

Sex Acts Beyond Boundaries and Binaries: A Feminist Challenge for Self Care in Performance Studies

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This essay calls for heterosexual feminists in performance studies to engage in theorizing and problematizing sex, its expressions and effects, evidenced in sanctioned and mundane moments in our lives. Sex acts, at their most normative, can be engaged contextually and critically for the ways disciplinary practices and discourses operate more powerfully on women's bodies than on those of men. This essay utilizes Foucault's characteristics of scientia sexualis to critique the constructions of heterosexual women's sex lives in disciplines that study sex. It then turns to three binary constructions—sex and gender, pleasure and danger, and public and private—that must be attended to and negotiated. Three examples of such brave attention in performance studies are featured as libratory technologies of self-crafting and world fashioning.

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Then there is the shifting middle ground of those things which may or may not be important in the long run, which are crucial to one person and inconsequential to the next, which seem essential and life-sustaining one day and downright stupid the next. This category includes money, a new car, sex, laughter, friendship, save the whales (the elephants, the whooping cranes, the ostriches), gardening, music, ballet, art, literature, and all other forms of happiness. (Schoemperlen 145)

Like Joanna, the protagonist in Diane Schoemperlen's novel *In the Language of Love*, I too fluctuate on the place of sex in my life, finding it "essential and life-sustaining one day and downright stupid the next." And yet, on theoretical and critical levels, I am fascinated. I am fascinated with sex, its organization, its practices, its cultural contours. I just don't necessarily want to do it every day. Somewhere in the gap

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between critical inquiry and material practice, I get weary. Old women, they do get weary.

And I'm more than miffed at Naomi Wolf who counts it as a myth that "men want it more" than women: "Anatomists and sex educators over the last thirty years have found more and more evidence that women are not only designed, anatomically, to be at least as sexually intense as men—but even that *women's capacity for pleasure is extreme* in a way we have yet to accept" (xxvi, emphasis added). Anatomy, once again, is destiny—with a twist. How to account for this "extreme capacity for pleasure" when, sometimes, my weariness makes me less than enthusiastic? Voicing this weariness makes me a gatekeeper in bed. Name *one* radical feminist who's a gatekeeper in bed.

And I'm pissed at Tim Miller, performance artist and one of the dearest men I've ever met, who refers several times to "comfort sex" with his partner in his performance piece, *Glory Box*. That is, he and Alistair return home from an eight-hour transatlantic flight, have "comfort sex," and then, after a nap, and a *second* bout of "comfort sex," emerge refreshed enough to eat sandwiches at their favorite restaurant in Santa Monica. The last thing I want to do after eight hours on an airplane hurtling through space is have sex. The next to last thing I want to do is go out to a restaurant. By comparison, once again, I am lacking. "Female sexuality, because it does not mirror the male's," in Luce Irigaray's critique, "is an absence, or lack, of the male's" (Tong, 202).

And don't *even* get me started on that television commercial for Levitra where that squirmy-ants-in-her-pants-can't-sit-still-*who-directed-this-awfulness?*-woman asks, "Is your man ready for Levitra? Does he want a strong and lasting experience?"

Breathe.

I suppose I can be accused of *looking* for a fight on those days when sex seems "downright stupid." And yet, there are days when sex is, indeed, life sustaining. Sex is a barometer for my marriage, forecasting the relational weather on numerous fronts. Cold fronts and storms give way to low pressure systems that bring clear skies and beautiful days. All my self-identifications pivot on sex: I am middle-aged, white, heterosexual, physically able, married, an academic, a mother—subject positions implicating and enabling sex as raced, classed, produced in and through my body, institutions, and discourses. Sex is a joyful pleasure that sends me into and away from my body and its materiality, its flesh, into and away from the body of my lover. "Power happens to this body," Judith Butler writes, "but this body is also the occasion in which something unpredictable (and, hence, undialectical) happens to power; it is one site of its redirection, profusion, and transvaluation" ("Bodies" 187). At times like this, I can suddenly understand couples for whom sex is a hobby. And I long to be as interested, motivated, and dedicated as they are. All the time.

Sexual Centers, Poles, and Performances

Sex is the center of my writing and thinking as an academic. Sex is a continual spring of interesting questions and contingent answers, although the questions and answers

seem to change day by day, like my sexual temper. Sex moves back and forth between public and private, local and universal, historical and contemporary, discourse and practice, never quite settling comfortably on any one pole, but skittering off to its opposite, to confuse and reinvent the issue of its performance. “Pole” (perhaps an unfortunate pun) is a useful analogy for exploring sex as articulated among Foucault’s “transfer points” of knowledge, power, and pleasure across the proliferating discourses that constitute sexual subjects. Eve Sedgwick’s definition of sex/sexuality also moves across subject positions: “Sex/sexuality does tend to represent the full spectrum of positions between the most intimate and the most social, the most predetermined and the most aleatory, the most physically rooted and the most symbolically infused, the most innate and the most learned, the most autonomous and the most relational traits of being” (*Epistemology* 29). Defining sex—as constitutive of subjectivity and identity, as discursive regimes that define and produce its institutions and material effects, as culturally and materially embodied in historical moments—as a starting point for analysis and critique is like chasing a bead of mercury.

Despite the mercurial definitional task, three performance theorists use sex as an example when attempting to answer the question, “What is performance?” Richard Schechner lists eight common situations in which we use the word performance: “in sex” is number six (25). Introducing the ubiquity of performance as a term to describe social rituals, everyday interactions, political demonstrations, and experimental art works, Jon McKenzie writes, “Today, as we navigate the crack of the millennia, work, play, sex, and even resistance—it’s all a performance to us” (3). Marvin Carlson also utilizes sex as an introductory example:

When we speak of someone’s sexual performance or linguistic performance, or when we ask how well a child is performing in school, the emphasis is not so much on display of skill (although that may be involved) or on the carrying out of a particular pattern of behavior, but rather on the general success of the activity in light of some standard of achievement which may not itself be precisely articulated.
(4)

When sex is utilized as a common heuristic for describing performance, the political value and limitations of that usage demand examination.

When sex and performance come together in the phrase, “sex acts” (as both subject + predicate and adjective + noun), the meanings explode exponentially. “Sex acts” is a phrase that accounts for and describes physical embodiments and practices performed by individuals. *The sex act* at its most normative, according to Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, is “heterosexual coition” (“Sexual Skirmishes” 2). But when Foucault details the flowering of discourses in medicine, psychiatry, religion, and the law that produced and policed sexual subjects and disciplines, he moves beyond sex acts to the organization of knowledge—through confessions—about selves: “It was no longer a question of saying what was done—the sexual act—and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it” (*History* 63). For Foucault, the history of sexuality in

the west is marked by a contradictory relationship of injunction against speaking sex and solicitation to tell the truth about sex:

... sexual behavior more than any other was submitted to very strict rules of secrecy, decency, and modesty so that sexuality is related in a strange and complex way both to verbal prohibition and to the obligation to tell the truth, of hiding what one does and of deciphering who one is. The association of prohibition and a strong injunction to speak is a constant feature of our culture. (“Technologies” 223)

Moving beyond *the* sex act to *how* sex acts—normatively, transgressively, productively and as obligation, prohibition, and constitution of selves—is the starting place of this essay.

This essay takes the phrase, “sex acts,” to argue that heterosexual feminists in performance studies ought to engage in theorizing and problematizing sex, its expressions and effects, evidenced in sanctioned and mundane moments in our lives. Caught between prohibition and obligation, this feminist engagement might seem impossible: how to tell the truth of our sexual lives? how *not* be caught in the discourses that demand such truth telling? how to talk “slant-wise” the language of disciplines—medicine, psychiatry, law, religion—that have produced the very discourses of sexual truths? Technologies of the self are strategies for these beginnings.

While many feminists are critical of Foucault,¹ others claim that Foucault’s later works on technologies of the self are valuable tools for feminist projects of self care and world fashioning. Foucault details techniques of the self as “letters to friends and disclosure of self; examination of self and conscience, including a review of what was done, of what should have been done, and comparison of the two. . . . *Askesis*, not a disclosure of the secret self but a remembering. . . . They include exercises in which the subject puts himself in a situation in which he can verify whether he can confront events and use the discourses with which he is armed” (“Technologies” 238–39). For Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, these techniques can be important strategies for feminism. A Foucauldian ethos demands “engaging the present, taking responsibility for oneself and the world, furthering and expanding the work of freedom. . . . Feminism is strengthened not by the assertion of a single, homogeneous identity but rather through a dedicated, contextual, and critical engagement with itself and the world” (Taylor and Vintges 4).

