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Coding military command as a promiscuous practice? Unsettling the gender binaries of leadership metaphors

Karen Ashcraft and Sara Louise Muhr

Abstract

Despite abundant scholarship addressed to gender equity in leadership, much leadership literature remains invested in gender binaries. Metaphors of leadership are especially dependent on gender oppositions, and this paper treats the scholarly practice of coding leadership through gendered metaphor as a consequential practice of leadership unto itself. Drawing on queer theory, the paper develops a mode of analysis, called “promiscuous coding,” conducive to disrupting the gender divisions that presently anchor most leadership metaphors. Promiscuous coding can assist leadership scholars by translating the vague promise of queering leadership into a tangible method distinguished by specific habits. The paper formulates this analytical practice out of empirical provocations encountered by the authors: namely, a striking mismatch between their experiences in military fields and the dominant metaphor of leading as military command. Ultimately, the paper seeks to move scholarly practices of leadership toward queer performativity, in the hopes of loosening other leadership practices from a binary grip and pointing toward new relational possibilities.

Keywords

Gender, leadership, metaphor, military command, queer, sexuality

Introduction

Despite a long history of scholarship dedicated to gender equity in leadership (e.g. Acker, 1990; Clarke, 2011; Haslem & Ryan, 2008), a great deal of leadership literature remains attached to gender binaries (Ford, 2006; Leicht et al., 2014; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). The term *gender binaries* refers to that host of dualisms which emanates from the oppositional division of ‘men’ and ‘women’, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, such as hard-soft, rational-emotional, and analytical-intuitive. Metaphors of leadership, in particular, continue to lean heavily on these oppositions to distill complex practices into recognizable essences, and to align leadership with (and against) certain contexts, figures, and activities (e.g., Alvesson & Spicer, 2011; Amernic et al., 2007). Indeed, the very intelligibility of dominant leadership metaphors depends on gender binaries, as evident when leading is ‘naturally’ associated with military and sporting contexts (e.g., Amernic et al., 2007; Cornelissen et al., 2005), or cast in terms of the heroic versus post-heroic, transactional versus transformational (e.g., Bass, 1990).

In this paper, we approach the scholarly practice of coding leadership through metaphor as itself a consequential enactment of leadership. Specifically, we contend that when we employ metaphors based on gender binaries to analyze empirical observations and theorize meaningful distinctions, we “do gender” (Fenstermaker & West, 2002) as relations of division and inequality, thereby contributing to the devaluation of feminized settings, bodies, and activities. Such scholarly practice only perpetuates debilitating gender traps that have long troubled the dance of leading and following.

We propose, therefore, that the scholarly practice of coding leadership resist *reductive* reliance on well-worn gender binaries and seek to promote *productive* confusion instead. Doing so requires *queering* leadership metaphors, or destabilizing the heteronormative oppositions that presently anchor the coding of leadership in order to

multiply gender-sexual¹ potentialities (see Muhr & Sullivan, 2013; Parker, 2002).

Ultimately, the paper cultivates one such knowledge practice motivated by queer theory, called **promiscuous coding**. We argue that promiscuous coding can assist leadership scholars in queering binary metaphors, first, by translating the very quest to queer into an identifiable analytic practice and, second, by distilling specific habits of conduct that facilitate queering. In short, promiscuous coding transforms growing calls to queer into a tangible research aspiration and activity.

Our formulation of this practice was inspired by a mismatch between one of the most persistent metaphors of leadership, that of military command, and our own experiences in different military contexts. In separate encounters, we both found that the metaphor of military command as portrayed in the leadership literature did not align with empirical practices of military leadership we witnessed. Because this paper grew out of our serendipitous discovery of this similar clash, we begin there: with the metaphor of leading as military command, and our respective “strange encounters” with it. Next, the paper turns to queer theory for guidance in how to contend with this mismatch and, specifically, how to shift the binary gender performativity of leadership metaphors toward queer performativity. We then develop the practice of promiscuous coding accordingly, as a concrete pathway toward queering the metaphors of leadership.

Troubling binaries: Empirical provocations to the metaphor of leading as military command

Were there an award for “most durable metaphor in leadership studies,” it would likely go to the military, with sport a close contender. The habitual association of strong, strategic leadership with military contexts, figures, and practices is by now so familiar as to scarcely need review (see Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Cornelissen et al., 2005). The

abiding appeal of this metaphor seems to stem from its power to evoke pure clarity, certainty, and potency. It readily summons bureaucratic rationality, for example—well-defined chains of command, standardized procedures, and regimented discipline in the service of unified purpose and action (Bass, 1990; Price, 2003). With the military comes a vivid vocabulary for controlled, means-end action: tactical missions of collective conquest (Cornelissen et al., 2005), executed through “directive and autocratic leadership” (Krasikova et al., 2013: 1330) in a command climate (Ziegler & DeGrosky, 2008) rife with phallic efficacy (e.g., verbs that conjure decisive, forceful, penetrating agency toward victory; see Linstead & Marechál, 2015). As this suggests, the metaphor evokes unflinching strength, toughness, and even brutality. Amernic et al. (2007: 1858), for instance, use the military metaphor to describe the harsh work of leaders, whereas they invoke other metaphors to capture “socially sensitive” tasks.

Like military units, the metaphor has endured heavy fire over time. Some critical scholars, for instance, challenge the military metaphor for endorsing the sadistic underbelly of leading (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), encouraging toxic or abusive relations (Collinson, 2005; Pelletier, 2010). These critics question the positive valence of the metaphor, since a focus on rationality, instrumentality, hierarchy, and aggression can become fetishized and destructive (Spicer, 2011). Iconic military leadership, in this view, is too harsh and controlling. It is power-obsessed (Prince, 2005), insufficiently self-reflexive (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2006), and “intolerant of vacillation and criticism” from subordinates (Spicer, 2011: 187): “They [commanders] are certainly not interested in nurturing the feelings and emotions of others.” Critique in this vein highlights excess rather than gender (i.e., the metaphor swings too far toward one side), even as gender binaries are indispensable to the critique. In search of balance, critics contrast the tough guy, alpha male, or even predator archetypes invoked by the military metaphor against

‘softer’ figures concerned with “feelings and emotions” (Grint, 2014; Spicer, 2011). As Collison (2014: 41) observes, “even critiques may not escape the dichotomizing impulse, sometimes reproducing it through inversion.”

