



# Post-anti-identitarianism

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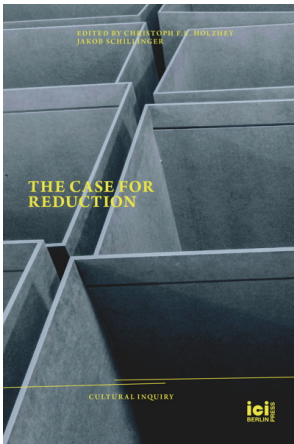
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BEN NICHOLS

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**The Forms of Contemporary Gender and Sexuality**

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**ABSTRACT:** Feminist, queer, and trans studies are all influenced significantly by anti-identitarian thought. Yet, contemporary gender and sexual identities only seem to be proliferating: nonbinary, graysexual, demigender, and more. This chapter focuses on a series of reference guides that schematize this recent expansion. Often miming reductive reference forms (the dictionary, the A-Z list), these texts and the questions they raise help to rethink the place of 'identity' across gender and sexuality studies.

**KEYWORDS:** Queer theory; Identity; Identity politics; Queer liberalism; Information; Proliferation; LGBTQIA+; Lists

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# Post-anti-identitarianism

## The Forms of Contemporary Gender and Sexuality

BEN NICHOLS

I recently came across an item in my local queer bookshop that struck me as both trivial and intriguing. With a cover in the colours of the progress pride flag, *The Queens' English* (2021) styles itself as a 'dictionary' of queer life.<sup>1</sup> A publication aimed squarely at a popular audience, it nonetheless mimes this somewhat standardizing, technical, and specialist (as I will explore, we might even say reductive) reference form. Across its over 800 entries, this dictionary offers its readers a digest of a whole host of gender and sexual identities: demigender, graysexual, aromantic, heteroflexible, polysexual, neutrois are just a handful of terms. These identities complement the lengthening initialism that commonly stands in for non-cis-hetero culture and life: LGBTQIA+, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, with a 'plus' that implies inevitable expansion. Whether we live in an era of more intensely proliferating gender and sexual identities, or whether this proliferation has always characterized gender and sexuality more generally is open to debate. But whatever the answer, the interest in identity now complements how social identity looms large across life in many Anglophone contexts, where social and political

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1 Chloe O. Davis, *The Queens' English: The LGBTQIA+ Dictionary of Lingo and Colloquial Phrases* (London: Square Peg, 2021).

emergencies continue to make the work of identity-based thought and movements urgent and necessary, even as many commentators on both the left and the right still decry the apparent dominance of 'identity politics', as they have done for decades.<sup>2</sup>

How are the academic fields of feminist, queer, and trans studies to respond to this identitarian moment, influenced as they are by anti-identitarian thought? Through conceptual frameworks rooted in post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, or through critiques of the framework of liberal rights, representation, and recognition that identitarian positions seem to require, these fields have been defined in prominent ways by their scepticism towards *identity*. Identity *reduces*: it reduces us to vectors of knowledge-power, or it reduces the errancy of desire, or the instability of language, or opportunities for coalitional struggle. Within the most prominent frameworks of gender and sexuality studies, identity still tends to seem either theoretically and conceptually impossible, politically problematic and exclusionary, or just aesthetically uninteresting. My main question in this chapter is whether this framework of anti-identitarianism remains adequate or helpful for theorizing gender and sexual life now, where it seems that identities are only proliferating. If anything, gender and sexual life is becoming more identitarian than ever before. One response to this is to say that we therefore have an acute need for anti-identitarian thought. Another would be to use this moment to reflect on whether all forms of attachment to identity are problematic in the way that anti-identitarian thought has tended to imagine. Are all forms of attachment to identity identical?

There are a number of ways in which we can read forms of reduction at the heart of this identitarian proliferation. For one thing, in conceptual terms, as I hint above and as we will see more below, identity has been strongly associated with reduction. But equally, a prominent form of response to the new complexity of the terrain of

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2 For a recent left-liberal critique of identity politics see Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017). For a similar argument from a neoconservative perspective see Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Profile Books, 2018). Suzanna Danuta Walters summarizes many of the historical debates on identity politics in her 'In Defense of Identity Politics', *Signs*, 43.2 (2018), pp. 473–88.

gender and sexual identity has been to turn to genres or forms that help schematize it — that is, to reductive or reducing genres. One example is ‘the list’ as a form, as in the initialism LGBTQIA+ cited above that substantializes each identity in the list and also formalizes them as more or less equivalent. Across popular print publishing and social media, a range of guides, such as *The Queens’ English*, have similarly taken the form of what are essentially lists: dictionaries, A-Zs, and ABCs-style guides. To give them a name, I call these ‘information genres’ and they take their place in much broader histories of the importance of such forms to queer and other forms of minoritized life for whom the issue of access to information has been particularly important. The point in the context of this chapter is to highlight the close relation between expansion and reduction: the expansion of sexual and gendered life seems also to generate an attachment to genres and forms that are schematic, formalizing, reductive. This is not to claim that there is any conceptual necessity to the link between expansion and reduction, but to register the context of these guides where the two phenomena seem to have gone hand in hand.

