Original Article

Sexuality, subjectivity … and political economy?

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Abstract This article argues that the relationship between sexuality and political economy remains elusive to the extent that fantasy is under-theorized. Queer and feminist theorists of this relationship provide accounts that assume we have moved away from kinship formations and towards new intimacies within late capitalism, yet continue to pay exclusive attention to 'gay and lesbian' subjects as the litmus test of sexual inequality. Debates about how far such subjects remain marginal (and in need of recognition), or have become co-opted (through commodification and reification) misses the ways in which kinship structures are not only an empirical issue. Reading Lauren Berlant and Teresa de Lauretis together, this article re-examines their arguments about the importance of ongoing and complex attachments to the familial, and proposes interdisciplinary ways of considering the relationship between sexuality and political economy otherwise.
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Introduction

In 2004, Mandy Merck asked cultural theorists to consider the relationship among 'Sexuality, Subjectivity, and … Economics?' anew, insisiting quite rightly that the first and last terms continue to be posed – both within and outside of queer and feminist studies – as mutually exclusive. In her important piece, Merck sought to reconnect these terms by revisiting the debate about the 'cultural' or 'economic' nature of sexuality between Judith Butler (1997) and Nancy Fraser (1997) in *Social Text*, and by exploring more recent interventions, particularly those with a transnational focus. Yet while able to identify examples of their mutual entanglement, Merck admitted being unable to work out a consistent basis on which these terms

might be linked. In 2012, this difficulty continues, both for me, and for feminist and queer studies, even when we open up the disciplinary closure of 'economics' to consider the relationship between sexuality and 'political economy'. This article is concerned with why this relationship remains elusive, and proposes alternative interdisciplinary modes of imagining sexuality and political economy that centre the question of the psychic life of kinship.

There are several reasons why I think feminist and queer scholarship struggle with how sexuality and political economy come together. The first is that, for all the attempts to think beyond reproductive kinship forms and oppositional identities, feminist and queer scholarship continue to use understand sexuality in terms of a heterosexual/homosexual divide. The second is that, because of this tendency, it remains hard to move beyond a transgression/co-optation dichotomy, within which lesbian and gay subjects carry a disproportionate burden of representation. This is a somewhat universalizing statement to begin this article with, and I hope to persuade you of its validity as my argument progresses. However, for the moment, consider the following points to take forward. In terms of a heterosexual/homosexual divide, we know that theorists have done an excellent job of critiquing the history of this opposition (Sedgwick, 1990; Katz, 1995; Angelides, 2001), have challenged a reliance on identity politics that reinstantiates this divide's epistemological and political effects (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1990) and have developed alternative approaches that seek to unfix the relationship between ontology and gender of object choice (Butler, 1993; Sedgwick, 1993; Wesling, 2008). Further, postcolonial queer theorists, among others, have highlighted the Western life of the heterosexual/homosexual divide, insisting on both alternative paradigms of sexual meaning (Vance, 2002; Rofel, 2007; Long, 2009) and on the use of the this divide as a violent regulatory mechanism with respect to migration (Luibheid, 1998; Puar, 2007; Butler, 2008). Yet even in its most deconstructive mode, queer theory seems unable to avoid re-positioning homosexual identity as static (even if as Western), and is consistently drawn back to same-sex desire as a uniquely queer kind of evidence (even if leading to a different identity formation).[1]

As I will detail more fully in my own discussion of the debate between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser in *Social Text* in the 1990s (Butler, 1997; Fraser, 1997), my second introductory point is that the continued reliance on a heterosexual/homosexual opposition skews both our perception of historical change with respect to the relationship between sexuality and political economy, and marks lesbian and gay subjects with disproportionate evidential value with respect to the same. Thus, for Butler, Fraser and subsequent queer and feminist commentators, our move away from the suturing of the economy and reproductive kinship can be measured solely by demographic changes in family structure and the increase or otherwise of gay and lesbian rights and freedoms (Smith, 2001; Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004). Further, new forms of global capitalism can be registered and analysed through the relative co-optation or transgression of

lesbian and gay subjects in relation to markets and conservative agendas (Hennessy, 2000; Duggan, 2003).[2]

In my view, while doing lots of important work in its own right, queer and feminist work attending to sexuality and political economy remains caught in the oppositions that structure both the history and present of this field of enquiry. One of the reasons that this is so hard to shift is that we rely on an empiricist paradigm, within which visibility politics and a singular, progressive understanding of historical change in the structure and function of sexuality, take precedence over more complex models of sexual meaning. Thus, we tend to overstate the transgressive or co-opted nature of particular sexual subjects, and provide a more teleological account of material changes in the relationship between sexuality and political economy than is necessary or necessarily the case. In addition, because of this paradigm what Fraser terms the 'politics of recognition' (Fraser, 1997) can be imagined as adequate to sexual inequality's redress, although – as I illustrate below – it actually functions to produce the problem of identity oppositions it purports to help us move beyond. Instead, in this article, I propose that we pay much closer attention to the role that fantasy and familial attachment play in securing the relationship between sexuality and late capitalist political economy, as well as in offering ways of challenging that relationship.