Feminist scholars explicitly call out the patent yet often tacit work of gender on which the metaphor depends. Like associations with sport, the military metaphor is masculinist because it treats an arena of contest associated with men and so-called masculine values as ‘obviously’ akin and applicable to leading other organizations (Allard, 2004; Chase, 2001). Feminist scholars show how masculinist metaphors signal a seamless relation among ‘real’ leadership, predominantly male spaces, and masculinized activities and aptitudes, while creating a problematic relation for women and feminized bodies, skills, and practices (e.g., Eagly, 2005). With less experience and visibility in battle, historically and symbolically, women appear as ‘foreigners’ to leadership, at odds or discomfort with its ‘logical’ best practices, encumbered by their own assumed ‘natural’ feminine habits. A host of double binds ensue for women—for example, how to successfully ‘lead while feminine’ (Eagly, 2005), or live up to *both* expectations for femininity *and* faith in the superiority of masculine styles (Kark et al. 2012). Military and sport metaphors breed male privilege too (Koller, 2004; Ollilainen & Calasanti, 2007), as men are seen as more natural leaders or, at least, gender is less likely to be what gets in their way (e.g. Ashcraft, 2013; Pilemer et al., 2014). In short, feminist critique has a keen grasp on how leadership metaphors become consequential.

Despite their disagreements, proponents and detractors of the military metaphor share a tendency to characterize military leadership through a common set of binaries: hard-soft, tough-weak, competitive-collaborative, calculated-intuitive, rational-emotional, hierarchical-egalitarian, active-passive, top-down versus bottom-up, and outcome- versus process-oriented—to name only some. The military occupies the left side, of course, with

the right side serving as definitional foil. These binaries are undeniably saturated with—and bound together by—gender in the western cultural and historical context(s) of leadership studies (Dougherty & Hode, 2016). Gender is therefore deployed to constitute military leadership, regardless of whether authors acknowledge this point or maintain plausible deniability. Gender is *the* constitutive principle; or, as Acker (1990) might say, the metaphor is “patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 146). In sum, whether scholars promote, moderate, reject, or replace the metaphor, the fundamental gender binaries distinguishing military from other modes of leading remain intact among advocates and critics alike.

Imagine our surprise when, conditioned accordingly by the leadership literature, we encountered military leadership in the field and found striking, unintelligible deviations from the binaries to which we were habituated. The Danish author conducted long-term empirical research with the Danish military, whereas the U.S. author participated in a leadership seminar hosted by the Norwegian Air Force Academy. Upon learning through casual conversation that we were both involved with military settings, we began to compare notes and discovered our similar struggle to make sense of a mismatch between military command as coded by the literature and that which we had observed in our respective fields. We had stumbled upon empirical provocations that defied, in similar ways, all the accounts of military leadership above. To give readers a sharper sense of the clash, we recount those provocations next, in each author’s first person.

One caveat is crucial first: We use the phrase “empirical provocations” because we intend these scenarios as suggestive tales from the field—confessional vignettes that motivate our efforts in this paper, and that invite readers to vicariously experience, and perhaps reflect upon their own, field encounters with gender-sexual surprise or perplexity. We do *not* intend the scenarios as any kind of comprehensive data analysis (in fact, the

second scenario did not arise from a formal research project at all); and, thus, we are *not* claiming to have captured participant meanings. Our focus is on the scholarly practice of coding leadership, which begins in just such ambiguous moments in the field, as we start (not always consciously) to compare empirical observations with ‘the literature’ and make consequential decisions about how to deal with bewildering incongruity.

Gender fluidity in the Danish Military: Crucial competencies for leading and combat

The first field encounter stems from a long-term research relationship between the Danish author and the Danish Military. I established contact as part of a larger study of a governmental initiative called “charter for more women in management.” In 2008, roughly 100 Danish organizations signed an agreement to work determinedly on promoting more women into management positions. Of the 100 organizations, 37 granted me access to interview two top managers, and the military was among these. By the time I conducted the first military interview in 2011, I had already completed around 35 interviews with senior managers from other organizational partners in the study. Thus far, I had encountered little new thinking beyond the usual ‘fix the women’ or ‘value the feminine’ solutions, critiqued ad nauseam by scholars (see Ely & Meyerson, 2000) yet still advocated by executives, such as one CEO of a major financial institution who proclaimed to me, with a most unfortunate accompanying hand gesture, that “women just need a gentle push,” or the CEO of a large consulting firm who declared that the company “needs to be better at measuring the soft values” in order to support women’s careers. These interviews had left me, at best, discouraged with the apparent ‘state of the art’ in Danish efforts to advance women in leadership.

Given the prevalence of such logic, combined with common perceptions of the military as a bastion for masculinist leadership, I approached the military interviews with

lowered expectations, anticipating familiar diversity programs and normative personal perceptions of men and women. I was in for a major surprise.

The first person I interviewed was a high-ranking colonel (man²). After a long, successful combat career, he was now working as a high-level HR manager. Early on, our conversation began to erode my understanding of military command, which became deeply unsettled by the session's end. For example, his story included personal reflection on why he was often perceived as “androgynous,” and how his “feminine sides,” which came easier with age, enabled his career success. He shared instances in which he had been an ally for people (many women) who had been discriminated against or otherwise mistreated, and those in which his behavior deviated from expectations he experienced (e.g., more emotional and vulnerable), as well as moments of shame and disappointment (e.g., misogynist episodes he had failed to address) in an organization he loves—all encounters that he believed had made him the gendered leader he is now.

I was immediately moved by his story, not simply that it violated my expectations, but also the raw openness, humility, and vulnerability with which he told it. More than intellectual curiosity was sparked for me; I also became aware that I habitually directed a skeptical stance at practitioners more than at scholarly representations of practice. I felt some embarrassment that I, as a critical scholar, was so seduced by the military metaphor of the leadership literature that I had imposed its binaries on this interview before it began. Beyond a thirst to know more, I felt compelled to explore my own shortcomings (and perhaps those of other critical researchers?) in approaching fieldwork with familiar dualisms suspended.

Although the interview was scheduled for 90 minutes, we talked for more than 2.5 hours. In an effort to do justice to his initial offerings, I focused the rest of the interview on the transgressive accounts he had shared. What especially piqued my interest was the

colonel's observation that the military tends to foster "typical masculine" traits in initial military training; but as cadets become soldiers and climb in rank, it is increasingly the "softer skills" that the organization appreciates and promotes. As tempting as it was to hear this as a claim that the military needs 'others' (read: women) to do the 'softer' jobs, I tried to stay open, and gradually felt compelled by his insistence that the "so-called feminine" traits are crucial for the survival of even the most "hard-core marines."

