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or alternatively

*'I don't know what gender is, but I do, and I can, and we all do'*

An Interview with Clare Hemmings

**Clare Hemmings**

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FINAL AUTHOR VERSION

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## An Interview with Clare Hemmings



*Clare Hemmings*

### ABSTRACT

What follows is an interview with Clare Hemmings,<sup>2</sup> Professor of Feminist Theory and Head of the Department of Gender Studies at the London School of Economics. A leading figure in UK feminist theory, her research insists that we acknowledge matters of ambivalence and uncertainty in our history-making, story-telling, and theorising. As such, it contributes to and has productively intervened in many fields, including feminist epistemology, affect theory, historiography, and sexuality studies. Beginning with her first book, *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender* (2002), continuing in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), and most overtly in *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive* (2018), Hemmings interrogates and challenges dominant modes and expressions of gender and sexuality from a feminist positionality that is itself under-theorised and rarely articulated: that of a feminine bisexual woman. As Hemmings notes, bisexual positionality encompasses the affective capacity for a

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<sup>2</sup> In the interview that follows, I refer to Clare Hemmings as 'Clare' when I mean to signify my friend and colleague and to 'Hemmings' when I mean to signify the author and public figure.

‘combination of heterosexual and homosexual desire’ (Hemmings 2002a, Hemmings 2002b: 17) and thus generates ‘radical reconfigurations’ (Hemmings 2002b: 197) of our understanding of the relations between gender, sex and desire. Yet bisexuality has been repeatedly reproduced, within both feminist and queer theory, ‘as an abstract and curiously lifeless middle ground’ (Hemmings 2002b: 1).

As a lesbian and feminist who has occupied that supposedly ‘lifeless middle ground’, albeit differently (I have had two long-term relationships, one with a man, one with a woman), I was interested in speaking with Clare about these issues, and was compelled to do so after I attended an event that she co-organised at the London School of Economics: a screening of Sylvie Tissot’s film about the French feminist Christine Delphy that included the presence of Delphy herself. As soon as Delphy entered the theatre and began walking down the stairs to the podium, the audience burst spontaneously into a standing ovation and long applause (Eloit in Delphy, Eloit, Hemmings, Tissot 2016):

[T]his moment involved both a shared *jouissance* and the returning of haunting conflicts within feminism—conflicts that we wish had been resolved long ago—because it entailed both exhilarating and dissonant affects, it became a sort of feminist moment *par excellence*, a moment where solidarity is never exempted from the (re)emergence of disagreements, and where the fantasy of a collective fusion becomes the condition for those conflicts to emerge. (Eloit in Delphy et al 2016)

Delphy’s presence, and the film about her, reminded me that feminist thinkers from the 1970s and 1980s were extraordinarily sophisticated in their understanding of how gender constitutes us as men and women, this analysis is still mostly absent from public conversations, and we still long for such conversations.

My interview with Clare Hemmings is thus a continuation of this moment of shared jouissance and haunting. It was conducted informally, in 2017, in Clare's office in what was then the Gender Institute<sup>3</sup> at the LSE. For over 90 minutes during a grey afternoon in London, we spoke on a range of topics, from Clare's intellectual history to her (then) forthcoming book on Emma Goldman. We discussed her background as a poststructuralist theorist who also carries out empirical research and the challenge of studying sexuality in the archive. In the portion of the interview that appears below, we talk in detail about Clare's early work on bisexuality and how her thinking contributes to theorising gender in the present.

## KEYWORDS

*Clare Hemmings, gender, feminist theory, queer theory, ambivalence, uncertainty, bisexuality*

## INTRODUCTION

At the London launch of her book on Emma Goldman in April 2018, Clare Hemmings reminded her audience of the deep challenges facing feminist theorists worldwide and contemporarily. On the one hand, she said, awareness of gender and sexual inequalities seems high, yet on the other, single-issue feminism and a resistance to intersectional or trans\*<sup>4</sup> feminist interventions remain dominant. How can we find solidarity while recognising the complexity of identity positions? These were among the issues she and I discussed in the interview you are about to read. As you will learn, we share a deep interest in

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<sup>3</sup> The Institute is now known as the Department of Gender Studies.