At the same time, these new genres which seek to list, catalogue, and enumerate gender and sexual identities also encourage us to look back at the histories of feminist, queer, and trans studies for alternative non-anti-identitarian genealogies. Doing this, we can see that there have been significant seams within these fields that have not sought to do away with identity altogether, but rather have sought to historicize it, or else looked to foreground the versions of identity that may be obscured by more prominent or institutionalized forms. Rather than a wholesale rejection of identity, this work was often grounded in a rejection or problematization of a specific range of identities: prominently, woman, lesbian, gay, transgender. Perhaps we can see the proliferation of identities now as part of the continuation of a basic project to decentre this specific range of identities. The point then, particularly towards the end of the sections that follow, is to dwell on how forms of social identity bear the *rhetorical burden of identity* and its seeming reductiveness differently.

## TRACING ANTI-IDENTITARIANISM

There have of course been good reasons why some of the most important and defining formulations in feminist, queer, and trans theory have been anti-identitarian ones. Amongst other things, these formulations have helped us to interrogate a stable and exclusionary idea of 'woman'.<sup>3</sup> They have encouraged us to see heteronormativity as a structure whose influence operates well beyond the direct treatment of self-identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual people.<sup>4</sup> And they have taught us about the sometimes neo-colonial travels of the category 'transgender' when it is exported around the world.<sup>5</sup> Identitarianism has also been seen as inadequate for producing ethical projects based on self-abandonment as exemplary non-violence,<sup>6</sup> inadequate as the basis for the broadest visions of social justice and transformation,<sup>7</sup> and inadequate for the practical provision of healthcare interventions, such as in the contexts of HIV/AIDS.<sup>8</sup> The list could likely go on. The many important reservations about identity that have been articulated in gender and sexuality studies, particularly since, and most prominently within, queer theory, have resulted in a situation in which identity has come to have something of a political essence. If asked to characterize these fields, and particularly the field of queer theory, would anyone with a real familiarity with them ever say that their main concern is with identity?

Some conceptual roots of anti-identitarianism can be traced to the influence of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis in formulations that have characterized queer thought. A touchstone text in this regard would of course be Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the*

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3 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990] (London: Routledge, 1999).

4 Michael Warner, 'Introduction', in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. by Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. vii–xxxi.

5 Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy, 'Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections', *TSQ*, 1.3 (2014), pp. 320–37.

6 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

7 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

8 Simon Watney, 'Emergent Sexual Identities and HIV/AIDS', in *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 63–80.

*Subversion of Identity* (1990), where Butler argues through largely Foucauldian terms that the stable identity of 'woman' that they imagine some feminist work to have been attached to is in fact the outcome or product of regulatory and exclusionary practices that, amongst other problems, uphold the dominance of heterosexuality. Butler also draws on a wide range of other thinkers to question the 'metaphysics of substance' on which they imagine this stable notion of *woman* to rely.<sup>9</sup> This notion of a stable being is problematized not only because of its construction within discourse/power, but also via recourse to the destabilizing effects of the unconscious and of language, which both reveal the 'foundational illusions of identity' and unsettle its 'reductive efforts of univocal signification.'<sup>10</sup> Butler's later work in the 1990s similarly problematized sexual as well as gender identity categories. In the 1999 Preface to the tenth anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler hopes for 'a coalition of sexual minorities that will transcend the simple categories of identity' and that 'would be based on the irreducible complexity of sexuality and its implication in various dynamics of discursive and institutional power.'<sup>11</sup> While there is an irreducibility that identity categories misrepresent here, Butler also corrects a misunderstanding of *Gender Trouble*, clarifying that its critique of identity 'is no reason not to use, and be used, by identity.'<sup>12</sup> Despite the conceptual problems with certain formulations of identity that were raised in Butler's work, as they clarified, this did not mean that they thought it could, or should, be escaped entirely.

