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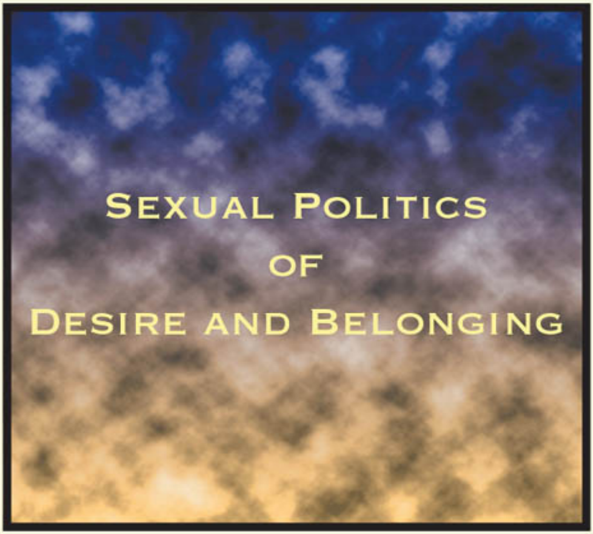

Sexual Politics of Desire and Belonging

Edited by Nick Rumens & Alejandro Cervantes-Carson

Probing the Boundaries

Sexual Politics of Desire and Belonging

At the Interface

Series Editors
Dr Robert Fisher
Dr Margaret Sönser Breen

Volume 36

A volume in the *Critical Issues* project
‘Sex and Sexuality’

Probing the Boundaries

Sexual Politics of Desire and Belonging

Edited by

Nick Rumens
&
Alejandro Cervantes-Carson

Amsterdam - New York, NY 2007

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of "ISO 9706:1994, Information and documentation - Paper for documents - Requirements for permanence".

ISBN: 978-90-420-2239-3

Printed in the Netherlands

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Welcome to a *Critical Issues* Project

Sexual Politics of Desire and Belonging is a volume within the *Sex and Sexuality: Exploring Critical Issues* project. This is an inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary research project which seeks to examine issues of sexuality across a range of critical and cultural perspectives. In an effort to promote innovative and creative dialogue, the project will bring together people working in any relevant disciplines along with queer activists and professionals in non-profit and non-governmental organizations.

The project will critically engage with a number of core themes:

1. Sexuality and Citizenship

The political main streaming of lesbian and gay issues, lobbying, queer activism, transgender movements and transsexual movements; sexuality and the work place: sexuality and power; sex and education; sexuality, legal issues and policy making; sexuality and health; health care

2. Sexuality and the Erotic

Understanding eroticism and the 'erotic': the history of the erotic, the erotic and phases of human development; national and cultural histories of the erotic: the politics of the erotic including issues of censorship and transgression; the erotic imagination: the erotic in art, art history, literature, film and music

3. Anonymity and Intimacy

Cybersex, public sex, private sex; technology, virtuality and sexuality; sexual intimacies; cheating and betrayal; sex work

4. Love, Desire and Theory

Queer theory; feminisms; transtheory; psychoanalysis; cultural studies; interdisciplinary approaches

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Sexual Politics of Desire and Belonging: An Introduction

Nick Rumens

1. Introduction

The Second Global Conference on Critical Issues in Sex and Sexuality, held in Vienna, Austria, in December 2005, from which these selected essays are drawn, is an important marker of a long-term project of bringing together critical work from scholars across diverse international contexts and disciplinary approaches. This project builds on wider debates that interrogate taken-for-granted, sometimes unhelpfully tenacious, assumptions and knowledge about how sex, gender and sexuality are connected and understood individually, across a variety of social and academic contexts. The dialogues that have been struck up by and among conference delegates, some of which have been published in edited collections, such as the predecessor to this volume, *Genealogies of Identity*, are compelling and vital: vital in that such conversations are not only of interest to academics across diverse domains, but also compelling to students and individuals in different cultures and societies. While these discussions are riven by differences, one major feature common to most, is a persistent questioning of those discourses that claim individuals belong to one sex, gender or sexuality. In one respect, then, this book provides a space for dialogues that disrupt normative ways of understanding sex, sexuality and gender.

With these broad issues in mind, I argue that exploring sexual politics and forms of desire and belonging is apt, especially given the advances and delays to expanding the provision of sexual rights of non-heterosexuals across the globe, and the parallel shifts taking place in how people engage with normative relationship discourses. Such has been the transformation in sexual politics in some societies, that a number of scholars (notably sociologists), for example, have suggested that individuals perceive there to be an extended scope of agency for experimenting with the construction of relationships that have little or no resemblance to traditional models of the family. Certainly, it seems, more opportunities exist for cultivating new forms of belonging that, in turn, help individuals to think about who they are and who they might become. These questions of identity, becoming and belonging, characteristic of what has been dubbed by some commentators as the "post-modern turn" in the social sciences, or at least, indicative of societies in which major shifts in gender and sexual relations have occurred, may be read as a sign of a maturing "politics of possibility," as Jodi O'Brien, in this volume, puts it. While such possibilities open up for individuals to construct multiple identities and subjectivities, to make possible diverse kinds of social, sexual and emotional bonds with others that transcend individual differences, the resulting actions and behaviours do not amount to a type of unbounded agency where anything goes, or indeed, where the material effects of such self-artistry can go unremarked upon. The social sphere is clearly not in stasis, as alternative ways of thinking about relating to others and being in the social world take root and flourish in the everyday lives of individuals. In another respect, then, this book aims to underscore the necessity of maintaining a heightened awareness of the political contouring of contemporary forms of belonging and sexual desire. An endeavour that is just as crucial as it was when feminists interrogated the political dimension to sex and gender in the first crashing waves of feminist theorising.

Considering the above, and before I proceed to outline the organisation of the book, I wish to return to an earlier remark about the type of readers who might find this volume of particular interest. It is hoped that this book will not simply be read as either a compilation of essays written by academics solely for academics, or as an illustration of an indulgence in intellectual fetishism. The interdisciplinary project, of which this edited collection of writings is one example of a growing number of companion publications associated with this venture, is designed to encourage others to participate in the important debates that have been undertaken within, though by no means exclusive to, such conference settings. This is a key point, because the critical examination of issues that relate to sexuality and sexual relationships is too important to be the exclusive object of analysis of a minority group of academics. The chapters in this book reveal as much, especially those that take as their object of analysis the culturally specific issues of sex, sexuality and gender, as they are negotiated in distinct ways in the everyday lives of individuals. The intention, then, is that a wider audience, one that might include students, activists and those individuals not traditionally associated with the academy, should read the essays in the pages to follow. It is the aim of the volume to provide an assortment of theoretical and empirical pieces that stir up challenging questions and ideas about sexuality, and the linkages that may be made to contrasting expressions of desire and belonging. Understood in this manner, the assembly of chapters in this volume brings together a diverse, though select, range of perspectives with the purpose of demonstrating how the sexual may be understood using different, sometimes competing, modes of intellectual thought. However, common to all the essays gathered here is the emphasis on criticality, a refusal to duck some pressing and often thorny questions, even if "answers" to these questions are not to be found. Indeed, rarely are such "answers" desirable given that they tend to shut down productive debate.

The book is comprised of three parts. The first section is "Citizenship and Sexual Politics," the second is "Connecting with Others" and the third is "States of Desire and the Erotic." While each section takes as its central object of analysis one major theme, I wish to point out that many of the chapters have overlapping themes.

2. Citizenship and Sexual Politics

The first section of the collection, titled "Citizenship and Sexual Politics" contains three essays that follow increasingly important lines of social inquiry in regard to the relationship between citizenship and sexual politics. Indeed, the writings in this part of the volume are very much in synch with the contemporary mood within the social sciences regarding the central place of sexuality in discussions of citizenship. While sexuality has often been omitted in traditional debates on citizenship, we are now witness to a upsurge, especially in feminist and queer studies circles, in the work that seeks to rectify the marginalisation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sexualities within mainstream models of citizenship. The concept of "sexual citizenship" has emerged from such debates to help articulate a broad range of concerns, from describing the sexual rights of certain social groups and how such rights might be accessed, awarded or denied, to the relationship between sexuality and wider social rights of citizenship.

In one respect, this rich body of research has extended the range of discourses concerned with the rights acquisitions of marginal social groups. In another respect, this strand of literature reveals citizenship as a contested term, not least of all because it can be understood in different ways in any given cultural context, and that each interpretation has implications for how men and women lay claim to socio-political status, rights and privileges. It is necessary, if we hope to critically engage with notions of sexual citizenship, to develop awareness of how sexual citizenship is intimately bound up with the institutionalisation of heterosexuality, and to acknowledge that normative constructions of citizenship are nearly always predicated on a white, able-bodied, male heterosexual norm. It is certainly on this basis, heteronormative models of citizenship have been held up to scrutiny by numerous feminist and queer studies scholars, and activists, for whom inequalities based on gender and sexuality have dramatically shaped the path men and women take to secure citizenship rights and privileges. As the chapters in this section demonstrate, how citizenship is defined and codified influences the shape of the everyday lives of individuals seeking to lay claim to its rewards or, who wish to extend mainstream models to include forms of queer citizenship.

Against this wide-angled context, Nancy Naples opens the collection with her essay "Sexual Citizenship in International Context: Towards a Comparative Intersectional Analysis of Social Regulation."

Naples' piece is a contemporary portrait of the contemporary legal contexts in which "out" gay men and lesbians may access sexual citizenship rights. Naples' research is important and illuminating in at least two respects. First, the landscape against which gay men and lesbians may try to obtain social rights, as they pertain to culturally specific models of citizenship, is progressively changing and, as such, more cartographic detail is needed to formulate a richer picture of the legal climate, as it affects gay men and lesbians across the globe. Naples adopts a broad view of sexual citizenship so as to account for a wide array of social rights, from access routes to technologies of reproduction to relationship and immigration rights. In this regard, the level of detail Naples offers up is enlightening of the second respect in which her research is significant. Naples argues that social rights and policies organise, shape and regulate the everyday lives of gay men and lesbians. Understanding how certain social rights and policies impact the lives of gay men and lesbians is critical for furthering knowledge about how gay and lesbian identities and subjectivities are then constructed. Through an exploration of the linkages between the notion of sexual citizenship and feminist theories, Naples draws attention to some of the theoretical and methodological tensions and dilemmas tied up with expanding the number of countries and policies (to include non-Western nations) for a comparative analysis of sexual citizenship rights. Here, Naples usefully describes the extent to which sexual citizenship is helpful as an analytic frame, and concludes, in order to underscore the diversity of sexual identities we must look beyond narrow Western conceptions of sexual citizenship.

The broad question of how social policy organises and regulates lesbian and gay men's access to sexual citizenship rights is taken up by Katie Acosta in "Everything Would be Solved if Only We Could Marry:" Queer Marriages and U.S. Immigration Policy." Acosta draws on research findings from a study of gay and lesbian immigrants who have entered into heterosexual marriages in order to obtain U.S. citizenship. Presenting rich, qualitative data that complements Naples' macro-level study, Acosta outlines existing legal frameworks and policies concerning gay and lesbian immigration, before considering how such policy frameworks influence the routes taken by gay men and lesbians to claim U.S. citizenship. Marriage is a central concern for Acosta and, indeed, the participants of her study, who enter into a heteronormative model of marriage, albeit one that is described by Acosta as a "marriage of convenience," to not only seek legal status as a U.S. citizen but also to signal a "false" claim to heteronormativity that elicits a sense of acceptability from their family members. Despite stiff penalties being meted out to those who are discovered by the State to have constructed a marriage of convenience for immigration purposes, Acosta describes the creativity and imagination evident in how three types of marriage of convenience are used by gay and lesbian immigrants to that end. At the same time, Acosta grimly concludes, in the absence of legalised forms of same-sex "marriage," both the State and the heteronormative ideology of the family continue to regulate the pathways taken by gay and lesbian immigrants to seek access to the very institutions that currently offer them no accommodation. Acosta points out that same-sex marriage might not necessarily be the solution to the troubles of gay and lesbian immigrants given its potential to shore up heterosexual privilege, whereas expanding the concept of family and delegimitising marriage as a basis for immigration might be the first step in formulating a more promising strategy of inclusion.

Last in this section is Kateřina Lišková's essay on pornography. One of the most hotly debated issues within feminist circles has been and, continues to be, the examination of how regulatory discourses control how sexuality is understood and ascribed meaning. Turning to the well-chronicled discussions regarding pornography, it is easy to periodise a long history of conservative discourses that have circulated within European and American societies, discourses that have frequently demanded the censorship of sexually explicit imagery. As Lišková remarks, however, current calls for censorship are being made "not by conservatives, but paradoxically by feminists." Beginning with a review of some of the most prominent and enduring feminist anti-porn arguments, Lišková's analysis examines how such theories have offered up a brittle framework for understanding the dynamics between men, women and pornography. One result of this, Lišková argues, is that feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon, who have appraised porn in largely negative terms, have fortified the pornographic discourses that position women as victims, victims who are "silenced" by porn. More than this, according to Lišková, is that such theorising tends to reify gender as a binary opposition. Using Bourdieu's concepts of language and symbolic power, Lišková aims to show how feminists can demystify pornography by wrenching apart and thence problematising these discourses, so as to reclaim a sense of agency that is, paradoxically, foreclosed within some liberal feminist anti-porn discourses. Explicit, then, in Lišková's commentary is the assumption that sexual politics and sexual citizenship are intricately linked since anti-porn discourses contribute to how the "sexual citizen" is defined in any given cultural context.

3. Connecting with Others

The second section of the volume, titled "Connecting with Others," contains five chapters that all bear testimony to not only the countless ways individuals seek and connect with each other emotionally, physically, psychologically, sexually and otherwise, but also to the significance of relationships in many people's lives. The diversification in form that such attachments find expression in the everyday lives of individuals is noteworthy, but more than this, is that connections between people can transcend individual differences (differences that sometimes run deep), the public and private binary, as well as geographical borders. Arguably, such observations are hardly new since they find a clear resonance with the findings of classic studies of human relationships carried out within the well-trodden fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology. Yet, the study of certain relationships such as friendships and ways of belonging that challenge normative expectations about how people's relationships ought to be ordered and structured have not always been ascribed the sustained scholarly attention they deserve.

Furthermore, how we might begin to understand the complexity of human relationships is also patterned by the heterocentric assumptions and ideologies that continue to underpin the academic research on relationships. As a result, the traditional scholarly material on human relationships has consistently fallen short of contemplating the diversity and issues that arise when gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sexualities are introduced. Some of the writers in this section sense this in differing ways, and contribute to a set of debates that has grown considerably in recent times concerning the experiences of these persons, as they connect with others in synchrony with and beyond heteronormative relationship narratives in order to give their daily lives meaning.

Albeit for different reasons and in different ways, the chapters in this section also underline the importance of understanding how one individual's desire to connect with another, in whatever form that attachment finds expression, is influenced by the cultural, social, political and organisational contexts in which such ties occur. Saying such is to come to recognise the rootedness of the connections individuals forge between each other, even if such ties are ephemeral and are clearly susceptible to change over time. Contributors in this section of the book recognise this as well as how understandings of gender and sexual difference (as they relate to and are informed by culturally specific contexts at any given time) influence how the desire to connect with others is experienced in people's everyday routines or, indeed, represented in literature.

The first essay to explore these issues is Christian Klesse's "On the Road to Equality? Gender, Sexuality and Race in Sociological Meta-Narratives on the Transformation of Intimacy." Taking the observation that gay men and lesbians figure in certain strands of social theory as the champions of an egalitarian postmodern relationship culture as a starting point, Klesse then sets about problematising this somewhat iconic representation of gay men and lesbians. Klesse does not dismiss out of hand the capacity of gay men and lesbians to be experimenters of relational forms in particular ways that may even set them apart from heterosexuals, but he is critical of the degree of exaggeration that has been applied by some social theorists when speaking about equality, agency and choice in connection with the place and role of gay men and lesbians within a democratic culture of intimacy. Drawing upon the oft-cited work of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Zygmunt Bauman and Jeffrey Weeks, Klesse argues that these popular sociological tracts have a tendency to obscure power relations within same-sex couples, especially those that are occasioned when categories of difference such as gender and sexuality intersect with race and class. For Klesse, dominant sociological theories that posit gay men and lesbians in the "vanguard of relationship culture" are largely predicated on Westo-centric assumptions that ignore non-Western, racialised populations. As Klesse notes, then, these theories tend to falsely imply that progress in "sexual democratisation" is confined to the Western world and, as such, unwittingly replicates problematic notions about race traditional modernist social theory is often said to perpetuate by its critics.

Like Klesse, Ruth Martin is partly concerned with how historically specific discourses regarding sexuality and gender informed the attempts made by some scholars and writers to represent and conceptualise the sexual relation. Entitled, "Love at a Distance: Kafka and the Sirens," Martin explores how Kafka's reinterpretation of the Greek myth of Odysseus and the sirens explores "an idea prevalent in the Austrian sexual psychology of his day: *Distanzliebe*, or love at a distance." Rereading the work of Otto Weininger, specifically the text *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character) as one example where the notion of *Distanzliebe* achieves prominence, Martin argues that while Weininger's ideas are clearly misogynistic the text is more usefully read as a reflection of the psychological and political views of sex and gender at the beginning of the twentieth century. Martin goes on to suggest that such views ran hand in hand with the examination of the concepts of feminity, love and desire in Kafka's "The Silence of the Sirens." By careful analysis of both Kafka's reworking of the portrayal of the sirens in classical mythology and the theme of *Distanzliebe* in Weininger's writing, Martin makes explicit a number of linkages between the two texts and writers. For Martin, one of the most significant is that both writers suggest that love at a distance is a "paradox that cannot be resolved." From this point of view, the form of connection depicted by Kafka between Odysseus and the sirens exists in a constant state of flux and tension, an "impossible" state but one, nonetheless, as Martin concludes, that mirrors the struggles of commentators at the time to understand relations between the two sexes.

The issues raised by Martin around the uncertainty and fluidity of certain attachments between individuals are developed from a specific perspective, and in a particular context, in my contribution (Nick Rumens): "In the Company of Friends: Insights into Gay Men's Friendships at Work." As I observe, discourses warning of the potentially uncertain and unproductive results when business relationship become intertwined with friendship have been and continue to be circulated widely within the popular business press, even within some academic circles too. Yet, the workplace is one example of an important source of friendship even though, taking into account the particular position of gay men in the workplace, some heteronormative work sites may be hostile places for gay men to strike up friendship with colleagues.

Pursuing an oft-neglected but vital intellectual current in the analysis of friendship, I hope to provide an in-depth analysis of the localised outcomes of the friendship choices made by two gay men in two *work* contexts. In the first vignette, one gay man's friendship with a straight male is examined, revealing how the two men negotiate their differences in terms of sexuality, gender and work roles that not only generates intimacy between the two men, but a blurring of the borders that differentiate the men along these lines. By contrast, the second vignette explores the dynamics of a gay male-straight female friendship dyad in the workplace to show how perceptions of similarities and differences especially in regards to sexual and gender difference influence the contours of friendship at work in a way that helps the two friends to succeed in an environment that privileges a white, heterosexual, middle class, middle aged, male norm. I conclude by suggesting that both examples offer insight into the ambiguities and risks cross-sexuality workplace friendships may carry with them, and the promise this holds for challenging, even "queering," heteronormative ways of belonging within work organisations.

Adopting a critical position in a manner not dissimilar to my own, Jodi O'Brien examines the ambiguity and tensions that arise when gay men and lesbians try to establish queer ways of relating and belonging within heteronormative frameworks. Taking same-gender marriage as a case in point, O'Brien explores the complex and often slippery arguments being used to grant or deny lesbians and gay men the right to gain entry into the culturally, socially and economically privileged relationship of marriage. Pursuing a trajectory that moves from discussing the "political symbolism" of marriage to the anti-marriage discourses, O'Brien focuses on exposing the "cultural myths" that seem to sustain both the desire of many lesbians and gay men to participate in marriage and the motivation behind the actions of the state and traditionalists who continue to ringfence marriage as the preserve of heterosexuals.

What is particularly striking about O'Brien's essay is the sensitivity displayed towards unfolding her own mixed feelings and the tensions that seep through the actions, words and emotions of those gays and lesbians seeking the right to marry. O'Brien avoids producing a rigid analysis of same-gender marriage for good reason, by showing that an either-or position in this field of debate is too sharp. As O'Brien powerfully argues, we should not look to resolve these tensions by favouring one position over another. Rather, by embracing and remaining watchful of the contradictions and tensions that whirl around same-sex marriage, an aperture emerges for developing a sensitive and critical understanding of the desire exhibited by lesbians and gay men for achieving such forms of recognition and belonging. To reject blinkered ways of viewing and understanding such perspectives is to nourish a "politics of possibility" that will help us to appreciate that in one sense, same-gender marriage issues are vastly more complex than they first appear. Thus, the chapter gives voice to a series of intense and keenly felt frustrations and conflicts about the cultural politics of belonging that are likely to become more so for as long as lesbians and gay men demand that the State sanctions same-gender marriage.

Last in this section is Serena Petrella's essay "Ethical Sluts and Closet Polyamorists: Dissident Eroticism, Abject Subjects and the Normative Cycle in Self-Help Books on Free Love." In much the same way that O'Brien and I problematise how same-sex relations have traditionally been understood within a heteronormative model of marriage and friendship respectively, so Petrella brings to the fore the shaky conceptual frames employed in a segment of the polyamory self-help literature that celebrates and promotes sexual diversity within relationship culture. Taking three self-help texts on polyamory as the focal point of her analysis, Petrella draws upon a Foucauldian set of conceptual resources to engage with a number of interrelated themes that overarch the three texts: governance, normalisation and the regulation of subjectivities. Such a framework allows Petrella to highlight how these texts discursively establish "schemas of subjectivation" for doing "licit polyamorous subjectivity and conduct." Petrella notes, the texts fall short of their aim to create new discursive spaces for the articulation and exploration of "dissident eroticism." The efforts of each text to prise open new ways of seeing polyamory are in one sense self-sealing because they unwittingly normalise polyamorous subjectivities, not least of all by constructing the opposing, twinned subject positions of the "good" and "bad poly." For Petrella, the aspiring "good poly" is subject to normalising forces that serve to regulate and constrain rather than liberate forms of dissident eroticism.

4. States of Desire and the Erotic

The third section of the book, titled "States of Desire and the Erotic" contains five chapters that consider the complexities of the sexual relation, female eroticism, how sexuality and violence shape the erotic, and forms of desire more broadly. Previous chapters highlight the transformations that have and are taking place in sexual politics, citizenship and ways of belonging through connecting with others in certain cultural and social sites. This final group of writers also sense that there are changes afoot around how desire and the erotic are understood and experienced. Each writer shows in differing ways that knowledge of desire and the erotic is historically situated, and that discourses of desire, and eroticism are not stable: they are incoherent, slippery and, thus, sometimes appear reluctant to be fixed to any particular meaning. As such, some of the essays that follow operate at a level of conceptual abstraction, designed to inspire conversations about, for example, the sexual relation. Other writers in this section analyse certain cultural artefacts within popular culture, literature and art, as illustrations of attempts made by some to respond to the vexing matter of thinking about and, in some cases, trying to represent and give meaning to desire and the erotic.

Fiona Peters is the first writer in this section to stimulate thinking about how we might begin to understand sexuality and, thus, the sexual relation. Drawing upon facets of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Peter's essay, "There is No Sexual Relation," aims not to demonstrate that there are no sexual relationships. Rather, "sexuality is not a relation but a series of what Lacan would call missed encounters." Through her focus on the Lacanian conception of "anxiety," Peters shows how the idea of sexuality as a series of missed encounters can be sustained, and contextualised in relation to contemporary issues such as the notion of the "gaze," as propounded in psychoanalytic terms by feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey. Peters' line of argumentation makes clear that Lacanian psychoanalysis can undermine fixed notions of gender that articulations of the gaze, within some strands of film theory at least, appear to be predicated upon. The concern that Peters expresses here with regard to thinking about the notion of the sexual relation as a series of missed encounters that "keep our motor of desire running beyond our control" forms part of a wider attention paid by some writers in this section and elsewhere to the mutable nature of the relationship between the self and the object of desire or anxiety.

In the next chapter, Diane Negra provides an analysis of midlife female eroticism in a selection of Hollywood films in her essay "Eroticism, Postfeminist Melancholia and the Cross-Generational Romance." Negra's main concern is with what might be changing in how midlife female eroticism is portrayed in Hollywood film, especially those where the figure of the midlife woman is centrally involved in a cross-generational romance plot. Three examples of such films, namely *P.S.*, *Birth* and *The Door in the Floor* are examined in detail. As Negra makes clear, current preoccupations with youthfulness and adulthood as they relate to women's experiences and popular culture representations of female sexuality are not new. However, Negra asserts that these low profile films all use the cross-generational romance plot in differing ways as a vehicle for helping their female protagonists overcome the death of a spouse or partner. In this vein, Negra moves to explore and conclude that the films herald a departure from the treatment of postfeminist melancholia within mainstream Hollywood film because they creatively devise fresh opportunities and spaces for their female leads, troubled by their own unhappy marriages, widowhood and single status, to experience intimacy and satisfaction outside traditional relationship narratives. Negra also comments on the location of these films within a wider constellation of women's film genres concerned with reincarnation and time travel.

In a different context, though sharing the same concern as Negra with unpacking the complexities of how certain cultural forms are used to represent the dynamics between female sexuality and the erotic, Sue Tate takes as her focal point the life and work of British pop artist, Pauline Boty. Entitled, "Re-occupying the Erotic Body: the Paintings and 'Performance' of Pauline Boty, British Pop Artist (1938-66)," Tate's examination of Boty's work and life is apposite if only because the artist's work went largely unremarked upon during the period when she was at the "peak" of her artistic powers in the 1960s. As Tate sharply observes, despite living and working at a time when the rise in radical sexual politics in the U.K. (and the U.S.) began to accelerate, Boty's contribution toward picturing a "female erotic imagination" within a popular cultural context found little or no intellectual headroom in the minds of (feminist) art historians for many years after her death. Tate argues that not only were Boty's paintings and appropriation of a "pop culture identity" strikingly original but they were also challenging and subversive in that Boty sought to find a form of expression for autonomous female sexual pleasure by borrowing already familiar and mediated signs and symbols derived from popular culture. Boty's work was uncompromising and innovative, and certainly not to everyone's liking, including feminist theorists who saw in Boty's work a sense of complicity with patriarchal norms. By weaving feminist theory into her analysis of some of Boty's most daring pieces, Tate puts forward a forceful political argument that suggests Boty's life and work is best read as exemplifying an astute awareness of the constructed nature of identity and desire, while at the same time, critiquing the sexual politics of her time.

In "Sexuality in Extremity: Trauma Literature, Violence and Counter-Erotics," Marie-Luise Kohlke takes up the theme of sexuality in extremity to comment upon the outcomes when sexuality and violence shape the erotic. With reference to the writings of Margaret Atwood, Liana Badr, Pat Barker, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy and D. M. Thomas, Kohlke explores the disturbing effects when sexuality is placed alongside extreme forms of human suffering in trauma literature. On the surface, the juxtaposition of sexuality with repellent forms of human suffering risks engendering as Kohlke comments, "the collapse of ethical witnessing into pornographic voyeurism." But, as Kohlke insists, sexuality may function in multiple and complex ways for those characters witness to and targets of harrowing forms of physical and psychological abuse. Central to this argument is Kohlke's close analysis of the narrative functions of sexuality as they pertain in examples of trauma literature where sexuality may help characters to escape and seek consolation from the harsh realities of trauma, generate a type of counter-erotics, act as a form of socio-political critique and be suggestive of a "sexual sublime." It is this last point that forms the basis of her essay's conclusion, one that explores the "wider linking of sexuality with the sublime." Here, Kohlke develops a train of thought that regards sexuality as being able to contribute to the creation of a counter-erotics, a way of contesting violence and dehumanisation, but at the same time reminding us of the pleasures associated with the sexual body.

Lastly, continuing with the theme of an expansive notion of the erotic (beyond sexual desire) within literary works, Jules Sturm takes Djuna Barnes' extraordinary novel, *Nightwood* (a text that encourages a wider interpretation of the erotic to encompass the emotional, psychological and sexual dynamics between individuals, especially women) as her primary source of inspiration for exploring the notion that reading can become an "act of writing or co-authoring cultural knowledge." Sturm's essay, "Reading for Monsters: Transgressive Corporeality in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," draws upon aspects of Judith Butler's complex arguments in *Excitable Speech* regarding hate speech and censorship, in order to closely examine the somatic dimension to reading. Specifically, Sturm attends to the notion of the "reading body," a body that is implicated in the creation of monstrosity or sexual "otherness" in Barnes' strange and nightmarish novel. Central to Sturm's essay is the concept of the "literary monster," and how it operates as a trope for the "performative enactment of linguistic representations of transgressive corporeality." Sturm problematises a straightforward notion of reading by suggesting how the novel's reader might be "complicit in the construction of monstrous embodiment."

By way of conclusion, I want to make a brief comment regarding the merit of crafting interdisciplinary modes of analysis. Collectively, the chapters in this volume, with their different conceptual and empirical foci, examine the sexual politics of desire, ways of belonging and connecting with others. As a whole, they mobilise a range of critical perspectives from queer and feminist theories to Lacanian psychoanalysis and traverse multidisciplinary fields such as politics, sociology, organisational analysis, art history, literature and film, to provide an interdisciplinary approach to thinking about and doing sexuality and (sexual) relationships. Read in this way, the book offers numerous insights into sexuality as a socially embedded, historically specific and contested construct. Indeed, some contributions investigate the legal, political and social reasons behind the construction of sexuality within forms of desire and ways of relating to others and belonging in specific contexts and moments in time. What we have, then, is a compilation of scholarly work that makes important contributions to contemporary debates regarding citizenship, marriage, friendship, pornography, intimacies, eroticism and desire. As such, this volume and its companion publications should be read as attesting to the value of inter- and multidisciplinary perspectives to thinking about (non) normative expressions of sexuality and gender.

Editors' Note

To begin, we would like to thank all the participants of The Second Global Conference on Critical Issues in Sex and Sexuality for critically responding in various ways to all the papers presented at the conference. Particular thanks go to the Series editors Robert Fisher and Margaret Sönser Breen, who have been central figures in not only supporting this book project but ensuring the Second Global Conference on Critical Issues in Sex and Sexuality was as successful as the first held in Salzburg, Austria in 2004. We would also like to acknowledge the valuable work of members of the conference steering group who spent many hours reviewing conference abstracts and organising the conference papers. Last but by no means least, we would like to thank all the contributors of this volume not only for their essays but also for their patience, enthusiasm and willingness to respond to our questions and undertake revisions.

On a personal note, Nick would like to thank colleagues and friends at Keele University including Deborah Kerfoot, Paul Willis and Beverley Hawkins, and at Southampton Solent University, Matthew Cannon and Graham Benmore, especially. I would like to extend special thanks to the following people, listed here in no particular order, who have been enormously supportive and encouraging: Margaret Sönser Breen, Rob Fisher, Su Holmes, Peter Heather, Trish Buckley, Mandy Esseen, Susan and Gerald Rumens.

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PART I

Citizenship and Sexual Politics

Sexual Citizenship in International Context: Towards a Comparative Intersectional Analysis of Social Regulation[1]

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, the sexual citizenship of lesbians, gay men and same-sex couples has been placed on the political agenda in many countries. Calls for sexual citizenship rights include demands for reproductive rights, relationship rights and immigration rights, among others. Using data gathered from published reports by international lesbian and gay rights organisations and by national advocacy activist groups as well as by international and national human rights organisations, this chapter provides an overview of the current legal climate for gay men and lesbians as it relates to their ability to access social rights as "out" sexual citizens. The chapter also includes a discussion of some theoretical and methodological dilemmas raised in developing an intersectional and comparative analysis of sexual citizenship including an assessment of the value of different research models developed for the study of sexual citizenship in comparative perspective. **Key Words:** citizenship, social policy, sexuality, comparative studies, human rights, feminism.

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I report initial findings from a comparative study of sexual citizenship and include a discussion of the theoretical and methodological dilemmas that surfaced in developing an intersectional model of social regulation. I am currently working on a multi-stage study that began with the process of conceptualising what types of policies need to be considered in order to capture the multiple ways that social policy organises the lives of gays and lesbians.

Following Julia O'Connor, Ann Orloff and Sheila Shaver, I start with the premise that "the ability to exercise civil citizenship rights can[not] be divorced from the ability to exercise certain social rights."[2] For this intersectional comparative approach, I take a broad view of sexual citizenship because I wish to examine a wide range of social policies that impact the lives of lesbians and gay men as citizens and to explore how these policies regulate their social citizenship. I began this multi-stage study by conceptualising and identifying the types of policies that need to be considered in order to capture the multiple ways that social policy organises the lives of gay men and lesbians.

2. Outline of the Multi-State Analysis of Sexual Citizenship

Using data gathered from published reports by gay and lesbian rights organisations and human rights organisations, the first phase of this study documents the current legal and political climate for gay men and lesbians in different national contexts and their ability to immigrate as "out" sexual citizens. In this phase of the research we are defining sexual citizenship broadly to include four dimensions:

1. Decriminalisation, anti-discrimination and hate crime policies.
2. Reproductive rights: this includes access to abortion, reproductive technologies and adoption and freedom from sexual coercion, genital cutting and forced sterilisation.
3. Relationship and household formation policies.[3]
4. Immigration: this includes policies that permit gay men or lesbians to immigrate or grant asylum on the basis of sexual orientation.

The first national recognition of same-sex partnerships came in Denmark in 1989. Since then, over twenty countries have established policies recognising civil unions, common-law domestic partnerships, or marriage rights. Four different types of relationship policies that can be utilised by same-sex couples are now in place in different countries. Registered partnerships or civil unions are meant to act as a substitute for civil marriage and include all or substantially all rights. The Nordic countries Denmark (1989), Norway (1993), Sweden (1995), Iceland (1996) and Finland (2002) utilise this approach to same-sex partnership rights. Registered cohabitation laws provide a substantially inferior package of rights that depend on the rights attached to heterosexual cohabitation in the country. Tasmania, Australia (2004) and New Zealand (2005) utilise this approach. Domestic partnership policies vary and offer only a few rights that are attached to marriage (e.g., work-related benefits, hospital and prison visitation rights). Merin argues that these four types correspond roughly to "levels" of recognition, except in the case of domestic partnerships, where, at least in terms of rights and obligations, it can be similar to registered partnerships. Unregistered cohabitation policies are also utilised in some countries that allow same-sex couples to claim relationship status equivalent to opposite-sex couples that could include inheritance and hospital visitation. Austria and Hungary utilise this approach to relationship rights. [4]

Robert Wintermute pinpoints four issues that are faced by all jurisdictions considering the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships: (a) "the package of rights" and how much it will differ from civil marriage (very large, substantial, relatively small, or nonexistent); (b) to provide a mechanism for registration of the relationship, therefore offering an immediate official legal status or to establish a period of time for cohabitation that would not require initial registration; (c) whether or not to limit the new form of recognition to same-sex couples or to make it also available to different-sex couples; and (d) what to call the new form of recognition. He identifies several patterns: (1) the closer the package of rights and benefits gets to marriage, the more likely it will be limited to same-sex couples; and (2) the greater the difference between the package of benefits for same-sex partners and that of married different-sex partners, the easier it is to avoid calling it "civil marriage."[5]

Nine countries (Belgium, Canada, Finland, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom) have national policies that include parental and immigration rights. A registered partnership policy for same-sex couples that includes immigration rights will take effect in Switzerland in 2007. In Australia, different jurisdictions provide different levels of same-sex partnership rights. The U.S. permits asylum on the basis of sexual orientation but does not offer immigration on the basis of same-sex partnership. Eleven countries (Austria, Brazil, Denmark, France, French Guiana, Germany, Guadeloupe, Iceland, Israel, Martinique and Norway) have some form of partnership rights and offer some immigration rights, but do not permit lesbians, gay men, or same-sex couples to access reproductive technologies or to adopt children.

In some countries that provide civil union or partnership policies, same-sex couples cannot use these policies to access immigration for their partner or spouse. Argentina and Hungary offer some form of partnership rights and some parental rights but do not offer immigration rights for lesbians, gay men and same-sex couples. Croatia, Czech Republic, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal and Slovenia offer some form of partnership rights but do not permit gay men and lesbians to access immigration or reproductive rights. In some nations with some form of relationship rights that do include the right to immigration for non-citizen partners, inequities regarding country of origin that shape immigration policy more broadly are woven into the policy so that if one member of a bi-national couple comes from a country that is not privileged in terms of immigration status, they might not be able to access this right regardless of relationship status or sexual orientation.

As of April, 2006, there are twenty countries that provide immigration benefits to same-sex couples: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Israel, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, South Africa, Sweden and the United Kingdom. French Guiana, Guadeloupe and Martinique recognise French legal rights including *pacte civil de solidarite*. A bill pending in the U.S. Congress called the United American Families Act (UAFA) is designed to take up this issue. UAFA (formerly known as the Permanent Partners Act) would add the term “permanent partner” next to “spouse” in those sections of the statute that currently allow a U.S. citizen and a legal permanent resident to sponsor his or her partner. As Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú explain:

> The U.S. has come a long way since 1990 when the ban on lesbian and gay immigration to the U.S. was lifted. In 1994 they were added to the list of those who could apply for asylum. AHIV/AIDS exclusions have also become an issue for all migrants. In 1987, U.S. immigration law added HIV to the list of dangerous, contagious diseases for which immigrants should be excluded and required that all applicants for legal permanent residence must test negative for HIV…Although lesbians and gays may no longer be explicitly excluded on sexuality grounds, their sexuality still makes them liable to be constructed as lacking good moral character or otherwise ineligible for residency and citizenship.[6]

An important issue related to the ability for same-sex couples who have recognised partnership status in another country is whether or not their relationship will be recognised when they travel to or immigrate to another country. In her analysis of the ability of couples married in one national context to have their marriages recognised in another country, Martha Bailey concludes that:

> States that attempt to block recognition of foreign same-sex unions may not entirely achieve their goal. Their rules of private international law may undermine attempts at exclusion. But even if those laws are not successful in achieving their state purpose, they may operate as a signal of a cluster of social values that are attractive to some and repellent to others.[7]

The movement for same-sex marriage has also garnered intense backlash. U.S. states that did not already have Defense of Marriage laws (DOMAs) that formally limit marriage to opposite-sex partners are passing similar laws. Conservative religious institutions are leading the charge. The U.S. has a federal level DOMA which prevents same-sex married couples from other countries or U.S. couples who were married in other countries from legal recognition of their marriage in the U.S. Furthermore, the Massachusetts Supreme Count recently ruled that couples from other states in the U.S. cannot legally marry in Massachusetts.

One interesting finding to date is that almost half of the countries that offer relationship rights to same-sex couples do not permit same-sex couples to adopt or access reproductive technologies. Ironically, in the U.S., where only a few states offer some form of partnership rights, twenty-two states plus the District of Columbia have statutes or court rulings permitting second parent adoptions. A second parent adoption provision permits the non-biological parent to adopt his or her partner's child without requiring the birth parent or legal guardian to give up his or her parental rights. Of course, this presumes that there is no other parent or legal guardian in the picture. In some states like Oklahoma, individuals cannot access reproductive technologies, while in other states this access is not tied to marital status. In fact, Connecticut recently passed a law requiring insurance companies to cover so-called infertility treatment for women under the age of 40 without regard to marital status. Of course, policy cluster differences within countries complicate a comparative analysis across countries.

3. Comparative Studies of Sexual Citizenship

Few studies exist that survey and compare countries that have relationship rights for same-sex couples. Of these studies, Merin offers one of the most comprehensive comparative study of relationship rights for same-sex couples. His study compares northern European countries and the United States.[8] Merin conceptualises sexual citizenship broadly using the four dimensions that I have adopted for my preliminary analysis. Merin organises the policies as follows: (a) freedom from persecution, harassment and criminalisation; in this regard, we are looking at hate crime legislation, decriminalisation of homosexuality and sodomy, sexual harassment policy; (b) reproductive rights, including access to abortion, reproductive technologies, primary adoption and second-parent adoption policies; and (c) ability to form and maintain families and households, e.g. civil union, registered partnership, or domestic partnership and marriage legislation/policies. I follow his lead in the first three dimensions. In addition to the policies I foreground, Merin includes age of consent laws and access to the military.

Merin notes that in some countries "parental rights are separated from partnerships recognition, [and that] these two steps come at different times depending on the country."[9] One explanation he offers is that "unlike the Nordic countries and France, the United States emphasises the individual's right of autonomy in relation to having children; a natural consequence of such emphasis is also the insistence on the rights of gay men and lesbians to have children and raise them."[10] He concludes:

> that other than scattered U.S. court decisions providing same-sex couples with some parental rights, both domestic partnerships in the United States and registered partnerships in northern Europe show a trend toward granting same-sex couples more economic rights than rights that may conflict with common notions of religion and morality, which are grounded in tradition and culture.[11]

In their large-scale study of same-sex partnership policies that cover the period 1984 to 1995, David Frank and Elizabeth Mceneaney offer a quantitative analysis of 86 countries. Using regression models on cross-national data, they demonstrate: (1) high levels of individualisation and gender equality provide a "cultural opportunity structure" that gives rise to active lesbian and gay social movements and liberalised state policies on same-sex relations; and that (2) active lesbian and gay social movements and liberal state policies each facilitate the other.[12] They found that competing explanations such as economic development and democratisation received little support.[13] They measured individualism as the country's commitment to human rights, its link to the tradition of Protestant liberalism and the prevalence of psychology.[14]

While Merin's and Frank and Mceneaney's studies direct attention to the passage of same-sex partner legislation, their specific conclusions diverge. Merin emphasises the "necessary process" argument (namely, from passage of decriminalisation to anti-discrimination to relationship policies), while Frank and Mceneaney highlight individualism as a key explanation. However, both stress the importance of examining gender.[15] To assess gender equality, Frank and Mceneaney examined each country's commitment to women's rights in 1985, women's political and legal equality, social and economic equality and equality of the sexes during marriage and divorces along with women's rate of labour force participation and participation in international women's movement organisations. Merin is also concerned with gender equity in the countries he studied,[16] but he foregrounds ways in which gays and lesbians challenge compulsory heterosexuality. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's classic article, Merin writes that "the mere existence of gays and lesbians challenges and calls for a re-evaluation of traditional conceptions of gender roles and gender hierarchy."[17] He also points out that "empirical studies have found correlations between antigay feelings and a belief in the traditional family ideology, i.e., dominant father, submissive mother and obedient children," as well as "traditional beliefs about women."[18]

However, neither Merin nor Adam and Mceneaney address the gendered or racialised construction of the welfare state itself. Therefore, in order to develop an intersectional approach, one that can capture how gender, race and class contour sexual citizenship in different national contexts, I return to feminist theories of the state for guidance.