Something else was going on here, a trajectory veering off the usual course of opposition: not hard *versus* soft, masculine *versus* feminine sides, but essential competencies for all, which are multiple and entwined: "If they don't have trust, intuition, empathy, compassion, they die out there." The colonel was not so much appealing to a "both/and" pairing (i.e., the heteronormative assertion that hard and soft are opposites that need each other to be whole) as he was pointing to the ways in which so-called opposites are thoroughly entangled in the doing. Masculinity and femininity began to seem like unmoored notions to me, washing out and blurring into each other, difficult to hold apart, much less in contrast.

His detailed explanation of capacities present in the strongest of marines affected me, unsettled my binary anchors, and affected our relation. Although we struggled to articulate what had just happened in the moment, we concurred that something was grossly wrong with the way leadership in general was usually portrayed and, more specifically, with popular interpretations of the military. As he mournfully observed, "when you see movies like *GI Jane*, well, then it's just one side of it they show."

In this instance, staying open and attuned to my surprise and confusion proved generative. Not only did it produce an ongoing bond between the colonel and me, altering the energy of our interaction, it also spurred further curiosity. I wondered what else I might be foreclosing in my surprise to hear these reflections emerge from *his* body. For

example, initially I was tempted to pursue something similar to Leicht et al.'s (2014) counter-stereotyping, and to therefore capture the colonel's account through counterintuitive identity pairings, such as the empathetic commander, the androgynous soldier, or the anomalous HR man. But then it occurred to me that treating these pairs as identities attached to certain bodies perpetuated their fixity and reinscribed gender binaries, flipping expected relations but not challenging deeper dualisms. I thus opted instead to treat 'strange' pairings as malleable practices that transcend gender-sexual identity. Indeed, one productive way to read the colonel's account is that surviving in battle (however we may wish to evaluate that task itself) requires letting go of gender-sexual binaries and identities and 'committing' oneself to the development of queer capacities, or practices once forbidden to your own marked body.

For me, this interview marked the beginning of an 'unfaithful' attitude toward analysis, by which I mean a rising effort to avoid fixed binaries and categories as much or as long as possible, toying with sparks of transgression, fighting with the first hunch (e.g., this colonel must be a special case, hand-picked to shine a positive light on the military). Spurred by such curiosity, I initiated a longer, in-depth relationship with the military, conducting interviews, observations, and action research over a four-year period (so far). This research afforded a chance to investigate more deeply the gender 'oddities' that caught my attention during that first interview in 2011. I continue to cherish the feeling of intensity from the interview with the colonel to remind me of my own humbling surprise and how productive it is to keep trying, however impossible, to release the urge to know. In a way, my approach to the field resembles Derrida's (1993) *aporia*, in that I do more justice to respondents and my own work by *not* understanding fully, by *not* knowing—and not only admitting that, but allowing it to guide embodied curiosity.

A Norwegian Air Force leadership seminar: Seductive command and queer recruitment

Our second encounter with military practice stems from the U.S. author's participation in an annual, two-day leadership seminar hosted by the Norwegian Air Force Academy. Approximately 300 participants joined in this event, including high-ranking officers and cadets, the overwhelming majority of whom appeared to be men. I was invited to deliver a keynote on gendering in aviation professions, an invitation that immediately jarred my assumptions about topics of interest to a military audience. My talk was the only formal session that transpired in English, although informal social conversations (with me) also took place in English. For most of the seminar, I participated through a translator via headphones and was the only participant to do so.

Contrasts with our first field encounter emerge already: Whereas the Danish author was a cultural insider immersed in the scene, I was a double outsider: a particular kind of foreigner (American) and fleeting visitor. Combined with the language difference and overt focus on gender, this status seemed to provoke lively interactive sense-making. Throughout the seminar, participants asked about my interpretations and shared their own, and these inquiries led to animated group conversations that weighed leadership and gender in a more open and nuanced way than might ordinarily occur. Participants appeared to approach this as a fun opportunity, with genuine curiosity instead of politically correct resolve.

For example, several people asked how I felt about the final session on the first day's program: a lesson in leadership from belly dancers. I sensed that they were asking me to stay open, so I checked myself: Yes, I *was* suspicious, assuming that the session would be heterosexist, neo-colonial entertainment designed to arouse a male audience after a long day of content—'lubrication' for socializing, perhaps. But the gentle coaching I received from participants convinced that the session would entail substantive leadership

content pushed me to tune in and stay vigilant and curious. I still cannot say precisely what happened, which is why the moment remains so powerful.

The session began with a few officers (men) explaining the importance of bodily movement to leadership. Common neglect of this fact is unfortunate, they said, because leadership actually *is* seduction. I could not suppress a smile, as Calás and Smircich's (1991) work on precisely this point came to mind. We treat leadership as persuasion, the officers continued, but then sever this from seduction because the latter is associated with feminized submission. Yet persuasion is deeply embodied, so leaders have much to learn from the seductive arts about how to maneuver one's body to compel that of another. In short, leadership is not only of the mind, will, and words; it is also about embodiment and feeling. Strong military leaders must therefore enhance their comfort and confidence with seducing others. With this introduction, three dancers (women) took the stage and, several minutes later, began to circulate through the auditorium. Officers stood and encouraged cadets to join them in imitation of the dancers' movements, allowing their bodies to communicate with the flow of music and movement around them.

As I joined in the sensory experience, I envisioned similar scenes over time and place, and the overdetermined heteronormativity of it all: military men recharging through sexualized activity with 'loose' women. All the earmarks were here—scantly clad, eroticized female forms gyrating provocatively before the gaze of uniformed manhood on the verge of cocktail hour. But in this repetition, amid slips of nervous laughter and sexual innuendo, an unmistakably different energy was also in bloom. *Most* participants appeared to be genuinely, even vulnerably, attempting to work with their bodies. The tide of attention was turning, from the heterosexist privilege of gazing upon the bodies of others to gazing at one's own, from being seduced to becoming a competent seducer. Witnessing hundreds of men in military dress try, all at once, to improvise movements long relegated

to feminization—some with serious, concentrated expressions, others with jubilant abandon—was truly a thing to behold. It felt as if the air had been sucked out of heterosexual male privilege in the very scene where it should have thrived. The session ended with a spirited debriefing of lessons gleaned from this foray into seduction. As affirmed by abundant talk later that night, most participants took this conversation seriously, despite some lingering, anxious heterosexual humor.

Even as I offer this one, other tempting readings abound. Disturbing relations of race-nation were also afoot, for example. A few participants later expressed surprise at the talent of the two “Scandinavian” (read: white) dancers, whereas the third, brown dancer evidently was deemed “natural” to such activity and *not* Scandinavian. It is also worth noting that the dancers never spoke. Envision the juxtaposition of fully clothed men alongside silent, nearly naked women, whose superior seductive competence is verbally introduced by male officers. Now imagine that you are one of the few women cadets (*no* women officers) in the room, feeling the slippery symbolic relation between the sexed body you inhabit, precariously clad in uniform, and that of the dancers.