The next section of this article returns to the Butler and Fraser debates, not to rehearse familiar arguments but to track their differing views about how far we have moved away reproductive kinship, the relationship of gay and lesbian subjects to political economy and the vexed question of co-optation or transgression. This attention is important, despite these debates taking place 15 years ago, because it helps us identify lingering difficulties in contemporary discussions of the same issues, which have yet to be resolved. This is followed by an engagement with the work of Lauren Berlant and Teresa de Lauretis, two authors I believe are helpful for exploring the relationship between sexuality and political economy otherwise.[3] Both authors are intimately concerned with the role of desire and fantasy in shoring up a gendered reproductive heteronormativity in the present, and in teasing out the important ambivalences that characterize its temporal repetition. Both authors are interested in sexuality in its fictional as well as empirical modes, and in the importance of the one for the other. Although both Berlant and de Lauretis have been key for theoretical developments within the interdisciplinary Humanities, their importance for understanding political economy remains under-explored. In thinking through the ways in which investments in heterosexual norms dovetail with a continued belief in capitalism as providing satisfactions, I bring together Berlant and Teresa de Lauretis's rather different work on 'scenes' as helpful both in analysing the ties that bind us to reproductive norms and in imagining otherwise. This shift through my text from 'sexual identity' to 'desire and fantasy' might if you like return us to the important

middle term in my re-framing of Merck's question, to the importance of 'subjectivity' in the relationship between 'sexuality' and 'political economy'.

Part One: From Margin to Centre

In 'Merely Cultural', Butler responds to Fraser's argument in *Justice Interruptus* (Fraser, 1996) that homosexuality is a cultural rather than economic inequality, and as such, one that can be redressed by formal recognition rather than economic redress. Butler seeks to refute this by challenging Fraser's assumption that harms experienced by gays and lesbians are always and only about recognition (Fraser, 1997, pp. 272–273), and by highlighting the centrality of heteronormative regulation to the pre-modern and modern state and economy. For Butler, in contrast, failure to recognize lesbian and gay subjects is central to the ways in which economic resources are imagined and distributed within and across nations, and to accept sexual inequality as 'merely cultural' reproduces the divisions that result in inequality in the first place In turn, Fraser critiques Butler for failing to account for the changed nature of capitalism in late modernity, with its broader range of kinship structures that signals an uncoupling of the economic sphere's reliance on reproductive familial norms (Fraser, 1997, pp. 283–927). In the process, argues Fraser, Butler over-emphasizes gay and lesbian capacities to disrupt the economy on the basis of being 'outsiders within', while denying the precise social and economic changes that have in part been brought about by the social movements she cherishes.

My concern here is not with who I think wins these debates, but with the commonalities between them that make theorizing sexuality's relation to political economy otherwise so very hard.[4] Despite claiming otherwise, both see the structural constraint of sexuality in relation to political economy as sutured to kinship forms. For Fraser, this means that as we move away from a closed relation between economic regulation and heterosexual familial forms, sexuality itself is untethered from the economy. For Butler, continued marginality of gay and lesbian subjects references a continued link between the economy and the reproductive family. Importantly, for both theorists, the marginalized subjects that stand outside of heteronormative state and economic imperatives, elude recognition by the former, or are happily incorporated as part of the latter are *gay and lesbian* subjects. Neither writer considers other sexual identities, or contexts of sexual inequality, and so heteronormativity reiteratively cites heterosexuality, however kinship is imagined to have changed. Both authors read sexuality's relation to political economy through a heterosexual/homosexual divide. In a sense, Butler and Fraser want to have it both ways. Butler wants lesbians and gay men to remain quintessentially marginal while also wanting the gains of social movements to be recognized politically; Fraser

wants to insist on heteronorms as having shifted, yet provides no explanation for her assumption that gay and lesbian subjects will nevertheless remain the ones in need of recognition. Thus, as suggested in my introduction, the weight of sexuality's relationship to the political economy falls squarely on the shoulders of gays and lesbians, as if all questions of sexual meaning could be answered by their presence or absence in the public sphere of the visible or by a settling of the question of whether such subjects transgress, embrace or fuel late capitalism.