4. Linking Analysis of Sexual Citizenship and Feminist Theory

Research designed to explain the expansion of citizenship rights for gays, lesbians and same-sex couples has a great deal to gain from the extensive comparative research of feminist state theorists. Among the most valuable contributions of the feminist approach is the attention to the gendered construction of citizenship and the heterosexual assumption of household form embedded in social policy. These dimensions are both central to an intersectional analysis of sexual citizenship. However, it is necessary to combine a gendered lens with a queer eye to examine how sexuality is constructed in specific policies and across policy arenas, including immigration, family assistance, reproduction and child welfare policies.

Retaining a sharp focus on gender within an analysis of sexual citizenship also responds to concerns raised by lesbian feminist theorists who argue that approaches to sexual citizenship render lesbians invisible. As British sociologist Diane Richardson argues:

> Many lesbian/feminist demands have not been premised on the idea of lesbians as a 'minority group,' who are entitled to certain rights that have previously been denied them. They have been based on a more complex argument for the rights of all women to have sexual relationships with other women, and for conditions which enable women to exercise sexual autonomy more generally.[19]

She asks whether or not we should "theorize sexual or intimate citizenship in terms of universalistic notions of 'the sexual citizen' or to embrace a gendered and sexually differentiated model which would allow for a specific notion of 'lesbian citizenship.'"[20] Richardson criticises the gender-neutral mode of sexual citizenship that

> focus[es] upon 'lesbian and gay' struggles for equality, rather than specifically analysing lesbian citizenship per se…Thus, in making no distinction between lesbians and

> gays the concern is not simply that possible differences in the experience of social inclusion/exclusion are being ignored, but that lesbians are at risk of being subsumed under the category 'gay.'[21]

Lesbian feminist theory, in particular, emphasises how "heterosexuality, as a system of privileged, institutionalised norms and practices is central to the oppression of women *and* lesbians *and* gay men."[22] In Richardson's view,

> many of the recent campaigns for 'equal rights' for lesbians and gay men represent demands which, far from taking a similar critical stance on heterosexuality, uphold heterosexual institutions and their interlinkage with gender hierarchies as the normative framework for sexual citizenship.[23]

Losing sight of the heteronormativity embedded in demands for certain kinds of sexual citizenship rights, as Richardson makes clear, does not work for women, lesbians, or gay men. Losing sight of the racialisation processes and class and other dimensions of difference and inequality that shape social policy and constructions of citizenship also limits how we can understand and analyse sexual citizenship claims.

An exclusive focus on same-sex marriage does serve to co-opt efforts to decouple legal rights and benefits such as health insurance from the institution of marriage. As more people lay claim to the institution, political struggles to broaden access to medical care, job benefits and other benefits that now accrue primarily through marriage will lose constituents. As Shane Phelan points out:

> By extending an institution that feminists and others have widely identified as a linchpin of patriarchy (even as this institution is under attack for other economic and social reasons), we run the risk of reconsolidating the idea of the responsible citizen as economically independent (or at least married to a provider), thus removing the burden of notice and care from other citizens…The making of citizens has become privatised as never before, subcontracted to families without means to make a go of it.[24]

In this context, I would like to see more attention given to increasing the diversity of forms of relationship rights so that civil marriage may become one among many forms of recognition from which couples or families or others can choose from. What is lost in the way of choice or relationship rights when marriage is the only form recognised by the state? And what is gained when same-sex as well as opposite-sex couples can choose from a range of relationship forms?

For example, as I discussed earlier, some civil union policies are open to opposite-sex couples as well as same-sex couples, others are limited to same-sex couples thus leaving civil marriage as the only form available for opposite-sex couples. With the passage of civil marriage in the U.S. state of Massachusetts, same-sex couples lost access to some provisions that were in place before the law was passed. For example, a number of employers in Massachusetts offered same-sex domestic partner health benefits. Some of these employers plan to or already have eliminated domestic partner coverage now that same-sex couples have the right to marry in the state. In addition, same-sex partners who marry in Massachusetts may be denied the ability to adopt a child internationally as a number of countries have explicit policies against lesbian and gay men as adoptive parents.

In developing an intersectional feminist and queer approach, I also do not want to lose sight of other complicating factors such as the dominant political culture, the representation of left-wing parties in government, the power of conservative religious institutions to influence public policy, the political spaces for social movement organising, the legal context for claims-making and the presence and effectiveness of international organisations such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association.[25] A comparative and intersectional study must also take into account the ways in which social policies generated at the level of the nation are consequences of international political pressures such as the global gagging policy of the U.S. that prevents countries receiving U.S. foreign aid from providing contraception and sex education.

In their study, O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver highlight the importance of women's movement mobilisation for the expansion of women's citizenship rights. They explore the representation of issues related to gender equality in the political systems and the success in affecting change in government policy in each of the four countries they studied (Australia, Canada, the Great Britain and the United States).[26] Sexuality studies scholars also emphasise the significance of gay and lesbian movement mobilisation for explaining the expansion of sexual citizenship. It will be important to examine the coalitions that have developed across different movements for the expansion of sexual citizenship as well as how citizenship claims are framed. It will also be necessary to explore how individual lesbians, gay men and same-sex couples of different races and ethnicities and from different national backgrounds can access social sexual citizenship rights within specific national contexts.

One significant limitation in the literature on feminist welfare state policy has been the focus on “Western” countries and the relative lack of attention or marginalisation of non-“Western” countries. Legal scholars Robert Wintermute and Mads Andenaes also make the point that “Western” countries are over represented in studies of sexual citizenship for same-sex couples because, they argue, many “non-Western” countries are at an earlier stage in terms of legislation and social movements (i.e. they are still struggling for individual rights, which in their view is the prerequisite for partnership recognition).[27] However, Wintermute and Andenaes do note that some steps (ranging from singular attempts to bills and judicial decisions) have been taken in “non-Western” nations including Colombia, Namibia, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and India.

An intersectional approach to sexual citizenship must also include attention to the ways that sexual citizenship is organised in “non-Western” countries as well as to the related issue of how sexuality is constructed and experienced in different cultures. The heterosexuality/homosexuality binary and the “Western” construction of “gay and lesbian” that dominates in many social movement organisations, as post-colonial feminist and queer scholars caution, construct a much too narrow framework that does not capture the diversity of sexual identities and practices that are evident among people in diverse cultural contexts. One of the most salient oppositional frames generated to deny sexual freedom to gay men and lesbians in many non-Western countries is the charge that homosexuality is a Western import, one designed to pollute the culture. In contrast, as one observer notes, “the main force behind homophobic sentiments in many countries is often the Christian church, which is the true Western import.”[28]

In broadening the range of countries for a comparative analysis it is necessary to widen the lens on which policies should be included. For example, West African countries include legal systems that combine, customary, colonial and Islamic law. How should this combination of laws be treated in a comparative analysis? For example, in an expanded view of sexual citizenship should policies against female genital mutilation be included? It is also important to examine the extent to which other sexual minorities appear or are invisible within the claims-making strategies and resulting policies. In his book, *Governing Sexuality: The Changing Politics of Citizenship and Law Reform*, Carl Stychin expresses concern that placing the law at the centre of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer politics, specifically in the area of relationship rights, “may constrain us, by acting to limit the variety of ways of living – of styles of life – which sexual dissidents historically have developed.”[29] However, he also argues that citizenship discourse has potential to exceed social regulation because of its indeterminacy as a concept, "creating the possibility of active, democratic and politically empowering forms of citizenship."[30]

5. Conclusion

The frame "sexual citizenship" first gained currency among gay and lesbian scholars following the publication of David Evans' book by that title in 1993. By the end of the 1990s the term had been taken up by both academic and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer (lgbtq) activist organisations as a claims-making strategy to argue for a wide range of political, economic and social rights. On the one hand, evidence that the use of the frame may be expanding beyond lgbtq claimants is found in the Economic and Social Research Council's announcement of a seminar series called "New Femininities: Post-Feminism and Sexual Citizenship" that focuses on young women. On the other hand, the right to sexual agency has not been fully integrated even into transnational feminist organising. For example, Amalia Cabezas argues that: "the absence of sex workers' experiences in the human rights dialogue of violence against women raises significant questions about what voices are heard, what counts as violence, and what assumptions are made about women's sexuality in legal reforms."[31]

The term "sexual citizenship" does provide a useful framework for interrogating the processes of social regulation and heteronormativity across different policy arenas and national contexts. As an analytic frame, sexual citizenship offers a useful and flexible tool for linking diverse claims and disparate policy arenas. Here, I wish to conclude by highlighting the growing constraints placed on any citizen who does not fit within the narrow definition of the heteronormative family form. As Phelan argues:

> The persistent intertwinement of gender, race, and sexuality in modern America, and the extensively documented relations between each of these and citizenship and kinship, make clear that citizenship cannot be queered without confronting the structures of gender and race through which it is constructed. This is the persistent problem with strategies of entry that do not simultaneously account for gender and race…Queering citizenship, then, must be more than citizenship for queers.[32]

Notes

1. My thanks to Katie Acosta, Mary Burke, Dina Giovanelli, Jamie Gusrang and Deric Shannon for their research assistance.

2. Julia O'Connor, Ann Shola Orloff and Sheila Shaver, *States, Markets, Families: Gender, Liberalism, and Social Policy in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 189. They are referring to T.H. Marshall's stages of citizenship: civil rights or due process rights, political rights or the franchise, and social citizenship or welfare entitlements. Orloff argues that Marshall's stages only apply to men; for example, she explains, women won social rights before they got the vote. See Ann Shola Orloff, "Gender and the Social Rights of Citizenship: The Comparative Analysis of Gender Relations and Welfare States," *American Sociological Review*, 58 (1993): 303-328.

3. Robert Wintermute points out a few exceptions, but then argues that they are not really exceptions since partnership legislation more or less coincided with anti-discrimination laws even in these cases. In Robert Wintermute and Mads Andenaes, *Legal Recognition of Same-Sex Partnerships: A Study of National, European, and International Law* (Oxford, U.K.: Hart Publishing, 2001).

4. As of January 2007, full marriage rights are available to same-sex couples in Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Spain, South Africa, and in the U.S. state of Massachusetts. Civil unions for same-sex couples are available in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and in Tasmania, Australia, Buenos Aires and Rio Negro Province in Argentina, Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, Mexico City and Coahuila, Mexico, and in the U.S. states of Vermont and Connecticut. Registered partnerships are available to same-sex couples in Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greenland, Iceland, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the Australian Capital Territory. Unregistered partnerships are the approach to recognising same-sex couples utilised in Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Israel, Portugal and in ten regions in Italy.

5. Wintermute explains that jurisdictions tend to choose between "subtraction" (i.e. same-sex couples will have all the rights of married different-sex couples, *minus*) and "enumeration" (the actual listing out of each right) methods of allocating rights and obligations. See Wintermute and Andenaes, 763.

6. Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú, eds. *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), x and xiv.

7. Martha Bailey, "Migration of the Same-Sex Family." *Working Paper No. 2004-05*, Queen's University Law and Economics Workshop, Faculty of Law, Queen's University, 2004, 20.

8. Yuval Merin asks the following questions: (1) Are marriage alternatives open to same-sex as well as different sex couples? (2) What are the citizenship and residency requirements? (3) Do gays, lesbians, and same-sex couples have parental rights? (4) What are the associated rights, benefits and obligations? (5) What is the portability of these rights? (6) How many partnerships or marriages have been registered in each country. See Yuval Merin, *Equality for Same-Sex Couples: The Legal Recognition of Gay Partnerships in Europe and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

9. Other key differences that Merin (Ibid.) found between the countries he studied include the following: (a) European countries are more advanced in terms of partnership rights, but less advanced in terms of parental rights (these differences are changing however); (b) the pursuit of parental rights is done through the courts in the U.S. in contrast to the legislature in Europe; (c) some countries exhibit a child-oriented ideology of parental rights while others have a parent-oriented ideology; and (d) different countries have different conceptualisations of family that influence the development of citizenship rights for gay men, lesbians and same-sex couples. I should add that it is essential to examine the role of the European Union in the move to standardise citizenship rights across European countries, something that Merin does to some extent.

10. Ibid., 261.

11. Ibid., 262.

12. David John Frank and Elizabeth H. Mceneaney, "The Individualization of Society and the Liberalization of State Policies on Same-Sex Sexual Relations, 1984-1995," *Social Forces* 77 (1999), 911.

13. Frank and Mceneaney (Ibid.) conclude that: "The individualisation of society has displaced family-based procreative sexuality…spurring the liberalisation of state policies on same-sex relations and the rise of lesbian and gay social movements, which have further pressured states for reform" (Ibid., 912). Their primary dependent variable is state policies on same-sex sexual relations. They differentiate among the following: (a) the countries that outlaw same-sex sexual relations such as Algeria; (b) those that prosecute "same-sex relations under a more general legal provision, such as hooliganism," like the Philippines; (c) those with no regulations of same-sex sexual relations like the Panama; (d) those countries where same-sex sex is permitted but is regulated "to a greater extent than heterosexual relations, e.g. with a higher age of consent (e.g., Croatia);" and (e) states that offer equal status to same-sex and opposite-sex couples such as Sweden

14. As a measure of the prevalence of psychology, Frank and Mceneaney used "the number of psychology authorships in professional

journals, cumulated 1972-80 and logged, per thousand people in 1980" (Ibid., 924).

15. For example, Frank and Mceneaney report that as of 1995, 1/3 of the countries they studied "accorded legal, unrestricted status to sexual relations between women, while 1/4 prosecute them. Similarly, 29% of the nation-states…provided for legal sex between men, while nearly 45% prosecuted them" (Ibid., 913). They argue that:

> Historically, women have appeared in the direct gaze of the state mainly conjunctionally, in their roles as wives and mothers…Thus aspects of female sexuality such as same-sex relations (and, more generally, aspects of sexuality not directly related to reproduction) have remained outside the state purview…This has not yielded a realm of sexual freedom for women, but it has meant that the state is not typically the primary source of restrictions on the non-reproductive sexual behavior of women." (Ibid.)

16. Merin writes:

> There seems to be a correlation between the degree of both formal and substantive equality of women in the northern European countries and the United States on the one hand and the status of same-sex couples in these countries on the other. As Eskridge maintains, the acceptance of equal rights for women contributed to equality of homosexuals as well, and cities and states with populations favoring equality for women have not been only more likely to decriminalise same-sex intimacy but have also been much more likely to adopt laws prohibiting sexual-orientation discrimination. (Merin, 48.)

17. Ibid., 45

18. William N. Eskridge, Jr. *Gaylaw: Challenges the Apartheid of the Closet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), quoted in Merin, 45.

19. Diane Richardson, "Claiming Citizenship: Sexuality, Citizenship and Lesbian/Feminist Theory," *Sexualities* 3 (2000): 255-272.

20. Ibid., 261.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 266.

23. Ibid.

24. Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 158-159.

25. Barry D. Adam, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Andre Krouwel, eds. *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics: National Imprints of a Worldwide Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

26. In order to analyse the issue of gender equality representation, O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver create a five-point framework consisting of: social movement, mobilisation and orientation; mobilisation and anti-feminist movements; political party configuration; the political opportunity structure; and the institutional context and legacy. The ways in which the four nations differ in terms of this five-point framework greatly affects gender equality politics and gender policy logics in each country.

27. Wintermute and Andenaes, 2001.

28. Aimee Shand, "Invisibility, Globalization, and the Struggle for 'Lesbian' Rights in the Third World," paper presented at *Women's Studies Conference*, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, March 16-17 2005, 3**.**

29. Carl F. Stychin, *Governing Sexuality: The Changing Politics of Citizenship and Law Reform* (Portland: Hart Publishing, 2003), 4.

30. Ibid., 8.

31. Amalia Cabezas, "Accidental Crossings: Tourism, Sex Work, and Women's Rights in the Dominican Republic," in *Dialogue and Difference: Feminisms Challenge Globalization*, eds. Marguerite R. Waller and Sylvia Marcos (New York: St. Martin's/Palgrave, 2005), 206.

32. Phelan, 159-160.

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“Everything Would be Solved if Only We Could Marry:” Queer Marriages and U.S. Immigration Policy[1]

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Abstract

U.S. Immigration policies are based on the premise of family unification with the majority of visas distributed to immigrants who are married to American citizens. Unfortunately, since same-sex partnerships are not recognised by U.S. immigration law, gay and lesbian immigrants cannot be sponsored for immigration by their same-sex partners who are American citizens. Immigration officials have estimated that approximately 30% of all marriage visa applications they receive are fraudulent. In these instances immigrants are believed to have entered marriages of convenience, also known as MOCs, with American citizens in order to gain U.S. citizenship.[2] In this chapter, I analyse the experiences of gay and lesbian immigrants who enter heterosexual marriages of convenience in order to immigrate to the U.S. I argue that these marriages of convenience often serve a dual purpose: in addition to helping immigrants enter the U.S., MOCs also allow closeted gay and lesbian immigrants to gain acceptance and approval from their families. **Key Words:** marriages of convenience, U.S. immigration policy, gay and lesbian immigrants.

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I seek to analyse the ways in which sexuality is situated in both the public and the private spheres. Gayle Rubin argues that sexuality is shaped by external forces.[3] The state reinforces a sexual hierarchy that places married heterosexual relationships above all other forms of romantic unions. The family is complicit in shaping sexuality because as an institution it maintains sexual conformity. In the U.S., this sexual hierarchy is reinforced via state laws that privilege heterosexual marriage and render same-sex relationships inferior. The Federal Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as between a man and woman, was passed in 1996. The U.S. stands apart from most other developed countries on the issue of same-sex marriage. France, The Netherlands, Australia, Canada and Spain have all passed policies that recognise some form of same-sex unions at the federal level. Because marriage to a U.S. citizen is the primary mechanism for immigration to the U.S., same-sex binational couples are denied immigration rights that are granted to heterosexual married couples.

I highlight the experiences of gay and lesbian immigrants who have entered heterosexual fraudulent marriages in order to gain U.S. citizenship. For these immigrants with few legal resources for gaining citizenship in the U.S., entering marriages of convenience has served as a necessary vehicle for citizenship. I critically examine the marriage process and explore the ways in which these migrants have learned to negotiate constraining legal policies in order to obtain their desired goals. In addition to entering marriages of convenience as a way to manoeuvre the law, the participants in this study utilise their marriages of convenience to satisfy their familial obligations. I argue that in some instances, entering marriages of convenience has served more than just a legal purpose. MOCs have also served as a way for sexual minorities to gain acceptance and independence from their families. In addition to exploring the legal and familial reasons why gay and lesbian immigrants enter marriages of convenience, I will also analyse the personal costs associated with this kind of conformity. I argue that when gay and lesbian immigrants enter marriages of convenience they are subjugating their sexual identities and are maintaining a dual existence. The participants in this study enter marriages of convenience for two interrelated reasons: 1) to apply for U.S. citizenship; 2) to appease their families who impose heteronormative ideals on them. Conforming to these legal and familial constraints causes these gay and lesbian immigrants to maintain two situational sexual identities: a heterosexual identity that they strategically perform in instances of non acceptance and a gay identity which they maintain within the comfort of their same-sex relationships, as well as within their gay subcultures. Here, I explore how gay and lesbian immigrants negotiate these dual existences and the larger ramifications of these negotiations for their sexual identities.

2. Existing Immigration Policies

Prior to 1990, gays and lesbians were unable to immigrate to the U.S. because the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) classified homosexuality as a psychopathic disorder. In 1950, homosexuals were explicitly mentioned as an excludable group:

> The subcommittee believes however, that the purpose of the provision against 'persons with constitutional psychopathic inferiority' will be more adequately served by changing that term to 'persons afflicted with a psychopathic personality,' and that the classes of mentally defectives should be enlarged to include homosexuals and other sexual perverts.[4]

In the Immigration Act of 1990, Congress re-wrote the exclusion list in the INA, eliminating homosexuality as a means for exclusion and instead, basing exclusion on a medical impairment that could directly put U.S.

citizens at risk: "a mental or physical disorder which could endanger the alien or others." [5]

Since 1990, gays and lesbians have been able to enter the U.S. via education, work, tourist and family sponsorship visas. Since 1965, the majority of U.S. visas have been allotted to immigrants applying under family reunification.[6] Today, 95% of immigrants living in the U.S. have applied on the basis of family reunification. Through family sponsorship any individual regardless of sexual orientation can be sponsored for immigration by a parent, grandparent, or sibling who is already a citizen in the U.S. Family reunification visas are disseminated in order of preference. An unmarried child of an American citizen is given first preference. A spouse of an American citizen is accorded second preference. Third preference is afforded to the parents of an American citizen and fourth preference is given to the siblings of an American citizen.[7] Because family sponsorship by a spouse or parent is considered to be a stronger familial tie, spouses and unmarried children of an American citizen are given a higher preference than sibling sponsorships, and are therefore processed more quickly.[8] Given the large number of visa applications, sibling sponsored visas can take a minimum of twenty years to be processed and as many as fifty years.[9] Thus for an immigrant whose parents are not permanent residents of the U.S., sponsorship through a spouse is the preferred choice. Unfortunately, this right cannot be extended to same-sex partners because immigration law does not recognise these unions. Therefore, while The Immigration Act of 1990 expands the options of immigration for gays and lesbians, it still confines them to a traditional definition of family that may not always encompass their needs.

3. What is a Family Anyway?

Since the U.S. immigration law is based on the premise of family reunification and privileges heterosexual married couples, it is important to understand how family and marriage are defined within immigration policy. In her work on the process of obtaining fiancée and marriage visas, attorney Ilona Bray describes the type of marriage that Immigration and Naturalization Services deems bona fide:

> According to the INS, the normal couple has a fair amount in common. They share a language and religion. They live together and do things together, like take vacations, celebrate important events or holidays and have sex and children. Normal couples also combine financial and other aspects of their lives after marriage. They demonstrate their trust in one another

> by sharing bank and credit card accounts and ownership of property, such as cars and houses.[10]

This definition is troubling because of its vague nature. Furthermore, the definition of a "normal couple" is very confining. It does not account for the ingenious and non-conforming marital partnerships which couples often create to fit their complex needs. Bray explains that many immigration officials hold the misconception that bona fide marriages must be happy ones where disagreements are not evident. This is also troubling because it sets an extremely high standard for the kind of marriage that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) considers legitimate.[11] Many legitimate heterosexual couples would have a difficult time meeting this standard. The one point that is clear regarding what counts as a marriage for immigration purposes is that it must be a legal, federally sanctioned matrimony. Since same-sex couples are denied access to marriage under the Defense of Marriage Act, it is impossible for their relationships to be legally sanctioned at the federal level.[12] This narrow definition of marriage does not encompass the complex arrangements that couples often negotiate for themselves. U.S. immigration policy exemplifies how the state fosters partial citizenship rights for gays and lesbians.[13] Same-sex couples are rendered less deserving of full citizenship than heterosexual couples by the very nature of the institutions within our society.

4. The Same-Sex Marriage Debate

For several decades, feminist scholars have problematised the institution of marriage. Carol Pateman argues that the institution of marriage is a patriarchal, contractual system where women are subjugated and treated as property.[14] For Pateman, women cannot exist as free individuals within the marriage contract, but rather they exist as sexual objects, procreators and care workers. Pateman goes on to say that inherent in the fact that the marriage contract is a patriarchal system, equality cannot exist between the individuals that enter it. Women will continuously hold an inferior position to men within a marriage because of their inferior status to men within wider society.

Scholars have applied Pateman's critique of the institution of marriage to the contemporary same-sex marriage debates. Peel and Harding suggest that the radical feminist critique of marriage is not applicable to same-sex relationships because these critiques focus on the oppression of heterosexual women.[15] Johnson adds to Pateman's critique, that not only does the institution of marriage subjugate women but that it privileges heteronormativity and heterosexuality.[16] Many feminist scholars have argued against same-sex marriage based on the inherent inequality of the institution as well as the subordination of women within it.[17] Walters avers that gay marriage sets up a "hierarchy of intimacy" that privileges long term, monogamous relationships between two people. Walters proposes that rather than same-sex couples trying to assimilate into dominant ideology, they should instead, challenge this restrictive family unit. For Johnson and many others, strategies of assimilation contribute to the construction of heteronormativity. Similarly, Stychin points out that partnership policies are designed to replicate a heterosexual ideal.[18] From his analysis of same-sex partnership immigration policies in Australia, the U.K. and South Africa, Stychin concludes that: "Same-sex immigration…occurs with a requirement to replicate an idealized model of heterosexual romance, centered upon monogamy, cohabitation and extreme interdependency."[19] Stychin further argues that same-sex binational couples who have entered partnership agreements for the sake of immigration, are encouraged to emulate heterosexual married couples and are subjected to scrutiny and surveillance as their relationships are compared to the heterosexual model. Stychin's analysis underlines how same-sex partnership immigration policies create an image of the "good homosexual citizen," who is financially secure enough to support his/her dependent same-sex partner, and who is in a stable relationship.[20] For Stychin, the "good homosexual citizen" is one who can comply with these characteristics, but even then, their partnerships are kept in a category outside of marriage, despite these partnerships being granted recognition based on their similarities to marriage. Johnson adds that the government is complicit in reinforcing "the good homosexual" subject and doing so, reinforces the dominant notion of heteronormative citizenship.[21]

In contrast to those scholars who see same-sex marriage as an assimilation strategy that fails to challenge the "traditional" family unit, other commentators advocate for the legalisation of same-sex marriage.[22] Chambers points to the need for same-sex parents to be recognised and their families legally protected. Chambers further suggests that same-sex marriage would allow the financial situation of same-sex couples to become intertwined. Eskridge emphasises that legalising same-sex marriage will help change societal norms and further the acceptance of gays and lesbians in society.[23] His work moves away from rights discourse as a reason for legalising same-sex marriage and focuses on the intangible benefits that same-sex couples would receive through same-sex marriage.

It is clear that when gay and lesbian immigrants enter marriages of convenience they do so from an inferior status position in society. For Pateman, women hold an unequal, inferior status in society and are therefore the subjugated individuals within the marriage contract. However, I argue that both the gay men and the lesbians in this study are subordinate parties in their marriages of convenience because of their undocumented status. When gay or lesbian immigrants enter marriages of convenience they are entering a contract where they do not share equal power. For the participants in this study, entering marriages of convenience was a mechanism to gain legal benefits reserved for married couples. Chamber's argument is salient in considering the legal protections currently denied to same-sex binational couples. For these immigrants who need the legal privileges granted to married couples, entering a marriage of convenience provides them with a potential means to this end.

In what remains of this chapter, I explore the ingenious ways in which gay and lesbian immigrants negotiate the complex process of entering into a marriage contract with a U.S. citizen in order to gain citizenship as well as the affect that these marriages of convenience have on their familial relationships. Furthermore, I explore what these couples must give up in order to successfully enter marriages of convenience and the very high costs they pay in their efforts to gain citizenship.

5. Methodological Considerations

I used a combined approach in this study. I conducted a content analysis of listserv web postings, which I found on multiple Internet message boards, and I conducted in-depth interviews with individuals who were active posters on these listservs. For approximately one year, I observed the listserv threads and message posting that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (lgbt) immigrants engaged in. The message boards consist of advertisements that are posted by lgbt immigrants and American citizens who are searching for marriageable partners for the purpose of immigration. These Internet message boards maintain archives for approximately one year, which provided me with a wealth of data. I conducted a content analysis of the advertisements on the message boards. Previous scholars have documented that immigrants frequently post newspaper advertisements when seeking marriage as a method for obtaining U.S. citizenship.[24] I found very little difference in the requests being made by immigrants in the newspaper advertisements that Dueñas discusses versus the listserv advertisements that I analyse. These advertisements serve as a way to link undocumented immigrants with American citizens who are willing to enter a marriage of convenience. I used the contacts that I made through the listserv members to obtain four in-depth interviews with gay and lesbian immigrants who entered heterosexual marriages for immigration purposes.[25] Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

6. Marriages of Convenience

In this section, I discuss three different types of marriages of convenience utilised by gay men and lesbian immigrants and argue that these marriages serve a dual purpose for the immigrants. While obtaining legal status is the main motivation for immigrants, these marriages of convenience also help the immigrant gain acceptance from their families.

Entering a marriage of convenience for immigration purposes is punishable with up to five years in prison, a $250,000 fine and deportation of the undocumented immigrant.[26] The USCIS estimates that approximately 30% of the marriages it encounters are "fraud" marriages.[27] Although the accuracy of this estimate has since been brought into question, it served as the basis for the 1986 Marriage Fraud Act. Scholars have argued that the Immigration Marriage Fraud Act (IMFA) was an unnecessary and detrimental precaution which caused more harm than good.[28] However, the language of the IMFA discourse has not been critically assessed. The Immigration Marriage Fraud Act has created a dichotomy of bona fide versus fraud marriages. It presumes that marriages can be polarised into two neat categories: "good" versus "bad." The lived experiences which I highlight in this chapter, illustrate that marriage cannot be neatly dichotomised in this way. Furthermore, like so much of immigration discourse, the usage of words like "fraud" in immigration legislation, imply criminal intent and operate to "other" undocumented immigrants. While engaging in a critical analysis of immigration discourse is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that I do not use terms like "fraud" marriages uncritically.

Bray notes that: "the US government has developed amazing talents for discovering fraud by examining what look like insignificant details of people's lives."[29] Furthermore because the process is so time-consuming, Bray argues that it is almost impossible for immigrants to make their "fraud" marriages appear legitimate for such a long period of time. Still, undocumented immigrants search for marriageable partners so that they can get the citizenship they so desperately need. Gay and lesbian immigrants who have fewer options for legal immigration than heterosexual undocumented immigrants are at an unfair disadvantage because they cannot marry their same-sex partners. While both heterosexual and gay immigrants enter marriages of convenience, in the case of sexual minorities there is a unique personal cost associated with entering into them. Gay and lesbian immigrants must publicly deny their sexually non-conforming existence when entering marriages of convenience, which constitutes a particular disadvantage for the participants of this study. Their experience cannot be understood through a heterosexual lens.

A. Three Types of Marriages of Convenience

The first type of marriage of convenience exists between two strangers that enter an agreement to benefit both parties. In these arrangements a gay or lesbian immigrant pays an agreed sum of money to a stranger who is an American citizen and the two begin to plan for their fraudulent marriage. These arrangements normally cost anywhere from $10,000 to $30,000. The agreement usually involves half of the money to be paid up front and half of the money to be paid when the immigrant obtains legal status. This type of marriage of convenience is the most common. Instances of individuals prosecuted for engaging in this type of marriage of convenience have often been reported in magazine and newspapers articles.[30]

Yolanda confided in me that she engaged in this kind of marriage of convenience. She initially came to the U.S. on an education visa, but she knew that she would not be able to stay in the U.S. for more than four years with a student visa, so she left the university and moved to New York to get married.

> I met a friend over the Internet that told me that lots of people get married for their green card in New York. He told me that I could work and send money to my family. I really needed to send money to my family. The man charged me $5,000…It took me almost a year to save up $2,500, when I gave it to him he married me.

Yolanda entered a marriage of convenience in the early 1990s. She admits that at the time, the cost for these arrangements was approximately $5,000. Today, however, American citizens are charging at least double this price for marriages of convenience because they have become much more difficult to prove with USCIS. Currently, if USCIS is suspicious of the legitimacy of a marriage the couple will be separated during their interview and interrogated individually. The couple will be asked the same set of questions and their answers will be compared. These interviews are designed to incessantly probe an individual with questions until the officer can find an inconsistency in their story. Sometimes the USCIS official will lie to a person, telling them that their spouse has already confessed to the "fraudulent" marriage, or threaten them with jail time in order to get them to speak out.[31] Because of these harsh interrogation tactics along with the steadily increasing number of desperate immigrants in the U.S., the cost for marriages of convenience has risen dramatically and their success rate has plummeted.

American citizens who are aware of this underground market use the message boards to advertise their availability, as in the following example:

> $25,000 CA$H Send me your PHOTO/AGE...in the 1st email I will be in touch with my photo. Also willing to RELOCATE with the right offer. I am 35 but look 25, Never Married, No Children. Nothing holding me down. I can move anywhere, any time.

This advertisement is considered to be one of the most desirable types of MOCs because the man who placed it has no familial ties and is willing to relocate to whichever state the immigrant lives in. This message was followed by many different replies from desperate immigrants asking for more information. In the event that an American citizen is faced with multiple prospective offers, immigrants sometimes enter bidding wars. The most expensive MOC offer I noted on any of these websites was $30,000. This was after an extensive bidding war between two immigrants for a marriage of convenience with the same American citizen.

The second type of marriage of convenience I encountered via the message boards involves a gay binational couple, who enter a marriage of convenience with a lesbian binational couple in order to gain legal status for both the gay immigrant and the lesbian immigrant at the same time. In this case, there is no money transferred between the couples. Theoretically, both couples would benefit from the marriage equally because the end result is that the gay immigrant and the lesbian immigrant gain citizenship status. None of the respondents I interviewed engaged in this type of marriage of convenience, however, it is a recurring request on multiple message boards where I conducted content analysis. The following posting illustrates this exchange.

> We are a bi-national lesbian couple (36/36) seeking a gay couple for a mutually beneficial relationship. The couple must be in a stable loving relationship, financially secure, and drug/alcohol free (as we are)…We will not pay, and are not looking to be paid. We understand the risks and commitment involved, and intend to get to know you both before getting married. If there are any interested couples, please write us as soon as possible

Some of the postings on the various message boards have even offered dual living arrangements, where both couples live together under one roof and thus learn about each other's private routines and become better prepared for their immigration interview. However, because of the rigour of USCIS interviews, this arrangement is not likely to yield permanent residency for both immigrants and can easily result in one undocumented immigrant gaining citizenship status while the other does not.

The third type of marriage of convenience that I found in my research occurs when a binational couple asks a close friend or family member of the partner who is an American citizen to marry the foreign partner for the sake of immigration. This is the most common type of marriage of convenience and is also the type that most scholars refer to when they are defining a marriage of convenience. In this arrangement there is usually no monetary exchange. For Carmen and Cassandra who met in the Dominican Republic when Carmen was vacationing, this type of marriage of convenience was their most viable option. Carmen explained to me her plan to bring Cassandra to the U.S.

> I asked my nephew to marry her, because I didn't trust a stranger to do it. I knew my nephew wouldn't let me down. I had no other choice, I couldn't live in the U.S. without her.

In this case, there was no money given to Carmen's nephew for entering this marriage. It was simply a favour he did for a family member. Most of the lgbt immigrants on the message boards tried to enter a MOC with a family friend first, marrying a stranger, is often a last resort.

The three types of marriages of convenience discussed above do not exhaust all of the different ways that immigrants can manipulate marriage in order to gain permanent residency in the U.S. Scholars have shown that sometimes immigrants strategically enter romantic relationships with American citizens in an attempt to gain permanent status.[32] Curiel argues that Mexican undocumented immigrants often use marriage as a strategy for obtaining citizenship. However, as Curiel points out, this is not to say that there is no emotional connection between partners in these relationships, but rather, that the impetus to legitimate the relationship via marriage comes from the foreign partner's need for citizenship. Examples of these marriages of convenience have often been reported in newspaper articles.[33] These arrangements demonstrate the blurred line between what the ISCIS would consider a bona fide marriage versus a marriage of convenience. Often these marriages are executed based on a combination of practical legal needs as well as on the basis of some emotional attachment.

A romantic relationship, where the couple chooses to get married primarily in order to gain citizenship for the undocumented partner whilst still holding strong feelings of love and commitment for one another, may be considered a marriage of convenience. At a minimum, it may be considered a marriage that falls outside of the traditional "marriages entered into in good faith," as defined by immigration law. These possibilities highlight the power that immigration officials have to determine which, among all marriages that fall outside the narrow marriage construct put forth by immigration policy, count as legitimate partnerships and which ones do not.

B. Putting the Marriages of Convenience into Action

The participants in this study, who entered marriages of convenience in order to gain citizenship, went to great lengths in order to legitimate their marriages. The immigrant must purchase wedding rings for both parties, provide many pictures of the wedding day and thereafter, show proof that the couple has been living together by way of utility bills, joint bank accounts and jointly filed income taxes. They must also memorise very intimate details about the daily rituals of their so-called spouse. During the face-to-face interview, they are often asked questions about which side of the bed they sleep on, how often do they make love and what time they usually wake up in the morning.[34] They are often interviewed separately and have no idea what questions they will be asked beforehand. Thus for gay and lesbian immigrants who enter marriages of convenience, it is crucial that they learn as many intimate details about each other as possible and that they find multiple ways of documenting their relationship.

When I interviewed Carmen and Cassandra, they showed me pictures of the fabricated wedding they held when Cassandra married Carmen's nephew. The bride and groom are both dressed in very traditional gendered attire: Cassandra wore a long white wedding dress and her spouse wore a tuxedo. In a picture featuring their hands joined together, one can see traditional wedding bands on their fingers. Carmen and Cassandra also showed me a plethora of pictures that Cassandra took with Carmen's nephew over the years showing the longevity of their relationship.

Yolanda also engaged in a similar type of performance. She told me how she managed to convince Immigration officials that their marriage was valid. She explained that she wrote a lot of fake love letters to her husband and took a lot of pictures with him in romantic poses. They even returned to the Dominican Republic together so that they could show USCIS the airplane ticket stub. They told USCIS that she was bringing her husband home to meet her family.

These elaborate facades that gay and lesbian immigrants engage in when trying to gain legal citizenship status illustrates the parallel lives they lead in order to go through the immigration process. When Cassandra posses for pictures in an endearing embrace with her "husband," she is performing gender in the way she knows is expected of her. As she prepared for her face-to-face interview, she again played the role of a traditional wife, as she perceived one to be. Yolanda played similar roles in her marriage. Yolanda and Cassandra are "doing gender" and performing what they believe to be heterosexual femininity.[35] Furthermore, they are emulating heterosexuality in order to give the appearance that they are happily married. Through their marriages of convenience they are engaging in what Johnson calls "the politics of passing." However, the process of performing heterosexuality is one that queer immigrants engage in not only through the legal process of immigration policies but also through their familial relationships. In the next section, I will explore the significance that these heterosexual marriages play in the participants' relationships with their families.

C. Performing Heterosexuality within the Family

The marriages that the participants in this study engage in are not only a performance for immigration officials, these marriages are also a performance for their families. For the participants in this study, entering heterosexual marriages of convenience serve a dual purpose: to negotiate citizenship via a heteronormative institution as well as to satisfy their familial obligations. The importance of family as a regulator of sexuality has become a prevalent theme in the work of Latina/o sexuality scholars. Gonzalez-Lopez' work explores the ways in which the Mexican family functions as a social institution that reinforces heterosexual marriage and that disseminates "proper" principles of masculinity and femininity.[36] Understanding the power of the Latina family as a regulator of heterosexuality is useful in this analysis for understanding why gay and lesbian immigrants utilise their marriages of convenience to gain acceptance in their homes.

Manuela, a lesbian woman from Guatemala, understood that her family had attached her independence and womanhood to her ability to find a suitable male partner and enter a traditional heterosexual union. Manuela did not need to get married in order to immigrate to the U.S. because she was eligible for an education visa. She wanted to be married so that she could immigrate to the U.S. with her parent's approval. I relate this to Pateman's argument that women can only establish identities or a sense of self through their marriages. Similarly, Espin notes that Latina women's self worth is legitimised through their relationships with men.[37] Manuela needed to be married so that her parents could acknowledge her as an adult and allow her to immigrate. Thus Manuela married her best friend who was a rock star and within months they moved to the U.S.

> It was a huge wedding. There were 400 people invited. I think that it was my dad's celebration to tell everyone "Look she really isn't a lesbian! It was either just a phase or rumours." He hated the man that I was marrying and so it didn't make any sense. Why did he celebrate it so much if he didn't like him?

In some Latin American countries heterosexual marriage enables the family to maintain its honour**.** The future of the family name often rests upon a son or daughter's ability to find a suitable partner to marry and to do so without engaging in any moral transgressions.[38] Manuela's family had long suspected her lesbian existence, thus by deciding to enter a heterosexual marriage Manuela's parents are absolved of the stigma associated with their daughter's life choices. Gonzalez-Lopez points out that when children engage in sexual transgressions it reflects negatively on their mother's teachings. The importance for Mexicans to enter heterosexual marriages lies in the validation that the parents, especially the mother, receive for successfully teaching their children about sexual morality. When Manuela chooses to get married her parents receive validation that their daughter has adequately internalised their teachings.

For Manuela the marriage serves a dual purpose. Not only does it rid her of the familial and communal pressures to conform to heterosexuality, it also enables her to gain an independent adult status from her family: a status which she had been struggling to achieve ever since she graduated college. Gaining this independence ultimately resulted in her being able to move to the U.S., something her parents were unwilling to let her do unless she was married.

> I was looking to be far from my family. I was in love when I married him. He was a wonderful person. Sexually I had reached some connection with him…When I married him I told him we are going to Boston to live so I can get a Masters…eight months later the relationship fell apart. The moment I came here I knew I was not going to stay married. I just knew…We got divorced. And I was anxious to start meeting women.

This example shows the complexities involved in marriages of convenience. Manuela, who had struggled with her lesbian identity in

Guatemala for years, conformed to heteronormative ideals of sexuality and gender and married a long time friend. For Manuela, the marriage of convenience served more than just a legal purpose, it also served a symbolic purpose. It enabled her to gain her adult independent status from her family and to immigrate to the U.S. where she believed she would be sexually liberated. Entering a heterosexual marriage was the answer to creating distance between herself and her family, the regulator of heterosexuality.

Yolanda was able to gain a similar kind of acceptance from her family through her marriage of convenience. She had never let on to anyone in her native country that she was a lesbian. Thus, when she married an American citizen, she sent pictures of the wedding to her family. During our interview, she said: "they were so happy that I did the right thing." Yolanda showed me her wedding pictures where she stands in a white dress, holding a bouquet of flowers and her "spouse" fully embracing her from behind. Yolanda sent this picture to her mother so that she could place it on her living room mantle. Gonzalez Lopez argues that for Mexican families, wearing white on one's wedding day is a public display of one's sexual purity.[39] Wearing white signifies virginity and morality. Yolanda sends a picture of her marriage of convenience to her mother as a public announcement of her own sexual morality and as a reassurance of her "heterosexuality."

7. Personal Costs to the Performance of Heteronormativity

In order to fully understand the marriage experiences of gay and lesbian immigrants, it is important to analyse the various dimensions of the self that they juggle in order to successfully enter marriages of convenience. I reason that these immigrants maintain a dual existence. By immigrating to the U.S., gay men and lesbians believe that they will find a more sexually progressive environment where they can openly express their sexuality and gain liberation from the closets they experience in their native countries. The dilemma, however, is that in order to immigrate to the U.S., these immigrants are suppressing their gay existence and performing normative heterosexuality. Thus, I suggest that immigrating to the U.S. has only resulted in the further subjugation of their sexually non conforming self and in the reinforcement of heterosexual relationships as superior to same-sex relationships. For the participants in this study, entering heterosexual marriages of convenience comes at the cost of denying the complexities of their sexual identities. By entering marriages of convenience, the sexual identities of these immigrants are rendered invisible. When gay and lesbian immigrants pass as heterosexual for the purpose of immigration, in the eyes of the law their existence as sexual minorities ceases to exist.