Evident here is how unconventional vectors can emerge in the midst of, and even *through*, seemingly conventional combinations of settings, people, and practice. A tangle of contradictions stretched and snapped familiar binaries for me in this moment, such as hard-soft, tough-weak, rigid-fluid, active-passive, and control-surrender. Physical vulnerability and flirtation as critical to strong command? The Temptress as a role model for aspiring military leaders? What happens here to subject and object, gazer and gazed upon? It becomes dizzying to draw the performance along binary lines, or to know who plays what part, when the roles and scripts start to melt and overlap.

Another generative moment arose at a session the next morning, when the leader (man) of an elite rescue squadron presented his team’s efforts to recruit for gender

diversity. I found myself cringing in anticipation of tropes like the ‘regrettable’ lack of interested or qualified women, or appeals to women recruits based on stereotypically feminine practices. I tried again to register and check these doubts in favor of curiosity. What I heard was a vulnerable tale of organizational learning that began with the *failure* of gender-sexual appeals that paint people and practice with a binary brush.

The squadron leader explained that an initial video (replayed for the audience) had sought to arouse men’s and women’s interest, respectively, by featuring high-tech, high-risk action shots performed by male bodies and set to hard-rock music, alternated with close-up shots of female bodies engaged in caring, healing, and emotional labor and set to softer, soaring strains. This first attempt milked gender binaries, enacting the heteronormative principle that men and women are homogenous groups drawn to opposite tasks. Its portrayal of rescue work was arguably innovative, combining masculinized *and* feminized portrayals of an occupation usually coded as hyper-masculine. But the team found that the video lost too many people who did not identify with either pole.

After much reflection, the team redefined their goal as “recruiting for a diversity of gender and sexual expressions” rather than “counting women,” although the successful inclusion of female bodies remained one indicator of success. They ultimately produced a video that featured the same ‘opposing’ activities, only this version reversed the music, such that the labor of caring was paired with high-adrenaline rock, while the labor of daring unfolded to a symphonic score. The sexed bodies of actors were obscured, and a few new scenes and songs that defied easy gender coding were added. The result was a dazzling array of conflicting and evasive imagery that left the audience breathless and required creative reflection, as evident in the gasps, applause, and excited conversation that followed. Reconfigured in this way, the same ingredients now told a radical tale of

possibilities, compelling because it broadened appeal by revealing suppressed readings of all tasks, refusing binary difference, and keeping mystery alive.

Seductive command and queer recruitment provide just two examples of generative moments of surprise and confusion encountered during the seminar. Sessions on the vital role of emotional vulnerability as well as mindfulness in military command also left me buzzing with a destabilized military metaphor, and a budding sense of what else it might promote, in scholarly as well as other organizational practice.

Debriefing empirical provocations: Three qualifications

Taken together, our respective scenarios suggest this summary: Many of the military leaders we met embraced the value of feminized skills and practices in substantive and embodied ways, well beyond so-called politically correct scripts for good leadership. Participants demonstrated considerably more reflexivity and play around the limitations of gender binaries than either of us were accustomed to finding in non-military organizations in Scandinavian and North American contexts, including even some feminist communities with whom we had worked. Moreover, these ‘oddities’ arose amid highly predictable formations, such as familiar racial and sexual hierarchies and the overwhelmingly male membership, leadership, and masculine embodiment of our respective sites.

Before delving further, three qualifications are critical. First, some readers may be tempted to resolve the mysterious mismatch through its Scandinavian location. While the region is widely known for gender progressiveness (especially at the state level with regard to work-family policy), several factors counter this hasty explanation. In most Scandinavian organizations, leadership remains rooted in traditional models of heterosexist masculinity (e.g. Muhr, 2011), such that the gender-sexual fluidity we experienced in the field can actually be read as cultural aberration. Meanwhile, Denmark’s

percentage of women CEOs (around 6%) is among the lowest in the EU (Larsen et al., 2015); and Sweden puzzles researchers with one of the highest occupational gender segregation rates in the ‘developed’ world (Charles & Grusky, 2004). In short, Scandinavia is hardly immune from gender problems bemoaned around the globe, such as glass ceilings and escalators (Hultin, 2003). Although gender relations assume distinctive and localized forms in Scandinavia (see Romani et al., 2016), as they do everywhere, claims that the region has quashed workplace gender inequalities found elsewhere are simply not credible. Furthermore, additional support for the broader relevance of our mystery can be found in empirical research on military practice in other regions of the globe, which also yields evidence that confounds gender binaries. Some studies find, for example, that military personnel align strong leadership with collaboration, relational sensitivity and skill, understanding, creative problem-solving, networking abilities, and consensus-building (e.g., Magee, 1998; Wong et al., 2003). Yet, according to the leadership literature, most of these features are the province of feminine-leaning leadership, the very opposite of military command.

A second qualification follows: Our point in raising this apparent mismatch between practice and theory is *not* to complain that the leadership literature fails to ‘get it right’, or to capture actual military leading ‘accurately’. For us, the mismatch is productive, *not* corrective: It reveals that *knowing* leadership can be more imaginative, and that developing tangible practices of imagination could not only improve our craft but also stimulate novel alternatives for *doing* leadership. Put another way, empirical scenes are lively, wayward, and confounding, whereas metaphors predicated on gender binaries arrest that fleeting promise. They interrupt generative moments of bewilderment by pointing us down well-worn interpretive and performative roads, which enforce limited options for enacting gender relations.

A third and final qualification addresses why, exactly, the suppression of gender perplexity is a problem. After all, if gender binaries are so tenacious, and if they help to resolve needless confusion, why not simply let them be? An initial answer is that binary logic serves as a key mechanism for maintaining gender-sexual privilege and oppression, as much in fields of leadership as in other arenas of western culture (see Linstead & Pullen, 2006). As many theorists have demonstrated (e.g., Butler 1990; 1993b), binaries create and overstate oppositions that are “never neutral or morally equivalent. Instead, binaries usually assert a hierarchy in which one pole is privileged over the other. The privileged poles of binary sets tend to be linked to other privileged poles, whereas the devalued pole is linked to other devalued poles” (Dougherty & Hode, 2016: 3).

For a graphic example, return to our earlier list of binaries that sustain the military metaphor of leadership: hard-soft, tough-weak, active-passive, control-surrender, rational-emotional, and so on. Consider how all the terms on the left and right, respectively, appear to logically align; then consider the relations of power between the two columns. It is the binary gender relation that does the heavy lifting here, activating all these ‘natural’ judgments, whether or not particular authors acknowledge that the metaphor is a cipher for gender difference.

