexual and collective possibilities, which perhaps fitted the fin de siècle epoch. But even then, it came with a yielding kind of loss, with the fading of those brief, conflicted moments of collective feminist consciousness. We gained other kinds of imaginative possibilities, but queer effectively supplanted a feminist political momentum until #MeToo came along two decades later. I suppose a gender solidarity was unintentionally derailed. We stopped talking about building homes for aged lesbians and frankly I am beginning to regret that now.

In broad terms, the 1970s and 1980s were underpinned by strong Leftist movements that in the UK were made possible by a welfare state. Thatcher's agenda was to destroy that state, something that the British Tory/LibDem Coalition Government in 2010 made tangible with its Austerity agenda. For a brief moment in our nation's history, political economy had enabled oppositional movements to thrive. In one of the ironies of 1980s Thatcher's Britain, her government's social benefit, the Enterprise Allowance, gave many of us forty quid a week to invest in alternative cultural production of all types, and provided enough security with housing and basic income to protect and enable the labour of our activism. Thatcher's economic policy made everyone an entrepreneur and enabled a reverse discourse that was instrumental in terms of building alternative hopes and dreams. Now, the poverty safety-net of welfare has been effectively replaced by the Gig economy of zero-hours contracts, it has removed people's capacity to politically mobilise as they are too exhausted and/or too ill. Nowadays it is much more difficult to create alternate political realities – people are quick to blame social media for mobilising right-wing populism (and of course that is a powerful aspect), but I remain convinced by Bill Clinton's campaign meme 'it's the economy, stupid' (James Carville, 1992). As we plummeted into Brexit, and into a resultant economic catastrophe made starker by COVID-19, it may be that welfare reforms may creep back onto the agenda, but I am not holding my breath for a utilitarian Tory conscience to emerge.

So, because Maslow's hierarchy of needs were sorted by Thatcher's state benefits, studying sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s became possible and felt urgent as a work of political representation. But in the 1990s, such efforts became more experimental (in mind and body, as it happens), and it was heady, intense. I could not really cope well with what felt like the commodification of senses, and attachments, and I often felt out of my depth. It was fun and harsh, at the same time. We were inventing, but we were also sometimes reaching beyond our capacities; there was a certain kind of ruthlessness at that time, perhaps even recklessness in the way we treated each other. My academic life and my personal life became one and the same, and I am not sure whether for a time our dreams outran our grasp, because humans have *a priori* social needs of stability and security, and we cannot cope with too much indecipherability. We were having categorical crises all over the place, which can be a lot to manage! But I found the backstreet butch/femme pub and met some postal workers and bus drivers and drag queens and discovered somewhat of a sanctuary from the febrile and neurotic machinations of bourgeois university life.

The academy snapped us up as young academics, and it seemed like then there were a lot of jobs, gender/queer studies became marketable. When universities became businesses, and students were now customers, there was considerably more pressure to 'train' rather than 'educate'. In the last couple of decades, our work in sexuality has become more instrumental and manifested in things like 'transferable skills'. So latterly, in teaching, I told my students that there are two purposes in doing my modules, the ostensible one, which is to gain and repeat knowledge and pass their assessments (because we all need to eat), and the subtextual one, which is to engage in ethical reflection, to ask ourselves what kind of person do I want to be in my relationship with others?

I read a lot of Liberation Theology when I was young, and it still informs my pedagogy, because despite postmodern cynicism and dissembling, we still need to liberate our ideas.

It was later on that the political movements of the 1970s and 1980s became labelled retrospectively and perhaps pejoratively as ‘identity politics’, I remember using the concept of liberation at a conference in the 1990s and being attacked for it, for being ‘gullible’. It was critical (and exhausting) at that time to believe in constant reinvention, and it was an intellectual faux-pas to deploy a pre-existing self that required liberating. At the time, we would not have described our movements as ‘identity politics’, we would have said that we were involved in liberation politics, a different slant entirely, and I suspect that whilst postmodernism has had its benefits, the loss of mobilisation around identity in order to fight for our ‘liberation’ silenced many once powerful voices. Whilst the concept of queer has been very useful for deploying challenges to mainstream culture, it is rather less useful as a political tool. The liberation movements got rather professionalised by academia, and abstracted.

