

# FIRSTNESS

Lovise Haj Brade

L: “Based on what you have told me about you wife and your family I suppose you identify as straight?”

Man: “??? I don’t understand the question?”

**CATCHING THE UNEXPERIENCED** experience of normativity in a form that makes it possible to analyse is often a challenge. Throughout the years, the struggles of the “Other” and its position as abject and constitutive outside of normativity has been thoroughly theorised, but we have not yet seen a similar expansion of concepts to grasp the specific unmarkedness of *not-otherness* and how it functions as constitutive *inside* of normativity. In this piece, I propose *firstness* as one such concept and develop its position within the genealogy of (objectless) queer studies.

In her influential *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Jasbir Puar argues for an open undefined – objectless – queer theory. She points out how queer studies, in order to preserve its critical potential, must observe how queerness fluctuate and is produced through power regulation and discipline, rather than focusing a single pre-defined identity category (such as sexuality). Puar (2007) highlights how the “tolerant” Western self-perception that acknowledges and include certain types of well-polished, economically liberated urban gayness into the national community, is based on and actively produce simultaneous exclusions and disqualifications of other types of queerness – located in, for instance, positions as Muslim, non-white and/or Middle Eastern – from the same community.

Rather than understanding queer as an identity position that one can inhabit (or be appointed), the objectless queer theory enables an investigation of the normalising power technologies that produces the mere idea that such an identity position exists. The critique of a queer theory with a fixed referent has been put forward numerous times before – most notably perhaps by Judith Butler (1994), who argued against a theory with “proper objects,” and by David Eng and colleagues (2005, 1) who, like Butler, argued that the promise of queer was that it contained a broad critique of multiple social antagonisms and the “social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity.”

Along with these interventions the last decades has seen multiple examples of studies that are critical of normativity and normative positions. Particularly in the last three decades the research disciplines of critical studies of men and masculinity, critical whiteness studies, critical studies of heteronormativity, as well as crip studies have advanced and expanded intensively and have contributed to a radical rethinking of the ways we understand the reproduction of inequality and privilege. However, contrary to the argument put forward by Puar (2007), these different versions of “normativity studies” most often is tied to a specific and fixed referent and may thus – quoting Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) – run the danger of a single story and a too simple argument. It is in order to co-think and “queer” these interventions I suggest the concept of *firstness* as a vehicle in what perhaps could be called objectless *normativity* studies.

Based on the critical approaches to, for example, whiteness, masculinity, colonialism, straightness, able-bodiedness, middle-classness of privilege studies, firstness can be used as a platform to interrogate how normative power technologies produce privilege. Further, it is a prism to co-think following key elements in these technologies: The concept of hegemony as it is applied in (Marxist) masculinity studies (most notably, Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), the understanding of normativity production from (objectless) “queer” (and crip) studies, the “normate,” which is central in current cripistemologies (Garland

Thompson 1997) and how unmarkedness and invisibility is (not) experienced, which is key in classic critical whiteness studies (Frankenberg 1993; Dyer 1997). The concept of firstness is thus based on an idea to:

[E]ncourage an open, but critical and destabilising intervention into the intersections, interactions and/or dissonances between one or more simultaneous processes of majorization and their “firsting” effects in a given context, based on an ambition to dismantle and de-privilege its normative status and hold those who benefit from it accountable. (Brade 2017, 346)

### **The Methodological Challenge of Catching Firstness**

In *Up the Anthropologist* (1972) (which may be the first intervention proposing a consistent focus “upwards” – i.e., specifically on firstness) Laura Nader urged her colleagues to turn their gaze from the sociological darling of the underdog and begin to more actively engage with the (re)production of what seems to be given and uncontroversial positions of power. Since then, Nader and many of those who followed her call has presented convincing arguments as to why this shift of focus is important but very few has presented methodological reflections concerning the question of how to do it. In my own endeavours into firstness research, I have tried out various strategies to keep a steady focus “upward” (or perhaps most often: sideways) when recruiting and interacting with research participants with a self-perception as “neutral.” I was curious to find ways to shed light on what it entails to be subjected as non-other and on the experience of fitting in, not generating any friction and of being rightful in the position one inhabits. However, as Bob Pease (2010, 9) has noted, people tend to get angry or defensive when confronted with their privileges and navigating these reactions, as well as the uneasiness of insisting on discussing a topic that research participants may refuse or deny, are parts of what makes studies of positions framed by firstness challenging. The strategies I tried varied from gentle poking over strategic (and thoroughly scientific) *flirting* to actively *being a killjoy* (Ahmed 2010) and each had different advantages and shortcomings in sensitising participants to their privileges during interviews.<sup>1</sup>

The ambition of interventions like these is to enable cracks in the discourse of neutrality that is vital in upholding the societal (and scientific) blindness when it comes to privilege and to enable a move toward a more vulnerable, ethical, and self-aware position of firstness. José Esteban Muñoz' (2009) concept "worldmaking" and its link to the necessity of dis-identifying with hegemonic positions captures how such cracks might allow for a view to an elsewhere, beyond the discourse of neutrality and the privilege of firstness.

**LOVISE HAJ BRADE** is an assistant professor in Gender Studies at the Mid Sweden University. She obtained her PhD in Gender Studies at Lund University 2017, and engages in all kinds of critical thinking, teaching, and activism that challenge neoliberal hegemony and fascist tendencies within or outside university structures. Currently she is involved in a research project about norm-critical innovation in Swedish forestry industries.

## REFERENCES

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2009. "The Danger of a Single Story." TEDGlobal. [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript).
- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brade, Lovise Haj. 2017. "Vi, de neutrale: Skitser til udfordring af akademisk førstehed." PhD diss., Lund University.
- Butler, Judith. 1994. "Against Proper Objects." *differences* 6:2–3:1–26.
- Connell, R. W. 1995. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Connell, R. W., and James Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society* 19.6:829–59.
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Eng, David L., Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz. 2005. "Introduction: What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* 23.3–4:1–17.
- Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Garland Thompson, Rosemarie. 1997. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Colombia University Press

- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Nader, Laura. 1972 "Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up." In *Reinventing Anthropology*, edited by Dell H. Hymes, 283–311. New York: Pantheon.
- Pease, Bob. 2010. *Undoing Privilege: Unearned Advantage in a Divided World*. London: Zed.
- Puar, Jasbir. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

## NOTE

1. See Lovise Haj Brade (2017) for a more elaborate discussion of these different strategies.