I can easily understand why Butler wants to resist Fraser's progress narrative in this debate, one in which the interventions of social movements have made Western democracies ever more accepting of minority sexual identities, to the point where they are free to take up or reject the other things capitalism may have to offer (including the benefits of other – economic – inequalities). Whether intentionally or otherwise, Fraser positions gay and lesbian identities as well as inequalities as *de facto* residual, as a lingering hangover of reproductive times to be remedied by increasing recognition by the state (until this is no longer necessary). However, in wanting to counter such a narrative, Butler hyperbolizes a gay and lesbian subject caught in a familial nightmare, doomed forever to be on its outside, marginal in relation to the benefits of a heterosexual subject of economic progress. In the process, too, as Fraser is the first to note, Butler seems to corner herself in a framework that lacks historical specificity, and is reluctant to see contest over the meaning of both structures and actors. In my view, both Butler and Fraser become caught on a historical timeline that must see sexuality as one thing or the other: changing (for better or worse) or staying the same (for better or worse). The constant is the lesbian or gay subject, and as we will see, one effect of this is to make the co-optation that both would want to ward against more rather than less likely: through, rather than despite, the process of recognition.

Let me now move to discussion of the resonance of these debates within the broader terrain of concerns with sexuality and political economy. To begin with, Fraser's work on recognition dovetails with sociological accounts of 'the transformation of intimacy' that articulate new family formations in tandem with new employment structures and modes of capitalist expansion. Despite key differences about whether or not to celebrate the current relationship between sexuality and political economy, writers such as Anthony Giddens (1993), Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Zygmunt Bauman (1998) conceive of history as proceeding through a progressive series of transformations governed by changes in the organization of capitalism, which in turn give rise to and are also shaped by gay and lesbian and feminist subjects and movements. In terms of marginalized sexuality, we move from private to public, from closeting to identity and from shame to pride, which is the point at which recognition can be claimed. To characterize this account as a progress narrative does not tell us anything about the political feelings of those subjects, of course: Fraser is

absolutely clear that they are as likely, if not more, to be invested in a mainstream that has allowed for the flourishing of previously disallowed opportunities, particularly for lesbians and gay men not on the economic bottom. Indeed, this argument is a familiar and pervasive one. Progressive gains can be cited at the level of 'publics' including global increases in civil partnership or same-sex marriages, hate crime legislation, the rolling back of 'Don't Ask Don't Tell', the development of sexual asylum possibilities for gays and lesbians, and the extension of 'queer leisure' within the global tourist industry. As these gains are partial, activists, lawyers and academics continue to work hard to try and secure greater freedom from homophobic violence in a range of contexts, clear in the belief that legislative and public recognition of LGBT identities ameliorates harms and provides an opportunity for greater social participation for those subjects.

Even in contexts where the progress narrative's end-point of identity is challenged, where pride or visibility are critiqued, and the exclusive nature of lesbian and gay nomenclature highlighted, the progress narrative itself is not necessarily any less strong. Indeed, queer theory's emphasis on deconstructing identities can figure easily as 'the next stage' in such developments, as suggested in the introduction, particularly in its understanding of those identities as anachronistic (both historically and globally).[5] To extend this line of argument, queer theorists are currently concerted with the mobilization of gay and lesbian identities as markers of achievements of Western democractic inclusion, underlining the dangers of identity politics very firmly indeed. As commentators have rightly explored, such identities are currently being mobilized as emblematic of secular achievements in contrast to the unfreedoms of 'pre-modern' religious states (particularly Islamic ones), and through the demonization of particular subjects – most often Muslims – as homophobic through and through, and therefore unable to participate in 'the modern' even through migration (Puar, 2007; Waites, 2008). As the wealth of writing about European 'citizenship tests' has also shown, lesbian and gay subjects are positioned – and can position themselves – as border patrollers of who can count as part of 'the modern liberal nation', irrespective of the paradoxes such a position may engender in relation to their own recognition (Stychin, 2003; Binnie, 2004). Butler too has intervened in these more recent developments, arguing that as lesbian and gay subjects become less marginal, their recognition is having increasingly counter-progressive effects at the border, consolidating nationalism and zenophobia (Butler, 2008). Of course, Fraser herself might well remind readers that she never promised that recognition would lead to gays and lesbians being less rather than more invested in Western capitalism, but that such recogntion should nonetheless be granted. However, for Butler, in a set of reflections that implicitly updates her 1997 critique, recognition can never be neutral, but actively *brings about* new identities forged through the late modern state's gaze.[6]

Such approaches – Marxist feminist as well as postcolonial queer – foreground the work sexual identities do in relation to the state and its various apparatuses,

the ways in which they are mobilized in the service of heteropatriachal, colonial and capitalist interests, but in adapted forms suited to our times. Yet they continue to prioritse a heterosexual/homosexual divide even as they contest its effects and challenge lesbian and gay marginality. A slightly different strand of this argument emphasizes the ways in which lesbian and gay identities function as *commodities* that travel and can also be exchanged. For Rosemary Hennessy (2000) and Lisa Duggan (2003), circuits of neo-liberalism capitalize on and extend marketization of identities to make 'gayness' a commodity. While for Lisa Rofel (2007), the emergence of lesbian and gay identities in China cannot be understood outside of the profound ambivalences that characterize China's status as a transition economy. No longer 'merely marginal' one might say, lesbian and gay subjects participate in a global set of signs that capitalism also has access to and uses for profit and exploitation of the most economically disadvantaged: thus, lesbian and gay tourists, like any other, expect service provision in the poor countries they visit, and to pay for and be provided with the very best of times. Thus, to extend the 1997 debates between Butler and Fraser, we might say that in late modernity a contemporary Western political economy produces differentiated subjects of capitalism whose function is not to reproduce and care for a labouring, exploitable population at no cost to the state, or at least not always or only, but to participate actively in markets.

