



Interview with Kathy Davis: Transitioning to Gender Equality with Regard to Sexuality

Christa Binswanger

1. Introduction

This interview opens up the chapter on transitioning to gender equality, exploring sexuality and sexual agency. It aims at addressing possible changes towards more equal sexual relations among all sexes.

Within the field of Feminist and Gender Studies, sexuality and sexual encounters are contested topics and riddled with tensions regarding gender relations. First, sexual intercourse is taken as the basis for human reproduction and, as such, is entangled with hierarchical practices and politics in contemporary societies. This entanglement with power dynamics can be the cause for subordinating female sexuality to male sexuality, as long as systems are in place in which male dominance is taken for granted. Second, sexuality is a field in which relations of oppression are still very prevalent and lived out on a daily basis all over the globe. #MeToo and the many hostile reactions to it have recently proven that this phenomenon counts equally for Western societies where sexual harassment is often entangled with professional relationships. Third, and equally important, sexuality is considered as a potentially ecstatic experience framed by joy, intensity and/or consensual dialogue. Perceptions of sexuality within the field of Feminist and Gender Studies reach from “sex positivity”, including, e.g., SM and BDSM (Sadomasochism and Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism) as variations of joyfully lived out sexuality, to “sex negativity”, which treats sexuality as potentially harmful for women. These tensions have provoked many debates or even “wars” within the field of Feminist and Gender Studies.

In this interview with Kathy Davis, Christa Binswanger takes up feminist discussions dealing with inequality within sexual relations since the 1970s in order to lay out and make sense of the field.

2. Interview with Kathy Davis

2.1. *First Set of Questions: Looking Back to the 1970s*

CB: I would first like to go back to the second half of the 20th century, especially the women's movement in the 1970s. Looking at the movement from an intersectional perspective: who were the participants? What were their claims and what changes did they aim for?

KD: The standard take is that the women's movement of the 1970's, both in the US and in Europe, consisted primarily of white, middle-class, educated, heterosexual women. Yet the fault lines were already emerging around sexuality and race, with lesbians and women of colour demanding that their voices be heard. I don't think the movement was nearly as monolithic or unaware of differences among women as it is sometimes portrayed. I was in the US at the time and I remember the welfare women's movement, Black feminism, First Nation women's movements, and lesbian feminism as all part of the feminist landscape. There was a wide spectrum of political orientations, from more liberal feminists who wanted equality in the workforce to socialist feminists who wanted an encompassing transformation of society to radical feminists who directed their energies against male supremacy in all its forms. While there was certainly a tendency to think in terms of 'we women'—something that has since been heavily criticized—even back in the seventies the notion of a unified feminist subject was already being undermined by feminist activist scholars like the Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and many others. I think part of the problem in thinking about differences among women has been in getting past the 'add and stir' approach—that is, in order to teach or investigate differences in power among women, one just needed to add a class on 'women of colour' to a feminist theory course or a chapter on lesbian sexuality to an anthology on women's studies. This is where intersectionality made such an important contribution. The term 'intersectionality' was coined in 1989 by the US legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), but, as a perspective, it was already being used by feminists of colour and Third World women. It was important because it allowed us to think about identity in a more complex way. It marked the end of the naïve belief that you could even talk about gender without considering 'race', class, and sexuality. But, even more important, it provided the beginnings of a methodology for investigating how different constellations of power actually interact and are mutually constitutive in specific contexts and how these interactions shape

people's opportunities and possibilities for action. The work facing feminist scholars who are interested in seventies feminism is to re-read this history through an intersectional lens—that is, to show how intersecting differences generated particular concerns or mobilized individuals in specific ways or produced different strategies for change at specific moments in history. I think our article (Binswanger and Davis 2012) on shifts in feminist debates on sexuality in which we analysed two feminist classic texts from different eras, Verena Stefan's *Häutungen* (Stefan 1975) and Charlotte Roche's *Feuchtgebiete* (Roche 2008) is an example of this kind of historiography. We showed how these texts reflected both similarities and differences in feminist thinking about gender and sexuality, but also about race and class.

CB: As you have mentioned our article, I would like to add a question about it: What are the main "claims"—in a feminist sense—since *Häutungen*, if we look at *Wetlands/Feuchtgebiete* by Charlotte Roche? We have discerned some common grounds of critique in both texts with regard to the commodification of a perfect female body, which should hide its smells and fluids. But, at the same time, there is a clear distancing articulated in Roche's text from "the bad old days of feminism". Could you comment on Roche's so called postfeminist critique with regard to female sexuality?

