

THE KIM KARDASHIAN'S BUNDA: THOUGHTS ON SEXUAL POLITICS<sup>1</sup>

## A BUNDA DE KIM KARDASHIAN: REFLEXÕES SOBRE POLÍTICA SEXUAL

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay was presented as the opening talk of the VI International History Conference under the theme "History and the challenges of the 21st century: politics, feminisms and gender performances" that took place at the Federal University of Goiás, Jataí, in 2018. The author suggests the enduring value of analysing discursive construction and the competing knowledge and narratives that condition our lived experience, but also that we must, as historians of, and in, the present, be aware that we are occupying socially and temporally contingent positions.

**RESUMO:** Este ensaio foi apresentado como conferência de abertura do VI Congresso Internacional de História com o tema "História e os desafios do século XXI: política, feminismos e performances de gênero" ocorrido na Universidade Federal de Goiás, Jataí, em 2018. É tratado sobre as questões pós-identitárias utilizando a perspectiva de Michel Foucault nas pesquisas sobre a história da sexualidade. Há uma (re)visão do célebre ensaio Foucault e a teoria queer sob a ótica dos avanços mundiais nas questões identitárias. A autora reflete sobre as políticas sexuais e os limites do pensamento pós-identitário.

**Keywords:** identity, sexual politics, gender.

**Palavras-chave:** identidade, políticas sexuais, gênero.

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So much has changed so quickly since I wrote the original version of **Foucault and Queer Theory** in 1999 and I welcome the opportunity to return to some of my earlier observations and to see if they still have value. My purpose is to raise questions and suggestions for work that I hope some of you will explore. I am no longer based in a university as I chose, three years ago, to move from the city of Liverpool to my birthplace in rural Cornwall. Now I balance my time between writing and community work. So my thoughts today are “modified” object today will be to explore some features of contemporary discourse on sex, gender, and sexuality that interest me. My hope is that some of you may find food for thought and further analysis.

I call myself an “improper historian” - I find it hard to identify fully with, or within, the discipline and I am interested in the challenge to trying to capture the elements of the present that bear conflicting traces of the past. Something that has struck me forcefully since I returned to my rural birthplace in Cornwall is that time does not move at a universal pace and that each of us may live within several “time zones” or “moments” at once. I have been elected to serve on my local Council and have been shocked to discover that while male councillors are called “Councillor Brown” or “Councillor Smith”, the female councillors are all identified by their marital status. When I was automatically hailed as “Councillor Mrs Spargo”, I thought I had been transported to the 1950s! Our officers have now compromised by addressing me as “Councillor Dr Spargo” - my relative “status” as a professional was seen as a counterbalance to my marital indeterminacy! - but I have yet to win this almost antique battle.

I mention this because I believe that we must not forget that we inhabit a world where we may sit and read articles on the potential power of non-binaries while the most entrenched discursive structures and knowledges hold people in places and positions that are restrictive and oppressive. I have a very strong sense, as I explore the representation of many aspects of gender, sex, and sexuality, in my own society, that we are living in a period when time seems to be looping back on itself as multiple discourses collide in claiming the truth of sex, gender, and sexuality. I hope that, in this talk, I can suggest the enduring value of analysing discursive construction and the competing knowledges and narratives that condition our lived experience, but also that we must, as historians of, and in, the present, be aware that we are occupying socially and temporally contingent positions.

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I was originally commissioned to write **Foucault and Queer Theory** in 1998 as part of a series entitled **Postmodern Encounters**, whose intention was to explore connections between key philosophers, and post-structuralist theorists, and various topics. I expected my little essay to be read by a few postgraduate students and activists in the United Kingdom but it has since been translated into 11 languages and, while I have no illusions about the importance of my own work, its popularity indicates the centrality of issues of sexuality and gender, and sex, to our lives across the world.