Rosalind Gill points out that accounts of neo-liberalism – even where critical, but particularly where they are not – often understate the extent to which new global formations are gendered. This is true both in terms of the tensions women continue to have to negotiate in relation to 'home-making' and work – despite claims of radically changed kinship structures, women continue to do the majority of domestic labour in late modern democracies – and also in terms of how they are marketed to as subjects (Gill, 2008). In her work on gender and media, Gill focuses on the importance of irony as an alibi for advertisers who continue to represent women (and men) in heterosexist, objectifying modes, an irony radically undercut by continued difficulties women face in securing the equality they are continually reassured they have already achieved (Gill, 2007). For Gill, as for Angela McRobbie (2009), post-feminism posits a sexually liberated, feminine young woman inheriting the promise delivered by now anachronistic equality agendas. Heterosexual femininity itself is thus repackaged as freedom in neo-liberalism's sexual and political economy. To fail to feel liberated is thus to be emotionally out of synch with the sexual plurality neo-liberalism insists we currently inhabit.

We might wonder why sexual identities distributed across a heterosexual/homosexual axis remain so significant, if being commodified is primarily a question of being marketed as the next good thing to come out of late capitalism? It might make as much, if not more, sense to privilege an open sexual and gendered plurality instead, as this would guarantee the largest range of consumers now that traditional kinship structures have lost their salience.

However, perhaps what makes sexual and gendered commodification in late modernity so particular here is its marketing and circulation as part of an unalienable contemporary Western *right* previously, and often still, denied. In this light, in their focus on commodification of identities, Hennessy and Duggan are pointing to something very important about what attention to sexuality and political economy's intersections reveals about late capitalism. Namely that the marketing of gay and lesbian identities in particular (rather than desire more generally) allows Western subjects to participate in the fantasy of 'trade offs' in the face of what we know about the stark inequalities that global capitalism engenders and props up. In other words, it is precisely because of the continued (fantasy of) marginality of lesbian and gay identities within a heterosexual/homosexual opposition that these identities work so well to allow consumption to operate unabated. On the one hand, gay travel, clothing and so on rely on underpaid labour globally – which importantly we also know, rather than are ignorant of in this time of globalized communication – on the other, gayness is a repeated celebration of overcoming oppression and so its recognition remains constructed as an advance, even once it has been achieved. The same may be true of the marketing of a 'previously constrained femininity', through such banalities as 'being worth it'. In my view then, it is not simply that marginality has become mainstreamed within markets, but that marginality becomes the condition for a fantasy of continued ethical or even progressive orientation to those markets, all the while (previously) marginal subjects remain free to enjoy its benefits. In this respect, 'recognition' might be said less to showcase the move away from marginality and into the mainstream, but be one powerful means through which that tension in the present is mediated.

My analysis of the both Fraser's and Butler's legacy in relation to how to think through – and ameliorate the effects of – the relationship between sexuality and political economy reveals several questions to take forward. I believe that these accounts emphasize too strongly historical shifts from reproductive kinship models and towards other kinds of economic entanglement, and in doing so overlook the continued folding together of both models. In empiricist mode, they underestimate the role fantasy and attachment play in securing sexual subjects' relationship to political economy, and the importance that imagining ourselves (barely) beyond kinship has in our relationship to the market. Thus, as I have argued, a marginal relation to kinship remains formative of how gay and lesbian subjects take up positions in late modernity, even as we might think their centrality to forms of regulation (consumer or nationalist) marks their distance from that marginality. It is important to be able to attend to the role that sexual identity production plays in the relationship between sexuality and political economy, of course, but not to read back from these identities as the fullest extent of sexual meaning, in part because this is an extraordinary burden for gay and lesbian subjects to have to bear. Fraser's progress narrative and her political technique of recognition fail to get at multiple or ongoing experiences of sexual

inequality for those subjects, restrict redress to what can be seen and so ignore vast areas of inequality that do not inhere in identity at all (Fraser, 1999). If we want to begin to undo the mutually reinforcing relationship of late capitalism and sexual meaning, we need to look deeper than identity and its effects. In Part Two, I suggest that one way forward is to reframe sexuality in terms of 'scenes' that we act in and that act on us in ways that are both miserably predictable and interestingly ambivalent.