<sup>4</sup> We deliberately use the word 'trans\*', which has, since about 2010, been used in place of transgender and trans, to provide a range of possibility in terms of gender identities (Bettcher 2014). Genderqueer people who don't identify as men or women may feel excluded from the category of 'trans'.

and yet resistance to poststructuralist uncertainty. Despite Hemming's early interest in poststructuralist theory and claiming of the productively disorienting perspective of the femme bisexual, for example, her research has identified the ongoing significance in people's lives of the category of gender. In my case, the pressure of conventional gender narratives was a lived experience and the ambiguity of poststructuralist thought a place of liberation. I married at 22, had 2 daughters before I was 30, and didn't come out as a lesbian until I was 45. Yet throughout this period, I inhabited queer space in my intellectual life. Through poststructuralist theory initially and eventually in women's experimental writing, I found spaces of openness in which I caught glimpses of other ways of being and alternative worlds.

I'm working now on a manuscript called *Queer Openings*, about the decades during which I was drawn to reading and teaching queer experimental writing as a way of moving toward a queer identity. I'm particularly interested in the facilitative role that encountering uncertainty plays in recognising, creating, and moving toward alternative realities. In 'On ardently reading Caroline Bergvall' (Rudy 2019), I describe this phenomenon of being drawn to alternative realities in terms of inhabiting 'strange passages.' Eve Sedgwick speaks of the 'ardent reading' (1994 [1993], 3) undertaken by many of us who survived the 'profligate way this culture has of denying and despoiling queer energies and lives' (1). The survival of each of us, Sedgwick argued, is a miracle; we all have stories about how it was done (1994 [1993], 1).

During our longer conversation, Clare spoke about the ways her understanding of her sexuality has also been linked to the process of articulation. As she put it in relation to teaching a class on bisexuality for her sexuality course, 'I needed to remind myself what I had actually said about my sexuality; I needed to remind myself what I thought.' As

Hemmings writes in *Why Stories Matter*, it is crucial that we continue to analyse ‘the politics that produce and sustain one version of history as more true than another, despite the fact that we all know that history is more complicated than the stories we tell about it’ (2011: 15-16).

What Hemmings thinks about queer sexuality has been at the forefront of feminist theorising for decades. From her first book, *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender* (2002b), she has interrogated gender and sexuality from the perspective of the feminine bisexual woman, epitomised in the history of sexuality in the figure of Stephen Gordon’s lover, Mary Llewellyn. In a piece on *The Well of Loneliness* (2002a), she argues that the feminine bisexual represents meanings that emerge

between heterosexuality and homosexuality, binary genders or sexes, but also  
at the heart of the lesbian community, between lesbian and gay communities,  
and in parallel with transsexuality within queer feminist terrain. (2002b: 196)

Drawing on our own experience, we spoke frankly about the ways people inventively and diversely inhabit their gender while at the same time recognising the severe restrictions, they, and we, have experienced. What strikes me in retrospect is the ways the conversation opened up the possibility of permission-giving for any mode of gender inhabitation, while taking account of the fact that different gender categories have been available at different times. Despite the celebration of gender fluidity in feminist and queer theory, the resistance to recognizing the existence of individuals whose gender presentation challenges a coherent gender narrative, reduces the possibility of easily inhabiting gender otherwise. We hope that the conversation gives permission for the inhabitation of gender across a range of perspectives and positionalities while recognising the constraints within which we continue to live and work.

## INTERVIEW

*London, 11 January 2017*

**Susan Rudy (SR):** I've just read *Bisexual Spaces* (Hemmings 2002b) for the first time and it strikes me that our thinking about the apparent fluidity of gender in the present could be usefully informed by recalling that, as you argue, bisexuality is 'a sexuality, or indeed a gender or sex, itself' (2002b: 2). But frankly, I've been wondering whether we even need the category of gender anymore. What do you think?

