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Sexualities 2038

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Sexualities

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**Keywords**Anniversary, journal, publishing, *Sexualities*, sexuality studies**Introduction**

Sexualities has been pivotal to the flourishing of sexuality studies. In addition to sitting on this journal's editorial board, I was for five years Editor-in-Chief of *American Anthropologist*, the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association. I know well what managing a large journal like *Sexualities* entails. As I wrote toward the end of my own editorship, 'editing is simply accorded far less prestige than research' (Boellstorff, 2012a: 567). This is a deeply flawed view, because 'Editing is an inherently social act, collegial in every sense, that requires setting aside one's own priorities to invest in those of another' (Boellstorff, 2012a: 568). The editors of *Sexualities* have demonstrated this commitment to scholarly excellence throughout two decades of transformations in the study of sexuality, and played no small part in the high quality of those transformations themselves.

It goes without saying that the word limits of this short commentary preclude me from recounting these contributions in any detail. However, this is not something to be regretted: it simply means a shift in genre. While the review essay is valuable for analyzing scholarly work, one that I have myself employed to discuss sexuality research (Boellstorff, 2007), this essay takes the form of more general provocations. I make no attempt to be comprehensive: my goal is rather to chart a few examples of topics and debates that seem likely to play an important role in future sexualities scholarship.

Institutions and disciplines

Journals legitimate domains of research and build networks of scholars engaged in that research. With regard to the topic at hand, this is important because the study

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of sexuality remains marginalized in the academy. There are a very small number of full-fledged Departments of Sexuality Studies (the best-known is probably at San Francisco State University) and a few research centers (the best-known is probably the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University). There are also a number of interdisciplinary centers that in some cases support undergraduate majors or minors in Sexuality Studies; a few offer MA degrees or even participate in PhD programs. Very few of these centers are free standing. Most operate under the auspices of other programs; while this includes disciplines like sociology and psychology, Gender Studies has proven the most proactive and hospitable home. It will be crucial to attend to the place of Sexuality Studies in the academy into the future. Sexuality is an attractive topic for higher education it can attract student interest, and is highly interdisciplinary—from the social sciences and humanities to the arts, medicine, and the biosciences. Yet universities often shy away from sexuality studies for fear of attracting controversy and potentially offending funders. Even in ostensibly progressive quarters, it is remarkable how often the study of sexuality is considered ‘narrow,’ whereas, say, studying a 16th-century peasant revolt in Poland is not.

The politics of Sexuality Studies are shaped as well by engagements with Queer Studies and Trans Studies. But here too questions of politics are not external to the discussion. For instance, while analyses of heteronormativity and homonormativity abound, there has been far less attention to queernormativity. Indeed, some scholars define ‘queer’ in such a way that it definitionally excludes the normal, but of course the wishful thinking behind this rhetorical claim does not match empirical reality. Indeed, ‘in the consolidation of queer “studies” as an institutionalized project of antinormativity, queer critique has undergone its most sustained and confounding normalization, one that operates to define the contours of the field and the core critical grammar that drives its political intentions’ (Wiegman, 2012: 305). The scholarly work published by journals like *Sexualities* will help advance these important debates regarding the politics of disciplinarity.

Selfhoods and relationships

A core tension at the heart of Sexuality Studies concerns selfhoods and relationships. As charted by a well-known body of historical scholarship (e.g. Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1981), when notions of sexuality first emerged in the 19th century it was largely from a Euro-American perspective and deeply informed by the new discipline of psychiatry. The dominance of the Freudian paradigm, as well as sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, has shaped ever since an attention to the interplay between individual ‘drives’, desires, and sensations, and on the other hand relations between sexual partners, between kin, between authority figures and those they influence. This focus on selfhoods and relationships has remained a productive hallmark of Sexuality Studies. Even as Freud was at the height of his fame, some scholars (including anthropologists) questioned the 19th-century Victorian nuclear family that was presupposed by ostensibly universal processes like the Oedipus Complex (e.g. Malinowski, 1927). In the 20 years since

the launch of *Sexualities*, sexuality scholarship published here and elsewhere has greatly expanded this attention to the varieties of selfhood and relationship at play. This has included intersectional research exploring how gender, ethnicity, race, religion, age, class, ability, and other domains of human difference shape sexual selfhood, sex practices, and forms of affiliation, romance, and love. In the decades to come, it will be fascinating to see both how sexuality scholarship continues to expand this exploration of sexual diversity, and how such scholarship explores commonalities and patterns in sexual selfhoods and relationships. For not all is difference: more accurately, the ways in which we understand things as ‘similar’ or ‘different’ is itself a social process, not a priori, and is thus part and parcel of the very phenomena under investigation.

Communities and politics

This journal has, from its beginnings, been at the forefront of shifting the scholarly conversation on sexuality away from a solely biomedical model, and encouraging attention to social and political context. Indeed, in the very first issue of *Sexualities* Ken Plummer, the founding editor, informed potential authors that ‘contributions should be critical, engaging with their subject matters in ways which will significantly advance our understanding of human sexualities and their place in culture and society. Where appropriate, political implications should be explicit’ (Plummer, 1998: 1).

Sexualities came into being when HIV/AIDS had become a truly global threat (the first protease inhibitors had just been approved a couple years earlier, and multidrug antiretroviral therapies did not yet exist). From its beginnings, this journal has played an important role in linking scholarly research to the politics of sexual shame and silencing, and to relationships between sex and power. It bears noting that the inaugural issue of *Sexualities* included an article discussing how the influential Kinsey Scale did not accurately represent African-American homosexualities (Mays and Cochran, 1998). The journal has published a range of work exploring how women’s sexualities cannot be ‘read off’ those of men, as well as work on trans sexualities, intersexualities, and asexualities. Such work has largely followed Plummer’s injunction to explicitly address political implications, and has shown how sexuality is constitutive not just of individual selfhoods or dyadic couples, but of communities. Beyond stereotypes of the ‘gay ghetto’, this has included attention to distributed, networked, and translocal communities. The role of online technologies and virtual communities has been an important part of this scholarly focus, as well as questions of globalization ranging from transnational media to international migration (see Boellstorff, 2012b).

Parting thoughts forward

In his editorial missive inaugurating *Sexualities*, mentioned earlier, Ken Plummer stated that its goal would be ‘to provide a critical, international social

science/cultural studies based journal which focuses upon the shifting nature of human sexualities in societies' (Plummer, 1998: 1). We can rejoice in the great success of this journal in meeting that goal.

I am wary of the imperative to predict the future. Given that none of us have access to time travel, 'predictions' are usually statements about the present, and often sales pitches to boot. With those caveats in mind, however, I will engage in a little prolepsis of my own—a 'flashforward', as in the phrase 'you're a dead man' (see Boellstorff, 2011). *Sexualities* has been a true beacon of interdisciplinary scholarship on sexuality since 1998, bringing together research from a dizzying array of disciplines, disseminating work on a vast range of topics, and pushing forward our scholarly, policy, and activist conversations. I fully expect that in 2038, we will be writing essays celebrating the 40th anniversary of *Sexualities* and the key role it will have continued to play in the academy and beyond.

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