But beyond Butler, other influential figures within queer theory continue to be drawn to conceptual frameworks that have tended to imagine 'identity' as an impossibility. Prominent voices in the field keeping this more thoroughgoing strain of anti-identitarianism alive include Jasbir Puar, who has problematized the framework of intersectional identities using models of affect and assemblage derived from Deleuzian thought, and, from a quite different perspective, Lee Edelman, committed as his work remains to a model of queerness as a

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9 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 14.

10 Ibid., pp. 44 and 132.

11 Ibid., p. xxvi.

12 Ibid.

kind of Lacanian Real that confounds all identity. For Edelman, 'queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one.'<sup>13</sup> For Puar, 'intersectional identities are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility.'<sup>14</sup> In her more recent work, Puar similarly roots her analysis of international disability politics in a concept of affect as 'ontological irreducibilities that transform the fantasy of discreteness of categories not through their disruption but, rather, through their dissolution via multiplicity.'<sup>15</sup> The theoretical commitments in both Puar and Edelman make the complete impossibility of identity and categories a much more central concern than it had been in Butler.

As the mention of Puar perhaps begins to indicate, a prominent way of critiquing identitarianism now is to attach it to or fold it into a critique of Western liberalism. That is, in queer theoretical writing now, one is arguably less likely to encounter a post-structuralist deconstruction of identity as the most pressing scholarly project, but the spirit of this deconstruction continues in critiques of identity for being part of an implicitly Western liberal rights project that seems to demand stable subjects for representation. For example, in a special issue of the US-based journal *Social Text*, titled 'Left of Queer' (2020), Puar and David Eng have continued their individual projects of critiquing the conceptual bases of minority rights claims. What Puar has called 'homonationalism' and what Eng has called 'queer liberalism' both name structures in which the identities of formerly marginalized people (or, more specifically, of lesbians and gay people) are folded into modern liberal states rooted, both in terms of their histories and contemporary orientations, in racism and colonialism.<sup>16</sup> The claims of these formerly marginalized people to be recognized within the terms

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13 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 17.

14 Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 213.

15 Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 36.

16 See Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).



of those nation states serve therefore only to bolster these racist and colonialist projects.

In the more recent incarnation of this argument that they have offered together, Eng and Puar also fold into their account the ever-increasing range of sexual identities vying for recognition, or what they call 'the evolution of LGBTQ+ in US identity politics'.<sup>17</sup> They argue that this evolution leads to the continued formation of liberal subjects as bearers of rights, which rests on the 'sublation' of three main concepts that exceed the bounds of identity and the liberal subject: '*debility, indigeneity, and trans*'.<sup>18</sup> They therefore make the case for what they call both a 'subjectless' and 'objectless' critique that, they argue, avoids these negations.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, while they directly critique what they see as the way in which queer studies has become reduced to a version of US area studies, their critique of liberal inclusion has originated from, and speaks most prominently to, the context of the contemporary United States. It is also clear that the paradigm of the liberal state that they employ is the US. Moreover, as they implicitly suggest by citing a wide range of US-based scholarship that does this, articulating the desire to set the sights of queer studies beyond the US nation-state now so thoroughly marks scholarship coming from the US that the demand only positions one even more strongly in that geopolitical location.<sup>20</sup> The exact extent to which their critique of liberal inclusion remains true in other locations is perhaps to be determined. Are all forms of liberal inclusion the same?

Or perhaps another question would be, where exactly is this liberal inclusion happening? At one less frequently cited moment in her famous essay on paranoid and reparative reading, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asks what I take to be a similar question. To rehearse the overall argument briefly: Sedgwick argues that modern Anglophone critical theory has mostly been characterized by a 'paranoid' mode which seeks to uncover hidden violences and oppressions in whatever it attends to. This mode has an important role to play, but also deserves to be seen

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17 David L. Eng and Jasbir K. Puar, 'Introduction: Left of Queer', *Social Text*, 38.4 (2020), pp. 1–23 (p. 7).

18 *Ibid.*, p. 2, original italics.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 19 n. 9.

as just one among many possible approaches. The approach she calls 'reparative' is focused just as much, for example, on what is enabled or made possible by the inevitably adulterated, imperfect, or even violent phenomena of the world: it is about finding sustenance or pleasure in the objects that we study. One of the hallmarks of one version of paranoid thought, she argues, is that it relies on the 'prestige of a single, overarching narrative: exposing and problematizing hidden violences in the genealogy of the modern liberal subject.'<sup>21</sup> She continues:

Where are all these supposed modern liberal subjects? I daily encounter graduate students who are dab hands at unveiling the hidden historical violences that underlie a secular, universalist liberal humanism. Yet these students' sentient years, unlike the formative years of their teachers, have been spent entirely in a xenophobic Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush America where 'liberal' is, if anything, a taboo category and where 'secular humanism' is routinely treated as a marginal religious sect, while a vast majority of the population claims to engage in direct intercourse with multiple invisible entities such as angels, Satan, and God.<sup>22</sup>

While the version of the essay I cite here was published in 2003, in 2022, when I write this, we might similarly ask if the formation of a liberal subject who bears rights is really the most acute violence we can imagine when, as Eng and Puar themselves write, 'far Right and ultra-nationalist governments have been (re)elected and/or strengthened in both democratic and authoritarian states.'<sup>23</sup>

Will all versions of appeals to liberal personhood, to a subject who is the bearer of an identity and of rights, always mean the same thing? I do not ask this to defend what has been critiqued as universal liberal humanism. For one thing, this would mean taking on decades of theorizing within critical theory that has sought to dislodge or otherwise trouble the modern liberal subject. Moreover, important renewed critiques of humanism have been offered in recent years by a range of scholars who have explored the variously abject positions afforded

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21 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 139.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 139–40.

23 Eng and Puar, 'Introduction: Left of Queer', p. 3.

to Blackness within the ‘universal liberal human project’.<sup>24</sup> Instead, I point to a conceptual knot: if the problem with universalist liberal humanism is its *universal* concept of the human, then is there a problem with claiming that liberal humanism is itself universally always one thing? This conceptual knot does not go unremarked in scholarship that takes on universal liberal humanism. In her recent book *Becoming Human* (2020), Zakiyyah Iman Jackson similarly recognizes that the Enlightenment humanism that she takes to be the paradigm of liberal humanist thinking is itself ‘a multivocality with contradiction and moving parts, and thus not reducible to its more infamous ideas’, whilst remaining ringingly clear on its place in the history of anti-Blackness.<sup>25</sup>

#### INFORMATION GENRES

The scholarly consensus that I have briefly traced, however, contrasts somewhat with how gender and sexuality are increasingly lived in less academic contexts. For example, the fiercely anti-identitarian energies of queerness as articulated by some queer theorists have been given identitarian form, as I would not be the first to observe, by being folded into the lengthening initialism that names non-cis-heterosexual identities. This continues to expand from LGBT, or LGBTQ, to LGBTQIA+, or to cite one particularly full recent version: ‘LGBT-QQIP2SAA’ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit, androgynous, asexual).<sup>26</sup> Facebook, of course, now famously offers users more than 70 gender categories to choose from.<sup>27</sup> As I mentioned above, this context is liable to make us

24 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), p. 28. Jackson references a very wide range of scholars related to her project: Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, Aimé Césaire, Sylvia Wynter, Frank Wilderson III, Katherine McKittrick, Christina Sharpe, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Achille Mbembe, and Alexander G. Weheliye (p. 19).

25 Ibid., p. 23.

26 Guy Davidson, ‘Queer Literary Studies and the Question of Identity Categories’, *Literature Compass*, 17 (2020), e12561 (p. 12n2) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12561>>.

27 For a discussion of this and a list of the gender options available on the US and UK versions of the site see Patricia Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis: A Lacanian Perspective on Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 29.

think either that we need anti-identitarian thought more than ever, or else that clinging on to it is a losing battle.

To test out how to view this contemporary expansion of gender and sexual identities in light of the history of anti-identitarianism in the fields of gender and sexuality studies, I would like to look to some genres of writing in which this proliferation and expansion is registered in some specific ways. For the purposes of this volume, I am interested in the link between identitarian proliferation and certain genres or styles or forms that we might imagine as quite reductive. Over the last few years, across popular publishing and social media in Anglophone contexts, we have seen the appearance of a number of queer genres of writing that take the form of, essentially, lists and style themselves after forms that schematize and formalize information: dictionaries, A-Zs, 'ABCs' guides, or even, in one case, the periodic table. To give examples of a few titles here: *The Queens' English: The LGBTQIA+ Dictionary of Lingo and Colloquial Phrases* (2021), *The Queeriodic Table: A Celebration of LGBTQ+ Culture* (2019), *From Ace to Ze: The Little Book of LGBT Terms* (2018), or *The A-Z of Gender and Sexuality: From Ace to Ze* (2018).<sup>28</sup> While we could look to many places to see the expansion of gender and sexual identity categories recorded, these kinds of texts, on the one hand, give us a useful overview of the terrain, and, at the same time, introduce formal questions about reduction.