At the core of my interest in the work of Michel Foucault in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality, was his overturning of the notion that the history of sexuality is one of progress from repression

towards a liberation of a sexuality that is already there, and, by extension, sex and genders that are innate and waiting for full expression in the right situation. I do not have space or time to rehearse his arguments here and am sure that many, if not all of you, are familiar with them. But I will be relying on his approach of analysing multiple "discourses" as historically situated material practices that produce subject positions and power relations and is bound up with constructed knowledges, institutions, and practices. I will suggest that in analysing some of the discourses now in circulation, and their impact on people, we can find a way to talk about the present.

When I wrote **Foucault and Queer Theory**, I was determined that, although the title of my essay had to stress the role of an academic in the development of a theoretical "movement", I would also explore the greater impact of the multiple and diverse activities of activists and others - in response to the AIDS crisis and their own socio-political contexts - on changing ideas about sexuality and gender. Today, I will also focus on the popular rather than the academic but it may be helpful if I offer a brief reminder of some key points in **Foucault and Queer Theory** that may connect with my observations today.

I focused then on the strategic interventions and activism of groups such as Act Up and Queer Nation, including the and redeploying of "queer" and non-assimilationist critiques of heteronormativity. The recuperation of the term "queer", once used predominantly pejoratively, connected late-twentieth-century activists with marginalised men and women whose ways of being were not congruent with the subject positions available in the dominant discourse of post-1960s' gay and lesbian liberation. From a cultural-historical perspective, one could see contemporary activists finding common cause with figures from earlier eras, whose transgressive, or ludic, or queer ways of living could not be assimilated into normative social structures and whose positions within normative discourses would always be marginal. This included figures of "camp" culture, as defined by Moe Meyer, where the hyperbolic performance of gender and sexual-identity stereotypes (SPARGO, 1999, p. 60). By their transgressive difference, by what David Halperin called "eccentric positionality" queer subjects had, and have, the potential to queer the "normal" or normative, the respectable, the dominant (SPARGO, 1999, p. 64).

I was keen in 1999, and am still, to stress the difference between performance and performativity. In my understanding of queer theory, Foucauldian models of discourse and power were brought into dialogue with Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender. Butler argued that the effect of gender as "social temporality" was created through the stylised repetition of particular bodily acts, gestures, and movements (SPARGO, 1999, p. 56). This repetition is "at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimization" (SPARGO, 1999, p. 57). Butler did not present gender as a choice but as a necessity if one is to have any intelligible identity in terms of the current system. I will return in the final part of this talk to this point, as there are signs of positive challenges to the dominant system of sex-gender knowledge but first I want to explore some of the less encouraging developments since 1999.

In 1999 I wrote that "Queer critiques of normativity cannot overlook the ability of dominant discourses and knowledges to appropriate and contain subversion" (SPARGO, 1999, p. 62). Judith

Butler had referenced, predominantly “male as female”, drag in her work on performativity, rejecting earlier feminist critiques of drag as reinforcing a stereotyped femininity and arguing instead that its hyperbolic parody exposes the imitative structure of gender itself. What has interested me in recent years is what might be called “Straight Women’s Drag”: the production of a semi-virtual, bio-plastic bodily enactment of hyperbolic femininity that is presented as empowering through the claimed “ownership” of this hybrid body (politic). I want to suggest some subversive potential in this “bodily work”, but that in the mainstream circulation of narratives of bodily construction and desirability I see an, almost sadistic, appropriation of this enactment that reinforces the hierarchy of natural over artificial and punishes the deviant.

## Kim Kardashian’s Bunda

I find myself wondering if Michel Foucault would have found Kim Kardashian’s bunda of interest if he were still writing his history of sexuality in the West? I am not, of course, commenting here on Ms Kardashian’s motives, beliefs, character or life beyond the production and circulation of a famously hyperbolic body, defined by buttocks that literally seem to be “beyond belief”. There have been famous big bundas before. I will just, as an example, choose US singer and actor Jennifer Lopez’s *bunda*. In her “JLo” phase, Lopez capitalised on her curves, and her big bunda, rather than capitulating to demands that she lose weight to fit a, predominantly white-, Western-, norm of female celebrity body in North America, and the elements of European society that are bound up with US-trends. Lopez connected her shape with her Puerto-Rican heritage as well as her ambitious workout regime. At the time, and since, commentators have claimed that Lopez changed the way that female bodies were categorised in the contemporary media. Impressionistically, Lopez’s success and the ubiquity of her image in the media from the 1990s, does seem to have contributed to a media fashion for bigger bunda.

