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### Introduction to the special section

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# Introduction

## Guest editors:

Chris Beasley, Heather Brook, Mary Holmes, Monique Mulholland

Heterosexuality has been addressed in critical literature on sexualities as something that is generally nasty, boring and normative. Heterosexuality is of course implicated in a variety of oppressive, normative and downright dangerous discourses and practices, not least of which include gendered power relations, homophobia, and sexual violence against women—all of which continue to draw appropriately serious and censorious attention. However, sex as boringly normative or dangerous is not all there is to heterosexuality. Our interest in this field was sparked several years ago when we began to notice ways that heterosexuality is almost routinely derided, even demonised, in critical scholarly accounts or at least remains unmarked except as it is problematised. We were more hopeful that heterosexual intimacies, sexualities, and identities might have some subversive potential, particularly in relation to feminist perspectives. We wanted to investigate how heterosexuality could be considered playful, pleasurable and even peculiar in progressive rather than merely normative ways. For us, this work spawned a continuing interest in the potential of heterosexuality to undo its own biases and phobias, and perhaps even to untangle itself from the regime of domination with which it has been historically strongly associated. At the same time, we do not intend to offer some form of revisionist account of heterosexuality, let alone intend to encourage an apologist perspective. Rather, in our work together (Beasley et al. 2012; Holmes et al. 2011), as well as in this special issue, we tread a hopeful and sometimes blurred line between acknowledging the damaging effects of heteronormative domination and seeking out heterosexuality's potential to be done *differently*. It seems to us that this attention to heterogeneity and uncertainty in the realm of the dominant is crucial. Since to condemn heterosexuality by default to unvarying ahistoricity amounts to upholding the status quo while dangerously understating the creativity of social life and opportunities for social change.

In our co-authored book, *Heterosexuality in Theory and Practice* (2012) we coined the term *hetero-doxo*. We use this term to signify that which is unorthodox but falls short of the heretical in the realm of heterosexuality. Specifically, we identify successive amplifications of heterodoxy: from inadvertent 'departures' or strayings from conventional heterosexuality and its norms, to deliberate subversions. In this special issue of *Sexualities*, we invite consideration of the usefulness of heterodoxical thinking and practices. Can the concept survive expanded application in relation to structures of domination, or does the weight of feminist and queer criticisms of the dominance of heterosexuality foreclose its potential? The papers in this issue open up the debate to a wider

audience, extending the analysis to include interdisciplinary work in, for example, sociology, cultural and media studies, politics, social theory, gender studies and women's studies.

This collection of papers covers some intriguing territory. In addition to heterosexuality as play and pleasure, contributors provide accounts of how heterosexuality intersects with other markers of difference such as gender, class and ethnicity to produce multiple configurations. They explore cases and accounts that unsettle the well-trodden connection between heterosexuality and dominance both theoretically and empirically—in digital/cyber cultures, popular television series, sexual subcultures, 'pornified' popular culture, relationships, and more. As a whole, the articles collected here address three themes. First, all engage, to a greater or lesser extent, in theorising heterosexuality as not merely oppressive and as not always or inevitably opposed to queer and feminist politics. Second, a number of the papers offer ways of thinking about diversely heterosexual identities and practices. Because these identities and practices slide across multiple axes of privilege and subordination, the boundary-work of categorisation demands careful attention and precise language. Such language makes it possible to think about identification through pleasures and practices that may be multiple and changing. A third theme interrogates explicitly heterosexual representations in various forms of popular culture. Inevitably, this raises questions about the nature of effects of pornography relative to heteronormativity, and to gendered visual economies more generally.

The opening paper unpacks how heterodoxy might be identified and theorised, setting out the broad themes with which each of the articles collected here engages. Stepping through the rationale for conceptualising the heterodoxical as opposed to versions of 'queer heterosexuality', Beasley et al. outline the usefulness of their term, offering tentative illustrations of a range of heterodoxical moments that point to the need for continuing theorisations of heterodoxical experience. Drawing on certain terms coined by Sara Ahmed (2006) and those developed by Tulia Thompson in response to Ahmed's approach (2014) [sorry I should have checked this for our article's references, which will now have to be altered to include this new info...this PhD thesis is now published and can be accessed at <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/22100>], Beasley et al. demonstrate the need for new thinking about, and new language for, heterosexual practices even in the realm of the dominant.

Heterosexual diversity and its heterodoxical potential is explored in the papers that follow. Jess Keen explores the entanglement of sexism, heteronormativity and the norm of monogamy, using the popular television series *Big Love*. She argues that even thoroughly conservative polygamous practices can challenge normative frameworks in certain ways. Keen suggests that contesting the

norm of monogamy does not necessarily interrupt other axes of privilege even though monogamy, sexism, and heteronormativity are often mobilised together. In short, challenging one does not necessarily bring the others down. Kath Albury investigates the politics of non-normative heterosexual identities. In research with adults participating in 'sex/play parties', Albury exposes the complex, 'crossed' and multiple categories with which participants identify. Such identities can be understood as other than heteronormative, but are not necessarily positioned as its 'opposite': rather, these are sideways, divergent identity categories. Similarly, Alison Better and Brandy L. Simula explore sexual orientations which defy the heteronormative binary. They present a framework in which sexual orientation is characterised not by corporeal gender but by preferences more directly related to sexual power-plays of submission and domination. In this framework, the erotics of power differentials are not necessarily gendered in any fixed way. Each of these papers offers heterodox variation in the way heterosexuality is routinely understood and described.

The final three papers explore representations of heterosexuality in material, popular and digital cultures. Jay Daniel Thompson discusses the ways that heterosexuality is framed in a number of feminist critiques of pornography. He argues that such discourses naturalise heterosexuality and heteronormative gender hierarchies. In these accounts, heterosexuality is both under-theorised and figured as always/already (and implicitly) reliant on the eroticisation of gendered power differentials. Heterosexuality thus often remains unnamed and assumed. Thompson argues that heterosexuality's positioning in feminist critiques of pornography should be destabilised and investigated for alternatives to the pleasure/danger dualism that has so often characterised these debates. Amparo Lasén and Antonio García explore heterosexual, explicit-erotic representations in a field in which such alternative constructions might be possible. Using 'selfies' posted by heterosexual men in digital seduction websites, they argue that such 'self-portraits' can disturb the domination and gendered economy of 'the male gaze'. Monique Mulholland offers another case in point, exploring how representations of heterosexual sex in popular, 'pornified' culture are understood by young people. She suggests that while young people have interesting things to say about this material, possibilities for progressive interpretations sit alongside continuing constraints anchored in classed and gendered frameworks of 'respectability'. In short, while a potentially heterodoxical repertoire for open acknowledgment of certain forms of play and pleasure may be opening up, heteronormative conventions simultaneously limit these possibilities.

Taken together, these papers offer new ways of thinking about heterosexuality. They contest the false uniformity of 'heterosexuality' and uncouple it from straightforward binary oppositions that position heterosexuality as the unchanging norm against which all other sexual orientations must

measure up. While 'heterodoxy' does not offer an easy container in which heterosexuality might be repackaged or recuperated, the articles collected here do suggest that there is more to heterosexuality than reiterations of homophobic exclusion and protected gender norms. That is not to say, of course, that heterosexuality can be excused from critical analysis in sexualities scholarship. On the contrary, it is to suggest that because heterosexuality is not all of a piece, we might find in its cracks and fissures opportunities for social change. Identifying such opportunities as hetero but not necessarily normative might work towards undoing the ubiquity of binary hetero-homo sexual logic that has characterised the politics of sex for so long.

## References

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