### **What would you say are the key themes that inform your work?**

Always social justice issues – I think everything I have written has had this at the source, and I think many of us from my generation do this work, I am not special in that. We benefitted from free university education, a funding support denied working class teenagers today who continue to suffer exclusion from the luxury of higher education and a lifetime of debt. Working class students are much less likely to benefit from highly paid careers post-university, social mobility is much more intransigent than university marketing would admit. Our generation was funded by taxation to lift ourselves up, it was a brief spell of social democracy in our country, paid for by industrial production, that the current government would no doubt label ‘communist’, so poisonous has the principle of redistribution become. Excluding working class students from contributing intellectually impoverishes our ability to imagine things differently. I am always drawn to social and cultural exclusions, for example, in 2013, I did a book with Olu Jenzen on paranormal cultures, it’s a beautiful book, there is not much sex in it but it’s definitely queer! I try to notice what attracts contempt because there is a surfeit of contempt in academic life, academics are terrible snobs, and I am very sensitive to it. Universities also perpetuate militant secularism and contempt for any kind of folk spirituality or mysticism. Academics subscribe to the gods of empirical analysis and classification – in a classic repressive hypothesis, perhaps academics are the real Victorians! Relatedly, I am perennially frustrated by how much academics persist in viewing the underclasses as stupid and having base cultural practices (consider how many of the liberal middle classes blame the poor for Brexit and Trump, when in fact the largest demographic to vote them in, in both cases, was the white petit bourgeoisie). I am still astonished by the kinds of comments that pass for acceptable in universities, and the older I got, the more I found this environment chafing. Years ago, I made a decision only to focus on ideas that have the potential for social change. I was brought up in a family that chattered incessantly about politics (my grandparents were working class intellectuals, conscientious objectors in the Great War, vegetarians, socialists, anti-vivisectionists and Spiritualists), and I thank them, although I never knew them, for the gift of being Questioning and Bloody-Minded, and Difficult, which I have definitely inherited. It’s exhausting to be perpetually challenging

the status quo though, and I do not always get this right; in nearly 40 years in academia, I have made plenty of mistakes – but I have also learned that if you are going to be the thorn then you also need to learn how to retreat and protect yourself and be sheathed.

I think that the other theme that informs my work has been ‘precarity’. Only class privilege allows academics to explore the life of the mind in and for itself, without thinking about money. For me, being an academic has been framed by my material conditions. I have never had a financial safety net, so if I lost my job I would lose my home, and this fear has subtly informed my whole career until I finally paid off the rest of my mortgage because my brother Richard died. My personal loss has been ironically freeing, in that for the first time in my life I have the security of a home (this was my brother’s last gift to me, although he spent half his life disabled, dependent and ultimately demented, as the eldest he had always aspired to be our provider/protector). For the first time I feel materially secure, and hence free to say what I think without fear of reprisals. I have been reflecting on the extent to which this precarity had underpinned my research decisions. I have had to negotiate the knowledge that the neoliberal academy values money more than anything else in promotion and job security evaluations, and this often goes contrary to performing queer research. I have spent 20 years on international and national research assessment panels and I can pretty confidently assert that queer research – creative and good projects – rarely gets funded. Queer research gets funded when it presented as *\*really\** being about something else, such as migration, transnationalism, spirituality/religion, health, parenthood or many other themes except primarily sexuality. Young scholars need to protect themselves and package their work accordingly, because higher education is resolutely mainstream and conformist, and quite a toxic environment for most minority groups. I wish that someone had told me this practical information at the start, which is: in order to get queer research funded, you need to underpin its credentials via respectable and recognised/safe intellectual frameworks. Funding panels, for all their rhetoric, prefer convention to innovation, it is very counter-intuitive. For a brief moment in the 1990s under New Labour, queer studies *was* perceived to be edgy and interesting, but in these more conservative times, there has been a backlash and retrenchment into narrow-minded disciplinarity.