Part Two: Scenes of Attachment

Thus far, I have been exploring ways in which the relationship between sexuality and the political economy is represented as a shift from traditional to plural kinship forms, through a discussion of Fraser and Butler's work, but also via more contemporary feminist and queer developments. The role of fantasy is already at play here in terms of imagining others who are not neo-liberalism's Western democractic subjects as still mired in traditional kinship forms, still subject to patriarchalism or tied to reproductive (and affective) labour. Indeed, a progress narrative of a move away from reproductive kinship models as part of a heteronormative political economy in Western democratic contexts requires that this not have happened everywhere (yet), and thus the particular ways in which reproductive kinship models do continue to structure many Western democratic contexts as well are easily overlooked. To risk repetition in order to restate one of the main points of my argument here, such 'old' frames are better characterized as folded into 'new' ones, as part of how sexuality and political economy are sutured. More importantly perhaps, the way in which fantasy shuttles back and forth between past and present, nostalgia and optimism not only more accurately characterizes how kinship figures in the present, but also points to rather different ways of thinking about sexuality and the political economy.

In this endeavour, I am drawn to two queer feminist theorists who have articulated sexual subjectivity as taking place within historical and politically situated 'scenes'. Both my chosen authors – Lauren Berlant and Teresa de Lauretis – argue that it is desire and attachment that articulate contemporary subjects in relation to political economy more than a heterosexual/homosexual axis. Both stress the importance of fantasy for understanding sexuality's continued centrality to late modernity, and carefully excavate the ways in which sexuality's narration, its repetition in time, sutures it to reproductive temporality. Berlant clearly articulates her position in relationship to contemporary neo-liberal precarity and emphasizes the role of 'intimate publics' in maintaining the fiction of a contract between the subject and the state. Although she does discuss Butler at different points in her oeuvre, Berlant does not reference the *Social Text* debates, and makes no reference to Fraser. Neither does De Lauretis, who is more tangentially

connected to debates about the relationship between sexuality and political economy, in part because she is even more firmly rooted in the Humanities than Berlant. However, in her detailed discussion of how narrative and visual frames suture gender and sexuality to reproductive, Oedipal norms, her work emphasizes sexual operations beyond the empirical in very helpful ways for my argument here. Further, both Berlant and de Lauretis conceive of psychic and intersubjective attachments as a kind of normative glue, but also as sufficiently unstable to open up possibilities for imagining sexuality otherwise. My own interest in both theorists also emerges from a belief that contemporary questions of sexuality's relationship to political economy can only be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective that does not confuse object of analysis with disciplinary convention.

Berlant intervenes in the debates I have been tracking through what I consider to be a quite remarkable turn. For Berlant, what she terms 'intimate publics' no longer underpin our relationship to the state in straightforwardly gendered, heteronormative ways, not primarily because kinship structures have altered as they become less necessary to capitalism, but because the state no longer stands in direct, reciprocal relationship to the subject (Berlant, 2008, 2011). There is no reciprocity between the state and a citizen with the rolling back of welfare provision and the crumbling of state-supported services such as health and retirement provision (Berlant, 2007a, b), and there is no longevity to the relationship between the employer and employee, who may be hired and fired, or who may never have stable employment (or any employment) as a way of marking time and subjective coherence over a life course (Berlant, 2006). For Berlant, this state of precarity means that the promises of upward mobility previously shared by working-class and migrant labourers in the United States and Europe now function *fictionally*. Instead, the promise of later happiness resonates as an empty dream that our attachments actually work to undermine, are indeed 'a central part of the reproduction of the difficulty of their singular lives and lived struggle on the bottom of class society in the first place' (Berlant, 2007a, p. 278). We agree to participate in a story about 'the good life' that substitutes for real social advancement in an era in which social relations are ever more untethered. Rather than contemporary precarities resulting in a diminishing importance of 'the intimate' as what undergirds the social contract, then, our current late capitalist political economy of misery and immiseration for those on the economic bottom re-invests the intimate sphere with a significance that it is always bound to fail to deliver: it is thus a 'space of disappointment, but not disenchantment' (Berlant, 2008, p. 2).

Berlant describes this promise and our attachments to it as a 'relation of cruel optimism [that] exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). For Berlant, this is one way of accounting for why subjects with nothing to lose continue to attach to normative agendas that act counter to their interests. The subjects in Berlant's contemporary over-invest in small moments of intimacy, long for a stable set of familiar or familial

relationships in which they can believe, and try to pull together the fragments of their attachments into something that can provide them with the reciprocity they crave. Her interest in the Dardennes' brothers' films *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* is illustrative: their characters are often on the threshold of adulthood, trying to piece together relationships – usually with strangers – that resemble (in a tragic kind of mirroring) the familial forms that elude them. They know they cannot turn to family for the reassuring familial affects they need to participate in a life that remains just out of reach (Berlant, 2007a).[7] What is particular to Berlant here is that the attachment to the figuration of the familial is *redoubled* because of its emptiness rather than undermined, a position a million miles away from Fraser's pragmatics. State recognition for these subjects is entirely off the agenda, and although Fraser would no doubt argue that it is redistribution that is needed here, for Berlant it is the attachment to 'aspirational normativity' (Berlant, 2007a, p. 275) itself that forecloses the political disruption necessary for being able to imagine anything else and thus invest in the possibility of social transformation of any kind. In other words, Berlant insists that people attach even more firmly to the norms that are a nostalgic fiction for something that never was, let alone ever will be, precisely to the extent that they face no other prospect of recognition. If Berlant is right (and I believe she is), then the lack of even the possibility of recognition for the most economically vulnerable propels intimate attachments that thwart the necessary conditions for a *will to redistribution*. The psychic dimensions of sexuality here are extraordinarily powerful in shaping and propping up a political economy also on its knees.

