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Journeying with Ken Plummer through radical constructionism, critical humanism and intimate counterpublics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Christian Klesse** 

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Abstract

Ken Plummer's life work has had a major impact on the development of the sociology of sexuality. While being firmly rooted in and committed to the traditions of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism – which chimes nicely with his philosophical stance of critical humanism – Ken Plummer openly engaged in a critical dialogue with many theoretical perspectives. This renders his work a rich resource for researchers working on sexualities from within different paradigms. This paper engages in a critical appraisal of some of Plummer's most significant concepts through autobiographical reflection on my personal experience of working with Ken Plummer as a PhD student, further tracing the influence his work has had on my own writing on consensual non-monogamies, LGBTQIA + activism and queer film festivals. Using autoethnography and memory work, the essay highlights the powerful potential residing in Plummer's path-breaking contributions to social constructionism (script theory and narrative power), methodology (personal documents), narrative sociology (sexual stories), critical humanism (dialogical ethics and cosmopolitan sexualities) and political sociology (intra-movement conflict, intimate citizenship, counterpublics and age standpoints). The essay argues that these ideas – and Plummer's overall legacy as a scholar and theorist – bear a strong significance for future research in sexuality studies.

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Introduction

Ken Plummer's¹ *oeuvre* is distinctive in that it is both modest (in terms of how the author presents his claims and arguments) and ambitious (considering the scope of issues tackled, ranging from personal matters, desire and sexual practice to questions of world politics and cosmopolitanism). In this article, I engage in a critical appraisal of Ken's key contributions to sociology and sexuality studies through a reflection on the influence of his work on my own research and writing. As the primary supervisor of my PhD thesis on gay male and bisexual non-monogamies, which I worked on from 1997 until 2003 at the University of Essex, Ken has been an important figure in my personal intellectual history and trajectory as an academic, researcher and writer. Yet my engagement with Ken's work has not been confined to this period, and I have been returning to Ken's writing at different points working on different projects over the last 20 years. Because this essay is partially rooted in autoethnographic reflection on my own intellectual trajectory, it is without any question shaped by some of my own theoretical preoccupations and interests. It is therefore necessarily partial in perspective and limited in scope: it cannot do justice to the comprehensive nature of Ken's life work and the astonishing multiplicity of his engagements. That notwithstanding, I have persistently aimed at linking my personal reflections back to wider academic debates, hoping to thereby advance the larger collective effort undertaken in this special issue to acknowledge and further Ken's outstanding contributions to the disciplines of sociology and sexuality studies.

This essay will start with a personal account of my experiences of working with Ken as a PhD student in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I believe that my reflections on Ken's style of supervising convey some key features of his distinctive approach to sociology (regarding mentoring, teaching, instruction, collegiality, methodology and theory). The main objective of this section is an appraisal of Ken's keen interest in multiplicity, his appreciation and skillful practice of dialogue, and his ability to work *with* and *across* difference. The essay then progresses to critically engage with three key themes that have shaped Ken's work throughout his lifetime: (a) radical constructionism, (b) critical humanism and (c) conflict, dialogic contestation and intimate citizenship. I dedicate one section to each of these persistent intellectual preoccupations of his, organising my discussion around selected key publications and personal reflections on my own engagement with this work. In my view, these three themes are closely interconnected in Ken's writing, feeding into an over-arching agenda in which theory (social constructionism) and methodology (symbolic interactionism and life stories) intersect with philosophy (critical humanism), resulting in a comprehensive, well-rounded and *dialogic* approach to social inquiry, which can be seen as an instantiation of a kind of *transversal sociology*.²

On being a joyous sexuality scholar: Working with Ken Plummer

I began working with Ken in September 1997, when I started my PhD on Consensual Non-monogamies (CNMs) in gay male and bisexual social movement contexts under Ken's supervision at the University of Essex. My monograph *The Spectre of Promiscuity Gay Male and Bisexual Non-monogamies and Polyamories* (Klesse, 2007b) is based on this research project. I had been in e-mail contact with Ken prior to me applying for a place of study for the degree of PhD. He responded with great interest to my research ideas and encouraged me to apply for funding for the project. I then met him personally at the European Sociological Association Third Conference at the University of Essex in August 1997, where he engaged in a joint discussion with Jeffrey Weeks on their respective publications and sexuality studies in more general terms. I took up my studies at the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex later that autumn.

I loved working with Ken, and I thoroughly enjoyed our supervision sessions in his office on campus (which I always reached journeying from London, where I had my home base). The most amazing aspect of these supervision meetings was the amount of fun we had together. I remember us laughing and giggling along half of our sessions, while at the same time (or the rest of it) having meaningful conversations, getting things done.