Much important work in performance studies within communication arises from queer perspectives on sex and sexuality as resistant counterstatements to powerful dominant discourses of heteronormativity, masculinity, gendered binaries, and social identities.² Much less attention, however, has been given to the place of sex acts in heterosexual women’s lives within performance studies. Given that heterosexuality is most often considered a “charmed circle” and state-sanctioned sex within marriage the magic center,³ married sex is too often assumed to be unproblematic, unworthy of critical attention, and just plain boring. If heterosexual feminists don’t engage these assumptions in our lives, we leave heterosexual privileges unexamined, we protect marriage as untouchable critical space, and we mute our own experiences that might

challenge those too-easy assumptions. Sex acts, at their most normative, sanctioned, and mundane, can be engaged *contextually* and *critically* for the ways disciplinary practices and discourses have operated more powerfully on women's bodies than on those of men. Our practices of freedom, in turn, may be powerful and useful for all.

This essay, first, sketches how "performance of sex" is never a genderless construct, but weighs differently across and on subject positions. Second, this essay surveys the disciplines that study sex for their territorial boundaries and quests—walls and tasks that take heterosexual women's lives as problems and as quantifiable. Third, I offer three binary constructions—sex and gender, pleasure and danger, and public and private—that must be bravely attended to and negotiated in any feminist performance studies project that takes sex acts as its subject and object. Three examples of such brave attention are featured there, not as Foucault's indictment of the confessional, but as libratory technologies of self-crafting.

Gendering "Performing Sex"

To take what is undoubtedly a very simplified example, one cannot say that it was only men who wielded power in the conventional marital structure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; women had quite a few options: they could deceive their husbands; pilfer money from them; refuse them sex. (Foucault, "The Ethics" 292)

To begin delineating sex acts for a feminist performance studies project, it is necessary to move past the easy parallels between sex and performance as articulated by Richard Schechner in his *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. If McKenzie and Carlson mention sex in passing, Schechner's use of sex as an example is fruitful for exploring the assumptions about gender left unarticulated, the masking of gendered labor, and the ways the phrase "performing sex" weighs differently on women than men. Schechner asks readers to

... consider the range of meanings attached to the phrases "performing sex," "How did s/he perform in bed?" and being a "sexual performer." The first refers to the act in itself and the second to how well one "does it," while the third implies an element of either going to extremes or pretending, of putting on a show and therefore maybe not really doing it at all. (27)

While Schechner does capture typical ways of characterizing the constitutive elements of performance, pairing these commonplaces with sex commits a kind of sexual essentialism—attributing to sex a fixed essence as normal, natural, inevitable, universal, and ahistorical (Irvine). Most importantly, this essentialist move does not account for the very different social meanings attached to sex for heterosexual men and women. Moving from the gender neutral pronoun "one," to the gender specific, collective pronoun "women," reveals a very different set of social meanings attached to women who "do it," "do it well," "go to extremes," or "pretend" to do it at all. Because these social meanings are differently articulated in and through race, class, age, sexual orientation, and geopolitical boundaries, the complexities of "performing

sex” need to move from constituting sex as a performance to a more careful examination of *how* sex acts to create gendered subject positions and to accomplish gendered standards that weigh heavily on women.

Doing It

Any talk of performance as “doing,” the “actual execution of action” (Bauman, “Performance” 41), is very much about work, the status quo, and quotidian expectations for success. In this sense as a key term, performance is about *doing* a job—whether that job is selling bolts, holding up bridges, taking a test, or bench pressing 200 pounds. And jobs most always *assume* success. That is, we are only concerned about quotidian performance when something breaks, doesn’t do its job, or fails to perform. My car and my watch become concerns for me only when they fail to do their jobs. While the range of performance standards varies, the failure clause in the system is a binary one—on or off, yes or no, pass or fail, does or doesn’t.

While cars and watches are symbolically loaded in a variety of culturally and historically determined ways, sex is another kind of “doing” altogether: as job, as status quo, as quotidian expectations for success. Heteronormative definitions and expectations are culturally defined, enacted, and enforced differently across history and cultures. Lenore Tiefer, in her chapter “Performance Problems” in *Human Sexuality*, writes,

... what every culture and subculture regards as a *normal performance* is that minimum necessary for procreation. Performance standards differ with regard to the degree of pleasure expected in sexuality, the range of technique variations, whether female orgasm is expected and what the relative active and passive roles of the partners should be. (90, emphasis added.)

While Tiefer’s analysis predates discussions of normativity of gender (Butler, *Undoing* 40–56), Tiefer’s attention to a baseline for performance, a range of expectations, and performance standards problematizes “doing” as a simple model for sexual performance: any model of “doing” implies a “not doing” model of “problem.” Medical and therapeutic institutions and discourses for attending to sexual “problems” have flowered, in Foucault’s parlance, especially considering the current heterosexual marriage mandate that “a healthy sex life is a cornerstone of longevity” (Tiefer, “Medicine” 105). A committed, long-term, heterosexual relationship’s status is most often attended to publicly when sex breaks down: impotence, infertility, desire disorders, infidelity, separation, “breaking up,” divorce, death.

The first three examples (impotence, infertility, and desire disorders) are evidence of the medical model of “working parts.” The “job” of sex is centered in a hydraulics model for men (Baglia) and in a reproductive model for women (Martin). The next set of examples (infidelity, separation, breaking up, divorce, and death) can be captured with the label “relationship difficulties” and attests to sex acts as a barometer—a measurement of the range of pressure exerted, internally or externally, on a sexual relationship. Whether “working parts” or “relationship difficulties,”

the “doing” of sex bespeaks structures that value and evaluate very different performances by men and by women. Bernard Apfelbaum sums up the gendered difference on the divergent responses to male impotence and female frigidity:⁴ “People are usually relatively indulgent about it, telling the dysfunctional young man that he will soon get over it . . . people typically respond with amusement. . . . But people are not amused when a woman cannot fulfill her role. Here the reaction is grim. This is the male point of view” (82).

When the parts and relationship are both working well, however, the quotidian “doing” of sex is publicly invisible. Gargi Bhattacharyya writes:

Although every document of power reveals the hegemony of the norm, the lived texture of improvisation and surprise that must characterize any intimate life is rarely part of the document. Without this detail of everyday variation, heterosexual life is reduced to the core components of normative myth—formalised romance as a route to marriage, procreation as a socially necessary outcome, lifetime monogamy as the domestic building block of social stability. So little is said about the sex itself—in terms of acts, feelings, meanings or anything—a reader could be forgiven for believing that, until very recently, the life of a respectable heterosexual contained no sex at all. (22)

The “invisibility” of sex in heterosexual relationships, I argue, is comparable to the “invisibility” of whiteness in white lives. Richard Dyer comments on Peggy McIntosh’s influential article “White Privilege and Male Privilege”: “The invisibility of these assets [the knapsack of white entitlements] is part and parcel of the sense that whiteness is nothing in particular, that white culture and identity have, as it were, no content” (Dyer 9). The invisibility of sex in heterosexual relationships and the invisibility of whiteness in most white people’s lives are very much about positions of power and privilege. bell hooks, speaking of white heterosexual men’s authority in her classroom, claims, “The politics of race and gender within white supremacist patriarchy grants them this ‘authority’ without their having to name the desire for it” (81). The white, heteronormative “doing of sex”—as both everywhere and invisible—testifies to the privilege of not having to name one’s desire, justify one’s social practices, or critically examine one’s entitlements. In short, white men’s heterosexuality evidences those privileges.

Heterosexual women, on the other hand, who “do sex” must constantly negotiate and justify desire, social practices, and cultural mandates in a perpetual ricochet of competing agendas within heteronormative marriage. “Sex on demand,” solicited by either partner, is a heavy weight in any relationship; reproductive technologies and decisions produce class, race, and medical access issues for women of child-bearing ages; and statistics that claim married men live longer than unmarried men place the burden of *his* longevity on *her*—her sexual practices, availability, and willingness. Any examination of “doing sex” must attend to the gendered division of that labor, the divergent weights and expectations for those jobs, and the sliding evaluative scale—applied interpersonally and culturally—to specific embodiments.