### **You write extensively about affect, particularly shame. How do you think queer life is affected by shame and has this changed over time?**

In my lifetime (I was born in 1960), queer lives have been transformed in terms of legal status and visibility, but I am not sure we have yet fully understood the extent to which shame structures sexuality. Going back to my previous point, we significantly fail to understand how Christian values continue to underpin sexualities, great and small, in Western cultures. Homosexuality continues to be pervaded by shame (how could it not?), but for some, that shame has been projected onto others in forms of envy and contempt. Recently, I published an article ‘Gay Shame in a Geopolitical Context’, which is a reflection on how gay shame has been globalised and projected onto Islamophobic imaginaries, in representational mechanisms that really are not that different from the

colonial imaginaries of the 19th century. We like to think that we are more ‘knowing’ these days, but I suggest that these white unconscious, discursive projections pop up again regularly in racialised phantasies that ‘get rid of shame’ by ascribing it to Muslim terrorists and transnationally relocating it back onto brown bodies. We have to be able to understand why white gays are increasingly drawn to conservatism and even neo-fascism, and how those groups attract (by provoking primitive fears) gay subjects whose interests are antithetical to fascism’s core precepts. There is a particularly pernicious myth embedded there, that Westerners are free of sexual shame, that neoliberalism has granted freedom via the markets. I think it is possible to resolve shame, but first it is necessary to recognise it. As a psychotherapist in clinical practice, I find that shame is usually the last emotion to get recognised and acknowledged by clients. Shame is shy, sly, and often presents symptomatically in envy, contempt and hatred. I have written about the pernicious effects of shame, but I am planning a book (if in retirement I ever finish it) called *In Defence of Shame*, in which I want to outline the necessity of shame. I gestured towards this in *Queer Attachments*, in which I described shame as having the Newtonian force of a slap in the face. When the face is turned away, it allows different connections (and therefore attachments) to form, so it has radical potential. In the new book I want to consider the rising problem of *shamelessness*; politically, the world is in a new era of shamelessness that has seen a massive surge in support for political leaders without conscience, brutes and bullies who mobilise raw emotions and glamorize violence. Conversely, we have social media that is suffused with shaming acts; so, we have this conundrum in which populations are mobilising for and against shame simultaneously. This is epiphenomena of global capitalism that requires our investigation.

**I would argue that ‘lesbian’ is an incoherent category, but that it is often viewed as a rigid, inflexible term that has negative stereotypes and connotations. For that reason, I think it’s important to use it and cite in order to challenge those negative associations and assert it as a category of multiplicity. How do you view the term?**

I do not think of myself as a lesbian anymore, I think of the term as generationally specific. When I use the term it’s as you say, strategically, either to signal political solidarity or to describe my historical self. I have not (in truly postmodern sensibility) ‘transcended’ lesbianism, but the older I get I find I am less and less interested in what body parts people have. Other things are attractive: kindness, empathy, reliability, intelligence, humour and warmth. I am quite resistant to being called ‘queer’ though, because that descriptor came in after my generation had named ourselves and to do so (as lesbian) was a big costly fight, which I do not want to forget. These days, living with dogs, cats and a regular clientele of foxes and seagulls, I prefer to think of my dominant identity as ‘animal’. Thinking of oneself as an animal readjusts one’s priorities: it challenges Humanistic aspirations to species supremacy, it focuses one’s attention on the life cycle, and it reorients oneself to our interdependence on other species. In a climate emergency, these reorientations are necessary.

To the extent that 'lesbian' is coherent, that makes me respond with Monique Wittig's powerful writing in *Le Corps Lesbien* (The Lesbian Body) in which she famously claims that 'lesbians are not women' and argues for the advantages of illegibility. We have to make lesbians visible and invisible, which requires circumstantial dexterity. I did not look at Internet porn until this year (I am a child of my times) and when I did, lesbian acts were *everywhere*, but not in a good way. I found it peculiarly unstimulating and it provoked me into remembering that sexual discourse in Western culture is predominantly visual, when in everyday life it is much more about touch and intimacy. I think we have to be careful, though, about managing the vestiges of shame attached to the word 'lesbian' which remains predominantly an insult within mainstream culture. Using the synonym 'queer' is preferred by young women because I think it signifies 'not rigid, not inflexible' and therefore presumably 'less negative'. But the man-hating butch lesbian is the spectre behind such modern nomenclature.