Crucially, then, metaphors like military command do not just depend on gender binaries. Rather, such metaphors *enact*—at once animate and generate—these dualisms, bringing them into active, present being and force. In short, metaphors of leadership are engaged in gender **performativity** (Butler, 1990): They are not merely static, abstract heuristics; they are knowledge *practices* with ontological effects. They “do gender,” continually yielding the ‘realness’ of binary difference (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As Mol (1999, 2014) elaborates, ways of knowing something (e.g., coding leadership through metaphor) are also ways of doing that ‘thing’:

...there are not just many ways of *knowing* ‘an object’, but rather many ways of *practising* it. Each way of practising stages—performs, does, enacts—a different *version* of ‘the’ object. Hence, it is not ‘an object’, but more than one. An object multiple... If ontology is not singular and given, the question arises about *which* reality to ‘do’. Ontology does not precede or escape politics, but has a politics of its own. Not a politics of *who* (who gets to speak; act; etc.) but a politics of *what* (what is the reality that takes shape and that various people come to live with?) (2014, March 19, original emphasis).

This is what we mean in claiming that the effort within leadership *studies* to know leading through metaphor is itself a form of leadership *practice*. Inquiring after the ontological politics of knowing leadership means paying attention to the mode of relations such coding practices accomplish, and within which they leave future participants.

In our view, then, it is not hyperbole to answer the question “why not leave binaries be?” more sharply: *Invoking metaphors of leading that are constituted in and through gender binaries ensures that gender-sexual inequality remains a backbone of leadership studies and practice*. When we use leadership metaphors premised on gender binaries, we direct traffic toward predictable traps, generating reverence for leadership premised on masculinist potency and virility, ready rationales for the segregation and devaluation of leadership associated with femininities, double binds for those marked ‘women’ or otherwise feminized, and acute gender conformity pressures for any body aspiring to credible leadership. Attesting to these snares, Calas & Smircich (1993) warn that the heralded feminization of leadership simply reinforces a glass ceiling for feminized bodies and practices because higher levels of leadership remain dominated by the military metaphor (i.e., globalization “warriors”). Likewise, Fletcher (2004) fears that the feminist

potential of postheroic leadership is stunted by lingering desire for the masculinist heroism evoked by the military metaphor. It seems, as West & Zimmerman (1987) declare, that it is all but impossible to value opposites born of inequality.

In sum, metaphors based on gender binaries condition us to know through conservative empirical sensors and, thereby, discipline leadership. It is this scholarly practice—of coding leadership practice through such established leadership metaphors—that we intend our vignettes to disturb, inviting leadership scholars to join us in “doing gender” otherwise by coding differently. Queer theory offers a useful guidebook.

From binary gender performativity to queer performativity

Queer theory (QT) emerged from what is now called LGBT/Q social movements as a way to mark political practices that resist normalization, specifically those mechanisms which produce and sustain heterosexual relations as *the* standard against the deviance and threat of homosexuality—a condition abridged as **heteronormativity** (Eng et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2008). For queer theorists, gender and sexuality are inseparable, already made together and always entangled. The notion that masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive opposites that need and desire one another secures the heterosexual relational matrix, which mandates dualistic alignment between bodies, gender, and yearning, such that ‘real’ men desire women and vice versa (Butler, 1990). The gender binary is thus a distinctively heterosexual pairing (Landström, 2007) wherein dominant gender and sexual systems enforce one another’s legitimacy and subjugate alternatives.

It is no wonder, then, that QT was especially quick to challenge binary identity formations—core categories like men-women, masculine-feminine, and heterosexual-homosexual—as primary agents of oppression (Fuss, 1991). After all, it began as part of a political movement for the right to refuse dualistic categories and still be recognized as a

subject. The quest for queer subjectivity, however, is not simply one for new categories. Rather, it entails resistance to fixed identity politics, or staving off categorization altogether (Harding, 2016; Parker, 2002; Pullen et al., 2016). As Butler contends, queer signals a radical otherness—a claim to difference that cannot be pinned down, a commitment to perpetual transgression of expectations, and surrender to the impossibility of accounting for oneself. Hence, to remain “critically queer” (Butler, 1993a), queer resists definition and can never fully describe the subjects of or for whom it speaks (see Eng et al., 2005; Pullen et al., 2016).

A tension thus runs through QT: an impulse, on the one hand, to make alternative gender-sexual practices and selves visible and legitimate and, on the other, an impulse to eschew identity categories altogether, in part for their regulatory force upon practice (Butler, 1993b), and also for their typical reliance upon a ‘perverse’ opposite. Indeed, queer performativity proceeds *through* this tension, enacting the boundaries of the intelligible even as it also tests, twists, and grows those boundaries through their very repetition (Cabantou et al., 2016; Just et al., 2016). In other words, as much as the tension confounds, it also carries forward the promise of queer, insisting on the multiplicity of gender-sexuality (Pullen et al., 2016)—not a “multiplicity of the same” (e.g., multiple masculinities, which clings to binary origins), but a fuller, ontological multiplicity (i.e., infinite becomings of difference) (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Mol, 1999). It is this kind of performativity, or politically active ‘doing’ (Berlant and Freeman, 1992), that animates QT and makes it an essential instrument for disrupting binary logics of leading.

Although QT has only recently established a considerable presence in organization studies, this tension—between celebrating queer identities and unraveling identity—is already vibrant in the field (Courtney, 2014; King, 2016; Prasad, 2012; Riach et al., 2016). Many studies examine and legitimize LGBT organizational experiences and identities

(e.g., Muhr et al. 2016, Einarsdóttir et al., 2015; Rumens, 2008; Rumens & Keerfot, 2009), while others emphasize the quest to keep queer critical and unsettled (Butler, 1993a). Projects in the latter vein often reference *queering*, in the gerund form, to evoke this ongoing process.

“Queering” signals more than the perpetual activity of destabilizing heteronormative binaries; it also broadens the scope, suggesting the power of QT for disrupting normative relations beyond those dubbed gender-sexual and for revealing operations of heteronormativity in arenas where it is presumed to be irrelevant. Organization scholars have variously moved to queer, for example, capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 1996), management (Parker, 2002), public administration (Lee et al., 2008), business schools (Rumens, 2016), popular culture (Tyler and Cohen, 2008), theory (Parker, 2002) and method (Lee et al., 2008; Riach et al., 2016). Queering in this sense entails interrupting normalization wherever it occurs—or donning an “attitude of unceasing disruptiveness” (Parker, 2002: 148)—and cultivating a curious appreciation for the strange, deviant, and perverse. This is a rather different, but by no means opposing, endeavor to that of legitimizing queer identities and experiences per se.