It is not any old intimacy that is craved here: it is reciprocal care and love. The less the characters in Berlant's careful readings can see opportunities on the horizon, the more they invest in relationships that cannot carry the burden asked of them. These fantasies are absolutely about kinship as Berlant's characters try to force relations with strangers and even enemies into familial mirages, the more so as the proper scenes of 'the family' devolve. Rosetta's angry refusal to play along with her alcoholic mother's attempts to recreate a typical familial dining scene thus cannot be read as a rejection of the affects such a scene might ordinarily be said to generate. Rosetta is tenacious in that respect, refusing to relinquish her attachment to the good life, however tenuous, and it is clear Berlant (2007a) admires her for her foolishness. However, in Berlant's (2002, 2006, 2007a) scenes, sharing only doubles the sorrow as family members bleed you dry and new attachments turn to violence, coercion or disappointment. Yet, Berlant says, we cannot help but repeat our attachments in familiar scenes, not because there is a single psychic origin to our bad object-choices, but because it is a last hope of comfort that enables endurance or survival, providing the possibility of 'a space of collective relief from the ongoing present in which living on is an activity of treading water and stopping loss amid unreliable dependencies' (Berlant, 2007a, p. 292). Kinship is alive and well for all of us it

seems. In its contemporary intersection with political economy, sexuality might thus be better rendered not as a site of co-optation or transformation, but as one of deflection and survival, integral to the workings of the political economy but in utterly new, and frequently quite devastating, ways.

Let me move now to Teresa de Lauretis, whose work on sexuality, fantasy and narrative in the late 1980s and early 1990s prefigures the debates I have been tracing here, and whose insights lend themselves to the arguments I have been tracing despite not engaging global political economy directly. De Lauretis's work spans literary and film theory, queer and feminist theory, and her consistent emphasis on desire as a *scene of possibility* – both for social co-optation and for non-reproductive imagination – provides a useful complement to Berlant's rather more miserabilist vision. For de Lauretis, fantasy is fundamental for thinking about sexuality, particularly in its relationship to narrative as the mode through which social meanings are given shape. The heroic tale, as Judith Roof (1996) has also argued, includes overcoming obstacles and 'claiming the loved one' as part of how the 'happy ever after' is imagined. Sexuality is thus embedded in the narrative momentum of what constitutes a successful life: remaining alone is always 'bitter–sweet'. For de Lauretis, the narrative structure of fantasy is central to how reproductive sexuality is maintained, not because it keeps women in place, but because it has nothing to do with women. Drawing on the work of Luce Irigaray (1985 [1974]), de Lauretis argues that this fantasy (and the materiality that follows – it is that way around) is linguistically and structurally male, and that '[w]ithin the conceptual frame of that *sexual indifference*, female desire for the self-same, an other female self, cannot be recognized' (de Lauretis, 1988, p. 156). For de Lauretis (1984) then, women have always been absent from reproductive kinship (its structure and narratives) because they can only occupy it as shadows, fictions that represent men's visions and desires for repetition of the order they benefit from. Via Monique Wittig (1992 [1980]), de Lauretis proposes a rather different way in which 'lesbians' are outside of reproductive sexual norms to Butler, then: not because they are not heterosexual, but because they are not women. In this sense, de Lauretis's question concerning increased freedom of sexual subjects would not be the extent to which we have moved away from reproductive kinship structures, but the extent to which our fantasies have moved away from their gendered narrative structure.

If we read de Lauretis with Berlant then, we might well say that political economy and sexuality remain firmly sutured in reproductive modes not in relation to kinship structures particularly, but in terms of the psychic hold of reproductive narrative form in our imagination of the good life. Yet de Lauretis is less pessimistic in her articulation of the affective hold of heteronormativity than Berlant, even though she is relentless in her insistence that we can never fully escape Oedipal re-enactments at a variety of levels. For de Lauretis, the very psychic structures that call us into narrative and attach us to certain scenes as familiar (as well as familial) consistently threaten to tip into failure or excess. Thus, de Lauretis

re-writes Laura Mulvey (1975) to suggest that the processes of identification in the scenes we participate in may certainly favour a masculine orientation, but they also open up a gap, precisely because they are scenes rather than fixed relationships. The subject of masculine identification may well not be male, for example, and the role of spectator(s) that attend scenes of sexual desire (even if only imaginatively) may alter surface meaning and give them a different histories.