Doing It Well

If “doing it” is a complex intersection of materiality, institutions, sociality, and privilege, then “doing it well” introduces questions of performance competence. One fruitful route is to remember Noam Chomsky’s use of the term “performance.” With its genesis in structural linguistics and generative grammar, performance here is the manifestation of deep structures of language, those structures and rules tacitly known and understood by a native speaker of a language, that Chomsky called “linguistic competence” (9–12). In this usage, performance is riddled with mistakes, flaws, and imperfections. The actual practice of speaking is both undergirded and undermined by the “perfect” system of language usage and rules implicitly understood, but imperfectly practiced, by a native speaker.⁵ Levi-Strauss married linguistics and anthropology to posit “deep structures” of culture. For Victor Turner, this marriage dehumanizes subjects of anthropological study either as impersonal “bearers” of culture or as completely determined by cultural structures and forces (72). Instead, the local, the interactional, the participatory are better anthropological accounts of performance (Hughes-Freeland and Crain 3–7). No longer “deep structures,” performance competence is articulated more loosely as “rules of the game.” In organizational settings, Stewart Clegg writes that organizational members “are able to make sense, use discriminations adequately and intersubjectively yet be at a loss to be able to describe the rules that they use to do so” (280). Attention to individual performances allows us to posit and to explore cultural rules, often unexamined and unarticulated, manifested in specific performances and evaluated as “cultural competence.”⁶

The “rules of the game” of sex, “sexual competence,” if you will, is very much about institutional rules and regulations. Who couples with whom, when and where, what constitutes “sexual” activity, and how cultures, institutions, families, and individuals organize around heterosexuality are cultural structures articulated and produced in science, religion, the law, and normative myth-making. Despite its passé construction, I like to think that—like language—each culture implicitly and tacitly understands its grammar of sex, teaches it to members, and all individual performances are bound to and measured by the system of loosely and tightly constructed sexual rules. The grammar of sex in the west regulates and mandates heterosexuality, marriage, serial monogamy, privacy, vaginal penetration, age and blood-kin appropriateness, and reproduction. Performing these sexual structures is always a tensive yearning toward a kind of utopian perfection of coupling—whether that yearning is toward Platonic ideals “upward” or Levi-Strauss’s “deep” structures downward. Laura Kipnis’s brilliant analysis of adultery begins with characterizing marriage, monogamy, and its implicit “rules.”

A happy marriage would mean having—and wanting to have—sex with your spouse on something more than a quarterly basis. It would mean inhabiting a structure of feeling in which monogamy wasn’t giving something up (your “freedom,” in the vernacular). . . . It would require a domestic sphere in which monogamy wasn’t proactively secured through routine interrogations (“*Who was*

that on the phone, dear?”), surveillance (“*Do you think I didn’t notice how much time you spent talking to X at the reception?”*), or impromptu search and seizure. A “happy” state of monogamy would be defined as a state you don’t have to *work* at maintaining. (291)

Sexual competence, the rules of the sexual game of heterosexual life trajectories, is always tensively negotiated in quotidian work of “performing sex well.”

Putting on a Show

Schechner’s third characterization of sex as performance (“going to extremes or pretending, of putting on a show and therefore maybe not really doing it at all”) has so many difficult connotations for heterosexual women that it’s almost difficult to know where to begin. “Going to extremes” and “pretending” raise the specter of Freud’s Dora—the hysteric who is “flamboyant, expressive, superficially seductive, and prone to inappropriate outbursts of emotion” (Bassuk 144), as well as the strategically faked orgasm as both culturally commonplace and politically efficacious for women (Spivak 169). “Putting on a show” recalls sex work—in a variety of outlets—in which johns are dupes and duped by women workers across the industry.⁷ “Not really doing it at all” speaks to the formulas of soft-core pornography.⁸

At the same time, Schechner’s description can ask us to think of sex as a “show” outside the quotidian, illustrative of performance as “marked as available for the enhancement of experience, through the present enjoyment of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself” (Bauman, *Verbal Art* 11). Jackson and Scott list some of the “commonsense understandings of sexuality, investing it with magical and romantic properties, with ideas of transcendence, with the belief that it can raise us above the mundane realities of quotidian existence” (“Embodying” 103). Nor does “artistry” fall out of this conception of sex acts. For when sex is conceived as technique, as agency, as spiritual and physical fulfillment, as “perfect” expression of love and commitment, the ends and means of artistic expression and sex are very much the same. Catherine Waldby claims, “If sex can be regarded as a kind of theatre where subjective negotiations between men and women are played out, then the choreography of sexual encounters—what counts as active and passive, whose boundaries are breached, who gives and who takes pleasure—tells us something about these negotiations” (267). With Waldby’s theatrical metaphor of sexual encounters, she has touched on the cultural rules determining sexual performances, the quotidian doing of sex, as well as the subject positions and relational weight we ascribe to heterosexual acts and institutions.

Doing it, doing it well, and pretending to do it at all are never genderless constructions, but are intricately articulated across subject positions, institutions, and discourses. When Dwight Conquergood asks, “How does performance reproduce, enable, sustain, challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology?” (190), he has captured the range of possible effects of sex acts. These normative, mundane, and sanctioned moments in our lives are worthy of critical engagement, important to

political movement, and opportunities for self care. To do this work, however, we need to be cognizant of the knowledge and subjects produced in discourses of contemporary sex research.

Beyond the Boundaries of Sex Research

And as society has become more and more concerned with the lives of its members, for the sake of moral uniformity, economic well-being, national security or hygiene and health, so it has become more and more preoccupied with the sex lives of its individuals, giving rise to intricate methods of administration and management, to the flowering of moral anxieties, medical, hygienic, legal and welfarist interventions, or scientific delving, all designed to understand the self by understanding sex. (Weeks 35)

Recent trends in sex research can be located in specific disciplinary homes, and each discipline paints its own picture of the quest to understand individuals through an understanding of sex. Biomedical, psychosocial, and survey research claim their own rationales for studying sex; most often these rationales hinge on overlapping constructions of heterosexual women's sex lives as problems to be fixed and as catalogues of normative expectations. These constructions of women's "selves" are potent examples of Foucault's *scientia sexualis* and the process by which "sexuality" is situated "at the intersection of the technique of confession and a scientific discursivity":

sexuality was defined as being "by nature": a domain susceptible to pathological processes, and hence one calling for therapeutic or normalizing interventions; a field of meanings to decipher; the site of processes concealed by specific mechanisms; a focus of indefinite causal relations; and an obscure speech (parole) that had to be ferreted out and listened to. (*History* 68).

The science of female sexual dysfunction and survey research on sexual behaviors are two knowledges of self that purport to "speak the truth" of sex.

Science Studies Sex

Across medical and scientific efforts, heterosexual women's sexual lives are attended to as *problems* to be fixed. These problems are most often difficulties in sexual arousal, climax, and pain during intercourse.⁹ Given the astounding success of Viagra in treating erectile dysfunction, medical science is on a pharmacological quest to find a "magic bullet" for women, too. The picture that emerges from the research is that chemical agents (prolactin, testosterone, dopamine norepinephrine, and serotonin—all chemicals produced in the body and somehow linked to desire, arousal, and orgasm) are confoundingly complicated, especially in women's bodies that refuse to act like men's bodies in the laboratory (Voelker).

The Working Group for a New View of Women's Sexual Problems, comprised of feminist sexologists, therapists, and clinicians, critiques this scientific quest for "constructing a false equivalency between men and women, erasing the relational

contact of sexuality, and ignoring differences among women” (4). Despite their critique, science and medicine continue the quest to put heterosexual women happily in the bedroom with their husbands, while no doubt filling the coffers of pharmacology companies and stakeholders. Such a closed system concentrates on “fixing the genitals” and ignores the fact that “there are no magic bullets for the socio-cultural, political, psychological, social or relational bases of women’s sexual problems” (Working Group 4).

If scientific understandings of sex are rooted in a biological determinism cum capitalism, then social psychological approaches to women’s sexual problems paint no better a picture of this problem to be fixed—whether approached from a medical model or sexology’s therapeutic model. Indeed, most psychological studies rooted in a medical model begin with the functional/dysfunctional distinction, survey treatment options and the success of “guided masturbation training,” and then call for careful consideration of “the role of societal and cultural factors in the etiology and treatment of sexual disorders” (Rosen and Leiblum 885).

Why do women have sexual “problems,” what contexts are salient, and what issues are featured as contributing to sexual dysfunctions? Sex researchers from the sociopsychological camp have taken a number of stabs at “risks,” starting with environmental influences or “everyday life stressors (defined as hassles)” (Beck 922; Morokoff and Gilliland). Working outside the home seems to be one risk factor for sexual dysfunction (Avery-Clark). Much work in the psychology of sexual response attends to cognitive factors, especially the role of perceptual and attentional processes. A woman’s ability to focus on sex during the act itself, blocking out distractions, seems to play an important role (Morokoff and Heiman). Relational factors that influence sexual dysfunction include “communication difficulties, lack of intimacy or trust, and power conflicts” (Rosen and Leiblum 879). These “non-genital factors” move the study of dysfunction into realms such as affection, communication, and nonsexual touch (Leiblum).

These quantitative studies, satisfied with counting and finding correlations among variables, do little more than help predict risk factors. These relational risks—jobs, stress, attention issues, and nongenital factors—are treated, not with the magic bullet of chemistry, but with more and better sex: “Suggesting changes in positions or venues, or the addition of erotic materials is helpful. Encouraging adequate foreplay or the use of vibrators to increase stimulation may be helpful. Taking a warm bath before intercourse may also increase arousal” (Phillips 127).