This joyous nature of my experience of working with Ken is worthy making a point of Ken taught me to – and reaffirmed me in – approaching sexuality research as a joyful activity. Over recent months, I have done a lot of reading – for a different project – into the history of autonomist Marxism, namely, the work of Antonio Negri (including his collaborations with Michael Hardt). In Negri's Spinozist work on subjectivity since the mid-1980s, we can find an intriguing emphasis on joy as an integral part of struggle and resistance. Negri calls for linking the project of communism with joyful and life-affirming practices, envisioning a *joyous communism*, further talking of leftist Spinoza scholarship as 'joyous Spinozists' (see, for example, Guattari et al., 2010; Hardt and Negri, 2002; Negri, 2020). 'Joy is a way of linking the world – it is inseparable from the common, from immanent life', Negri states in an interview with Anne Dufourmantelle, interpreting social movement struggles of the 1960s and 1970s from within a Spinozist perspective (Negri and Dufourmantelle, 2004: 29). In a different interview, he elaborates on the dialogic nature of joy. 'Joy is an expression that finds a response, an act that is added to another, that connects' (ibid.,: 101). In a very similar vein, sharing joy with Ken introduced a profoundly bounding dimension in our experience of working together. It had a firm place within his practice of research and teaching and facilitated dialogue with his students. Being supervised by and working with Ken provided me with an example of a mode of professionalism rooted both in a celebration of joy and a commitment to critique. Ken taught me great lessons about being a *joyous sexuality scholar*. I do not think it is by accident – and it reveals something quite significant – that Ken concludes his last book on *Critical Humanism* (Plummer, 2021) (in which he defends a humanist position in the face of the destructive and traumatising dynamics of war, crisis capitalism, escalating inequalities and ecological devastation) with an epilogue on *the joys of everyday living*. Like Negri, Ken attributes to joy the capacity of facilitating connectivity, creativity and care (next to contemplation, calm and contentment) (ibid., 202–203).³ His endorsement of a *critical humanism* – in this book

and elsewhere – attests to his amazement with multiplicity and diversity and the human capacity for symbolisation, storytelling and – most importantly – also embodied, fleshy pleasures.

I consider myself as being extremely privileged of having been able to study with Ken, whose supervision, guidance and mentorship was generous and always down-to-the point. His laid-back, openminded and confident approach strongly resonated with my preferred style of working and made me feel safe during the PhD journey – despite all the delays and obvious flaws of my early drafts. Ken had an amazing eye for gaps and inconsistencies and communicated critique and disagreement in an explicit, up-front but sympathetic manner. Ken's commitment to his students, his vast experience in supervision and his skilled practice of giving feedback made me grow with my project. I have always strongly felt that the success of our supervision relationship was mostly down to Ken's rounded character and strong self-confidence as a scholar, which put him in the position to let me explore ideas and make theoretical commitments which were not necessarily his own.

In the case of our cooperation, this mattered because Ken and I where – theoretically speaking – not necessarily on the same page. Like many postgraduate students of my cohort, I was enthralled by the burgeoning of radical queer theories throughout the 1990s, most of which were shaped by poststructuralist insights, with Michel Foucault's critiques of normativity and governmentality being particularly influential (Bristow, 2011; Halperin, 1997; Jagose, 2010; Seidman, 2017).

Ken himself was curious, but ultimately also reserved. He had been strongly committed to symbolic interactionism, a location from which many of the paradigmatic assumptions of queer theory appeared to be questionable. The aspect of queer theory that irritated him most of all was its exclusive concern with discourse. His critique of what he believed to be a reductionist fixation on textual analysis can be traced in many of his publications (Plummer, 1998a, 1998b, 2012, 2013). For example, the essay 'I Can't Even Think Straight' 'Queer' Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology' (Stein and Plummer, 1994), a widely read essay and critical endorsement of queer theory from a sociology perspective co-authored with Arlene Stein, clearly conveys this ambivalence. On the one hand, the authors validate queer theory and activism for their novel ways of conceptualising sexuality, creating an exciting momentum for critical gender and sexuality research in the humanities. The authors hope for a similar deghettoization of lesbian and gay studies to happen in sociology, too, advocating a move 'toward a more queer sociology' (ibid.,: 183). They see an 'elective affinity' between some social constructionist currents in sociology (e.g. within lesbian feminism and symbolic interactionism) and postmodern queer theories. In their radical interrogation of essentialist categories and identity labels, these older approaches can be said to be 'protodeconstructionist' (ibid.,: 183), the authors argue, prefiguring the 1990 push towards Derridean deconstruction in queer theory. Most importantly, while the authors welcome queer theory's emphasis on fluidity and ambiguity, they complain about its narrow concern with textual analysis:

'Queer theorists (...) appreciate the extent to which the texts of literature and mass culture shape sexuality, but their weakness is that they rarely, if ever, move beyond the text. There is a

dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore “real” queer life as it is materially experienced across the world, while they play with the free-floating signifiers of text’ (ibid.,: 184).

In his farewell note as acting editor of *Sexualities*, commenting on the state of the art of sexuality studies nearly 20 years later, Ken reconfirms his ambiguity with regards to queer theory very clearly. While not explicitly disliking queer theory, he counts it among the rather well-trodden theoretical approaches that has created its own orthodoxy. He criticises its USA- and Eurocentrism and its reductionist concern with anti-normativity. ‘I have always thought queer theory a narrow theory – and that *Sexualities* will, I hope, always have a much wider remit’, suggesting that his vision of what *critical sexualities studies* could look like exceeds the queer agenda by far (Plummer, 2013: 760).