Moreover, these works take their place in a much broader history in which what we might call 'information genres' have been central to queer and many other forms of minoritized life: guidebooks, bibliographies, event listings, personal ads, safer sex education manuals, coming out guides, young adult advice books. These kinds of genres have a greater significance for minoritized people whose lives depend on access to information that is often not available within mainstream and readily accessible genres of cultural reproduction and dissemination. As the media studies scholar Cait McKinney writes, 'groups marginalized because of gender, sexuality, and race have the most to

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28 Davis, *The Queens' English*; Harriet Dyer, *The Queeriodic Table: A Celebration of LGBTQ+ Culture* (London: Summersdale, 2019); Harriet Dyer, *From Ace to Ze: The Little Book of LGBT Terms* (London: Summersdale, 2018); Morgan Potts, *The A-Z of Gender and Sexuality: From Ace to Ze* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018).

tell us about how, when, and for whom information matters.<sup>29</sup> What interests me about the titles I cite above though is their relation to cultural forms that are particularly reductive, standardizing, and schematizing. Dictionaries collect, catalogue, and define language usage. A-Z guides provide lists that comprehensively present and schematize the significant features of a given phenomenon. In the UK, A-Z Maps are a well-known brand of map that since 1936 has provided comprehensive roadmaps of the UK. Maps, of course, translate the complexity of three-dimensional life into a flat, modularized formal representation. The proliferation and expansion of new forms of gender and sexual life seems to have gone hand-in-hand with highly reductive cultural forms.

The hitherto unmentioned ‘information genre’ that has a key role to play here is the contemporary Internet. Indeed, it would be difficult not to relate any proliferation in gender and sexual identities to the new media forms that we now live with. Many platforms from YouTube to Reddit have become places for sharing information and guidance that refines, breaks down, and reformulates the increasing complexities of contemporary gender and sexual life. One popular YouTuber — who now goes by the name of Ash Hardell and at the time of writing is on temporary hiatus from producing videos — also published a book in 2016 called *The ABC’s of LGBT+* (2016). The book starts with a ‘cheat sheet’ aimed at an ‘LGBTQIA+ terminology novice’ and includes 105 terms including: ‘Abrosexual/romantic: Someone who experiences a fluid and/or changing orientation’; ‘Aporagender: Both a specific gender identity and an umbrella term for being a non-binary gender separate from man, woman, and anything in between while still having a very strong and specific gendered feeling’; ‘Diamoric’: a term for describing the sexual and romantic orientation towards non-binary people.<sup>30</sup> Hardell suggests that the book is explicitly for any LGBTQIA+ person who is ‘looking for their label’.<sup>31</sup>

29 Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 3.

30 Ashley Hardell, *The ABC’s of LGBT+* (Coral Gables, FL: Mango Media Inc, 2016), pp. 7, 8, 9, and 12. Apple ebook.

31 Ibid., p. 46.

There might be a set of easy academic critiques of the project of this book. For one thing, the belief that any category could be sufficient for transparently capturing a lived reality is of course an idea that we are inclined to think of as naive. According to some dominant conceptual frameworks that I briefly addressed earlier, any identity is simply impossible because of the inevitably corrosive force of the unconscious or because of our distribution as subjects across 'ontological irreducibilities' of affect. Moreover, the proliferation of identities or labels does not escape the overarching reductive logic of identity and labels itself. From Michel Foucault, we know that modern power works not through restricting sexual identity, but through the 'proliferation of specific pleasures and the multiplication of disparate sexualities' in what he dubbed 'the perverse implantation.'<sup>32</sup> From Marxist scholars, we are familiar with parallels that we might draw between neoliberal consumerist logics based on infinite choice and the seemingly infinite options for sexual and gendered life similarly out there to 'choose.'<sup>33</sup> But all of this said, it is hard to simply dismiss Hardell's project. Hardell has over 600,000 subscribers on YouTube, which is a far greater reach than any queer theorist. The book is an interesting phenomenon for how it lays out many fine-grained distinctions and names them: it is a digest of a range of careful taxonomies of sexual and gendered life.

Nevertheless, in some ways, the examples in the previous paragraphs perfectly exemplify the politics of liberal inclusion that Puar and Eng critique. For them, the expanding list of identities laying claim to liberal rights is 'predicated on a signifying chain of identity as analogy and the awarding of legal rights and entitlements through a politics of incremental recognition.'<sup>34</sup> The problem with 'identity as analogy' is that new forms of identity still rely on the unproblematized and recognizable liberal subject of rights. For Eng and Puar, it seems that no form of identity could escape this. The works cited above demonstrate

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32 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley, 4 vols (London: Penguin, 1978–2021), 1: *The Will to Knowledge* [1976] (1998), pp. 49 and 36.