Entering heterosexual marriages of convenience also comes at the cost of denying one's legitimate same-sex relationships. Johnson argues that the performance of heterosexuality is particularly oppressive to same-sex couples because it requires the self-regulation of their sexual affection. By entering these marriages of convenience gay and lesbian immigrants are denying their affection for their same-sex partners and conforming to an existence within the sexual hierarchy that oppresses them. The irony in all of this is that study participants immigrated partly to avoid sexual conformity. However, in their efforts to negotiate legal frameworks, immigrants continue to conform and to perform heterosexuality. Scholars have only begun to explore the intangible ways in which this subjugation of one's same-sex desires impedes upon one's same-sex relationships and how couples cope with the marginalisation of their loving relationships.

8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that gay and lesbian immigrants enter marriages of convenience in order to negotiate immigration law as well as their relationships with their families. The lived experiences of the participants in this study illustrate the complex ways that institutions, like the state and the family, operate as regulatory forces of sexuality and as enforcers of a heterosexual ideal. This analysis is an example of how institutions including immigration, marriage and family participate in the establishment of sexual norms that privilege heterosexual marriage and grant all other relationship forms an inferior status. I follow Gayle Rubin's work, emphasising the ways that the law reproduces a sexual hierarchy by privileging heterosexual relationships, thereby showing how issues of sexuality straddle both the public and the private spheres. I argue that exploring how gays and lesbians negotiate their existence from within a heteronormative system that subjugates them becomes essential to understanding their lived experiences. Here, I have shown the ways that these immigrants experience family sponsorship policies and the ways that they negotiate its exclusive nature in order to gain U.S. citizenship. The participants in this study are agents who work within their disadvantaged position to gain citizenship, however, the unintended consequence of their actions is the reinforcement of an oppressive sexual hierarchal system.

All of the study participants felt as though the issues they have faced with immigration would disappear if they were just allowed to marry their same-sex partner. For them, the legal sanctioning of same-sex marriage at the federal level would provide access to the institutions from which they have been excluded. As many scholars have contested, affording same-sex couples access to marriage would only increase the membership of this already restrictive, patriarchal institution. Furthermore, as Holt points out, same-sex marriage is not the answer to the immigration problem because it would only create a system where all couples are judged according to a heterosexual standard.[40] In addition, same-sex marriage would further exclude those unable to access these types of benefits because they are not partnered. I reason that a more equitable arrangement would be to delegitimate marriage as a basis for immigration and to extend the definition of family within immigration policy so that more families of choice are embraced. By making the institution of marriage a precondition to an individual's ability to access immigration rights, the state sends a direct message: all those who cannot or choose not to access the institution of marriage are less deserving citizens. By utilising such a narrow definition of family, the state is penalising alternative family forms for their non-conformity.

Clearly, it is time for the U.S. to eliminate marriage as a basis for the dissemination of legal rights and make a commitment to providing more equitable benefits for alternative family forms. If loving relationships rather than legal marriages were the basis for determining an individual's eligibility for immigration, the participants in this study could have been sponsored by their same-sex partners. I propose that the institution of marriage be debunked as a means for determining an immigrant's eligibility for citizenship and that the emphasis of U.S. immigration be on uniting all families, not just those that are legally sanctioned. By destabilising the institution of marriage, the state would no longer have a central role in policing our relationships and immigrants, like those discussed in this chapter, would be subject to fewer constraints on their sexual identities.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on a larger empirical work, where I explore the lived experiences of gays and lesbians from Latin America.

2. In this paper, a marriage of convenience is defined as a contractual arrangement between an immigrant and an American citizen to provide mutual benefits for both parties. Throughout this chapter, I will sometimes use the abbreviation MOC in reference to marriages of convenience.

3. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 267-319.

4. S. Rep No. 1515, 80th Congr.,1st Sess. (1947), 345 quoted in Robert J. Foss, "The Demise of the Homosexual Exclusion and New Possibilities for Gay and Lesbian Immigration," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 29 (1994): 451.

5. H.R. Conference Report No. 995, 101 Congress, 2d Sess. (1990), quoted in Foss, 461.

6. Nick Gillespie, “Beyond the Family Way,” *Reason*, July (1994): 44-46.

7. United States Department of Homeland Security, “Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2004,” 30 October, 2006 (27 November, 2006). <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2004/Yearbook2004.pdf>.

8. Jerry Tinker, “Symposium Legal Immigration Reform,” *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 4 (1990): 161-276.

9. Tinker, 163.

10. Ilona Bray, *Fiancé & Marriage Visas: A couples Guide to U.S. Immigration* (California: Nolo, 2001), 7.

11. In 2003, U.S. Immigration services transitioned from the Immigration and Naturalization Services to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. It is currently housed under the Department of Homeland Security. Throughout this chapter, I will utilise USCIS when referring to our current immigration services and INS when referring to the laws of the immigration system prior to 2003. See <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>.

12. As several states made progress in allowing same-sex marriage, Congress passed The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996. It states that marriage is between one man and one woman. The DOMA denies same-sex couples the right to federal benefits and absolves states from recognising same-sex marriages performed in other states.

13. Here, I borrow from Shane Phelan’s notion of partial citizenship. Phelan argues that gays and lesbians must abide by the rules and regulations of the U.S., even though these laws do not equally protect their rights. She argues that gays and lesbians are struggling with partial citizenship, because their needs are not considered or respected to the same degree that heterosexuals rights are protected, however, they are still expected to abide by them.

14. Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1981).

15. Elizabeth Peel and Rosie Harding, “Divorcing Romance, Rights and Radicalism: Beyond Pro and Anti in the Lesbian and Gay Marriage Debate,” *Feminism and Psychology* 14 (2004): 588-599

16. Carol Johnson, “Heteronormative Citizenship and the Politics of Passing,” *Sexualities* 5 (2002): 317-336.

17. Suzanna Danuta Walters, “Take My Domestic Partner, Please: Gays and Marriage in The Era of the Visible,” in *Queer Families/Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State,* eds. Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 338-357.

18. Carl F. Stychin, “A Stranger to its Laws: Sovereign Bodies,

Global Sexualities, and Transnational Citizens," *Journal of Law and Society* 27 (2000): 601-25.

19. Ibid., 615.

20. Ibid., 619.

21. Johnson, 320.

22. David Chambers, "What if? The Legal Consequences of Marriage and the Legal Needs of Lesbian and Gay Male Couples," in *Queer Families/Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State,* eds. Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 306-337.

23. William Eskridge, *The Case of Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

24. Christopher Dueñas, "Coming to America: The Immigration Obstacle Facing Binational Same-Sex Couples," *Southern California Law Review*, 21 (2000): 811-844.

25. In this chapter, I utilise direct quotes from these interviews in order to illustrate the negotiation process involved in entering a marriage of convenience. The original names of all the participants have been changed in order to preserve their confidentiality and anonymity. In some instances, all or part of the interview was conducted in Spanish, at the request of the respondent. Regarding these interviews, the transcription was first done in Spanish, and only the direct quotes I use here, have been translated into English.

26. Dueñas, 2000.

27. This number has since been refuted as being a gross inflation, however, because of a lack of more accurate statistics on "fraud" marriages, the USCIS continues to use this estimation in creating policies.

28. Charles Gordon, "The Marriage Fraud Act of 1986," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 4 (1990): 183-192.

29. Bray, 1, 8.

30. Mary Farrell, "For Immigrants trying to obtain the coveted green card, marriage may be a treacherous strategy," *People Weekly* 25 (February 1991): 93-95.

31. Bray, 13,12.

32. Martinez Enriquez Curiel, "The Green Card as a Matrimonial Strategy: Self-Interest in the Choice of Marital Partners," in *Crossing Borders: Research from the Mexican Migration Project,* eds. Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004).

33. Peter Shinkle, "Marriage Fraud Draws New Focus after 9/11," *Five Star* 8 (March 2005), sec. NEWS, A01.

34. Gordon, 185.

35. Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West, eds. *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

36. Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez, *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and their Sex Lives* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005).

37. Oliva Espin, *Latina Realities: Essays on Healing, Migration, and Sexuality* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997).

38. Gonzalez-Lopez, 122.

39. Gonzalez-Lopez, 128.

40. Martin Holt, "Marriage-like or Married? Lesbian and Gay Marriage, Partnership and Migration," *Feminism and Psychology* 14 (2004): 30-35.

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Pornography as Language: From Discourse of Domination to Heretical Subversion

Kateřina Lišková

Abstract

Censorship of sexually explicit imagery is currently being called for, not by conservatives, but paradoxically by feminists. In various places throughout Europe, feminist groups have launched campaigns against pornography; campaigns which they conceive in terms of crimes against women, discrimination, humiliation, and especially the silencing of women by men. Anti-porn feminists declare the domination of women to be the only, unfailing, and all-powerful effect pornography has always had, and the only it ever can have. Not only do these efforts reproduce "man-woman," "either-or" binaries, they also construct women as mute by definition - unable to use language in order to enhance their own agency. This paper explores the capacity of porn to impose silence, the unexpected results a discourse of domination may trigger, and the other ways a "woman" can use language. My analysis of feminist anti-porn arguments - both current European and older American examples - is based on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of language and symbolic power. **Key Words:** sociology, feminism, pornography, Europe, gender positions, language, subversive strategies.

1. Introduction

> Pornography is like a film that is projected on a blank screen. And that blank screen is women's silence. Pornography is filled with images of silencing women. Gags are being put into women's mouths. They are slapped to be still. Our silence is the way in which our status as objects is being made real. We don't express ourselves - the words are being put into our mouths.[1]

As Susan Griffin claims in the quotation above, taken from the famous anti-porn documentary *Not a Love Story*, women are being silenced by pornography. Feminists who argue against pornography maintain that porn harms and discriminates against women on both physical and symbolic levels. On a symbolic level, the most important aspect of pornography's power is it's alleged ability to silence women. In the anti-porn feminist narrative, pornography does not and cannot have any other effect on women but to impose silence.

Thus the consequences of pornography are typical of the broader consequences of language. Griffin implicitly perceives language as a main tool of patriarchy. But rather than focus on how language structures gender inequalities, she instead stresses that the silencing of women throughout history causes the loss of an "authentic" woman's self.[2] Similarly, Mary Daly has written about patriarchy's rootedness in language. She claims this situation is age-old and unchangeable. According to her, since men have governed language, women have been enslaved. Therefore, women's power to name has been stolen from them. Women have been robbed, and there is no remedy within the already existing symbolic system of language. Daly recommends the development of an alternative language for women because the current one is polluted by a masculine element.[3] This supposedly static, unilateral and monocausal character of language is expressed by Andrea Dworkin as something inevitable and essential. According to her, male domination coincides with language to the extent that "every sentence both heralds and affirms it."[4] Men have the power of naming, and so it follows that, as Dworkin says, woman "uses the language against herself because it cannot be used any other way."[5] In this narrative, since the power of naming belongs to men, it is impossible to step outside the system of masculine domination. Reclaiming power for women - in the words of Daly "to steal it from the thief" - is out of the question; according to Dworkin, this power is backed up by physical force and is simultaneously translated into deeds. The power of naming connected with violence becomes reality. In a similar fashion Catharine MacKinnon holds that the speech of women is being silenced:

> Protecting pornography means protecting sexual abuse *as* speech, at the same time that both pornography and its protection have deprived women *of* speech, especially speech against sexual abuse. [6]

In the work of Griffin, Daly, Dworkin and MacKinnon, men are presented solely and exclusively as speaking, while women - presented as the binary opposite - are mute. The means for silencing women *par excellence* is identified as pornography. In the 1980s, these American feminists (especially Dworkin and MacKinnon) initiated anti-pornography campaings with the ultimate aim of a legal ban on porn.

These efforts resonate now, two decades later, in Europe. In various places (Ireland, 2005; Czech Republic, 2005; Germany 2003), feminist groups have launched campaigns against pornography, which they conceive in terms of crime against women, degradation, humiliation, and – silencing women. Using "American" reasoning, some European feminists are lobbying for a law banning porn. British feminist Catherine Itzin writes: "Another dimension to the harm of pornography is its function as a form of incitement to sexual hatred…words have the power to harm."[7] Assuming that "everywhere, women are silenced" by pornographic pictures,[8] European feminists again want to enhance agency for women by framing porn within the Civil Code as a form of discrimination, which they hope will bring speech back to women.[9] Litigation is viewed as the ultimate way to counter a pornographic message that, in the words of Itzin, states: "women can be hurt and hit and hated."[10] In this respect, current European anti-porn efforts draw heavily on the older American ones: they both claim that pornography is silencing women, and that pornography directly acts in the social world, erasing the representational character of pornography. In the following paragraphs I will show how and why anti-porn feminists dismiss pornography as representation. Contrary to this perception, I will argue that it is not only logical but also strategic to keep this distinction. The framework offered by contemporary European anti-porn feminists MacRae, Baer, Itzin and others so dutifully mirrors that of MacKinnon and Dworkin that it is worth closely analysing the work of the founding mothers of the feminist anti-porn stance.

2. Does Pornography Act Directly in Social Reality?

In the American context, pornography has been conceived (and thus protected under the First Amendment) in terms of what it *says*. Contrary to this conventional perception, MacKinnon and Dworkin recommend looking upon it rather in terms of what it *does*. Their argument goes like this: any form of communication cannot do harm (except offend); however, pornography does not offend - it actually subordinates women. On the assumption that words have only a referential relation to reality, pornography is typically defended as "only words." Yet according to MacKinnon, "even when the means of writing are women's bodies, even when a woman is destroyed in order to say it or show it or because it was said or shown."[11]

Pornography according to her is not "only words," pornography does what it says, it is an act. According to the anti-pornography feminist view, pornography is masturbation material. It is used *as* sex - it therefore *is* sex.[12] So how could it be an idea worthy of First Amendment protection? In this view, having sex is ultimately antithetical to thinking, to producing ideas. For MacKinnon, it is nonsense to claim that pornography is speech while men masturbate with it, to "women being exposed, humiliated, violated, degraded, mutilated, bound, gagged, tortured, and killed…It is not ideas they are ejaculating over."[13] It follows that pornography does not simply express or interpret experience, it substitutes for it. It does not only bring a message from reality, it stands in for reality. And because representation *is* reality, pornography is no less an act than the rape and torture it represents. In this argument, it makes no sense to distinguish between speech and action - "Speech acts, acts speak."[14] Collapsing speech and action opens up a way for cutting pornography out of the realm of protected speech and pasting it into the unprotected realm of prosecuted conduct.

Pornography seems to have two ends. First, pornography is, as Susan Griffin has put it, silence imposed on women; second, pornography is speech protected for men as in Catharine MacKinnon's view. Moreover, pornography does even more than speech usually can: porn harms and discriminates. In what remains, two questions will guide my argument:

1. What are the conditions for speech to act? The answer to this question should challenge the inevitability of MacKinnon's claim "porn harms and discriminates."

2. Are women always and only *silenced* by porn? Is language always standing against the dominated? What are the other ways a "woman" can use language?

When MacKinnon claims that porn is not representation but instead acts directly in social reality, she draws tacitly on the notion of speech acts developed by J.L. Austin.[15] In his work symptomatically entitled *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin elaborates the idea that some words when pronounced under certain conditions by certain people have power that does not normally belong to words. That to say something is, in the fullest sense, to do something. For example, to say, "I do" in the course of a marriage ceremony. "When I say, before the registrar or altar, I do, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it."[16] Austin noticed that some words bring about exactly what they utter, meaning they have power exceeding the usual possibilities of speech. He coined such speech "performative," because it acts, it does not state or describe anything. Peformative speech acts are of two kinds. With perlocutionary performatives, the effect is different from the speech itself; in order to be successful, something else must happen (i.e. warning, threatening, or persuading). Illocutionary performatives, on the other hand, do what they say in the very act of saying something; illocutives are themselves a deed (I promise, "I do" during the wedding ceremony, and so on). Austin dedicated his life to endless attempts at creating a complex classification of words that have the effect of deeds. It is symptomatic that in this Sisyphean task he failed - it proved to be impossible to capture all the infelicities and misfires undermining the word's power to perform.

I suggest that MacKinnon's definition of pornography corresponds to Austin's definition of illocutionary performatives. Pornography does what pornography says, i.e. it harms and discriminates against women. But Austin, contrary to MacKinnon, made an effort to define the conditions under which illocutives work. Such an effort makes evident that there are situations when a speech act could miss its target. In MacKinnon´s account, on the other hand, porn never misses, it never fails to harm and discriminate against women. In short, Austin is very well aware of the fact that there are many circumstances that can thwart the function of the performative. His account can be read as a catalogue of failed performatives. On the other hand, MacKinnon does not question the possibility of a performative's failure to perform, that is that pornography might fail to injure. MacKinnon has forgotten the distinction stressed so much by Austin - the distinction between felicitous and infelicitous speech acts. This omission frees her hands to claim grimly that pornography constitutes an injury in itself. All pornography without exception subordinates all women without exception. Her notion of power and social inequalities is mechanical and predictable. Taking into account all the complexities of "acting speech" (illocutionary performatives), MacKinnon's notion of pornography as act is no longer defensible.

MacKinnon's allusion between porn and illocutives is flawed. The only performative force connected with pornography is the one stemming from feminist anti-porn writing itself. A recent study from the United Kingdom shows the extent to which women's feelings about pornography are influenced by the feminist anti-porn position.[17] Some participants in the research even cited anti-porn writings "as having had a more powerful effect on them than porn itself."[18] Interestingly, women who aligned themselves with feminist views in general have reported such an impact. Their reactions to anti-porn texts,[19] range from feelings of distress ("I remember reading that and feeling really *upset*") through feelings of being overpowered ("I think also when I *do* read stuff like that it makes me sort of a harder person in terms of my relationships with men") to ambivalent feelings of hatred and arousal ("I hated that book … it was disgusting, it was exploitative… part of the reason that I *hated* it so much was I actually found it quite exciting… there were other parts of me that were absolutely *fascinated*"). As a reaction to feminist anti-porn organising, some women feel guilt about being feminists and yet enjoying porn: "I feel angry and demeaned by the whole, you know, experience of seeing pornography, and yet also being aroused by it."[20] Not only pornography but even anti-pornography stirs up powerful reactions. These might be effectively exploited by the resurgent anti-porn feminist movement in Europe. Feminists writing against porn accomplished a perlocutionary effect. They threatened, or at least warned against the possibly damaging effects porn might have. It is necessary to add that this kind of performative force is not the one anti-porn feminists have in mind when they speak of porn.

If we accept that porn may constitute a threat, we should realise that the threat might solicit a response that is never anticipated. This response might be resistance, which the threat itself helped to produce. Anti-pornography campaigning proves this point well. It paradoxically undermines the only alleged effect of pornography, that it perpetuates patriarchy and deprives women of speech. Although MacKinnon's and Dworkin's anti-pornography crusades were far from a useful and necessary framing of the debate about sexuality, they were a good example of an unexpected reaction pornography may trigger. When claiming that pornography subordinates and silences women, women from the anti-porn feminist camp showed that they did not let themselves be silenced.

Feminist anti-porn organising takes many shortcuts. But when they claim generally that "social inequality is substantially created and enforced - that is done - through words and images,"[21] we should pay close attention. What are the social conditions under which speech creates inequality?

3. The Authorised Language of Power and Its Subversion

Social domination created and reproduced through language is a topic elaborated on by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.[22] Austin had already noticed that the felicitousness of an illocutionary speech act resides to a large extent in its non-randomness. The efficiency of an illocutionary act is a function of its belonging to a series of the same acts which are a part of a repeated social action. This fact is not very different from the one observed by Derrida and coined "iterability" or "citational chain."[23] The ideal type of such social action is ritual. And it is an example of the discourse of ritual (and ritualised discourse), which for Pierre Bourdieu became a yardstick in his research on the efficiency of speech acts. Austin's discovery of performative speech acts is useful, but Bourdieu deepens the analysis by examining the institutional framework the illocutionary acts are embedded in. The crucial term for his analysis of domination in regard to the analysis of gender domination is the notion of symbolic violence. More than a specific type of power, it is an aspect permeating all types of power. In our everyday life, power is rarely exercised in the form of open physical violence. Instead, it is transformed into symbolic forms and thus gains legitimacy that could hardly be reached otherwise. Bourdieu calls the result of this transformation "invisible power," which is then not understood as power at all, and is thus more readily accepted.

Speech acts yield their power to act not from linguistic or grammatical circumstances. The power of speech acts to act is delegated by a social institution, which the speech act is part of. In other words, speech acts participate in the authority of the institution.[24] What is at stake are the institutional conditions of the production and reception of performatives. Reliably felicitous speech acts are those anchored in a fairly rigid situation. The ideal context, in which speech acts are felicitous, where they accomplish precisely what they say, is the situation of ritual. [25]

If we borrow the terminology of quantitative sociological research, we might say that what is at stake is the validity and reliability of the ritual. However, these are not dependent on its technically flawless exercise. An act of authority is a specific discourse whose effectivity does not rely solely, or even primarily, on being understood (sometimes it may even fail to be understood and still would not lose its power). For the act of authority to be successful, it needs to be recognised by the audience. The performative magic of the ritual works insofar as the audience exercises on itself the magical efficacy of the performative utterance. Speech acts work only to the extent that one fails to realise that in submitting to them, one has contributed via his/her recognition to their establishment. The participant's prior faith in the ritual is the act's very condition of possibility. "One only preaches to the converted."[26] The chain "legitimacy - recognition - legitimacy" is the mechanism that creates a felicitous speech act. This chain makes it clear that if the speech act is successful - that is if it is recognised by those it is addressed to - it perpetuates the further reproduction of the institution backing up the speech act in question, as well as the legitimacy of this institution.

The language of authority cannot do without the cooperation of the dominated. While recognition of authority seems to be a necessary condition for this cooperation to take place, this alone is not sufficient to sustain it. In Bourdieu's argument, complicity is based on misrecognition. What the dominated so often misrecognise is the character of the foundation on which the social order, the institutions backing up the speech acts, stands. The *arbitrariness* of the social order's foundation is misrecognised as *naturalness*, which connotes fixity and appropriateness. At the bottom of all authority and its recognition there is, paradoxically, misrecognition. This complicitous misrecognition is not a random event. On the contrary, it is of structural character. It emerges because social agents take the world for granted, in other words, because their mind is shaped according to the structures of the social world. Misrecognition is the fact of recognising violence that is wielded precisely insofar as one does not perceive it as such. Symbolic violence is violence exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity.

Hierarchy is not always clearly visible, which is a function of its legitimisation. If the hierarchical relations are enchanted,[27] it only means they are vulnerable to the destructive effect of words that unfold and disenchant. The structuring power of words constituting a discourse of common sense must be fought with words that disenchant, expose the extraordinary and unheard-of. Subversion lies in naming the unnameable, in breaking-up subtle forms of hegemonic censorship, both institutionalised and internalised.

In this respect, Bourdieu talks about heretical subversion, which draws from the possibility to change the social world through changing the representations of this world, which in turn contribute to its reality. Against those representations which help to perceive the social world as natural and self-evident, we should counterpose a paradoxical vision. Another challenge for heretical discourse aimed at creating a new status quo is the creation of new common sense, which would include the previously unuttered speech and suppressed practices. Discourses of subversion are thus productively parasitic upon the dynamic of authorised language. Every language heard by the group is an authorised language, which legitimises the speech it utters by uttering it. In a single step it constitutes and reproduces the group to which it speaks to and draws its legitimacy from it, and thus the power to say what it says.

At a glance, it might seem that Bourdieu's notion of a speech act as a ritual embedded in the power of an institution fits MacKinnon's understanding of porn as reinforced by, as well as reproducing patriarchy. However, since masculine domination is not an institution in the strict sense of the word, we might consider porn as participating in the authority of hegemonic discourse. In this case, we should not forget the two conditions of possibility for a discourse of authority to work:

1. To have a performative speech act under total control, owing to Derrida, we know that this is not only impossible, but that the impossibility of total control is the very definition of performative acts.

2. To talk about sovereignty is only possible, if ever, in rare cases of rigidity of the speech situation (e.g., in church ceremony).

Pornography is far from being rigid and the so-called institution supposed to keep an eye over its legitimacy is far from being as united and as organised as a church. If the felicitousness of a performative gets weaker with increased distance from an ideal type (ritual), then it is necessary to doubt the success of a pornographic performative as presented by MacKinnon.

But let us consider porn as taking part in discursive practices sustaining the system of masculine domination. Then we should focus on the conditions of possibility of the discourse of authority. Bourdieu's performative works only if it is part of a legitimated power discourse. To accept authority means to unreflectively renounce the possibility of verifying "truths" which are authoritatively presented for belief. To ban a discourse, meaning the pornographic discourse, is not only impossible (it is backed up by a legitimised power) but moreover, it is counterproductive. In order to subvert the authoritative discourse, we need to explore and question it, which could possibly lead to its delegitimisation.

Creating heretical discourse does not equal its victory over hegemonic discourse. For the latter, it is desirable to be accepted without being questioned or scrutinised. Thus the existence of heretical discourse itself makes the authoritative discourse "strike back." The dominant tactic is to deploy an omnipresent feeling of necessity and naturalness of the status quo. The language of the dominant parades as unmarked, and is supported by an ethos of propriety and decency; conservatism always invokes the "decent people."[28] In terms of gender relations this usually materialises as calling for married coupledom, which involves domesticated monogamous sexuality serving only one end, that of procreation. Thus it is not only counter-intuitive but also disquieting when feminists demand "reactions of the modern state toward sexuality and deviations from a declared sexual norm" in the same breath that they request state limitations on pornography. [29] The matter-of-factness with which feminist anti-porn discourse condemns the indecency of so-called non-normal sexual practices, disdains their practitioners, and calls for the state to intervene, is highly disturbing.

Bourdieu understands his concept of symbolic violence as a pivotal tool for any analysis of dominance. The paradigmatic form is gender dominance.[30] While Bourdieu's concept lies ready at hand to analyse masculine domination, I suggest using it to dissect the practices of those who ostensibly struggle against domination, yet in the process also hegemonise this counter discourse. We can use Bourdieu's theoretical framework in precisely this manner by applying it to feminist anti-porn discourse.

4. Anti-Porn Feminism: United (and Hegemonic) We Stand

Feminism à la MacKinnon posits itself as a movement speaking for all women, women who are conceptualised as not being able to speak for themselves. It has proven to be a discourse of authority heard and followed by not insignificant numbers of women. Yet while rejecting one form of authority, they have tacitly accepted another. In the anti-porn feminists' counter-plan, there is no other option but to fall back on a performative force of stronger power - the power of the law - which is supposed to liberate women from patriarchal shackles.

MacKinnonesque speech acts are themselves suspect of hidden aspirations to authoritatively govern feminist discourse. Such a project requires that other women accept this regime, resulting in a total belief in the so-called reality of porn. It thus forecloses any possibility of challenging authority - patriarchal *or* feminist - and "women" are expected, again, only to internalise and follow. However, blind obedience is in sharp contrast to the project of strengthening feminist agency. The anti-porners' attempt to create a unified "truth of porn" seeks to ensure and manifest a unity of interests between those who control feminist knowledge and those who are supposed to abide by it. MacKinnon's language resonates with the sisterly tone of the early second wave feminist discourse, which makes it harder to see hegemonic abuse of the name feminism by only one part of the feminist community. The assumption embedded in this language - that of a homogenous women's interest - conceals a very specific program that if revealed, would in fact prove highly contentious.

Bourdieu offers us a chance to see a performative as a ritual. Anti-porn mobilizing, which as we saw is another form of performative speech, is its own kind of ritual. If we borrow the theatre-like sociological perspective of Erving Goffman, we can see that the everyday re-playing of rituals fulfils the function of reproducing peer relations and "we" identification within a group, which is contrary to "them," who are sometimes pictured as an enemy.[31] "Women-sisters" are thus offered an instant discourse, which contains easily acquired binary oppositions with far reaching aspirations of applicability to the entire social system. On the other hand, magical, non-everyday rituals amplify their power by manipulating taboo words or objects (taboo words, if uttered, are perceived as a substitute for the signified object). Taboo words can only be dealt with by authorised persons who reproduce the social order via ritual manipulation.

MacKinnon's approach only strengthens the power of pornography because by denouncing it as a pure evil that can only be suppressed by a legal ban (rather than examined, understood, reinterpreted, or a multitude of other potential responses), she reinforces it by taking away the ability to demystify it. Her view of porn imbues it with qualities similar to those of Bourdieu's description of the ideal type of performative speech act, that of church ceremony, which by its definition cannot fail. A great deal of its power relies precisely on the fact that ceremony *as such* is not questioned. Church ceremony firmly and reliably reproduces the status quo and reaffirms power holders so long as nobody questions its authority. In European history, whenever established ceremony was challenged as *the* only right one, it resulted in power shifts and the weakening of the church as the legitimising institution. In order to preserve their power, church authorities have always strongly opposed any attempts at demystifying and disenchanting the power that maintains ceremony and with it the church. It was attempts at reformation that brought more freedom and empowerment to people while dissolving the monolith of the Catholic Church.

In fact, these fights for the diversification of performative speech acts, rather than calls for ending them, are what foster agency for the bearers and, more generally, the subversion of hegemony. Elaborating on this analogy we can say that MacKinnon's approach only strengthens the authority of the dominant because she strives to ban pornographic discourse, which stands as the performative act backing up masculine power. Doing so, she takes pornography out of the realm of contestable performative acts and thus changeable social practice. The misguided efforts of anti-porn feminists therefore prevent the subjugated from changing porn as well as power inequalities, at least to the extent that power inequalities arise from and are bound up with social representations. Instead of calling for a ban on porn, feminists should do the contrary: open up this discourse, which would disenchant the divine ownership of its traditionally authorised masters.[32]

5. Writing the Hegemonic Script

The social existence of subjects is a product of structures of dominance. Every individual is, in sociological sense, created by society along its axis of power; no one can exist outside of the structuring power of society. Power structures subjectify us in the double meaning of that word: we are *subjects* and *subjectified* at the same time. As Bourdieu has pointed out, there are two kinds of structures: structuring structures and structured structures. However, the objective structures of society (those which structure) and incorporated structures of individuals (those which are structured) are not identical. Thanks to this dissonance, it is possible to defy the structures inscribed in the minds and bodies of subjects. Through these ruptures it is possible to dismember hegemonic objective structures. The only way social structures are reproduced is through repeated practice. Given this mechanism, it is alternative reiteration that can erode and potentially change social structures delineating power imbalances.

I propose that it is necessary to ask the questions that are impossible to ask using MacKinnon's definition of pornography, the same one that is currently being taken up by some European feminists. Anti-porn feminists not only call for legally shutting porn down, their definition of pornography identifies representation with reality. Porn is presented as *the* reality of lower social status of women. Two non-identical entities, reality and its representation, are conflated. As a result, it is out of the question to ask how to change social reality by changing its representations. It is precisely representations, as Bourdieu argues, which might act on the world by acting on peoples' depictions of it. Moreover, social groups can be made and unmade through representation, by the articulation, re-articulation or the non-articulation of group representation. In a sense, it is representation which makes a group visible both for its members as well as for others. Portraying women as helpless victims reinforces the objective structures which classify all women as a disempowered group and further helps to reproduce this self-image in women themselves. The first step needed in feminist political action is to disentangle the representation/reality conflation, while the second is to subvert hegemonic representations of women.

Feminist anti-porn discourse strengthens the old binarisms "man-woman," "culture-nature," "pure-impure," and so on**.** It tries to reverse the age-old domination of men over women through simply reversing the polarities. However, such a strategy is inefficient because it is not radical enough. I propose utilising deconstructive tools as an effective means to challenge the essentialising notions of social reality to which anti-porn feminism falls prey. If two binary terms always mean hierarchy and subordination, it is necessary to deconstruct them, as Derrida explains:

> Put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system…Deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated.[33]

We must realise that for subversive rewriting we do not need to invent new forms, it is not necessary to change names, we can easily keep the old one, pornography, and thus maintain "the structure of the *graft*, the transition and indispensable adherence to an effective *intervention* in the constituted historical field."[34] What is important to change, however, are the processes at work within the form, the pieces of the puzzle and the angles we view from. Enter Bourdieu's concept *louche*, symptomatically borrowed from French grammar:

> *Louche* [skewed]. This word is used, in grammatical context, to indicate expressions which seem at first to introduce one meaning but which go on to determine an entirely different one. It is used in particular of phrases whose construction is equivocal to the point of disturbing the clarity of expression. What renders a phrase *skewed* arises therefore in the specific disposition of the words which compose it, when they seem at first glance to create a certain relation, although in fact they enjoy a different one: just as *skewed-eyed* people seem to look in one direction, while they are actually looking somewhere else.[35]

The concept of *louche* opens up the possibility of looking anew at something we have taken for granted, whose meaning we previously considered fixed and unchangeable. In the case of pornography, *louche* asks us to reconsider the traditional judgement of pornography as something low, dirty, unworthy of serious regard. Using *skewed* perception, we can analyse pornography as a certain kind of representation of the social relations of gender in contemporary Western society. Moreover, it makes us challenge the predominant feminist view that porn must be universally and inescapably harmful to women. Thinking *louche* allows for equivocalness, non-fixity and flux of the analysed social phenomena.

6. Conclusion

Anti-porn feminists claim porn to result, without exception, in silencing women. I propose two possible levels on which this claim can be refuted. The first is the fact that these feminists take action against porn, organise, lobby, in other words *speak*, which is itself contrary to their own argument. On the second level, using the deconstructive tools of recontextualisation, citation and "*louche*," re-readings of pornographic signs make it possible to imagine shifts in location on the gender map, and enhance the speech of women.

Holding the view that the oppression of women has one common cause, pornography, in which powerful and commanding male perpetrators mistreat obedient and silent female victims, and moreover claiming that this pattern spreads throughout the whole society, proves to be a flat, oversimplified and thus untenable perception of power. Pornography is not the oppressive monolithic giant that anti-porn feminists would have us believe. Going beyond rather than against pornography would be one way to rearticulate the symbolic gender order.

Pornography does not act directly in the social world, at best it constitutes an authorised language of power which calls for delegitimisation and subversion. I propose porn to be one possible way for feminists to reappropriate language as a constitutive means of constructing social reality and politics in broader terms. "Other uses of language" - heretical readings, subversive reiterations and "*louche*" appropriations of a traditionally male genre - open up space for feminist agency and allow porn to become a site for the critical examination and reworking of stiff gender subject positions.

Notes

1. Bonnie Sherr Klein, *Not a Love Story* (National Film Board of Canada, 1981), video recording.

2. Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 201-202.

3. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology. The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

4. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1979), 17.

5. Ibid.,18.

6. Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 9; emphasis in original.

7. Catherine Itzin, "Pornography, Harm, and Human Rights: The UK in the European Context," in *Sexual Politics and the European Union. The New Feminist Challenge*, ed. R. Amy Elman (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996), 69.

8. Susanne Baer, "Pornography and Sexual Harassment in the EU," in *Sexual Politics and the European Union. The New Feminist Challenge*, ed. R. Amy Elman (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996), 52.

9. Heather MacRae, "Morality, Censorship, and Discrimination: Reframing the Pornography Debate in Germany and Europe," *Social Politics* 10 (2003): 314-345.

10. Itzin, 68.

11. MacKinnon, 12.

12. This is another example of inconsistency in MacKinnon's anti-porn argumentation.

13. MacKinnon, 17.

14. Ibid., 30.

15. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words,* edited by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

16. Austin, 6.

17. Karen Ciclitira, "Pornography, Women and Feminism: Between Pleasure and Politics," *Sexualities* 7 (2004): 281-301.

18. Ciclitira, 289.

19. The following refers to Dworkin, 1979. Quoted women are the participants of Karen Ciclitira's research (emphasis in the original).

20. Ciclitira, 293.

21. MacKinnon, 13.

22. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

23. Jacques Derrida, *Limited, Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

24. Bourdieu, 115.

25. Ibid., 113, 125-126.

26. Ibid., 126.

27. “Enchanted” here is a play on Max Weber´s term “disenchantement of the world” by which he means the impact of reason and rationality on the perception of the world at the dawn of the modern era. I borrow and recontextualise “enchantement” in order to draw the reader’s attention to a certain constitutive character of power – its dimness and obscurity.

28. Ibid., 131-132.

29. MacRae, 314.

30. Bourdieu analyses gender dominance in *La domination masculine* (1998). Here he examines the masculine point of view, the “phalonarcissistic cosmology” structuring social organisation of time and space and cognitive structures inscribed in bodies and minds. Not surprisingly, he finds masculine as dominating and privileged, and feminine as dominated and unprivileged.

31. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

32. An exploration of feminist appropriations of pornography would require another chapter. However marginal compared to the huge body of mainstream pornography, feminist pornography exists and might possibly expand if not for constant feminist calls to “end the oppressive institution of pornography.” The potential audience is thus discouraged from paying attention to feminist porn, ironically by feminist voices claiming pornography to be nothing but harmful at all times.

33. Derrida, 21 (emphasis in original). In this context, Catharine MacKinnon’s reproach of postmodernism sounds out of place: “Postmodernism is premodern in the sense that it cannot grasp, or has forgotten, or is predicated on obscuring, this function of language in social hierarchy” (1993, 123). Elsewhere she compares “a society saturated with pornography” to “an academy saturated with deconstruction” (Ibid., 7). Not only is “postmodernism” - and I am aware of the multitude of approaches, sometimes even contradictory ones, covered by this term - not oblivious to these phenomena, it actively aims to subvert them.

34. Derrida, 21 (emphasis in original).

35. M. Beauzée, *Encyclopédie méthodique, grammaire et littérature, vol 2.*, quoted in Bourdieu, 1991, 137. Emphasis in original.

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PART II

Connecting with Others

On the Road to Equality? Gender, Sexuality and Race in Sociological Meta-Narratives on the Transformation of Intimacy

Christian Klesse

Abstract

Sociological grand narratives on the transformation of intimacy claim that accelerated processes of modernisation and detraditionalisation result in a diversification and democratisation of family forms and relationship patterns. While gay men and lesbians have been absent from most of such "post/modernisation theories," they often get attributed a privileged position in the ones that include them in analysis. Lesbians and gay men are frequently represented as the pioneers of intimate and sexual democratisation. In this chapter, I argue that there are a variety of problems with this sort of analysis. The thesis of an enhanced egalitarianism at the heart of same-sex relationships rests on a reductive analysis of power that privileges gender at the expense of other social divisions. The exaggeration of the themes of choice and agency plays down the relevance of the power relationships around race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and disability. Most post/modernisation theories either implicitly or explicitly construct "the West" as the motor of change. Racialised populations both within and outside the "West" are framed as "traditional" and backward. The discursive racialisation and spatialisation of the concept of modernity renders post/modernisation theories an inappropriate tool for the theorisation of post-colonial sexual and intimate cultures. **Key Words:** same-sex relationships, intimacy, sexuality, modernity, postmodernity, individualisation, detraditionalisation, racialisation, power, intersectionality.

> If indeed global changes are working their way through into a transformation of intimacy on a broad scale, then it is lesbians and gays who are by necessity in the vanguard – which makes an understanding of the ways in which lesbians and gays have made their own history in recent years, albeit in circumstances not of their own choosing, not a peripheral interest but a key way of understanding sexual history as a whole.[1]

1. Introduction

A number of writers have suggested that there is an implicit link between the experience of lesbians and gay men and the experience of modernity. Such arguments have found a specific articulation in sociological meta-theories that aim at capturing the specific conditions of (depending on the analytical stance of the writer) high modernity, late modernity or postmodernity for contemporary cultures of intimacy and sexuality. Despite their differences, these theories have in common the argument that large scale economic and cultural transformations linked to modernity or post-modernity have resulted in the individualisation and diversification of family forms and relationship patterns. Most of the grand narratives on the transformation of intimacy have primarily, or even exclusively, focussed on the changing patterns and meanings of heterosexual relationships. The analysis of the "post-familial" in Beck's and Beck-Gernsheim's work, for example, remains limited to an exploration of phenomena among heterosexuals, such as divorce, re-marriage, post-divorce families, cohabiting couplehood, families of choice and serial monogamy.[2] The lack of attention paid to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people's relationships reveals the persisting heterocentrism of much of this theory. Homosexualities have only recently been put at the centre of reflection on the processes of modernisation.[3] I find it striking that while lesbians and gay men have been absent from most modernisation theories, they tend to get attributed a privileged position in the theories that include them in analysis. Lesbians and gay men (bisexuals and transgendered people are rarely considered) are often constructed as the "pioneers" of change and democratisation.[4] Although I have a great deal of sympathy for the attempts to challenge the heteronormativity at the heart of what generally counts as "social theory," I am worried that the representation of lesbians and gay men as the forerunners of an egalitarian relationship culture obscures persisting power relationships within same-sex relationships.

In this chapter, I critically discuss the application of hegemonic modernisation theories to the study of lesbian and gay male relationships. I am particularly concerned with the approaches linking modernisation with the thesis of reflexive individualisation. This perspective is strongly associated with the work of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. This strand of modernisation theory has been particularly influential in recent work within the sociology of the family and sexuality in Britain and continental European countries.[5] I argue that the exaggeration of the themes of detraditionalisation, individualisation and democratisation, tends to play down structural power relationships around the social divisions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and disability. Because the notions of equality, agency and choice tend to be overstated, detraditionalisation is usually read as a process of democratisation, as a result of which power and processes of normalisation move out of focus. I then go on to show that the temporal and spatial logic of the modernity/tradition dichotomy, intrinsic to most post/modernisation theories, advances racialised and West-centric interpretations of history, society and progress. Sociological theories on the "transformation of intimacy" are, therefore, frequently marked by a lack of sensitivity with regard to power relations both on the micro and macro levels of analysis.

2. Detraditionalisation, Individualisation and Democratisation in Post/modernisation Theories

Lynn Jamieson argues that contemporary theories of the transformation of intimacy are modelled on an historical narrative structure deploying a threefold periodisation. These periods are usually classified as "pre-modern," "modern" and "post-modern," referring to the pre-industrial, industrial and contemporary (post-industrial) periods respectively. Jamieson uses the term "post-modern" as an umbrella concept that covers the divergent processes resulting in a profound and accelerated destruction of traditional certainties.[6]

It is important to note that postmodernity is a contested concept. There are major disagreements among the authors working on these topics about periodisation and theoretical emphasis. Anthony Giddens, for example, prefers to talk of "high modernity," "late modernity" or "post-traditional modernity." Ulrich Beck has promoted the concept "reflexive modernity" or "second modernity." Zygmunt Bauman interprets postmodernity as "modernity reflecting upon itself" and William Simon describes it as a shift from "paradigmatic" to "post-paradigmatic societies." [7] Inasmuch as I am concerned with the similarities of the grand narratives these authors have constructed, I will refer to their theories with the term post/modernisation theories. I perceive post/modernisation to be a term flexible enough to take account of these theoretical differences through a differentialist reading practice, stressing either the former or the latter part of the couplet (i.e. **post**/modernisation or post/**modernisation**).[8] In both readings, post/modernisation signifies processes of change and large-scale societal transformation.

