The Institutionalization of Queer Theory: Where Has Lesbian Criticism Gone?

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> The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. (Lorde, 2007, p. 56)

1. Introduction

In 1989, under the title of "Postmodernism and Feminism: Where Have All the Women Gone?" Patricia Waugh (1989) pointed out the ambivalent relationship of feminism and postmodernism. Indeed, postmodernism's ontological disruption of the subject was acknowledged as deleterious not only by most feminist women but also by those excluded from the dominant culture for reasons of class, gender, race, and sexuality. This was so because the advent of postmodernism deconstructed and jeopardized the very site of minority identity configurations, as well as other forms of academic feminism that challenged patriarchal configurations of politics and society. In "What Ails Feminist Criticism?", Susan Gubar (1998) offered a critical approach to these questions and lamented the course of feminism at the end of the 20th century, claiming "a number of prominent advocates of racialized identity politics and of poststructuralist theories have framed their arguments in such a way as to divide feminists" (1998, p. 880). Gubar's contention was endowed with a censorious tone about race-based and lesbian critical enquiries, and condemned poststructuralism for delivering a language crisis that refuted alliances among women. Accordingly, Gubar stated: "I can only respond with my view that critical election, abjection, and obscurantism perform a disservice to the libertarian politics and pedagogies endorsed by many of those whose astute ideas play a justly prominent part in feminist thinking" (1998, p. 900).

Amid this war of feminisms, the emergence of queer theory in the early 1990s in academia contributed to casting more theoretical doubt and uncertainty on a historically robust corpus of feminist and lesbian studies. Significantly, Suzanna Danuta Walters (1996) made an important contribution to these critical conversations and interrogated

"queer" as the perfect postmodern trope that lost sight of collective experience and displaced "radical and lesbian feminism, often positing itself as the antidote to a retrograde feminist theorizing […] foregrounding lesbianism as the unfortunate absence" (1996, pp. 832, 847). In her thorough critique on "queer" as the new reigning subjectivity that vindicates postmodern sexual pluralism, Walters is wary of what is left aside in the marginalization and demonization of feminism and lesbian feminism, as she understands that "queer evacuates the specificities of racialized identities without seriously developing a race-based critique on heteronormativity" (1996, p. 860).

Three decades after such debate, this article aims to trace a parallel line of thought between the academic overshadowing of feminism in favor of postmodernism, and the rise and institutionalization of queer theory in the 21st century to the detriment of lesbian sexuality as an epistemological category. As will be argued, much of queer theorizing, initially fascinated by the Butlerian mantra of "gender performativity" (Butler, 1990) and currently interwoven with key social and political concerns, problematically ignores the relevant role that women of color and lesbian feminists have played in its genesis and praxis. Accordingly, by rethinking "queer" as a form of intellectual activism, I also intend to highlight the primary role of lesbian thinkers in the past as well as their contribution to the political utility of queer nowadays. So, after praising the main interventions of these lesbian writers in queer scholarship, I delve into the queer affective turn as an example of queer inquiry that has forgotten about lesbians. This is not a negative aspect in itself, but the attenuation of queer's reference to race and sexuality, I contend, pushes lesbian criticism aside and favours research on queer theory from other perspectives such as posthumanism, ecocriticism, and new materialism.

The present contribution, then, attempts to bring to the fore the lesbian silences that have been veiled by dominant theorizations of queer studies, nowadays more worried about social affections such as immigration, terrorism, human rights, and necropolitics, thus broadening its exclusive focus on sexuality. Moreover, I am interested in eliciting how such existing approaches can help chart queer horizons in more inclusive ways without ignoring lesbian voices. Concomitantly, I posit such lesbian positions as critical epistemological sites we cannot do without, since only by unfolding past accumulative knowledge on gender and sexuality will action and transformation become real. By lesbian positions I do not exclusively mean the well-known lesbian categorizations of butch and femme, but also other identifications and lesbian genders such as the stone butch, the dyke, and transgender persons who identify themselves as lesbians. I also