KD: Roche reacted against what she saw as an overly restrictive feminist sexual morality. Some of what she wrote struck a chord among young women who liked her brazen defiance of all norms and her off-the-wall humour and this accounts for the popularity of *Wetlands/Feuchtgebiete*. Roche has been criticized for assuming that women can be totally autonomous subjects when it comes to sexuality. I don't believe in the kind of autonomy she proposes. We are all embedded in the social worlds we inhabit. Even when we rebel against constraints, we are, at the same time, attending to them. She likes to shock and many of her depictions of sexuality are an example of this. I don't think she has much to say about sexual pleasure as an experience, let alone as an important issue for feminist and other progressive social movements.

CB: There has been a strong "sex positivity movement". What were the main concerns or claims made by this movement? Can you think of any examples drawing on your own experiences?

KD: There is an erroneous assumption that feminism in the seventies was all about sexual oppression and that the concept of 'sex positivity' is of a much more recent vintage. I remember endless conversations in the early days of second

wave feminism in which we talked about sexuality, sexual pleasure, and desire. Most of us came of age during the so-called 'sexual revolution' and were aware that it had been something of a mixed bag for women. On the one hand, we enjoyed the freedom to have sex outside marriage and without fear of getting pregnant, unlike many of our mothers. On the other hand, we were subjected to the pressure of always being up for having sex (something that has, if anything, increased in this postfeminist era) and our male partners were not necessarily attentive to our sexual needs and desires. Verena Stefan has written beautifully about this in *Häutungen*. We had to figure out what we wanted from sexuality and how to negotiate sexual encounters. I recall talking about what we liked and didn't like in our sexual experiences with partners, both male and female. We were open to experimenting. For example, we shared our masturbation experiences and tried out each other's methods. We all purchased vibrators from the newly emerging feminist sex shops. We discussed our sexual fantasies and sexual feelings at great length. Influenced by Anne Koedt's (Koedt [1970] 1996) 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm' and Carla Lonzi's (Lonzi 1975) important essay on female desire¹, we generally took a critical stance toward penetration (as we called it) and saw clitoral stimulation as the only acceptable avenue toward sexual pleasure. Looking back on it, I would say we were too judgemental about what constitutes sexual pleasure (for example, we did not discuss BDSM as potentially pleasurable and were dogmatic in our rejection of pornography as invariably being bad for women). In this sense, the 'sex wars' in the eighties were a necessary corrective and opened our eyes to the vast varieties of sexual pleasure and the impossibility of ever establishing a politically correct feminist sexuality.

2.2. *Second Set of Questions: Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS)—A Travelling Book*

CB: You have investigated the self-help book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, originally written in the 1970s. You analysed, how it has travelled and how body politics and understandings of sexuality vary around the globe. What have you learned about sexuality through this research? What other categories of difference have proven to be powerful with regard to sexual oppression, as well as with regard to sexual fulfilment?

¹ See, a roundtable discussion of Lonzi's work in the *European Journal of Women's Studies* (2014) 21, 3.

KD: Sexuality was, of course, always a central concern in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. You can trace the changes in feminist thinking on sexuality through the editions of OBOS. For example, the first issue treated sexuality as the same for all women. By the mid-seventies, lesbian sexuality had become a topic. Later, sexuality was interrogated through the lens of race and disability. By the beginning of the 21st century, the whole notion of gender had been deconstructed with attention paid to transgender and gender fluidity. There were three things that I particularly appreciated in the OBOS approach to sexuality. First, OBOS was always oriented toward pleasure and in the early days of feminism it was unique in this respect. From the first edition, readers were encouraged to explore their bodies and discover what gave them pleasure. The chapter on masturbation was classic and I spoke with many women who remember reading the text instructing them how to masturbate ('Just try it!') and how it encouraged them to find out what felt good to them. In fact, I remember reading this passage aloud in a gender studies class many years later, assuming that this would be old hat for my sexually savvy students. But, in fact, they were just as surprised and enthralled as I had been when I first read the text. Second, OBOS adopted an intersectional approach (without using that word) by having differently situated groups critically read each and every chapter of the book as part of the authors' collective process of revision. For example, women with disabilities were asked to comment on the sexuality chapter, thereby ensuring that its treatment of sexuality included differently embodied women. These groups of differently situated readers were specifically chosen for the critical work they could do in opening up new ways of looking at a particular topic. Third, when OBOS was translated into different languages, it was the chapter on sexuality that invariably had to be adapted in order to meet the needs of women living in different cultural contexts. This sometimes meant adding information that was absent in the US text (for example, the Egyptian adaptation of OBOS included a discussion of female circumcision and arranged marriages). While the US authors of OBOS initially had a policy that all of the controversial topics (lesbian sexuality, masturbation, and abortion) needed to be included in the translations, they gradually became more flexible about this, leaving the decision to the local feminist groups who were responsible for translating and adapting the book in their own cultural contexts. The most important lesson that I took away from OBOS and its various translations and adaptations is that there is no one feminist perspective on sexuality (see Davis, 2007). More important is that we find ways to generate debates across our

