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Sexuality

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Introduction

Sexuality has a lot in common with how Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart viewed hard-core pornography: hard to define “but I know it when I see it” (Stein 2010, 313). Feminist theories of sexuality, from a host of different perspectives, confront the question of what sexuality *is*. It involves bodies (or not), has to do with desire (or not), shapes behavior (or not), connects to identities (or not), is a product of discourses (or not). In an attempt to come to grips with the slippery nature of the subject, we speak of plural “sexualities” as a means of gesturing to the ways sexuality is shaped by gender, race, class, ability, and other vectors of difference, as well as varying across time and cultures. If sexuality, whatever it is, takes on so many different forms, one persistent feature can be found in the societal distinction between normative and non-normative sexualities and the resulting border wars over which desires, practices, identities, and discourses belong on which side of the line. The feminist “sex wars” of the 1980s crystallized the tension between pleasure and danger that had, in fact, long shaped feminist thinking about sexuality. And the emergence of queer theory in the next decade uncoupled sexuality from bodies and behaviors and identities, asking how we come to exist as sexual subjects. Pleasure, danger, and queerness are, in fact, recurrent themes in the history of feminist thinking about sexuality.