claim to acknowledge those lesbian positions and experiences that are detached from imperialistic logics and pleasures; namely, the racialized Other, the migrant, and the self-exiled (Spanish) working-class lesbian from rural and impoverished areas like myself, who must find our own path, either by living a lonely lesbian life or by being always already elsewhere, thus accentuating the importance of understanding lesbian lives in different geographical and cultural environments. Much grateful and indebted as I am to US-based scholars for their pioneering, valuable and precious work on queer theory, my point here is to highlight that the field has resulted in showing little interest in work from the periphery.[1] If we aim to build up a more inclusive and intersectional paradigm of queer identities, attention should be paid to these sites of oblivion. To do so, my article draws attention to those lesbian voices that have been erased from the centrality of queer scholarship. Forgetfulness breeds violence and other forms of oppression and discrimination: unless past and present lesbian practices are fully known and assimilated in our queer discourses and actions, the legacy of inequality will persist, for the same mistakes are liable to be made again, drawing us to elitist academic comfort.

2. The Silencing of Lesbian Voices in the Queer Canon

The emergence of queer theory cannot be isolated from the enormous impact that feminist and lesbian studies had on the category of gender from the late 1970s onward. Historically, the category of the lesbian has conjured dissident voices, which called for the inclusion of sexuality within the prevalent paradigm of identity politics. Most feminist scholarship has redefined "the lesbian" by emptying it from its sexual content, overlooking the importance and complexity of sexuality in the formation of gender identity. As Eve K. Sedgwick reminds us, the concept of sexuality can be associated with "the social/symbolic, the constructed, the variable, the representational" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 29), thus forging a cultural cornerstone that unveils the constructed status of heterosexuality. During the last decades of the 20th century, the perception of homosexuality as a socially constructed product contributed to the writing of a distinctively lesbian history, aimed at narrativizing our lives from varied cultural and social backgrounds. The main challenge to heteronormativity was more eminently

[1] As I have argued elsewhere (Escudero-Alías, 2008), the political force of "queer" is lost when used in other countries, mainly because it is not translated, and the centrality of the English language through which queer identities are defined erases the cultural, social, and historical connotations of other words for naming queer lesbians like the Spanish *bollera* or *tortillera.*

defended in the 1980s with the demands of women of color and lesbian feminists. Influential works on the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality, were best encapsulated by theorists like June Arnold (1976), Cherríe Moraga (1983), Gloria Anzaldúa (1983), bell hooks (1984), Audre Lorde (2007), Barbara Smith (1985), and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), to name but the most relevant. For example, Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) denounced the systemic oppression they suffered because of their race, sexuality and class and, more specifically, they claimed that being lesbians constituted the venue through which their oppression became more fiercely silenced, thus making them more prone to suffering poverty and social exclusion. These feminists' protests against heteropatriarchy and white feminism offered not only new models of kinship centered on race, lesbianism and structural inequalities, but also a way for female agency that queer theory was to dismiss in favor of "antinormativity as the signature value of a newly emergent activist and academic movement" (Jagose, 2015, p. 32). Queer's anti-identitarianism paradoxically displaced the very gender norms that enabled these lesbian feminists to achieve political transformation.

Such feminist and lesbian critiques have forged not only arduous theoretical and methodological strategies, but have also cultivated affective habits of interpretation and prediction. The founders of non-heterosexual feminisms deeply mistrusted a white Western feminism that was aligned with an increasingly neoliberal and imperialist world, especially those critics narrating feminist criticism within the safe space of academia. By contrast, for black women embracing lesbianism as the fundamental site of freedom from coerced heterosexuality attested to their liminal identity position as both victims and rebels. And yet, they concurrently shared with lesbian critics an urgent impulse toward "resisting dogma, expanding the canon, creating a non-racist and non-classist critical vision, transforming our readings of traditional texts, and exploring new methodologies" (Zimmerman, 1981, p. 471). Ultimately, this antiracist and anti-imperialist stance has also been a prevailing defining trait of queer theory, which from its activist genesis, has aimed at rendering visibility to people of color, working-class, HIV positive, and trans persons as an inclusive pattern of political comportment and aesthetic theorization. For Anzaldúa (1987), queerness was both inherently linked to race and threatened by the nonspecificity of whiteness itself, thus defining it beyond sexuality: "we are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions" (1987, p. 208).