An emphasis on detraditionalisation is a central theme in post/modernisation theories. Paul Heelas conceptualises detraditionalisation as the strengthening of autonomous subjectivity and self-responsible social agency in the face of fading certainties and binding cultural and moral codes. Detraditionalisation is further said to feed processes of individualisation.

> As a working definition detraditionalisation involves a shift of authority: from 'without' to 'within'. …Individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of the disorder and contingency which is thereby generated. 'Voice' is

> displaced from established sources, coming to rest with the self.[9]

Individualisation thus results in a pluralisation of authority as a result of which choice comes to assume an unpreceded centrality in the self-constitution of the social agent. With its focus on the interrelationship between society, community and the individual, detraditionalisation theory has a strong bearing on the understanding of ethics and politics. Heelas differentiates at least two major positions within detraditionalisation theory: the "radical detraditionalisation thesis" and the "coexistence thesis."

Proponents of the radical detraditionalisation thesis stress the rapid decline of established and timeless social or ethical orders. The break up of communities and the privatisation of morality result in accelerated processes of individualisation. Depending on the philosophical stance of the author, these processes might either imply democratisation and the empowerment of the individual with regard to constricting systems, or alternately, uncertainty, contingency, moral relativism and lack of orientation. In my opinion, it is possible to group Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and Jeffrey Weeks among the proponents of a radical detraditionalisation thesis.

The coexistence thesis is based on a critique of a linear periodisation of history and criticises the clear-cut distinction between modern and traditional societies. Authors adopting this position tend to argue that in contemporary societies traditional forms coexist with modern ones, which puts a certain limit on individualisation. Within the study of sexuality, Ken Plummer has made a claim for the coexistence thesis by emphasising the simultaneous presence of traditional, late modern (or postmodern) intimacies both on a global scale and in the context of national societies and regional cultures.[10]

Even if detraditionalisation theorists agree that all the above mentioned changes are currently taking place, some welcome them more than others. Detraditionalisation theories are marked by differing degrees of optimism or pessimism. At least some theorists have argued that detraditionalisation bears the potential for a new scope of democratisation. This theme is probably most pronounced in Giddens' version of the detradionalisation narrative. For Giddens, individualisation translates into increasing degrees of self-reflexivity and personal autonomy, which he sees as the precondition for inter-personal and societal democratisation. Jeffrey Weeks, too, has been rather optimistic about the effects of modernisation. In his work, the promise of equality and sexual pluralism tends to outweigh the problem of contingency that enters his work due to a strong reliance on Zygmunt Bauman's philosophical sociology.[11] It is primarily this strand of detraditionalisation theory that I will focus upon in the following section, in which I will illustrate my argument with a few examples.

3. Gay Men and Lesbians as the "Prime Experimenters" of a Democratic Culture of Intimacy.

A. Anthony Giddens: the Pure Relationship Model

Anthony Giddens' work has been exceptional in that it has considered gay male and lesbian relationship practices in the thesis of the transformation of intimacy around the emergence of the "pure relationship." Giddens describes the possibility of the pure relationship as a result of spreading processes of detraditionalisation and reflexive individualisation. The concept stands for a relationship that is entered into and maintained by choice and for its own sake. It is based on "confluent love," trust and commitment. In the late modern period, according to Giddens, confluent love has come to replace previous models of romantic love that were primarily based on projection and identification. In contradistinction, confluent love is a more active and contingent form of love that has to be continuously negotiated. The generalisation of the practice of open negotiation within the pure relationship, according to Giddens, promises true "emotional democracy."

Giddens' model of the pure relationship has been widely criticised. In particular, feminists have rejected it as an inappropriate tool for understanding contemporary heterosexual relationship practices. Jamieson has argued that Giddens' emphasis on emotional democracy, enhanced egalitarianism and chosen affinities reinforces post-feminist discourses.[12] His reductionist notion of "disclosing intimacy" (that prioritises what people say to each other over what they finally do together - or with each other) obscures persisting inequalities regarding the division of labour in most heterosexual relationships. Others have argued that the equation of the pure relationship with the dyadic couple relationship ignores kinship (e.g. children) with regard to which people - and in particular women - may have obligations.[13] In brief, it supposes the notion of a single, autonomous, emotionally and economically independent rational subject. While the pure relationship has been widely rejected as a model for the theorisation and study of heterosexual relationships, it has gained an awkward popularity in the literature on same-sex relationships and families. I assume it is due to the fact that Giddens has positioned gay men and lesbians so benignly as the vanguards of the pure relationship that the concept has continued to provide the theoretical frame for writings on gay male and lesbian relationships.[14] Because lesbians and gay men have always been free from constricting relationship norms, Giddens claims, they have pre-perceived the conditions of the post-traditional society in their experience. He defines them as "pioneers" and "prime everyday experimenters," and argues that "[t]hey have for some while experienced what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples."[15] According to Giddens, an endorsement of egalitarian relationship patterns is at the heart of these "everyday experiments" in living.

> Gay women and men have preceded most heterosexuals in developing relationships, in the sense that the term has come to assume today, when applied to personal life. For they have to 'get along' without traditionally established frameworks of marriage, in conditions of relative equality between partners.[16]

Moreover, Giddens credits lesbians and gay men with being the arch-inventors of a democratic culture of recreational or "episodic sexuality," as it has blossomed, for example, in gay male cruising and bathhouse culture.

B. Henning Bech: "Liberty, Equality and Maleness"

It is no wonder that Henning Bech explicitly refers to Giddens' arguments about the pure relationship, when he praises the intrinsically democratic character of gay male casual sex in his book *When Men Meet. Homosexuality and Modernity*. Bech stresses the implicitly democratic element in gay male gazing, cruising and anonymous or casual sexuality: "[T]here is something democratic about the gaze, insofar as it ensures a certain equality, independence and free choice between the parties."[17] Sex without threatening expectation, he argues, can be more playful, artistic and eccentric. At the same time, friendship networks (often including former sex-partners) provide the necessary social and emotional security, while love has been re-coded in a way that allows for the creation of consciously open or non-monogamous relationships. The homosexual "way of life" has, thereby, given rise to a new sense of individual freedom based on a condition of "liberty, equality and maleness."[18]

Although I would like to credit Bech for challenging the common pathologisation of gay male sex and eroticism that is so common in heterosexist academic and popular discourses by claiming them as a cultural achievement, he fails to consider in his description any power relations (such as the ones around race, ethnicity, class, gender and dis/ability) in his idealistic description of gay male relationships or sexual encounters. Bech's affinity with Giddens' model of the pure relationship, further derives from his conviction that gay men's experience will finally be universalised in the course of a process of accelerated post/modernisation. Ever since the category of homosexuality came into being in the 19th century, modernity has expressed itself in its most unrestricted form in the "homosexual experience." The major features of the "homosexual existence," according to Bech, evolve from the fact that homosexuality as concept and as subject position came into being "as a problem." As a consequence, the homosexual's sense of self and his relationship to society have been tinged by feelings of wrongness, uneasiness and loneliness. This problematised self-identity and, moreover, the confrontation with state surveillance and the subjugation to medical monitoring, treatment and categorisation, have resulted in a condition of permanent observedness. This experience led to a variety of emotional, cultural and social responses, inclusive of a sense of displacement, a specific sensitivity, camp, the sexualisation of everyday life in the city, social and political networking. Many of these "essentially modern" conditions, such as urbanisation, the increase of surveillance techniques and the growth of self-observation (as mediated through the cultures of psychotherapy and self-help), are increasingly impacting on heterosexual life worlds, too. In the realm of the intimate, Bech argues, the traits of homosexualisation are obvious: "[t]hey, too, [i.e., *heterosexuals*] experience promiscuity, broken relationships and serial monogamy and they establish networks of friends rather than relatives."[19] The "disappearance of the homosexual" (as a problem, as a category or as a distinctive way of life) will stand at the end of this modernisation process.

C. Jeffrey Weeks: Equality in the Last Instance

Jeffrey Weeks, too, has in the recent past argued extensively with the pure relationship to make his points about "intimate democratisation" and the pluralisation of sexual cultures. While he has always acknowledged the validity of the feminist critiques of the concept, he has for a long time defended the concept's application to the lesbian and gay context. Against the backdrop of a global transformation of intimacy along the lines of detraditionalisation, secularisation and individualisation, gays and lesbians "are by necessity in the vanguard" and have pioneered current changes in sexuality and relationship life. Even if he acknowledges that same-sex relationships are compromised by all kinds of power relations, Weeks claims that they are, "in principle," relationships chosen by free agents.[20]

A similar ambivalence with regard to the pure relationship concept has shaped the empirical work into "non-heterosexual" relationships and families of choice that Jeffrey Weeks has conducted in conjunction with Catherine Donovan and Brian Heaphy.[21] While the authors concede that egalitarian relationships are rarely achieved, they read a strong commitment to egalitarian and mutual relationships in non-heterosexuals' narratives on intimacy: "The key issue, we nevertheless argue, is the commitment to striving for an equal relationship, which is the prime characteristic of non-heterosexual ways of being."[22] Although the authors reject the thesis of the pure relationship as a descriptive marker of empirical reality, they embrace its claim that gay men and lesbians invest to a much higher degree than other groups in emotional democratisation. The pure relationship is redefined as a primarily normative concept on the level of non-heterosexual discourse or culture. It is their firm commitment to egalitarianism that sets non-heterosexuals apart from heterosexuals.

> Non-heterosexuals feel they have more open possibilities for two reasons: first, greater choice and openness in their relationships and second, the belief that they can escape many of the structural differences, especially those of heterosexuality, which limit traditional relationships.[23]

Their relationships are presented as advanced in so far as they have resolved issues around gender power, because many non-heterosexual women and men have consciously attempted to shape their relationships in opposition to assumed heterosexual models. I do not doubt that most people in same-gender or gender-queer relationships relate more equally in terms of gender. But are non-heterosexuals, therefore, really closer to the egalitarian ideal? Is the fact that most non-heterosexuals want egalitarian relationships really more important than the fact that their relationships often are not – as Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan repeatedly imply? Although the authors name and discuss other axes of power within intimate relationships, such as class, race/ethnicity and access to social capital, they do not develop the same analytical depths as in their focus on gender. The thesis of an enhanced non-heterosexual egalitarianism clearly prioritises gender at the expense of other divisions.

Apart from such a prioritisation of gender as the major source of power, the thesis of non-heterosexual emotional democratisation further stems from the authors' endorsement of the detraditionalisation theories outlined by Giddens, Beck, Beck-Gernsheim and Weeks himself. The break up of community structures in capitalist Western societies and the loosening of normative life expectations throws individuals back on themselves when faced with life (style) decisions, the authors argue. In these times of moral uncertainty, people invest to a much higher degree in the creation of mutual, egalitarian and democratic relationships.

Against the backdrop of a paradigm, according to which detraditionalisation and modernisation equal reflexive individualisation, concepts like agency, choice, creativity and self-invention gain enormous prominence. While the authors are cautious to always highlight the structural context that inevitably limits agency, the modernisation model tends to tip the delicate balance in the complex interrelation of structure/agency strongly towards the side of agency. Even non-heterosexuals cannot exist unaffected by the norms of dominant heterosexuality and the ones embedded in the hegemonic forms of the subcultures created by themselves. The exaggeration of the notion of detraditionalisation forecloses a perspective on the persistence of certain traditions and the creation of new ones. This is why post/modernisation theories fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of power and do not sufficiently take account of the power effects of difference and normativity around a broader range of social divisions. In contradistinction, they tend to exaggerate choice and play down the power dynamics in relationships around the social divisions of gender, race, ethnicity and class.

4. The Racialisation of Modernity in Post/modernisation Theories

At the heart of most meta-narratives of the transformation of intimate cultures lies the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. In its hegemonic conceptualisations, modernity has derived its meanings from the symbolism of the binaries modern/primitive or modern/traditional.[24] The concepts of modernity are thereby discursively racialised, spatialised and temporalised. As a consequence, modernity has been coded as Western, European and White. A serious problem with most detraditionalisation theories is that they tend to continue to construct the West as the motor of change. This is usually paired with an ideology of the belatedness of non-Western societies.[25] This is the case with both the radical and the coexistence versions of detraditionalisation theory.

A. "A Lag of Decades:" the Representation of Racialised Populations and Diaspora Cultures

Most radical detraditionalisation theories have an exclusive focus on the West. Other localities and global relations, either do not come into the picture or, are evoked as an anti-pole to the definition of the post/modernising spin.[26] Even coexistence theories, with their emphasis on uneven and contingent temporalities and developments in general, do not usually exceed the racialised symbolism of hegemonic narration of post/modernity. Although the simultaneous presence of traditional and modern or postmodern intimacies or sexual cultures is assumed, the labels traditional and modern/postmodern still tend to be attributed according to a racialised or ethnicised mapping of social realities. For example, Ken Plummer sees "traditional intimacies" persisting primarily in the relational practices of the elderly population or the majority of families "outside the West."[27] Race and ethnicity provide nodal points for Franz X. Eder's, Lesley Hall's and Gert Hekma's sketch of the cultural history of Europe, in their introduction to the edited volume *Sexual Cultures in Europe. National Histories*.[28] The authors assume the coexistence of a plurality of sexual cultures in Europe based on region, degrees of urbanisation, gender, generation and social class. This diversity of sexual cultures, they argue, has been further reinforced by immigration which has significantly "diversified the sexual kaleidoscope of urban centres."[29]

The authors stress two effects of immigration on European sexual cultures: (a) diversification and enrichment and (b) the reinforcement of divergent temporalities. On the one hand, they claim that immigrants from other European countries and from African, Asian, and American nations "have implanted foreign cultural seeds in the urban centres and contributed to racial, cultural and sexual syncretism." Being rather fond of cultural hybridity and inter-raciality, they conclude in a quite exoticising fashion that: "[t]his will certainly enrich the language of lust and love."[30] At the same time, the authors seem to imply that there is also a problem related to this kind of immigration. The traditional moralities articulated in diaspora cultures have slowed down the process of modernisation. The authors concede that, to a certain degree, the path of modernisation in Europe has been uneven anyway.

Like Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, they attest a lack of modernisation to the (ex-Communist) Eastern European countries.[31] This involves the claim that, for example, Russia has remained untouched by most of the sexual changes linked to Enlightenment, early sexology or the sexual revolution. However, according to the authors, not only Russia, but also most Eastern European countries have missed the modernising developments which the rest of Europe has undergone over the last decades. The same applies to immigrant or diaspora cultures in Western European countries:

> The modernisation of the East has been very partial. The same is true for many groups which have immigrated to Europe recently. These cultures may be contemporary, but in certain ways they face a lag of decades. That may not be too important, as it is easy to adapt to the newest sexual theories and practices. But on the other hand, the minds of people change rather slowly and, when it comes to the moulding of people's sexual opinions and practices, a retardation of some decades is a real disadvantage.[32]

The presence of ethnic minorities (inclusive of East Europeans) in West Europe is clearly depicted as the presence of the traditional in the modern. The thesis of the backward character of immigrant sexual cultures has strong affinities with - and the potential to reinforce - discourses on cultural conflict that blame immigrants for inhibiting further liberalisation of sexual mores. Generalising and homogenising claims about an allegedly patriarchal or sexist nature of certain ethnic and racial groups' "culture" has been a salient feature of racist discourses in Europe throughout the last few decades.[33] After September-11, this theme has emerged as a particularly strong feature of specific forms of racism that are articulated within anti-Islamic discourses. This allows Europeans, with a hegemonic ethnic or cultural background, not only to project the sexism, but also (to a much stronger degree than years ago) the homophobia prevalent in European countries onto Islamic or Muslim culture.[34] Similar arguments have surfaced in the gay and lesbian movements and given rise to a kind of "homonationalism," such as it can be identified in the campaign against Islamic fundamentalism by Peter Tatchell, the most prominent speaker of the British activist group *OutRage!*[35] Racialised assumptions about modernity are at the heart of argumentative patterns that present conflicts about gender relations and sexual ethics as a matter of a "clash of civilisations."[36]

B. Rewriting Classical Modernisation Narratives: the "West" and the Promise of Diversity and Democracy

In most cases, meta-narratives on detraditionalisation do not have much to say about the multi-ethnic and multi-racial character of the fast modernising Western societies they are talking about. If they do, they tend to stereotype the racialised and ethnicised sexualities and intimacies as traditional or even backward and intolerant. I think Lynn Jamieson is quite right, when she claims that the thesis of the transformation of intimacy simply re-models problematic assumptions at the heart of earlier generations of "classical" modernisation theories that were hegemonic within British and U.S. family sociology from the 1950s to the 1970s. This generation of modernisation theories framed the development of modern familial forms of intimacy as a process of increasing democratisation that reached its height within the model of the companionate marriage.[37] Book titles such as *The Family: From Institution to Companionship*, *The Symmetrical Family*, *From Patriarchy To Partnership* reveal that democratisation was a salient theme in family sociological writings of these decades.[38] Since modernisation theories further frequently drew upon an evolutionist understanding of history they assumed that, finally, this democratic "modern Western family" would establish itself as a universal model on a global scale. Ronald Fletcher's concluding remarks in the second edition of his book on the British family powerfully illustrate this widely held belief:

> Throughout the world in the twentieth century, the new type of family we know in Britain is becoming universal - it is becoming the universal family of mankind. And this rests everywhere on the spread of industrializaton, improvements in material and moral welfare, and the securing in every society of human rights and the principle of social justice…After millennia of separating differences and widely held different levels of social development, the unity of mankind is within our grasp; it is within the sight of achievement. The ideas of mankind are now - within the bounds of realisation.[39]

Such accounts have been discredited as myths by (among others) feminist scholars, who blamed them for ignoring gender power as a constitutive factor of the family experience.[40] Critics have further pointed out that these theories have reinforced the erroneous and normative notion of a homogenous family culture that is derived from the generalisation of heterosexual, white, middle class family or relationship practices.[41] Others have argued that the propagation of a scenario that endorses the universalisation Western values, driven by the spread of Enlightenment and industrialisation, qualifies these theories as racist and culturally imperialist.[42]

Although contemporary post/modernisation theories are based on a similar West-centric logic, they have broken with other assumptions central to this earlier generation of theories. The vision of the universalisation of a particular family type has clearly been abandoned. On the contrary, contemporary post/modernisation theories hypothesise the pluralisation of relationship and family forms on the global scale. The new credo is diversity, fluidity, unpredictability and instability. This fact leads Judith Stacey to claim that the emergence of this "postmodern family condition" signals the end of any belief in the logical progression of history in stages.[43] However, in my opinion, contemporary post/modernisation theories have mostly not succeeded in critically deconstructing the notion of history as linear progression. They deploy narrative schemes that mostly follow a crude periodisation into the "premodern," "modern" and "postmodern." Within this narrative structure, it (still) appears as if post/modernity has come to mark the final stage of the historical development - not by bringing about a future family type, but a future model of plurality and diversity.

Despite the strong emphasis on reflexivity, most post/modernisation theorists have not been reflective enough on the racialised temporalities that their central concepts imply. Chetan Bhatt argues that sociological and political analyses that rely on a categorical distinction between tradition and modernity cannot grasp the significant cultural formations in most societies across the globe.[44] In the face of the histories of colonialism, imperialism and capitalist globalisation, the term "traditional" has finally lost its potential for meaningful explanation. Few "Third World" countries could these days be labelled "traditional," in any meaningful way, Bhatt maintains. Usually, they show traces of all the characteristics originally claimed to be the prime determinants of modernity: organisation as a nation-state, constitutionality, cultural nationalism, urbanisation, capitalist markets, militarisation, informal surveillance, civil society institutions, enfranchisement and the presence of forms of nuclear family patterns. The social, economic, cultural and political formations of these societies cannot be said to be "traditional" - since they have not existed in this way before. Colonialism, imperialism, globalising capitalism and exploitation have altered most "non-Western" societies profoundly. Bhatt's analysis shows up the bankruptcy of epistemological perspectives that evolve around the notion of a Western teleological modernity. It is, therefore, of enormous importance to develop a theoretical outlook that bears the potential to overcome the ranking of racialised temporalities implicit in the modernity/traditional dichotomy. This can only be achieved through a radical reconceptualisation of the concepts modernity and postmodernity in social theory.[45]

5. Discussion: Differences that Matter

In this chapter, I have critically engaged with sociological theories that describe gay men and lesbians as the vanguard of a self-democratising late modern or postmodern relationship culture. The depiction is frequently dependent on a repertoire of assumptions derived from sociological meta-theorising on the conditionality of modernity or postmodernity. Detraditionalisation and individualisation are among the core concepts of the post/modernisation theories that are currently en vogue in European debates within the sociology of sexuality. Their interconnection is almost always explained in a way that suggests an increase of choice in the biography of individuals. "Choice, once the rarest and most calamitous of human experiences becomes an everyday experience in all aspects of social life and mandates equally unprecedented occasions for self-reflexivity, the self scrutinizing itself," argues, for example, William Simon.[46] The claim of a multiplication of choices is also the kernel of Anthony Giddens' theory of the emergence of the pure relationship. It is the centrality of choice and agency in most detraditionalisation theories that justifies the characterisation of much of this work as "liberal postmodern theory."[47] The analytical centrality of choice suggests a single, autonomous, emotionally and economically independent, rationally acting subject: "Choice is an individualistic and, if you will, bourgeois notion that focuses on the subjective power of an 'I' to formulate relationships to people and things, untrammelled by worldly constraints", avers, for example, Kath Weston.[48] By replicating the salient ideological tropes of consumer capitalism, the discourse of choice has given rise to a reconceptualisation of politics as "lifestyle politics."

Despite the common celebration of difference, liberal postmodernism thereby fails to take account of the "differences that matter." According to Sara Ahmed, this indeterminacy and "unboundedness" of (liberal) postmodernist discourse "has an hegemonic function - it is a way of bringing differential and contradictory phenomena back into a single reference point or meaning," she argues. "Here, every-thing, in the event of being named postmodern, becomes just any-thing like any other-thing."[49] One of the dangers of contemporary post/modernisation theories, therefore, consists in their tendency to erase the significance of certain categories of difference (such as race, class, gender, sexuality) from the repertoire of the sociological analysis of intimacy and sexuality.

Postmodern theory tends to oppose any claims to validity of so called "grand narratives," which are debunked as totalising and authoritarian strategies for the production of truth.[50] However, obliviant of this critique, the post/modernisation narratives discussed in this article recapitulate a lot of the problematic assumptions that structured modernist tales on history and progress. The racialisation of the dichotomy between modernity and tradition, around which the meanings are organised, reveals a lack of awareness regarding the local and global power relations and the racist discourses they depend upon. The capacity for progress and democratisation tends to be located in Western societies and/or its white, non-racialised populations. "Non-western societies" or racialised populations in the West get stylised as the bearers of tradition, gender oppression, and/or homophobia. Post/modernisation narratives that present gay men and lesbians as the forerunners of sexual democratisation tend to build upon a whole range of problematic assumptions that render them insensitive to power relationships, both on the micro and macro levels of social analysis. In order to avoid crude misrepresentations of certain groups of subjects and the intimate and sexual cultures they are engaging in, we are in urgent need of sociological perspectives that can capture the complexities and subtleties of the "interlocking systems of oppression" around, for example, gender, sexuality, race and class in people's intimate and sexual lives. Sources for the development of such approaches can be found in the work on intersectionality and positionality that take their major stimulus from the political and theoretical debates among women and queer people of colour.[51]

Notes

1. Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 243.

2. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995); Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, "On the Way to a Post-Familial Family - From a Community of Need to Elective Affinities," *Theory, Culture and Society* 15 (1998): 53-70.

3. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992); Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995); Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, *Same-Sex Intimacies* (London: Routledge, 2001); Henning Bech, "Citysex: Representing Lust in Public," *Theory, Culture and Society* 15 (1998): 215-242; Henning Bech, *When Men Meet* (Oxford: Polity, 1997); Ken Plummer, "The Square of Intimate Citizenship: Some Preliminary Proposals," *Citizenship Studies* 5 (2001): 227-253; Ken Plummer, "Intimate Choices: 'Getting a Life" in a Late Modern World," in *Theory and Society: Understanding the Present*, eds. Gary Browning, A. Halcli and F. Webster (London: Sage, 2000), 432-444; Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Gunter Schmidt and Bernhard Strauß, eds. *Sexualität und Spätmoderne* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1998); Gunter Schmidt, *Sexuelle Verhältnisse* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1998).

4. Giddens, 1992; Bech, 1997, 1998; Weeks, 1995, 2000; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001; Jeffrey Weeks, Catherine Donovan, and Brian Heaphy, *Families of Choice: Patterns of Non-Heterosexual Relationships* (London: School of Education and Social Science, Southbank University, 1996).

5. See Weeks, 1995, 2000; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001; Andrew K. T. Yip, "Gay Male Christian Couples and Sexual Exclusivity," *Sociology* 3 (1997): 289-306; Elisabeth B. Silva and Carol B. Smart, eds. *The New Family?* (London: Sage, 1999); Carol B. Smart and Bren Neale, eds. *Family Fragments* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999). The modernisation theories of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim and Giddens differ quite significantly in detail. Although I will briefly mention some of these differences in this article, I will not be able to provide an exhaustive comparison. For discussion, see, for example, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, eds. *Reflexive Modernization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

6. Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

7.Giddens, 1992; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Anthony Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society," in *Reflexive Modernization*, eds. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), 56-109; Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage, 1992); Ulrich Beck, *Die Erfindung des Politischen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993); Ulrich Beck and Wolfgang Bonß, eds. *Die Modernisierung der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001); Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization* (London: Sage, 2002); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); Zygmunt Bauman, "A Sociological Theory of Postmodernity," *Thesis* 11 (1991): 33-46; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1996).

8. See also David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

9. Paul Heelas, "Introduction: Detraditionalization and its Rivals," in *Detraditionalization*, eds. Paul Heelas, Scott Lash and Paul Morris (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 1-20, p. 2.

10. Plummer, 2000, 2001.

11. Giddens, 1991, 1992; Weeks, 1995; Weeks, 1998, 2000.

12. Jamieson, 1998; Lynn Jamieson, "Intimacy Transformed? A Critical Look at the 'Pure Relationship'," *Sociology* 33 (1999): 477-494.

13. Silva and Smart, 1999; Smart and Neale, 1999.

14. See Bech, 1997; Weeks, 1995; Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1996; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001; Yip, 1997.

15. Giddens, 1992, 135.

16. Ibid., 15.

17. Bech, 1997, 105-106.

18. Ibid., 142. Bech limits his engagement with lesbian culture and its relevance for a theory of modernity to one paragraph. Because lesbians and gay men faced similar modes of oppression, he argues, we could expect them to develop similar cultural practices as gay men (i.e. promiscuity, anonymous sex and camp styles. Bech explains the fact that they have not done this to the same degree with the argument that, as a "species," lesbians "have not lived with 'the conditions of modern life' for so long." Due to the experience of economic disadvantage they have furthermore not lived "as close" to these modern conditions (Ibid., 136). Bech's thesis that gay men represent the true vanguard of modernisation, thus, partially rests on the theory of an arrested development of lesbians.

19. Bech, 1997, 195.

20. In this order: Weeks, 2000, 243; 1995, 35.

21. The research draws on life history interviews with 96, mainly, but not exclusively, white, middle class "non-heterosexual" men and women, conducted in 1995 and 1996. A range of publications has emerged from this study, including a theoretical literature review, several articles and the book *Same-Sex Intimacies.*

22. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001, 109.

23. Ibid., 50.

24. See Steven Crook, Jan Pakulski, and Malcolm Waters, *Postmodernization. Change in Advanced Society* (London: Sage, 1992); Giddens, 1995; Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, "Individualization and 'Precarious Freedoms:' Perspectives and Controversies of a Subject-Oriented Sociology," in *Detraditionalization,* eds. Paul Heelas, Scott Lash and Paul Morris (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 23-48.

25. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993); Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps* (Harmondsworth: The Penguin Press, 2000); Chetan Bhatt, *Liberation and Purity* (London: UCL Press, 1997); Alastair Bonnet, *White Identities* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997); Antoinette Burton, ed. *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* (London: Routledge, 1999).

26. See Weeks, 1995; Bauman, 1998; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 1996

27. Plummer, 2000.

28. Franz X. Eder, Lesley Hall and Gert Hekma, "Introduction," in *Sexual Cultures in Europe. National Histories*, eds. Franz X. Eder, Lesley Hall and Gert Hekma (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 1-29.

29. Ibid., 18.

30. Ibid., 18.

31. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, modernity has affected the populations in many Eastern European and Asian countries only since these countries abruptly "open[ed] their doors to Western ways of life." In the mid-1990s, the authors see the "[p]eople in the former GDR, in Poland, Russia or China…caught up in a dramatic plunge into modernity," Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996, 24.

32. Eder, Hall and Hekma, 1999, 18.

33. Umut Erel, "Transnationale Intime Bürgerrechte - Eine Dekonstruktion von Identitätszuschreibungen, Sexueller Moderne und Ethnischer Tradtion," in *Heteronormativität. Empirische Studien zu Geschlecht, Sexualität und Macht*, ed. Jutta Hartmann, Christian Klesse, Peter Nancy Wagenknecht, Bettina Fritzsche and Kristina Hackmann, (Wiesbaden: VS, 2007); Birgit Rommelspacher, *Schuldlos-Schuldig?*

(Hamburg: Konkret Literaturverlag, w.d); Irmgard Pinn and Marlies Wehner, *Europhantasien* (Duisburg: Diss, 1995).

34. The current debate about the alleged lack of "integration" of immigrants in German society produces exactly such kind of racist hegemony. The alleged incommensurability of "German values" with "Islamic culture" is currently presented as the major problem in this debate. Early into the year 2006, the states of Baden-Wuerttemberg and Hesse issued guidelines for the naturalisation process in order to implement frames for the examination and surveillance of prospective German citizens (on the 1 January and the 14 March respectively). Applicants are subjected to a set of questions regarding ethics and politics that are supposed to make sure that only such persons may gain citizenship are those who fully subscribe to the values articulated in the constitution. Both guidelines list questions regarding gender democracy. The guideline issued in Baden-Wuerttemberg, further contains questions regarding the acceptance of homosexuality. This practice sets up a discourse in which sexism and homophobia get externalised and projected onto racialised "others," and in the current discursive context, more specifically, on the Muslim population. See entry "Einbürgerungstest" on the Wikipedia site: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einb%C3%BCrgerungstest> (05 June 06); See further: Gert Hekma, "Imams and Homosexuality: A Post-gay debate in The Netherlands," *Sexualities* 5 (2002): 237-248.

35. I adopted the term "homonationalism" from Jasbir Puar, "On Terror: Secularism, Queerness, Affect," *Keynote Lecture,* "Out Of Place: Interrogating the Silences in Queerness/Raciality," Lancaster University, 24 March 2006. See further: Jin Haritaworn and Tamsila Tauqir, "Gay Imperialism. An Intervention in the debate on Muslim Homophobia," *Next Genderation*, (forthcoming). <http://www.nextgenderation.net/writings.html>. The article will also be published in *SchwarzSehen: Kritische Perspektiven von People of Color auf Rassismus, Kulturpolitik und Widerstand in Deutschland,* eds. Dimitria Clayton, Kien Nghi Ha, Nicola Laure al-Samarai and Sheila Mysorekar (Berlin: Unrast, 2007).

36. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

37. Jamieson, 1998, 1999. See, for example: Ronald Fletcher, *Britain in the Sixties. The Family and Marriage* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962) and the second edition of the same text, 1966; Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (Harmondswoth: Penguin, 1970); Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family* (Harmondswoth: Penguin, 1975); Peter Willmott and Michael Young, *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (London: The New English Library, 1960).

38. Partially my translation: Ernest Burgess and Harvey Locke, *The Family: from Institution to Companionship* (New York: American Book Company, 1945); Young and Willmott, 1975; Michael Mitterauer and Reinhard Sieder, *Vom Patriarchat zur Partnerschaft* (Müchen: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1991).

39. Fletcher, 1966, 231-232.

40. Jamieson, 1998; Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, "Social Reconstruction and Companionate Marriage, 1945-59," in *The Sociology of the Family. A Reader*, ed. Graham Allan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 12-35.

41. Stacey, 1996; Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997); Stephanie Coontz, Maya Parson and Gabrielle Raley, eds. *American Families. A Multicultural Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

42. Stacey, 1996; Finch and Summerfield, 1999; Francessa Kluge, "'Oh to be in England:' The British Case Study," in *Woman-Nation-Sate*, ed. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (London: Macmillan, 1989), 16-35.

43. Stacey, 1996, 7-8.

44. Bhatt, 1997.

45. See Gilroy, 1993, 2000.

46. Simon, 1996, 7.

47. Although the term "postmodernity" is rejected by some of the authors under discussion here, their work is frequently read as being illustrative of a set of liberal postmodernist assumptions due to its emphasis on radical change and fragmentation. See Rose 1998, 1999; Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

48. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 110.

49. Sara Ahmed, *Differences that Matter. Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

50. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1987).

51. See Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Contextualizing Feminism: Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions," *Feminist Review* 15 (1983): 62-75; Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora. Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1995); Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," in *Sexual Identities, Queer Politics*, ed. Mark Blasius (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 200-227; Jin Haritaworn, "Jenseits von Homonormativität. Eine queer of colour Kritik am Beispiel von 'Thailändischsein,'"in *Heteronormativität. Empirische*

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Love at a Distance: Kafka and the Sirens[1]

Ruth Martin

Abstract

In the short story "The Silence of the Sirens," Kafka rewrites the myth of how Odysseus escapes the sirens in his own unique style. I will argue that, far from being an idiosyncratic reading of Homer, Kafka's text uses the rich history of the myth to explore an idea prevalent in the Austrian sexual psychology of his day: *Distanzliebe*, or love at a distance. With its origins in "courtly" love poetry of the Middle Ages, *Distanzliebe* plays upon the mutual exclusivity of idealised (male) love and proximity to its object. The idea is articulated most radically in Otto Weininger's book *Sex and Character*, a text that voiced the underlying misogyny of the times in its attempt to solve the "Woman Question." Love at a distance is a paradigm for both Kafka's story and his relationships with women, though it also has a wider application. Kafka's friend and executor, Max Brod, uses it as a metaphor for racial and cultural relations in the twentieth century. He sees the relationship as paradoxical, since: "where love is there can be no distance – and where there is distance, no love." I will examine Kafka's story as a metaphor through which the paradox and its implications may best be grasped. **Key Words:** Kafka, Weininger, sirens, love, misogyny, modernism.

1. Franz Kafka: The Silence of the Sirens

This chapter examines Kafka's story "Das Schweigen der Sirenen," a short piece written in 1917 in the author's notebooks and published posthumously. Since I will be examining it in detail, I begin with a translation of the story in its entirety.[2]

> The following serves as proof that inadequate, even childish measures, may serve as the means of salvation. To protect himself from the sirens, Odysseus plugged his ears with wax and had himself bound to the mast. Naturally, every traveller before him could have done something similar, except those whom the sirens managed to tempt even from a long way off, but it was known throughout the world that this was of no help whatsoever. The song of the sirens pierced through everything, and the passion of those they seduced would have broken through much more than mast and chains. But Odysseus did not think about this, although he had perhaps heard of it. He trusted completely in his handful of wax and his length of chain, and in innocent

joy over his little stratagem sailed out towards the sirens.

Now the sirens have an even more dreadful weapon than their song, namely their silence. Admittedly, it has never happened, but it is conceivable that someone might have escaped from their singing, but certainly not from their silence. Were this unthinkable escape to succeed, the feeling of having triumphed over them by one's own strength would result in the most extraordinary arrogance.

And in fact, as Odysseus approached them, these powerful songstresses did not sing, be it that they thought that this enemy could be vanquished only by their silence, or be it that the look of bliss on the face of Odysseus, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and his chains, made them forget their singing entirely.

But Odysseus, so to speak, did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and that he alone was saved from hearing it. For a fleeting moment he saw the movement of their throats, their deep breaths, their eyes filled with tears, their half-open mouths, but he believed that these gestures accompanied the arias which died away unheard around him. Soon, however, all this slipped out of sight as he fixed his gaze on the distance, the sirens literally vanished before him, and at the very moment when he was closest to them he was no longer aware of them.

But they - lovelier than ever - stretched their necks and turned, let their gruesome hair flutter in the wind, flexed their claws freely on the rocks. They no longer had any desire to seduce; all they wanted was to retain as long as they could the radiance that fell from Odysseus' great eyes. If the sirens had possessed consciousness they would have been annihilated at that moment. But they remained as they had been; all that had happened was that Odysseus had escaped them.

Incidentally, a codicil to the foregoing has also been handed down. Odysseus, it is said, was so cunning, was such a fox, that not even the goddess of fate could see into his heart. Perhaps he had really noticed - although this possibility is beyond human comprehension - that the sirens were silent, and had

> merely used the pretense of ignorance as a sort of shield against them and the gods.

2. The Sirens

In 1911, six years before Kafka jotted down this piece, Norman Douglas wrote:

> The Sirens, says one, are the charms of the Gulf of Naples. No, says another; they were chaste priestesses. They were neither chaste nor priestesses, but exactly the reverse. They were sunbeams. They were perilous cliffs. They were a race of peaceful shepherds. They were symbols of persuasion. They were cannibals. They were planetary spirits. They were prophets. They were a species of Oriental owl. They were the harmonious faculties of the soul. They were penguins.[3]

The sirens are best known for failing to entrap Homer's Odysseus with their irresistible song, but their appearances elsewhere in mythology do not add up to a coherent picture, and unlike the overwhelming majority of Greek gods and monsters, they seem to have no universally agreed genealogy. They are most commonly thought to be the offspring of the river-god Akhelous and one of the muses (probably Melpomene or Terpsichore), which tells us no more than that they are associated with water and music. One legend has them as the playmates of Persephone, when she was abducted by Hades, their bodies were transformed into those of birds so that they could search the world for their lost friend.[4] Another tells that they once challenged the muses to a singing competition. When the sirens lost, the muses plucked out their feathers and banished them to the island (usually thought to be Capri) where they are encountered by Homer's Odysseus. In later Greek tales they are said to guide souls to the afterlife with their voices. Siegfried de Rachowiltz suggests that "It was precisely because neither the singer of tales nor his audience knew much about the Sirens that Homer was able to turn them into such suggestive and ambivalent presences."[5] This ambiguity is the quality which has allowed both the physical appearance and the symbolic significance of the sirens to be extensively developed and revised in the 2,800 years since the Odyssey was composed. It is also what makes them such fertile material for Kafka's own brand of ambiguous, complex fiction.

The Homeric sirens are half-bird and half-human. Earlier depictions of the creatures on Greek earthenware see them sporting beards, but over the centuries their appearance became increasingly feminine.

Homer's sirens are almost certainly female. Nowhere in the Odyssey is this explicitly stated, but their objective, to prevent Odysseus from continuing his voyage home, and their means of attaining this, by attracting him with their singing and keeping him in (fatal) idleness in their corpse-strewn meadow, is very similar to that of Circe, the witch, and some of the epic's more pleasant female characters. The sirens are, however, storytellers and not sexual predators as they are in later descriptions. Their song tempts the hero with promises of the infinite knowledge they possess: they will sing to him of great deeds accomplished by the Achaeans and the Trojans during the siege of Troy, and of Odysseus' place in relation to a higher truth. As a consequence, this episode is in part an indication of the mythic or magical power of the poetic voice. Homer's sirens are also representative of uncultivated nature. They recline in a meadow scattered with unburied human remains, the latter an affront to the sensibilities of any civilised Greek. Circe also warns that the man who stays to listen to the sirens has no prospect of returning home to his wife and children, a picture of self-indulgence versus domesticity which pits the sirens against the accepted social structure. This last interpretation has remained the dominant version of the sirens myth: as purveyors of sensual pleasure, they represent the chaos that threatens social and moral order.

In later, Christian traditions across Europe, the sirens were employed as allegorical figures representing the temptations of heresy or pagan literature in the writings of Boethius (480-524A.D.) and Saint Augustine (354-430A.D.) amongst others. Siegfried de Rachewiltz chronicles the transformation of the sirens' appearance, as the church began to use them to signify not only heretical thought, literature and song, but "worldly pleasures in general, and the lure of the flesh in particular."[6] Images of the sirens which appeared on illustrated manuscripts and were carved on the facades and columns of medieval churches changed over the centuries: feathers receded to make way for a greater expanse of (female) human flesh, and although the creatures often retained their wings, fish-tails increasingly replaced their talons. Christian iconography slowly turned the siren into a mermaid, her plumage having finally been entirely lost to make way for the classic bifurcated tail still sported today by the siren on the Starbucks logo.[7] The irresistible allure of the mermaid has provided literature with fertile ground for the creation of a more modern mythology, a tradition particularly evident in German literature, where Nixes, Undines and other descendents of the Greek sirens continue to thrive. Dangerous water-women are especially abundant in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, from Goethe's *Fischer* and "Die neue Melusine" to La Motte Fouqué's *Undine,* and Clemens Brentano's poem "Zu Bacharach am Rheine," and this trend has its legacy in modernist literature. By the time the sirens reached fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century Europe, hundreds of years of folk-law and literature had transformed them from Homer's almost asexual bearers of infinite knowledge into powerful symbols of the Other, the mysterious world of the feminine in which it is death for any man to immerse himself. They were widely used during this period in erotically charged paintings (for example, those of Herbert Draper, John William Waterhouse and Otto Greiner), and in literature (James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Rilke's poem "The Sirens' Island"), as images of danger, mystery and Otherness, objects of forbidden love.

3. Kafka, Weininger and the Silent Siren

Kafka's sirens are in many ways products of the long tradition of water-women which had grown up in European literature and art in the time between ancient source and modern retelling. They are feminine in a way that suggests more recent sources, stretching their throats and parting their lips in a display of sensuality, which is one of the piece's most striking visual impressions. I would like to suggest, therefore, that "The Silence of the Sirens" represents a marriage of the original story of the power of the poetic voice with the idea of love at a distance, a marriage which is enabled by the historical transformation of siren into mermaid.