While welcoming LGBTQIA + content, Ken was always clear that he did not want *Sexualities* to become a queer studies journal, being primarily interested in work that goes beyond textual analysis or theoretical abstraction. In the editorial to the first edition of the journal, he declares that he would like to publish work that is ‘social/cultural’, ‘theoretical and empirical’, and ‘critical’ (Plummer, 1998a: 7). He envisions an even measure or unity of empirical (ideally qualitative) and theoretical dimensions, stressing that ‘contributions should engage with events in the empirical social world while at the same time theorizing them’ (ibid.,: 7). He declares his favour for qualitative and ethnographic studies: ‘Work that focuses on “the lived life” or “real world events” are especially welcome!’ (ibid.,: 7).

Ken founded the journal *Sexualities* with the explicit hope to create critical and empirical knowledge on sexualities *beyond the abstractions of discourse analysis*, creating a forum for critical research into sexualities as actions involving human bodies, minds, desires and fantasies.

It is remarkable that Ken never pushed me towards incorporating a symbolic interactionist perspective in my thesis and that he was happy to support me in developing a queer framework and a discourse analytical reading of my research data (consisting largely of interviews, focus groups and fieldnotes), elaborating a fusion between Foucault’s (2020) and Laclau and Mouffe’s (2014) discourse theoretical approaches, which also left some space for a critical hermeneutics (see Klesse, 2007b). I saw Ken’s ability to support me adopting an approach that was not at all his own, as an instantiation of a matured scholarship on his part.

Our different approaches can certainly also be understood from a generational point of view in the sense that due to our different ages, we both were exposed to quite different intellectual climates, developing distinct intellectual sensibilities in response. Ken himself elaborated upon the idea of ‘sexual generations and generational sexualities’ (2010: 165), referring thereby not simply to the idea of *cohorts*, but advocating the view of a ‘symbolically grounded position’ that for LGBTQIA + people depends on their exposure to different age-related ‘sexual subterranean traditions’ (ibid.,: 165). What is interesting here is that Ken had the ability to construe supervision as a mentoring process and relationship that partially transcended these *age standpoints*, thereby creating the rare opportunity for reciprocal and mutual learning, reflecting upon and *mediating generational shifts*.

In the case of any disagreements, Ken remained calm and relaxed, even when – as it happened once – I had misrepresented his own work, due my adherence to a rather narrow interpretation of power from within a queer framework. I remember that he was really irritated when I criticised the work of a group of sexuality scholars (including his recently published *Telling Sexual Stories* (Plummer, 1997)) allegedly lacking an explicit theory of power in my very first presentation at a Postgraduate Research Conference. He asked me how I could say such a thing, when the term power even appeared in the title of his book. And indeed, *Telling Sexual Stories. Power, Change and Social Worlds* posits power as central when asking what stories can be told in public or have the capacity to create audiences large enough to kick off social movements or trigger real life social change. Ken is adamant that story telling has always to be understood within a complex web of streams of power (1997: 26–28). Refusing to be deterministic, his theory of power is dynamic and interactionist. Ken defines power ‘as a flow, a process, a pulsate – oscillating and undulating throughout the social world and working to pattern the degree of control people experience and have over their lives. (...) It affects hierarchy, patterns of domination and the distribution of resources’ (ibid.,: 26). For Ken, power ‘flows through all interaction, though in starkly different ways. It is both *negative* – repressing, oppressing, depressing – and *positive* – constructive, creative constitutive’. Operating across different scales of interaction, power appears within momentous situations, habitual grids of socialised action and within the whole social order. Within Ken’s understanding, power is a relational process, worked out between people – and the institutions they create and are embedded in. Traces of a discourse analytical reasoning, too, can be identified in *Telling Sexual Stories* (1997) – and certainly also in *Intimate Citizenship* (Plummer, 2003) – largely due to the influence of an Habermasian notion of the public sphere and the definition of democracy as a matter of conversational discourse and dialogue (see, Bernstein, 1995; Chambers, 2017; Habermas, 1974, 1999). Feminist notions of positive power, too, namely, the notion of power as a capacity have further shaped Ken’s theorisation of power. Yet the following is clear: For Ken, power does not reside in structural positions or formations (as in Marxist approaches), nor is it simply a matter of power/knowledge (as Foucault would have it). ‘Power is not a simple attribute or a capacity, but a flow of negotiations and shifting outcomes’, he puts it in a clearly interactionist fashion (Plummer, 1997: 26).

The analysis of power I was working towards in the context of my PhD, was certainly different. I did heavily invest into discourse theory, queer-feminist critiques of heteronormativity and compulsive monogamy, always harking back to structuralist theories of oppression and further to intersectional Black feminist theories concerned with the ‘simultaneity of multiple oppressions’ (The Combahee River Collective, 2017). While Ken has always started out with subjective experience, working himself up to institutional or structural issues (Plummer, 2014: 120), my approach has put a much stronger emphasis onto structural, material and governmental processes. Our approaches to power were certainly different, but this should have not prevented me from acknowledging that Ken had indeed presented a *well-elaborated distinctive theory of power* (albeit operating within different paradigms). As a young PhD student, working my way into the worlds of academic research and theory, I was still too strongly focused on a limited body of work I

had prematurely identified as the *right* approach, which stopped me from recognising the full depth of contributions from within other schools of thought. Ken on the other hand, had already been in the field for decades, living and working through many major debates, both with close colleagues and within the discipline, as aptly illustrated by his brief historical sketch of what he calls the ‘action-structure debates’ in his edited volume on 50 years of the Department of Sociology (ibid., 120). As suggested above, Ken has been keen to acknowledge and celebrate multiplicity, not only with regards to ways of life and forms of sexuality, but also with regards to *ways of thinking*. This manifested itself in his firm defence of *cosmopolitanism* (Plummer, 2015). It also provided him with a sound and thoroughly reflected platform for addressing *difference* with a curious mind and calm attitude.