**You edited a book called *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, which was published in 1998. What was the inspiration for this?**

I found butch/femme really comfortable to inhabit. I spent my 30s and 40s living in this mode. I looked up to the key American writers of butch/femme culture, like Joan Nestle, Jewelle Gomez, Esther Newton, Gayle Rubin ... I found their writing really intersectional, relatable and intensely political in a way that I was not finding in other places. Whereas my Mum and I always seemed to be in conflict, I also just adored my Dad (classic divorced parents split/identification, by the way!). I lived through a butch identification for many years that I have not quite relinquished but I do not feel it in the same authentic way now, either, it's more vestigial. I was proud to be a butch adventurer, I got into a lot of scrapes that retrospectively I think were risky and foolish, but I am also so glad and grateful that butch/femme allowed me space to explore whilst providing some kind of ontological security. At the time of editing the book, butch/femme had become fashionable again with middle class lesbians, whereas in the 1970s and 1980s it was seen as shameful and 'common'. A lot of lesbian intellectuals got briefly enamoured with butch/femme and in many ways it became a minor social trend.

In the wake of postmodernity and the misappropriation of Butler's *Gender Trouble*, it seems now that butch/femme is mainly practiced ironically, and gender is seen as intentional, voluntary and consciously expressive. We have lost something there. I also got worn out by homophobia – being visibly butch takes a psychological toll, it requires energy and verve to present and perform a stigmatised yet proud identity, day after day after day, and in the end I just got tired. I have had to fight so much in my life (I am from a working class background, I have chronic illness/disability, I spent 16 years in psychotherapy, I have been gender dysphoric and so on) that I had to consider which struggles to relinquish. As a butch lesbian I used to think that it was not the outright homophobia that kills you, it's the withdrawal of warmth, it's the cold demand that you have to continuously fight for the right to belong, to be recognised and valued, be seen as a person. This became too hard. Thankfully, age brings with it a certain relaxation of gender expectations, so when I hit 60 there became fewer pressures on my gender presentation,

and in many ways becoming less visible via age is a relief. (Just to qualify that though, I do not equate ageing with becoming sexless). I have been looking more butch recently due to my accidental Pandemic haircuts (I forgot to put the plastic attachment on the clippers), but I decided my age meant I could get away with it. I could not have got away with this when I was younger as the shaven look is perceived as too brutal/uncompromising for a woman, and incites homophobia. Now, people are too polite to say anything in case I have got cancer.

**Recently, there has been some interest in butch lesbian identities in mainstream culture, for example, features in magazines and representation in shows such as *Orange is the New Black*. How do you view this development?**

I do not think this is a new development, I think there have been other breakthrough moments in popular culture, such as Herb Ritts' photo of K D Lang and Cindy Crawford on the cover for Vogue magazine in 1993, the *Brookside* soap opera snog in 1994, Ellen Degeneres, lots of *Buffy*, Sue Perkins in her various guises, the British institution which is Clare Balding – there is a plethora of lesbian representations on television now, albeit some of them continue to be problematic such as in *Coronation Street* on which so many lesbians seem to end up dead. It's like the 1950s all over again up North, if you only watch soap opera.

Lesbians are still popping up in dramas as a way of providing narrative spice and signalling 'edgy'; however, I think the breakthrough representations of British lesbians on television this century have been in the stolidly British comedy-drama *Last Tango in Halifax* (2012-) which shows lesbians as ordinary, integrated and centred in English life, and of course the absolutely glorious BBC drama *Gentleman Jack* (2019-on), the vitality of which took my breath away. These two leading characters are at one and the same time representing upper/middle class English life and yet manage to be remarkably disrupting. These lesbians are pillars of the community, and best of all, live in West Yorkshire, where I grew up. *Last Tango in Halifax* and *Gentleman Jack* are written by Sally Wainwright, who has singlehandedly infiltrated iconic lesbians into British television culture by her sheer ingenuity, social observation and wit.