In the specific context of leadership studies, we see both approaches: research addressing LGBT leaders and/or their followers as well as efforts to queer leadership as such. These are not entirely separate, of course, as scholars go about queering differently. Whereas Rottmann (2006:1) defines queering as “demystifying leadership, critical dialogue and structural support,” Courtney (2014) argues that LGBT-identified leaders inadvertently queer leadership with their disruptive bodies. In the latter study, queer is not a discrete identity like L, G, B, or T, but a moment of transgression that “creates the possibility of the ‘inadvertently queer’ school leader, where an essentially motivated or understood leadership practice or identity has a queer outcome” (Courtney, 2014: 388).

Other scholars queer leadership by unfurling its heteronormative and homoerotic subtexts. Calas & Smircich's (1991) deconstruction of canonical leadership theories as texts of seduction poignantly illustrates this approach. Twenty years later, Harding et al. (2011) demonstrate how lay theories of leadership similarly depend upon the unspeakable elusive pleasures of homoerotic seduction and penetration, the heteronormativity of which is delicately maintained through collaborative denial of the leader's body. Also weighing in on the knotty relation between queering and the body, Muhr and Sullivan (2013) argue, like Courtney (2014), that queering requires more than acceptance of queer-leaning leaders. Their analysis of one transgender leader's transition finds that, despite expressions of support, most employees stayed entrenched in binary thinking about her body, struggling to understand leadership competences independent of dualistic gender appearance. Muhr & Sullivan (2013: 431) thus contend that "queering leadership necessitates a vision of gender fluidity and multiplicity," which can then assist the "consistent and repetitious challenge of the idea of boundaries in the first place."

In tune with these diverse efforts, our attempt at queering is trained on the practice of leadership—specifically, as enacted by scholars coding under the influence of established leadership metaphors—but also reaches outward. We are "centrally concerned to politicize the terms upon which knowing is almost always conceptualized" (Parker, 2002: 156). Put more playfully, we concur that "a certain 'nervousness' about words, and about practices, and about the relationship between them, is sometimes rather useful for fucking things up" (164). Such 'fucking around' is "not meant to circulate solely within academic milieu," however, but "to identify and illuminate forms of injustice" that elude articulation (Harding et al., 2011: 931) and, ultimately, to "contribute to a practical politics of queer" (944).

Guided by queer theory, then, our goal is deceptively simple: *to move our own enactments of leadership, as accomplished in the coding of leadership practice, from binary gender performativity toward queer performativity, in the hopes of loosening leadership practices elsewhere from a binary grip and nudging them toward queer possibilities, including those they already disclose.* Instead of disciplining unruly practices back into heteronormative order through binary gendered metaphors, the coding practice we develop next is meant to embrace the inevitable disorder of practice as a playground in which to notice and curate non-normative instances of gender-sexual relations.

Queering the code: ‘Fruitful’ moments and the promise of promiscuity

Queer organization theory often advocates queering as method but remains vague on the tangible conduct involved. Lee et al. (2008) suggest tactics for queer reflexivity around interview questioning; and Riach et al. (2016: 1) extend this focus by developing a novel genre of “anti-narrative interviewing,” which interrupts the customary complicity of research(ers) in the mandate for stable, coherent accounts of identity. Shifting empirical attention from data generation to analysis, Harding et al. (2011: 933) suggest that queer method begins with qualitative analytic techniques like thematic coding, but “then ‘queers’ these themes by asking what is odd or queer about them, that is, what norms are active, and what is not being said and cannot be said alongside that which is said.”

The texture of our metaphorical-empirical mismatch led us down a different path. Namely, we became concerned with how to exercise recalcitrance toward gender-sexual binaries through a queer performativity of analysis. We sought a coding practice that could trouble masculinist metaphors but not replace them with feminine or feminist alternatives—a practice that could refuse familiar readings of leadership conditioned through heteronormative expectations for ‘women’ and ‘men’, and that could exploit

rather than suppress ensuing contradictions. Such a practice might bear some resemblance to Leicht et al.'s (2014) counter-stereotyping. However, rather than assert as easy pairs terms once presumed oxymoronic (e.g., women engineers), as they recommend, we suggest that a less stable—that is, a less *faithful*—approach to pairing is needed.

We thus propose here the basic contours of an analytic practice we call **promiscuous coding**. In using this term, we mean to call attention to the monogamous undertones of much qualitative methodology (e.g., interpretive “fidelity”), but we do *not* mean to oppose or reject those tones with yet another binary hierarchy, wherein promiscuity topples monogamy. Rather, in line with queer theory, we aim to suggest that sexual relations already inform our research practices and to expand the ways in which they might do so. The term promiscuous is vital here not only for its sexual overtones, but also for the particular mode of shifting, uninhibited, ‘loose’ flirtation and partnership it evokes. For us, this is important because it does not eschew pairing altogether, thereby acknowledging that truly *non*-dualist options are difficult to come by, especially in linguistic contexts premised on binaries.

Promiscuous coding may dwell upon and even savor certain pairings, but it also recognizes that pairings are impermanent, satisfying (or not) for a particular time and purpose without progressing toward matrimonial commitment. At the same time, a promiscuous mode of relation also points us beyond pairing, toward interpretive orgies not yet imagined. In friendly contrast with—but *not* opposition to—a queer politics of strategic essentialism (see Prasad, 2012), promiscuous coding enacts strategic *inessentialism*, toying with many possible essences, shape-shifting, or refusing essence to see how it feels when the bottom drops out. Crucially, this too is a queer politics, animated by pleasure and play but also by a relational ethics of desire, love, and respect for difference and variety, such that values akin to consensuality and mutual safety are vital.

Even as it refuses any normalizing moral accountability, then, promiscuous coding is not without ethico-political responsibility (see Diprose, 2009; Pullen & Rhodes, 2014); it is not a reckless or “self-serving” (in either identity or egotistical senses) analytical rampage. In short, we intend promiscuous coding as an analytical method that gleefully *and* conscientiously ‘gets around’.

Guided by this deviant notion of *analysis as conscientious promiscuity*, we suggest five ‘loose’ guidelines conducive to a queer performativity of coding leadership. For help in illustrating these guidelines, we return to the empirical provocations that motivated this paper and consider how promiscuous coding emerges from them.