The possibilities for de Lauretis are creative in that they allow us to think about sexuality as a 'staging' of multiple attachments that opens up space for alternative alignments, precisely because desiring scenes are malleable rather than only dense carriers of Oedipal repetition as the basis of a heteronormative economy. In her reading of the film *She Must Be Seeing Things*, de Lauretis (1991) takes a dual approach to opening up the formal narrative basis of scenes of desire. First, she identifies the film's exploration of gendered, heteronormative and colonial histories of lesbian, as well as straight desire through what we might call 'lesbian camp'. Second, she analyses the protagonists' integration of visual and narrative fantasies into their relationship in ways that scramble historical continuity and play with different perspectives, until the viewer (and reader) can no longer be certain of a singular history or present of desire. In part because of the pleasure in identification and desire that cannot be fully contained, in part because of the non-exclusive nature of desiring scenes, de Lauretis insists that subjectivity, narrative and reproductive economies are not always in synch, and encourages her reader to exploit this ambivalence to productive effect. For de Lauretis, then, the task we face in uncoupling desire from its reproductive repetitions is emphatically not an empirical one; it is one that involves devising 'strategies of representation which will … alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of *what can be seen*' (de Lauretis, 1988, p. 171). Neither can the basis of such a politics be identities that repeat the histories of narrativisation we need to move away from. Instead, in addition to representational tactics that allow for sustaining non-reproductive attachments, de Lauretis proposes the development of sets of imaginative practices that 'constitute a sort of habit or knowledge of the body' (de Lauretis, 1994, p. xx).

In her emphasis on fantasy and identification as the core of sexuality's relationship with political economy, de Lauretis segues with Berlant in important ways, I think. Although Berlant remains primarily focused on the relationship between desiring attachments and neo-liberal exploitation, she too draws our attention to the unfinished and ambivalent nature of those attachments at certain points in her work. Indeed, Berlant chides Butler for her over-emphasis on the finality of childhood learning of attachments through vulnerability and dependence, suggesting, in ways that remind me of de Lauretis, that childhood only exists in the present as memory, which is always partial, and at once obscure and hyperbolic (Berlant, 2007a, pp. 293–297). Whereas investing in familial affects is bound to disappoint, intimate attachments are scenes you can

always get back into, precisely because their outcome is not fixed. The cruel nature of their appeal is also what makes them productive sites of possibility.

While Berlant represents Rosetta's miserable situation as quite simply overwhelming (Berlant, 2007a), in 'Two Girls, Fat and Thin' (Berlant, 2002), she narrates the fates of her heroines Dorothy and Justine rather more openly, if not optimistically. For Berlant, the girls' complex, sustained attachments to (food) consumption and poor relationships also allow them to foster a growing attachment to one another. At the end of the narrative, the two girls fall into bed with one another and curl up together, exhausted. Berlant is clear that neither the text nor her reading constitute 'a lesbian ending, exactly', but like de Lauretis she remain intrigued by the possibility of alternate meaning nestling within that 'exactly', concluding that 'this mutual fall into bed is not nothing' either, '[i]t's something else' (Berlant, 2002, p. 267). To follow de Lauretis this might be the beginning of a 'sort of habit or knowledge of the body' (Lauretis, 1994, p. xx) that has a range of possible meanings. Indeed, it may not mean the same thing to its two participants, the text's author or its readers – Berlant and then me and now you. Combining Berlant and de Lauretis, one might hazard that in a sense this is late capitalism's affective gamble: to try and secure attachments to norms through mechanisms that are 'deeply ambiguous, compromised and unstable' (Berlant, 2007a, p. 297). In addition, precisely because attachments are ambivalent or excessive or both, even within the most grim of circumstances, sometimes, '[n]onetheless, flourishing happens' (Berlant, 2008, p. 31).

Conclusion

Thus far in this piece I have tried to show how queer and feminist understandings of sexuality's relationship to political economy can remain hampered by the terms of debate they inaugurate. In their overly strong emphasis on shifts from reproductive kinship to new domestic arrangements and a continued reliance on a heterosexual/homosexual opposition, such accounts reinforce the visibility paradigms that place an undue burden on gay and lesbian subjects (as either transgressive or affirming of capitalism). Further, they rely on progress narratives that order time and space in the most conventional and uni-dimensional ways. This matters, because it prevents us having a more nuanced account of the multiple ways in which sexuality and political economy come together currently, and understates the central role that fantasy currently plays in securing attachments to the 'good life' that late capitalism promises, even as that life is less and less possible to attain or even believe in. In revisiting Merck's question about why it is that 'Sexuality … and Economics' (Merck, 2004) are so difficult to theorize together, I have paid close attention to that elusive term 'Subjectivity' in her original title, particularly as it pertains to the role of subject formation in the suturing of the other two terms.