**What do you think is the place of butch/femme within queer theory today?**

There is a suggestion that butch/femme has been eclipsed by trans visibility, but the issues there are complex and the positions taken seem so intense and harsh it is very difficult to disentangle or to speak with any authority. Understanding why the debates feel so polarised and conflictual necessitates an understanding about the poverty of representation and why that produces subcultures that scrap over the ownership of the few precious images that there are. I am not sure where queer theory is today to be honest, I tried reading a couple of queer theory books about 5 years ago and found them, as we say in

Yorkshire to be rather ‘up their own arse’, it felt tired and derivative. I wondered if queer theory has had its moment (it achieved a great deal!), and what we need more urgently is good, solid, empirical fieldwork. If I had to mark one more student dissertation on queer representations in film I think I might have had to fulfil the cliché and kill myself at the end. I really want to know more about lived experiences. It is as though we feel social research on LGBTQIs etc., has been ‘done’. It has not been done. Queer realities are barely understood, queer everyday lives are subjected to much ignorant assumption; do we all want to get married now? It feels like that debate basically silenced more nuanced investigation, it was the Trojan horse for homonormativity that seemed to drive out any idea there might be alternatives.

**Your work touches on many aspects of lesbian and queer experience – affect, religion and desire, for example. What would you say is the main contribution of your work in relation to sexuality studies?**

Crikey. I have no idea. Is not that for others to judge? I am always surprised and flattered when someone contacts me and says ‘I read your piece on...’. Do not most academics think they are writing in a private chatroom with an audience of 1?!

If pushed I would like readers to take from my work the idea that life is short and glorious and always exceeds our attempts to explain it. I would ask them to be more consciously alert to quotidian power. Foucault remains the biggest influence on how I understand the world, and his death from sepsis/AIDS represented a huge loss to our field – think how we might have enjoyed challenging him about feminism. He died aged 58 which is younger than I am now. We desperately needed his fourth volume on the History of Sexuality (*Les Aveux de la Chair*) to help us think through how Christianity has shaped queer peoples. I would like my readers to consider how people are generally more fragile than they appear (brave Foucault, writing and writing even though he must have felt terribly tired and ill) and generally consider how to make academic life less combative and individualistic.

This last point I struggle with all the time, as university life has become more and more Kafkaesque, our energy for political interventions is drained: at the point where you have submitted and revised your request for a new module form 13 times, you have ceased to care about it. Academic life is filled with illegitimate bureaucratic claims that weaken our critical attention, as the anarchist and Anthropologist, the late David Graeber would say, they are ‘bullshit jobs’. I would like us to remember that the whole energy of living at the moment is consuming our faculties, yet we have finite resources, globally and individually. Whilst sexuality studies are important, because they contribute to the vexation of what it is to be human, we also need to think about human-animal rights more broadly; queer research should make us question ethics and always push for intersectional analysis, it should provoke us into seeking alliances across identity-lines because as outsiders there are so many injustices for us to feel and think with.

My recent work with refugees and asylum seekers evolved out of my work on sexualities. Some of the people I work with are seeking asylum because of their non-normative sexualities, but some are so wounded that sexuality is the least of their concerns. We are about to experience a global crisis for survival, as psychopathic narcissists lead major nations towards the abyss of climate destruction. I believe the Coronavirus to be a consequence of our annihilation of the natural world. We must continue to aggravate for minority rights but I think also recognise our diminution in this vast dramatic catastrophe which is global warming. My link to this has been experiential – in 2007, I started scuba diving and whilst diving coral reefs I have thought a great deal about the queer realities of marine life. Due to the pioneering work of marine biologists like Victoria Braithwaite who died in 2019 aged only 52, we know that fish feel pain, have emotion and personalities. Their sexualities are so mysteriously other to human sexualities (though not, presumably, to themselves), our preoccupation with human animal sexuality becomes tiny compared to the rest of our planet's biosphere and its chiaroscuro of desires. I wonder about things like octopus sexualities, their potential for sensation is inconceivably complex, they have 9 brains including 1 in each arm; I wonder about what angelfish feel when they kiss, and what does an anthia feel when it changes from female to male, and who makes the decision within the coral colony for her to be chosen? New science is telling us that trees 'talk' to each other, make attachments, sustain each other. Greater humility is required from humans. We remain wedded to the Christian fantasy that God made the earth in order for man to rule over it; recent international laws about non-human persons are challenging this and requiring us to reconsider human hierarchies of classification. We are faced with our great and wilful ignorance whilst at the same time we are watching whole eco-systems die. In thirty years or so, scientists predict that the seas will be empty of fish, through a combination of climate change and over-fishing. Already, the reef I know and love in Egypt is showing signs of bleaching. Thus, we must broaden our vision and cease defining life within the strangling binary of human/non-human. Academics need to make huge, emotional connections to global patterns and recognise the political urgency about acting as well as thinking.