**Clare Hemmings (CH):** When I wrote *Bisexual Spaces* I thought, and still think, that it's important to challenge understandings of bisexuality that presume a gender binary. Yet I was also very interested in bisexuality because (epistemologically as well as in identity-terms) it raises questions about gender of object choice even as it seems to rely on oppositional categories at the same time. But so too I was curious about the ways in which 'bisexuality' is often positioned as reinforcing binaries more fully than 'gay' or 'lesbian' identities, which do no more to challenge those categories in my view.

In the present climate, if I say, 'I'm a lesbian,' that doesn't necessarily (only) mean I'm a woman and I desire other women. It might be an expression of politics or priority; it might include nonbinary or trans\* subjects in ways that extend or contest the categories of 'women' and 'men' in the first place. But mostly it does index desiring women (however expansively understood), and when people say it they don't tend to mean 'I have resisted the emotional and labour context of heteronormativity as part of my feminist project to embrace desire for similar beings', at least not in my experience!

**SR:** Well, lesbianism has been theorised more consistently than bisexuality in terms of its relationship to gender, hasn't it?

**CH:** One of the things that intrigues me about Christine Delphy and also about Monique



Wittig, is their thinking about gender as a category of *labour*, and therefore, of lesbianism as a refusal of the labour that heterosexuality requires. On the other hand, even if we reject ‘gender’ as an oppositional category in theoretical or political terms, it still continues to carry a lot of fantasies for us, and to do a lot of work both for identity and desire. In other words, ‘gender’ continues to do very important work for people.

**SR:** But whose interests does gender serve?

**CH:** Well, we still live in an extremely gender-divided world. In some ways, gender possibilities have been extended in terms of trans\* identities and communities that are increasingly available, and in terms of queer cultures and the range of possibilities that these open up. In other ways, when I look back at how gender fluidity operated in earlier decades in the UK for example, there are ways in which gendered norms can seem more rigid rather than less in lots of ways, particularly for people who are not part of counter-cultures. As mentioned, my sense is that for most people, the question of gender is still pretty important.

The gender non-binary people that I know are constantly negotiating the question of gender for themselves, and are consistently subject to continued gendered presumptions from others.

While there are increasing numbers of people who want to be identified in non-oppositional gendered terms (as non-binary, trans\* or gender neutral), there is still a lot of work to do to think about the relationships between identity and social context, I think. Only some people are subject to social aggression or constraint because of not being readable in gender oppositional terms. I am usually read as a woman, for example, even though I might want to trouble the idea that this means my gender and sex are in any easy alignment, and that means I move through the world differently to – more easily than – those whose sex or gender are consistently called into question.

**SR:** How do you understand the political efficacy of challenging gender norms in the

present?

**CH:** There are lots of ways in which one can challenge gender norms, of course, other than moving beyond, or ‘transing’ gender. One of the things that femme politics has achieved quite well, I think, alongside ‘camp’, has been to hyperbolise rather than move out of the category of femininity. When ‘femininity’ is emphasised in its desiring modes (either within or outside of heterosexuality), or when its presumptive whiteness is challenged, we start to see a different set of meanings that challenge the limits of gender from within, we might say. Drawing on one of my favourite theorists, Teresa de Lauretis, for example, we might think of gender as a scene of desire and racialised/class negotiation, as well as oppositional coding.<sup>5</sup> In her work on butch-femme desire, in particular, she articulates gendered and racialised difference within queer contexts as sites of struggle rather than fixed meanings. This is really important as part of recognising the important histories of butch/femme spaces as overlapping with spaces of sex work and working class marginality as well. I worry that the specificities of these histories risk being lost if we look only to critiques of gendering as politically productive.

**SR:** I agree, and trans\* folk who identify, not as genderqueer, but as men or women, often violently come up against the rigidity of the binary ideology of gender, and therefore feel required to reproduce very conventional gender norms in order to be recognised as the men or women that they are. And speaking of identities beyond conventional gender norms, have you noticed that the whole category of soft butch, for example, has pretty much disappeared?