Whether phrased as “intimate problems” discussed in the doctor’s office, “complaints” recorded in medical charts, “sexual difficulties” prompting couples counseling, or “dysfunction” for the purpose of coding and filing insurance claims, the heterosexual, married woman is caught in the problem/solution model of sexual discourses: “sex would derive its meaning and its necessity from medical interventions: it would be required by the doctor, necessary for diagnosis, and effective by nature in the cure. Spoken in time, to the proper party, and by the person who was both the bearer of it and the one responsible for it, the truth healed” (Foucault, *History* 67).

From Health Care to Self Care

But if there's a dirty little secret among some middle-aged, married women, then it might be that women's sexual "problems" are truthfully spoken, not in doctor's offices or on the counselor's couch, but with girlfriends. Peggy Orenstein interviewed a number of white, middle-aged, married heterosexual women and specifically asked them about sex. The conversation she reports is worth reproducing here:

"How important is sex to you?" I ask.

"It's not very important to me," Helen says. "It's more important because of knowing that it's important to my husband."

Me, too," says Susannah, forty, grinning. "Maintenance."

The other women laugh. "Yes," Helen says. "Sometimes you think, 'Oh, what a mood. Boy, I know what would fix this.' But given the choice of having sex or reading my novel . . ."

"Oh, yeah," interrupts Susannah, "I always want to say, 'Mind if I read while we do this?'" (230)

Taking my cue from Orenstein, I asked my dinner companions one night about sexual desire. "How often do you want to do it?" I put it bluntly. The four white women all rolled their eyes in exasperation. One said, "It takes so long for me to come. It's just not worth it." Another said, "Sleep. I want sleep." Still another tapped her watch, "Come on . . . Come on . . . Let's get this over with."

Bolstered by their answers, I asked the next question. "If there were a pill you could take to increase your desire, would you take it?" The two women in their late twenties instantly and simultaneously said, "Yes!"

The fifty-year-old woman sitting next to me, said, "No. But if there were a pill that could get my kids to sleep through the night, wash the dishes, and fold the laundry, I'd sure take that."

The forty-something woman laughed. "Where's the pill that makes *his* desire match *mine*—say—every two weeks?"

Magic bullet, indeed, for very different dedications, contexts, and desires.

I treasure these moments of intimacy, laughter, and friendship for the wide variety of attitudes and experiences expressed here. "Feminists do want differently," de Lauretis claims ("Essence" 6). And she's right. But more than friendship and affection around that restaurant table, these are practices of freedom and techniques of self care. These practices entail the individual drawing up "rules for his or her conduct with which he or she aims to achieve a transformation in ethical terms. . . . These techniques allow the individual to change his or her ideas and views, and to achieve a certain state of wisdom or happiness" (Bloem 22). "Truth telling" has long been a feminist strategy for personal transformation within social contexts. Margaret McLaren details the consciousness-raising activities of the 1960s as evidences of Foucault's technologies of the self. Women engaged in talk together that enabled them to realize that "their individual problems were not personal pathologies but reflected a larger pattern of social and political discrimination" (229). Taylor and Vintges write, "For Foucault, responsibility stems from freedom that is discursively

situated: it exists in discourses that offer tools and vocabularies that persons can utilize in creating themselves as responsible, ethical, and political—but always discursive—subjects” (3). Our talk around that table, critical of the strategies of *scientia sexualis*, did not attach blame or fault to our partners. We were crafting ourselves as subjects—and, I’d like to think, responsible, ethical, and political ones.

Survey Research Counts Sex

Sex survey research, with its genesis in Alfred Kinsey’s early work in male and female sexual behavior, certainly seeks to paint a “big picture,” but it’s not unlike the current technique of “photo-mosaic”: pasting together tiny little pictures to form one huge composite photograph that has nothing to do with its tiny parts. Numbers are deceptively satisfying as “real” indicators of material practices. Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels’s 1994 *The Social Organization of Sexuality* is touted as the most sophisticated survey of sexual practices in the United States in recent times. Its 718 pages make fascinating reading, and we can each locate ourselves in their “Master Status” categories of gender, age, marital status, education, religion, and race/ethnicity. Detailed statistics cover rates and frequency of sexual intercourse, number of partners, oral sex, anal sex, fantasies, visiting prostitutes, condom use, and X-rated video consumption.

Laumann, Gagnon et al. begin their report by justifying sex survey research as public concerns: “For most of us, sexual behavior is private. With whom we make love, how and when we do so, and even why we do so are among our most intimate and private matters. But sexual behavior has many public consequences that make this most private of activities a public concern and a frequent target of public policy” (xxvii). Survey research, supposedly revealing sex *not* as a problem but as an inventory of sexual behaviors, misses the “social analysis” necessary to jump from private behaviors to public policies (Connell 64). For Robert Connell, survey work on sex, as a form of social constructionism, is “not *social enough*,” for it doesn’t “account for sex as an ‘arena of social practice,’ the locus of a distinct form of politics, or—to generalize the point—a structure of social relations” (Connell, quoting Rubin, 64).

Sex survey research is notorious for hiding, as Dorothy would say, behind that black curtain. Survey work rarely acknowledges its own historical, geopolitical, and discursive constructions of sex and sexuality as already assumed and determined by the categories, questions, and language in the survey instrument. Lauman, Gagnon et al. defined sex through questions about masturbation, frequency, oral and anal sex, and so forth, as mentioned above. But a longitudinal study of 227 married couples from 1935 to 1955 asked these questions: “What relative weight does each sex assign to the attraction variables of dress and voice?” “Is gracefulness weighted by the two sexes as an attraction variable?” (Ard 18). If how “gracefully” we dressed and talked was interesting and important to sex research in 1935, then Lauman, Gagnon et al.’s 1994 survey surely includes underlying assumptions and constructions that will strike us differently in sixty years. Still another sexual survey questioned 300 women at a family planning clinic in Tehran, Iran, using Taylor, Rosen, and Leiblum’s Brief Index

of Sexual Functioning for Women, or BISF-W. The authors write, “Some items of the BISF-W were omitted or changed because of differences and limitations of Iranian culture and religion and characteristics of the participants. BISF-W questions about masturbation, oral and anal sex, and sexual orientation were omitted” (Shokrollahi, Paymaneh, and Mirmohamadi 212). The unspoken, unasked, and unarticulated “differences” in and across cultures also determine the construction of sex and sexuality in survey work. If the questions asked (and not asked) already define the reigning assumptions about sex and sexuality, then numbers confirm those constructions. Mary Poovey, in “Sex in America,” her analysis of Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata’s trade book, published in tandem with *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, writes, “Numbers help deshame sex not only because numerical representation forecloses the kind of detailed, anecdotal narration that the authors associate with pernicious ‘myths,’ but also because the properties of statistical representation enabled the authors to set out their assumptions about normativity in the guise of statistical norms” (372).

Sexual binaries and hierarchies are reinscribed in these normative constructions of sex. Survey research creates compliance with, or opposition to, sexual categories. The compliance route creates sex as monolithic, as homogenized, as impervious to individuality and agency. Lists of sexual practices arranged in hierarchies of heterosexual behavior, ranging from most practiced (“deep kissing”) to least practiced (“anal sex”) encourage this notion of sexual sameness. While the behaviors in the repertoire seemingly present a wide range of activities, the net effect is to reduce sex to a limited series of choices that normalize, predict, and create behavior. “Everybody does this, right?” is both a statement of fact and an assumption regarding “normalcy.”

The oppositional route, “Nobody does this, right?” also creates sex as monolithic, but sets the individual outside the range of normative, predictable behavior. If the social scientific discourses of sex repertoires and hierarchies encourage “sameness,” then these same discourses create sexual “renegades,” outsiders, loose women, women “who love too much,” and women who don’t love at all. When heterosexual women’s sexual practices are *counted*, this normalization is too easily mobilized to serve oppressive practices and institutions.

From Confession to Codification

The man who cuts my hair is my lay audience for much of this material. He always asks what I’m working on, and then he listens attentively while I attempt to explain postmodernism, feminism, and performance studies in two-minute sound bites. He’s fun to talk with, very quick with good questions and a joke, and I enjoy the challenge of trying to find the language, free of academic jargon, to explain the concepts and issues I grapple with at my desk.

When I explained that my current project involves looking at surveys of women’s sexual functioning, he seemed puzzled. I quickly moved to a few examples. Specific numbers are always helpful here.

“Did you know,” I asked, “that according to one survey only twenty-nine percent of women reach orgasm every time they have sex with their regular partner?” I paused to let that sink in.

“No way,” said Joseph.