The memories and stories discussed in this section on working with Ken as a supervisor were meant to illustrate a range of core characteristics of Ken’s disposition to academic work and scholarship: Ken was dedicated to a joyful and passionate practice of teaching, researching and mentoring. Acting as a role model of a ‘joyous sexuality researcher’ Ken was involved in shifting the parameters of professional conduct, subverting hegemonic ideas of muscular intellectualism (Redman and Mac an Ghaill, 1997) and detached professionalism. Ken’s joyful practice rooted in a genuine interest in personal and intellectual encounters, and a keen interest in dialogue and reciprocal learning. Being not adverse to claiming and naming his position (as a symbolic interactionist, pragmatist and humanist), Ken always has ventured beyond the narrow canon of these traditions, fully embracing the challenges bound up with the radical flux of social and methodological thinking. Again, this approach revealed a profoundly dialogical disposition towards academic practice and the world of research, and his eagerness to work across difference. In all this, Ken refused orthodoxy and valued experimentation.

Radical constructionism

Ken’s lifework is profoundly enmeshed with the intellectual and methodological approach of symbolic interactionism. He remembers that he ‘arrived at Essex in 1975 as a passionate symbolic interactionist and continued to remain so’ (2014: 120). Ken saw symbolic interactionism rooted in the philosophical work of William James, John Dewey, Charles H. Cooley and George Herbert Mead, developed as a distinctive sociological approach in the writing of Herbert Blumer and the authors associated with the Chicago School. In his personal approach, symbolic interactionism stood for a fusion of radical empiricism, formalism, pragmatism, postmodernism and humanism (Plummer 2012), a position that he elaborated – mainly in the period of the new millennium – as a distinct philosophical position that he termed ‘critical humanism’ (Plummer, 2001, 2013, 2021).

Ken’s first monograph *Sexual Stigma* (Plummer, 1975) has been a milestone in advancing symbolic interactionism in the field of sexuality studies. Pioneered by the work on scripting theory by the US American scholars John H Gagnon and Simon William (Gagnon and Simon, 1977) in *Sexual Conduct*, Ken advanced their approach by drawing on labelling theory, deviance studies and subculture research to develop a

sociological theory of homosexuality. Ken presents a radical social constructionist account in this book, which emphasises action, change and flux, focussing upon choice, always contesting hegemonic assumptions regarding biological determinism. Symbolic interactionism presents a radically anti-essentialist point of view and contests the ideas of naturalism regarding questions of both sexual behaviours and orientation: *'nothing is sexual but naming makes it so. Sexuality is a social construction learnt in interaction with others'* (Plummer, 1975: 30). The strong emphasis on adaptability and choice did not go down well with all readers (see Sagarin, 1975), and radical versions of symbolic interactionist constructionism, such as the early accounts of Gagnon, Williams and Plummer have often been accused of the denial of biological facticity and the ideological erosion of the assumed 'reality' of 'sexual minorities' and their demands for recognition. These criticisms of social constructionism, while largely mistaken or unfounded, have persisted and increased their currency in the course of the political and legal mobilisation of sexual orientation models in LGBTQIA + politics (Brickell, 2006).

It is worthwhile to emphasise that social constructionism has been a mixed hat (Heckert, 2005) and that the ideas associated with it have been complex and multi-faceted (Vance, 1989; Plummer, 2000). They have included variable historical accounts (Weeks, 1986, 1990, 2000; Greenberg, 1990; Halperin, 1990; Faderman, 1992, 1997; Angelides, 2001; Foucault, 2020), labelling theories (McIntosh, 1968; Weeks, 1998), political sociology (Epstein, 1987), developmental psychological models (Cass, 1984; Ponce, 1998), macro-politico-economic accounts (D'Emilio, 1993) and materialist feminisms (Jackson, 1996; Federici, 2021; Wittig, 1992). Queer theories certainly build upon social constructionist insights but go a step further by not only accounting for the specificity of certain identities and categories, aiming at the destabilisation and decentring of the meanings and social practices that hold the power relations around them in place (Butler, 1990, 1993; Namaste, 1996). In contradistinction to more abstract versions of queer theory, an emphasis on embodiment and the recognition of the material contingency of sexual desire, action and identification through its connection with human physicality has always been an integral feature of Ken's radically constructionist account. While, in *Sexual Stigma*, he refers to biological functions, organs and processes (such as orgasms) as 'biological and universal facts' (1975: 30), he is emphasising at the same time that they are always *charged with meaning*. Ultimately it is not sexuality that determines being, but meanings that determine sexuality. In his more recent work, as a result also of his personal experience of illness, liver disease and organ transplantation, Ken has reasserted adamantly that the body ought to be put at the forefront of social theorising of human experience. In his autoethnographic article, 'My Multiple Sick Bodies', Ken rejects any analytical separation of the symbolic and the body: 'The material and the interpretive have to be held together not turned into a false dualism or split. Both are at work together all the time' (Plummer, 2012: 84).

