sexual moralities

At the 25 years of *Feminist Review* celebration event in 2005, Elizabeth Wilson cautiously suggested that for feminist theory to remain relevant for the next 25 years, we might have to relinquish previously treasured objects of study. One of these objects was 'sexuality', the relevance of which to contemporary concerns of globalization, war and poverty was not readily apparent. While not disagreeing with the general point that feminist theory must ever be prepared to interrogate its knowledge base, however difficult or uncomfortable that feels, we are convinced that serious feminist consideration of sexuality remains as important as ever. In a sense this special issue might be understood as responding to the question mark held over sexuality's contemporary political relevance, a counter-assertion of sexuality's central significance within global regimes of power. The pieces included in this issue map the complexities of sexual morality in a range of geographical locations, through a range of disciplinary foci, and through attention to a range of levels of materialization. In relation to the latter, the authors interrogate casual conversations, legal interventions, historical documents, interviews, filmic representations and critical texts, among other arenas, to provide a strong sense of the ways in which sexual morality pervades all aspects of life.

In our original call for submissions, we suggested that a conservative sexual morality appears to be on the increase globally, operating in both new and familiar ways. We were particularly keen to attract work that explored both current and historical manifestations of sexual morality because of the ways in which it is consistently the most vulnerable groups and individuals that are the targets of its logic. Declarations of sexual morality are consistently directed at women and minorities, often as a way of policing national boundaries and preserving the 'integrity' of the heterosexual family. Discourses of sexual morality operate in contradictory ways, frequently serving as a dense site where hierarchies of race, gender, class, and religion are affirmed or challenged. As a result new oppositions emerge – we speak of high- and low-risk groups for sexually transmitted diseases, and sexually liberated versus sexually oppressive nation-states. While cries of sexual morality are increasing, new forms of sexual exploitation and expression reveal themselves – in the global sex trade, in contests between women's rights and foetal rights, in civil partnership legislation for same-sex couples, and in new sexual practices made possible by new forms of communication or mobility.

As this special issue came together, it was clear that many of our concerns were shared by contributors, and that a rich variety of research on sexual morality is currently being undertaken. The majority of articles included here demonstrate the centrality of discourses of sexual morality to the drawing of nation's boundaries. The global circulation of the idea of non-heterosexual, non-familial sexuality as 'Western', for example, operates to keep national citizens of postcolonial nations in line, as both Paul Boyce and Srila Roy illustrate in the context of India. Further, it is through the complex connections among related discourses of nation, sexuality, gender, and class that established hierarchies among subjects within and between nations are managed. Jyoti Puri, Almas Sayeed, Eithne Luibhéid, Campbell *et al.*, Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor, and Esther Bott all unpick the discursive slips and connections that allow sexual regulation to flourish contemporarily, and that position subjects in relation to one another. In each case, this work involves painstaking attention to a local site (New Delhi, Kansas, South Africa, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, Ireland and Tenerife, respectively) as a way of better understanding the relationship between local and global meanings and flows. This indeed is one of the primary reasons for sustained attention to sexuality: it is frequently at the level of the intimate, the intersubjective or the everyday, as Puri in particular emphasizes, that national and international power relations are produced and sustained.

While we had anticipated a focus in the submissions on new subjects formed through contemporary sexual morality, we were delighted to read work focusing in such detail on the contradictory logics and expectations that sexual subjects negotiate. Boyce's same-sex practitioners, O'Connell Davidson's 'sex slaves' Sanchez Taylor's sex tourist, Bott's migrant lap dancer, Roy's married revolutionary, Hooper and Kaloski's paedophile, and Luibhéid's pregnant asylum seeker are all carefully drawn, real subjects, never 'othered' by their authors, but situated in relation to the local and global contexts that give rise to them. These subjects are never passive, but actively negotiate the conditions of their emergence, in part by constituting others whom they are not. The 'Others' against whom these subjects compare themselves are always more entrenched, less aware, less respectable, more violent, and so on, and for Bott, O'Connell Davidson, and Sanchez Taylor others are consistently racialized or ethnicized. An unsentimental sense of these subjects' precarious agency emerges that, for the authors concerned, is the product of the ambivalences and embeddedness of sexual morality discourse, and evidence of its imbrication in the tangled knots of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual morality.

Reflecting again on the original call for submissions, we had highlighted our interest in articles that examined the role of feminist and women's movements in challenging the pernicious effects of sexual morality. And, in fact, this question of feminism's role in consolidating or challenging sexual morality is a consistent

theme across this special issue. Several of the articles point to the limited capacity of current feminist theory or practice to address the complex issues raised by a consideration of sexual morality. Both O'Connell Davidson and Sayeed highlight how, in the UK and US, respectively, a feminist emphasis on legislative intervention to combat the pernicious effects of sexual trafficking can be counter-productive, frequently reinforcing discourses of Western superiority and existing, punitive migration policies. Campbell *et al.* and Boyce challenge feminist and sexuality studies to reflect more consistently on how to translate global HIV and AIDS concerns into local contexts. Without that reflection, they argue, development and policy interventions compound rather than alleviate problems of health-care knowledge and access in South Africa and India. And Hooper and Kaloski and Luibhéid tackle the limitations of some fiercely held feminist presumptions: the paedophile is evil and cannot change, and pro-choice discourses are always in all women's interests. For Hooper and Kaloski, a belief that a paedophile can change challenges the deeply pessimistic assumption that sexual desires and behaviours are set in stone in perpetuity. While for Luibhéid, an analysis of the shifting position on abortion policy in Ireland highlights the ways in which migrant women, and women seeking asylum, may need to have recourse to a foetal rights discourse, however problematic that may be, in order to have any voice at all in legal battles over who has the right to settle within particular national borders.

More tentative, of course, are the suggestions for feminist change that emerge from these reflections, although all the authors are clear that where feminist orthodoxy is inadequate to the task of local–global analysis and action it should be called to account, or indeed abandoned. All authors advocate careful mapping of local contexts as a way of reading the materialization of global sexual discourse, and many suggest the development of flexible translation strategies as an appropriate feminist response to the complexities of sexual morality discourse. In addition, the articles in this special issue all underscore the necessity of feminist approaches attending as centrally to questions of nation, race, ethnicity and class as to gender and sexuality, and demonstrate that a full contextualization of sexual morality is necessary for adequate understanding of its impact. Without this complex attention, it is simply not possible to provide an ethical feminist response to discourses of sexual morality.

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