As Garber points out, queer theory should recognize the work of "insurgent, activist feminisms, including lesbian feminism and the poetry that constitutes some of its key early political theory" (2001, p. 177), whose voices confronted the heterosexism of women's studies and the sexism of the gay liberation movement. Yet, writers such as Judy Grahn (1971) and Pat Parker (1978, 1983) have been excluded from the lists of queer theory's compulsory readings, despite their blunt disruption of heteronormativity and racism. Furthermore, Lorde and Anzaldúa have been oft quoted among some queer theorists who are more interested in claiming a postmodern *mestizaje* that disrupts gender norms than in "exploring how queer theory is indebted to the work of black lesbian feminists" (Garber, 2001, p. 200). Yet, Anzaldúa's initial affinity with "queer" did not prevent her from accusing white academics of using it "to construct a false unifying umbrella which all queers of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under" (Walters, 1996, 843). Similarly, Moraga embraced the phrase "queer lesbian" for its difference from middle-class lesbians. Initially, then, queer was adopted by those who sought to acknowledge the "differences of class, or ethnic culture, generational, geographical, and socio-political location" (de Lauretis, 1991, p. iii).

On the other hand, Amber Jamilla Musser wonders if "claiming Lorde as queer has somehow erased her identity as a black lesbian feminist" (2016, p. 347). While Lorde defined herself as a woman, a black lesbian feminist mother lover poet, her legacy offers a way for us to re-think about queer female sexuality. In her essay "Uses of the Erotic", Lorde (1978) developed a powerful model of lesbian community through difference in which it was possible to think "about possibilities for coalition, solidarity and affect […] marking the erotic as a binding force that supersedes differences of race and gender" (Musser, 2016, p. 349). This understanding of the erotic aimed to launch a critique upon heterosexist, racist and capitalist structures of oppression that objectified women, as well as to develop solidarity through difference. Thus, Lorde defined the erotic as a set of communal affective bonds that sought to forge feminist alliances based on coalition and joy: "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (Lorde, 2007, p. 56).

I find Lorde's concept of the erotic a compelling site of resistance for black queer women and lesbians, as it allows us to cultivate affective relations outside a heteropatriarchal space that inevitably objectifies female bodies differently, depending

on our material conditions. Interestingly, Musser (2016) also elaborates on Lorde's discussion of the maternal as an erotic site of black lesbian feminism: "Lorde's invocation of the maternal works to produce a particular mode of community formation across difference" (2016, p. 354), an idea that has not been much explored by queer theory as another positionality and experience for many lesbians. For Lorde, the maternal is a mode of care, of teaching, filled with optimism and eccentricity in as much as it posits a queer kinship filled with eroticism. Queering the lesbian mother would entail an active sexuality. Musser (2016) cites Lorde's poetry as the juncture where the terrain of the black lesbian and the black mother overlap, evoking "hands and tongues and textures and tastes, calling forth a sexuality that is embodied, active, and sensual" (2016, p. 358).

The need to decolonize heteronormative structures of power is a premise that women of color and black lesbians have traditionally claimed, for this dynamic involves the structural superiority of one race and gender over the others. To this positionality, I would also add the specificities of local and geographical sites. For example, María Lugones (2007) carried out substantial research in this direction, not only emphasizing the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality in feminist analyses, but most remarkably, in thinking that "transnational intellectual and practical work that ignores the imbrication of the coloniality of power and the colonial/modern gender system also affirms this global system of power" (2007, p. 188). Central to this task has been the defence by black feminists of intersectionality as the premise which will free feminism from its exclusionary practices, producing transformative counter-hegemonic politics of social justice.