individual, cultural and geo-political differences about what our sexual desires, practices, and political aspirations are.

2.3. *Third Set of Questions: Contemporary Sexualities*

CB: What can we learn from the feminist movement since the 1970s? Can sexuality ever be freed? How is sexuality entangled in power dynamics among the sexes as well as other hierarchical societal structures, institutions and relationships?

KD: I find the notion of ‘free sexuality’ problematic. It reminds me of the old sexual revolution talk which tended to obfuscate the ways women were being pressured into having sex and not necessarily enjoying it. Sexuality—like any social practice—is always enmeshed in relations of power, meaning that it will have to be negotiated. Young people have to discover what they like and don’t like, a process which usually involves some insecurity and stumbling around in the dark. There will always be some grey areas, something which tends to get left out in the #MeToo discussions today.² If there is anything we can learn from the feminist movement of the 1970s, it is that women should be encouraged to explore their bodies and find out what they like and don’t like when it comes to sexuality. With respect to sexual harassment, for example, I would like to see more emphasis on women’s agency and less on establishing rules and restrictions for managing every situation. I also think that sexual desire is enormously complex and that we need to find ways to explore the contradictions and tensions between our discursively held feminist beliefs (what we used to call ideology) and our—often unruly—desires and practices.

CB: The UN is regularly investigating the progress of the SDGs. Unfortunately, concerning SDG 5, female sexual self-determination is still not a given in many contexts. The UN reports in 2019, “In 51 countries with data on the subject, only 57 per cent of women aged 15 to 49, married or in union, make their own decisions about sexual relations and the use of contraceptives and health services” (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>). So, I would like to come back to the 1970s with regard to these results. Would you agree that fifty years ago, the—maybe utopian—idea was considered possible that female sexual and marital oppression could be conquered on a global scale? So, how would you comment on the 43% of women, who cannot make their

² See Zarkov and Davis (2018) where we talk about some of these ‘grey areas’.

own decisions nowadays? And how can we keep up certain feminist beliefs, but still not contribute to a mainstream Western perception of these women as victims?

KD: I don't think that feminists in the 1970s assumed that female sexual and marital oppression could be 'conquered on a global scale'. The assumption was that gender oppression exists overall and everywhere and that feminism in some form or another was, therefore, necessary and desirable. The emphasis was on struggle as an ongoing process. While there were some utopian-minded thinkers around (Shulamith Firestone comes to mind), most activists in my memory were engaged in practical projects that would change women's everyday lives in ways that were beneficial to them. What was problematic in the 1970s was the notion of global feminism as a one-size-fits-all model. US Third World women and women from the Global South have criticized this model as representing the needs, perceptions, and struggles of white, affluent women from the Global North. It has been imposed as a kind of cultural imperialism upon women from different contexts and with very different histories of struggle. Part of this critique was that so-called Third World women have been reduced to victims in need of rescue by their more emancipated 'sisters' in the West. I think more recent work on transnational feminism has been helpful for thinking about this. This perspective takes differences between women as a given, reflects upon power differences among women, and looks for mutually beneficial alliances. This means listening to what women in different parts of the world have to say about their own problems and being attentive to the kinds of struggles that already exist. There is a lot of activism outside the Global North, activism that may or may not appear under the banner of feminism, which should be given much more serious attention. This would help feminists in the Global North to keep their own notions of gender equality and sexual freedom in perspective, as one version of feminism, but not the only one.