#1: First, leadership scholars can *be on the lookout for, and carefully foster, “fruitful moments”—ephemeral instances that show gender-sexual potentialities in bloom.*

In overt appreciation of the double meaning of “fertile” and “fruity,”³ we use the term **fruitful moments** to signal empirical instances that are, in both senses, “full of fruit.” Fruitful moments arrived on scene, for example, when the Danish colonel maintained that he owed his successful military career in large part to so-called feminine skills, or when the Norwegian cadets attempted seductive dancing in a mode of serious play. Such potential aberrations could be missed altogether, or hastily resolved by squeezing them into familiar plotlines. To recognize and pursue a fruitful moment is to embrace uncertainty as to what is happening or where it might go, to stave off ready scripts and wonder what else might be transpiring. Lee et al. (2008: 149) call for the development of “diverse reading strategies and multiple interpretive stances” that carefully mine generative moments like these in order to foster “resistance to regimes of

the normal” (see also Harding et al., 2011: 933). We see fruitful moments as opportunities to practice minor rebellion by delaying the usual *reductive* turn toward habitual binaries and promoting *productive* confusion instead. *How* to identify and cultivate such moments, however, are the next pressing questions.

#2: Scholars can *find fruitful moments by developing field habits of intensified embodied attunement*.

In the absence of ready interpretive frames, we suspect that fruitful moments are not easily marked as such. To discern them, customary observational habits, such as watching and recording what gets said and done, will need to be enhanced with more acute “sense-abilities,” like registering flashes of discomfort, confusion, excitement, or delight, shifts of mood or energy in a room, or felt but formless awareness of something ‘off’ or odd (for more on this, see Stewart, 2007; Ahmed, 2014). This was exemplified in our first empirical provocation, where a critical researcher became embarrassed by her uncritical reception of the military metaphor as depicted in the literature, and opted to follow this sense (as in sensory impression) of vulnerability and shortcoming with humility and openness to the moment, instead of deferring to her ‘expertise’. Likewise, our second empirical scenario required a kind of perpetual body scan, acknowledging and checking the researcher’s conditioned defenses in order to stay open to energies arising, such as those in group belly dancing or the presentation of a recruitment video. Relevant currents of feeling are not limited to the researcher’s sense-abilities, of course. The interview with the colonel is especially instructive here, as it was *his* early enactment of openness, modesty, and vulnerability that facilitated reciprocity from the researcher. Finding fruitful moments, therefore, involves tuning in to the affective relations of a

field—to the subtle and shifting sensory flow, not only to the more obvious interaction usually emphasized in fieldnotes (e.g., speech, behavior, environmental characteristics). It may involve emitting as well as detecting cues that contribute to the sort of energetic dynamics that can enable participants (researchers included) to veer off of habitual gender-sexual scripts. Securing interpretative claims becomes more challenging, as in our empirical provocations, but this is precisely the point: that queering leadership metaphors starts with embodied vulnerability to what the moment may offer, allowing it to seduce us down mysterious corridors rather than clinging to confident yet premature ‘hunches’ about what is occurring and where it will lead. In promiscuous coding, affect leads the way.

#3: Scholars can *re-frame the purpose of coding not as a quest for ‘the one’* (e.g., the right, ‘soulmate’ metaphor) *but as a search for multiple, unusual partners*, especially those once deemed off limits.

This turn would shift common interpretive questions, for example, from “what is the best (e.g., most faithful) reading amid plural truths?” to “what plural and counter-intuitive readings can make this strange moment bear new intelligibilities?” The multiple and seemingly incongruous readings of the belly dancing incident offered in our second provocation yield one example. There, familiar patterns in the racializing and gendering of occupations played out alongside the strange vision of uniformed men trying to objectify themselves as seductive dancers in order to become better military leaders. The point is not to choose an interpretive partner and loyally support it, downplaying other contenders, but rather to allow the coexistence of multiple partners, and to appreciate even seemingly incompatible relations among them. This guideline pushes us to pursue and relish rather than moderate interpretive multiplicity.

The recruitment video in our second empirical provocation provides an especially vivid illustration of guideline 3's promising shift in orientation. The video's evolution demonstrates the destabilizing and generative capacity of shifting, implausible, yet also thoughtful pairings. Each successive partnering served up a 'looser' relation between leadership tasks and gender. The final video's coding refused the fixed hyper-masculinity of rescue work with the startling pairs of risky labor and gentle music as well as caring labor and blaring rock, which melted the brittle meanings of gendered tasks.

#4: Scholars can *practice relentless curiosity in order to prolong and nurture unsettling surprises*, relishing them as springs of creativity instead of rushing to familiar comforts of resolution and closure.

Stewart (2007) describes this capacity to keep mystery alive as one that requires staying in the middle of potentials and pathways, speculating on possibilities in the offing with perpetual inquisitiveness, and suspending judgment as long as possible. Whereas guideline 3 invites a new orientation to multiplicity (i.e., embrace rather than reduce), guideline 4 suggests habits of action through which to realize that posture. In our empirical encounters, we found ourselves facing various choice points in the midst of unexpected developments. Actively maintaining uncertainty through extended curiosity (e.g., rigorously following the mantra, "Stay open; you don't know yet; what else might be budding here?") proved to be a difficult, but also rewarding, choice that stretched out fruitful moments, allowing them relational space to bear fruit. In the first scenario, it enabled a robust energetic bond through which the researcher and colonel could join in unraveling binaries. In the second, it turned an archetypical performance of seduction strange, "as if the air had been sucked out of male heterosexual privilege in the very scene

where it should have thrived.” Guideline 4 thus works in tandem with guideline 2’s push for affective attunement, specifically fostering habits of curious vigilance that treat confusion as generative. Such habits can help to ease the trained anxieties of research (e.g., can wayward scenes and pluralistic coding generate useful results?) that often push us to domesticate the scene by taming meaning into stable, sanctioned partnerships. By rehearsing perpetual interest in new interpretive partners, we began to sense how military practice can unsettle the very heteronormative binaries it is invoked to sustain.

#5: Finally, to aid the fourth guideline of suspending judgment for as long as possible, scholars can *hold people, settings, and practices analytically apart without ignoring their relation* (for additional guidance, see Fisher & Robbins, 2015).