According to Jennifer Nash (2019), the prevailing narrative of intersectionality among women of color has pigeonholed it as a rooted practice in black feminist thought, as "the system of value that aligns 'intersectional' with 'good feminist work', that presumes that intersectional scholarship is politically virtuous" (2019, p. 45). Drawing herself to the term "intersectionality wars" (p. 36), Nash explores the recent battles "rooted in intersectionality's citational ubiquity" (37), in its "whitening, commodification, and colonization" (p. 38). She further pinpoints intersectionality's critical limits when the nonblack critic —i.e. Jasbir Puar— is perceived as a race-traitor, as an outsider that makes intersectionality problematic. As a queer of color theorist, Puar (2008) "embraces black feminism, but only black feminist work from an earlier

historical era than intersectionality" (Nash, 2019, p. 55).[2] Such a retrospective approach to black lesbian scholarship, particularly to Lorde, entails interpreting "the critic as engaged in a loving practice rather than a malicious one, a generative act rather than a destructive one" (Nash, 2019, p. 58). What it reveals is that women of color and queer of color critique can be complementary modes of examining the intimate relation between race and sexuality, thus foregrounding an affective engagement through a retrospective gaze to the past, a positionality that is essential for my arguments here.

Despite these women's conviction of paying critical attention to race and sexuality, the canonized texts which have achieved recognition and authority among queer theorists, were the ones written by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) and Judith Butler (1993). Both publications shifted the history of gay and lesbian studies, placing "queer" at the centre of debates around gender and sexuality, and incorporating differences such as race and lesbian queer genders. Annamarie Jagose (2015) has insightfully acknowledged de Lauretis' insistence that "queer theory, unlike lesbian and gay studies, is a critical enterprise foundationally interested in race and, through the master term of *race*, in all the taxonomic classes by which social subjectivity is differentiated" (p. 29). Likewise, Butler (1990) includes "cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (p. 174) as part of her model of gender performativity, thus featuring an archive of practices identified as antinormative. And yet, the decentering of the lesbians of color whose work was central to queer theory's origination in favor of white theorists continues to be a dilemma that needs reconciliation.

In the realm of theoretical criticism, queer's much claimed mobility, flexibility and adaptability allows for a postmodern theorizing of identity that, in Sedgwick's words, refers to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (1993, p. 8). The issue of queer antinormativity via a feminist perspective was revitalized by Butler and Sedgwick who routinely emphasized "its fundamental indefinability in the present and the unknowability of its future forms" (Jagose, 2015, p. 33), thus attesting

[2] In discussing the origins of intersectionality, Nash mentions several thinkers and innovators such as Combahee River Collective, Toni Cade Bambara, Deborah King, Frances Beal, Anna Julia Cooper, Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberle Crenshaw, and she notes that "it is crucial to note that Crenshaw's work has remained a touchstone to intersectional histories" (2019, p. 41).

to both its semantic malleability and the possibility of political transformation. Queer theory, then, is a theory always in the making, gesturing toward its own future emergence. Even though queer theory has sought to foster the study of cultural and literary modes of political alliances among minority groups, most of it strikes a chord that continues to overlook women of color and lesbian writers. Linda Garber (2001) suggests that the lesbian feminism/queer theory polarization is unproductive because "many queer theorists in the 1990s dismissed lesbian feminism wholesale as an unsophisticated, essentialist politics" (p. 11). The Manichaean feature attached to the essentialism versus constructivism debate throughout more than three decades by both lesbian and queer studies has indeed prevented the field from recasting other issues permanently silenced not only by heteronormativity but also by a new homonormativity that excludes white lesbians, lesbians of color and transgender lesbians systematically.

Similarly, queer theory has been criticized by some queer of color scholars such as Puar (2008), whose work attempts to denounce queer theory for reproducing a historical amnesia that tends to erase non-Anglo-Saxon and regional, gendered, racial, and sexual differences. Puar challenges a regulatory queerness that not only excludes queer of color and queer immigrant communities but "conversely it also holds queer of color organizing and theorizing to impossible standards and expectations, always beholden to spaces and actions of resistance, transgression, subversion" (2008, p. 41). This is an important claim that should help us to critically interrogate both the de-racialization of queer and the simultaneous structural subversion that is allegedly defined as intrinsic to such queer of color identities. It is my belief that the commodification and gentrification of queer has stripped it of its radical and transformative meaning. Likewise, it has also enabled the institutionalization of an all-inclusive category that refashions queer scholarship and activism into a trendy and insipid practice that yields to a global dominance of US-based scholars in the field and erases geographical differences. This is also the case in academia where "queer" has become a prevailing trend in a publishing market that has manifested its own exclusions.