The first of these elements is perhaps the most obvious, although by its absence: Kafka's sirens are conspicuously silent, a fact further emphasised by the title which Max Brod appended to the piece. The sirens have no poetic voice, and the narrator (who in the original is Odysseus himself, as he recounts his adventures to Alkínoös and the Phaiàkians) has become a mere custodian of the legend. Silence, however, is described here as a weapon far more powerful than song, and the narrator adds that even if it were possible to survive exposure to the song of the sirens, their silence is something from which no man could conceivably escape. The implication is that the unspoken word, the possibility of "perfect song" is far more enticing than the reality of the sirens' voices could ever be. It is the passing sailor's own imagination which then torments and seduces him, and persuades him to leave his ship so that he may at last experience this perfect song. Odysseus, with his ears full of wax (another quite fundamental change made by Kafka to the original) is not subject to this torment. The story's third paragraph suggests that he escapes the sirens' silence because he does not hear it. He construes their gestures as belonging to a song that they are actually singing, and is therefore unaware of their more powerful weapon. The erotic intent in the description of the sirens' bodies is lost on him, as he reads their parted lips and straining throats as symptoms of the music he believes they are producing, and it is this misreading which saves him. The story as a whole raises the question of the nature of silence: Kafka asserts that Odysseus "did not hear their silence," as if it, like song, had a kind of presence of its own and a source in the person who chose not to express herself. A further complication comes at the end of the story, in a codicil which puts forward the possibility that Odysseus, so cunning that even the gods cannot see into his heart, may really have "heard" the silence of the sirens and merely pretended the naïveté which saved him. The possible interpretations of the sirens' silence have dominated criticism of Kafka's story, to the extent that it seems superfluous to add another here.[8] The idea of the "perfect song" is, however, relevant to my main theme, in that *Distanzliebe* is also based upon the projection of an ideal which is much more seductive than the reality of the object onto which it is projected.

The description of the sirens' silence and Odysseus' interpretation of their gestures takes up the first half of the story; the part which forms the focus of this investigation is the second half, beginning halfway through the third paragraph. As Odysseus' ship passes the sirens' island, he ceases to be aware of them, as he "fixe[s] his gaze on the distance." This far-sightedness is usually a characteristic attributed to the sirens themselves, their muse-like omniscience precluding knowledge of the present moment, and yet Kafka attributes it to Odysseus. A further complication comes in the next paragraph as, having passed from the gaze of Odysseus, the sirens forget their desire to seduce and think only of keeping the hero in their vision: "all that they wanted was to retain as long as they could the radiance that fell from Odysseus' great eyes." Although the sirens are acknowledged to be powerful, and indeed inescapable by all but Odysseus, as soon as he has escaped them there occurs a strange reversal of power-relations whereby the sirens are themselves seduced and left to languish on their rock. As the narrator points out, their annihilation following this episode is avoided only by their lack of consciousness. With this parting shot, Kafka deprives his sirens of every sort of power, including the power to destroy themselves.

I believe that this strange sequence of events is intimately related to certain ideas on gender and sexuality which informed the *Zeitgeist* of Kafka's age, most notably those which appear in Otto Weininger's book *Geschlecht und Charakter* (*Sex and Character*). Jacques Le Rider suggests that Viennese modernism should be understood in terms of a triangle of sexuality, Jewishness and questions of identity.[9] The rise of psychoanalysis, which placed sexuality at the core of an individual's process of psychic development and maturation, is symptomatic of the overwhelming concern with these issues, which also showed themselves in the literature and visual art of the time. *Sex and Character* interweaves sexuality, Jewishness and a gender-based notion of identity in a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary thesis. It was admired by a surprising number of

German and Austrian intellectuals, including Karl Kraus, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Robert Musil, Arnold Schönberg, Georg Trakl, Hermann Broch and Franz Kafka. The book was published in 1903, as sexual psychology was becoming a widely-recognised discipline, and by 1925 its popularity had occasioned twenty-five reprints. Its ideas are both misogynistic and anti-Semitic, but the work is a serious attempt, as David Luft points out, "to map every significant human problem on the polarities of gender."[10] In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Weininger, and his work, which at first glance seems to be the hate-fuelled delusions of an individual, has been accepted as "securely rooted in his epoch," an important window on the sociological, psychological and political views of sex and gender at the beginning of the twentieth century.[11] The book's main project was to address the "Woman Question,"[12] and it was in part a response to the call of early Austrian feminism for the emancipation of women. Weininger comes to the conclusion that women have no autonomous self, no soul, and instead live at the mercy of their sex drive, which (directly or indirectly) determines all their actions. They are therefore dependent on men. If women have no autonomous self, Weininger reasons, there is nothing to be emancipated, making feminism mere nonsense.

Two features of Weininger's theory are particularly noteworthy. The first is his concept of the fundamental "bisexuality" of all human beings, by which he refers not to sexual orientation but to the presence of both "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics in people of either sex. He defines two abstract characters, the "Absolute Man" and the "Absolute Woman." The former's actions are determined by reason alone, and he is capable of acts of genius; the latter is an entirely sexual, irrational being. Real individuals are a mixture of the two. The rare woman who demonstrates superior intellectual ability does so because she is more "masculine" than the average female, though of course never more masculine (and thus no more intelligent) than the most effeminate man. Bisexuality was not a new idea. Indeed, Weininger was careful to corroborate all his initial theories with philosophical or scientific evidence from thinkers both contemporary and historical. He argued for the theory so memorably, however, that he made it his own. The second feature is the analogy he makes between sex and race. The German word *Geschlecht,* which appears in the book's title, can mean both "sex" and "race," and Weininger suggests that femininity and Jewishness have many of the same qualities. In reaching beyond the issue of sexual identity and relationships to make analogies between these and the relations between different cultures, Weininger takes a step which is also crucial to my own argument. He demonstrates the link between hatred and fear of women, and hatred of what is more generally Other and therefore perceived as threatening to the dominant culture. The growing anti-Semitism in Austria and Germany during this period would lead to the demonisation of Jews, just as women had been demonised in the figure of the *Femme fatale*. The sirens are not merely representatives of another sex, but of another species, and the misunderstandings between them and Odysseus can also be interpreted as the result of the unbridgeable divide of race.

I do not wish to suggest that "The Silence of the Sirens" was directly influenced by Weininger; there is only one reference in Kafka's letters to suggest that he was familiar with the philosopher, and this does not occur until 1921, four years after the story was written.[13] It is, however, likely that Kafka was aware of Weininger's ideas by 1917 through Karl Kraus's journal *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*), even if he had not read *Sex and Character* itself, and his contemporaries and first readers would doubtless have known the book due to its popularity amongst the Austrian intelligentsia. "The Silence of the Sirens" certainly parallels the notions of femininity, love and desire expressed by Weininger, as an analysis of the sequence of events in the story's second half will demonstrate.

4. The Distant Gaze of Odysseus

As he approaches the sirens, but whilst he is still some way off, Kafka's Odysseus studies them avidly in an attempt to interpret their gestures. When he comes closer, he simply does not see them any more. This is the most fundamental point in the distinction Weininger makes between noble, edifying love and sexual desire. "Sexual attraction increases with physical proximity; love is strongest in the absence of the loved one; it needs separation, a certain distance, to preserve it."[14] Weininger separates love from physical desire to the extent that their objects are conceived as two different types of women: the one desired an ordinary, imperfect human being, the one loved an "ideally beautiful," "immaculate" woman, an idea, in other words, projected by the lover onto the beloved. Proximity to the object would entail the recognition of the "base femininity" within her, and so love, or more specifically, platonic love, can take place only at a distance.[15] Women, says Weininger, have no capacity for this sort of feeling, love is strictly a masculine emotion. This, of course, is a corruption of the tradition of what is now referred to as "courtly love," "courtly" because the idea originates in a medieval aristocratic milieu (although the term "l'amour courtois" was not coined until the late nineteenth century).[16] The poet, the lover, falls for an inaccessible lady, perhaps married or of royal blood. The lover is ennobled by his continual striving to attain the beloved through endless praise and worship. Although the beloved is assumed to be worthy of such treatment, what ennobles the lover is not the object of his devotion but the devotion itself, the service of an ideal. Courtly love may, however, result in consummation, once the hero has won his lady's heart through the great deeds his love has inspired. The most famous courtly romances, those of Tristan and Iseult, and of Lancelot and Guinevere, both take the path of secret consummation followed by subterfuge, the lovers' attempts to avoid detection, and a final catastrophe. By contrast, Weininger's idea of love depends upon the maintenance of the first stage of this tragic trajectory: admiration, longing and inspiration. In Kafka's story the wax in Odysseus' ears means that the sirens' song is only a projection of the hero's own ideas of the perfect song. In order to maintain the beauty of this idea, he cannot allow himself to come too close to it.

The idea of *Distanzliebe* is far from new. A version of it also appears in Goethe's tale about the sorrows of a lovelorn hero, young Werther. Kafka's sirens are, however, hardly comparable to Guinevere, Iseult, and Werther's Lotte: they are more modern *femmes fatale,* creatures who actively court the attentions of a lover and desire his destruction. In Tristan's tragic romance, it is the irresistible temptation and the impossibility of the love itself which proves the lovers' downfall; in mermaid literature, innocent men are lured to their doom by wicked, selfish or ignorant temptresses. Courtly love takes place between equals, the man ennobled by veneration and great deeds, the woman typically of noble birth as well as astonishing beauty. Those who fall prey to the sirens are either weak-minded or in some way desire their own destruction, and their "love" entails the loss of the self in an ocean of feminine otherness. It is Weininger who brings these two ideas together, both explicitly by suggesting that woman is most like the "soulless Undine,"[17] and by implying the danger involved in consummating love. Coming too close to one's love-object will allow a glimpse of the "base femininity" within her, and will turn a spiritually-minded man into the victim of his partner's animal sexuality. It is not by chance that Weininger invokes Undine, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's beautiful water sprite. Symbols and stories such as this allow the perpetuation of an idea in the cultural consciousness in a way that conceptual philosophy does not. As D.S. Wehr explains, "Symbols and images operate preverbally and prerationally and find their way into the thought-systems by which we live, including the ones society sometimes holds as the most rational," such as science or psychology.[18] The image of the siren or mermaid with her irresistible but deadly charms is a powerful symbol of the irrational fear and hatred of women which was a widespread phenomenon in fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century Europe, and for which Weininger sought to provide a scientific justification.

5. The Projection of the Ideal

The idea of the projection of a male ideal onto a love-object also prefigures one of the principle concepts of Jungian psychology. Jung argues that the unconscious is home to everything that is felt to be "not-I." In males, therefore, feminine qualities are relegated to the unconscious, and appear as what Jung calls the "anima." In the anima, repressed feminine qualities form a female character, the anima-image, which is usually projected onto women. When a man falls in love, he does not always fall in love with a woman, but with his own anima-image unconsciously projected onto his chosen mate.[19] The anima has different sources, but its archetypal *image* is determined, according to Jung, by the collective unconscious, which contains inherited symbols and images from myth, fairytale, art and religion. Appearing as a real woman in dreams and fantasies, the anima seduces and even endangers man, compelling him to enter the unfamiliar depths of his unconscious. The danger of immersion in the unconscious, which "hides living water, spirit that has become nature," is the loss of the conscious self. Jung even characterises the anima as "a siren, *melusina* (mermaid), wood-nymph, Grace, or Erlking's daughter, or a lamia or succubus, who infatuates men and sucks the life out of them."[20]

Neither Jung nor Weininger are particularly popular amongst literary theorists today. The renewal of interest in Weininger in recent years has been largely amongst historians, who see in *Sex and Character* the unique amalgamation of a number of important cultural phenomena.[21] As Gerald Stieg points out, "*Nowadays* decency would seem to forbid mentioning the names Kafka and Weininger in one breath, but historical truth forces one to commit such a sacrilege."[22] In the vast body of secondary literature on Kafka, only Stieg, Rainer Stach and Heinz Politzer have devoted any attention to the connection, and they have restricted themselves to a brief consideration of Kafka's novels. Weininger's unpopularity is almost certainly the reason for this quite striking aspect of Kafka's story having been overlooked in previous interpretations.

Kafka famously had a predilection for *Distanzliebe* in his own life, where the myth of the sirens provides a model for his personal relationships. A quote from a letter to Dr. Robert Klopstock demonstrates this clearly:

> [T]hese are the seductive voices of night, this is how the sirens sang. We do them an injustice if we think they intended to seduce. They were well aware that they had talons and barren wombs; that is why they lamented. They couldn't help it that their lament sounded so lovely.[23]

In this passage, the sirens appear as an analogy for “the girl’s letter,” which is “as lovely as it is abominable.”[24] Kafka conducted his relationships with women almost entirely through long, frequent letters, in which he urged intimacy but shied away from physical proximity. The sirens’ lack of a fertile womb, though their song is highly seductive, is suggestive of the terrible conflict Kafka felt between the desire to marry and have children, and the knowledge that this was impossible due to the devastating effect he believed it would have on his work. The siren-song of the physical world, promising happiness and fulfilment, is a song Kafka knows to be empty because he believes that domestic life would drain his potency as an author. In the diaries, he describes the intellectual purity he finds in solitude: “In me, by myself, without human relationship, there are no visible lies. The limited circle is pure.”[25] Whilst this is by no means a consistent personal view of contact with the physical world, it is also that held by K., the protagonist of Kafka’s novel *The Trial*. The women who aid him in his case present increasingly disturbing pictures of femininity: the wife of the court usher is, despite being attracted to K., carried away by a student without any resistance, presumably for sexual purposes. As Gerald Stieg notes, this portrayal corresponds to Weininger’s “prostitute” type, a woman who is interested in men indiscriminately and with no desire for children by them. Leni, the servant of K.’s lawyer, is apparently also attracted indiscriminately to all accused men, fulfilling Weininger’s suggestion that women do not understand male individuality and autonomy (not being possessed of it themselves), and desire only representatives of masculinity as a whole. She also has a small disfigurement which suggests a link to water, in that two of her fingers are webbed. The priest who addresses K. in the cathedral warns him of the dangers of seeking help in this way: “‘You cast about too much for outside help,’…‘especially from women. Don’t you see that it isn’t the right kind of help?’”[26] He explains to K. what the rather sordid nature of his associations with this series of women might have made a more perceptive man realise for himself**.** Not only are women not the source of “true” help, they distract him from the pursuit of truth.

Kafka, too, saw the physical presence of women as a distraction from the life of the mind. In a letter to his first fiancée, Felice Bauer, he reacted with horror to her suggestion that she would like to sit beside him as he worked: “Listen, in that case I could not write…For writing means revealing oneself to excess.”[27] Elias Canetti, in an essay written after the publication of these letters, traces the development of Kafka’s idea of Felice from the early picture of the woman as a muse, “security somewhere far off,” to the terrible threat of cohabitation and coitus in the days after their engagement.[28] The third Octavo Notebook, in which “The Silence of the Sirens” appears, was begun two days after Kafka’s final letter to Felice in 1917, in which he broke with her forever. Written days before the story's composition, a short, dream-like passage in Kafka's diary reads: "'No, let me alone! No, let me alone!' I shouted without pause all the way along the streets, and again and again she laid hold of me, again and again the clawed hands of the siren struck at my breast from the side or across my shoulder."[29] The siren is a recurring motif in Kafka's writing, both personal and fictional, and - whether explicit, as in the diaries, or implicit, as in his relationship with Felice Bauer - she is clearly an extremely potent symbol.

6. "Sexual Attraction Increases With Physical Proximity"

Women, says Weininger, are purely sexual creatures, "possessed by" their sexual organs and incapable of the higher idea of love. Kafka's sirens illustrate this: as Odysseus approaches, they are overcome by desire and forget their traditional purpose. They are also typical of Weiningerian femininity in other ways, since they wish only to retain "the radiance that fell from Odysseus' great eyes," in which, presumably, they see their own reflections. Weininger's remark that woman "can only value herself at the rate of the man who has fixed his choice on her" suggests that women need to see themselves reflected in men before they can have a sense of self-worth, and ultimately of self.[30]

This is related to the last puzzle in the story: the sirens' lack of consciousness. "If the sirens had possessed consciousness they would have been annihilated at that moment. But they remained as they had been; all that had happened was that Odysseus had escaped them."[31] Weininger puts forward the idea that the "Absolute Woman" (a figure which, however, is not consistently abstract and is often conflated with real women) lacks an ego. The Chinese, according to Weininger, deny that women have "a personal soul," and his own theory is not greatly different. Although he prefers to speak in more modern terms of woman's "ego" and "consciousness" (or absence thereof), he also declares that "Undine, the soulless Undine, is the platonic idea of woman. In spite of all bisexuality she most really resembles the actuality."[32] The water-sprite is the best image Weininger can find for the essential nature of woman, and in this he indicates just how fundamental the connection between water and the feminine is in the western mind. Jung makes the same identification when he speaks of "living water, spirit that has become nature" in the (male) unconscious, the home of the anima. The connection may stem from the development of the foetus in the womb, surrounded both by amniotic fluid and the body of its mother. Immersion in the feminine, the watery abyss of the unconscious, entails the loss of the self, a return to the state of the unborn child. In the figure of the mermaid, the connection becomes monstrous: water does not signify protective amniotic fluid but the cold, black depths of the sea, and the loss of the ego becomes the death of the body.

Weininger's fluid "Absolute Woman" is in a strict sense not even a monad. She "is always living in a condition of fusion with all the human beings she knows, even when she is alone."[33] In a series of extraordinary assumptions, he argues that women have no continuous memory, no narrative sense of self, and no grasp of cause and consequence. Kafka's all-powerful sirens might have been expected to commit suicide having been defeated, as they do in the *Argonautika* (when Jason escapes them), but since Kafka's sirens have no consciousness, no sense of cause and effect, they merely remain.

7. Cultural Analogies and the Dialectics of Love

I introduced Weininger with David Luft's recent comment that *Sex and Character* had a larger aim: "to map every significant human problem on the polarities of gender." This is true not only of Weininger, but of a whole generation of Austrian writers and thinkers. Edward Timms tells us: "In turn-of-the-century Vienna sexuality became the 'symbolic territory' where the fundamental issues of the age were debated: the crisis of individual identity, the conflicts between reason and irrationalism, between domination and subservience."[34] Weininger's connection of sex and race (*Geschlecht*) in his attribution of feminine qualities to the Jewish people, is echoed in the use of the sexual relation as a metaphor in the literature of the era. The heroine of Frank Wedekind's "Lulu" plays, for example, is displayed by the "Animal Tamer" in the prologue to *Erdgeist* (*Earth Spirit*) as a snake, whose destiny is to seduce and destroy. She is named "Nelly," "Eva" and "Mignon" by her lovers, who project onto her their fantasies of womanhood. Lulu (whose name also suggests Lilith, the first wife of Adam in the Jewish tradition), is an empty vessel into which meanings are poured, a prime example of the eternal mythologisation of femininity.

Max Brod, a member of Kafka's generation, writing in 1966, uses the "symbolic territory" of sexuality to discuss the possibilities for a harmonious relationship between Jews and Germans: "I call the central concept '*Distanzliebe*'. It does not only hold between Germans and Jews, but wherever two populations with their own characters collide physically and spiritually." Whilst this hinders too great an intimacy,

> [A]t the same time it creates, even out of the feeling of distance, the wish to bridge the gap. Love at a distance is therefore a dialectical concept. In general, at least in theory, where love is there can be no distance – and where there is distance, no love.[35]

In this, Brod gives us the answer to why the story of Odysseus and the sirens provides such a good paradigm for the idea of *Distanzliebe*: the movement of the ship as it passes the sirens' island means that a static relationship is never established. The connection is always in motion, always uncertain. "The Silence of the Sirens" reflects this, as the perspective of both parties changes over the course of the story, and the reader is left in a state of confusion about what has actually taken place. Adorno and Horkheimer were to take up the image of Odysseus and the sirens in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as an example of the entanglement of myth and rationalism.[36] Although Odysseus is often seen as a Homeric ambassador of human rationalism in a world of threateningly mythical creatures, his death at the hands of the sirens is prevented only by the advice of a witch who turns men into pigs. The interaction between rational and irrational, culture and nature, is not always simple. Adorno and Horkheimer employ this mythical encounter of the sexes, which is also the meeting of man and monster, to illustrate the relationship between myth and enlightenment. They use the "symbolic territory" of sexuality, and the image of the siren, to demonstrate not, as might be expected, the great *difference* between opposing forces, but their mutual dependence and inseparability.

This aspect of the relationship between the sexes is missing from Weininger's theory. At best, woman is necessary for the continuation of the species and the satisfying of man's animal sexual urges, but beyond this man might well be better off without her. In Homer's rendering of Odysseus' encounter with the sirens, there is a greater connection between hero and monsters than there might first appear. The wax in the ears of Odysseus' men is "honey-sweet," as are the voices from which the wax protects them, and although the hero is usually the active party, forging ahead through dangers in his quest to return home, here he is bound to the mast of his ship and as passive as his seducers. In Kafka's version, too, the sirens and Odysseus mirror each other. First Odysseus gazes intently at the creatures, then they at him. Enlightenment thought (which Adorno and Horkheimer view as a particular methodology rather than as attached to a specific historical period) defines itself against myth, in that where myth is irrational, enlightenment is rational, and where myth imagines, enlightenment seeks evidence. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the great mistake of enlightenment thought is that it fails to realise that it is itself a myth, the myth of emotionless rationalism and perfect objectivity. Masculinity in Weininger defines itself against femininity in a similar way, though Weininger does make the concession that male and female may exist together in the same body. Jung's expression of the dependence of the sexes upon each other is perhaps more akin to Adorno and Horkheimer's vision of myth and enlightenment, in that he acknowledges a *repressed* “female” part of every male psyche (as enlightenment represses its mythic status).

The dialectic is a form of argument that moves towards the reconciliation of differences, but in the case of *Distanzliebe*, this is a reconciliation which can never be achieved. Love at a distance is a paradox which cannot be resolved. And this is what Kafka demonstrates so well in his story: there is progress and development - Odysseus sails past the sirens - but, thanks to the confusion caused by the codicil, no closure. There is no conclusion to the love relationship in Weininger either. Its success depends on the exact maintenance of an impossible state of tension between lover and beloved, a distance which cannot be bridged but must not become too great lest the lover lose sight of his object. Kafka sets this unrealistically static idea vividly in motion, showing the movement of the see-saw as the balance of power shifts and struggles to maintain its equilibrium. The image with which he chooses to accomplish this speaks both of the preoccupation of his age with questions of sexuality and desire, and of the enduring power of symbols in shaping our attitudes toward them.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Martin Liebscher, director of the Ingeborg Bachmann Centre, London, whose seminars on the sirens in Austrian literature occasioned my first investigation of this topic.

2. My own modern English translation of the story “Das Schweigen der Sirenen,” published in Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2002), 351-2. All English translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

3. Norman Douglas, *Siren Land* (London: Martin Secker Ltd, 1911), 26.

4. One literary source of this information is Appollonios of Rhodes. In Book IV of his *Argonautika,* the sirens are said to be the daughters of Akhelous and Terpsichore, and the playmates of Persephone. See Apollonios Rhodius, *The Argonautika*, translated by Peter Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)

5. Siegfried De Rachowiltz, *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare* (New York: Garland, 1987), 3.

6. Ibid., 77

7. The original Starbucks logo was based on a siren depicted in a sixteenth-century Norse woodcut, with long hair, bare breasts, a starred crown and bifurcated tail. She symbolised the seductive nature of Starbucks coffee. On the current logo, only part of the siren is shown: her hair modestly covers her breasts, and she is cut off at the navel, so that only the ends of her tail can be seen framing her face.

8. Interpretations of the sirens' silence have been given by, amongst others, Elizabeth Boa in her article "Revoicing Silenced Sirens: A Changing Motif in Works by Franz Kafka, Frank Wedekind and Barbara Köhler," *German Life and Letters* 57 (2004): 8-20; Stéphane Moses, "Franz Kafka: The Silence of the Sirens," *University of Denver Quarterly* 2 (1976): 62-78; Heinz Politzer, *Das Schweigen der Sirenen: Studien zur deutschen und österreichischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1968).

9. Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de- Siècle Vienna*, translated by Rosemary Morris. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

10. David S. Luft, *Eros and Inwardness in Vienna. Weininger, Musil, Doderer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 54.

11. Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science and Self in Imperial Vienna* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.

12. The term "Frauenfrage" was common during this period, and texts devoted to the subject, such as Conrad Ettel's *Die Frau und die Gesellschaft. Ein Wort zur Frauenfrage* (Wien: Georg Szelinski, 1890) and Ludwig Knapp's *Zur Frauenfrage* (Prague: Calve, 1905) were widely available.

13. "I have heard hardly anything about you, though I read about your Weininger lecture. (Don't you have a spare manuscript, perhaps a proof of the essay?)," Letter to Oskar Baum, April 1921, in Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors.* (New York: Schocken, 1958), 276.

14. Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (New York: Howard Fertig, 2003), 239.

15. Ibid.

16. The term was first used by Gaston Paris in 1883 (in the journal *Romania*) and remains a blanket definition for what in the mediaeval period was referred to as "Fin Amour" or "Amour Honestus."

17. Ibid., 188.

18. Demaris S. Wehr, *Jung and Feminism. Liberating Archetypes* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 1987), 22.

19. For a more detailed explanation of the anima's role in Jung's psychological system, see Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious,* translated by Richard Francis Carrington Hull (London: Routledge, 1968).

20. Ibid., 25. Jung's concept of the anima is more sophisticated and more empirically founded than Weininger's idea of love, and the former provides a valuable critique of the latter (though it was not written as such).

21. See, for example, Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger. Sex, Science and Self in Imperial Vienna* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

22. Gerald Stieg, "Kafka and Weininger," in *Jews and Gender. Responses to Otto Weininger*, eds. Nancy A. Harrowitz and Barbara Hyams (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 195.

23. Letter to Robert Klopstock, November 1921, in *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors,* 310.

24. The unnamed "girl" was somebody known to Robert Klopstock, probably the love-interest of a mutual friend, Glauber. It appears from Kafka's words that Klopstock had received her letter and passed it on to the author.

25. Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka vol. I: 1910-1913,* translated by Joseph Kresh (London: Secker and Warburg, 1948), 300.

26. Kafka, *The Trial,* translated by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Secker and Warburg, 1950), 230.

27. Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, translated by Christopher Middleton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974), 37.

28. Ibid., 13.

29. Ibid.,182.

30. *Sex and Character,* 202.

31. Quotation taken from my translation of the story.

32. Ibid., 187-8.

33. Ibid., 198.

34. Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist. Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 28.

35. Max Brod, *Der Prager Kreis* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1966), 62.

36. The encounter with the sirens in Book XII of *The Odyssey* is examined in the first chapter, "The Concept of Enlightenment," in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London/New York: Verso, 1997), 3-42.

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In the Company of Friends: Insights into Gay Men's Friendships at Work

Nick Rumens

Abstract

Despite a growing number of studies that show how friendship occupies an important place in the lives of many gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, few studies have paid close attention to how these people make and sustain friendships in the workplace. In an effort to animate scholarly discussion that concerns not only the general significance of workplace friendship but also of the particular salience of friendship in the work lives of non-heterosexuals, this chapter assembles various empirical insights into the place and role of friendship in the work lives of a group of gay men. Qualitative materials presented in two case studies below, show that sexual and gender differences, organisational hierarchies, status distinctions, and gendered work cultures influence how gay men and their friends create, develop and maintain close friendships. The resulting observations of these friendships in action are used to support a concluding argument for recognising the normative elements of gay men's workplace friendship as much as for imagining how gay men, other sexual minorities and heterosexuals might develop new, perhaps queer ways of belonging and relating within organisational friendships. **Key Words**: friendship, work organisations, gay men, heteronormativity, sexual and gender difference.

1. Introduction

The exploration of friendship in the work lives of gay men is very much in synch with the contemporary mood in sociology, feminist and queer studies regarding the study of friendship. Despite a chequered history as a subject of sustained academic concern, within these scholarly circles friendship matters. Elsewhere, the growing interest in friendship can be noted within the field of organisational and management theory, where commentators are investigating the significance of workplace friendships. Studies show that friendships do much more than help workers to kill time at work, have fun, share gossip and news, though this is not to suggest such friendship rewards are trivial. Friendships are used by workers as sources of psychological and emotional support, they help individuals construct identities, provide meaning to work, influence decision making and may improve individual work performance.[1]

People in organisations, as it has been argued many times within critical organisational studies, do not participate in organisations on an equal footing. Inequalities and differences divide individuals in the workplace, and as research reveals they impact on how and on what basis friendships are struck up and maintained. For instance, gay men may find making friends at work problematic because they comprise one example of a minority group whose members do not neatly match, though some individuals may come very close, the notion of the model worker: one who is assumed in countless organisational theory texts to be white, middle class, able bodied and heterosexual. Yet, while the organisational inequalities and struggles of gay men and other sexual minorities have been reasonably well documented, the same body of research more often than not falls short of addressing how the friendship choices of gay men are mediated by heteronormative modes of organisational inclusiveness and belonging. This is a key point, one that serves as a central plank for this chapter because there is much to be gained from understanding how workplace friendships can help constitute meaningful (non) work related ways of belonging and identities for those individuals whose lives are shaped by queer genders and sexualities.

With this in mind, the broad purpose of this chapter is to explore the importance of work friendships for gay men by focusing on the ways in which these friendships are made, maintained and given meaning. The impact of sexual difference, role distinctions and organisational context on gay men's friendships with heterosexual men and women is examined to demonstrate how personal preferences and the structural components of certain work settings influence the meanings ascribed to friendship. The gay-heterosexual friendship dyad is the main focal point here because empirical analyses of friendships between these groups of people are scarce. Furthermore, the chapter holds friendships between gay and heterosexual people to be of much interest given the prominence matters of gender and sexual difference achieve when these individuals enter into friendship. Relatedly, I also aim to show that while friendship ties are just as important for helping gay men (as they are for heterosexuals) to retain employment, have fun, and pass the time at work, they may specifically afford gay men and their friends with periods of respite from heteronormative work cultures and opportunities to create different senses of identity relating to gender and sexuality. In so doing, I wish to stimulate thinking about these aspects of friendship which are largely missing from the literature on workplace friendships in general and the feminist and queer studies friendship scholarship in particular.

This chapter is organised as follows. I begin by examining how friendship has been seen increasingly as occupying a key place in the lives of many gay men. However, I import this idea into a work context, suggesting that friendship in the workplace should not be thought of as a peripheral concern, especially for gay men and other sexual minority groups who often find themselves employed in heteronormative work cultures. A brief summary of the study's methodology is provided before presenting an extended analysis of friendship in the work lives of two gay men. I draw the chapter to a close by offering up thoughts about why the examination of how gay men and their friends go about tackling sexual, gender and formal role differences in their friendship at work can help us to imagine alternative, even queer ways of belonging in work organisations.

2. Friendship and Gay Men

The discussion below is largely propped up by the theoretical work of feminist and queer studies scholars for whom friendship is not simply a voluntary, personal relationship entered into freely by two individuals. These theorists and other friendship commentators, notably some sociologists, have argued that friends neither exercise unencumbered liberty to befriend whomever they deem eligible nor shape the basis and object of friendship entirely as they wish. Graham Allan is often cited, with good reason, for questioning rather than rejecting the notion of friendship as an unfettered "voluntary, informal and personal relationship."[2] Important to what I am exploring across these pages is the notion that while people may be exercising choice in different ways in regards to making and sustaining friendships, these choices are not free floating but stamped by the contexts in which they are made. At the same time, it is also crucial not to over estimate the degree of influence organisations may have over their members since organisations are not total institutions. Individuals may resist the efforts of organisations to order their identities and mould their work relationships with others. What I am suggesting is that it is helpful to point out the ways in which such matters are negotiated, because doing so brings into view the potential contradictions and ambiguities that individuals live with in their relationships with work colleagues as they try to be professional or indeed, seek the freedom to be who they want to be at work.

The notion that friendship serves as one resource for individuals to experiment with the self finds a clear resonance with those scholars for whom the primacy awarded to friendship over blood ties by many gay men and lesbians (and, though largely unremarked upon, bisexuals) amounts to a new way of seeing how relations between people may be organised differently within society. According to Jeffrey Weeks, one reason for such experimentation in relational possibilities is that these people often knit the fabric of their lives outside the heteronormative family unit. What fascinates me about Weeks' argument is that these "life experiments," as Weeks calls them, are not confined to the worlds of non-heterosexuals.[3] Heterosexuals are responding to the same major social shifts such as the rupturing of heteronormative ways of structuring (non) familial relationships in similar ways. Individuals rather than families it seems are becoming the "primary focus of contemporary life," and as such the "do-it-yourself biographies" of gay men and lesbians may offer points of reference for heterosexuals.[4]

Weeks belongs to a group of academics who hold gay men and lesbians as distinct from heterosexuals by their seemingly strong commitment to forging personal relationships upon egalitarian principles. While the positioning of gay men and lesbians in the vanguard of relationship culture is problematic, as Klesse rightly points out in this volume, what I take from these debates and then explore is the observation that friendships involving gay men and heterosexual men and women may operate in certain ways that help both friends to challenge heteronormative discourses of gender and sexuality. There is no reason to doubt that some workplace friendships might bear out this train of thought. Of course, in order to note the outcomes of such relationships, attention must be paid to the conditions that make them possible, which is one reason why the examination of relations of power overlaid by discourses of gender and sexuality (and indeed any aspects of individual difference) should not be obscured.

On this very point, a number of feminist theorists have been rattled by what they cannot see in sufficient clarity in Peter Nardi's work on gay men's friendships. Janice Raymond argues that Nardi avoids weighing precisely the value of both sides of the paradoxes regarding the power and irony of gay men's friendships. In other words, Nardi's claim, based on empirical evidence in the U.S., is that gay men's friendships can simultaneously challenge and reinforce heteronormative ideals of masculinity.[5] Raymond's dissatisfaction with Nardi regards his tendency to inadequately engage with feminist theory in order to fully articulate the difficulties and contradictions in gay men's friendships, a concern that echoes over a wider range of (lesbian) feminist critiques of same and cross-sex relationships.[6] Such debates are of particular value for highlighting the asymmetrical power relations between gay men and women in terms of gender and sexuality that may cement, more than they undermine, normative gender regimes that disadvantage (lesbian) women especially.

3. Friendship, Work and Gay Men

As I have already mentioned, rare until recent times, is the line of argumentation that organisations are important locations for individuals to meet people and make friends. Indeed, this train of thought might seem far fetched when set at the foot of a wave of scholarly and pop culture literature, and Hollywood blockbuster films that illuminate and warn us about the dark side of the world of work.[7] Curiously, some friendship commentators tend to agree. For instance, Ray Pahl, whose writing has furthered the sociological study of friendship, appears to regard the workplace as a poor source of opportunities for friendship making.[8] In much the same negative vein, Mark Vernon baldly asserts that the "omnipresence of utility" has blurred the distinctions between instrumental and "true" friendship.[9] Acts of goodwill between friends at work, for example, may disguise instrumental intent. Despite sketching out the earlier arguments of Alan Silver, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, for whom the commercialisation of society improved the capacity for workers to make and sustain friendships, Vernon remains steadfast in his pessimistic view of the workplace.[10] Utility as an organising principle, according to Vernon, seems to be a permanent feature of corporations under which all other principles including friendship are secondary.

The bleak and totalising tendencies of such accounts of the workplace are problematic. This is not to say that I do not share some of the scepticism expressed by Vernon regarding the implications of utility in workplace. After all, workplace friendships may be "compromised by the utility of the workplace."[11] As Vernon cautions, our closest work friends render useful services and thus hold utility, even if such utility ranges from providing material and emotional support in times of crisis to buying lunch in the office canteen. Unlike Vernon, I hold open a wider scope of possibilities in which friendship can be initiated and maintained at work. It is possible to conceive of friendships struck up at the workplace with instrumental or business goals in mind but which grow over time into relationships of intimacy. Put differently, while friendship ties may be cultivated for the material and social benefits they might furnish individuals at work, this does not mean that such friendships merely help workers to climb career ladders, retain their jobs, and pass the time. As Lynne Pettinger found in her study of retail sector shopfloor workers in the U.K., intimate friendships can crystallise out of relations of instrumental sociability that may extend outside of working hours.[12]

Yet, while I argue along the same track as Lynne Pettinger, that "work is not universally negative," as some critics might have us believe, and that friendship is just as important in helping workers to define and attribute meaning to work as the workplace is for friendship formation, it is still important to note the challenges the landscape of work may contain for individuals seeking friendship.[13] For instance, while Nardi puts forward the problematic view that work is more likely to be a source for casual not close friends, he does express a valid concern that gay men may find many work settings harbour barriers to friendship making. On this matter it is reasonable to suggest that gay men's friendships are susceptible to the threats posed to the workplace friendships of heterosexual men and women. As Barry Wellman and Theodore Cohen argue, writing separately in *Men's Friendships*, type of occupation, the number of hours worked, competitive work cultures and the configuration of work can inhibit friendship making in the workplace, especially among men.[14] Nardi goes further, though, and notes that homophobic and heterosexist work cultures are likely to be of equal if not greater concern for gay men hoping to befriend colleagues.

A modest but expanding body of literature on the experiences of sexual minority workers offers a reasonably fertile seam of data in which to mine illustrations. For example, Woods and Lucas's oft-cited study of the professional lives of gay men in the U.S. found that respondents employed in homophobic work cultures often struggled to find and maintain friendships. Responding to the anti-gay cultural constituents of one workplace, Geoff, a construction manager, protects his private life from the scrutiny of colleagues by preserving "two completely separate groups of friends" in the "professional" and "social" spheres of his life.[15] Carving up the intersecting worlds of work and leisure in this way is not without its problems as Geoff is aware. Such schemes are prone to "collapse" when "crossover friendships" occur no matter how diligently such boundaries are policed.[16] Other men, whilst finding shelter in the corporate closet, reported how they missed out on friendships with colleagues because of the perceived negative consequences associated with coming out. The same fear prompted some men to withdraw or end existing friendships. However, the analysis is left there. Little is known about how same or cross-sex friendships between workers might influence the construction of (non) work related identities and perceptions of self and others as professional.

More recent research on the work experiences of sexual minority workers in the U.K. also raises questions about men's friendship even if friendship is not the central concern. In Ward and Winstanley's study of a Fire Service organisation, an "out" gay male firefighter recalls how following the disclosure of his sexual identity at work his Watch became dubbed the "Pink Watch."[17] The label did not appear to be a "problem" for the team due to the "close-knit" bonds between the Watch members.[18] One question the study stirs up, but fails to explore, regards the influence friendship might exert on shaping the responses to sexual minority workers from other work colleagues. Another, more pointed question, relates to the issue of how sexual difference is negotiated within the closely-knit bonds that presumably tether some of the men of Pink Watch in friendship.

While empirical research of the kind above offers some clues to help address the questions this chapter explores, this is not to overlook the feminist contributions to the study of friendship. For example, the work of Lillian Faderman, Janice Raymond and Pat O'Connor has revealed how women's friendships affirm female identities, promote woman-loving, form the basis of feminist politics, and dispel the myth that the only source of pleasure for women is in relations with men. Furthermore, as lesbian-feminist Sheila Jeffreys strenuously argues, "the bonding of women that is woman-loving" is "very different from male bonding."[19] Significant here is that Jeffreys evaluates how men's friendships are often the "glue of male dominance."[20] Such arguments resound widely with many feminist analyses of how men (re)produce gendered relations of power within work organisations. Women in the workplace, it is often said, are positioned within and excluded from male dominated structures. Nonetheless, research shows that the activities women participate in together that constitute the object of friendship in the workplace can challenge patriarchal values. Andrew and Montague's first hand account of their workplace friendship in a U.K. university is a case in point.[21] As vital as this feminist literature is, few commentaries investigate the possible connections that may be forged between gay men and lesbian/heterosexual women (and some gay/heterosexual men) in the workplace that resist organisational systems of heteronormativity. Certainly, the political nature of friendships between gay men and others, especially heterosexual women, has been debated in theoretical terms but much still remains empirically open.

4. Methodology

The analysis below is based on in-depth, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with sixteen gay men aged between 26 and 60, employed in U.K. organisations in the National Health Service, higher education, arts and entertainment, information technology, engineering and environmental consultancy. Unstructured interviews were used in the first instance to enable the men, recruited by the use of a snowball sampling technique, to describe and reflect at length on their experiences of work. The first interviews lasted from two to three hours and produced rich descriptive data about the various organisational contexts in which the men had made, developed, ended and lost friendships during their working lives. From this vast amount of interview data, categories were constructed and used to inform the design of a second, semi-structured interview schedule. The aim of the second interview was to pursue new lines of inquiry that had emerged from the analysis of the original interviews. Twelve men participated in a second interview that lasted between one and a half to two hours. Throughout the interviewing process the men were encouraged to talk expansively so they could convey what they perceived to be the most important aspects and experiences of their workplace friendships. As a result the first and second interviews combined generated over fifty hours of tape-recorded discussion and hundreds of pages of transcription. From the vast quantity of interview data two case study examples of friendship are presented below. The case studies have been selected because the empirical insights they provide resonate across the wider data set. Also, I wish to draw out in a level of detail not always found in the friendship literature the salience of friendship in the context of the work lives of two gay men and their heterosexual friends.[22]

5. Being One of the (Gay) Guys: Jack and Martin[23]

A. The Friends and Work Context

Jack is 47, white, a divorced husband and father of three children, and employed as a Director within a small, but international environmental consultancy firm called Greenco. A company of 110 staff, Greenco is a place of work where "everyone knows your name," according to Jack, who went on to describe how the informal socialising in and outside of the workplace helps employees to befriend each other. It is also an environment in which Jack, in his own words, does not make "a secret" of his sexuality since "coming out" at work four years into his current employment relationship.

Jack manages fifteen direct line reports within his department. Martin, a junior manager, is one of Jack's subordinates and a "good friend." He is 24, a recent graduate, white, and heterosexual. Jack appointed Martin personally, telling me that he was "ideally qualified" and felt that Martin would "fit into" the existing team on a "social and personal level."

B. Befriending at Work

Though the emphasis varied, all of the study men indicated that workplace friendships could be relied upon for having fun, passing the time, getting promotion, helping solve problems and being intimate at work. A large number of the men said that in their organisations workers are encouraged to participate in events and rituals that integrate new employees as well as strengthen existing ties between colleagues. Greenco is no exception. Soon after his first day of work within Jack's department, Martin was invited to join in the social outings organised by his colleagues. These "ad-hoc" and "casual" outings usually involved retiring to the "local pub" after "a hard day's work," especially on a "Friday." Such leisure highlights at the end of the working day are valuable for the younger male and female team members to spend time together to get to know each other and perhaps make friends.

As a single gay man without any immediate familial obligations at home, Jack has the time and commitment to participate in these "extra-curriculum" activities. Indeed, Jack sees more of some of his team members outside of work; arguably the most notable of these is Martin. Like the other men I interviewed, the stage at which Jack thought his friendship with Martin had become "close" was around the time the friendship extended into other avenues of his personal life. That Jack was unable to periodise precisely how relations between them grew into friendship is not exceptional given that friendship is seldom the outcome of planned and rational choices. There may be, as Bhikhu Parekh avers, components of "deliberation" and "choice," but friendship often grows "unconsciously and involves an elusive chemistry."[24] Alternatively, in Jack's words: "it's quite hard to put a finger on, at the end of the day, how that chemistry actually works in term of friendship." What Jack did say with confidence was that work-related proximity gave him plenty of occasions to spend time with Martin that in turn helped build the foundations for an intimate friendship.