Lopez’s body was presented as overtly sexual and questions about objectification versus empowerment must surely be asked of any commodified image. I am also aware that these bodies are read not only in terms of sex/gender but other forms of difference. In the case of both Lopez, Kardashian and other female US celebrities, their images are also widely read in terms of race. Lopez is a New Yorker of Puerto-Rican parentage, while Kardashian, whose Armenian and English antecedents locate her in the category of “white” American, has a high-profile relationship with the African-American musician Kanye West, and has been frequently criticised for appropriating black culture. The notorious early image of Kardashian, described as “breaking the internet”, in which she balances a glass of champagne on her *bunda*, was a copy of a photograph of a black model in a similar pose but naked in a 1976 book called *Jungle Fever*, which also featured a naked Grace Jones snarling in a cage. The book sparked a row about its racist presentation of its subjects which was revived by the Kardashian image and this, in turn, reminds us that bodies are multiply encoded in terms of race and ethnicity as well as sex/gender/sexuality.

## Porn, pudenda, and punishment

Some have connected Kardashian's hyperbolic body with what has been called the "pornification" many Western societies. I find this partly persuasive although I am uneasy about the sweeping nature of the concept. The term itself has been criticised for occluding the specificities and differences in the cultural and social domains, but numerous academics in diverse disciplines, have argued that pornography is saturating society to an unprecedented degree, through the reach, and interactivity of social media. Some have argued that this is an unqualifiedly negative, and regressive, development reinforcing gender and sexual hierarchies and stereotypes (BOYLE, 2010; DINES, 2011). Others read it as part of a "democratisation of desire", educating consumers in the diversity of sexualities and practices (MCNAIR, 2013, p. 15). The latter argument seems, to me, to echo the assumption challenged by Foucault that the history of sexuality was one of progress from repression to liberation, and to be at best utopian in its assertion that pornography effects the introduction of hitherto marginalised groups into "sexual citizenship".

Concerns about the impact of pornography on children and young people who access even the most extreme forms on their cellphones have led, in the UK, to the government commissioning a report on possible harms. It is certainly worth considering the type of sexual narratives that children encounter and through which they negotiate their own emerging desires and orientations. But in much of the debate on pornography and its impact, and on "hypersexualisation", there is an implicit assumption of an authentic, pre-existing sexuality that is corrupted by a depraved construction, leading us back to the normative understanding of sex, gender, sexuality.

My focus, though, is on the changed representations of the sexualised body to which the exaggerated, and sometimes hyperbolic, features of mainstream pornography contribute. There are undoubtedly pornographic texts that transgress and subvert conventional models of masculinity and femininity but it is the smooth, over-inflated female body of the mainstream that has become a key reference for Western body modification. Lip fillers are now widespread among young British women who feel the need for the extreme pout, characteristic of the mainstream porn-star, but I have been most struck by another changed female grooming habit in recent years.

In the late-twentieth century in the UK the intensification of discourse about paedophilia, leading at times to public hysteria, coincided with an unprecedentedly widespread fashion among young women for removing all traces of pubic hair. It seemed ironic, to say the least, that the loud reinforcement of the (in my judgment understandable) prohibition on sexual relationships with children should coincide with a powerful injunction on grown women showing signs of sexual maturity. This "fashion" has been ascribed to the influence of pornographic images in which genitals must be exposed to the gaze, but very swiftly a narrative started to circulate among young people in particular in which pubic hair was presented as unclean, disgusting. In the nineteenth-century, critic John Ruskin's horror when seeing his young wife's pubic hair on his wedding night, having only seen hairless classical representations, was judged exceptional. Now, if media accounts are to be believed, young women assume that any boy would be horrified if they failed to wax and express disgust at their own bodies should they allow their own hair to grow. A result of the trend for hairlessness

has also been an increasing number of young women seeking medical interventions, or expressing extreme anxiety, because their exposed genitals do not meet the neat, often surgically-altered, pornographic norm. Surely we can read this as a discursive circulation of apparent knowledge that demands that young women present themselves in a way that mimics sexual immaturity in order to be sexually desirable or acceptable.