“Did you know,” I ask now that I’ve *really* got his attention, “twenty-four percent of women *never* have orgasms?” This stops his scissors in mid air. “That means that orgasm is hit or miss with about half of all women.”

Joseph took a step back. “You know,” he said, pointing the scissors at me, meeting my eyes in the mirror. “I just wish that women would say what they want. In bed with a woman, I’d do *anything* she wants me to. Really. It’s important to me that she have a good time. I *want* her to come. Why doesn’t she just tell me what to do?”

Joseph, and the other heterosexual men I’ve shared these numbers with, all have the same reaction: the first is shock, but the second is a plaintive and sincere concern for their partners’ pleasure. When I share these numbers with women, they all nod knowingly.

Orenstein uses statistics from Lauman, Gagnon et al. to claim there is a “pleasure gap” between men and women: seventy-five percent of men report they always climax; twenty-nine percent of women report they always climax (Lauman, Gagnon et al. 114). As she interprets these statistics, Orenstein seems to be echoing Joseph’s question: “That pleasure gap says something profound about women’s deepest feelings of legitimacy, the license to . . . ‘ask for what you want,’ and expect to get it. Will a woman who suppresses her needs during sex be able to assert them in other realms of her life?” (26). What if asking for what you want is not sex, but sleep? reading a novel? folding the laundry?

“Not tonight, dear,” is an attitude unrepresentable in the sexual discourses of science, psychology, and sexology. That is, constructing female sexual dysfunction begins with the premise that more and better sex ought to be a relational goal, physiologically attainable, and indicative of good mental and physical health. This premise permeates all the discourses of dysfunction and survey work. This premise then creates gendered constructions of desire and orgasm that begin and end with the masculine—for women’s voices, bodies, and experiences are muted, transformed, and ignored in a phallogocentric system that writes desire and orgasm as omnipresent, measurable, and, most of all, advantageous for everyone. Foucault details the difference between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* as goals for individuals:

The most important elements of an erotic art linked to our knowledge about sexuality are not to be sought in the ideal, promised to us by medicine, or of a healthy sexuality, nor in the humanist dream of a complex and flourishing sexuality, and certainly not in the lyricism of orgasm and the good feelings of bio-energy (these are but aspects of its normalizing utilization), but in this multiplication and intensification of pleasures connected to the production of the truth about sex. (*History* 71)

The pleasures of analysis, outside the boundaries of scientific discourses and against normalizing, invisible, and omnipresent constructions of male desire, are technologies of the self for women. “I must confess,” Foucault says, “that I am much more

interested in problems about techniques of the self and things like that than sex . . . sex is boring” (“On the Genealogy” 253).

Beyond Constitutive Binaries

For heterosexual women who endure “that austere monarchy of sex” (Foucault, *History* 159) in ways both mundane and sanctioned, moving from docile bodies to productive power that produces sex acts is no small feminist task, especially given the emphatic attention to sex as a category. Jackson argues:

[O]ne of the pervasive features of the social organization of sexuality within the modern world is the extraordinary weight and significance accorded to the sexual, the way in which it is singled out as a “special” area of life whether it is seen as requiring specific and stringent moral controls or celebrated as a route to self-fulfillment and radical social change. (4)

Jackson’s bifurcation of sexual effects into control or celebration is typical of the many binaries associated with sex for feminists: pleasure/danger, public/private, body/mind, censorship/protection, consent/coercion, and, of course, theory/praxis. When the emphasis is on sexual practices, expressions, and effects, however, three binaries demand special attention for any feminist performance studies project: sex and gender as articulated through body, the pleasures and dangers associated with studying sex, and the vexed issue of public and private boundaries of sexual expression. The ways three performance scholars negotiate these binaries—in writing about their own sex acts—are important lessons in techniques of the self.

Reworking the Norm: Sex and Gender

The separation of sex/gender was an important moment in feminist theory and continues today in commonsense notions of sex as a biological designation and gender as social expectations for masculine and feminine. Gayle Rubin proposed that separation in 1975 to better enable theorization of how sex/gender is the “set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity” (“Traffic” 156). Rubin’s project, utilizing the already sexualized systems of Levi-Strauss and Freud, sought to tap into their “deep recognition of the place of sexuality in society, and of the profound differences between the social experience of men and women” (“Traffic” 156). In 1984, Rubin advocated further separation of sex from gender:

Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice. I am now arguing that it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to more accurately reflect their separate social existence. (“Thinking Sex” 308)

Six years later, three important works took to task Rubin’s separation of sex from gender: Teresa de Lauretis’s *Technologies of Gender*, Eve Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology*

of *the Closet*, and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Each work questions the sex/gender division for its problematic construction of sex—as body, biology, reproduction—and for its too easy designation of gender as learned, taught, malleable, culturally variable, and historically dependent.¹⁰ Sedgwick's critique is an apt one: "I remember the buoyant enthusiasm with which feminist scholars used to greet the finding that one or another brutal form of oppression was not biological but 'only' cultural! I have often wondered what the basis was for our optimism about the malleability of culture by any one group or program" (*Epistemology* 41).

Queer theory and theories of performativity have blossomed in the fifteen years since de Lauretis, Sedgwick, and Butler proposed, respectively, gender as a technology of representation, gender as anchored to heterosexuality, and gender as performatively constituted. Part and parcel of attending to gender in these works was the vexed issue of "woman" as ontological category: how to make claims about woman without a universal, generalizable, and concrete subject of feminism?¹¹ While the debate still lingers, most postmodern feminists agree that "woman" is a politically necessary, if ontologically contingent, term. As important (and lasting) as the sex/gender distinctions and critiques have been for feminism, some feminists have placed feminism under the larger umbrella of gender theory and what Judith Butler labels "The New Gender Politics."¹²

Butler describes these politics as a struggle "with presumptions about bodily dimorphism, the uses and abuses of technology, and the contested status of the human, and of life itself" (*Undoing* 11). For Butler, gender is the constitution and interpolation of normative boundaries with tremendously high stakes for sexual minorities, reproductive technologies, and intrasexed and transsexual communities.¹³ She argues that the terms "gender trouble," "gender blending," "transgender" or "cross-gender" are testimonies to gender as already "moving beyond" naturalized male/female categories (*Undoing* 42–43). At the heart of these libratory projects is the assumption that gender is "a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone" (*Undoing* 29).

Despite these libratory, important, and transformative claims for gender theory, feminism is a constant and important reminder that the world operates *as if* there are discrete and binary gender categories, that these categories do produce hierarchical materialities, and sex acts are particularly salient places the world judges, regulates, and controls women. Butler said as much in 1988:

Genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent. And yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable. In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. ("Performative Acts" 528)

What feminism, as theory and movement, understands all too well is that "the world continues to treat women—in very consequential ways—as women" (DiPalma para. 4).

For a feminist performance studies project, then, studying sex acts should deal with these constructions of gender, as utopian constructions that move beyond binaries *and* as material realities that regulate and control women. The relationships among gender, sex, and body have been feminist projects for thirty years. Exploring sex acts is one route to interrogate those relationships: “. . . it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings” (Butler, *Undoing* 20).

Craig Gingrich-Philbrook is one performance scholar who navigates this sex and gender binary, “reworking” the normative boundaries of gender in his life and writing. He writes eloquently of “queer performance moments on and off stage, each of which contributed to [his] experience of queer theory’s elusive boundaries, calls, and possibilities” (“Queer Theory and Performance” 353). He details one such performance:

I had just moved back to Carbondale from New York, where my partner Jonny stayed, at least for the time being. A dear friend came to my house for dinner. As we had on so many nights, we talked for hours at my kitchen table. As she left, we embraced goodbye, and, for the first time in years, I felt the beginnings of absolutely unanticipated desire . . . standing in the doorway—growing harder in the dark, waving goodbye to my friend as she drove away, the street growing quieter and darker as her car disappeared—was easily one of the queerest performances of my life.

And so I should tell you what I did with it I suppose. . . . See, I did the queerest thing of all with this erection: I theorized it.

. . . I sat there wondering what this erection asked of me. It challenged my autonomy, the hubris of my pretension to have exhausted myself with language, to have come to “know” myself, my body. It helped me remember that thought and the body never close upon one another, commensurable at last. Queer theory and performance help me remember that experiences of desire come to us neither wholly authentically, from within, nor wholly discursively, from without. Instead, these possibilities mix, calling one another into a mutual doubt that somehow sustains their respective intelligibility as one another’s loyal opposition. (“Queer Theory and Performance” 355)

Gingrich-Philbrook’s writing breaks down those too easily naturalized boundaries of masculine and feminine, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, constructed and policed as normative and fixed. His “absolutely unanticipated desire” forecasts gender as already reworking the norm. I’d like to see feminist performance studies projects that also engage in queering “straight” theorizing—making the familiar heteronormative moments of our lives as compellingly and as importantly new for feminism.