C. Crossing the Line: Friendship and Sexual Difference

Gay and lesbian friendship commentators have argued that because gay men and lesbians tend to socialise in non-heterosexual settings they are likely to befriend others with whom they share a common sexual identity. While there is evidence that lends weight to this idea, gay and lesbian workers may find themselves occupying the same circles with colleagues with whom they have little in common but whom they wish to befriend. Friendship initiation can be a rocky process as far as differences are concerned, because they must be negotiated if the friendship is to flourish. Regarding the differences that divide Jack and Martin, sexual difference is of particular interest here, given that friendships with gay men may provide some heterosexuals with points of identification and the opportunity to experiment with schemas of personal relations.

Dwight Fee's study of gay men's friendships with straight men makes a sizeable contribution towards understanding the impact of gender and sexual difference on such friendships. One of the most striking, if not altogether remarkable, observations Fee makes is that gay-straight male friendships demand "regular engagements with such troubles of identity and difference."[25] Regarding the small number of men I interviewed who said they had friendships with straight men, the discussion of beliefs and values regarding sexuality were deemed crucial to fostering intimacy. Those men who managed to achieve intimacy with straight men reported their pleasure at being able to "talk deeply" about their "dreams," "hopes" and "fears" about life. Findings further suggest that when and where matters of gender and sexual difference are negotiated tend to be spontaneous. Sometimes there is a "conscious" effort to raise the subject by one friend; other times, as one man revealed, trivial discussions between friends about the "office canteen food" can suddenly "wander off" into the "demanding" subjects of sexuality and gender.

For Jack and Martin, then, getting to know and "accept" each other's differences involves both men criss-crossing gay and straight worlds. Jack explained:

> He goes out to some really rough straight clubs and pubs and I'm used to going out to gay venues, but we've

> adapted to each other's circumstances. I'll watch the rugby and football in the pub with him and afterward he'll come for a couple of pints down the local gay pub and neither of us seem to flinch doing so.

Significant here is that these befriending processes primarily take place outside of the workplace. One reason might be that work status differences can be awry outside of work. More "free time" is also key since leisure time allows the friends to indulge in the pursuit of common pastimes and talk that involves mutual self-disclosure. Noteworthy, too, is that Jack makes the first move to overcome the disparity in their social background and leisure interests. Socialising in "straight" leisure sites is symbolic not only of Jack's desire to develop the friendship in heteronormative contexts that can be hostile to gay men but also of a desire to have fun with his friend. This move is perhaps easier for Jack since he spends much of his waking day negotiating the obstacles he faces as a gay man in various heteronormative environments. Additionally, Jack bears the vestiges of a former "straight identity" as a "father" and "ex-husband," having "come out" much later in life. Thus for someone who has been closeted for many years, the integration within heteronormative social structures seems to make travelling in heterosexual worlds less daunting. Interestingly, while Martin has little experience of socialising in gay bars and clubs, inexperience that might otherwise amplify a fear of gay men in the hearts of some straight men, he appears not to "flinch" when crossing the threshold of Jack's local gay pub.

The way in which the two men service their friendship outside of work is meaningful for Jack not least of all in the way it helps him to feel "fully rounded," rather than a member of the "gay scene ghetto." Rolled up with feeling more "rounded" as a person is a sense of greater, though still partial, inclusion and integration within heteronormative social and vocational settings. But there is also a possibility that Martin, too, might be seeking an alternative to organising all aspects of his life around compulsory heterosexuality. In this vein, the "gay scene" is not merely a sideshow for Martin's entertainment. From Jack's point of view, their friendship enables Martin to explore the artificiality of the heterosexual-homosexual binary and question the ambiguity of "[Martin's] sexuality." Jack notes that Martin has now begun to suggest they socialise in gay venues and puts this down to how such locations afford Martin a wider scope for agency as far as being heterosexual, masculine and intimate are concerned.

Holding on the latter point, I do not wish to be understood as suggesting that the workplace leaves little or no room for the intimate exchanges of friendship. Though there are limits to how forms of intimacy may be displayed during the course of work, Jack notes that in the office

Martin "sits more closely" to Jack "than everyone else does" and that he always "undoes the top button of his shirt" in his presence. The sense of "playfulness" with which Martin displays intimacy is not altogether whimsical. In one regard, intimacy as "play" in this situation maintains the friendship through the titillation of bodies being as physically close to each other ("without touching") as well as what intimate gestures might mean at a deeper level. In another regard, having "got to a stage at work" where they know each other so well, their friendship helps to get work done. In talking about attending a meeting with a client with Martin, Jack said: "because we both knew what each other was thinking all the time we handled the clients really well." Such things bring pleasure as Jack declared: "I'm not going to disguise the fact that I enjoy it…it's nice to be intimate."

D. Ambiguity and Normativity

All that being said, role status distinctions can inhibit the development and nourishment of friendship. For instance, Jack spends much of his time treading a tightrope between enjoying the company of friends who occupy junior roles in Greenco and avoiding accusations of "favouritism" from disgruntled onlookers. At the positive end, Jack spoke at length about how his network of friendships with all the members of his team reflected a high level of esteem and credibility. He told me: "I'm the only director who gets asked to join them at the pub after work and that's really important to me…I'm still one of them, and it affirms our solidarity as a team." Contained in Jack's comment is recognition of the power of friendship for breaking down hierarchies and constructing meaningful, work related identities. Nonetheless, at the negative end, the outcome of any suggestion made by colleagues of friendship being used to aid a "favourite" could be "damaging," as Jack remarked. Under this lens, friendship is seen as wasteful and possibly acting against the interests of the company.

The dilemma of being at one and the same time manager and friend to Martin is partially resolved by compartmentalising work activities that require "one hundred per cent professionalism" from those where a "more light hearted approach to management and work" can be adopted. However, the place and time for servicing friendships at work is not always clear-cut. Although both enjoy the affectionate aspect of their friendship as the examples above indicate, the attention Martin furnishes on Jack at work invites finger pointing from colleagues. Jack is anxious that Martin might be seen as a "favourite." Troubling also is that the friendship is at risk of being cast into suspicion given the stereotypes that surround men's friendship, especially when one friend is gay. Jack went on to say that their "familiarity" was becoming "increasingly obvious" to others in the office and that Martin's "ambiguous" sexuality was now the object of office "gossip." Such concerns inscribe well-rehearsed lines of reasoning that suggest non-traditional friendships are often subjected to normative pressures to define them in ways that are intelligible to others. Reid and Fine also note that such pressures can compel men to "choreograph" their behaviours in ways that legitimise forms of "togetherness" in friendship.[26]

With these worries on his mind, Jack told me in his first interview that he was planning to speak to Martin about "drawing back from the friendship at work." In our second interview I asked whether the friendship had developed along the lines Jack hoped it might do. He replied: "I think we managed it just for the time I did Martin's performance review. Then it was a case of we became manager and employee for an hour or two." After that, "we went back to normal." While the friendship clearly carries the risk of being seen by colleagues as exclusionary and the men themselves as the office "odd couple," creating distance from Martin seems hard to achieve given that the friendship provides for a broad range of Jack's needs at work.

6. Sharing an Identity of Interests: Sam and Simone

A. The Friends and Work Context

Sam is twenty-seven, white, working class, well educated and is employed as a project co-ordinator for Edsco, an educational charity organisation. Sam has worked for Edsco for seven years over which time he has gradually risen through the ranks. Sam's friendship with Simone is "the closest" he has had "with anyone at work." Simone is forty, white, heterosexual and has line management responsibility for the role Sam presently occupies. They have been friends for about five years and regularly see each other in and outside of Edsco.

Edsco is similar in size to Greenco, employing just over one hundred staff. Unlike Greenco, Edsco attaches greater emphasis to maintaining hierarchical divisions between staff. Having worked in a variety of positions within Edsco, Sam has gained insight into how hierarchy and work sub cultures influence friendship. For example, he notes that during his time as a call handler in the customer services department he made new friends quickly given the propensity of the young workers to socialise in large groups after work. In his role as project co-ordinator, friendship making is a little "harder" since the set of expectations Edsco has of "junior professionals" and "managers" is less about cultivating friendship than "professional business relationships." I will have more to say on this point later, but concentrate in the next section on the issue of how sexual difference colours the friendship between Sam and Simone.

B. Opposites Attract?

As I have already established, friendships marked by sexual difference offer the opportunity for friends to expand aspects of the self that might otherwise be limited in friendship consisting of homophilous ties. In that regard, friendships that bridge the heterosexual-homosexual divide are not only valuable but also sought-after by some individuals. For example, popular stereotypes would have us believe that straight women and gay men have absolutely fabulous friendships. One reason, so we are told, is that gay men and straight women do not find each other sexually attractive, so sex cannot spoil the platonic nature of friendship. While such stereotypes are clearly not to be relied upon, it would be a mistake to entirely dismiss the notion that either straight women or gay men may covet such friendships. Indeed, Sam states:

> Being a gay man I've always been more drawn to relationships with women. There's less competition going on…whereas men are always looking to climb the corporate ladder…whereas with women the whole sort of work thing is a bit more fluffy and open. So we can talk about things a bit more which helps you to get to be where you want to be much quicker than being very business like about things and so much more masculine about things in that respect. I have very few male friends. I have even less straight male friends.

Sam's analysis reflects the thinking evident in the commentaries of other study men of how important their friendships with straight women are. Such claims are notable for underscoring the value of these friendships for getting on at work as they are for the problematic assumptions upon which they are based.

On the positive side, Sam was almost certainly the most impassioned supporter of how sexual difference between gay men and straight women can produce rewarding friendship. It is crucial to acknowledge though that not all gay men associate with straight women in the same way. For instance, while Jack observes "many gay men find solace in friendship with women," he does not count himself as one of them. Jack's portrait of his friendship with Martin reflects his preference for friendships with straight men. Unlike Jack, who thinks friendships with women harder to form, Sam finds making friends with straight women an "easy" endeavour. As Sam said: "the difference in sexuality is the one reason we can be best friends because Simone knows I'm not after her in a sexual way." Sam echoes many of the study men's comments regarding their friendships with straight women. The focus on personality, and common interests is seen to be consequential to the absence of any underlying sexual tension reported to exist in some other friendships.

The implications of Sam's optimistic assessment of friendship appears to have resonances in a workplace characterised by a "masculine" way of getting things done. Likewise, some of the other men talked about how women seemed less "bothered" about competing for "power" and "status" in the same way straight men appear to be at work. Certainly, research points to how competitive work cultures can obstruct friendship processes between men. For Sam, however, friendship with Simone offers an alternative set of relations that pattern a more "open" style of interaction unfettered by traditional masculine values that, in turn, helps the two friends to get things done efficiently. Like Jack and Martin, who seem to be able to think along the same lines and accurately interpret each other's behaviours at work, are Sam and Simone. As Sam says: "we are able to read each other's minds in meetings" and make "eye contact" in ways that convey "our thoughts" but remain undetectable to onlookers. For all the apparent advantages such friendships bring in the workplace, Sam's conceptualisation of gender differences to explain the nature of the interactions of his friendship with Simone is problematic. Not least because thinking about men as being "more business like" and women as "fluffy" and "open," albeit in a positive manner, reifies gender differences between men and women. Likewise, the conjecture that friendship between gay men and straight women are "safe" from the perils of sexual attraction gives the impression that this is the case, inevitably so. With this in mind, what I find particularly striking about Lisa Tillmann-Healy's ethnographic research is that friendships between gay men and straight women can be beset by sexual tension that is not easily resolved by blotting out sexual desire in favour of the appeal of personality. One problem, of many problems, associated with conceiving gender differences between gay men and straight women as natural, is that the influence of context is lost.

C. Organisational conditions for friendship making

As is well established in segments of the gay, lesbian and queer studies literature, countless work sites are organised around the cultural norm of heterosexuality. By paying attention to structure, the ways in which gay men might use friendships at work to negotiate the problems they face in heteronormative work cultures and the impact heteronormative structures have on friendship are brought into sharp relief.

Sam's friendship with Simone grows not just because Sam has a personal preference for befriending straight women. It also crystallises out of recognising the constructive quality of sexual difference, which is also to be cognisant of how compulsory heterosexuality may confront certain individuals. Sam said:

> I went with my partner, Steve, to my boss's kid's fifth birthday party and there was all these couples, middle class couples, and all that business going on, and so we were on the edges of all of this…and there was Simone on the margins because she didn't have any kids or anyone else with her for that matter…and because none of us fitted in with this type of normality we kind of got talking to her really, and that's when we started to become very friendly.

As the above example shows, when pitched against the might of the conventional heterosexual world a sense of affinity may develop among those who become marginalised. As rosy as this picture of the first flush of friendship might be, I do not wish to romanticise or overlook the struggles of other men I interviewed who battled to improve the conditions for growing friendship.

For Sam and Simone, contextual factors within Edsco shape Sam's strong perception of the differences and similarities between them:

> I am open about my sexuality within Edsco and it's accepted but I should think that's because I'm an acceptable homosexual…I'm conservative and have the moral standards any straight man or woman might have. But, I'm still outside of the norms and expectations of senior management…like Simone, you see Simone is very outside of the normal kind of expectations within an organisation like this…she's a woman, which sounds bizarre, but you know for this organisation…that's unnervingly different…and she's also a creative, very innovative, dynamic person. So she and I are a threat to the elite group that run this organisation…the white, middle class, middle aged, men.

The way in which Sam thinks about how they occupy the outside-edge of Edsco's dominant corporate culture is significant in at least two respects. First, Sam's assumption that they both might pose the same kind of "threat" to the "elite group" of men who run Edsco forms one of the central planks of their friendship. As Sam went on to say, they "look after each other" in an organisational world that does not provide for a wide range of their needs. Thus Simone helps Sam, wherever she can, to solve the problems he faces at work from listening to his "moans" about office life, "difficult and obstructive people," and the "politics" of work relations, to "pushing" him into different jobs and securing Edsco funds to enable Sam to complete a Master's degree in a non-vocational subject. But, for all this goodwill, even Simone is "constrained by the limits of the organisation," as Sam puts it.

How Sam understands the field of constraints across which Simone services their friendship is the second point of significance. That Sam aligns himself with Simone in the same dislocated position from conventional heterosexual norms at work is somewhat problematic. Stephen Maddison, writing on gay men's relationships with straight women, begins to outline the predicament when he argues that the connections between these individuals are mediated by heteronormative ideals. Maddison's comments chime in with certain feminist analyses that focus on gender differences to help to illuminate and thence problematise the bonds between gay men and straight women. Indeed, feminists such as Jane Ward, Sheila Jeffreys and Marilyn Frye have amply shown, albeit in different ways, women are more disadvantaged within heteronormative gender relations than gay men. Although some queer studies scholars have suggested that gay men suffer more acutely in relation to a heteronormative category of sexuality, they may still partake to some extent in heterosexual male privilege. While such theoretical frames make for a brittle analysis of differences between gay men and straight women, the important point here is that utilising gender as a focal point of analysis spotlights the ways in which heteronormative relations in the workplace impact differently on gay men and straight women in friendship.

D. Gender, Hierarchies and Friendship

Like Jack and Martin's friendship, Sam and Simone's friendship subtends work status distinctions. As managers, both Jack and Simone exercise power to ascribe acts of goodwill, in an Aristotelian fashion, to promote the other's good. Yet, it is possible to suggest that the cultural constituency of each one's work context exerts an influence on how they are able to bear goodwill. For instance, in an earlier comment, Sam implied that Simone is "constrained" by the "limits" of the managerial circles in which she moves. Indeed, the managerial orbits of Jack and Simone are likely to vary in size for a number of reasons including the gendered expectations of what it is to be a manager. On this matter, many feminist theorists have made clear how management has a long pedigree of being synonymous with masculinity.[27] From Sam's talk we are able to glimpse the ways in which Simone experiences a sense of being at odds with the environment around her. But, this is not to say that Simone is a figure entirely alienated from Edsco's elite management team.

Simone figures in Sam's commentary as a woman who is keen to prosper within Edsco. To do so, Simone must continually (re)confirm her managerial legitimacy to the top management team: a male dominated group who appear to have epistemic privilege over determining what counts as "manager" within Edsco. One consequence for Sam of Simone's combined labour of the self and the precarious sense of dislocation within Edsco this generates is not only the restrictions imposed on how she can promote his good as employee and person, but also the way in which Simone relies on Sam as a friend. On the one hand, it is in Sam that Simone finds a confidante with whom she can vent her "frustration" with the endless merry-go-round of "faculty board" meetings, share "ideas," and enjoy respite from the work practices of the senior males who surround her. On the other hand, because she is a woman who wishes to scale the highest rungs of the career ladder, her friendship with Sam carries with it a number of risks that might jeopardise her ascent.

Some feminist and queer perspectives have underlined women's reliance on a naturalised relationship with dominant groups of straight men in order to thrive materially and socially. One point of view might be that for Simone to maintain her link with the authoritative group of men at the apex of the organisation to safeguard her current and future position is contingent on ensuring this connection is not undermined. In other words, within a heteronormative work context that establishes relationships between straight men and women along patriarchal lines, to expose such linkages as arbitrary and sustaining male privilege would certainly endanger the (limited) privileges straight women gain within systems of heteronormativity. For Simone, then, establishing status distinctions to create distance from Sam would represent the conventional and safe route to circumvent the dangers of how friendship can erode heteronormative relations between male and female workers. However, what emerges very strongly from the data is how their commitment to friendship produces solidarity.

Accepting that friendship, especially women's friendships, can form the political basis for women (and some men) to challenge how women are disadvantaged within heteronormativity raises questions about whether friendships might be used in this way at work. In one respect, Simone's close friendship with a gay man might be seen to generate potential to bring queerness closer to the heart of heteronormative relations. After all, such queerness, which has become associated with an "intolerable" or "dangerous" side to homosexuality, aims to problematise by denaturalising, heteronormative constructs of sexual difference. However, Sam and Simone's friendship does not appear to facilitate a weakening of the foundations of Edsco's heteronormative work culture. In this vein, both Sam and Simone carefully maintain the friendship at work so as to avoid any overt challenge to dominant systems of gendered power and the type of finger pointing Jack and Martin's friendship arouses. Communication, fundamental to sustaining friendship, is largely conducted in private spaces such as Simone's office, temporal spaces outside of work in cars and trains travelling to and from conferences, as well as in each other's homes after work. Accordingly, the friendship does not bring the "intolerable" face of male homosexuality into the purview of other colleagues. That Sam is a "white," "well educated," "conservative," politically inactive and thus "acceptable homosexual" at work does much to dampen any whiff of intolerable homosexuality. Incorporated in this way into Edsco's heteronormative work culture, Sam strengthens his ability to lay claim to male privilege. In this regard, both Sam's non-managerial position and his presentation of self as the "acceptable homosexual" render him less conspicuous than Simone within the prevailing gender system.

With the above in mind, it is possible to suggest that Sam and Simone both struggle to find ways in which they can be accommodated within Edsco. But, this is not to imply that Sam and Simone are identically positioned in relation to normative concepts of gender and sexuality within Edsco. Both relate differently to sexuality and gender and use their friendship as a means of expressing how they negotiate not only these identities but also their place and status within the organisational hierarchy. There are, of course, implications of how their friendship impinges upon forms of compulsory heterosexuality within Edsco. I will have a little more to say on this matter in the conclusion below. But for Sam, at least, friendship offers time out from some of the demands of heteronormative work life that enable him to work "quite happily within Edsco without wanting to strive to the higher echelons." More than this, as Sam went on to say, is that "if Simone left (Edsco) I would have to reconsider my position here."

7. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has sought to explore gay men's experiences of workplace friendships. In so doing I have shown how contemporary work settings can supply gay men with possibilities for meaningful friendship. Indeed, the empirical analysis above has much in common with wider vocational friendship research regarding the need for close involvement with others at work. Clearly, people invest much time and effort in developing relationships with colleagues, even when the conditions for friendship making may be difficult. Where friendships are struck up the benefits derived from friends at work may vary widely from the routine provision of practical and emotional support to providing friends with a sense of identity, given that friendship ties may operate outside of the formal role attachments that unite people as employees within any given organisation.

In relation to the particular position of gay men in the workplace, this chapter has shown how various personal qualities and certain structural arrangements that pertain in two organisations can impede and lubricate friendship processes. For both sets of friends, sexual and gender differences, organisational hierarchies, status distinctions, and gendered work cultures influence how they create and maintain the affective and instrumental attachments that bind them as friends. In each case study, the friendship blooms well in spite and because of the obstacles faced by the men and their friends in heteronormative work sites. However, we may also see the above vignettes of friendship bearing testimony to the commitment required of friends to manage and live with the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions that workplace friendship carries with it.

One of the notable consequences of these relational experiments in the workplace is that the clarity of the boundary that (re)produces normative expectations of gender and sexual differences begins to look blurred and fluid. For example, Jack and Martin do not disassociate the intimate connections from their friendship, as research on men's friendship tends to show. We see as a result, the two men engage in play and camaraderie that periodically gives way to reflection on the social construction of their own masculinity and sexuality. Such activities might be seen as the object of those friendships feared by some employers: the friendships that choke out productive business relationships. To digress a little, applying a business perspective does not necessarily rule out friendship having a wider organisational relevance. For instance, the trust, warmth and close relations fostered between Jack and Martin appear to generate productive service relationships with clients, which from an organisational perspective might be seen as a "friendship bonus," worth sustaining. At the same time, there are risks, and those that stem from how friendship obfuscate the borders that distinguish manager from employee, professional from friend and heterosexual from homosexual may spawn suspicion and office gossip, which can be problematic for employers to manage but also hard for friends to both ward off and recover from.

However, a key concern of this chapter has been to explore how such differences are negotiated and (un)resolved by gay men and the friends with whom they can construct a positive sense of identity and belonging in the workplace. As I have indicated, the doing of friendship at work is not uniformly experienced by gay men and their friends, and as has been documented elsewhere by academics such as Peter Nardi and Jeffrey Weeks, may prise open new ways of relating along the lines of gender and sexuality as well as conforming to heteronormative ideals. For instance, that Jack and Martin may use friendship to explore the constructive quality of sexuality might not amount to much in a queer and feminist attack on heteronormative systems of gender and sexuality. The supportive treatment Martin receives from Jack to protect him from the accusations of being labelled at one and the same time a "favourite" and "gay" is partly based upon an implicit recognition of the differences between men and women. Jack is a senior male within his place of work, and Martin, is a "career hungry" young man, and so the friendship maintains and aligns the status and ambitions of both men with the wider purposes of the organisation.

Similarly, Sam and Simone's friendship presents little direct threat to hegemonic expressions of masculinity and sexuality within their workplace. What becomes apparent here is the lack of any good reason for Sam and Simone to dismantle the very normative, organisational systems of gender and sexuality that advantage them, albeit in different and limited ways. For Sam, an almost self-styled mirror image of his heterosexual colleagues, this means a satisfying career and life beyond the corporate closet. For Simone, this means maintaining her current senior managerial position, income and the access to organisational resources. However, this does not to mean to say that Sam and Simone are oblivious to the objectionable features of the corporate landscape in which they work since they rely on their friendship for time out from such normative regulations.

While it is important to adjudicate on the consequences of friendship for friends and the organisations within which they work to gain insight into how such friendships can exist in tension, I do not wish to lose sight at this closing stage of the promise gay men's friendships hold for (re)thinking ways of belonging in the workplace. Certainly, the above examples give insight into how gay men and their heterosexual friends are committed to constructing their friendships at work on relations of equality, and even though this might be rarely achieved, it is apparent that within the men's friendship differences and inequalities in terms of gender, sexuality and those associated with the formal roles they occupy can become increasingly unclear and partially resolved. Indeed, analyses of the kind I have presented above do much to undermine atomistic models of organisations and their agents by revealing the importance of people's relations within a business context but also that (hetero)normative expectations of how people should be organised within the workplace need not be thought of as being either permanent or an inevitable way of organising people. It is here that potential exists for imagining how relations between workers within organisations may be less hierarchical, especially in those work contexts where hierarchies reflect the ascendancy and subsequent domination of one group over others. Holding on the latter point, we may look to how gay men do friendship at work as *one* example of how individuals negotiate differences and inequalities in terms of sexual and gender difference through play and critical self-reflection that can upset the ways organisations are structured and coded in normative heterosexuality.

Of course, saying such is to acknowledge that many questions remain to be addressed in order to fully understand the different facets of workplace friendships and of the opportunities friendship occasions for individuals to generate alternative, even queer, ways of belonging in the workplace. I end then by making a familiar, though vital, appeal for extended theoretical and empirical analysis of an array of friendships and professional business relations between men and women that cut across genders and sexualities within diverse work organisations.

Notes

1. For examples, see Claudia B. Rezende, "Building Affinity through Friendship," in *The Anthropology of Friendship*, edited by Sandra Bell and Simon Cole (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Pri P. Shah and Karen A. Jehn, "Do Friends Perform Better Than Acquaintances? The Interaction of Friendship, Conflict, and Task," *Group Decision and Negotiation*, 2 (1993): 149-165; Doris Francis, "The Significance of Work Friends in Late Life," *Journal of Aging Studies*, 4 (1990): 405-424.

2. Graham Allan, *Friendship: Developing a Sociological Perspective* (Hemel Hampstead: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1989), 17.

3. See the empirical research on same-sex intimacies by Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and other Life Experiments* (London: Routledge, 2001).

4. Ibid., 181. Also see Sasha Roseneil and Shelley Budgeon, "Cultures of Intimacy and Care Beyond "the Family": Personal Life and Social Change in the Early 21st Century," *Current Sociology* 52 (2004): 135-159.

5. See Peter Nardi, *Gay Men's Friendships: Invincible Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 189-206.

6. Janice Raymond offers an incisive if brief feminist critique in a review of Nardi's text in *The American Journal of Sociology*, 106 (2000): 275-76.

7. See Martin Parker, *Against Management* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) for an excellent overview of the demonology of large corporations in pop culture film. Also see Madeleine Bunting's *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives* (London: HarperCollins, 2004) as one of many examples of the negative representation of work life in pop culture literature.

8. Ray Pahl, *On Friendship* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

9. Mark Vernon, *The Philosophy of Friendship* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 18.

10. For an overview of the philosophical debates surrounding the role of friendship in commercial society see Lisa Hill and Peter McCarthy, "Hume, Smith and Ferguson: Friendship in Commercial Society," in *The Challenge to Friendship in Modernity*, edited by Preston King and Heather Devere (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

11. Mark Vernon, *The Philosophy of Friendship* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 22.

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12. Lynne Pettinger, "Friends, relations and colleagues: The blurred boundaries of the workplace," *The Sociological Review* 53 (2005): 37-55.

13. Ibid., 41.

14. Peter Nardi, *Men's Friendships* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992).

15. James Woods and John Lucas, *The Corporate Closet: The Professional Lives of Gay Men in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 113.

16. Ibid.

17. James Ward and Diana Winstanley, "Watching the Watch: The UK Fire Service and its Impact on sexual Minorities in the Workplace," *Gender, Work and Organization* 13 (2006): 193-219.

18. Ibid., 213.

19. Sheila Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 20.

20. Ibid.

21. Alison Andrew and Jane Montague, "Women's Friendship At Work," *Women's Studies International Forum* 21 (1998): 355-361.

22. Interestingly, few gay men described in any detail friendships they held with other gay men, lesbians or bisexuals at work.

23. For reasons of confidentiality and to preserve anonymity the two men, their friends and the organisations they work for are referred to by their given pseudonyms.

24. Bhikhu Parekh, "An Indian View of Friendship," in *The Changing Face of Friendship*, edited by Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 95.

25. Dwight Fee, "One of the Guys: Instrumentality and Intimacy in Gay Men's Friendships with Straight Men," in *Gay Masculinities*, edited by Peter Nardi (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 57.

26. Helen M. Reid and Gary Alan Fine, "Self-Disclosure in Men's Friendships: Variations Associated with Intimate Relations," in *Men's Friendships*, edited by Peter Nardi (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992), 149.

27. For example, see Deborah Kerfoot and David Knights, "Managing Masculinity in Contemporary Organizational Life: A Managerial Project," *Organization* 5 (1998): 7-26.

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Queer Tensions: The Cultural Politics of Belonging and Exclusion in Same Gender Marriage Debates[1]

Jodi O'Brien

Abstract

Advocates for same gender marriage tend to focus on the rights and benefits associated with state sanctioned unions. This strategy eclipses the cultural roots of marriage, thus it does not provide an adequate account for the resistance against same gender marriage. Nor can it explain the paradoxical desire among lesbians and gay men to participate in a social institution that has been the subject of derision and critique among feminist scholars and queer activists. In this article, I explore the cultural bases of marriage in the United States and the rhetoric in anti-marriage arguments in order to demonstrate the underlying cultural myths that contribute to both the desire to preserve traditional marriage and the desire among lesbians and gay men to participate. This interpretation reveals several tensions (both cultural and psychological) underlying the "marriage wars." These tensions may be one of the best indicators of both the meaning and stability of marriage as a social institution. **Key Words:** marriage, homosexuality, cultural politics, law, gender roles, anti-gay movements, gay rights activists.

1. Introduction

On July 26, 2006 the Washington State Supreme Court ruled that existing legislation defining marriage as between a man and a woman is legal and constitutional. In a 5-4 decision, the Court voted to sustain heterosexual unions as the only basis for legally recognisable marriage.[2] I am a resident of Washington State. On the day of the decision, I happened to be in Victoria, British Columbia where I was on holiday with my parents. I learned of the court decision from my partner who phoned me early in the morning from our home in Seattle with the breaking news. Turning on the hotel television, I quickly scanned for news of the event. There was nothing on any of the Canadian stations. Neither was there anything in the various Canadian newspapers that I glanced at over the next few days. In the United States, the decision was commanding headlines and pundits across the nation were gathering to weigh in on the implications of the decision. Meanwhile, there I was travelling the southern B.C. countryside with my parents and we spoke not a word about the issue.

A. “We Love Our Lesbian Sinner, But….”

Throughout the ensuing days immediately following this long anticipated court decision, I was acutely aware that I was choosing not to broach the topic with my parents. I was also more than a little surprised at my own deeply emotional disappointment in the court decision. I was in a state of painful confusion and isolation but shared none of this with my parents during the many hours we spent together in the car. At a glance, my parents are cosmopolitan in appearance and demeanour. They have advanced college degrees, they travel extensively and have nuanced (some would say progressive) political perspectives, especially on issues concerning race, immigration and poverty. They are also devout Mormons. Throughout my adult life they have been aware of my lesbian sexuality. They are warm and welcoming toward my girlfriend and, for the most part, treat her as a member of the family. However, without any conscious awareness that I can recall, we seem to have negotiated a terrain of acceptability that is bordered by a strong wall of silence. In other words, their “tolerance” of my “lifestyle” is predicated on conflict avoidance. I have been complicit in this, especially to the extent that I have nodded in agreement over the years as friends have remarked positively on my Mormon family’s acceptance of me and the women I have loved. I gave my family credit for trying so hard. After all, they’d had to wrestle some significant contradictions to be able to make room for me in their theologically dictated cultural reality.[3]

My unease with this pattern of silence has been exacerbated by the issue of same gender marriage. In recent years, watching as one state after another pursued anti-gay legislation, I’ve grown less and less comfortable with the realisation that, for my parents, as well as many colleagues, friends and neighbours, individual lesbian and gay men are fine, but as a group, we remain sinners/deviants/fill-in-the-blanks from whom the rest of the “normal” population deserve protection. For my family, this translates as: we love our lesbian sinner daughter, but the rest of those perverts, well, they’re obviously a social scourge that needs to be purged. Furthermore, they want *me* (and all gays and lesbians) to understand that this is nothing personal, it’s just the way it is: you’re just not part of the club. Why do you insist on being so unreasonable about that?

Within this discursive context, I have found it nearly impossible to gain any traction in discussions with my family about queer culture and politics. Over the years, I’ve stopped trying to talk with them about how much any of this matters to me. Instead, I focus on making a difference through the courses I teach on sexual politics at a Jesuit University, through my writing and public lectures (including, ironically, the many churches that invite me to speak), and related forms of education and activism. Still, my complicity in this family silence gnaws at me. It's a tension I try both to live with and also to learn from.

As we drove the countryside, this tension felt particularly acute. "Why do I care?" I asked myself repeatedly. Despite my chronically optimistic hope, I hadn't actually expected the Court to legitimate same gender marriage. The matter is even more complicated for me in that I have many critical reservations about marriage as a social institution, especially as supported by the state. To the extent that I do think some form of same-gender marriage warrants cultural recognition, I'm also conflicted about whether this should be enacted through courts or the legislature. I have written and lectured extensively on these topics in the past few years. Intellectually, I have a well-articulated position on the matter: I oppose state sanctioned marriage. Yet, there I was, an emotional hostage trapped in a car with well-intentioned but clueless parents feeling angry, frustrated, and, perhaps most poignantly, betrayed. And all I could think to ask myself was "why do I care?"

2. Queer Tensions and the Political Symbolism of Marriage

> Marriage is a coercive institution that creates insiders and outsiders symbolically and through conferred benefits.[4]

Feminist scholars, among which I include myself, have been adept and convincing in the deconstruction of the traditional nuclear family as being an inherently unequal, patriarchal and socially exclusive institution. Debates about same gender marriage have underscored the problematic relationship between the welfare state and assurances and benefits conferred through state sanctioned social relationships.[5] Eligibility for benefits that are presumably a right of citizenship, are actually bestowed based on membership in a traditional family. In other words, in countries such as the United States, the unit of economic and legal analysis is, uncritically, the nuclear family rather than the individual citizen. As many scholars and activists have noted, the union between state benefits and family status is long overdue for dissolution.[6]

Historians Haney and Pollard use the term "familialism" to describe a convergence of state policies and family imagery whereby specific forms of family organization are culturally valorised and socially rewarded.[7] The specific "familialism" of a given society is reflected in the economic and social benefits granted those who subscribe to *the* acceptable family form. The imagery of this family form is manifest ubiquitously through practices of law, politics, religion and education. In short, the culture is saturated with a specific and entrenched image of acceptable family organisation such that it can be said to exist as a social institution. To this end, advocates of same gender marriage have insisted that, to the extent that the familialism of a given society results in taken-for-granted benefits conferred automatically on those who follow the family form, it is unreasonable and even illegal to deny everyone who wishes it access to this benefit-rich social institution. In recent years, this line of argument has come to be known as the "rights" argument.

In an earlier essay, I suggested that "rights" rhetoric, while compelling in its logic, is inadequate as an instrument of social activism in the fight for same gender marriage.[8] This instrument is not so much blunt or incorrect as it is irrelevant for chipping away at the foundation in which traditional marriage is rooted. To paraphrase, I suggested the need to pay more attention to the *meaning and significance* inscribed in the institution of marriage. Whether one agrees or disagrees with this meaning, it is empirically unsound and politically foolish to ignore the cultural significance of marriage. As feminist scholars we have been very successful in demonstrating the tremendous social and economic burden this small unit (the "couple") carries in a corporate capitalist economy, not to mention its tremendous compulsory grip on our sense of self and accomplishment. Despite these insights, we have not done the best job of achieving an additional feminist creed, comprehending the "field of relations" on its own terms. Clearly marriage stands for more than the various federal benefits (numbered in the thousands in some countries) "rights" activists would have us believe. To put it another way, even when these benefits are taken into consideration, the burdens of traditional family responsibility to the individual are considerable, especially in a capitalist economy. Given this, why are people so eager to participate? What explains the tenacity of the institution of marriage in its current cultural form?

This line of analysis is more likely than "rights" rhetoric to provide an explanation for the seemingly bewildering paradox of lesbians and gays clamouring for admittance to an institution that has long cast us off. Why, particularly in the United States, is the battle not simply one of gaining the benefits associated with marriage (i.e., civil unions or what historian Lisa Duggan has called an "expanded menu of options").[9] At a glance, the simple but profound answer is that this is not really an issue of rights and benefits, its about familialism, or rather, tweaking the existing cultural imagery of family – its social symbolism - to include same gender relationships. In a word, it's about belonging.

I submit that cultural belonging is at the root of the desire for state sanctioned (and religiously blessed) unions among lesbians and gays. As critical scholars, we can't just ignore this. Yet, to a great extent, that is what we've done with the "rights" rhetoric. I have recognised this even in myself as I wrestled with my own tensions. This wrestling has prompted me to revisit and problematise my own critical analyses in order to more accurately take into consideration the tensions of belonging that shadow even those of us who thought we'd deconstructed our way out of the marriage box.

In the following considerations I explore my own questions and tensions: Why do I care about a state supreme court granting me access to a social institution I have long described as socially decrepit and economically dysfunctional? And why do I care that my own biological family supports me in this? These are queer tensions indeed.

3. Cultural Politics of Belonging

> The constitutional amendment on marriage is a good thing, yet is wrongly perceived by many as nothing more than a "ban" on gay marriage. The "ban" language suggests taking away something that belongs to homosexuals, limiting their rights, etc. Yet the situation is quite the opposite. "Gay marriage" is a strange and relatively new idea, and the very suggestion that it is a timeless right is laughable! Keeping marriage the way it has always been – between a husband and wife – is common sense, not a bigoted restriction. Of course, I love homosexuals, but love does not mean unconditional agreement. It is the homosexuals' right to argue for gay marriage, but it is just as much (if not more) my right to argue against it. Please, don't call me a bigot for holding a different point of view. There is nothing hateful about believing marriage should remain between a man and a woman. Quite the contrary, I support male-female marriage because of my love for people and for God. [10]

Religion and law are the fronts on which the battle for same gender marriage is being waged. Why? The obvious answer is that both institutions are makers of cultural rules. The more complicated answer is that these institutions reflect not only the rules, but the symbolism of cultural inclusion and belonging. Regardless of other current debates about the roles of U.S. courts and judges, the court is, indirectly but significantly, a social beacon that people look to for rationales about social inclusion and exclusion. Religion provides the cosmology or entire system of meaning through which these rationales are given a larger than life significance that is presumed to transcend historical context. When religious and judicial imagery and rhetoric are mutually reflective and harmonious, people consider the resulting proscriptions to be imbued with a social significance that is worthy of veneration. One manifestation of this process is the establishment of certain intractable cultural forms and practices that are robustly inured against critical scrutiny or debate. Marriage and the imagery of the traditional family are an example of this process. In the minds of many, the correctness and goodness of these institutions is beyond debate – and certainly immune to change. In fact, those who attempt to question these institutions and subject them to critical inquiry are themselves labelled social outsiders, a position often reinforced by punitive actions of religion and law. In short, any opposition usually has the effect of further solidifying the incorrigible nature of the institution and the inherent rights of those who subscribe to it. As the letter quoted above proclaims, because we already belong we have as much right, "if not more," to argue against you.

A. Permissible Prejudice

In previous work I have referred to this process as "permissible prejudice." This concept is used to explain institutionally supported exclusion and oppression through the legitimation of fear, hate, and loathing. Even in the most supposedly fair and equal conditions, all social institutions maintain exclusionary boundaries. These forms of exclusion (prejudice) are embedded in existing social conditions and upheld in the practices and discourses of central institutions such as law and religion. Permissible prejudice is perpetuated when persons in positions of institutional authority behave in ways that condone acts of prejudice. Thus, representatives of these institutions tend to reinforce existing cultural prejudices (often unthinkingly) and individuals look to these representatives ("cultural legitimators") as sources of permission in everyday matters of conduct and conscience. For instance, when a judge declares: "I put homos and prostitutes on the same level and I'd be hard-pressed to give anyone hard time for killing either one of these," it sends the message that homophobia is not only an acceptable prejudice, but one that is culturally permissible as grounds for hate based assault and murder.[11] Rights activists who attempt to point out the inequities in such practices (i.e., relegating some citizens to second-class status on the basis of group characteristics such as gender, race, sexuality, etc.) often find themselves falling through the rabbit hole of culturally sanctioned prejudices which "everyone knows" are just common sense. This "common sense" basis for discrimination is supported in myriad comments, teachings and rulings uttered by representatives of culturally sanctioned institutions, especially law and religion. Thus, irregardless of whether one considers oneself "religious," or what one thinks of the courts, there is apt to be a sense of cultural betrayal when representatives of these institutions issue a formal reminder that you are a social outcast who does not fully belong.

With this as a backdrop, I find it useful to examine some of the current rhetoric being used in arguments presented by the courts and religious groups against same gender marriage. A noteworthy aspect of these arguments is the Orwellian logic. As in the above quoted letter, these arguments are based on claims to "common sense" cultural understanding. One implication is that if you don't get that (i.e., if you're inclined to argue the points) then your own status of belonging is suspect. These arguments can be grouped as follows: family = two differently gendered parents; tradition = family = tradition; expanding marriage = erosion of its cultural significance. In reviewing each of these arguments my intent is to examine the underlying cultural values and commitments that pass for common sense logic. An exploration of these taken-for-granted cultural assumptions reveals some of the underlying and mostly unexamined myths and paradoxes of the modern nuclear family.

B. Family = Two Differently Gendered Parents

One of the most ubiquitous statements in current debates about same gender marriage is "research reveals that children do best in two parent households." This statement (even the attempt to study it one might argue) implies that the nuclear model of mother/father is ideal. The statement as usually uttered leaves out some significant factors. A comprehensive survey of existing research indicates 1) that children do best in *stable* households, and 2) that child-rearing is difficult for single adults. In other words, children do best in environments where rules and routines are clear and predictable, and raising children entails a set of responsibilities that is most easily shared as a team effort.[12] The common sense conclusion that the two-parent household is best is erroneous in that it assumes this is the only model that addresses the need for stability and team efforts in child-rearing.

When presented with this point, defenders of the traditional family counter with a correlate of "common sense" logic: children need gendered role models. This is a tiresome argument, but one that requires response nonetheless. Unless they are being raised in a gender-specific monastery or commune, the average child will be exposed to a wide range of gender models through contact with extended family members, teachers, neighbours, media and so forth. The ideal that underlies the "children need gender role models" argument is not about gender per se, rather it is the desire for children to be exposed to *relational* models of gender that replicate traditional gendered family roles (e.g., the breadwinning, head-of-household father and nurturing mother). The assumption is that children raised in differently gendered two parent households will learn and replicate traditional models of dating, romance and, eventually, family organisation. Upon examination, it is clear that this argument is rooted in a motivation to maintain traditional gender roles. It has very little to do with questions of how to raise healthy, creative children. There is absolutely no evidence that indicates that this particular model is best for children. Rather, it is an argument for a gendered status quo, and in this regard, is socially conservative. Certainly people wishing to do so may advocate for the perpetuation of a gendered stats quo, but in posing arguments against same gender marriage and family, the claim that differently gendered, two parent households are, *ipso facto*, the healthiest, is a ruse. The burden of proof rests with those who would perpetuate this ideal, but the tendency in argument has been to accept this proposition as a given.