At this point I feel I should ask a question that you might want to pick up after the paper. Here I plead ignorance but also curiosity. In the UK, a full waxing that returns female pudenda to a smooth, pre-adolescent state is called a "Brazilian". Brazil is also referenced in the media debates about the status of celebrity "butts", to use the favoured North American term. "She's had a Brazilian Butt Lift" is often the answer when a plastic surgeon is asked for an opinion on whether or not a celebrity's buttocks are "for real". In both cases, Brazil is identified as the source of the modishly hyper-sexual and I hope to hear more about this from you.

I would argue that the case of Kim Kardashian's *bunda* points to a particular element of what we might refer to as the *scientia sexualis* of our own age: anxiety about what is natural. Most questions asked of Kardashian's *bunda* are not about its desirability, or its racial coding, but about its authenticity. It is possible to see, in the hyperbole of the celebrity bottom, a recognition of the constructedness of our sexual, and gender, characteristics and positions. Caitlin Moran, a popular feminist commentator in the UK who is frequently cited as influential in contemporary popular feminism, recently wrote an article in praise of cosmetics in which she wrote: "I am all for artifice, and unnatural things for women. Using contraceptives is unnatural; my emergency caesarian was unnatural [...]. as is my acne medication; my eyebrow-threading and my Clairol Dark Chocolate hair dye [...] The idea that a woman is born a fixed and unchangeable thing is dispiriting" (MORAN, 2018, p. 5). Moran foregrounds a range of empowering, even life-saving, interventions against the "natural way", creating a vision of hybrid of the natural and artificial that differs markedly from traditional feminist critiques of medical and aesthetic processes as unnecessary supplements to natural female sufficiency. So can the overtly false body, or body part, be subversive?

It depends, of course, on context. With some notable exceptions - "When people say my butt's fake, I take it as a compliment", US - actor Coco told *In Touch* website (24 Oct 2017) - most "celebrities" still claim their body parts are "natural" and an enduring hierarchy of value places the 'natural' above the artificial in most commentaries on the body. The hyperbolic body is easily read as morally suspect, a pretence that, in the roles still allotted in our (soap opera) narratives of desire as well as ambition, marks the soul within that body for tragedy. Whatever the claims to empowerment on the part of the female celebrity, her life will be interpreted within the structure of romance, even when that romance is itself understood as a "brand": Kim and Kanye, themselves or itself so often viewed against their less hyper, less disruptive, but still romantically turbulent, others/other Beyoncé and Jay-Z.

In a recent edition of a celebrity-gossip magazine (which I obviously only read in the doctor's waiting room!), I read a story of a minor British 'reality- television star' who, in the judgment of the writer had undergone excessive plastic surgery. The female, celebrity's minor-television-celebrity "boyfriend" was asked for his thoughts and quoted as replying "I like the false look". This

brief narrative intrigues me. In the shocked-but-knowing discourse of celebrity fandom, in print and online, readers engage with *petit récits* about figures whose lives are performed according to an overarching narrative of, usually failed, romance. Career success, for the female would-be star, is implicitly acceptable only at the price of personal happiness and the old story of 'lucky in life but unlucky in love' is given a new twist. The tragic trajectory of the fame-seeker is played out through a body that is repeatedly re-made to reach an ideal of youth and desirability, but the story demands that the quest fail and the tragedy is played out as grotesque comedy; readers are incited to sympathise with, but also laugh at, the literal disintegration of the ambitious woman. In the UK many of these, ostensibly heterosexual, dyads are hybrid actors/'real people' who achieved fame through 'scripted reality' shows that shape and hone the interaction of characters to create drama, to produce stories. The permeability of the boundary between programme and 'real life' as constructed through the media could be argued to invite an ever-wider range of people to take part, to perform their lives in its, tragic, terms.