So my advice to early career researchers in sexuality studies is – do not get stuck in a rut, do not get bored, follow your curiosity, be open and have the confidence to explore new things, fulfil your work quotas then look up, look around you, ask yourself 'what am I doing to further activist goals in my research? In what ways can my knowledge be powerful for social change?'.  
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**You have explored diverse topics in relation to sexuality, including alternative spiritualities, in your research and writing. What do you see as the relationship between sexuality, religion and spirituality?**

I have never stopped being interested in spiritualities, and I listen to a lot of religious music (I am an ex-Christian in the same way that I am an ex-smoker, I can still get wistful about having a drag and when I cannot sleep I listen to hymns). I am much more aware of

how we are all part of nature, a nature which is threatened. We are natural organisms that are simultaneously cultural, because nature is also culture (as Elizabeth Grosz's philosophy reminds us). Thus, I also wonder about death a lot, my death, but also the deaths that have been closest to me and the threatened death of all that is beautiful in our world, including ourselves.

We are trained to overvalue our importance in academia, it's inevitable in an organisational culture that revolves around self-promotion and self-importance and it is important to resist being seduced by its false promises or be sucked into the collective paranoia it fuels. Earn enough to be secure and feel safe, and protect your loved ones from destitution, but your job is not your life! I am not focussed on pursuing romantic love anymore, I would not necessarily say no, but I would happily settle for a cuddle with the dogs and spending time with a good friend; my attachments have become less intense. Buddhism has a name for the craving/suffering that life brings (*dukkha*), and most Buddhist traditions discourage too much sexual attachment because that sole preoccupation blinds us to the possible animal/natural attachments all around us, it can make us selfish, absorbed and unempathic. Perhaps we have lost our way with respect to other orientations like intimacy, loyalty, companionship and patience. I often ask people what they find spiritual, and their responses are interesting. For me, my deep happiness comes from being immersed in the sea or seeing a fox sleeping on my shed. Our bodies, minds and hearts are aspects of the natural world. Capitalism fetishises difference and individuation, but I would like to think sameness as an energy of dissolution is insufficiently explored.

**In your article 'A Seat at the Table: some unpalatable thoughts on shame, envy and hate in institutional cultures' (2007), you explore some of the implications of the institutionalization of lesbian scholarship. What are your thoughts on this today?**

The bi-annual Lesbian Lives conference in Dublin and Brighton has been probably one of the precious few places that young scholars can find density of expertise and focus, and the women who run it continue to uphold its heterotopic importance. Of course, it's also full of minor intrigue and gossip, and I am sure functions as all good conferences should as a forum for sexual exchanges. I really hope so. The arguments I made in the article about the toxicity of academia, and the necessity for making allies, and critically interrogating our projections, still stand. What I think has changed since 2007 is that education for profit has become so much more evangelistic, and thus today's young scholars are entering a more insecure and exclusionary job market in which universities view their ideas/bodies/selves explicitly as conditional investments. Lesbian Lives and the few opportunities like it are needed more than ever to provide islands of fellowship in what is becoming an increasingly anti-collegiate industry. Over the years, I have forged great friendships from academic events, and it is these networks that have kept me sane through the stress and tumult of professional life. I think those of us of my generation from the working class who became intellectuals have been blessed with the combination of a welfare state and free education and an old-fashioned enlightenment sense of world

progress. We were perhaps the last generation to feel that we had a right to demand our place and that if we worked hard the future would be better. Precarity is economic and geographic. I wonder what our faculty colleagues in Bangladesh, the Maldives, in the Philippines, the Caribbean and the Middle East are thinking about their futures at the moment.