Dangerous Sexual Liaisons: Pleasure and Danger

“Pleasure and danger” is a familiar construction to feminists, beginning with Carole Vance’s 1984 collection, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. I began this essay, however, by noting that pleasure, for me, is most often set over and against weariness, an indication of my privileged position as a married, heterosexual, white,

physically able woman. But studying sex *is* dangerous, regardless of my occasional lethargy, and the dangers are different for men and for women, for lesbians and for gay men, for the ways in which race, ethnicity, class, age, physical ability, and status intersect, but everyone, instantly, invites suspicion when asking questions and writing about sex. Brian McNair perhaps says this best: “Writing about sex is not only difficult, it is dangerous, in a way that few other subjects are” (viii).

Every work on sex I have encountered begins with this kind of caveat. Even William Masters, of Masters and Johnson fame, said it is impossible to work in sex research and not become paranoid (Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny 76). But paranoia, as we all know, doesn’t mean that they’re not watching you. Sallie Tisdale, after the publication of her essay “Talk Dirty to Me” in *Harper’s Magazine*, received many, many “icky” letters.¹⁴ Susie Bright, sex radical and educator, sums up the gendered differences in how men and women who study sex are perceived: Men are labeled “predator,” while women are variously labeled “naïve sucker,” “self-deluded narcissist,” or “cheap patsy.” Most important, “women should be able to start a conversation about sex without having to put a ‘For Sale’ sign on their ass” (*Full Exposure* 73).

For white women, the waves of feminism have not resolved questions of sexuality and the danger in sexual expressions. Two decades ago Walkowitz and Newton wrote: “contemporary feminists have still not determined how to articulate a feminist sexual politics that simultaneously addresses the possibilities of female sexual pleasure and the realities of sexual danger” (4). Third-waver Merri Lisa Johnson, editor of the 2002 collection *Jane Sexes It Up*, makes the same claim:

The world polices women—even now in this so-called post feminist era—into silence about sex, socially constructed modesty, and self-regulating repression of behavior and fantasy. . . . [This collection] begins with this recognition of the very real limits on what a woman can say about her sexuality without putting herself in physical danger and/or social exile. (1)

For black women, access to and expression of sexuality is tempered by historical and social constructions of African American women as unsexed “nannies” or whorish Jezebels (Hill Collins 77). Sex is “economically” loaded for class issues, as well, for middle- and upper-class privilege is a “luxury of displacing the body as means of labor onto the body as pleasure zone” (Ebert 8). For lesbians and gay men, the social contract of “compulsory heterosexuality” draws normative lines around sexuality, lines that most often victimize, pathologize, and control (Rich; Halperin; McWhorter). For the physically challenged and elderly, these normative lines situate their bodies and desires outside sex (Wendell).

All these “dangers” in researching and practicing sex ultimately shut down, rather than open up, the possibility of performing sex differently. Carole Vance explains:

The overemphasis on danger runs the risk of making speech about sexual pleasure taboo. Feminists are easily intimidated by the charge that their own pleasure is selfish, as in political rhetoric which suggests that no woman is entitled to talk about sexual pleasure while any woman remains in danger—that is—never. Some also believe that sexuality is a privileged topic, important only to affluent groups, so

to talk of it betrays bad manners and bad politics on the part of sexual betters toward the deprived, who reputedly are only interested in issues that are concrete, material, and life-saving, as if sexuality were not all of these. (7)

“Pleasure and danger,” despite its descriptive power and material reality for women’s lives, need not be a binary construction that shuts down possibilities for writing and theorizing sex acts.

Performance studies, so long familiar with negotiating binaries of local/historical, self-conscious/unconscious, and theory/practice, is well positioned to explore the continuum of effects and social meanings that fall between pleasure and danger. Surely there are others? Delight, contentment, satisfaction, relief, maintenance, boredom, weariness, distaste, discomfort, risk, jeopardy. . . . The list could go on and on, change day to day, and from relationship to relationship.

Jacqueline Taylor is a performance scholar who negotiates this pleasure and danger binary. She captures the all-too-real dangers of coming out with the all too real pleasures of discovery; in between, she reflects on “the difficulty of being visible enough to be of use, the risk of being marginalized as excessively lesbian. The arching silences that surround lesbian lives. The hunger for visible lesbians. The exhilaration of speaking, of the inevitable connections such speech produces” (65–66). Taylor writes:

I was heterosexual, as far as I knew, until I fell in love with a woman when I was thirty-one years old. For a long time I thought we were friends. Then my stomach started to do a little happy flip every time I saw her. Finally one day we kissed, and, at that precise moment, as if one door slammed shut and another opened, I became a lesbian. I was astonished and thrilled. Suddenly, love, passion, romance, sex, and a whole lot of other things that I had concluded were over-rated creations of Hollywood fantasy mills, began to make sense. . . . I reinterpreted my past, discovering the inevitable lesbian warning signs of my previous heterosexual experience. I know that in actual practice human sexuality does not fit neatly into the rigid categories with which we try to contain it, but, for me, a lesbian identity has never been especially complicated. My conversion didn’t come until I had had a number of years to figure out just how unenthusiastic a heterosexual I made.¹⁵ (66)

Taylor’s negotiation of pleasure and danger is feminist performance work that delineates the nuances between those sexual poles. Both pleasure and danger operate normatively for women, and Taylor questions those operations. Butler writes of these normative operations in telling ways for Taylor’s description of her conversion:

What falls outside the norms will not, strictly speaking, be recognizable. And this does not mean that it is inconsequential; on the contrary, it is precisely that domain of ourselves that we live without recognizing, which we persist in through a sense of disavowal, that for which we have no vocabulary, but which we endure without quite knowing. This can be, clearly, a source of suffering. But it can be as well the sign of a certain distance from regulatory norms, and so also a site for new possibility. (“Bodies” 190)

Such nuanced explorations of these normative operations can explode the pleasure/danger binary. Unenthusiasm, distance, disavowal, reinterpretation—these are self-

crafting practices that can move the feminist study of sex out of the pleasure/danger construction and into the more complexly felt embodiments that fall between.

The Personal is Still Political: Public and Private

A third problem for feminists conducting sex research is the question of the personal. Whether biomedical, psychological, or critical work, I see few attempts to reconcile “data” with experience. Brilliant analyses, careful cultural critique, insightful historical surveys, social science par excellence—all have been published with no reference to the sexual assumptions of the researcher. Pat Califia maintains, “I trust the investigator who outlines his or her own biases much more than the expert who compulsively excludes the personal element from his or her prescriptions and explanations” (*Sex Changes* 2).

Such “outlining” is easier said than done. Lynne Segal offers three causes for the sustained silence of white heterosexual women on the subject of sex since the sexual revolution of the 1960s: first, discursive constructions of hegemonic masculinity continue to leave little room for sexual assertiveness for women; second, feminism itself questioned women’s “authentic female bodily experiences” as caught between pleasing men and self-pleasure and direction; third, the rise of Right wing politics casts sexual “permissiveness” as part and parcel, if not the cause, of continued moral decay. For Segal, the ironic and crucial question for feminism is, “How . . . did a movement which came out of, and drew its initial strength and inspiration from, the assertive sex radicalism of the 1960s manage to produce so many who would end up so silent about their own sexuality?” (79).

Perhaps the mantra “the personal is political” will serve as one way to answer Segal’s question on the silence of white heterosexual feminists. Claims about sexual desire, sexual proclivities, and sexual experiences, when made by a white married, heterosexual feminist, necessarily involve not just men, but a specific man. How then to make arguments, “Women do this” or “Women don’t do that,” without the implicit claim, “I do this with my husband” or “I don’t do that with my husband.” The public/private binary too often assumes that “heterosexuality, more especially within a married relationship, is normally granted both more privacy and more public recognition than other sexualities” to better explore heteronormativity and legal lines and prohibitions against homosexuality (Richardson 14). If heterosexuality is the “charmed circle” left unexplored and unexamined in Gayle Rubin’s “acceptable sexualities” (Jackson 164; Rubin, “Thinking” 281), then “married relationship” is an even more critically untouchable territory. Elizabeth Grosz makes the same argument regarding the

. . . increasing discretion granted to the heterosexual couple . . . a kind of discursive privacy. One must assume that in the era of AIDS, it is still the sexuality of marginalized groups—gay men, intravenous drug users, prostitutes—that is increasingly administered, targeted, by public health policy, while the sexuality of the reproductive couple, especially of the husband/father, remains almost entirely unscrutinized, though his (undetected) secret activities—his clandestine

bisexuality or drug use—may be responsible for the spread of the virus into hitherto “safe” (heterosexual) populations. (153)

Grosz’s leap, from private sexual behaviors to public policy, sidesteps the question: whose scrutiny? When I am both wife *and* cultural critic, I am placed in an untenable position—regardless of my husband’s bill of health. Novelist Stephen King (not a frequent footnote in critical circles) puts these words in his protagonist’s head in *Bag of Bones*: “. . . any good marriage is secret territory, a necessary white space on society’s map. What others don’t know about it is what makes it yours” (90).