**CH:** It’s really problematic if ‘butch’ is read as more likely to “become trans\*” in ways that seem self-evident. I suppose there’s an assumption that there’s a continuum of

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<sup>5</sup> See De Lauretis (1988) in “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation” for more on gender as a scene of desire and, more generally, De Lauretis (1994) on The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire.

masculinity or femininity on which butch and FTM /trans\* are close allies. But this is not necessarily how gender is experienced, particularly once we draw desire back into the picture. A lot of people are exploring that as a way of saying, what does it mean then to leave 'she' as only the province of femininity, and not the province of a range of different gendered subjects, who were never going to make it into 'he' and don't see themselves as 'non-binary' either?

In some senses, when articulated through sexuality and desire, 'she' is not the opposite of 'he', the lesbian is not a woman. But where is 'she', particularly when a feminist 'she' is expansive enough to include a range of different ways of gender inflections of embodiment?

**SR:** De Lauretis in *Technologies of Gender* created the category of 'a(-)woman' (1987)<sup>6</sup> and with that concept she attempted to figure - to represent in language - the existence that you and I are talking about now.

**CH:** Yes, exactly. I think this has profound implications for the ways in which we think of new binaries, as for example the one posited between 'trans\*' and 'cis-gendered'. This makes little sense to me, because not being 'trans\*' or 'non-binary' does not mean that sex and gender are necessarily aligned or that there are no negotiations or struggles over gendered meaning. I don't mean to dismiss the violences and exclusions experienced by trans\* or non-binary people, but rather to raise the question of what 'cis' really means? Gender/sex alignment doesn't mean the same for all subjects – particularly men and women – either, and the question of power is too easily evacuated from these discussions. I can see the point of a term like 'cis privilege' at times, but not when it's used as a way of proclaiming others'

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<sup>6</sup> In 'Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer,' a chapter in *Technologies of Gender* (de Lauretis 1987: 107-126), De Lauretis speaks of being addressed as 'a(-)woman' by the 'double and self-subverting coherence' of the narrative grammar and figural ambiguities in Rainer's films (1987).

identity. And anyway, who decides?

**SR:** Who does decide?

**CH:** That's related to my anxiety about getting rid of gender. People's claiming of pluralisation and gender non-binary positions is available in ways that make quite routine gender attachments feel somehow shameful. The problem isn't whether people want to identify with these new or relatively new proliferations – I have no problem with that, in fact I think it's great - but it can produce its own kind of transgressive policing mechanisms. I'm quite drawn to thinking that most of us most of the time occupy gender in relatively unproblematic, and fairly straightforward, ways in our everyday lives. And my question is much more, how can you do that in ways that challenge power? How can you challenge power by refusing (or illuminating) gendered power rather than by thinking you can evacuate it?

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**SR:** How do these questions overlay, or intersect with questions around sexuality in the present?

**CH:** Plural gender identifications are particularly present in queer communities, so this overlaps at the community level, and this is largely where that's happening. It partly has a long history that is really exciting and interesting around trying to disarticulate gender from sexuality, and so precisely not to say, I'm a lesbian or I'm a gay man. I'm a queer subject, and that means that my desire is for similarly located queer subjects of whatever gender. So it's a really lovely and optimism-inspiring development within queer communities that allows for trans\* and non-gender aligned and bi identity subjects that doesn't assume that you're queer because you're same-sex desiring. That's really fabulous! It's about making the queer community not reliant on gay and lesbian identity and subjectivity in ways that probably have to do with the importance of resistance to things like assimilationist rights claims,

homonormativity, homonationalism in terms of its geopolitical problematics. It's linked to the ways queer politics and antinationalist politics are very strongly aligned, and rightly so.

But I worry a bit that generationally the possibility of identifying as genderqueer or non-binary means that the learning to live with dissonance can be lost. I have several butch friends in their 50s, for example, who describe their process of learning to live with their female bodies as part of their overall queer education in life; who describe learning to live with a mismatching body, a female body, with all its discomfort and struggle as part of becoming happy with who they are. They have said, for example, that they stopped at a certain point expecting the world to recognise them in particular ways. Any of us who are ageing know that our body is a traitor to our fantasies of ourselves, pretty much continually, in a whole variety of different ways.