In being disassociated from sexuality, the "heterosexualization" of queer has contributed to effacing part of its political engagement. As Walters remarks (1996), we must acknowledge from where we speak, and the politics of experience should be part of this dynamics, for knowing about queer theory is not the same as being queer: "the concept of positionality tends toward a voluntarism that ignores the multiple, felt, structural determinations on people's everyday existence" (1996, p. 841). The same

applies to questions of race, gender, disability, and so on. What values are lost or gained in the critic's passing as a lesbian? I believe that the heterosexual intellectual should explicitly address their positionality and experience in the classroom and their research; otherwise, it is a way of accentuating the invisibility of lesbians. Ironically, to quote Garber again, "the field that gave us *Gender Trouble* has gender trouble of its own" (Garber, 2001, p. 29).

While "queer" appeared as one solution to the allegedly reductive and problematic nature of identity categories such as "lesbian," it has failed to incorporate successfully the latter as part of its feminist theory and practice. Far from being essentialist and making a reductive and atomized proposal, my claim is to vindicate a more inclusive framework within queer studies in which lesbians can have a room of their own, if only to contest the well-known assumption of "out of sight, out of mind" (Castle, 1993). Undoubtedly, the question of where have all the lesbians gone in academia and the publishing market deserves more attention than ever.

3. Queer's Reparative Turn and Lesbian Oblivion

I now wish to explore some theoretical moves that may have triggered the obsolescence of the lesbian within queer studies.[3] The definitional turn of queer theorists to "the political utility of queer" was sensibly pondered by David Eng, J. Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz in 2005. They insisted that "the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality" (2005, p. 1). Their work paved the way for emergent assumptions of queerness, challenging reductive forms of queer critique and moving away from an exclusive focus on sexuality. Since then, we have witnessed a progressive evolution in its praxis, one that seeks to analyze not only converging axes of identity categories but also the condition of present-day global emergencies such as "debt, crisis, precarity, bare life, biopolitics, neoliberalism, and empire" (Wiegman, 2014, p. 5). This insight enacts a robust commitment to academic interest in questions of immediate political urgency, currently prompted by the COVID pandemic, environmental alarm, refugee crises, the Black Lives Matter movement, etc. Such a shift toward more affective frameworks, I argue, is also the result of the current

[3] Drawing on Nash's critique of intersectionality as an allegation invested with generosity, love and admiration (2019), my critique of queer theory's neglect of lesbians is also carried out as an intellectual practice of affection and, as such, I hope it is met with interest and fondness by the reader.

dominance of postcritical and posthermeneutic forms of analysis in academia, best illustrated by the turn to new materialism and postanthropocentric theory.

For several decades up to the threshold of the 21st century, queer discourse has been traditionally linked to the articulation of "critique", understood as the enactment of a paranoid reading against canonical heteronormative discourses. Robyn Wiegman (2014) has noted how Sedgwick famously called "paranoid reading" to the "rhetorical genre referenced as *critique*, which gives the critic sovereignty in knowing, when others do not, the hidden contingencies of what things really mean" (p. 7, italics in the original). To counteract the wielding agency of the critic over the text, Sedgwick elaborated on a "reparative reading" that could prompt more affective and intimate responses in the reader, such as hopefulness and creativity, inaugurating what is now known as "postcritique" (Sedgwick, 2003). Although Sedgwick called for reparative readings in the mid-1990s, queer theory has widely embraced them a decade after its first citation (Wiegman, 2014, p. 12). In her work, Wiegman discusses a body of work which she labels as "*queer feminist criticism*, which attends to the condition of the present through the converging analytics of affect and time" (2014, p. 5). While noticing the absence of lesbians in Sedgwick's work, Wiegman's list of essential scholarship founded on reparation calls on a variety of tactical strategies that may fuel queer feminist readers today: from Ann Cvetkovick's use of the productive possibilities of depression "as an entry point into a different kind of cultural studies" (2012, p. 13), to Heather Love's focus on negative affect in order to ask questions "about how 'feeling backward' can offer affective resources for queer survival in the political present where forgetting has become the keynote of a progressivist historical consciousness" (2007, p. 23). Such frameworks reinforce my belief in the need of tracing an affective genealogy of queer lesbianism if we are to cultivate a turn to reparative reading "as a practice of critical community formation" (Wiegman, 2014, p. 16).