## Trump? #MeToo

A couple of years ago I woke to hear the BBC news on the radio. The two lead items were the President of the USA facing accusations of bribing a prostitute to conceal details of an affair and the latest accusation of a prominent male media figure sexually harassing a young female actor and the #MeToo campaign response. It felt for a moment as if I had been transported back to the early 1970s, to a time when Second Wave feminists were fighting for equal rights and pay and raising consciousness of male privilege and abuse. I want to consider #MeToo (but maybe not Mr Trump!). The rapidity with which the #MeToo movement gained momentum surprise me in several ways, but particularly the extent to which so many women's lives had been untouched by the apparent legal and political gains of feminism. In one way, the global reach and claimed solidarity of the #MeToo movement reminds those of us in the relative freedom of academic culture that the world is not what we think and its critiques of gender inequality are proving empowering for many. And yet, I have concerns.

Inevitably, the #MeToo movement, even in the US where it originated, encompasses diverse strands that sometimes appear to be woven together in a banner of outrage against male behaviour that does not adequately discriminate between abuses such as rape and coercive use of power and the liminal area between flirtation and impropriety. There has also been an uncomfortably neo-colonialist tenor to commentaries that imply that diverse campaigns on gender equality in India, Afghanistan, Japan and many other societies have been prompted, or energised, by this high-profile, star-led movement. A global campaign based on conjoining myriad individual experiences risks occluding difference both in those experiences and in the conditions that give rise to behaviours. The globalised can also be the universalised. While #MeToo may serve as a tactical network that connects disparate campaigns across the world, the place afforded to women is that of "victim", and the implicit reliance on an unproblematised category of "woman", and, indeed, 'man', is also troubling.

What has struck me is that the claims and rhetoric of #MeToo resemble those of liberal feminism, the liberal-humanist approach to gender, that balanced precariously the concepts of autonomous individuality and common cause between women. The resurgent claims of female oppression and rights, as voiced within the #MeToo movement, connect with a model of identity politics that depend on the stability of gender categories but also a model of power that all-too-easily relies on an oppressor versus oppressed, male versus female opposition. In this respect the liberal-feminist discourse of rights and wrongs shares the binary structure that underpins another, apparently different, feminist discourse.

While #MeToo appears, like liberal feminism, to ignore the question of what makes a woman, there has been a notable resurgence in some contexts of “radical feminism” in its essentialist mode that posits a fundamental female difference. Like the #MeToo quasi-liberal-feminist movement, resurgent radical and essentialist feminism targets male abuse of power but explicitly locates it within a transhistorical patriarchal system. While #MeToo participants have been ‘calling out’ men for unacceptable sexual behaviour, and reviving the old liberal-feminist calls for equal pay and rights, some radical feminists have spotted what they argue is a new threat to women: trans men.

## Transgender transitions

In the final aspect of contemporary sexual politics that I want to consider, I see evidence of a positive fracturing of established binary gender categories and their restrictions on human lives. I also see the, sometimes fearful and sometimes angry, response from those who see the tangible outcomes of changed legislation and custom as a threat to those who are already oppressed.

In 1999 I asked: “If sexuality is a cultural construct or category of knowledge, and if [...] gender is culturally produced, then why do we assume that sex, conceived as a binary opposition between male and female, is simply there?” (SPARGO, 1999, p. 55). The contingent nature of the apparently “natural” and “universal”, opposition of male and female sexes (genetically programmed, physically manifested, and culturally lived-out), as well as genders, can be exposed by recognition of non-binary groupings, such as the Māhū of Hawaii and the Hijra of South Asia, but, in most Western societies, the assumption that Western medicine simply discovers and describes the natural condition of human bodies is powerful and enduring. Here I should add a note about the limitations of my own project. In 1999 I chose to analyse figures from the UK media, not, I hope, because of arrogant anglocentricity, but because I do not believe in universalising theory and I do believe in the limits of my own knowledge. Although undoubtedly across the world there are many people living in ways that refute binary categorisation, and cultures whose knowledges and positions are different, it is not for me to speak of them. What I can comment on is the popular-cultural nexus of Western media.