My own silence about sex and this “secret territory” has everything to do with my desire to protect my husband and our relationship, even while attempting to unpack and to critique the very material embodiments, cultural constructions, and institutional discourses that make our marriage and our sexual experiences possible. The personal is indeed political, not only in cultural pressures and permissions brought to bear in our bedroom, but critical theories that explore the cultural production of public and private lines are always the personal made general, to better understand and to protect ourselves.

A handful of women studying sex explore the intersection between critical theory and lived experience. Naomi Wolf, Dorothy Allison, Susie Bright, and Pat Califia,¹⁶ to name only a few, represent a wide range of sexual identifications, political agendas, and approaches to feminism. And a handful of books feature essays on sexual experiences as jumping off places for theory and criticism: McNeill, Freeman, and Newman’s *Women Talk Sex: Autobiographical Writing on Sex, Sexuality and Sexual Identity*; Robotham’s *The Blue Light Corner: Black Women Writing on Passion, Sex, and Romantic Love*; Damsky’s *Sex and Single Girls: Straight and Queer Women on Sexuality*; and Johnson’s *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire*.

While these authors and editors are courageously breaking taboos, disclosing sexual secrets, exploring formative and transformative sexual experiences, the public/private construction remains in place. Their brave explorations mark them as sexual dissidents, while social and political arbitrators of sex remain untouched, still holding the moral highroad. Susie Bright observes:

Because they’re condemning erotic freedom, we’re not supposed to categorize them as sex symbols. But they are! Andrea Dworkin is a sex symbol, so is Jesse Helms. I frankly don’t think they have any business talking about other people’s preferences if they can’t uncloak their own. . . . If right-wing feminists and Christians are having profound and intimate sexual experiences, I want to know. It would be the only thing that would make me listen to them. (*Sexwise* 66)

“Inquiring minds want to know” is no excuse for combining sexual research with sexual tell-alls, but the established research in sex leaves a considerable gap worth filling to better account for how this research creates and maintains sexual expectations.

At the same time, Eve Sedgwick reminds us of “how preposterous is *anybody’s* urbane pretense at having a clear, simple story to tell about the outlines and meanings

of what and who is homosexual and heterosexual” (“Pedagogy” 146). There is no clear, simple story to tell, in the research or in individual lives. But reading, writing, and thinking about sex are both a “guilty pleasure” and a “dangerous liaison.” And our stories will never be simple ones. But how to walk the fine line between the public and the private? How to tell stories without telling all? How to protect the ones we love, even while debunking and declaiming pernicious stories culture tells about our bedrooms?

Stacy Holman Jones is a performance scholar who negotiates public and private in salient and efficacious ways, writing about torch singing as “how the body *does* and *undoes* the experience of unrequited love” (“The Way We Were” 44). In her works, she laces and confuses husband, lover, and reader with pronoun play of “he” and “you” that never settles comfortably or referentially. Her husband appears, at both the beginning and end of the work, as a constant negotiation: “I sit at my desk and cry, not wanting my husband to see me. I don’t want him to see me weep for my own longings, refusals, and choices” (46); in the conclusion, she’s reconciled, “I leave my office and return to the living room. . . . I let my husband see me cry” (54).

In her work, the project of love and life is proposed as “two stories” (“Torch” 280), and then “two ideas” (“The Way We Were” 44), always weaving facts, fictions, and theories. The heading, “A Reader, Imagined,” introduces both a former lover and captures an encounter among reader, author, and text:

Our meeting does not happen by chance. I don’t catch a glimpse of you across some downtown street. No, when I visit my parents and our hometown, I call you. I give my name to the receptionist and wait for you to come on the line. My heart is pounding. I fight the urge to hang up. You are surprised to hear from me. (“The Way We Were” 46)

Her descriptions of lunch and the conversation that ensues are vivid, appropriately cinematic (for the constant parallels to Katie and Hubbard’s unrequited love), and, in the end, masked:

You suggest that we leave the restaurant, that we get some air. We walk into the brilliant daylight and stand facing each other in the parking lot. You ask to kiss me. I hear you say that no one knows you better than I do. That no one knows me better than you. I close my eyes. I feel your lips on mine and I fall back into some other place, some other romance. Your urgent, familiar kiss returns to me. I hear you whisper something about a hotel. (“The Way We Were” 50)

Second-person narration revels in ambiguity: it invites reader identification, even as it posits and “masks” a specific textual character (Capecci). Is Holman Jones’s “you” a lover or reader? Lover *and* reader? Gay? Straight? Bisexual? Or, as one of my students once described her sexual identity, mobile? Holman Jones’s text never answers those questions.

If Gingrich-Philbrook and Taylor are writing and teaching the intricacies and intimacies of their queerness in very public ways to important pedagogical and political ends, Holman Jones blurs public and private, reader and lover, fact and fiction, theory and practice, feminism, sex, and gender. She writes, “As performers,

we ask our listeners to live in our—and their own—desire for the other, even when this desire may seem destructive and painful and politically impotent. . . . Then [I] use this energy to understand and critique my own relationships, as well as the place of those relationships in larger social structures and histories” (“The Way We Were” 52, 54). Holman Jones is writing sex acts as a feminist performance studies project, and doing what married heterosexual women have had to do: protect others, even while exposing themselves, in the public/private ricochet of desire within and outside of marriage.

Shifting Middle Grounds: A Research Call and Challenge for Self Care

. . . as a fifty-year old man, when I read certain publications produced by and for gays, I find that I am not being taken into account at all, that I somehow don’t belong. This is not something on the basis of which I would criticize such publications, which after all do what their writers and readers are interested in. But I can’t help observing that there is a tendency among articulate gays to think of the major issues and questions of lifestyle as involving people in their twenties typically. (Foucault, “Sexual Choice” 153)

In my leisure reading, I look for stories in which I belong, for protagonists who act like me. Poor Mira, the protagonist of Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room*, trapped in her 1950s marriage to Norm, can’t achieve orgasm. French demonstrates that communication, “asking for what you want,” need not have the desired effect. Mira asks Norm

. . . if it would be possible for him to hold back a little, that she felt she was on the verge, then he would come, and lose all erectness. He said no healthy male could or should try to hold back. She asked, even more timidly, if they could try a second time. He said that would be unhealthy for him, and probably impossible. He was a medical student, and she believed him. She settled back to enjoy what she could, and waited for him to fall asleep to masturbate herself to orgasm. He always fell asleep quickly after sex. . . . (57)

Months later, “she had come to dislike sex entirely, for he would get her aroused and leave her dissatisfied; now, when she masturbated, she wept” (60).

Mira’s story isn’t my story. But, then again, neither is the story of Eve Dallas, New York police lieutenant married to Roarke, a multibillionaire, GQ-quality gorgeous, computer-wiz, entrepreneur, Irish expatriate. In J. D. Robb’s futurist series of crime thriller novels, Eve constantly drives herself to a frazzle through long hours, no sleep, no food, obsessed with catching the guy who did it. But no matter how bad a day it’s been, or how many times she’s been shot or stabbed, Eve and Roarke can’t keep their hands off each other. Always prefaced by biting and always ending in earth-shattering climaxes, their sex life needs no sex therapies or pharmacological jump-starts: “Her mouth was already roaming over his face, just missing his lips in teasing little bites. To his considerable surprise, and considerable pleasure, her fingers got very busy. They closed around him, not teasing at all, as her tongue laved thirstily along his throat” (174).

Mira and Eve represent an apt continuum for stereotypic portraits of heterosexual women's sex lives. Mira's desire is dampened and ultimately extinguished by her insensitive, selfish, and self-centered husband. She asks for what she wants to no avail. Eve's desire is ever ready, constantly lurking just under the surface of her daily grind. Without asking, Eve gets what she wants, and she always wants it. Not surprisingly, both characterizations of heterosexual married women sex miss the mark. Mira's sexual impasse points to the ways in which sexual agency can be thwarted, turned against a woman, out of her control, even when trying to do a sexual relationship "right." Eve's sexual exuberance is likewise uncontrollable, unlinked to occupation, cognition, attention, or "everyday life stressors." Both constructions place sexual desire and orgasm outside a woman's control, while still maintaining that she is responsible for the consequences of this desire—whether painful or pleasurable.