**SR:** This whole issue raises the problem of the sacrifice of the masculinity of women, really.

**CH:** What do you mean, the sacrifice of the masculinity of women?

**SR:** In my view, we've barely begun to recognise that there is masculinity in women, Jack (then Judith) Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) having been the first treatment of it.<sup>7</sup> Yet reminding ourselves of the masculinity of women is crucial if, for feminist purposes, we have any hope of interrogating the relation between trans\* and butch identities. If the masculinity of women becomes impossible to recognise, we are left with a) women who are

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<sup>7</sup> See Sally Munt's review (2000) of *Female Masculinity*, in which she notes that the enduring 'glue of gender to genitals seems to be depressingly intransigent' and asks:

Do these people go out? What kinds of intellectually solipsistic signs can be more stranded than the apparently permanent coding of men as masculine and women as feminine? For scholars of gender studies, it is time to flex these bonds and pay attention to the copious evidence of gender diversity which exceeds binary reductionism. (87)

feminine; b) transwomen who are at risk if they are read as masculine so they have no choice but to try to be read as feminine; and c) masculine men and transmen. But many women are masculine, and/or are attracted to masculinity in women, and that's something that we don't seem to be able to recognise at the moment.

**CH:** Indeed. Not all masculine-identified women should or have, or might, or will become trans\*.

**SR:** Exactly, yes. As Eve Sedgwick infamously noted in *Epistemology of the Closet*, 'People are different from each other' (1990: 23).

**CH:** Yes, exactly. But I don't want to focus on 'what's lost' here either. Any generation will have its own losses and gains to negotiate, and that's also ok. If my ageing butch friends feel a certain melancholy when they imagine losing that necessity of negotiating gender's failures, they also acknowledge that any position, however fluid it might be imagined to be, will produce negotiations of some kind as we age. In terms of humanness, in one's own life, how does one give value to the different relationships and encounters you've had if you've identified as butch or as femme, or still do? How does one feel generous towards others for whom those categories don't have meaning, but at the same time value one's own history of encounter and identification and desire?

For me, bisexuality, is a way of referencing who has been important in my life, and the different power relationships that are attached to those forms of desire. I partly go with this old-fashioned term 'bisexual' because, like it or not, I've had one very long-term relationship with a man in my life, and that had different meaning than if that long-term relationship had been with someone inhabiting a different subject position. And, in that sense, saying I'm beyond gender doesn't seem right, not because of bisexuality being interesting, but because of the ways it's not.

I also need a term that acknowledges the privileges I've had, because of some relationships over others. And to be like, oh well, I'm not interested in gender ... gender queering sometimes involves relationships that are hard to read, but sometimes it doesn't. That's the interesting thing, and in temporal terms, we encounter the fact that as we get older we might inhabit categories that younger generations would just find unbelievably embarrassing, cis-gendered and anachronistic. Maybe that's okay. They'll have different kinds of challenges as they hit their fifties.

**SR:** There are lots of queer people in my family, including two much younger queer women, and the story of their relationships with their partners really brought these questions to the forefront for me. One has a partner who was, at first, her best friend, although she always read as a lesbian to me. But my young relative reads as entirely straight. Even now that she is in a relationship with another woman she doesn't identify as lesbian. She just identifies as someone who loves her partner. My other young relative came out as a lesbian when she was 16 but is now living with someone who's trans (female to male). And I watch their generation, and all of these categories have been available to them all of their lives. In both cases, these two women are very feminine - pretty in conventional ways -- and enjoy presenting that way, and they can both pass easily as straight, yet they're in these queer relationships.

**CH:** And that's so interesting because their concerns are not going to be, 'what's going to happen when the soft butch disappears'?

**SR:** No, in fact they're more likely to ask, what's a soft butch? She isn't even a category for them. She's already extinct. The women I've been talking about are both in their mid-twenties and by the time they were teenagers they had this range of choices around their sexuality – they could love whomever they chose – but not around their gender. They both

present as conventionally feminine.