One of the most striking changes since I wrote **Foucault and Queer Theory** has been the significant attention paid to transgender, intersex, and non-binary subjects in academic and activist work in various contexts including in juridical and associated discursive structures in the UK.

In the UK over the past decade legislative changes have encoded new rights for transgender

citizens but has there been a change in the understanding of gender and of its relation to sex? The recent proliferation of stories in the mass media by, and about, those whose assignation of sex at birth has resulted in cognitive dissonance and often trauma indicates both the fragility of biological sex as a category of knowledge and the all-too-real impact on our lives. Recognition of the limits of binary sex constructions, epitomised by the baby whose biology or biochemistry does not neatly fit male or female models, could be seen to challenge the apparent sufficiency of those either/or categories. But within the juridical, medical, and associated discourses and knowledges at work in revisions to the rights of transgender subjects in the UK, those categories appear to be reinstated with minor revisions. The gains for transgender subjects, if assessed in the terms of a movement towards equality, have been considerable. Changes of UK law, both within the overarching legal structure of the European Union and independently, culminated in the Gender Recognition Act of 2004, which allowed people to apply to change their legal gender and to have the change recorded on pre-existing official documents such as birth certificates and passports. The Act requires that transgender people must present evidence of their "transition" to a "Gender Recognition Panel" in order to be granted a "Gender Recognition Certificate". The applicant does not have to undergo surgical treatment but must have 'transitioned' for two years.

I do not want to deny that these changes to the legal status and rights of those who identify as a different gender to the sex assigned to them at birth will have had a positive impact on many lives. But it is interesting to note that the discourse of "transitioning" and the processes of gaining the new legal identity do much to reinforce both the conventional binary oppositions of male/female, man/woman and that the re-writing of the birth certificate effectively re-writes the history of the individual, giving them a new natural point of origin. Preserving the idea that the transgender person has been assigned the wrong sex makes this a human error on the part of a medic rather than an indication that the binary system may be inadequate. Our knowledge about sex and gender as properly conjoined in binary opposition is fundamental, and fundamentally unchanged. Successful transition also changes history. Data Protection legislation in Europe now means that, for example, if in a school a teacher, or student "transitions", all traces of their earlier gender assignment must be erased. Being "transgender" is, then, a temporary condition. It is something to be endured, under the protection of the law, until you can seamlessly be re-embodied, in law and in life as the old either/or, man or woman.

The cultural impact of changed legislation on transgender subjects reveals the ongoing battles over the terrain of gender and sexual politics. A recent controversy concerned the issue of "All-Women Shortlists" of political candidates for the Labour (broadly left-wing) party. This positive discrimination strategy was adopted in response to the fact that women constituted less than 10% of elected Members of Parliament in the UK in the 1990s. The prospect of trans candidates who had earlier identified as men being eligible for selection has disturbed some radical and essentialist feminists. Here, despite my own orientation towards anti-foundationalist and essentialist thinking, I have a sense of unease. Some of the voices of opposition to "trans politics" are those of black British lesbian feminists whose multiplied experience of marginalisation contrasts sharply with the relative privilege of academic advocates of queer thinking on gender. Like the #MeToo campaign,

the oppositional stance of radical feminists including Linda Bellos and Clare Heuchan reminds us that we still live in a time of multiple inequalities, and that the troubling of gender categories, and possible emergence of different ways of being cannot be a utopian process (**The Guardian**, 6 October 2017). Changes will take place at a cost, and possibly a cost to those least able to pay. But have the women-only shortlists and either/or logic of gender, defended by essentialists and liberals alike, really created a world to celebrate?