Ken has never revised his radically constructionist views. In *Cosmopolitan Sexualities*, he proclaims: 'Recent critical sexuality studies have made it very clear that there is really no such thing as a universal fixed sexual or gendered being' (2015: 21). Ken's constructionist scholarship and his rejection of naturalistic and biologically reductionist or

determinist accounts of sexual categories have strongly resonated with my own scepticism regarding such views. In particular, I have been wary of the legitimacy and value of mobilising collective identity labels and sexual orientation narratives in the fight for the inclusion of minoritized or marginalised intimacies or sexualities. Ken's radical constructionism has provided some of the groundings for my arguments against advocating sexual orientation-based claims in order to push for multiple marriage or for legal anti-discrimination measures for people who practice polyamory or other forms of CNM (Klesse, 2014b, 2016).

Ken's contribution to an emerging sociology of homosexuality and later lesbian and gay studies (which nowadays has evolved into LGBTQIA+ Studies) has been immense. The edited volumes *The Making of the Homosexual* (Plummer, 1981c) and *Modern Homosexualities. Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience* (Plummer, 1992a) were vital stimuli creating a fruitful moment for research into same-sex sexualities in the UK and beyond. For me, these books were key sources when I worked on my MA thesis concerned with Jewish gay liberationist politics in UK lesbian and gay movement politics (Klesse, 1997). Ken's own contributions provided excellent conceptual framings and methodological guidance. His texts of the 1980s and 1990s can truly be described as 'protodeconstructive' (Stein and Plummer, 1994: 183), for example, when he states: 'categorization is paradoxical: it aids and destroys', suggesting that sexual categories 'serve material forces of domination and control', and that their usage (ascribed or self-ascribed) has a 'damaging impact on human experience' (all quotes Plummer, 1981b: 29). I cherished his critique of the flaws of *homophobia* as an individualising and psychologically reductionist concept (Plummer, 1981b) and his nuanced definition of *heterosexism* as a framework of power (Plummer, 1992b). These conceptual clarifications helped me developing my own definitions of heteronormativity and compulsive monogamy (nowadays theorised as mononormativity (see Schippers, 2016) in the context of my research on CNMs and to further place them in the context of a longer genealogy of theorising oppression, subordination, normalisation and privileging around gender, sexuality and intimacy (Klesse, 2007a, 2007b).

With *Telling Sexual Stories* (1997), Ken gave his symbolic interactionist constructionism a definitive narrative-analytical twist. Ken focuses in this book on the significance of personal stories concerning gendered, sexual and erotic experiences for identification, community formation, contestation and political struggle. The capacity for telling stories later also figured prominently in his fully elaborated articulations of a critical humanist standpoint (Plummer, 2019, 2021). For example, in *Critical Humanism*, he refers to Hannah Arendt (1998) to show that narration and narrative creation is a basic feature of the human condition. 'Telling stories is what makes us human: we are the thinking animal and ours is a narrative humanity', he explains (Plummer, 2019: 23, quoted in Plummer, 2021: 105). Ken is very much interested in the power of stories to connect subjectivity and sociality. Stories thereby represent the crystallisation of cultural dynamics, providing excellent opportunities for deep insights into social processes.

'The telling of sexual stories can ultimately move beyond the life of a person or a community, and beyond an informational educational role, and become a clue to the wider symbolic

workings of whole cultures. The stories told in daily lives flow from the culture and back into it; they are major resources for comprehending a culture and its dynamics, values, and changes'. (1997: 176)

Change is a key term here. Tracing the emergence of novel sexual stories provides the means for a diagnostic of sexual transformations. It has been no accident that *Telling Sexual Stories* has been adapted by many authors who have reflected upon the emergence of new identities and intimacies, such as, for example, Ani Ritchie and Meg-John Barker (Ritchie and Barker, 2006) analysing linguistic innovations around polyamory in the early 2000s, Merl Storr (1999) grappling with the popularisation of bisexuality through the theme of postmodernity, or Gary W Taylor and Jane M Ussher (Taylor and Ussher, 2001) making sense of BDSM experience narratives. Furthermore, I myself found Ken's narrative-focus helpful for framing current debates on bisexuality, pansexuality and non-binary genders in my contribution to the 20 Years Anniversary Special issue of *Sexualities* (Klesse, 2018). It provides an excellent tool for theorising radical flux in what Ken describes elsewhere as the proliferation of *pluriversal sexualities* (Plummer, 2021), a view that resonates with Volkmar Sigusch's (Sigusch, 2005) reflection on *neo-genders* and *neo-sexualities*.

Telling Sexual Stories (1997) and also his later *Narrative Power* (2019) build upon Ken's much longer interest in life stories as a genre and method within the social sciences. The first edition of Ken's book *Documents of Life* (Plummer, 1983) already provided an important source for my work on the life story of a Anglo-Jewish gay male activist as a MA student (Klesse 1997). The extremely popular 2nd edition of this book had been revised and expanded to include a novel chapter on 'Critical Humanism in the Post-Modern World' (Plummer, 2001). In the following, I will focus upon Ken's contribution to the revitalisation of humanism as an ethical and philosophical stance. Ken's approach to critical humanism introduces a strongly normative orientation to his work. This normative disposition is paired with an endorsement of dialogue or – more to the point – a *culture of dialogic contestation*. Ken's close attention to value conflicts in his historical reflections on lesbian and gay social movement politics and in his theoretical work on intimate citizenship had been very useful also to my work on LGBTQIA+ and CNM political activism (Binnie and Klesse, 2013; Klesse 1997, 2007b).