C. Tradition = Family = Tradition

Tradition *qua* tradition has apparently trumped critical and scientific examination in discussions of family form. For instance, in its recent decision, the New York Supreme Court suggested that "tradition" (or at least what passes for tradition in our current media-driven culture) is basis enough for maintaining the exclusionary legal and cultural status of marriage. How do arguments for tradition work? It's difficult to analyse them rationally. As Max Weber pointed out long ago, appeals to tradition rely largely on the authority of the "eternal yesterday" buttressed by fear of anything new. Thus, courts (and citizens who support these positions) are really saying that we want our governments to maintain the appearance of a particular cultural ideal which has become ideal simply by virtue of having been the way it was yesterday. Again, this may be a valid cultural position, but let's call it what it is: maintenance of a cultural status quo with a steadfast refusal to examine the underlying bases and utility of the protected cultural form.

An analysis of the actual functions of the family is useful here. Within its current traditional and cultural formulation, the differently gendered, two person unit is expected to perform the following functions: 1) biological and cultural reproduction, 2) economic self-sufficiency, 3) love, support, companionship. Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest this is a tremendous burden for a two-person unit, especially one without the "nested support" of extended family, community and government assistance. Yet, since the 1940s this has been the predominant cultural expectation in the United States. Furthermore, there is an increasing propensity to blame individuals if they fail to live up to these "traditional expectations." Some observers have suggested that current welfare and marriage "reform" acts in the United States actually vilify those who cannot or will not meet these expectations of traditional family. Certainly, the present system rewards those who do.

Ironically, the argument for maintaining the tradition, or status quo of marriage, is based to a large extent on a myth. There is very little evidence that the ideal family form as conveyed in traditional imagery has ever been widespread in the history of modern capitalist nations. To the extent that it does exist, it can only ever apply to a very limited group of families who occupy the upper echelons of the social and economic realm. Traditional gender roles in marriage and family have always been limited to a select few, despite the widespread myth of an idyllic life in which men bring home the bacon and women fry it up while wearing a welcoming smile and pearls.

Social historian, Stephanie Coontz, has written extensively on the historic economic hardships experienced by average white working class women and children in a capitalist system that 1) undervalues women's labour and 2) accorded the "breadwinner" the right to whatever money he brought into the relationship.[13] The all too common result was that women and children lived in a state of poverty and servitude while the man enjoyed the fruits of his own labours as well as the fruits of the labours of his wife and children. Hardly a model of "family values." Further, the myth reveals particular class and racial roots sometimes referred to as the "cult of domesticity" (with accompanying breadwinner and public role model expectations for middle-class white men). The roles of domestic wife/breadwinner husband and the accompanying notions of social harmony and domestic bliss are reflective of Victorian (with a resurgence post WWII) attempts to establish and maintain specific middle-class values.

This social context is usefully compared with research conducted by sociologist Bart Landry who provides compelling evidence for a very different, but arguably more workable, gender and family model based on women's differential participation in the workforce and the accompanying self-identification around this.[14] According to Landry's research, which is based on the experiences of "black working wives" in antebellum southern United States, black middle-class women's rates of participation in the labour force came much earlier than that of white women. According to his thesis, white women were trying to live up to the expectations of "domesticity" with the accompanying ideal of the traditional nuclear family as the ultimate moral and social accomplishment. In doing so, they became second-class citizens economically and politically which resulted in a dependency on their husbands that had limiting effects on their personal development and community participation. In contrast, black women were more interested in "lifting up the race" through participation in the social and economic realm, which meant pursuing education and employment as well as maintaining a household. In Landry's formulation, the result was more parity between black men and women, more of a community voice among women, and a stronger, more balanced model of family than that based on the "cult of domesticity" which requires the economic subjugation of women.

In short, from a historical (traditional) perspective, there is nothing inherently natural or wholesome about women staying home and raising children while men earn a living. My point here is simply that the supposed benefits of this model for children and society are, at best, a subject for debate, not an *ipso facto* basis for claiming superiority of one form of family organisation over another. If we truly care about children and the relational basis of healthy living, we would welcome critical analysis of this taken-for-granted (traditional) family form.

D. Expanding Marriage = Erosion of its Cultural Significance

Opponents of same gender marriage who wish to appear equality minded but remain on the side of exclusionary tradition often claim that if lesbians and gays are allowed to marry, the symbolic significance of marriage will be reduced to a mere contract. This particular argument can be traced directly to the "rights" rhetoric mounted by lesbian and gay activist groups in which a central claim to the right to marry is that marriage is associated with a plethora of state supported benefits. Opponents fear that if same gender marriage is allowed *on these grounds* that marriage in general will come to represent nothing more than the contractual rights and obligations that same gender marriage advocates have spelled out in their claims for equal rights. The arguments for this are somewhat convoluted. The idea that marriage is nothing more than the state supported benefits and obligations associated with it radically underestimates its the cultural significance. In other words, if marriage *could* be reduced to a mere contractual agreement, it probably wouldn't be the subject of such a major cultural war to begin with. Still, given the emphasis to date on rights, courts, etc., it makes a kind of sense that observers would assume that same gender marriage advocates are interested primarily in the contractual aspects of state supported marriage.

As I noted earlier, feminist legal scholars have long advocated for the separation of state supported benefits conferred primarily through marriage – they are calling for a divorce between marriage and the state. Paradoxically, opponents of this position make the argument that the state needs to be in the marriage business in order to give the relationship a contractual weight. Those who make this argument are fond of citing statistics that suggest that changes in family law, such as no-fault divorce, have resulted in the destabilisation of marriage, especially with respect to family obligations.

Again, this observation is based on erroneous, and in this case, spurious, reasoning. Certainly, state sanctioned rules and benefits play a role in motivating people to remain in relationship. But there is another paradox at the heart of the matter: either marriage is, first and foremost, a package of rights and obligations (i.e., a contract) or it's something bearing more cultural significance, including notions of love, commitment and emotional investment. If it's the former, then all any of us need is the contract (and a handbook of our responsibilities – one friend of mine has suggested requiring a test, similar to what one takes for a driving licence). If it's the latter, a hallmark of union based on love and commitment, then we're back at the initial question of whether the state has any place in regulating marriage. The theoretical and empirical question is one of *motivation*. Having postulated the motivation that underlies the appearance of relational stability, the question becomes, is it a sufficient basis for maintaining the attachments and commitments that are supposedly at the heart of marriage. Let's examine:

I find it useful to make a distinction between commitments of the heart *versus* habits of circumstance. The appearance of a stable relationship does not imply that the underlying motivation is one of love and commitment. Other factors, such as a lack of alternatives or risk-aversion may give the appearance of stability, but the true test would be whether someone chooses to stay if alternatives became available and easily attained (revealed preferences). This questionable basis of relationship stability is exacerbated under conditions of "force." If individuals can't leave a relationship because the state makes it difficult to do so, this certainly doesn't lead to the conclusion that such relationships are "functional." In fact, prior to no-fault divorce, partners were often trapped in abusive relationships. The increase in divorce statistics following the enactment of no-fault divorce laws may reveal the rate of marital dissatisfaction that existed prior to the option of leaving, rather than a decline of interest in and respect for the institution of marriage generally. This dissatisfaction is likely to be even higher in cultures in which individuals feel that marriage is "mandatory" and have had little opportunity to reflect carefully on the life path that might work best for them and their circumstances. In other words, in cultures in which individuals are encouraged to channel all desire for relationship and intimacy into marriage, the likelihood that they may experience dissatisfaction when faced with the actual demands of marriage is high. This dissatisfaction is likely to increase under circumstances in which the state controls the possibility of exit. Ultimately, this puts the state in a position of supporting a forced relationship - an idea that is surely at odds with our contemporary notions of love and companionship as bases for marriage and family.

Strange as it may seem, the idea of the state as a relationship manager is gaining some traction. In order to reconcile this seemingly contradictory position with respect to claims for same gender marriage (marriage is more than a contract, but the contractual element is necessary, yet neither should extend to lesbian and gay couples) a rather preposterous proposition has been put forth, including by one justice on the New York Supreme Court. The logic goes like this: heterosexual couples *need* the contractual aspects of marriage in order to *compel* them to carry out their family obligations (especially fathers vis-à-vis financial support of offspring) in a culture in which getting married/having sex is as easy as falling off a log. Whereas, same gender couples do not enter into family commitments lightly, especially the choice to bring children into the relationship, thus it can be said that they do not require the obligatory hand of marriage to assure that they will take care of their relationships and their kin.

E. Summary of Myths and Arguments Against Same Gender Marriage

The myths revealed in these various arguments can be summarised as a commitment to the ideal of traditional gender roles as the basis for a healthy family (gender role ideology), a rationale for this historically contextual "tradition" anchored in its presumed association with prosperity, propriety and social and moral status (middle-class virtue ideology) and, paradoxically, the notion that the motivation for traditional marriage transcends the state, but requires state support in the form contractual obligations. When examined logically, this last notion suggests the possibility that the ideologies of middle-class virtue and traditional gender roles are not sufficient to sustain marital obligations, especially the associated economic responsibilities. Many observers point out that if traditional marriage is so inherently right and good, it shouldn't need to be managed so closely by the state. But this isn't a battle of logic. Cultural politics are rarely grounded in reason and logic. Rather, they are attempts to maintain the myths and ideals that capture hearts and energies and bend the collective will not only in the name of tradition, but also for the sake of a sense of cultural belonging.

I find this basis of analysis much more informative in trying to make sense of the seeming contradictions of increased attempts by the state to regulate and control marriage (the publicisation of private affairs) and the even more paradoxical claims among lesbians and gay men, who have long been cast off from this system of meaning, to be granted full participation.[15] In the following section, I explore briefly contemporary attempts in the United States to bolster and regulate the cultural myth of marriage through forms of scapegoating. Having laid this groundwork, I return to the original question of why lesbians and gay men want so badly to participate in what this analysis has revealed to be a highly problematic institution. In so doing, I implicate myself and my own mixed reactions to the cultural trappings of marriage and family.

4. Exclusionary Scapegoating

The director of the (U.S.) Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Sean Cahill, begins an article on the politics of same gender marriage with a quote from a U.S. Republican Senator, Bob Barr (Georgia). Likening the current cultural climate to the fall of the Roman Empire, Barr proclaims:

> …as Rome burned, Nero Fiddled, and this is exactly what [supporters of same gender marriage] would have us do…The very foundations of our society are in danger of being burned. The flames of hedonism, the flames of narcissism, the flames of self-centered morality are licking at the very foundations of our society: the family unit.[16]

Barr is one of the architects of the 1996 U.S. Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). This act of Congress was built largely on a rhetoric insisting that civilisation as we know it is being lost and therefore tradition requires government protection. Cahill points out that simultaneous to the construction of DOMA, members of Congress were articulating a welfare "reform" bill that has come to be known as the Marriage Promotion Act (MPA). DOMA reaffirms the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman. The MPA connects welfare benefits to marriage by "prioritizing heterosexual marriage, reducing births to unwed mothers (primarily through abstinence only education) and *reinserting* fathers into families led by low-income single mothers" (emphasis mine).[17] Both bills were passed with bipartisan support and signed into law almost simultaneously. The logic underlying both is that an erosion of the traditional family is responsible for social upheaval and economic decline. The MPA claims a causal relationship between failure to marry and child poverty as well as various other social pathologies such as child abuse and juvenile crime.[18] Social analysts have demonstrated repeatedly that current rates of child poverty in the United States are largely due to increasingly punitive and draconian welfare policies, but the 1996 legislation is explicit in placing the blame with individual choices rather than state policies.[19]

At first glance legislation emphasising the importance of marriage for one group and banning it for another might seem illogical. However, each of these acts is intended to reinforce the ideals discussed previously. The simultaneous vilification of lesbians, gay men, and single mothers living in poverty underscores the trope of family as the basis of individual and social well-being. It does this by reinscribing the nuclear family as the basic unit of economic and legal recognition, and, most importantly, casually connecting social ills such as increased poverty and economic decline with deviant sexual choices. Together, DOMA and the MPA send the message that the traditional family is still the basis of a healthy society and that threats to this good life are based in selfish sexual behaviour. This is a powerful cultural message that has the effect of creating a cultural yearning for the "good old days" (or what Coontz has called, "the way we never were")[20] and re-establishing belief in the paternalistic state as a basis of returning us to that utopia by regulating dystopic sexual behaviour. One immediate consequence in the United States has been the proliferation of "abstinence only sex education" programs that aim to curb individual and social dissolution through the control of individual sexuality.

Several observers have wondered why U.S. citizens have been so passive in the acceptance of these seemingly out-moded social and sexual regulations (which appear to be increasing). Certainly the most active proponents of these moral regulations, sometimes referred to as the Christian Right, have been effectively vocal in their assertions. However, for such seeds of assertion to take root, there must be other social conditions that nurture the fertile soil on which they fall. One condition, as I've already noted, is a persistent sense that something is being "lost" – an illusion of a utopia that has somehow disappeared but which we can bring back by identifying the dystopic source of erosion. Seen in this way, the blaming of individuals whose choices can be tied to an "attack" on "traditional family values" is likely to resonate with many who feel a sense of social dis-ease. Naming the villains give a shape to this otherwise amorphous feeling that something is not right and does so within an existing system of meaning that is believed to rest on irrefutable basic assumptions (the family as right and good and a source of love and fulfilment).

This particular form of scapegoating, is consistent with another entrenched U.S. cultural tradition: blaming individuals rather than social systems. This tendency is what European social psychologists refer to the "fundamental attribution error" or the tendency to attribute causes to individuals rather than systems/circumstances. This mode of thinking/blaming is rampant in U.S. cultural politics. Blaming individual sexual choices for the loss of an imagined utopia may explain some of the acceptance (or at best, ambivalence) among U.S. citizens willing to accept the current regulations, but it's not sufficient to explain the feelings and desires of those who are cast off from this system (or disagree with the contemporary cultural politics of exclusion), but still desire to participate.

Progressive social analysts continue to provide evidence that suggests the traditional family model is socially and economically unviable in an advanced capitalist state. The root problems, according to these analysts, are the erosion of extended family networks, communities and strong social ties that provided people with sustainable meaning, connection and motivation for participation. The decline of these ties, due largely to a highly transient workforce, and the increasing economic demands on the individual, leads to a "time bind" that further compromises the bases for sustained meaningful relationships and community participation.[21] We have become a culture of what I might call "Ikea Pods" (isolated individuals occupying separate cubicles that are well-equipped to keep us entertained but detached). My hypothesis is that declining community and increasing social isolation makes many of us susceptible to the charms and promises of the traditional family model, especially as conveyed in contemporary media complete with visions of love, romance, and celebrated cultural acceptance. Thus, and again, paradoxically, even those of us who excel at critique of these myths also yearn for the hearth of acceptance that they promise. As products of this marriage obsessed society, we are no more immune to its siren calls than anyone else.

5. A Cultural Psychology of Belonging

Like many lesbians and gay men, until the rise of the "marriage wars," I hadn't given much thought to marriage. It was just another one of those cultural institutions that didn't apply to me. The lesbian and gay politics of an earlier decade were centred more around the ramifications of "coming out" in the workplace and family and community acceptance. I had been writing about this level of acceptance in terms of religious participation.[22] Specifically, what motivated people who wanted to be both openly queer and devoutly Christian? My research in this area has given me a richer understanding of the ways in which we wrestle contradictions in order to belong to and be embraced by significant cultural systems of meaning.

My first invitation to write on same gender marriage was for a law journal.[23] I approached the topic in terms of what is sometimes called the "radical/assimilation" debate: are lesbians and gay men who seek marriage simply perpetuating the status quo through attempts to assimilate into the lifestyle and values of middle-class culture? Or will the expansion of marriage to include lesbians and gays radically alter the institution? In that article, I suggested that the debate was more complicated than either/or, but concluded that, while same gender marriage will radically alter the gender basis on which marriage is predicated, it's not likely to change much in terms of the economic and cultural significance of marriage as a marker of acceptance and belonging. This argument was a standard feminist critique spiced with what I hoped was an evocative measure of sociological reasoning regarding the (heretofore) underestimated cultural significance of marriage among scholars and activists.

Subsequently, I was invited to speak to an audience of sociologists on the same topic. Although the audience was predisposed to my "critique of traditional marriage" point of view, the site was San Francisco and the moment was the day after the governor of California had revoked marriage licences granted to lesbians and gay men in the brief halcyon days following the legalisation of same gender marriage in Massachusetts. Perhaps the correspondingly sombre mood contributed to my own state of being, but I was quite surprised at my reaction when an elderly man approached me after my talk, thanked me for my words and then remarked that he was feeling considerable grief because he and his partner of 30 years were still not able to marry legally. Hearing this, I nearly burst into tears. A few days later a friend sent pictures of herself, her partner and their young son signing marriage documents in Toronto. Again, I felt tears welling up as I gazed at them standing so formally in the office of the justice of the peace to receive official state recognition of their union. In the ensuing months, I had similar reactions to countless announcements from friends who were finding a variety of ways to celebrate and, in the cases where they live in places that allow it, legally formalise, their family unions.

What is going on with me, I wondered? I'm no less committed to my critical analytical position on the traditional family form, yet I'm genuinely happy to celebrate with lesbian and gay friends who are adopting various manifestations of this form as their chosen life. These experiences have compelled me to subject my own seemingly contradictory reactions to critical inquiry. In so doing, I have realised, similar to the insight I reached in studying queer Christians, that even as scholars we continue to underestimate the grip of cultural systems of meaning. Even the most robust intellectual analysis doesn't necessarily negate the desire to find a place for oneself in the story. To this end, I'm increasingly inclined to think that the "marriage wars" are more richly understood in terms of yearning, melancholy and fantasy.[24]

As a cultural institution, marriage symbolises the ultimate attainment of cultural belonging (a quest that is all the more robust in a culture in which there are very few ritualised rites of passage). At the individual level, it signifies a rite of passage or "arrival" by conveying images of achieved inclusion based on expressed maturity and a transference of affections to another in a ceremony recognised and sanctioned by church and state. Accordingly, the attainment of marriage proclaims: I can love another, another loves me, I deserve to be loved by all. Thus conceived, marriage becomes a kind of fantasy institution whereby the longing for community is realised. For lesbians and gay men, the quest for marriage can be read in similar terms: as an imagined belonging and ideals of community that one believes will be made real through the accomplishment of marriage. This symbolises a kind of "returning home," or what Anna Marie Smith has called, "a return to the imagined womb of family." In other words, marriage is a way of returning to the familial and cultural nest from which we have been ejected.

This line of thought may explain why the issue of marriage presents such a painful wedge within families who otherwise seem to tolerate their lesbian or gay members. Tolerance suggests a wide field whereon we have found ways to "agree to disagree." In many instances, this creates a veneer of parity, mutual respect and perhaps even embrace. The issue of marriage shatters this illusion by illuminating the borders. In debates about same gender marriage it becomes immediately evident that there is, in fact, a hierarchy of cultural belonging: by virtue of the ability to marry, one is either inside or outside the fences of cultural acceptance. I have no hard evidence to support this, but recent anecdotal information suggests that when the issue comes up in discussions, family members tend to take the position that they favour civil unions (i.e., equal legal and economic benefits) for lesbian and gay male couples, but that they must draw the line at marriage. Using the various arguments discussed earlier, parents and siblings tend to plead with the lesbian or gay family member regarding the social (and often religious) sanctity of marriage. For example, an acquaintance of mine is Spanish. Same gender marriage is now legal in Spain, but when she approached her parents with the news that she and her partner intended to marry, her parents said something to the effect of, "we're in favour of benefits for you, but why do you insist on trampling the meaning of your entire upbringing and dragging our family down by having a formal marriage." The statement is particularly insidious in that it implies not only that we are asking for too much, but that through our "demands" for full inclusion, we are trampling on the terrain of tolerance that they have been willing to grant us. Or, in the words of some of my own family members when we do talk about these issues, "why do you have to make everything a problem?"

One of the cherished myths of family is that members fight together against a common foe. Responses such as the above statements serve as painful reminders that the family is choosing the cultural status quo over one of its members and that, if need be, they will fight against the family member to preserve this status quo. Culturally, marriage is less about the union between two individuals and more about signifying one's knowledge of and commitment to collective values – in this case values of love, unity, order and transcendence of the self. It's a social act more than an interpersonal one. To borrow Breen's citation of White, "There's not a moment of straight life that isn't cosily familiar, that can't be associated with a song or a lyric or a movie or a poem."[25] The cultural embroidery of marriage is threaded throughout our lives. Lesbians and gay men are no more immune to the seductiveness of this cultural myth than heterosexuals. In fact, having been repeatedly marginalised, it's likely that we're even more attracted to the myth with its promise of warm embrace in the blanket of cultural acceptance. Knowing this, the anticipation of family resistance is especially painful and serves as an exacerbated reminder of marginality.

The absence of cultural conventions for avowing homosexual love and bonding has long been a basis for grieving and melancholy. This is much more than "the love that dare not speak its name." In a cultural climate that bestows its most profound recognition on the ability to engage in successful (i.e., "acceptable") coupling, it makes sense that lesbians and gay men would yearn for circumstances and conventions that not only give voice to homosexual love, but bestow upon it the full heart of cultural acceptance. In seeking marriage, we seek to project ourselves into this fantasy or cultural recognition and embrace even as we may simultaneously engage in critical deconstructions.

The result is a self-perpetuating cycle of cultural reification. In mourning their exclusion from the imagined ideals of family, lesbians and gay men reify this illusion. Heterosexuals, with an amorphous sense that something is wrong (i.e., the ideal can never be as we imagine it to be), project this mourning onto homosexuals clamouring for inclusion and, in defining them as the dystopia, are able to reify the imagined utopia through policies intended to restore the illusion.

Despite the compelling logic and socio-historical evidence that support the critiques of marriage as a social institution, the yearning for inclusion among lesbians and gay men is best read as an indicator of the depth and stability of this cultural ideal. Marriage as a cultural institution symbolises ideal forms of relationship and family and serves as a motivational basis for participation and commitment. It confers legitimacy, belonging, and a sense of life-stage transformation. To this end, the cultural psychology of belonging introduces a tension that is likely to be constantly present even in the face of the most compelling critical analysis.

6. Conclusions

If nothing else, these reflections are a reminder that sexuality is a cause of social panic. Scholars of sexuality and society have traced this process in a variety of ways. For example, Gayle Rubin suggests that in our "sex negative culture" all erotic behaviour is bad unless there is a specific reason to exempt it. The acceptable excuse is sex sanctioned through marriage. Any threat to this leads to a form of cultural panic. However, as she points out, "moral panics rarely alleviate any real problems, because they are aimed at chimeras and signifiers." She also notes that historical moments of sex panic always involve scapegoating.[26] For those who prefer the predictability of the status quo, these appear to be frightening times indeed. The combined factors of a global media and electronic communication enable individuals in places as diverse as Seoul and Idaho to find and explore variations on gender and sexuality. In terms of social ecology, the proliferation of these diverse forms may be an indicator that the traditional forms of gender, sexuality and family organisation are not entirely "commitments of the heart" but rather "habits of circumstance" perpetuated by a lack of awareness of alternatives and reinforced by a mechanism of interlocking social institutions such as law, religion and education. In other words, the presence of such variety should raise doubts about the presumed "naturalness" of traditional family arrangements. For those who dare to reach beyond the well-charted realm of tradition, this variation suggests a "brave new frontier." For most, however, the uncharted signifies danger, darkness and social erosion. The historically common response to threats of significant change has been a call for increased regulation. This is especially true with matters of family and sexuality. Thus, the "politics of possibility" are taut with the human tension of wanting/needing to preserve existing cultural institutions and the meaning they infuse into our lives while simultaneously recognising that these institutions, in order to remain viable, must be open to change.

In the preceding discussion, I've endeavoured to explore the cultural bedrock that supports the institution of traditional marriage. I've suggested that this institution is far more than the legal and economic benefits that have been highlighted by advocates of same gender marriage, Rather, this is a rich and deeply hewn terrain etched with material, cultural, interpersonal and emotional systems of meaning. Upon close examination, it appears that the terrain of marriage and family is, in many ways, the ultimate indicator of a cultural "reality." The particular reality at this point in time is shaped most significantly in terms of gendered roles and expectations and a pervasive socio-emotional knowledge that successful performance of these roles is the ticket to social acceptance. Marriage symbolises one's "attainment" of these expectations and results in full cultural acceptance and legitimation.

Lesbians and gay men who seek to have their own unions recognised through state and religious sanctioned marriages can be understood as seeking the same cultural belonging. This desire may be even stronger among lesbians and gay man who cannot take their belonging for granted given the individual and cultural marginalisation they experience. The basis of this marginalisation (a.k.a. homophobia) is, first and foremost, failure to perform the appropriate gender expectations associated with marriage and family. Lesbians and gay men who seek marriage are thereby attempting to alter a landscape based almost entirely on the fissures of a gender binary. This is indeed radical. At the same time, the point has been raised that this activity, gender radical as it is, may do little to alter the bedrock of *heteronormativity* on which cultural acceptance and belonging rests.

These explorations have given me little hope that same gender marriage will result in any kind of significant cultural revolution. Rather, same gender marriage is likely to perpetuate a status quo that favours one particular family form and concurrent set of cultural expectations and practices. For example, mainstream media depictions of homosexuality are decidedly asexual – perhaps in an attempt to convince heterosexual society that we are not that different after all. No need for sex panic. Additionally, court cases and religious groups that support same gender marriages are making much of the case that the couples and family seeking this recognition of legitimacy are wholesome and productive members of society who, with the exception of a variation in the gender of their chosen lover, are just like the best of the rest of us. In other words, contemporary depictions of lesbians and gay families believed to "deserve" public support tend to highlight the ways in which we fit the existing status quo: "We're here, We're queer, Let's go to Ikea."[27]

Same gender marriage will certainly alter aspects of our gender-obsessed culture and probably make some inroads into decoupling sexual behaviour and reproduction. But it's just as probable that in the attempt to demonstrate deservedness and remain within the cultural embrace of marriage, lesbian and gay families will also come to emulate (and support politically) traditional values. There are already some manifestations of this in the form of community efforts on the part of lesbian and gay parents to desexualise imagery in art and storefronts that have long been seen as a hallmark of neighbourhoods such as San Francisco's Castro district. Same gender marriage is not likely to provide any cultural sympathy for self-proclaimed anti-heteronormative, gender queer individuals such as drag queens and kings. Nor is it likely to generate social understanding and real reform for single mothers living in poverty, those who identify as gender queer and others who don't fit the form. In fact, it's likely that same gender marriage will exacerbate the vilification of those who cannot, or will not marry.

To the extent that these predictions bear out, it can be surmised that the yearning for a cultural utopia of belonging and legitimacy trumps even the most convincing critical analyses of the limitations believed to exist in the chimera of traditional marriage. To this end, we all have something to lose with regard to a politics of possibilities.

On the matter of same gender marriage, I conclude this essay with mixed mind and heart. As a student of human society, I am continually amazed at our ability to spin cultural stories and realise them through our actions and policies. Yet, this is an age in which we seem to fear this remarkable potential and appear impoverished in our imagination of the possible. Rather than celebrate and stoke our collective imagination, we seem inclined to curb innovation and creativity in favour of the safer, more predictable action of maintaining the status quo. We put a lot of energy into preserving recognisable cultural recipes that will tell us who to be and what to do – recipes for living that have been calcified into ideologies and accorded a status presumed to transcend human consciousness, critique and intervention. One of the problems in this (and there are many) is that we then use this notion of "transcendence" (a.k.a. tradition) to justify cultural practices of exclusion and discrimination. At the same time, the supposedly "progressive" position is based on claims for inclusion, but the ultimate form and practices remain much the same. This tension is, perhaps, one of the grandest paradoxes of our time. As we wrestle this, we are also grappling with the simple but age-old question of meaning: who we are, where we fit in, what we can do and be. Marriage as a cultural institution takes its significance from this realm – the realm of cultural stories that we wear like beasts on our backs to give us shape and form.

Put this way, personal and social integrity may consist of the ability to exist in the tension: it's not an either/or story. Rather, the tensions and contradictions prompt us to explore, isolate, and articulate the various dimensions of belonging and exclusion. My own hope lies not in the expectation that we will "solve" this issue, but in the cultivation of a collective courage that enables us not only to tolerate, but also to embrace, and even insist upon, cultural tension and contradiction. In this way, we may stoke the flames of imagination and keep alive a politics of possibility.

Notes

1. Much of the literature on this topic uses the term "same-sex" to refer to intimate relationships between lesbians and/or gay men. I have used this term myself in previous articles. However, upon reflection, I find "same gender relationships" to be a more accurate expression. There are many reasons for this, but the most pertinent in this case is that in cultural considerations of gender and sexuality, it is the manifestation of recognisable *gender identities and gender roles* that is under scrutiny. Legislation intended to "protect traditional marriage" defines marriage as a

"relationship between one man and one woman." Anthropologically, "man" and "woman" are gender constructs. Linguistically these terms are frequently conflated with and intended to correspond to physiological sex characteristics (e.g., presence or absence of a penis). However, there is considerable biological and cultural evidence that there is a wider range of both physiological "sex" and cultural gender than the binary "man/woman" allows for. Nonetheless, the law recognises only two *genders* but also allows for some possibility that these genders may be fluid – in other words, the law currently recognises transgendered men and women but insists that they can only be/have one gender identity at a time and it must be female or male (i.e., one can't be "trans"). Sex characteristics may or may not be consistent with the person's legally chosen gender identity. For example, a transgendered female-to-male may be legally recognised as male even though he may not posses the sex characteristics (testes, penis) associated with the gender. However, this legal definition of "male" is sufficient for him to legally marry a woman (who may or may not be transgendered). Thus, in considerations of marriage and intimacy, the issue is clearly a matter of *gender* identity – specifically whether two persons who identity as the same gender are allowed to marry. Technically, persons with the same sex characteristics (but legally/medically recognised as different genders) are already allowed to marry. This should not be interpreted to mean that transgendered persons do not experience prejudice - far from it. Rather, my point is that in considering the matter of marriage, it's the appearance and maintenance of a two-gender binary that is at issue. Accordingly, our analytical language should reflect this.

2. As of 2006 in the U.S., six states have established laws recognising either same gender marriage or some alternative form of same gender union, twelve states ban recognition of any form of same gender unions, including civil unions and thirty-four states have enacted laws denying the recognition of same gender marriages.

3. For an interesting reflection on this see Julie Shapiro, "Reflections on Complicity," in *New York City Law Review,* 8 (City University of New York, 2005): 1901-1919.

4. Nancy Polikoff, "Why Lesbians and Gay Men Should Read Martha Fineman," *Journal of Gender, Social Policy and Law* 8 (American University, 2000): 167-176.

5. Ibid.

6. Jodi O'Brien, "Seeking Normal? Considering Same-Sex Marriage," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 2 (Seattle University, 2004): 459-473.

7. Lynne Haney and Lisa Pollard, *Families of a New World: Gender, Politics and State Development in a Global Context* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

8. O'Brien, 2004, 469.

9. Lisa Duggan, "Holy Matrimony," *The Nation* (March 15, 2004).

10. Letter to the Editor in *Seattle Times* (25 August 2006).

11. This is an egregious, but true example of words uttered from the bench of Dallas Judge Jack Hampton, 1989.

12. Judith Stacey and Tim Biblarz, "(How) does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?" *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001): 159-183.

13. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) and Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

14. Bart Landry, "Black Women and a New Definition of Womanhood," in *Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Family Revolution,* by Bart Landry (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2000), 56-83.

15. Ken Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions, Public Dialogues* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

16. Bob Barr, "District of Columbia Domestic Partner Benefits Debate,' *Congressional Record,* 104th Congress (Washington, D.C: U.S. Congress, November 1, 1995), H11657.

17. Scott Cahill, "Welfare Moms and Two Grooms: The Concurrent Promotion and Restriction of Marriage in US Public Policy," *Sexualities* 8 (2005), 172.

18. Ibid., 170.

19. The 1948 National Conference on Family Life (American Council of Churches) provides an interesting comparison with contemporary policy and its emphasis on individual fault for social problems. The conference was convened for the purpose of, "assessing threats and opportunities of family security in post WWII upheaval." Conference records suggest that the participants also uncritically assume the equation of traditional family form with social health, but the emphasis throughout is on the *social factors* that enable the traditional family to carry out its social functions: specifically, there is a repeated emphasis on the significance of supportive social relations as buttressed by economic and political support. Some of the tangible effects of this conference on how to bolster the family include the formation of the Federal Housing Authority (which grants low interest housing loans), the Veterans Education Bill and other agencies and services intended to assist

individual families in carrying out their social functions. In stark contrast to current policy discussions, there seem to have been a widespread awareness that the functions expected of families are *difficult* and not something a tiny nuclear unit can do on its own.

20. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

21. See Kathleen Gerson, "Coping With Commitment: Dilemmas and Conflicts of Family Life," in *America at Century's End,* ed. Alan Wolfe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 36-68, and Arlie Hochschild, *The Time Bind* (New York: Owl Books, 2001).

22. Jodi O'Brien, "Wrestling the Angel of Contradiction: Queer Christian Identities," *Culture and Religion* 5 (2004): 179-201.

23. O'Brien, 2004, *SJSJ,* 470.

24. This conceptualisation was inspired by Margaret Breen.

25. Edmund White, *The Farewell Symphony* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 19.

26. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger* ed. Carol Vance (New York: Routledge, 1984), 25.

27. For example, in a ruling favourable to same gender marriage, a King County (WA) Superior Court Judge writes: The lives [of these plaintiffs] reflect hard work, professional achievement, religious faith, and a willingness to stand up for their beliefs. They are law-abiding, taxpaying model citizens. They include exemplary grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents and grandparents. There is not one among them that any of us should not be proud to call a friend, neighbour or to sit with at small desks on back-to-school night. There is no worthwhile institution that they would dishonour, much less destroy. Hon. William L. Downing, "Anderson, Christian, *et al* v. State of Washington," *Memorandum Opinion* (Superior Court of the State of Washington for King County, No.04-0496-4 SEA, Aug. 4, 2004: 26). Similar examples of the "normalisation" of lesbians and gay men who seek marriage can be found in references by religious groups who point out the numerous similarities and "good qualities" of these people. See for example, Religious Coalition for Equality: <http: www.religious coalition-wa.org>.

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Ethical Sluts and Closet Polyamorists: Dissident Eroticism, Abject Subjects and the Normative Cycle in Self-Help Books on Free Love

Serena Petrella

Abstract

In this chapter, I study self-help literature on dissident eroticism, and specifically those texts that teach how to engage in a polyamorous lifestyle. I approach these works as prescriptive texts for conduct, characteristic of a liberal mentality of government that embeds regulation into the subjectivity of individuals through processes of normalisation. I argue that the ontological bracketing for ethical polyamorous practice that these texts present are forms of "policing." Ultimately, they are counteractive to the efforts to "open up" a cognitive space for an effective articulation of a dissident ethics of eroticism in polyamory. **Key Words:** polyamory, normalisation, sexual identity, abject/subject ontologies, sexual ethics, governance, genealogy.

1. Introduction

In the following discussion, I examine the authoritative discourses of self-help literature on polyamory. In particular, I analyse three texts: *The Ethical Slut. A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*, by Easton and Liszt; *Polyamory. The New Love without Limits. Secrets of Sustainable Intimate Relationships*, by Anapol; and *The Sex and Love Handbook. Polyamory! Bisexuality! Swingers! Spirituality! & Even Monogamy! A Practical Optimistic Relationship Guide,* by Heinlein and Heinlein. These are not simply sex manuals, but prescriptive texts for moral conduct as well. The authors wish to overthrow normative monogamy, which they find spiritually and sexually restrictive, and usher in a new era of relational and spiritual abundance, through the practice of polyamory. Polyamory is defined as the sexual and emotional economy of non-monogamy. From its Latin and Greek roots, translating to "many loves," polyamory in these texts comprises different types of open sexual relationships, including open or group marriage, intimate networks and polyfidelity [1].

I contend that the revolutionary potential of these texts is quite limited. If, at first glance, the authors appear to be engaged in a practice of resistance and emancipation to the norm, upon closer scrutiny their definitions of polyamorous ethics is very conservative. Because they codify and make licit only a strict and policed version of polyamory, these texts, I argue, fall short of their subversive potential.

This essay is organised into five sections. In the first, I discuss how normalisation is perpetrated by discourse in prescriptive texts of sexual conduct. I argue that governance is not simply a form of external power that acts upon subjects, but also a form of ethical, or in-folded practice.[2] I illustrate how prescriptive discourses on sexuality attempt to regulate conduct, but unwittingly also create the discursive space for subversion, by generating abject subject positions for ontological dissidence.

In the second section, I flesh out the narratives that stress the importance of an austere and strict sexual ethics for "proper" polyamory. I argue that this insistence on personal responsibility is a feature common to all treaties on the "conduct of conduct" of the post Enlightenment period. I study the discourse of sexual politicisation that describes the involvement in the polyamorous lifestyle as a process of ontological grounding. According to the authors of the texts, the sexual ethics of polyamory allows individuals to gain access to a "truer" and more "authentic" self. There are strong echoes here to the processes of identity consolidation of other abject subject positions, such as gay/lesbian/bi/queer. The polyamorous lifestyle, then, is specifically defined by these texts as an ethical engagement that gives access to one's intelligibility.

I go on to explore the theme of relationships as "work." As we shall see, this conceptualisation allows the authors to at once describe monogamy as unnatural, pathological and emotionally restrictive, and at the same time elevate polyamory to the status of "superlative relationship," because of its complexity and spiritual depth. Any chance that polyamory be dismissed as a "way out" of the more serious and restrictive form of relationship, monogamy, is erased. Another important theme that I take up is the construction of the polyamorous subject as an autonomous creature, psychologically self-contained and emotionally independent from any other being. I analyse the insistence on full disclosure and honesty.

In the third part, I discuss the theme of spiritual enlightenment through the sexual awakening of polyamory. Specifically, I examine the authors' conceptualisation of embodiment, and its relationship to emotion and spirituality. I argue that these formulations of the body/mind dichotomy ultimately place embodied pleasure in a hierarchically subjected position to spiritual experience.

In the fourth section, I examine the different areas of moral concern that are discussed in the texts. I dedicate my attention to the definitions of pleasure and fulfilment present in these works, in order to establish whether hedonistic practice is unconditionally seen as positive, and not once again crystallised into the binary of Eros/Thanatos, so common to other prescriptive works on erotic conduct. I explore emancipation discourses and the topic of coming out, to disclose one's lifestyle first to oneself, as a political practice for the sake of spiritual authenticity, and to others.

I then move to give a detailed description of the ways in which the poly experts discursively set up schemas of subjectivation for "licit" polyamorous subjectivity and conduct, and I investigate whether these parameters are informed by the fear of potential censorship. Lastly, I conclude that the ontological bracketing for ethical polyamorous practice that these texts present, are forms of "policing." Ultimately, they are counteractive to the authors' own efforts to "open up" a cognitive space for an effective articulation of a dissident ethics of eroticism in polyamory.

2. Sexual Acts, Character and Identity

In the Foucaultian genealogical tradition, governance is not simply understood as a form of external power that acts upon subjects, but also as a form of ethical, or in-folded practice. This mentality of governance dates back to the Enlightenment. It is during these times in the West that the figure of the citizen as a self-governing and actualising subject emerges. This "responsible" approach to life has gained importance throughout the twentieth century and can be considered to be the foundational ethics for modern citizenship today.[3]

The emergence and establishment of this particular form of governance is facilitated by the discursive productions of various authorities that, since the 1850s, have stipulated acceptable and licit forms of subjectivation and human action.[4] Of particular importance, are those discursive utterances that deal with the subject of sexuality.[5] According to Foucault, discourses on sexuality which offer rules, opinions and advice as to how to conduct oneself as one should, provide schemas to give meaning to one's existence, and should be approached as "technologies" of subjectivation: they *produce* experience, they are *not produced by* experience.[6] Governance then comes to be increasingly administered through norms and decreasingly regulated through the law. Normalisation is exercised by the discursive stipulation of what is licit and illicit, and in-folded in the everyday lives of subjects as they strive to meet heterogeneous parameters of normality.

Yet, as Judith Butler has so effectively argued, normalisation can function in a peculiar manner. All discursive utterances that initially seek to confine, limit or prohibit specific sets of sexual acts, eventually open up to discourse their own definitions, and provide the occasion for resistance. In fact, any authority that attempts to regulate conduct actually produces two kinds of subjective positions: subjects and abject subjects.[7] By trying to codify and make licit a specific form of experience, unwittingly the conditions for the emergence of abject experiences are created as well – this is normativity's paradoxical opus. This mirroring effect eventually brings about the subversion of the definitions of normality and correct behaviour that the same regulative discourses tried to impose.[8]

If we follow the schema outlined above, we can interpret the erotic ethics of polyamory as emerging out of the peculiar reflexivity of normativity. It can be understood as a subversive reply to those discourses that attempt to make monogamous conduct the only erotic economy available, and its "poly" persona can be interpreted as the subject position it "abjectively" engenders. Once the dissident lifestyle of polyamory "perversely" emerges as a mirror effect of normative monogamy, the abject subject of the polyamorist claims "agency" through an ethic of erotic dissidence.

What is of particular interest in the advice literature on polyamory is that the personas of the polyamorists have gone well beyond the claiming of "agency." They have begun to speak from their abject subject position, as "authorities" of this new lifestyle and politically advertise their dissident ethics as a way to achieve responsible self-actualisation, in a language that has strong echoes of the liberal and empowered "free" citizenship of the Enlightenment. As such, they seem to be an emblematic example of the convoluted functioning of normalisation: once the polyamorists begin to shape the parameters of "acceptable" polyamory, they open up such definitions to discourse and the normative cycle starts once more.

3. Making the Subject Responsible

The public assertion of queerness, in this case the open celebrating of poly dissident eroticism, is aimed at the creation of a new cognitive space that will re-signify non-monogamous behaviour. It is an embracing of "abjection," and a transformation of it into a positive and politicised ontology, that is defiantly projected towards legitimacy. The authors of these texts have come to feel "at peace," managed to live against the normalising culture around them, and to be happy in spite of it. They wish to make public their knowledge and experiences so that other subjects can recognise themselves in this "abjectivity" - the resistance to the norm becomes the ontological foundation to life.

Dr. Anapol states: "Our culture desperately needs a new set of sexual ethics,"[9] in the opening passage of her book. The discourse of sexual politicisation is common to all three texts. Polyamory is described interchangeably as the "natural" evolution of relationships in present day society,[10] or the original economy of love, before patriarchal law deformed it.[11] The polyamorous lifestyle is depicted as on one hand providing the ontological schemas for recognition into the ethical persona of the poly and, on the other, as providing the tools that allow the individual to shape oneself into a more "authentic" subject.