### **What for you are the pressing research questions about queer experience today? What gaps and erasures do you think exist?**

Because I work a lot with asylum seekers and refugees, I think about the rise in homophobic hate crimes in countries in Africa, strategically funded and exploited by the Christian Religious Right in the USA. After 13 years of clinical work, I have also heard a lot of shocking stories of sexual abuse, but my work with asylum seekers has opened my eyes to how many people have endured sexual torture. Sexual shame is used as a weapon to abuse and force humans to do things they do not want to do. Of course, we have seen the photos of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, but I think there is much more widespread and deliberate denial about the extent to which sexual torture is used as a weapon of war. It's domestic too: I have been considering this week one of our clients who, because of excruciating shame, has not touched his penis since he was a child, when his family tortured him in order to make him turn away from homosexuality. The shame of his past means that he cannot touch himself; he is nearly 40. And I think about how a sweet and gentle man like him manages to not just survive but live, day by day, destitute, homeless, suffering from trauma-based psychosis and mercilessly refused asylum by the UK Immigration Office. I have heard stories of repeated abuse that I can only describe in religious terms as depraved. I am not sure what 'queer' means in such circumstances. We need to talk more openly about the perversions and legacies of abuse, and we need more research about its prevalence and effects; we need to address the strategic deployment of minimisation and doubt to destroy the credibility of abuse survivors. The biological facts of sex (who does what with whom) are not very interesting to me, but sex is made to symbolise all-sorts of cultural transactions about which we should talk more, especially those that are intentionally abusive. The #MeToo movement was significant, but the media has rushed on from it; we need to bring it back into focus with new and better empirical research. Western media others the abuse of women and locates it as though it was something to do only with poor countries/poverty and ignorance, it sees feminism as a white thing: we need research on the relentless sexualisation of girls and young women in Britain. Why is it that sexuality is so relentlessly exploited by capital? Sexuality is sharply striated with anxiety. Such anxiety is easily exploitable. Conversely, we also need to talk about the lack of sexual desire in long-term relationships and challenge the presumption that everyone has a right to sexual intensity from their partner for life; we need more research on singledom, satisfaction/contentment and on friendship. We also need to make historical thinking part of everyday conversation again; it was common in my childhood to discuss the war and have everyday memories of unrepeatable things, yet the present is becoming so intense and demanding it obstructs our capacity to reflect backwards.

I am sliding gracelessly into retirement now. None of us have escaped being groomed, packaged, marketised and sold on as neoliberal subjects working in a for-profit industry. We need to rediscover the lost discourse of public service and recall that we are servants striving for a common good, rather than income-generators profiteering from competitive individualism (not as research council bidding would have us believe). We are institutionalised into discourses of our own deep exceptionalism; perhaps academia functions at the zenith of the 'self as brand', we continue to be operated as cogs in a voracious knowledge machine. But good little Foucauldian that I am, I also see all the viral micro-tactics we deploy in order to resist this ongoing dehumanisation which has become endemic to UK universities. Universities are intensely anxious spaces where competitive scrutiny is ritualised, and I am glad to be putting on my hat and moving on.

In 2020 I had COVID pretty badly, and I am not yet recovered, at one stage my heartbeat was falling so low at night that my heart was stopping, and my autonomic response would kick in, which would mean to be shocked suddenly awake, feeling suffocated and gasping for breath. I have permanent neurological damage, and thus made the decision to stop working full time. I have struggled with chronic illness all my life, I am now officially 'disabled', and I have got my Blue Badge to prove it (I am that stock character of right-wing propaganda: the disabled, old, fat, angry lesbian with too many pets!). Such brushes with death (of ourselves or of those we love) force a philosophical reassessment and create intense sympathies for what Heidegger called *dasein* – for the Being-in-itself which is created through our openness to the world and its miraculous creatures. Being with my companions during lockdown (the human and the non-human) and trying to interact with them more resourcefully, consciously, tenderly and gratefully, confronted me what we do not notice when we are too busy. During the 2020 lockdown, we began to know our everyday biome differently, with more of our senses. Lockdown encouraged me to reach out to life with more attentiveness to its temporary qualities. We can intensely and momentarily attach to a sound, a colour, a word. I have become curious to explore more diffused sensory experiences, but this embrace of the natural world is also accompanied by feelings of regret, of *losing something*. The world will continue to bruise us, and we will bruise it, but, an appreciation of nature's open-handed gifts seems so necessary for mutual self-preservation, gratitude for all living things is a vital defence against our ecological destruction. To continuously say thank you for *this, now*, is to recognise our own brief appearance in this profoundly networked ecology, in which we are never alone.