Feminist performance studies scholars ought to be writing about responsibilities and consequences of sex acts in material lives. Our models for this work are few, but life and theory generating. When Gingrich-Philbrook, Taylor, and Holman Jones write sex acts, they do so in careful negotiations of conceptual binaries, outside the normalizing discourses of science, and without the generalizing totalities of sexual identities too often written into fiction. They also write in that place aware of the discursive trap of sex talk as verbally prohibited and confessionally obligated, "of hiding what one does and of deciphering who one is" (Foucault "Technologies" 223). Surely there is more to be said, written, and theorized about the multiplicity of sexual subject positions and their constitution. And surely these new texts will not just speak about, but speak to others.

Frederick Corey writes of Gingrich-Philbrook, "If Craig knew how his texts spoke to other gay men in mid-life, he would be obligated to cease all profitable activities and write full time" ("Arabes" 149). And here I add my admiration for Jackie and Stacy for writing their mid-life worlds. But I'd rather speak of all these works, not as obligating the authors, but as acts of self care for creating responsible, ethical, and political selves. Their works can be read as *hupomnemata*, "account books, public registers, or individual notebooks serving as memory aids." "However personal they may be," Foucault writes,

these *hupomnemata* ought not to be understood as intimate journals or those accounts of spiritual experience . . . the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self. ("Self Writing" 210–11).

If we write of what we read in performance theory, sex surveys, medical discourses, and fiction about sex and selves, then attempt to capture, collect, and critique the "already-said," this self-writing is very much about self care. For McLaren, "Foucault's later work has much to offer feminists; it articulates a connection between self-transformation and social transformation. And practices of freedom open up space for both individual creativity and social innovation, both of which are important for a feminist refashioning of the world" (230).

Performance studies has long been a space for individual creativity and social innovation, doing the work of returning bodies to theories that too often mute, forget, or erase them. Always mindful of bodies, desire, and their tensive materialization in performative moments, feminists in performance studies are primed to speak differently of and about scientific discourses, to bring our own experiential insights and political commitments to the task, and to probe the cultural meanings of sex in our lives.

This self-crafting can demonstrate the fluidity of gender *and* its constant policing by ourselves and others; this self-crafting can find contexts between pleasure and danger that constitute sexual selves always in relationship *with others*; this self-crafting can strategize public and private, as careful truth-telling. This self-crafting, self-writing, and truth-telling is collective political work: the politics of the mundane, the sanctioned, “all forms of happiness” that occur on “the shifting middle ground of those things which may or may not be important in the long run, which are crucial to one person and inconsequential to the next, which seem essential and life-sustaining one day and downright stupid the next” (Schoemperlen 145).

Notes

- [1] Feminist critics of Foucault’s early genealogical work offered two familiar, if contradictory, indictments of subjecthood: first, the subject is “de-centered,” fictional, and hopeless; second, the subject is completely determined by discourses and practices (McLaren 214; also see McNay). In both cases, agency is foreclosed. Moreover, much feminist critique challenged Foucault’s lack of attention to sexual difference, to the ways that women are differently, and some argue, more powerfully interpolated in and through disciplinary practices than men (Bradiotti).
- [2] Gay identities as performatively constituted are explored in Peterson (“Narrative” and “One More”); Gingrich-Philbrook (“Refreshment” and “Queer Performance”); Grindstaff; Bennett; Slagle; and Drummond. The intersection of race and queer identity is explored in E. Patrick Johnson and Alexander; disciplinary discourses that privilege and oppress enactments of masculinity are explored in Corey and Nakayama; Nakayama and Corey; Owen; and Gingrich-Philbrook (“Disciplinary Violation”).
- [3] In her classic article, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle Rubin draws a “charmed circle” that denotes the sexual value system. At the center of the circle, is “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” as “heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, and vanilla.” The “outer limits” of “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality” violates each element and falls outside the circle: homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, sadomasochistic” (281).
- [4] Apfelbaum notes that “frigidity” has fallen out of therapeutic parlance, replaced by the DSM-IV’s attention to female sexual desire disorders. “Impotence,” especially with the marketing of Viagra, has been replaced by “erectile dysfunction.” Both nomenclatures seek to shift the focus from “the sufferer” to “the symptom.”
- [5] Dell Hymes was one of the first folklorists to point out the Neo-Platonic assumptions in Chomsky’s view of performance as “a fallen state” from perfection.
- [6] “Imperfect” performances are no longer considered “contaminated” or “impure,” but they are instead “the focus of postmodern analytical attention” (Turner 77).

- [7] Two ethnographic projects speak from the “inside” to this feature of sex work, Amy Flowers’ *The Fantasy Factory*, and Katherine Frank’s “Stripping, Starving, and the Politics of Ambiguous Pleasure.” While both these works feature how sex work can be empowering for some women, Lesa Lockford’s autoethnographic account of her sex work is particularly painful and disempowering (*Performing Femininity* 55–105).
- [8] For other connections between performance theory and woman as performer, see my “Performance Studies as Women’s Work.” For details of performance as a key term in pornography, see my “Weddings and Pornography.”
- [9] Most recent medical research on sexual dysfunction begins by citing a 1978 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Its numbers are astounding: out of one hundred “happily married couples,” sixty-three percent of women had difficulties with arousal or orgasm. Almost three-fourths of the women expressed a lack of sexual interest or an inability to relax during sex (Frank, Anderson, and Rubinstein). The second most frequently cited study was published in 1993 and involved 329 women in an outpatient gynecological clinic. One-third reported arousal problems, and ten percent were anorgasmic, i.e., unable to achieve orgasm (Rosen, Taylor, Leiblum, and Bachmann). In 1994, Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels published *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. According to this work, twenty-nine percent of women reported that they always had an orgasm with their regular partner during sex. Twenty-four percent reported an inability to have an orgasm. One-third reported lack of interest in sex. The most recent data analysis was published in 1999 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. With data collected in the 1994 *Social Organization of Sexuality*, Laumann, Paik, and Rosen used multivariate analysis techniques to estimate risk factors for sexual dysfunction across several demographic categories. Women who are unaffected by sexual dysfunction constitute fifty-eight percent of their sample. Low sexual desire was prevalent in twenty-two percent, arousal problems experienced by fourteen percent, and sexual pain in seven percent of their sampled women. Black women report less sexual pleasure and lower sexual desire than white women; Hispanic women report consistently lower rates of sexual dysfunction than white women. Physical satisfaction, emotional satisfaction, and happiness are “quality of life” concomitants. The authors conclude: “experience of sexual dysfunction is generally associated with poor quality of life; however, these negative outcomes appear to be more extensive and possibly more severe for women than men” (542).
- [10] For a more in depth survey of Sedgwick’s and Butler’s critiques of the sex/gender system through queer theory and performativity, see my work with Daniel Blaeuer.
- [11] Feminist theory and feminist movement both acknowledge the necessity of the term “woman” for political praxis. The materiality of this problematic category, however, is both *overdetermined* in institutional discourses of law, medicine, education, and religion that too often prescribe women’s bodies as problems, deviant, or lacking, and *undermined* in political theorizing that refuses to claim women’s bodies as ontological or epistemological foundations. The cul-de-sac of “woman” required some theoretical finesse. De Lauretis proposed “taking the risk strategic essentialism” to name and claim alliances among women, based not on the “maternal,” but on the fact that all women are daughters. Across and because of their differences, women can ally with other women based on their shared knowledge of “female symbolic defeat in the social-symbolic world designed by men” (“Essence” 25). Sedgwick counts both high costs and rewards between “identification *as* (a woman) and one’s identification *with* (women very differently situated)” as an ethical pressure for feminism (*Epistemology* 61–62). Butler proposed that the political project of feminism is not to foreclose meaning or to censure use of the term “woman,” but “to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear” (“Contingent” 50).

- [12] For as important as social justice projects are, some feminists are concerned that the attention to gender studies masks women and dilutes the political power and claims of feminism. For just four feminist works interested the tensions of locating feminism *within* and *against* gender studies, see Foster; Baehrer; Brown; and DiPalma.
- [13] Transgender and transsexual issues are beyond the scope of this essay, but the questions raised about dimorphism of sexual bodies, chromosomal and genetic constructions of sex, social constructionism, and biology are the next phase in moving gender theory and feminism to new conceptual and political grounds. See, for example, Sloop; Hird; and Butler's chapter, "Doing Justice to Someone," in *Undoing Gender*. These works feature the intense debates surrounding David Reimer's life and body at the hands of medical science.
- [14] Personal correspondence with the author, 3 January 1995.
- [15] Taylor includes several footnotes in this passage qualifying her claims in light of critiques of lesbian coming-out stories that I have excluded. Readers are directed to Taylor's essay for her careful consideration of these critiques.
- [16] Pat Califia's work cited in this essay predates his recent coming out as a bisexual transman. See Califia, "Featured Author" for his powerful account of his journey.

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