CB: So, how can we address gender issues, which are related to male, female, trans, same-sex, non-binary sexuality—is it possible to talk about "female sexuality" any longer? And how can feminists handle differences in understandings and practices of sexuality (due to sexual identity, religion, age, etc.) and still find ways to "affective solidarity" as grounds for political transformation towards joyfully lived out female sexuality?

KD: I have always been in favour of talking about 'sexuality' without putting a label on it; i.e., 'female sexuality'. Sexuality is extremely fluid and complex

and I don't find it realistic or helpful to limit a particular sexual practice to an identity. There have been many productive approaches to understanding different sexualities. With regard to LGBTQI activism, intersectionality has inspired activists, particularly across Latin America, to unite under its banner as an antidote to identity politics. I would like to see more of this in Europe and the US. After all, no individual can be reduced to their sexuality; we are all located in complex configurations of power and difference. By calling themselves 'intersectional', these 'intersectional activists' are envisioning a new way to interact with one another—neither as an encompassing 'we' as second wave feminists used to propose, nor as a circumscribed identity, but as an complicated and ever changing panorama of differently located individuals. 'Affective solidarity' is an interesting concept developed by Hemmings (2012). I have used it myself with regard to bodily practices that feminists sometimes find problematic—for example, genital cutting, cosmetic surgery, sadomasochism. Central to this concept is the importance of reflexivity and engaging with one's own 'gut level' feelings of disgust or shame, but also of desire or attachment because this opens up the possibility for dialogue across differences. Given the enormous complexities of sexual desires and practices, a self-critical and open-ended dialogue seems to be the best we as feminists can hope for.

CB: As you just mentioned, genital cutting is a difficult topic for feminists. What would it mean to keep up the idea of "affective solidarity" with regard to genital cutting?

KD: Whether we like it or not, women across the globe engage in dangerous, painful, and oppressive bodily practices, often ones that they themselves fervently desire and defend. Genital cutting is not limited to certain regions of Africa but it is also done, albeit for different reasons, in the so-called West (cosmetic labiaplasty, intersex surgery). It is a practice, which feminists often find problematic and I think they are right to do so. However, the only way to have a dialogue with 'affective solidarity' is to listen to what the other has to say, reflect critically on one's own cultural biases, and be prepared to engage in a conversation without falling into the more comfortable space of discursive critique. In an earlier paper (Davis 2018), I have argued that many Western feminists, myself included, have felt comfortable chastising other feminists for reproducing Eurocentric and colonialist sentiments in anti-female-mutilation discourse, while ignoring their own embodied unease concerning the practice itself. Here, I see the task of feminist scholarship less in encouraging women

in how to engage with their bodies in more self-determined ways than in being willing to confront the broad panoply of feelings—from disgust, anger and shame, to attraction, sympathy, and compassion—that bodily practices can evoke. Affect should become an opportunity and resource for feminist scholarship that is critical, reflexive, and—above all—open to the messy contradictions of women’s lives as well as feminist politics.

References

- Binswanger, Christa, and Kathy Davis. 2012. Sexy Stories and Postfeminist Empowerment: From *Häutungen* to *Wetlands*. *Feminist Theory* 13: 245–63. [CrossRef]
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 14: 538–54.
- Davis, Kathy. 2007. *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminist Knowledge Travels across Borders*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Davis, Kathy. 2018. Facing uneasiness in Feminist Research: The case of female genital cutting. In *Body, Migration, Re/Constructive Surgeries. Making the Gendered Body in a Globalized World*. Edited by Gabriele Griffin and Malin Jordal. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 243–55.
- Hemmings, Clare. 2012. Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory* 13: 147–61. [CrossRef]
- Koedt, Anne. 1996. The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm. In *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*. Edited by Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 111–16. First published 1970.
- Lonzi, Carla. 1975. Die klitoridische und die vaginale Frau [The clitoral and the vaginal woman]. In *Die Lust Frau zu Sein [The Lust of Being a Woman]*. Translated by Sigrid Vagt. Internationale Marxistische Diskussion 55. Berlin: Merve, pp. 35–79.
- Roche, Charlotte. 2008. *Feuchtgebiete*. Köln: Dumont.
- Stefan, Verena. 1975. *Häutungen*. München: Frauenoffensive.
- Zarkov, Dubravka, and Kathy Davis. 2018. Ambiguities and dilemmas around #MeToo: #ForHow Long and #WhereTo? *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 25: 3–9.

© 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).