**CH:** How interesting. And even around their sexuality, they may encounter homophobia in ways they don't currently anticipate in employment situations, in different kinds of contexts.

**SR:** So in a sense regardless of sexuality we can't get rid of gender because there's too much privilege attached to gendered positions. My own experience is a case in point. I was married to a man for twenty-two years and then I fell in love with a woman. I'm the same person but at one point I had heterosexual privilege and now I don't. In thinking about these issues, I'm trying to find a way to theorise that.

**CH:** And not make that relationship exceptional, I mean, that's the hard thing, isn't it.

**SR:** Yes. Technically I'm bisexual because I lived for twenty-two years with a man, and I've now been living for more than 11 years with a woman. But that label doesn't work for me. I wonder if that's because of the strength of the narrative that you talk about around coherence. Like, oh, I was always a lesbian. That's a very powerful narrative in the gay community, as you know, one that is linked to our sense that identities have to be coherent.

This morning I was listening to your interview with Yasmin Gutaratnam, in which you talk about your book *Why Stories Matter* (2011), and you say, 'You have to think about yourself as not the heroine of your own story, but this ambivalent and duplicitous character.' And your recent book, *Considering Emma Goldman* (2018), considers the politics of feminist ambivalence. Within feminism and within queers' narratives, we're not often permitted to be ambivalent or duplicitous. Those characteristics tend to have only negative resonances rather than being simply a description of what's likely happening for most people most of the time.

**CH:** Right. As a bisexual femme I enjoy privileges of heteronormativity and gender norms in a range of contexts, and that's as much a part of my experience of desire as in contexts



where that privilege is denied or absent.

**SR:** Oh yes, the world is much easier when you're seen to be heterosexual, that's for sure.

**CH:** It sure is!

**SR:** Yet we still haven't really come to terms with women's relation to femininity. In your article on *The Well of Loneliness* (Hemmings 2002a), you theorise femme narrative and draw our attention to the fact that we haven't heard the stories of the women who love both masculine women and men. Those are stories that matter because we don't know very much about them at all.

**CH:** No, we haven't. And what does that mean to call that femme or femininity, particularly when the dominant renderings of that are very much about its having been framed as a sexological issue, the pick of the women that the ordinary man would leave behind.

Femininity, articulated either with a particular form of non-heterosexual desire, and/or articulated with a non-clearly aligned embodiment, is very complicated in terms of the ability to express it. As not just as an attachment to particular kinds of genders. I don't really know. I know that I can see how gender is articulated in relationship to sexed bodies, in particular modes like you're describing for your two relatives, for example, in particular ways that mean that their gender is not problematized in everyday life.

And then, in terms of their stories, I don't know what I think, I don't know what gender is, but I do, and I can, and we all do all the time. We have reading practices. I suppose this is coming back to narrative again. I don't know what gender is as an object, but I do know how it functions narratively. I know how gender aligns or doesn't align with other things in order to make it legible as the norm, and in order to reproduce that norm. So, in that sense, I

couldn't say to you gender is this set of characteristics, but I can say that when gender is articulated through its resonance with either the body or with sexuality, or both in ways that allow it to be unnoticed, or unremarkable, then gender becomes visible...

**SR:** And that's the key, isn't it: gender is important insofar as it is not remarked upon. But let me just describe another scenario for you to react to. A Facebook friend of mine – someone I've never met in person -- is trans\*, male to female - and she writes almost daily on Facebook about her experience of being a woman, which involves being treated in really disgusting ways on the street, in cafés, on public transit. But what struck me almost immediately is that if you look at her picture and at mine, we look very much alike. Our faces are similarly shaped, we have similar glasses, we are both white women. But she has long hair and I have very short hair. This person already sees herself as a woman but in order to be read as a woman she is not permitted any liminal space. All androgyny has to be erased in appearance. Her experience tells us explicitly that the markings of gender are obvious, read even in our faces.