In discussing Berlant and de Lauretis's work, I hope to have shown that the psychic and representational dimensions of sexual meaning that make up subjectivity are fundamental to how political economy works even as it crumbles, and may offer keys to imagining that relationship otherwise. Just as attachment is always unstable, so too of course is neo-liberalism's gamble that we will continue to invest in intimate paradigms that cannot any longer (if they ever could) bear the weight of the demand upon them.

It thus seems all the more important to conceive of the gaps in sexuality's relationship to political economy as more than mere interruptions in the psychic structure of kinship. Thus, in closing, I want to think again about sexuality, narrative and temporality in de Lauretis and Berlant. For de Lauretis, as we have seen, desire is fundamentally temporal: it moves through time, propels action at the narrative level, looks forward, reaches out and precipitates pleasure and disappointment (de Lauretis, 1984, pp. 105–106). Similarly, for Berlant, what is 'cruel' about 'optimism' is that it hopes for a future stability, or normality, that has never been and will never come to pass. In this sense, the temporality of desire and attachment is normative and even Oedipal, keeping us on a single track in line with reproductive economies, promises of 'the good life' a fiction for all but the most powerful subjects. However, both de Lauretis and Berlant also conceive of the space of alterity – a space that were if to thrive would change the nature of both sexuality and political economy as well as their relationship to each other – in temporal terms, through this elusive term 'practice'. De Lauretis, we will recall, does so in terms of a 'practice of love' that is also (to become) a habit, something repeated time and again, perhaps to inculcate a different coherence the subject comes to crave. Interestingly, Berlant uses similar language when she advocates a 'practice of intimacy that does not refer to the birth or childhood family, property, or inheritance' (Berlant, 2002, p. 267). Although its alternate referents remain unclear, such a practice produces 'a possibility that the habits of history might *not* be reproduced' (Berlant, 2006, p. 31). Berlant understands 'capitalist normativity' as a question of 'producivist pacing' too (p. 26), suggesting that it is at this level that interventions may occur, should we but recover from the result of reproductive repetitions, awaking like Justine and Dorothy from our 'exhaustion' (Berlant, 2002, p. 267).

Berlant presents her characters' narratives in terms of survival: but this too 'is not nothing', in my view. Rosetta gets the sleep she needs to carry on through mantra-like repetition of her attachments to 'the normal life' (Berlant, 2007a), for example. To endure, to keep on through time, is the only way of maintaining the possibility of a future; one has to endure to participate in restagings rather than repetitions. In addition, to stay in the game in order to do so is not perhaps so wildly optimistic a fantasy to close on, precisely because 'staying attached to life involves gathering up diverse practices for adjusting to the singular and shared present' (Berlant, 2011, p. 57). Attachments might provide glimpses of

other ways of being, even if only temporarily, and these may become part of the history one takes forward as practices; in conjunction with the routine banalities reproductive repetition engenders, certainly, but still. And perhaps too shared ambivalences in that shared present can be the basis of something like community, the basis for a different set of values that underwrites any challenge to neo-liberalism. Only then, surely, might there be the possibility of a desiring life that is not 'merely survival' but can attach to promises that may be kept, and might eventually even add up to 'something else'.

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Notes

1 See Paul Boyce's work for an exploration of the ahistoricism of such approaches, that curious forget colonial influences as they seek to recover an alternative sexual paradigm (Boyce, 2006).
2 This trajectory has a venerable history, drawing on and extending Marxist feminist arguments that illuminate the function of 'the sexual sphere' as underwriting economic exchange (Rubin, 1975; Pateman, 1988; Wittig, 1992 [1980]), and Marxist and psychoanalytic arguments about the radical significance of homosexuality in challenging consumerism and capitalist drudgery (Marcuse, 1955; Hocquenghem, 1993 [1972]).
3 Direct citation of both authors will follow in the main body of the text.
4 Merck (2004) considers Fraser to have carried the day; Lisa Adkins (2002) errs on the Butler side in her critique of the visibility politics of 'recognition', and Anna Marie Smith (2001) takes both to task for their ahistoricism in relation to the kinship/economy interface.
5 I detect an early anxiety about this in Rosemary Hennessy's critique of the 'queer theory' special issue of *Differences* (De Lauretis, 1991), where she expresses concern about the lack of attention to what makes 'queerness' possible, as well as the 'who' of an emergent deconstructive ethical and political high ground (Hennessy, 1993).
6 Lynne Segal (2008) traces the development of Butler's thought concerning identity, contextualizing changes as to do with an increased concern with 'the political' over 'the performative'. I am more convinced by Kaye Mitchell's response to Segal that changes primarily concern the political life of performatives rather than a prioritization of the former (Mitchell, 2008).
7 Berlant's 2007a essay is republished in *Cruel Optimism* (2011, pp. 161–189).

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