Towards a critical humanism

Ken's interpretation of what he calls 'critical humanism' is profoundly meshed up with his commitment to pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, both as philosophy and methodology. When Ken mentions who first spurred his interest in humanism in his book of this title, he refers to key authors in the traditions of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, such as William James, George Herbert Mead, Jane Addams and Herbert Blumer (Plummer, 2021: 3). Elsewhere, his listing is longer and further includes major figures from within feminism, postcolonial and anti-racist thought, liberalism and critical theory, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Pauline Johnson, Edward Said, Cornel West, Nancy Fraser, Anthony Giddens, Jeffrey Weeks, Martha

Nussbaum, Seyla Benhabib, Agnes Heller, Jürgen Habermas, Mikhail Bakhtin, and others (see [Plummer, 2001](#): 260–61). His first extensive treatment of critical humanism is included as a chapter in the 2nd edition of *Documents of Life* (2001), where it functions as a defence of qualitative methodology, namely, the research of personal stories and documents, which for him is grounded in humanism, bound up with the notions of both ‘being human’ (within interactionism and phenomenology) and the ‘*Humanities*’ (2001: 262). This view conceives of the human as an embedded, embodied, symbolic, intersubjectively engaged agent with a sense of selfhood, that is historically and culturally contingent, particularistic and universal. In *Documents of Life* 2, critical humanism is presented as building upon the ‘*humanistic commitment of the qualitative researcher to study the world always from the perspective of the interactive individual*’ ([Denzin and Lincoln, 1994](#): 575, quoted in [Plummer 2001](#): 255). In subsequent publications ([Plummer, 2003, 2015, 2019, 2021](#)), Ken develops his ideas of critical humanism into a much more ambitious, all-encompassing approach that gestures towards a global ethics and politics, while always placing a key emphasis on the body, desire, gender and sexuality.

Ken’s ambition in this project is to revitalise humanistic traditions of thought and analysis, simultaneously defending them against anti-humanistic critiques (namely, Foucauldian and Althusserian) and posthumanist successors (such as new materialism). Ken sees a critical theory of the human (and humanity) as indispensable for any theory of agency and any project of social justice within a world, divided by class, race, ethnicity, nation, religion, gender and sexuality (2015: 35). Modelled upon Martha Nussbaum’s (2000) capability theory and stressing the human potentials for integrity, sensual perception, imagination, thought, reason, emotion, affiliation, empathy, play, cooperation, organisation, and most above all *communication* and *narrative power*, Ken’s critical humanism (2015, 2019, 2021) aims at taking on the challenges of connecting a divided, damaged, traumatised and brutalised humanity. ‘Ours is an embodied narrative species and connective humanity’, he claims (2021: 5), believing firmly that the enhancement of narrative humanity can lead to harm reduction by bridging cultural divides and fostering a culture of dialogue across difference. His work can be seen in alignment with alternate attempts to resurrect a discourse of humanism around a transformative, reconciliatory, empowering or liberatory agenda (see [Alderson and Spencer, 2017](#)). He is adamant that the version of the human implied in critical humanism is different from ‘the solitary, unencumbered self of much of liberal theory – not a simple, self-actualizing individual’ (2001: 262). Ken acknowledges the flaws of modern western, civilisational humanism and aims to take on board the critiques of postcolonial, feminist, queer and other critical theorists. At the same time, he insists on a caveat. Ken is adamant that while these critiques provide necessary correctives of the major brands of liberal or imperial humanisms, they cannot be extrapolated to the whole breadth of humanistic projects. For example, Ken defends the validity of the *idea of humanism* against the radical onslaught of [Horkheimer and Adorno’s \(2002\) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*](#), claiming that their critique was hampered by their reductionist focus on Renaissance and Enlightenment humanisms and their undeniably problematic implication in the instrumental rationality of capitalism (2015: 22/23). He expands the frame of work by bringing into consideration

the various brands of humanisms developed by thinkers such as Confucius, Buddha, Zarathustra, Isaiah, Homer, Plato and Archimedes during the so-called Axial Age 800–200 BC (ibid.,: 23). In a very similar vein, Erich Fromm (1994) had highlighted the prevalence of non-theistic religious humanisms in the period from 1500 BC in Egypt, Persia and Asia, referring to – among others – currents within Mosaic belief, Taoism, Buddhism, Greek philosophy, and later messianic sectarian movements within Judaism and early Christianity (ibid.,: 19 and 139).

Quoting Alfred McClung Lee, Ken insists on the extensive plurality of the tradition of humanism. It is worthwhile to reproduce this quote (which Ken uses in at least two publications) at length:

‘Humanism has figured in a wide range of religious, political, and academic movements. As such it has been identified with atheism, capitalism, classicism, communism, democracy, egalitarianism, populism, nationalism, positivism, pragmatism, relativism, science, scientism, socialism, statism, symbolic interactionism, and supernaturalism, including versions of ancient paganism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Mohammedanism. It has also been rationalized as being opposed to each of these. It has served as an ingredient in movement against each. And these terms do not all suggest all of humanism’s ideological and social associations.’ (Lee, 1978: 44–45, quoted in Plummer 2021: 16).