**CH:** And in that moment, I think of gender as narrative, there's no other way of explaining it. In that moment, your friend has a stronger gender identity than you or I in the sense that they've done everything they can to inhabit it. The other thing we know about gender is that it's relational, and, one responds differently depending on where one is. So, in desiring terms I like the gender performances I inhabit, and when I feel like the gender that I'm able to inhabit is one that registers my queerness, is able to rewrite my history in ways that give me pleasure, because they rewrite what was experienced as not belonging as a kind of having its own history of belonging. I love all of that.

What I find harder to talk about is the ways in which I operate institutionally where I use my gender all the time for 'advantage'. I mean, one uses what one has. I don't have the

advantages of being read as a guy.<sup>8</sup> But I do find myself appealing men in particular ways, responding to men and women in ways that draw very strongly on heteronormative gender. I mean, you've been a head of department and I'm sure you've done it as well.

**SR:** Absolutely. Completely. And, unlike my partner for example, who is much more butch, I can pass as a straight woman, and I sometimes do, because it makes my life easier, but that's the sort of disgusting thing one recognises about oneself when one can pass.

**CH:** It's awful, isn't it? The instantaneity of it, which is what I find really shocking. One is right back there. Gender is relational, and it's narrative, and in that moment it's so precise and horrifying. And that's one of the reasons why I worry about the proliferation of genders, because it acts as though one isn't going to constantly move into different gendered performances that have to do with power.

**FINAL AUTHOR VERSION**  
 You'd wanted us to talk about Christine Delphy who saw sex as emerging from material understandings of power and economic relations in terms of labour, attending to who does what work, emotional, economic, reproductive or otherwise. It is, as you say, either associated with a kind of materialist or socialist feminism that doesn't bear on queer theory or ignores lesbian identities. The discussion we were just having about the ease with which one draws on that knowledge as, if you like, an emotional and labour-related repertoire that one uses very naturally as part of how one tries to get what women want from a committee meeting. In that moment, I feel like a woman, and not in a good way. And, in that sense, I find the idea that lesbians are not women really helpful as a formulation. Because in that moment of heterosexual labour I realise I'm so not a lesbian; I'm so a woman, and I'm so ashamed. Christine Delphy was fantastic for theorising gender in its everyday

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<sup>8</sup> Note from Susan Rudy, 28 August 2018: a productive future conversation between women like Clare and me would address the ways that cis women don't, for the most part, face the violent disadvantages of being read as guys either.

materialisations.

**SR:** Absolutely. Just crystal clear.

**CH:** Yes, when she says, 'Feminism is not a club for the liberated,'<sup>9</sup> she's also effectively saying - unlike Wittig, really - actually, feminism is filled with women who do this labour and women who are in the process of struggling to rearticulate their relationships with others, redefine the labour that they do in the social/economic and intersubjective world; not people who have taken themselves out of it. And I suppose that's one of the main differences between her and Wittig. And she's also saying it's not feminism if it's articulated through racism. Because she knows that there isn't a difference between white, secular, supposedly secular women in France and Muslim women, because everybody is doing that labour: she frees herself from thinking of Muslim, veiled women as more oppressed by patriarchy than secular and/or unveiled women.

Because she thinks of men and women as categories that result from labour, she knows that insofar as any of us are legible as women, we must have been doing (at least some of) that labour. And there's something quite interesting about that, because it enables her to take up, actually, quite a strong antiracist position as a result. Which a lot of French feminists are not doing and can't, because they're more interested in sexual difference, and, therefore, somehow the problem of the 'patriarchally-controlled veiled woman' becomes a political sticking point.

**SR:** I'm afraid we're out of time but closing with Delphy seems somehow fitting, as it was at her talk at the LSE last year, and the power of the audience response, that compelled me to ask you to share your thoughts about gender in the present. Thanks for speaking so openly

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<sup>9</sup> See Delphy et al (2016) for a transcript from the event during which she said these words.

with me, Clare.

**CH:** You're very welcome.

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<sup>10</sup> Gutaratnam did not date her interviews, but in an email message to me on 2 May 2018 she confirmed that the interview was done in July 2014.

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