33 See for example Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2000); Donald Morton, 'Changing the Terms: (Virtual) Desire and (Actual) Reality', in *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. by Donald Morton (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), pp. 1–33.

34 Eng and Puar, 'Introduction: Left of Queer', p. 5.

Eng and Puar's point rather perfectly via their formal organization. *The ABCs of LGBT+*, for example, could not do any more to invite us to see the identities that it describes as analogous: they are presented as an alphabetical list of basically similar and equivalent entries. In the other volumes cited above, too, the identities and terminology that they lay out for us are presented in lists of alphabetical entries. In formal terms, each identity is rendered the same, even if the content may differ. Moreover, these texts are likely to seem thoroughly to be about a 'politics of incremental recognition'. They are for those who are 'looking for their label' or for the category within which they might demand recognition. This resonates with a distinction between recognition and redistribution often discussed by Nancy Fraser, amongst others, where the former is about extending recognition within the basic political terms of the status quo and the latter is about a more thoroughgoing reorganization of political life with social justice in mind.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, the information genres I have briefly addressed may offer some challenges to this narrative. For one thing, Puar and Eng are clear that the main aspect of the 'recognition' that they problematize is legal recognition. It is claims for 'legal rights and entitlements' that problematically seek the validation of the state. By contrast, these guides make no claims on the law. Indeed, in their very forms they cite and perform themselves specifically as, as I have said, *information genres* (the dictionary, the A-Z, and so on). The guides I have cited make it clear that what is at stake is *information* rather than legal redress or recognition. That is, as these guides make clear, there may be uses and deployments of identitarian expansion that are not fully explained within the terms of either recognition or redistribution. Arguably, it is through embodying reductive forms — through reducing the identitarian expansion to nothing more than more information — that these guides might encourage us to think in these terms.

Moreover, to my mind, there are also some conceptual confusions in how Puar and Eng use the concept of 'liberal'. They would not be alone in using 'liberal' to evoke a catch-all evil which condenses prob-

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35 Nancy Fraser, 'Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation', in Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 7–109.

lematic political and economic orientations, as well as a specific theory of the subject. For them, the ‘evolution of LGBTQ+ in US identity politics’ is a specifically liberal phenomenon — they use the terms ‘liberal’, ‘(neo)liberal’, and ‘neoliberal’.<sup>36</sup> Yet, liberalism as a political and social orientation, at least in some of its articulations, actually stands in tension with the recognition of non-dominant social identities. One high-profile instance that articulates this is Mark Lilla’s popular book *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (2017). Lilla calls for moving away from identity politics approaches by arguing that such approaches fractured the liberal left in the US and therefore led to the election of Donald Trump in 2016.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the many decades’ worth of critiques that have been levelled at the ‘liberal humanist subject’ by conceptual work in the Euro-American humanities have made it clear that the problem with the conceptualization of this subject is that it conceives of a universal humanity unmarked by specific social identities. Of course, Puar and Eng might suggest that their point is that many social differences are now folded into conceptions of the universal human within contemporary multiculturalist liberalism. Therefore the meaning of the liberal subject has shifted and established social differences have lost their potential to anchor any radical politics. But nevertheless their critique of the ‘evolution of LGBTQ+ in US identity politics’ puts them actually *on the side* of liberals.

Moreover, while we would be hard-pushed to find scholars celebrating this for its relation to liberal inclusion, there have nevertheless been prominent strains of queer thought that have been interested in the categorial expansion that Eng and Puar malign. There have always been strands of queer thought that have been interested in enumerating, listing, or cataloguing forms of gender and sexual identity. To take one widely-cited and canonical example, Jack Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998), even as it works to distance itself from a naïve belief in categorization, is also all about bringing new forms of masculinity into wider view. Halberstam argues for the ‘production of new taxonomies’, as well as for more precision in gender categories: ‘The human potential for incredibly precise classification has been

36 See e.g. Eng and Puar, ‘Introduction: Left of Queer’, pp. 3–4.

37 Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*.



demonstrated in multiple arenas: why then do we settle for a paucity of classifications when it comes to gender?’<sup>38</sup> To take another canonical and widely-cited example, David Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (2007) is a critique of the forced use of the category of ‘transgender’ in some non-profit discourse but also an attempt to capture a wide-ranging and complex system of gender and sexual classification amongst Black and Brown sex workers in New York in the late 1990s that stands in tension with this category. The sex workers who Valentine works with cannot be assimilated to a position that just wants to celebrate exceeding identity categories though: they still adhere to ‘a system of categorical orderings’ even though it is organized differently to ‘mainstream identity politics’.<sup>39</sup>