This relational theory is fully aligned with the positing of lesbian affects as a platform of knowledge and experience from which to enact our desires and identity positions. In this respect, Kadji Amin (2016) offers "an *attachment genealogy* as a method of exposing, fragmenting, and reworking *queer's* historical inheritances to enable *queer* to do different work in new contexts" (p. 174). In Amin's view, it is urgent to ground queer in its affective histories that define it as well as to allow it "to do new kinds of work with different objects and archives in a range of historical, cultural, and geographic contexts. This may mean allowing *queer* to come not only to *mean* but also

to *feel* differently than it does now" (2016, p. 185). Her *attachment genealogy*, then, has a double purpose: that of excavating queer's multiple pasts and that of thinking about "more historically distant times, racialized populations, and non-US contexts in general" (p. 186). Similarly, according to Mel Chen (2012), we need a queer politics of recognition, that is, a politics that seeks to undo normative patterns of affective kinship through the foregrounding of queer possibilities of intimacy: "queering is immanent to animate transgressions, violating proper intimacies, including between human and non-human things" (p. 11). There is strong evidence to suggest that although the very questioning of "critique" began in the mid-1990s, the growing popularity of the term "postcritique" is opening new paths for queer studies, among which a posthuman ethics of subjectivity is included, but overlooking the presence of lesbians at once.[4] And yet, these relational affective modes are not something new, for lesbians of color such as Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Lorde suggestively avowed an archive of affects, among which rage, shame, touch, solidarity, and generosity were included. Asserting these affective histories of queer through an excavation of multiple pasts would "re-animate it in new formations —thanks particularly to queer of color, transnational, disability, and trans scholarship" (Chen, 2012, p. 83).

Queer theory's amnesia toward this past legacy may alert us against its colonizing and neoliberal stance, albeit unconsciously enacted. One way of incorporating lesbian voices within its scope could be to forge an intersectional epistemology wherein the explicit presence of lesbian agency is not foreclosed. For example, Angela Willey (2018) has suggestively developed a "dyke ethics of antimonogamy" grounded in "notions of friendship, community and social justice […] that renders its significance as a feature of humanness" (p. 237). In claiming diverse forms of affective ties and networks of social support outside the primacy of the lesbian couple, she draws on materiality and affect as new doors for thinking the lesbian body, as this quest is both erotic and epistemological. Interestingly, Karen Barad's notion of "ethical response-ability" (2012) also attests to our most sensible and sensitive ontological positions as lesbians, capable of weaving a relational net of knowledge, trust, and empathy that crisscrosses past and present accounts of queer sexuality.

[4] The field of critical posthumanism is also relying on queer affect theory in its appraisal of complex assemblages between human and nonhuman forces (Barad, 2008; Braidotti, 2013).

If the lesbian is at risk of becoming an obsolete and void identity category, semantically deprived of her own sexual desire and aesthetics, then we should be alert not to create antagonistic spaces, and think, instead, of contingent and attracting possibilities in which the main aim is "to do collaborative research, to be in touch, in ways that enable response-ability" (Barad, 2012, p. 208). According to Barad (2012), "theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world's patterning and murmurings" (p. 207). By entangling the intimacy of different lesbian and queer epistemologies, and theorizing the sensual metaphor of "touch," a more communitarian ethics and productive aesthetic spaces could be drawn since, as Barad points out, "is touching not by its very nature always already an involution, invitation, invisitation, wanted or unwanted, of the stranger within?" (2012, p. 207).