The recognition and emphasis of religious variations of humanism in Ken’s discussion render his critical humanism different from many Marxist, anarchist or socialist versions of humanism that frequently (although not always) have taken a decisively secular stance (see, Epstein, 2017; Morland, 1997; Suissa, 2012; Spencer, 2017). Plummer advocates a global, world or cosmopolitan (multi-faiths) humanism, based on a ‘differential universalism’ (see Lister, 1997), acknowledging local and particularised knowledges, values and framings, always trying to establish commonalities through practices of abstraction and translation (Plummer 2015: 92/93).

I am very sympathetic to Ken’s ambition to avoid the short-falls of Eurocentrism and racialized civilisational hybris, aiming to forge a *cosmopolitan humanism* that in many regards is compatible with the views of postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said (1994) or Paul Gilroy (2001), (see also Hussein, 2004; Spencer, 2017). Plummer’s proposal of a critical humanism is ripe with multicultural sensibility and intercultural thrive, always addressing the key questions: ‘*How are we to live cooperatively with our diverse yet common humanity, not rendering it divisive or dehumanizing? How can we best live together with our differences?*’ (2015: 5). Certain limitations of Ken’s approach can be said to result from his primary choice of references from within the western liberal traditions of pragmatism and/or critical theory. A stronger and more sustained engagement with more *systemic critiques* available across the spectrum of decolonial and anti-capitalist work would have helped him to delineate even sharper the flaws of mainstream liberal humanism (for an overview, see Alderson and Spencer, 2017; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

Conflict, dialogic contestation and intimate citizenship

One of the strengths of Ken's work is his frank acknowledgment of conflict and controversy right at the heart of the critical humanist project. 'Critical humanism engages with (and tells the stories of) the perpetual narrative reconstructions and conflicts of what it means to be human', he claims (2021: 5), it 'suggests a fallible, worldwide, contested narrative about the collective, connecting and changing ways of being "human"' (ibid.,: 11/12), and designates 'a project shaped by many controversies' (ibid., 12). Critical humanism therefore calls for the development of 'pluriversal politics', that is, attempts to proactively address the multiplicity of cultures and life worlds (ibid.,: 149). These aspects of Ken's work strongly resonate with the simultaneous emphasis on difference and equality in accounts of *transversal politics*, as elaborated in the work of Nira Yuval-Davis (1999, 2006). Yet Ken's critical humanism appears to be somewhat more optimistic regarding the ultimately reconciliatory power of dialogue, lacking a fully developed theory of *intersectionality as positionality*, as it enters Yuval-Davis's work through an engagement with Black feminist theories of multiple oppression and a revised standpoint theory.

As I will show in more detail later, the emphasis on conflict has rendered Ken's work very useful for my personal thinking about political activism in the context of LGBTQIA+ and CNM social movement struggles. However, Ken's notion of conflict is very much modelled upon and closely tied to the idea of value clashes and culture wars. Cultural wars and moral panics have certainly been prominent in gender and sexual politics (see, Duggan and Hunter, 2006; Herdt, 2009; Rubin, 1989;), but the focus on cultural values alone will not guide our understanding how gendered and sexual subjectivities are also shaped and regulated by structural divisions in society, as they manifest themselves, for example, around racial politics and capitalist accumulation and exploitation (Bohrer, 2019; Vergès, 2020, 2021). In my own work on LGBTQIA+ and CNM politics, I have often turned to the Black feminist notion of the 'simultaneity of multiple oppressions', a term aptly proposed by The Combahee River Collective (2017) to theorise the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and capitalism (Tate, 2023). Similarly, I have also been inspired by the critical work that fuses queer critique with the critique of class relations and political economy (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Ferguson, 2004; Floyd, 2009; Binnie, 2014, 2015; see Klesse, 2014a).

Although Ken rarely addresses the interconnection between class, race and political economy in an in-depth manner, his recurrent emphasis on schism, conflict and confrontation certainly has the power to sensitise readers for an inherently political analysis of the processes of social change. I have always liked how Ken (1999), in a brief chapter on the history of UK lesbian and gay politics, focuses on outer schisms (such as de/criminalisation, HIV/AIDS, and Section 28) and inner schisms (such as assimilation, rights agendas, gender clashes, class divisions, and boundary fights around paedophilia, bisexuality, BDSM, and race and racism) to show the coexistence of multiple conflicting agendas within an evolving lesbian and gay politics.

In the remaining part of this section of the essay, I would like to show how Ken's work on multiple sexual public spheres and intimate citizenship, too, lends itself for a

nuanced analysis of conflict in gender and sexual politics. Ken first presented a sketched theory of intimate citizenship in *Telling Sexual Stories* (1997). Ken offers *intimate citizenship* as a flexible term to address a set of concerns and/or rights relating to ‘decisions around the control (or not) over one’s body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences’ (1997: 151). In this elegant definition, Ken addresses the full range of social relations regarding autonomy, integrity and well-being, across the full scale of the personal, intimate and sexual to the more abstract idea of the social, thereby crossing the entire terrain of the public/private divide. Deciding to prioritise the framework of intimacy rather than sexuality (as done in alternate theorisations of *sexual citizenship* by scholars such as David Evans (2004) Jeffrey Weeks (1998) Diane Richardson (2000) or David Bell and Jon Binnie (2000)), Ken avoids the trap of being reabsorbed into identity political frameworks (around categories such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, bisexual, ‘BDSM’, ‘transgender’, ‘polyamorous’ etc.).

