Abstract for Theme IV:
Normativity and Hegemony

Intimate Counter-Normativities:
A Queer Analysis of Intimacy in the 21st Century

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Amid all the social scientific, political and popular discussion of the re-patterning of gender and familial relations in western societies in recent years, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to transformations in cultures of intimacy beyond that which is conventionally defined as “the family”. This paper seeks to develop a queer analysis of intimacy in the 21st century, which is grounded in an appreciation of the variety of ways a growing number of people live their lives outside the heteronorm. It offers a critique of the limitations of the disciplines of sociology and social policy for their failure to move beyond analyses of the hetero-relational, and for their on-going fixation on monogamous, dyadic, co-resident (and primarily hetero) sexual relationships, and changes within these. It argues that in the context of processes of individualization and within increasingly reflexive cultures, sexual relationships are openly lived in an increasing variety of ways. The boundaries between sexual/love relationships and friendships are becoming more fluid, and sexual partnerships are, for a significant group of the population, becoming de-centred in people’s day-to-day lives. It further suggests that there are transformations in the realm of the sexual in train, which I call “queer tendencies”, which are producing a fracturing of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, such that ways of life that might previously have been regarded as distinctively “homosexual” are becoming more widespread. In this context friendship is acquiring an increasing significance in people’s everyday affective lives and in terms of the provision of practical and emotional care at times of crisis. The paper draws on data from a longitudinal research project investigating the friendships and relationships of those not living with a partner (The Friendships and Non-Conventional Partnerships Project, part of the ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare).

Biographical Note

Sasha Roseneil is Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies and Director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Leeds. She is the author of Disarming Patriarchy (Open University Press, 1995) and Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The Queer Feminisms of Greenham (Cassell, 2000), and co-editor of Stirring It: Challenges for Feminism (Taylor and Francis, 1994), Practising Identities (Macmillan, 1999), Consuming Cultures (Macmillan, 1999) and Globalization and Social Movements (Palgrave, 2001). She is currently engaged in research on “friendship and non-conventional partnership” and “collective interventions on the terrain of care and intimacy” under the auspices of the ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare.
In contrast to the integrationist imperative articulated in the “families of choice” terminology, Berlant and Warner’s queer approach emphasizes the radically alternative aspects of non-heteronormative lives: “Queer and other insurgents have long striven, often dangerously or scandalously, to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture: girlfriends, gal pals, fuckbuddies, tricks… Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation…” (2000:322).