## Intersex, non-binary, genderqueer, agender? Identities or orientations?

Although recent modifications to the legal and social position of transgender subjects appears to reinforce the male-female sex and gender opposition, what of "intersex" and "non-binary"? Traditionally the term intersex is applied to those born with biological characteristics that do not fit with conventional medical categorisations of male or female. They will have been assigned a gender with which they may or may not identify and may or may not have had surgical or medical procedures to reinforce a sex-gender category. "Intersex" has, in recent years, been reappropriated, a little like queer; it has been turned from a negative label for an abnormal subject to an anti-normative disruption of the binary. Non-binary, genderqueer, and agender, are also used in different contexts by people who identify outside or against the male/female opposition, whatever their physical characteristics. Revised nomenclature, and categorisation, can be seen as an attempt to create a new knowledge. The coining of the term "Cisgender", for those who identify with their assigned sex-gender, or, perhaps it is better to say, who do not identify with a gender diverse experience, is particularly significant, implying that what has hitherto been the "norm" is now just another category. It will be interesting to see if this challenge to the assumed norm of the biologically and culturally congruent man or woman will be taken up.

There are signs that non-binary identification is being accommodated as a non-pathological category in some societies. In 2017, for example, Germany introduced birth certificates with Male, Female, or Neither options, allowing parents to avoid the either/or choice. "Mx", which has been in use for some decades as a non-gendered title, is used by an increasing number of organisations and institutions including UK government departments, although its pronunciation varies wildly and it has little or no usage in the US. Teachers' trades unions in the UK advise members on seeking a trans or non-binary student's own preference and advocate the avoidance of any gendered address in general.

Yet even if these changes permeate mainstream cultures, do the additions of identity categories effect radical change? In **Foucault and Queer Theory** I asked if queer had "already become just another identity category"? (SPARGO, 1999, p. 66). Certainly in the twenty years since I wrote that "queer" has continued to be a chosen identity, as has "genderqueer", and, to an extent both have been assimilated within a remarkably resilient discursive structure that accommodates additions as long as the hierarchy of power relations is retained. But, while the pull to a stable identity remains strong - how do we speak of ourselves without some form of temporal continuity? and who are we, academics, to deny the right of others to identify? - I believe that what might be called the "queer

project" still has value. If queer is understood as a verb it may still act to unsettle assumptions about sexed and gendered being and doing, challenging the normal and normative. Might we see the calls for a "Cisgender" category, and the use of "Mx" as gender-queering tactics?

If, in theory, the challenges to the normative are encouraging, what of the practice? In universities and among many Western millennials, it seems that the diversity of possible gender and sexual-preference identifications is unprecedented. Facebook, ever awake to the opportunities of addressing consumers' preferences, offers 56 gender identification options, while the dating site Tinder offers 37. Intriguingly, though, there is also evidence that the same millennials who are encouraged to explore alternative ways of identifying, are losing interest in sex as an activity. **The Sunday Times** newspaper (6 May, 2018) announced "Sex is virgin territory for intimacy-fearing millennials", describing research at University College, London and Lincoln University which noted rising ages for first sexual encounters. One psychotherapist, Susanna Abse, ascribed this to young people fearing intimacy as a result of a "culture of hypersexuality" which makes them afraid to "measure up" to ideals (Kim Kardashian's *bunda*?) and also to a 'new morality' in reaction to the hypersexual.

And I wonder. I wonder how we can read the incitements to identify and disidentify, to categorise and to refuse categories, to talk again and again about gender, and sex, and sexual preference in this moment? Michel Foucault overturned the "repressive hypothesis" that the Western Victorian age censored sex, uncovering instead a proliferation of discourses on sex that created knowledges and subject positions. Now, in the early twenty-first century, are our, competing and overlapping, discourses of sex, gender, and sexuality, offering identities but on condition that they are experienced as traumatic? If the discourse of #MeToo offers me a gendered identity as a woman on the basis of my "victim status", if the medico-juridical-social discourses of sex-gender assignment offers me an identity in terms of what has been done to me, then my longed-for, even if illusory, autonomy as a human being may seem like a cruel trick.

Liberation models of identity politics may seem to offer gains for some but at the cost of assimilation or being the "addition". Whatever Derrida may have argued about the "supplement" challenging the sufficiency and plentitude of the original, living as a supplement isn't much fun! (DERRIDA, 1976, p. 281). Better to turn away from the society I meet on my cellphone, and the political engagement that demands my victimhood, or pariah status, better to opt out, turn inwards, and weep. This is no recipe for collective or social action or empowerment.

## Genderquake?

Yet, is there a way of being, or at least imagining being, that allows us to orient ourselves in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality, and also towards each other?