On the other hand, the trope of "touch" was insistently vindicated by Lorde and Moraga not only as a source of pleasure and vulnerability among women, but also as a call for a return to the mother, as "a political gesture of making reparations" (Musser, 2019 p. 129). Moreover, Sedgwick developed the sense of touch as an attempt to move away from dualistic thought and raise new questions about phenomenology and affect. The association between touch and affect is obvious, and Sedgwick's approach to touching emphasizes a relational narrative reinforced by the title of her work, *Touching Feeling*, which metonymically suggests a wide range of desires, emotions, and attractions. In her own words: "to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people" (2003, p. 14). As I see it, such generous and empathic formulations should stimulate the inclusion of (transgender and stone-butch) lesbians within the academic discussions of feminist queer pedagogies. In rethinking the evolution of queer's definitional openness and theorizing it as a form of action, we must pay attention to the recognition of lesbian sexuality as a key analytic category.

4. Conclusion

The renewal and political utility of "queer" cannot efface the word "lesbian" from its scope. By this assertion I do not imply an unequivocal essentialism, but rather that, just when lesbian voices started to be heard, they were surpassed by a new canonicity of queer studies. In this way, "queer" continues deploying a race while erasing others. Sara Ahmed (2006) argues that queer theory has been interestingly propelled by its own

semantic disruption to describe unofficial paths of behavior, desire, and feeling, other than strictly queer. Such a shift reinforces the stereotype of the tragic lesbian, pointing to "the loneliness of the lesbian life, where the lesbian is 'on her own,' cut off from the family, and where her body is lived as an injury to others, which is conscious of feeling all wrong" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 104). In an analogous way, the lesbian may feel at odds with the imperialistic move of queer theory, consistently veiling lesbian subjectivity for the sake of liberal policies of knowledge control and production. My proposal here is cumulative; that is, the queer reparative turn must not isolate those lesbian voices that have laid the foundations of queer thought, but rather integrate them. So, the invocation of an imagined lesbian community defended by thinkers like Anzaldúa and Lorde should produce an alternative mode of all-female extended family that may counteract the current suture of queer (male) individualism. Similarly, Willey (2018) builds on versions of dyke resistance to normative kinship based on long-term intergenerational friendships, solidarity, multiple nonhierarchical romances, and investments in polyamory that are "simultaneously epistemological and corporeal" (p. 250).

If queer theory has engulfed the epistemological—and the material—conditions of lesbian studies, a new sociocultural, academic context emerges whereby the fascination for the former annihilates the visibility of the latter. Against the flattering promises of queer theory, the lesbian critic stands alone, tragically driving herself to academic neglect and semantic erasure. To put it in Terry Castle's well-known words: "The lesbian remains a kind of 'ghost effect', elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot. The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else; in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night" (1993, p. 2). To rephrase Wiegman's reflection on an anti-disciplinary "world of authorship-without-the-author, culture-without-literature, and the humanities-without-a-human-subject" (2014, p. 18), a queer theory-without-lesbians might leave the critic at war with the very discipline that has undone her. In weaving between the visibility of past lesbian voices and dominant theorizations of queerness as a trendy and convenient discourse, we must find our own place, one that interrogates silence so that a different genealogy of queer studies can emerge, enabling transformative connections among lesbians.

Significantly, the history of queer identities has been one of alliances, dialogues, and silences among different oppressed identity communities that have sought to open new ways to conceptualize the relations between gender, sex, sexuality, class, and race.

While the commodification of “queer” entails a cultural visibility for affirming ontological and epistemological diversity, the “lesbian”, however, has been dismissed as a marginal site of knowledge and material production. This, in turn, signals a lesbian identity no longer represented as a desirable locus of ontological certainty. The coalescence of “lesbian” and “queer,” though simultaneously identity-enforcing, should be invoked as a way of vindicating nonheteronormative desire beyond its usual modes of representations, including racial and transgender ones. I am interested in how to embrace this openness, so as to welcome a queer theory capable of accommodating the very category—i.e. lesbian of color, lesbians, and transgender feminists—on which it was initially wrought. We need to examine the demise of lesbianism and assert it not only as an academic discourse aimed at a constant revision of the history of sexuality, but also as a relational locus from which to interrogate racist, transphobic, and colonialist assemblages of systemic violence and discrimination. To do this type of critique on queer theory is to keep it open and in constant dialogue with its own limitations. We, as lesbians, should unapologetically try to find a voice of our own, one that is inclusive and relational, rather than solipsistic, and one that combines reparative possibilities and imaginative dimensions of lesbian existence.

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