The ground zero of gender and sexuality studies has not dramatically shifted, its “area” unsurmised. Or, it has at least not been sufficiently undermined, just relativized with the qualifying brackets of West, Anglo-European, US, or something of the like. And then the work that those concepts are set to do continues on its merry global ways. “Gender, race, sexuality”—the categories roll off the tongue like dice, and though we might yet feel the bitter fates that have made them fighting words, we also know how they have been pressed into imperial service, fashioned into a set of cognitive procedures for dealing with those other realities as so many reflections of, so many varying distances from, this center’s own.

You think you already know that, but you do not. You tend to forget, if you really knew it at all. If you do not know it, it is because those other “areas” have these other brackets around them, which you call “context.” It makes you feel cosmopolitan about your ignorance and comfortable with the provinciality of your nonconformist, subversive imagination. You know your theoretical acts are local, even as you are aware of the global, but still you cannot seem to retain the fact that this is the place where the brackets are made and placed, the areas conceived and implemented, the global defined (for those areas to demonstrate, resist, or elaborate), which sets the stage for all those other indeterminate “differences” not encapsulated by the ones you know so well to persist in some inchoate form that you are likely to call “cultural.” Anthropology will surely take care of that. And everyone can keep their place.

Or, if you know all this and, more, you know (but do not readily “understand”) at least one of these other “contexts” intimately, where smells as much as words call up associations that, loath to leave the premises, will enmesh you,
maybe tear somewhat at the “subject position” you have worked hard to build and win for yourself (rather than giving rise to those generic thoughts so transportable into “theoretical” reflections), still you might forget when you are looking through these analytical lenses—these nearly Kantian categories—that you are seeing only as far as these imperial shores will allow: the familiar forms of life that an “American grammar” of power and marginality, visibility and invisibility, identity and difference, normativity and nonnormativity, being and becoming can help you make out.

Eurocentrism is one thing. This is something else besides. Sure, there is the epistemological problem, the problem of reading, making sense of gender, race, and sexuality “in a global context.” In this endeavor, anti-Eurocentric, anticolonial critiques have not lost their pointed relevance, though now they too have brackets around them, like a third-string guest in a crowded party, nodded to in passing where there are more exciting conversations to be had with personages of field-making, field-troubling value (against which one would have to measure one’s own assets). “Moving on,” the academic shareholders say, as they make their way to the cutting edge with the highest profit margin.

Simply pointing this out might seem like you are going over to the other side of the culture wars, that side that wants to put an end to all this “identity” stuff, which has already rent the social fabric and its fundamental cultural values, a barbarism against which all manner of civilizational return is repeatedly proposed. They who, out of credence in Enlightenment humanist values or in post-Enlightenment, posthumanist theory, would underestimate the durable, even intensified salience of identity rationalities in the organization of contemporary statist practices do so in willful disregard of how this optic of abstract equivalence is a key function in today’s dominant social operating system. Or it could well play into that conservative strain of so-called historical materialists who, in a hysterical defense of their own hallowed ground of critique, would relegate the matters of concern propelling feminist, antiracist, and queer critique as of secondary importance to the primary, ultimately determining structures and forces of capitalism. In one fell swoop, such a defense writes off entire radical traditions of critical theory that had in fact deepened the historical materialist understanding of actual material life as organized by and composed of these very “matters” of the body and bodily relations. But these qualms should not stop the point from being made: this business of academic thought production is part and parcel of the problem.

I will not dwell on this much—the fact that entrepreneurship is now required for thought to gain enough traction—since the observation sits well with no one (neither “winners” nor “losers”). Yet the financialization of everyday intel-
lectual life cannot be gainsaid, nor should its effects on academic production be underestimated. No social stratum fully experiences the subjective condition of the falling rate of profit as do the middle and upper middle classes of the global north, of which the mid and higher tiers of the academic profession are solidly a part. The struggle to produce value from one’s life/work to maintain economic buoyancy and mobility (one might say, a viable career) in an increasingly corporatized, intensely competitive industry can be relentless and insidious. It can make it such that our endeavors seem to heed the protocols of entrepreneurship more than anything else. I am no political puritan about these matters, despite the puritanical strains that shape all manner of politics in the United States (a puritanism that detections of “complicity” have the funny effect of intensifying), but I am beginning to wonder how much of what we “innovate” in our various fields in critical “studies” has become a form of cognitive app making (which gives new meaning to the notion of subscribing to an idea).