Equally, in more recent work than Halberstam’s and Valentine’s, scholars working on the history of sexuality have continued to be interested in narrating the emergence of apparently new forms of sexual identity. Benjamin Kahan’s recent book *The Book of Minor Perverts* (2019), for example, looks back to the heterogeneous classifications and categorizations of sexology to draw parallels with how the hold of the homo/hetero binary on sexual definition has begun to erode in recent decades. Historians have conventionally dated the emergence of the homo/hetero binary that has organized dominant understandings of sexuality in the twentieth century to the end of the nineteenth century, but Kahan argues that it did not actually come to have true dominance until the 1980s and 90s, particularly after the AIDS crisis did so much work to catapult homosexuality into public consciousness. No sooner did this binary achieve this dominance than it began to erode, which Kahan credits to the emergence of queer cultures and theoretical paradigms from the 1990s, which explicitly situated themselves as being about something *more than* this binary. He lists some examples of the ‘proliferation of sexual and gender identities and bodily morphologies’ that have happened since the 1990s: ‘trans, down low, genderqueer, asexual, etc.’<sup>40</sup>

38 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 8 and 27.

39 David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 136.

40 Benjamin Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergences of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 136.

If we wanted to look for it, there is a yet more extensive minor history of scholarship in the field that has resisted its anti-identitarianism. For example, Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* (2007) argues for holding onto rather than jettisoning apparently spoiled identities: 'We need an account of identity that allows us to think through its contradictions and to trace its effects.'<sup>41</sup> In his recent book *Categorically Famous* (2019), Guy Davidson recovers some of the importance of identity categories to queer life, citing work by Rita Felski, Michael Snediker, Jeff Solomon, Christopher Reed, and Christopher Castiglia that indicates a 'disenchantment with anti-identitarianism' in the process.<sup>42</sup> In my own recently published writing, I have noted how, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, a range of scholars in lesbian studies, Black studies, and cultural materialism pushed back against what was perceived as the postmodern anti-identitarianism of queer thought.<sup>43</sup> Despite this minor history, and, indeed, as the continued existence of work in this vein implies, the dominant image of the field that endures is an anti-identitarian one. As I indicated above, I think it is a fair claim to say that no one with a real familiarity with the field would argue that its primary orientation was in fact *towards* identity. Standing against identity remains a powerful norm in the field.

But perhaps we can also specify this claim further, as it seems from the summary above that not all forms of identity have been seen as equally problematic. Rather than completely rejecting identity, foundational anti-identitarian work in queer theory was formed in relation to a specific range of identity categories. To return to the work of Judith Butler, for example, we are reminded of how it is the category 'woman' that is the foil for their problematization of identity in *Gender Trouble*. Contemporaneous work by Butler turned to the categories of *gay* and, more prominently, *lesbian* to argue that these identities run the risk of reproducing the activity of 'regulatory regimes'.<sup>44</sup> These categories

41 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 44.

42 Guy Davidson, *Categorically Famous: Literary Celebrity and Sexual Liberation in 1960s America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), pp. 15–16.

43 Ben Nichols, 'Library Fever: Lesbian Memoir and the Sexual Politics of Order', *Textual Practice*, early online publication (2022), p. 3 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2022.2032303>>.

44 Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. by Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 13–31.

should therefore be the ‘very rallying points for a certain resistance to classification and to identity as such.’<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Butler puts forward a view of identity as inherently unstable: the repetition necessary to perform stable identity also results in inevitable instability. For Butler, the non-negotiable fact of this instability is also the source of political and ethical value. If this instability is so intrinsic to identity then we might ask whether we really should have been resisting identity all these years, or actually embracing it more strongly. That is, there seems to be some confusion between the account of what identity is (namely, inherently unstable) and the need to object to it. While, as above, Butler later clarifies that she sees no reason not to use identity, in this influential moment the notion of stable lesbian and gay identities comes to seem perhaps like a foil or rhetorical move — a set of straw categories. Indeed, as far as I am aware, no other area of study focused on social identity has been founded in this way on displacing what might be seen as its organizing identities. Where anti-identitarianism endures in queer thought now, is it the continuing legacy of a foundational move to problematize a very specific set of categories?