I argued earlier that popular media casts the hyper-real celebrity women (and, it should be said, many gay men) in a modern version of tragic-comic soap opera that dooms them to a sad lonely end in which the publicly devoured disintegration of bodies and faces appears to manifest a corrupted interior. Yet a recent twist on the global television phenomenon - "Big Brother"- suggests

that the potential to “queer” conventional narratives, and discourses, of gender, sex, and sexuality.

In case you have escaped this phenomenon, “Big Brother” recruits a group of unknown people and isolates them in a house where their every moment and move (except use of the lavatory) is filmed. This is streamed live but also edited to produce programmes designed to turn the interaction of people under pressure into entertainment. Over the years, and series, the programme’s narratives turned from popularity contest, with sweet-natured heroes and dastardly villains competing to win audience approval and “win” fame, to romance and, ultimately, to a “peep show” incitement to broadcast sexual encounters. Interestingly “Celebrity Big Brother” hinges on the playing out of power games between contestants; these people who have already “won” the fame game are incited to behave as losers in life, fighting with each other or breaking down over supposed failings. You might describe “Big Brother” then as offering narratives that punish excess even as they incite and demand it.

So the prospect of a new adaptation of the formula, called “Genderquake” did not seem appealing. The programme was aired on the same UK television channel as the original series of “Big Brother” and worked to a similar formula, but lasting only for one week and without the competitive structure producing a “winner”. Eleven people were brought together to live in a house in the countryside, complete with hot tub and stray cows. “It’s never been more confusing to be young, free and single” claimed the voiceover at the start but what could have been a freak show of manipulation and sensationalism instead encapsulated many of the issues for the non-binary and genderqueer.

The housemates included: Campbell, a trans woman, Brooke, born as a boy with an extra X chromosome who experienced the trauma of developing breasts at a boys’ school, and Phoenix who experiences her gender as 70% female. One straight man, Tom, appeared to have been cast as the “villain” but his initial, bluntly expressed, either/or view of sex and gender is shown as quickly giving way as he hears about the experiences and views of his fellow housemates: “I’ve learned more in the last six or seven hours than I’ve learned in my whole life. It’s fucking crazy”. The supportive community, held together by discussions of many aspects of non-binary life, from bullying to beauty, as well as shared time in the hot tub, might seem utopian. A sharp reminder of social and cultural hostility and prejudice was dramatised in the group’s visit to a local bar, where a local man denounces non-binary as “quite fashionable [...] nothing more”.

“Genderquake”, like #MeToo, consists of different people telling their stories, often of abuse and suffering. This is no ideal society. There is no attempt to create a common identity, to conflate diverse understandings and experiences of being within a single category, but nor is this a utopian world of queered identities. This is also a staged scene in which performed (in the strong, Butlerian sense) sex, gender, and sexual identities are acted out, but it is a scene of conversation; it is what I will call a “conversation piece”.

In the eighteenth century there was a fashion for informal group portrait paintings that were known as “conversation pieces”. These were originally understood as representations of people in conversation, which meant not only talking, but interacting in within a group. Later the term “conversation piece” was applied to objects that were interesting enough to inspire conversation. To

me, "Genderquake" may be read in both senses. Intriguingly, the term "conversation" itself, in the sense of behaviour with others, was widely used in colloquial English from the fourteenth-century on as a synonym for sexual activity. Could the word be more apt for our use?

So, I want to end by offering "conversation" as a modest, but not prudish, model for future engagement as we embark not only on these few days of discussion but on the exploration of our places in the world.

I ended **Foucault and Queer Theory** with these words by Foucault:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed upon us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (SPARGO, 1999, p. 69)

In the genderquake moment in which we are living, which is also the moment of liberal- and essentialist-feminisms and of entrenched and retrenched gender categories, it is, perhaps, our role to engage this dual process of analysing the limits imposed upon us and experimenting with going beyond them. In gestures and refusals, styles and questions, in our conversation, we may queer the universalising, the dominant, and the normative and work together, differently, to create new ways of being in our world.

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