One could say, this is simply the latest development in a longer history of “difference” becoming incorporated, whereby the state and capital have found ways to mimic or adopt and politically evacuate insurgent practices through their institutionalization, such that we professionals may ourselves be doing our part in turning critical politics into policy. And is that not in fact the case when “gender” and “sexuality” figure so prominently in both governance and war? When feminist and gay and lesbian rights activism is embedded in the security and capitalist machinations of imperial projects? Many have already rightly called them out: imperial feminism, NGO feminist governmentality, homonalism, feminist governance, pinkwashing, carceral feminism. What they all bring out in stark relief is the global expansion of normative society’s modes of operation, even when supposedly working on behalf of the marginalized and excluded, that is, even in antinormative, antimarginalization critique. And while in certain places (I’m looking at you, Western Europe) one would wish that they had some of the more sophisticated versions of this critique where it seems to be sorely lacking (where tolerance and accommodation of diversity in the face of “multicultural” immigrant assault seems the best that can be mustered), still, there too it feels like it is the same family affair, despite the hopeful well-intentioned openness toward its odd new members.

It is not just that something like an identity politics can and has been placed on the side of states: we see political strategies of radical social struggle made over into programs, sets of procedures for the civil-service sector of global imperial democracy. Are we not ourselves among these international civil servants, or their mentors? When gender and sexuality become operative elements in the political campaigns of deadly, punitive, and genocidal states, the problem is not
determining why and how these categories might (yet) make a critical difference. As Hortense Spillers (1997: 140) long ago put it: the question is “not so much why and how ‘race’ makes the difference—the police will see to it—but how it carries of its message onto an interior.” Spillers was talking about how the poisonous idea of race insinuates itself into the psychic interior of the racialized. It is worth asking whether and how academic ideas of gender and sexuality are insinuating themselves into the ontic interior—the codes of being—of imperial expansion. Or whether and how they might have already been there, worming their way out.

Forget co-optation. Things are not so simple or easy. It might be comforting to think that critical forces are on one side and the forces of contemporary colonialism and capitalism are on the other, with the latter always appropriating, co-opting, the tools and methods of the former. Yet we know or should know better. We were forewarned about “the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (Foucault, 1983: xiii). And we recalibrated our critical tools to work on ourselves, to critique our own critiques. That is the nature of struggle, one supposes: gender and sexuality studies’ permanent cultural revolution.

But my sense is that it is not just, or primarily, that at all. When we do the critique that we do so well, do we not employ the grammar of the police? Of the slave trader and auctioneer? Of the entrepreneur and the investor? Do not we communicate and traffic in the particular colonial, capitalist, real abstract codes of social and subjective being that make up an American grammar?

As sociosymbolic, cultural logics, sex-gender systems extend beyond social identities/subjectivities and the ways these operate in liberal and neoliberal democracies in the north, with their particular fondness for juridical forms of political imagination. They are also sociosymbolic orders of allocation of power, labor, value, spirit, enjoyment, and moral ideals; they form the basis of protocols of personhood and sociality, of life and death, and the place of their before and after. Though sex-gender systems, systems integral to human life, may be many, it is the abstractable, transferable cultural logics that emerged out of the specific evolving sex-gender systems of an incipient Western European colonial capitalist bloc that dominantly inform and further develop out of the latest, global imperial projects. These are logics that inspire and organize practices of expropriation of value and expiation of violence not just in nations but across them all the time and not just in those exemplary, often fatal moments when sex-race-gender figures (numbers and names) loom large and spectacular, enough for us to force the brief consideration of the “structural” role of gender and sexuality alongside race in the making, and not just the interpretation, of the material world we inhabit.
Sexual economies are one way to highlight the organizing role of these cultural logics in the transnational regional and global conduct of economic trade and regulation and political-military alliance and cooperation among states. When some national economies are presumed and disciplined to service the needs and wants of others, sexuality is not a “mere” metaphor but the set of regulatory precepts of regional and global trade, of transnational production and governmentality. The cultural logics of gender and sexuality certainly operate in the ideological formation of key international state actors and policymakers from the age of world liberal development to the age of global neoliberal finance, Franklin D. Roosevelt and John Maynard Keynes, Margaret Thatcher and Milton Friedman. The old boys networks and the girls who are let in to the high-stakes clubs of the Fortune 500 and the G-8 as long as they play by the rules of the game are, after all, as socialized as anyone else in the ideological manners of the north. And undoubtedly the ships they “man” (the nation-states they lead, cut deals for, hock and sell) and the tanks they think-drive (military, financial, humanitarian) will translate their rosebud desires and the orders of gender and sexuality that such desires depend on, negotiate, rework, and transfigure into worldly, even worldwide, effects.