‘Unlike earlier versions of citizenship, which often foundered by marginalizing or excluding certain groups, “intimate citizenship” cannot imply one voice, one way, or one model. On the contrary, it is a loose term that comes to designate an array of stories and a multiplicity of voices, in which different lives, different communities, and different politics dwell’,

Ken argues (2003: 72). Due to its supple nature, the concept has given rise to a whole range of different theorisations, with Roseneil et al.’s (2020) comparative research into ‘intimate citizenship regimes’ around the tenacity of the couple-form in Europe being one of the more recent examples (ibid.,: 21).

Following Nancy Fraser’s critical reading of Habermas (1999) and elaborating upon her thesis of a ‘proliferation of multiplicity of competing publics’ (Fraser, 1990: 62) around nationalist publics, peasant publics, proletarian publics and racialized publics, including ‘*subaltern counterpublics*’ (ibid.,: 67), Plummer attests to the ‘pluralization of the public spheres’ (2003: 73), (see also Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Kluge et al., 2016; Majewska, 2021). But public spheres are at the same time also in themselves internally divided. For Ken, they are always stratified by the social divisions class, gender, age, ethnicity and sexuality and are consequently subject to constant internal and external contestation. Alongside Nancy Fraser’s feminist critique and Michael Warner’s (2010) discourse analytical adaptation of the model of counterpublics to queer politics, Ken’s work has been extremely helpful for me to think through the discursive contestations that have shaped, for example, social movement debates about bisexual and gay male non-monogamies (Klesse, 2007b). The focus upon social divisions and ethical conflict in political activism and on social movement’s investment in the creation of alternative public spheres renders Ken’s work a relevant resource for researchers concerned with sexual and gender politics. His subtle perception of schisms, displacements and ruptures, as well as his concern with both history and the body have allowed Ken to explore questions of intersectional difference beyond the classical categories of gender, sexuality, race and class. His path-breaking article on

intergenerationality and *age standpoints* (Plummer, 2010) zooms in on a widely neglected social division. It has provided an indispensable stimulus for my work with Jon Binnie on negotiations in transnational LGBTQIA + activism in Central and Eastern Europe (Binnie and Klesse, 2013).

Conclusion – joy, memory and sexuality scholarship in the neoliberal university

In this essay, I have presented a critical appraisal of Ken's contribution to the advancement of contemporary sexuality studies. Ken's oeuvre is expansive and any engagement within the framework of a journal article has to remain necessarily partial and incomplete. Through a critical discussion of key works, mediated by autobiographical reflections on my own experiences of cooperating with Ken and engaging with his thought, I have highlighted Ken's outstanding contributions to the sociological profession, and in particular to the sociology of sexualities. Ken has provided me with a role model for critical research and writing that refuses rigid boundaries and orthodoxy, embracing experimentation and fresh thought. Most significantly, Ken's personal style as a teacher, supervisor and mentor has allowed me to experience a joyous sexuality scholar in practice, embodying a professional ethos that is – unfortunately – very rare in contemporary academia, with the conditions for its existence continuously being further eroded by neoliberal restructuration, replacing creativity, criticality and play with a rigid performance principle (Alderson, 2016; Marcuse, 1998). Being mentored by Ken and reading his work has profoundly shaped my trajectory as a researcher and writer on LGBTQIA+ politics and alternative intimacies. I hope that tracing the relevance of Ken's thoughts and concepts in my own projects has allowed me to advance a much more substantial and far-reaching point about the great stimulative force, surprising suppleness and profound richness of Ken's scholarship. Due to these qualities, it provides an indispensable resource for future research and theorising in the field of sexuality studies. Throughout his life work, Ken has advanced major traditions or approaches, such as *radical social constructionism* (in the field of symbolic interactionism), *narrative analysis* and *critical humanism* (both as a normative frameworks and a research methodologies), and further highly innovative concepts for tackling gender and sexual politics, such as *sexual stories*, *age-standpoints*, *intimate citizenship* and *counterpublics*. Being acutely attuned to the grand challenges of our world grappling with difference, multiplicity and value conflict and advocating a humanist method of *dialogic contestation*, Ken's work has provided a precious and important legacy that harbours rich stimulation for new directions and fresh thought for critical sexuality research and ethical modes of academic practice.

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Notes

1. I will use the full name Ken Plummer at the opening of this article and subsequently refer to Ken using only his forename. This is because this personal form of address feels more appropriate in the context of the close relationship we had developed. His recent death, the notification of which I received while revising this article has reinforced its memorial function, rendering this decision even more pertinent.
2. This reference to transversalism is further inspired by the work of another great teacher of mine, [Nira Yuval-Davis \(1999, 2006\)](#).
3. Despite some overlaps, Negri's list would probably look quite different, with terms such as insurrection and others associated with an *unruly multitude* likely to be quite high up on the agenda.

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