Riding the wave of Queer Studies has been a vivid journey, but latterly I have become disconnected from it somewhat. When you are young you want heat, when you are older you want warmth. There can be too much centering of one's own experience nowadays which trumps competitively other people's realities or appropriates them. I am wary of this energy which can often be solipsistic, ahistorical and reactive. Social media performances have bled into our lives and caused snap judgments; we do not listen so much. Today, queer experiences feel less collegial and more fragmented or instrumental; we are forgetting how to disagree and still be friends. Online, disembodied pugilism is bleeding into our social lives. Civility, and openness, is reducing. (I wonder sometimes if the destruction of local pubs has something to do with it!)

It's worth reflecting upon the direction Queer Theory took in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when it got rather attenuated and abstracted. I feel it temporarily forgot Marxist pragmatism, which is so grounded in embodiment. I found it sometimes to be a bit – to adopt Bourdieu's term – 'socially weightless', because I am still a Marxist or at least a materialist at heart. Perhaps our *arriviste* status as Western liberal subjects could afford us a bit of indulgence, making us playful in ways that were quietly disconnecting from social realities, maybe thinking about our suffering was too overwhelming for some scholars. Because of our recently acquired cultural capital, maybe we deluded ourselves as to our superior capacity for enlightened thought? I have become suspicious of the ways in which Queer Theory can become a pinch of spice for writing that in all other respects is complacently mainstream or disassociated from the struggle of daily life for many. I am of the generation that grew politics out of lived experience, in empiricism, and used 'reality' as a way of moving people empathically towards identifying with the pain of others. Adorno talked about the 'waste products' of knowledge, he wanted us to consider those things which get left out of the consensus; in a way this applies directly to the industry of knowledge-production in late capitalism, so I would like us to be more suspicious of research that leaves out the pain and the prick to political action. Reading and writing academic journal articles really is not enough, like the worker-priests of Liberation Theology we also have to be activists in a real sense.

I do want to question whether an unintentional outcome of Queer Studies may have been to narrow our vision. Brexit was this great big scream of exclusion and disappointment (and overtly compensatory pride) that as queer scholars we should have predicted, understood and sought to mitigate sooner. What were we (not) thinking?! We did not mobilise our intellects fast enough. In the UK in 2019, 1.6 million people used food banks, I want to ask scholars not to disengage from such everyday scandals and question how we might be misrecognising our social privileges. For all of my working life, in corridors, cafés and offices, queer colleagues have made classist and racist statements to me, believing that their minority status made it permissible. How can this happen? How can a term like cis-gendered, for example, be deployed as an insult, when we have known for at least 3 decades that all human subjects are misgendered, and gender is never a category of stability or authenticity? Have we invested too much in neoliberal fantasies of self-enhancement at the expense of wider social inclusion? Foucault was the first philosopher to understand neoliberalism and the role of sexuality within it, he saw how we invested in the self as enterprise, and how we became entrepreneurs of our own lives, producing our selfhood as a form of human capital. His relentless focus was on power. Polishing our selfhood should lead to acts of collective arousal! For those of us lucky enough to live lives of privilege in the West, the political balance of our rights over our responsibilities has failed. If I have one final message for Queer Studies today, it is to remember our interconnectedness with, and interdependency upon, all living things, and to consider that in our animal mutuality we are living precariously on borrowed time. I have also learned in my psychotherapist work to challenge a fundamental precept of Western life: happiness does not come from within. A meaningful life is based in action, one that is brushed by others in a spirit of radical openness. And whilst pressing concerns of the self might start you off on a journey, perhaps the ambition of that journey is to push

yourself continually outwards, in order to connect to things you do not understand or appreciate, but need to.

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