But the cultural logics almost do not have to pass through those privileged ideological actor-subjects to carry out the work of their meaning making. They are, after all, already at work in the domains of the “economy” and statecraft, domains that are themselves forms of perception and reading as well as orders of living, transmitting the codes of gender and sexuality they abide by. So that when the categories become critical lenses for reading the workings mainly of social subjectivities and identities and their “differences,” there is a very good chance we will have lost sight of how these codes create the terrain on which these contestations take place, that is, the “area” that disappears into the ground zero of global gender and sexuality studies critique. And if so, there is an equally good chance that the latter, as a set of critical forms of perception and reading, will have lent themselves to a kind of cultural Keynesianism, a project of sociocultural reform that does not, perhaps cannot, unsettle that ground zero to the degree that it is now that ground’s pioneering extension, its pseudopodia, as it were—the organs of its locomotion and prehension.

What is the evidence that this is so? Or at least what is to tip us off that it might be? Surely when such categories consistently spell exclusion from or failure to fulfill social norms, seeing through them expands the intelligibility of normativity as the operative regime of sociality and indeed extends the model of disciplinary society (and its model of “power”) everywhere. The globalizing movements of critical humanism thus gain traction through gender and sexuality, which succeed less in establishing specific social identity norms (though they do that,
too) than in shoring up the sex/gender order of capitalist relations—still so little understood—an order that imagines and institutes whole, integral bodies as the units, repositories, and subject agents of libidinal life and death drives, governed by economies of regulation and/or freeing, of privation and/or gain. Our bodies, ourselves—grounding “sex” (as discursive, constructed, constitutive bodily acts and practices) as the incontestable test site of power and protest, the territory and property qualification of political subjects and their claims. Are these not also elements of ground zero, maybe even its cornerstones?

How they will succeed in making us men and women: Like the strange newly made people in the H. G. Wells story “The Island of Doctor Moreau,” we will all have to ask ourselves as we look no longer at our five fingers with the opposable thumb but now at the malleable, changeable, yet always bodily guaranteed subjectivity of our sex-gender life performances, “Are we not human?”

None of this is to say that the descriptors lie. Social formations and political formations are built out of the structures of identification, the exigencies and stakes of representation, the terms of legibility and viability, which have themselves become global forces of making human. Yes, of course, we are women and lesbians and trans and queer and black and of color and third world and more besides. And our bodies betray us as much as they allow us to survive, live, love, and find each other. These are lived formations. Yet everyone seems to endlessly repeat the political scripts and counterscripts of being and becoming for free individuals and collectivities as if in an ongoing dress rehearsal for a play that is always being performed “for real.”

If we—and I mean we, not you—are not to make the ideas with which we struggle to undo this world simply into the place we already live, the territory to be expanded, then those ideas, like our selves, must remain alive to the permutations of other places, as forms of life. To be alive here means to be open (not “vulnerable”) to transmissible forces, presences, and motions, to be mediums and mediators of what we are both a part of and apart from.

The problem is that we habitually mistake these ideas for the lived realities they critique and when you insist on them as the basis for social reform, you participate in making them the means of inhabitation for others. So libidinal forces are all too easily tailored to the social dresses of subjects and objects, where they might instead come across as modes of action, behavior, communication, and relation—modes of “happening”—that would be constrained to fit the familiar characters and props of “real” everyday life. The dynamism of nomadic morphing performed as a form of survival—a living—by so many of us who are by definition of history ill-fitted for that freedom, which is the axiomatic state of an achieved
humanity; the convertibility of one’s personhood in and out of, to and from things, pertinent existences, organic and inorganic beings; our habit and ability to make ourselves into the verbs of others—these are also what animate the world.