To conclude in a yet more speculative and also anecdotal register, I see a similar dynamic also in experiences of teaching in gender and sexuality studies. In this context, there seem to me to be some inconsistencies in what is recognized as *identity*. On the one hand, the critiques of identity categories and labels that have been made in gender and sexuality studies fields are popular and readily understood. Students will happily critique apparently shallow ‘identity politics’. And yet they also frequently make identitarian claims — say, in the name of genderqueer asexual people, or neurodivergent pansexuals — that they do not recognize as such. I have no investment in critiquing these students, but I am interested in how they do not see these kinds of claims in relation to ‘identity’ or as representing the kind of identitarianism that they also critique. Perhaps there is even something about the rhetorical charge of the word ‘identity’ that makes it a concept one cannot see oneself in relation to.

What gets imagined as an identity and what does not? It seems easy to critique ‘woman’, ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘transgender’ as identities, but

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45 Ibid., p. 16.

*genderqueer asexual*, *neurodivergent pansexual*, or other forms of identity do not register as such. These are surely only *not* identities if you imagine that only a specific range of categories should bear the burden of being identities. In her recent essay ‘In Defense of Identity Politics’ (2018), Suzanna Danuta Walters notes what I take to be a related dynamic at work in critiques of ‘identity politics’. She argues that critics of ‘identity politics’ approaches (who in Walters’s account are mostly straight white men) often imagine that only those who are marginalized due to race, class, gender, or sexuality actually have an identity. In making this move, Walters argues, these straight white men somehow get to imagine themselves as not having an identity and as being free from its confines.<sup>46</sup> But in my speculative and anecdotal take on the fate of ‘identity’ in gender and sexuality fields here, it is by no means always just white, cis, straight males who get to not have an identity, or who can imagine themselves as being free from its restrictions.

#### POST-ANTI-IDENTITARIANISM?

If at one moment in the early 1990s in Anglophone (and primarily US-based) academia, it seemed particularly urgent to step outside of identity categories, then this does not seem to have become the dominant way of understanding in contemporary gender and sexual life. Part of the critique of identity categories in queer scholarship has been that they in some sense *reduce* something more properly considered irreducible. The proliferation of identity options that I have surveyed in this short piece would not seem to contradict this: indeed, a curious genre that has emerged in relation to this proliferation is that of the *information genre* that mimes prominent reductive, standardizing information forms, such as dictionaries and A-Zs. The expansion or proliferation of gender and sexual categories seems to have drawn the popular queer imagination towards genres that, I have suggested, are reductive. The point has not been to try to disprove this reductiveness, but rather to stage it as a notable area to think about in making, to cite the title of this volume, *The Case for Reduction*.

Moreover, my claim has been that considering ways of living gender and sexual life now prompts us to reconsider the prominent

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46 Suzanna Danuta Walters, ‘In Defense of Identity Politics’, pp. 476–77.

anti-identitarianism of gender and sexuality studies as a field. Even if identity categories reduce, they do not seem to be going away. I have used the current proliferation of identities as the ground for considering the significant seam of anti-identitarianism in queer theory in particular and to ask whether such a theory remains adequate. The proliferation of identity categories has also been an occasion to look back at the history of the field for non-anti-identitarian histories. In light of theoretical models that foregrounded the inherent and necessary instability of all identity, it can perhaps be difficult to recover who exactly is supposed to have had a fixed identity anyway. Through historicizing anti-identitarianism, we can also see that it is specific identity categories that formed the crucibles for anti-identitarian thought or that were presented or styled as performing a greater fixity and reductiveness. In this history of the field, it was particular identities that were implanted with this fixity to form the foils for the anti-identitarian moves of early queer thought.

If we are not necessarily 'post' anti-identitarianism, as if we had experienced some great paradigm shift, then it could nevertheless at least be time to think of the 'post' in my title as a gesture of historicization, or rethinking and reflection. Perhaps the identitarianism of queer life now might encourage us to pause and shift attention from an opposition to identity, to continue to think about the manifold attachments to identity that might exist and what they each might mean. To cite the words of Heather Love again, 'We need an account of identity that allows us to think through its contradictions and to trace its effects.' In some ways, the lists of new identities that I have surveyed prompt us to do this. In the mixture of proliferation and reduction that they put into play, in confronting us with a sheer variety of categories, they encourage us to do the work of figuring out the 'effects' of each one. If there have been good reasons to be sceptical about the use of identity in certain contexts, does this mean that this scepticism should be applied unilaterally? Perhaps our current moment encourages us to ask or return to this question. In the process, we get a new perspective not just on the expanding contemporary forms of gender and sexuality, but also on those historical categories of identity that have been so vexed and contested in the history of the field.

Ben Nichols, 'Post-anti-identitarianism: The Forms of Contemporary Gender and Sexuality', in *The Case for Reduction*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger, *Cultural Inquiry*, 25 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 135–53 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25\\_07](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_07)>

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