The point of such conscious disentanglement is to temper binary habits where they are most likely to emerge as a powerful reflex. For instance, scholars can counter the impulse to code practice in accord with the nominal bodies of practitioners by willfully reading in ways that are implausible to the heterosexual matrix (e.g., military men learn to seduce like objects, rather than subjects, of desire in order to enhance their leadership skills). Likewise, scholars can resist the urge to assume that only a narrow range of gender-sexual performances would be found in certain work places and practices by vigilantly scanning for signs of deviance, however fleeting (e.g., military leadership aligned with caring, empathy, and mindful embodiment). This guideline advises acknowledging settings and people *without* taking them as an interpretive guide, instead staying open to the manifold ways in which gender-sexual difference might constitute leading. For example, we used parentheses as a device to mark the visibly sexed bodies of

participants for consideration without reifying associated identities or presuming their influence, and to remind us to tease body and practice apart, asking how the coding of practice might change if other bodies were doing it. The final recruitment video in the second provocation took the same tack, purposely obscuring the actors' bodies as a way of freeing up the gendered meaning of tasks, such that the unusual task-music pairings could more fully work their subversive magic.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has addressed the scholarly practice of coding leadership as itself a consequential leadership practice and, accordingly, sought to queer established leadership metaphors by elucidating a mode of analysis inspired by queer theory: promiscuous coding. We argue that promiscuous coding can help leadership scholars perform queering as a concrete research practice distinguished by particular habits of orientation and conduct. Specifically, we intend the five guidelines developed above to provide tangible aid in turning calls to queer leadership into an embodied research activity.

In this way, promiscuous coding extends ongoing efforts to queer method in organization studies. Most attempts thus far have focused on practices of data production, especially interviewing (e.g., Lee et al., 2008; Riach et al., 2016), although some have also considered data analysis (e.g., Harding, 2011). Work in the latter vein tends to treat queer coding as reflexive strategies for analyzing empirical materials already gathered. We extend these efforts by approaching coding as a practice that begins the moment we enter the field and continues throughout the life of a project. Although qualitative coding is often theorized and practiced in this iterative way, common formats for reporting research methods invite linear accounts that restrict coding to “data analysis,” a phase that follows “data collection” (Ashcraft & Ashcraft, 2014). With the notion of *cultivating* fruitful moments, promiscuous

coding highlights the need to resist binary impulses from start to finish, *across* those momentary acts of coding that produce data, findings, *and* theory.

The two field tales above achieve this resistance differently. In the first, a fruitful moment blossomed as the researcher-interviewer, moved by the colonel's honest tale of struggling to break binary molds, felt embarrassed by her own dualistic preconceptions of military command. Allowing this embarrassment, and letting it affect her theoretical inclinations, changed the course of the interview and the trajectory of the fieldwork. In the second example, a fruitful moment emerged as the professor-spectator felt called into participant-observation, as she experienced how members themselves were overtly toying with gender binaries, serving up their own bold and playful queer codes.

Both examples not only highlight coding *in the field*; they also reveal analysis as *data in co-production*. No matter how or by whom fruitful moments are generated, staving off reductive binaries and sustaining productive confusion requires, at minimum, promiscuous practice by researchers (e.g., 'commitment to infidelity' and desire to prolong curiosity). But our illustrations show how participant practice may enact promiscuity as well (e.g., the recruitment video), at times in tandem with research practice—hence, the need to develop 'sense-abilities' to discern when deviations are afoot, with or without our collaboration.

Promiscuous coding is a friendly partner in Riach et al.'s (2016) quest to provide "critical, reflexive spaces within our research for participants to articulate how and why they are 'gripped' by their narratives" (17), and to develop queer methods that relentlessly erode the ways in which "idealized organizational subjectivities are formed and sustained" (9). Whereas Riach et al. emphasize how the performative work of interviewing constructs the subjectivity of both 'known' and 'knower', we widen this lens to include the performative labor entailed in knowledge practices beyond fieldwork, not only in *empirical* but also *theoretical* practice—specifically, that of leadership studies. Promiscuous coding thus opens

into what Collinson (2014: 43) called “multiple, inter-related and simultaneous” research practice. By taking scholarship ‘about’ leading as a consequential form of leadership practice unto itself, we sought to illuminate the binary gender performativity of leadership studies (as called for by Cabantous et al., 2016) and to hone practical tactics of imagination by which we might facilitate our own and others’ capacities to “do leadership” otherwise. It is in this fuller sense that promiscuous coding *does* something to ‘the material’ it codes.

In other words, our particular contribution to queering methodology concerns the ontological politics of coding leadership via gendered metaphors. Earlier, we claimed the *deceptively* simple goal of fostering analytical practices that can enhance gender-sexual justice in broader relations of leading and following. “Deceptive” there acknowledged the sheer tenacity of binary logics and vocabularies in western practice. We certainly realize that binaries linger to some extent, even as they are also unsettled by promiscuity, in both of our empirical provocations. In a way, this suits the elusive character of queering, which strays off course yet stops short of charting a new one, such that normative paths must be repetitively disturbed before they show deeper ruptures. It is worth recalling here what we do *not* claim: that leadership metaphors based on gender binaries fail to capture practice ‘accurately’, while queering those metaphors yields a ‘truer’ correspondence. As argued earlier, metaphors that find traction are consequential precisely because they point us down certain interpretive and performative paths and foreclose others, amid the infinite plurality of ways we might know and do. Our contention, then, is that (a) current metaphorical coding tends to know and do leadership in ways that yield limited, and severely limiting, options for gender-sexual relations; (b) attending to practice promiscuously can stimulate efforts to mess with and multiply the available options; *and* (c) as long as *non*-dualist options elude us, it may be helpful to complement the audacious play of promiscuous coding with a posture of perpetual humility and forgiveness. It is in this spirit that we have called for minimizing *reductive*

reliance on familiar oppositions in favor of provoking *productive* confusion. Our aim is to encourage scholarship ‘about’ leading that helps to queer the leadership metaphors regulating various fields of practice, including but not limited to our own.

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Notes

¹ When we refer to “gender-sexual,” we do not mean to conflate the terms but, rather, to signal our queer theoretical orientation, which recognizes that gender and sexuality are suffused with one another, and that they emerge in relation, bound together by the constitutive heteronormativity of Western life. This position is elaborated in our later treatment of queer theory.

² We use parentheses here to at once acknowledge and offset the sex/gender identity presented by actors and interpreted by us. The parentheses serve as reminders (for readers and us) to keep asking and problematizing how readings and possibilities might change with bodily differences. We also attempt to rotate through a robust gender-sexual vocabulary (e.g., ‘masculinist’, ‘manhood’, ‘female’, ‘sexed bodies’, and so on) as a way of denaturalizing

gender identities and calling attention both to their performed ‘nature’ and to the complex socio-material entanglements involved in doing them. Such devices are also addressed as part of guideline 5.

³ Variants of the term “fruit” have long been used as pejorative slang against ‘homosexual’ figures. LGBT/Q movements have re-appropriated the term in clever and memorable ways, as we seek to do here.

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