And yet even those who feel keenly the need to claim that the places of their being are not simply elsewhere to the here of ground zero but somewhere in their own right ignore these vital forms that are in abundance in those other places, part of the leftover and condition of life after colonialism. They too reproduce the terms of their apprehension—we too participate in our own theoretical arrest. How could we not? Fight back and affirm what is denied, defend what is denigrated, uphold what is decried, make ourselves subjects in our own right. “We” (dakami) they and I say in contradistinction to you. But what about when I say “we” (datayu) to mean you (they) too? What about when any “I” is only a part-subject, and what if even together “we” do not add up to a whole subject or at least one that has any staying power as a political subject? When people habitually make themselves the instruments or vehicles for a “happening” or a “making” (pangyayari) without necessarily being the cause or the author or the object of the action; when some one of us—some lesser member—might serve as appendage or organ of an amorphous extended self of which she is a part, from which she is apart; when one might be as porous as a sentient medium for transmissions of certain and uncertain origin and remain as active as an intransitive verb without a subject or the agent of a noncausative action? These are, I believe, ordinary facts of social grammar for many. And what if that is not a problem but the historical form of our enabling and our caring, our creative living and enjoyment? And freedom is neither the condition nor the issue of well-being?

You may already know that this is the case, except the bodies pile up and always amount to a known quantity/quality, a collective or political identity/idea maybe, if not a community. Every day we are enjoined to keep accounts, measure and be measured, devalue in order to value, determine the I and the not-I, the body and member (bagi, kabagi) and the not-body, nonkin, nonmember, nonbody politic. These are pleasures as much as duties of our most mundane everyday struggles as well as of our most noble revolutionary efforts. It is what we get to have and do and what is exacted from us when we keep playing these scenarios of valuable life for real.

The enjoyment of devastation and carnage; the thrill of unimpeded muscular will either on behalf of or against the soft flesh, the pure seed, the redemptive soul; the gratifications of frigid control or inebriated sovereignty; the jouissance of self-dissolution or dissolute indulgence in warm waters as the counterpoint of erect, moral standing; the contentment of the violently protected. Are there other
libidinal modes and forces, other “kinaesthetic” orders of potential, besides these and more that are still making ground zero and its domestic and overseas possessions? What can other “areas” offer to a gender and sexuality studies struggling to decode these dominant forms of unconscious attachment, which hold things together while they are falling apart, while the rot is flying off the handle?

Language, organism, and race can be areas, too, if by area we mean places of life that are willfully, “structurally” (though humans are indeed always involved) denied the creative dynamism and honor of autopoetic being by master codes, which alone can confer their integral sense. If one were to carefully attend to these fully social areas that transgress existing geopolitical territorial boundaries—be alive to what they might say and be open to their effects and suggestions—one might oneself experience or remember, maybe get caught up in, and not simply recognize, maybe even become a component of, the way things occur and are made to occur when people are not simply playing “for real” but also for possibility, for realizability. What is realizable, both cognitively and practically, is suggested in people’s ways of communicating and organizing experience, which are sedimented and codified in the “live” archives of language, and in the ways of inhabiting and using physical and virtual being (not just “the body”), which are themselves transmitted “live” through intimacy, association, affiliation, and accompaniment. In this way, the realizable pleasures and powers of sentience and sensuality—and the “politics” they enact and imply—cannot be removed from how one moves and dwells in the material world, with and among others, including those who are dead but have not ceased to exist, who make their presence known and felt, and those who may not speak or breathe but compel consideration and response nonetheless.

Outside freedom, or within the conditions of nonfreedom, is a diminishing plethora of verbs of action, of happening and making happen, beside which the vocabulary of acts and practices, processes, events and structures, being and becoming is so purposefully impoverished, enamored as everyone is to conceptions of power and erotics that are the shared foundation of our material world. Learning and communicating in the semantic-kinaesthetic networks—plural, linguistic as well as nonlinguistic, languages and mixed tissue of shared existence—that are intrinsic to and immanent in the ways people not only make their lives in the best way they can in the material worlds they build and accommodate but also reach for the possibility of other lives in the ones they have or in the ones they might yet obtain, we might glean the invented and inventive forms of people’s personal and social thriving and enjoyment, forms of life set up in quiet and noisy defiance of the debasement, obsolescence, and elimination mandated by compulsory orders.
of kin or kind. To be alive to these other “areas” in this way might then, maybe, maybe, serve as a path for us to finally get somewhere, else.

References