The theme of sexual activity as an avenue to the authentic self is important. Foucault, in the *History of Sexuality Vol. I*, argues that towards the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s, sexuality and character are fused to each other, and what one does erotically comes to mark one's "true" self and identity. Foucault traces the emergence of this new hermeneutics of existence to the discursive fabrications of the budding science of sexology, where there was a shift in the understanding of sexual deviance from a form of behaviour to an ontological condition.[12]

The taxonomies of perverse behaviour and the concurrent medicalisation of sexuality, re-problematised deviance as an issue of moral essence of the individual, not a specific behaviour or a singular event.[13] Sexual deviance and sexuality in general, from this point forward, were discursively constructed as matters of personal identity and character. For Foucault, modern sexuality is specifically constituted by this "ontological bracketing," or socially created out of disciplinary power and discourses of knowledge. By grouping together behaviour, physical characteristics and the emotional make up of individuals, sexology created the identity of deviant subjects. The extension of these discourses, as Butler has illustrated, and the conceptualisation of the abject in this manner, allows for the articulation of disparate and various "personas" of sexuality, including our poly.[14]

On describing her monogamous past, Anapol sates: "I had to pretend to be someone other than who I really was."[15] In this sentence, the author underlines the non-authenticity of her previous obfuscated self, implying that only the enactment of a new and dissident sexual ethics could give her access to her "true" identity. On encountering a poly kindred spirit, Easton and Liszt note:

> …And I immediately got this strong sense of 'oh, people like me.' Two decades went by before I came out as a slut, and another decade before I came out as a bisexual, but there was something about the whole idea that I simply understood and responded top deep in my gut.[16]

Again, the authors return to the theme of ontological authenticity and connect sexual behaviour to character formation in a manner that fuses together sexual acts and identity. The emergence of this new identity is further politicised by the process of "coming out," which brings the realm of sexuality into the public sphere.

There are strong echoes here to the processes of identity consolidation of other "abject" subject positions, such as gay/lesbian/bi/queer. The polyamorous lifestyle then is described as an ethical engagement that gives access to one's intelligibility. The assumption here is that present "abject" economies will eventually become "normal," and thus be "digested" by the normative system.

The teleology for polyamory to achieve an "ultimate" human potential turns out to be quite austere. The conceptualisation of relationships as "work" recurs in all texts. It is, to a certain extent, a political casting: by insisting that polyamory is more complex and emotionally demanding than simple monogamy, the authors elevate this erotic economy to the status of "superlative relationship." Thus, no one would dare to claim that it is a practice for those who are afraid to commit, or are too immature to embark on an emotionally mature rapport. The poly lifestyle, because of its complexity, its intrinsic spirituality and emotional depth, actually borders the ascetic!

Anapol describes the mandatory requirements for proper polyamory. The list is long. All partners must freely agree to all the relationship's terms: there must be honesty, commitment to mutual caring and to the bond, integrity and respect of everyone's boundaries.[17] Easton and Listz add, to the already onerous list of parameters provided in Anapol's text, the necessity to communicate and plan, the gift of limit setting, and the injunction to be knowledgeable about oneself.[18] If the reader ever thought of approaching the poly lifestyle to shed the responsibilities that a monogamous relationship entailed, he/she is in for a shock.

Anapol additionally argues that any relationships should be embarked upon with the intent of lifelong support, by any means and in any way.[19] Moreover, it must have a positive effect on all involved, the children produced by it, and so in sum, it should serve the functions of family life and be consistent with one's values.[20] Easton and Listz also warn that there are a number of external physical factors that might further complicate the lifestyle. Time is finite, space needs to be shared, money and assets need to equitably administered, and the sexual prowess of male partners, which is realistically limited, needs to be judiciously managed by all lovers involved (the authors cheekily refer to this last problem as "the tyranny of hydraulics.")[21] The "beginner poly," at the mere reading of this long list of caveats, might become so exhausted he/she may not want to brave the orgy!

This attitude has echoes of a distant protestant ethics, where one can gain God's blessing and favour only by committing to a life of labour, and win a glimpse of God's goodwill by a judicious administration of hard earned goods (pleasures).[22] Similarly, there are echoes of a Liberal meritocratic logic: only to the committed and the hardworking go the spoils of victory, as Easton and Listz comment: "…but what a feeling of triumph when you succeed!"[23]

Another very important theme is the construction of the polyamorous subject as an autonomous creature, psychologically self-contained and emotionally independent from any other being. This is a peculiar discursive casting, especially because the rest of the narrative insists on the emotional connectivity of the polyamorist and its complex relational bonds.

The phrase "know thyself" is recurrent. The individual is made increasingly responsible for her/his attitudes on sex, her/his expectations and her/his economies. Another common injunction is "own your emotions." One's reactions to another's actions are made the sole responsibility of the self, especially with regards to jealousy. It is clearly stated that one's emotions are not the other lover's "job." All internal turmoil stirred up by the poly lifestyle is essentially made the personal baggage of each member involved.[24] This attitude is problematic, as it implies that socialisation can be undone at will. Easton and Listz state:

> Because I am responsible, every day, for my needs being met (or not), and for creating and maintaining the relationship in my life, I can take nothing for granted. Every person I meet has the potential for whatever it is that's right between me and that person, regardless of how my relationships are with anybody else. And so this lifestyle gives me a very concrete feeling of individuality, that I recreate everyday.[25]

The cliché that one individual "cannot own the other" regularly surfaces in the texts.[26] The authors also warn that a poly "enlightenment" and subjectivity can never be achieved under the wrong circumstances. These "negative" conditions always refer to external pressure or to the will of others: it is wrong to take on the lifestyle because a partner has pressured one into it or because one's peers are engaging in it. This is a return to the theme of authenticity.[27]

4. Pleasure and Other Areas of Moral Concern

In this section I analyse attitudes on hedonistic practice and establish whether it is unconditionally seen as positive, or if it is inevitably crystallised into the binary of Eros/Thanatos, so common in other prescriptive works on erotic conduct.[28] At first sight and in all texts, pleasure seems to be understood as a strong and positive force in human experience. Easton and Liszt declare that the poly lifestyle can be defined as "…The courage to lead life according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you."[29] Sexual love is perceived as an intrinsically positive force that has the potential of strengthening bonds, giving spiritual insight and improving the life of those who embrace it. Anapol fully aligns herself with the theories of Reich,[30] and extols the benefits of orgasmic sexual energy.[31]

A more thorough inspection of the theme of pleasure, and especially an analysis of what the authors believe to be the "proper" avenues to attain it, reveal a marked uneasiness towards hedonism. Some authors are more "forgiving" of pleasure for pleasure's sake, while others insist on deeper and "more authentic" feelings. Easton and Liszt state that "…Each relationship seeks its own level," and are quite practical.[32] In trying to map out the disparate forms that poly relationships take, they are forgiving of emotionally superficial encounters. The authors justify their position by arguing that their public must distance itself from the "obsession" with love that permeates our culture. Thus, "one night stands" and "fuck-buddies" are allowed, as long as there is honesty and respect, and a mutual understanding that the relationship is finite.

Heinlein and Heinlein are also quite untroubled by the issue of pleasure for pleasure's sake. Their text is actually largely dedicated to the discussion of pick-up strategies and seduction techniques on how to best approach new partners, which at times include downright unethical advice (for example, they suggest that the best way to "pick up" a lesbian couple is to approach the less attractive of the two *first.*)[33] Predictably, Easton and Liszt, and Heinlein and Heinlein discuss swinger culture in fairly positive terms, yet may be with an ounce of condescension, as if they were referring to a less fortunate or less emotionally and spiritually sophisticated relative.[34]

Anapol takes a much different approach to pleasure. In her description of various forms of polyamory, she states: "One thing that all these types of relationship have in common is that they are *both* sexual *and* loving or *sexualoving* with *no separation between the sex and the love*. In other words, we're not talking about casual, indiscriminate sex."[35] In this text there is a strong and clear positioning against pleasure for pleasure's sake, and commitment to the couplet of sex/love that is even more conservative than hegemonic non-polyamorous economies.

Another area of moral concern relates to the issue of honesty. One's engagement with another lover is generally assumed to imply full disclosure and honesty. However, even in this area we encounter dissenting opinions and heterogeneous positions. Anapol is the most severe here, demanding that those who have cheated disclose fully to the betrayed lover, even at the risk of forever compromising that relationship.[36] Heinlein and Heinlein take a different path, and acknowledge that not all people should adhere to the full-disclosure rule, and discuss the "don't ask don't tell" approach that some partners prefer, concluding, however, that it is not the preferable avenue for long term polyamory.[37]

Faithfulness to commitments and respect of agreements is deemed paramount by all. Authors urge each participant to establish within oneself, one's own limitations, and adhere to these parameters. Planning is paramount, so to each relationship are given the proper amount of effort and care. All texts approach relationships through a hierarchical schema (primary, secondary, tertiary) and attach a varying degree of responsibility and effort to each.[38]

The issue of honesty towards the outside world, and coming out to family members, friends, landlords, and co-workers, reveals that the authors fear lack of acceptance for the ethics of polyamory. Anapol unconditionally argues for a full disclosure and extols the advantages of an authentic existence.[39] Anxiety pervades the narratives on coming out of Easton and Liszt, and Heinlein and Heinlein, however. In discussing the issue of reputation, Easton and Listz exhort not to internalise negative characterisations that are circulated in the social. Nonetheless, they do not fully commit to their earlier political calls for poly identity definition and ethical emancipation, and warn that disclosure to some groups might not practical. The incitement to "stay in the closet" is surprising, in view of their previous political engagement (specifically they argue that one should be silent with landlords, to avoid eviction, and co-workers, to avoid being fired.)[40] Heinlein and Heinlein acrobatically avoid the issue by telling a couple of funny anecdotes about embarrassing moments of disclosure, of individuals coming out to the "wrong" people.[41] These grey areas show a certain level of unease and hesitation on the issue of "sexual rights." It appears that the authors do not believe to have the same public recognition as bi/gay or lesbians, and thus feel that discrimination might be inevitable. I believe this position points to an internalisation of censorship.

5. The Body, Emotion and Spirituality

The theme of spiritual enlightenment through the sexual awakening of polyamory recurs in all examined texts. In the following discussion, I examine the authors' position on the body, the mind and the spirit, to reveal that the classic Socratic formulation of the supremacy of the soul over the body,[42] and the subsequent Cartesian fusion of the spirit to the intellect,[43] persist. The valorisation of the spiritual over the embodied remains, and the authors are unable to break the conservative conceptualisation that sex, for pleasure sake alone, is not acceptable.

For Anapol, poly sexual ethics is the most reliable and true path to mystical illumination,[44] a fortuitous opportunity to attain higher consciousness and greater self-knowledge.[45] In the author's view, through the pleasures of the body, one can get in touch with one's emotions, and this in turn, gives one access to the spiritual world.

Heinlein and Heinlein devote a lengthy section of their text to spirituality and religiosity. They open with a discussion of the numerous examples of polyamorous conduct in the Bible,[46] and move on to discuss the philosophy of Gnosis.[47] In the authors' interpretation, Gnosis exemplifies the human resolve to find meaning in all areas of experience, from science, to art and religion. The assumption here is that in sex one can find such "deeper meaning."

At this point Heinlein and Heinlein reveal to their audience their personal and deep commitment to Christianity. Yet, they express sadness for Christianity's treatment of sexuality, as well as other religions' understanding of sex as degenerate. They mourn the refusal to recognise, what in their opinion, is the inherent spirituality of sex. They then argue that one's resistance to engage in sex, or to seek out its pleasurable limits, equate to depriving one's body of "the wonderful healing forces of love."[48] The authors reason that God has given humanity the capacity to learn and cultivate one's sexual energies, to achieve maximum health. Why squander such a gift? "If someone gives you a beautiful and useful gift, hiding it away and never using it to its fullest potential is a sin. To not use those gifts for the benefit of others and ourselves is a sin against God the creator."[49] Here the spiritual is understood to be in the body, in the carnal expression of sex, and placed there by divinity: thus, through the experience of embodied pleasure, one can access and return to that divinity. The divine is the obligatory destination of the sexual.

Easton and Liszt conceptualise "ethical sluthood" not only as an avenue to expand one's sexual boundaries, but much more. In the full engagement in one's sexual life, they foresee the development of an "advanced sexuality," which would allow one to be more "natural" and more "human."[50] They explain: "Sex really is a physical expression of a whole lot of stuff that has no physical existence: love and joy, deep emotion, intense closeness, profound connection, spiritual awareness, incredibly good feelings, sometimes even ecstasy."[51] Here the authors seem to suggest that emotional experience transcends the body.

Yet, they go on to state: "In our utopia, intellect is not a trap that we get stuck in, but an honoured tool we use to discover and access all the parts of ourselves, and give form to our experience."[52] Here, the rational is put in the service of the carnal. Through this, the body can become the doorway to mysticism. But, is it the emotional dimension of sex that one can unshackle from the constrictive tendencies of rationality, to gain access to "truer" experience - spiritual knowledge. So, there is an elision here, between the body and emotion, and again, between emotion and the spirit.

Discussing the rationality/spirituality dichotomy further, Easton and Liszt explain:

> We free our animal selves by opening our intellects to awareness of our bodies, and when we are no longer stuck in our intellects we become more like spirit: intuitive, experiencing the joy of life for the simple sake of experiencing, in communion with ourselves, with each other, and beyond.[53]

Once the intellect "lets out the beast," once reason is "animalised" through the embodied and emotional experience of sex, then the spiritual re-emerges and "true" experience can be accessed. It is the spiritual, once again, that is reiterated as the most "authentic" and "fullest" of human experiences.

Different and clashing discursive trajectories emerge in these narratives in relation to body/mind/sprit. It seems, at first glance, that embodiment is supremely valorised. Indeed, it is through the sensations centred in the body that one accesses the emotional, and through that emotion, the spiritual. However, there is a constant reiteration that "truer" and most "authentic" human experience resides in the spiritual. This ultimately and inevitably, places embodied pleasure in a hierarchically subjected position. The body, inexorably, is made the tool to access a "higher" and "more noble" spiritual experience.

6. Ontological Bracketing and Parameters for Subjectivity/Abjectivity

Now, I would like to turn to the ways in which the texts on polyamory discursively set up schemas of subjectivation for "licit" and "illicit" subjectivity and conduct. I will argue that by fashioning the parameters for "proper" polyamory so strictly and ascetically, the authors show a deep unease towards the same sexual dissidence that they try to make legitimate. Their efforts to define the "good poly" against the "bad poly" are inevitably repressive: they dilute polyamory's subversive potential in a manner that operates in alignment to sexual conservatism.[54]

Anapol provides a list of personal characteristics that the individual interested in the poly lifestyle must possess. The aspiring poly must have a talent for personal relationships, have high self-esteem and confidence, be a good juggler and have a love for intensity. Additionally, he or she must also appreciate diversity, be equipped with interpersonal skills, as well as be flexible, creative and spontaneous. Moreover, she or he should sport a sex positive attitude, have an independent streak, yet a strong team spirit and, finally, be committed to personal and spiritual growth.[55]

The author also provides an exhaustive list of amelioration activities that the aspiring polyamorist should undertake. Among the most important and valued skills to be added to one's repertoire are sexual and sensual techniques. The polyamorist *must* be a good lover and all texts are absolutely insistent on this point. There is an echo in the literature of the ideological teachings and the clinical practices of Masters and Johnson.[56] A great favourite among the sensitisation techniques is masturbation. Its effects are described as most beneficial and the authors' assumption is the old cliché: the better one is at pleasing oneself, the more likely one will be to please, and the more easily one will please others.[57]

Other suggested activities for betterment include the practice of meditative exercise, such as Yoga, Tantra and T'ai Chi Ch'uan, or martial arts, such as Aikido. These are considered by Anapol to be avenues for the "opening up" of oneself to sexual energy. Furthermore, once the body is sensitised, direction is offered to address the spirit. The author proposes to her acolytes to consider the illuminating teachings of alternative religions, such as Taoism and Native American Spirituality, and goes as far as to suggest obscure options, such as Alchemy.[58] Heinlein and Heinlein choose a more conservative path and direct their audience to the teachings of Christianity. When most daring, they discuss Neo-Paganism.[59]

The improvement of communication skills is deemed of utmost importance. The authors again, recommend focussing on the self, inciting their pupils to take classes under the guidance of counsellors and alternative therapists. They urge them to be emotionally honest, and to openly ask for support when needed. The injunction to be honest to oneself and others, once again, emerges out of the narratives of the texts.[60]

Jealousy management is a most important engagement. All authors dedicate long sections to it and relate a common basic message: each and every poly is solely responsible for her/his feelings. Each lover is instructed to empathise with a jealous partner, but never to let one manipulate the other into capitulation.[61] Additional advice offered to ease the sting and suffering caused by jealousy is ultimately singularising and self-containing in its nature. It is designed to make the jealous individual responsible for the suppression and neutralisation of the feeling, so that it does not spill over the others involved, regardless of the cause or source of the feeling itself. Authors advise their readers to draw and paint during fits of jealousy, and express their ire and frustration by using a bright colour palette and strong strokes. Alternatively, readers are instructed to do lengthy breathing exercises in the confinement of a quiet and dark room.

Related to the issue of jealousy is anger management. Practical advice is offered on how to deal with conflict and suggestions include allotting adequate time and space for conflict resolution and instruction on how to fight fairly. In conclusion, lengthy passages are dedicated in all the literature to the issue of safe sex, as responsible polyamoury can only be achieved through the ethical management of sexual safety. Detailed advice is given on how to avoid contracting sexually transmitted diseases and contraception methods.[62]

The good poly is discursively fashioned in a manner that makes him/her a rare creature, and the authors set the bar for ethical behaviour very high indeed. The call for such character traits and the need for a political determination to a life of physical, emotional and spiritual asceticism, appear to be manifestations of a deep unease towards sexual dissidence and an intense internalisation of a fear of censorship and ostracism.

In opposition to the figure of the "ethical" and "good" poly, the literature ontologically brackets and produces its necessary evil twin, or what Butler would term the poly "abject." All the traits of this sinister figure, as well as its character, are essentially marked by superficiality and dishonesty. Similarly, the array of negative sexual acts the "bad" poly will engage in are harmful towards others and self-destructive. Comparable to the way in which the early sexologists used to describe sexual perverts in the 1850s, "bad" polys are described by the polyamory experts as fundamentally *antisocial* creatures. The list is long and colourful, and includes "sport fuckers" or "collectors," "sexual predators," "thrill-seekers," "consolation-price fuckers" and even "swingers."

Sport fuckers and collectors specifically seek out beautiful or powerful people. One of their greatest sins is superficiality, as they are attracted to "unimportant" things, such as physical characteristics or social status; the other is lack of intimacy, because they cannot spiritually grow from the sexual experience.[63] Sexual predators specialise in the seduction of the unwilling or the unwitting, or even of the victimised, and thrive on exercising power upon others for the sake of conquest.[64] Thrill-seekers are pathologically driven by the "high" of cheating, "sneaking around", and the excitement of breaking rules or "getting away" with betrayal.[65] Consolation-price fuckers recruit lovers to make someone else jealous, or after loosing a previous relationship, latch on to someone and do to them what they have just experienced.[66] In conclusion, we have the swinger, who, as mentioned earlier, is condescendingly considered a "disabled" polyamorist, because she/he shuns emotional connection in favour of superficial sex. The recurring aspect of all these kinds of "unethical" sluts is the asociality of their actions. The assumption, therefore, remains the same: sex without any kind of emotional connection or intimacy is inherently wrong.

7. Conclusion

Ironically, in the detailed and thorough stipulations of "proper" and ethical polyamory, Easton and Liszt, Heinlein and Heinlein, and Anapol seem to be oblivious to their own power machinations. As they strive to give the poly legitimacy, and "liberate" this illicit body and its erotic practices from the shackles of hetero-monogamous law, they are re-enacting the same old trappings of repressive law. Their efforts to define the "good poly" can be interpreted as yet another incarnation of that repression. The poly's once subversive "essence" may eventually come to operate in the service of repressive law's self-amplification and proliferation.[67]

In conclusion, I find that the exercise of ontological bracketing that these texts present are at once engendered by hegemonic sexual normalisation and inevitably re-produce this normalisation. The attempts made by the authors to define ethical polyamorous behaviour and the unavoidable "policing" this activity engenders are two mirror facets of the same process of hegemonic sexual normalisation. Sexual repression opens up to discourse the cognitive space for ontological abjection and dissident ethical engagement, yet this new spawn, once it begins to self-police, sets up the schemas for normalisation to take place again, in a cyclical process.

Notes

1. Anapol, in *Polyamory The New Love Without Limits: Secrets of Sustainable Intimate Relationships* (New York: Penguin, 1997), offers a detailed explanation of the many forms polyamory can take, which include group marriage, intimate networks and polyfidelity. She defines open marriage as non-exclusive couple relationships; group marriage as closed multiple relationships of three or more people; an intimate network is a structure that comprises multiple non-hierarchical sexual relationships; and, finally, polyfidelity can be defined as the relationship among three or more partners who agree to be exclusively sexual, yet allow more partners to join if all others consent; 8-9.

2. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: De Minuit, 1986), 104.

3. Paul Miller, *Domination and Power* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987). According to Miller, liberal democracies no longer exercise power through the domination of their subjects, and coerce them into action by overt threat or positive inducements by regulatory and punitive systems. Rather, a distance is created between the state and the population it governs, thanks to the emergence of an array of authorities that, on one hand produce knowledge about the citizen, and on the other hand give counsel and offer advice on the most personal and minute aspects of the life of the subject; Nikolas Rose, "Calculable Minds and Manageable Individuals," in *History of the Human Sciences*, *Vol 1.*

(1988), *Inventing Our Selves. Psychology, Power and Personhood*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996b), 73. In this manner, legal and penal regulation can occur through the management of citizens' freedoms, their education and their aspirations, rather than through their direct coercion.

4. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, *Vol. 2*. (London: Fontana, 1985); Paul Miller and Thomas O'Leary, "Accounting and the Construction of the Governable Person," *Accounting, Organisations and Society* 12 (1987): 235-265; Paul Miller and Nikolas Rose, "Governing Economic Life," *Economy and Society* 19 (1990): 1-31; Rose, 1988.

5. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 155-156.

6. Ibid., 34; Nikolas Rose "Authority and the Genealogy of Subjectivity," in *Detraditionalization. Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity,* eds. Paul Hellas, Scott Lash and Paul Morris (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996a), 305.

7. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 107.

8. Ibid., 109; Foucault, 155-156.

9. Anapol, vii.

10. Kris Heinlein and Rozz Heinlein, *The Sex and Love Handbook: Polyamory! Bisexuality! Swingers! Spirituality! & Even Monogamy! A Practical Optimistic Relationship Guide* (San Francisco: Heinlein, 2004), 11.

11. Dossie Easton and Catherine Liszt, *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (San Francisco: Greenery Press, 1998), 135.

12. Foucault, 54-55.

13. Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 6.

14. Butler, 106.

15. Anapol, 2.

16. Easton and Liszt, 7.

17. Anapol, 14-19.

18. Easton and Liszt, 61-68.

19. Anapol, 17.

20. Ibid., 22.

21. Easton and Liszt, 126-131.

22. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin, 1985).

23. Easton and Liszt, 61.

24. Anapol, 60-64; Easton and Liszt, 63-65.

25. Ibid., 124.

26. Ibid., 117.

27. Ibid., 60.

28. Of particular relevance, are the works of Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1962) and Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (London: Abacus, 1972).

29. Easton and Liszt, 4.

30. Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of the Orgasm* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

31. Anapol, 67.

32. Easton and Liszt, 73.

33. Heinlein and Heinlein, 46.

34. Easton and Liszt, 78; Henlein and Heinlein, 121.

35. Emphasis in original, Anapol, 6.

36. Anapol, 67-68.

37. Heinlein and Heinlein, 86-91.

38. Anapol, 14-19; Easton and Liszt, 63; Heinlein and Heinlein, 205.

39. Anapol, 87-94.

40. Easton and Liszt, 206-207.

41. Heinlein and Heinlein, 253-256.

42. Umberto Galimberti, *Il Corpo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000), 32.

43. Ibid., 41-42.

44. Anapol, 45.

45. Ibid., 148.

46. Heinlein and Heinlein, 234-235. In this passage, the authors discuss the biblical story of Jacob's polygamy. They offer a very sketchy critique of the fact that all biblical marriages are polygynously patriarchal, and circumvent the inequality issue by dismissing Biblical misogyny as a testament of its times; 240.

47. Ibid., 239.

48. Ibid., 241.

49. Easton and Liszt, 241.

50. Ibid., 268.

51. Ibid., 268.

52. Ibid., 268.

53. Ibid., 268.

54. Butler, 93.

55. Anapol, 41.

56. William Masters and Virginia Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1970).

57. Anapol, 201; Easton and Liszt, 111; Heinlein and Heinlein, 56.

58. Anapol, 41.

59. Heinlein and Heinlein, 234-244.

60. Anapol, 145; Easton and Liszt, 89.

61. Anapol, 147-149; Easton and Liszt, 133-152; Heinlein and Heinlein, 67.

62. Easton and Liszt, 213-220; Heinlein and Heinlein, 206-221.

63. Easton and Liszt, 156.

64. Ibid., 157.

65. Ibid., 157.

66. Ibid., 157.

67. Butler, 93.

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PART III

States of Desire and the Erotic

There is no Sexual Relation

Fiona Peters

Abstract

This paper will integrate two different strands of Lacanian psychoanalysis that link together under the banner of my heading, that there is no sexual relation. As I will show, this does not argue that there are no sexual relationships, rather that sexuality is not a relation but a series of what Lacan would term "missed encounters" that keep our motor of desire running beyond our control - we never get "there." I will explicate what he means by this seemingly odd statement, concentrating particularly on the centrality of Lacan's conception of anxiety, then contextualise it in relation to a contemporary issue, that of the gaze. If we are to take Lacan's argument on in any serious manner, then recent articulations of the notion of the gaze, especially as theorised within film theory, are challenged as being dependant on a fixed concept of gender that Lacan's argument undermines. **Key Words:** loss, the Real, sexual relation, anxiety, love, shame.

1. Psychoanalysis and Loss

Lacanian psychoanalysis founds human subjectivity on *loss*, a loss that is irretrievable. However, a central tent of Lacan's is that there is no pre-symbolic unity that we can hark back to - the human subject *becomes* a subject through the processes such as the mirror stage and entry into the symbolic order of language, culture, sexual difference as difference and so on. Freud developed the idea of the beyond of the pleasure principle to start to answer his question of why, as human beings, we cannot merely follow the path that the pleasure principle seems to lead us on - gratification, immediate and at all costs. The beyond of the pleasure principle begins to explore the self-imposed limits of this, which forever restricts our attempts for love to keep us together. Lacan comes back to this and asks why love seems to tear us apart, reminding us of our splitting and separation from ourselves.

According to psychoanalytic theory, the human being comes into existence precisely through a series of identifications, both visually, with the gradual recognition of itself in the mirror, and through the multiplicity of others, most clearly the child's parents or those who take the place of the parents. Lacan calls the recognition that the human baby makes with its mirror image a misrecognition that casts the human subject forever into a narcissistic relationship where the totality that the child sees in the mirror can never be felt or captured. Lacan's term, the Symbolic, is the realm of language and culture into which we all have to enter if we are to become human subjects. This begins to become meaningful at the point where the child is beginning to speak. Language in this schema is not seen as something we freely use, but instead where words are symbols of that splitting, standing in for that which he has forever lost, the total and absolute, all-embracing bond with the mother. The child must develop an identity separate from the mother to become a subject, to enter into culture and civilization, and to transform its bodily drives and the misrecognition and narcissism of the Imaginary into inter-subjective relationships that *attempt* to gain recognition. The problem is, we never fully achieve this, and this is what Lacan means by "there is no sexual relationship." Separation, misrecognition and loss, make psychoanalysis a tragic discourse, the condition of being human, and it can be explained very clearly with the example of sexuality, desire and love.

Lacan's third term, the Real, is precisely not everyday reality, but that around which trauma is structured, the non-symbolisable abyss. While reality, according to Lacan serves as the external boundary which enables us to totalise language, to make out of it a close and coherent system, the Real in his schema is the internal limit of this, the fold that remains unfathomable and prevents reality from becoming seamless: it disrupts us, but we cannot grasp it. It has been described variously as "brushing up" against something unknown in a dark room without realising what it is and the uncanny sensation that this induces, the void or the abyss around which subjectivity hinges.

This non-symbolised kernel makes its appearances in the symbolic order in the form of traumatic returns (of the repressed, in the Freudian sense), disruptions, schisms, and things cast as both other, and, at the same time and all too worryingly, ourselves. The child could be said to exist in the Real up until the entry into the Imaginary through the mirror stage but that's quite a pointless thing to say because it has no concept of this at that time. The child has no idea of other because it has no idea of self. Once there is an awareness of that 'other' in the mirror, and a nascent sense of self (misrecognition) then instantly anxiety and loss gets into the mix. We cannot avoid this if we are to become human subjects.

2. Love and the Sexual Relation

In her introduction to *Reading Seminar XX*, (where Lacan develops his later concepts of love) Suzanne Barnard critiques a popular misreading of a mainstay of Lacan's oeuvre concerning the impossibility of the sexual relation. Barnard points out that (due in part to the delay of the full translation of Seminar XX,[1]) Lacan's claim, that there is no sexual relation, has been misread as grounded in *reality*, as an indictment of the actual relationship between the sexes. This, as Barnard quotes, leads to claims that are catastrophically misleading: "in an otherwise lucid entry on Lacan in a literary theory guide, one finds the statement, 'Thus Lacan claims flatly in Seminar XX that there is no such thing as sexual relations!'"[2] Barnard continues by clearly articulating the precise meaning of Lacan's remarks, emphasising the notion of *impossibility* as a founding principle, both of the sexual relationships and of sexual difference:

> as presented by Lacan in his formulas of sexuation, the impossibility of founding the sexual relationship is strictly coextensive with the conundrum of sexual difference. Indeed, one can best understand the formulas of sexuation as the product of Lacan's attempt to formalize and articulate the specific implications of the sexual relationship's *impossibility*.[3]

This more intricate and nuanced reading of Lacan's concept grounds it in the broader framework of his discourse on the formation of identity. Lacan argues in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* that, contra desire, love exists as a drive, inherently attached to the death drive:

> as Lacan puts it, 'what the one lacks is not what is hidden within the other'– the only thing left to the beloved is thus to proceed to a kind of exchange of places, to change from the object into the subject of love, in short: to *return love*.[4]

We can read in Lacan's work the extent to which the loss inherent in the assumption of sexual difference leans towards a construction of the "One," both holding out the promise of totalisation and concurrently withdrawing it:

> Love is impotent, though mutual, because it is not aware that it is but the desire to be One, which leads to the impossibility of establishing the relationship between 'them-two' *(la relation d'eux)*. The relationship between them-two what? Them-two sexes.[5]

Suzanne Barnard points out that the desire not *for*, but *to be* One that the sexually differentiated subject experiences (usually categorised as the phallic signifier) "stands ultimately for the impossibility of signifying sex. As such, it can be understood to represent both a traumatic failure of meaning and the impossibility of ever fundamentally anchoring or positivizing the subject."[6] Thus, "ever achieving one's gender or ever accomplishing one's sexuality" is barred from the subject as a loss that is *inherent* rather than a more or less pathological aberration.[7] Barnard explains:

> Hence, sexual difference can be understood to stand for that which forever eludes the grasp of normative symbolization. The obsessive individual and cultural reiterations of the 'surface' of sexuality – the seeming reality of the sexual relationship, as it is divided into binaries, such as male and female, masculine and feminine, hetero – and homosexuality, and so on – only cove up this fundamental dehiscence (discord) of the sexual subject.[8]

The notion of a concurrent splitting and a spilling out of the inherently ignorant and flawed sexual subject sums up Lacan's treatment of love and desire. While individual sexual relationships are, of course, possible within a psychoanalytic theorisation, Lacan stresses the *impossibility* of the sexual *relation*ship as such. This failure cannot be surmounted. Indeed any attempt to do so flees from the traumatic consequences of the imposition of the Real into the structures of sexuation and falls back upon, according to Suzanne Barnard, "the accepted logic of sex and gender, particularly as these terms have structured the essentialist-constructionist debates among American feminists and gender theorists."[9]

Colette Soler argues in her reading of the symptom: "If there is no such thing as a sexual relationship, which suggests a basic flaw in human relationships, there is the symptom, or a substitute formulation generated by the unconscious."[10] Soler explains how Lacan theorises the concept of the "One" as that which insinuates itself between the inadequacy of the sexual relationship and the unconscious symptom: "Between the two formulas, a third one remains implicit, a concept at which Lacan hammered away for a whole seminar through the famous phrase: "There is (the) One."[11]

Renata Salecl argues from Lacan that men and women both redouble their partners into the dualism of a stable partner who is at the same time an inaccessible lover, but what characterises men is that "the object of their desire is something they are essentially horrified at. That is why men cling so tightly to the self-imposed prohibitions and rituals that govern their daily lives."[12]

For Lacan, Don Juan, in his role as the epitome of feminine fantasy, is reassuring to women because, paradoxically, his promiscuity persuades them that he never "loses" himself in a relationship: "Don't you see that what is essential in the feminine myth of Don Juan is that he has them one by one *(un par un)*?"[13] He points to Don Juan's demolition of the concept of the "one" - the notion of a one true love: "From the moment there are names, one can make a list of women and count them…That is entirely different from the one of universal fusion."[14]

Writing on Lacan's seminar, Salecl argues that Don Juan, denying the "one" of sexual exclusivity, cannot lose his phallic power in that, by his very excess, he reveals that "Women and Don Juan thus have something in common here: no one can take the object away from women or from Don Juan, since none of them ever had it in the first place."[15] From a psychoanalytic perspective, "normality" is the most fantasy-ridden place of all. And sexual difference can be understood to stand for a threat that forever eludes the grasp of normative symbolisation. The phallic signifier becomes impossible to sustain, insofar as it

> does not signify essential sexual difference but is an empty signifier that stands ultimately for the impossibility of signifying sex. As such, it can be understood to represent both a traumatic failure of meaning and the impossibility of ever fundamentally anchoring or positivizing the symbolic order.[16]

Femininity, according to Paul Verhaeghe's Lacanian perspective, is both traumatic and a marker of lack: "the traumatic Real, for which there is no signifier in the Symbolic, is femininity. *Freud had discovered the lack in the Symbolic system: there is no signifier for The Woman*."[17] Femininity is traumatic, reflecting the sense in which "Freud never found a term with which to inscribe feminine difference."[18] It is important, then, to avoid the reassurance of a mode of feminine discourse and to refuse the marker representing any *woman* if, as Colette Soler argues, "a woman is someone whose phallic lack causes her to turn to love for a man,"[19] compounded by the brute reality of the physical manifestation of desire: "in a heterosexual couple, the man's desire, indicated by his erection, is a necessary condition. The so-called sexual relationship puts masculine desire in a primary position."[20]

3. Anxiety

Anxiety and, in Lacanian terminology, its concurrent affect, lack of desire, is of central importance here. Salecl argues that contemporary culture with its promise of infinite choice and concomitant demands on the subject to pursue his or her own *jouissance* has led to a situation in which anxiety develops in a particular way in response to this pressure:

> What has changed in today's society is that subjects seem to be less and less caught up in this dialectic of

> desire and more and more under the pressure of *jouissance*. The popular media bombard people with the demand to enjoy, and offer advice as to how one can find an excess of *jouissance*.[21]

This injunction to enjoy within a world of infinite choices is intimately bound up with the place of the other person and their *jouissance*. In other words, we want the demand that we make to the Other (as an individual or the symbolic network) to be reciprocated, to validate our choice and thus to alleviate our anxiety. According to Salecl, in relation to anxiety:

> The subject often wants to get a demand back from the Other and the Horror emerges precisely when this demand is lacking, as, for example, in a psychoanalytic situation, where the analysand is perturbed by the lack of the demand coming from the analyst. Analysands hope to get clear instructions from the analyst, but instead get silence or questions that bounce their own problems back to them.[22]

This very particular conception of anxiety is to be found, like the *sinthome*, in Lacan's later work. The seminal text here is Lacan's unpublished and unedited seminar on anxiety (*SeminarX: L'Angoisse*), 1962-1963. This is the seminar that directly precedes *Seminar XI* (1963-1964), which is published and known in English as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. The conception of anxiety that Lacan develops over the course of this seminar is clearly and coherently laid out as being central to his ideas at this point:

> As you will see, I think, anxiety is very precisely the meeting point where you will find waiting everything that was involved in my previous discourse and where, together, there await a certain number of terms which may appear not to have been sufficiently connected up for you to the present.[23]

In this seminar, Lacan develops his argument, seemingly in contradiction to Freud's final formulation of the concept, that anxiety *does* have an object, but that this object is unknown. In "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (1926), Freud argues that "We cannot find that anxiety has any function other than that of being a signal for the avoidance of a danger situation. The significance of the loss of object as a determinate of anxiety extends considerably further."[24] He distinguishes between the experience of fear as a situation in which we are able to name that which we are afraid of, and anxiety where we have the arguably more unpleasant sensation of a pervasive feeling that cannot be pinned down to any seemingly justifiable cause.

Freud argues that anxiety is an *affect*. In other words, that it relates to a bodily source that is displaced (primarily related in Freud's work to the childhood threat of the loss of the mother and also the threat of castration). It is in this retroactive sense that anxiety lacks an object. Throughout this paper, Freud grapples with the problem inherent here: that anxiety is on the one hand a response to an external cause (albeit without a recognisable object), while on the other it emanates from within. Salecl argues that, rather than interpreting this dilemma as an impassable contradiction, it is possible instead to view anxiety as a response to a loss that has already occurred:

> If pain seems to be an actual reaction to the loss of the object, anxiety becomes rather a reaction to the danger, which that loss entails. Thus, when we say that anxiety is an expectation of a possible danger, we can make a final turn here and conclude that in a state of anxiety, the subject is horrified by the very danger that the loss of the object brings to him or her.[25]

Put differently, it could be said to be related to a loss not of an object, but is instead a danger instigated by loss that remains with us, and can become reactivated by the anticipation of a threat that then projects previous threats outwards. Freud distinguishes between "signal anxiety," where the anticipation of a real and future danger takes place, and "neurotic anxiety," a situation in which any real danger is absent. This, according to Charles Shepherdson, describes that which we would usually describe as anxiety manifested in the symptom, anxiety as a problem:

> …In the case of neurotic anxiety, the signal does not indicate a real danger, but a psychic conflict that cannot be faced. The ego then responds defensively, suddenly refusing to speak, or abruptly leaving the room, or succumbing to an attack of panic or dizziness, for example, and therefore warding off a conflict that appears to be impending.[26]

In the above situation, anxiety is not a consequence of repression. The subject instigates repression in order to cope with a surfeit of anxiety. Thus, anxiety is not produced by repression but instead causes it: "Often, the subject develops various inhibitions or symptoms as processes of defence against this feeling of anxiety. Inhibitions, for example, try to prevent the subject from finding him or herself in anxiety situations while symptoms might try to replace anxiety."[27]

Lacan's premise for his seminar on this Freudian concept is that he will challenge the idea that, in anxiety, the object is missing: "Anxiety, we have always been taught, is a fear without an object. A chant in which, we could say here, another discourse already announces itself, a chant which however scientific it may be is close to that of the child who reassures himself."[28] Such a reassurance, according to Lacan, is based on an attempt to alleviate some of the anxiety about anxiety. In other words, this way of theorising anxiety works to reassure the subject against the challenges of the unrepresentability and unknowability of the object involved: "Anxiety sustains this relationship of not being without an object to the reservation that this is not to say nor be able to say, as we could for something different, what object is involved."[29] Charles Shepherdson explains that, for Lacan, anxiety is "not a response to the loss of an object, but rather arises *when lack fails to appear*."[30]

This "lack of a lack" obscures the object because there is no distance between the subject and his/her lack, thus "it is precisely the failure to register this lack - its "foreclosure" or non-emergence - that gives rise to the experience of anxiety."[31] This is clearly different to other psychoanalytic formulations that stress the idea that anxiety is caused by an inexplicable loss of an object, as in separation anxiety: "Separation anxiety can be felt by anyone, of any age, when a loved/needed person is absent, but its roots lie in infancy."[32]

Contradicting this emphasis, in Lacan's theory of anxiety, "the point is virtually the opposite of this: anxiety is not a response to the loss of the object, but is fundamentally the affect that signals when the Other is too close, and the order of symbolization (substitution and displacement) is at risk of disappearing."[33] It is when the subject is unable to mediate beyond this point, unable to instigate the "lack of a lack" that anxiety overwhelms. Shepherdson again: "We thereby see more clearly how anxiety is situated by Lacan, as the threshold that the subject must cross on the way to desire and symbolic mediation."[34]

In *Anxiety; Seminar X*, Lacan states clearly that anxiety is induced by and through the lack of reciprocation from the Other: "That is what anxiety is. The desire of the Other does not recognise me, as Hegel believes, which renders the question quite easy. For if he recognises me, since he will never recognise me sufficiently, all that is left to me is to use violence."[35] This is another way of explaining the "lack of a lack," the submergence of the subject into the all-encompassing Other that denies the emergence of *objet a*, the object of desire. In other words, anxiety thwarts desire and, echoing Lacan’s statement above, violence becomes a possibility through the failure of the Other’s recognition.

Lacan's notion of *passage a l’acte* and its relation to anxiety goes some way to explaining particular festations of desire and its lack. Shepherdson explains the distinction between acting out and *passage a l’acte* in terms of their different trajectories in relation to the Symbolic:

> acting out is a message addressed to the analyst, a symbolic act that calls for interpretation, unlike anxiety itself which is not a symbolic phenomenon, and which - if it does not find a symbolic foothold in this way - may culminate in a *passage a l’acte* that puts an end to any possible desire.[36]

In Lacanian terms, a *passage a l’acte* is an act without word, or symbolisation, that constitutes an attempt to break out of a situation of unbearable anxiety. In rupturing the Symbolic order through acts such as suicide or murder, it constitutes a violent attempt to effect a distance from the Other that had previously been lacking.

This abstract theorisation can be illustrated through looking at the notion of the gaze as gendered. Within the broad discipline of contemporary Cultural Studies, the conception of the gaze as formulated within Film Theory, is rarely questioned or challenged. Laura Mulvey’s paper “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” whether supported or opposed, remains the reference point when approaching film from a theoretical perspective: her appropriation of the notion of the gaze is paradigmatic. I will re-examine Sartre’s reading of the look in *Being and Nothingness* in respect of its status as a phenomenology of embodiment, and challenge the assumptions that have been made insofar as this has been welded onto a curiously selective and culturally specific reading of the notion of the gaze and pleasure.

According to Laura Mulvey: “In a world split by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly.”[37] The main argument with respect to what I have outlined from Lacan, hinges on the mis-reading of the “look” or the “gaze” as gendered, the idea that a structure of the gaze is established within which male and female simply *know their place*. Instead, I will be arguing that Sartre’s description of embodiment and the Other represents a more radical notion of Lacan’s “failed encounter,” which opens up space for a freer reading of phenomenological notions of experience and embodiment.

4. Sartre, Embodiment and the Gaze

Throughout one section of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre emphasises his intention by utilising the example of the tableau of the "voyeur" (i.e., the one "spying on the other"), being seen in this activity by another person. He argues that the figure crouched at the keyhole is "alone and on the level of a non-thetic self-consciousness."[38] In other words, consciousness at this point exists as possibility only, not fully developed as human subjectivity: "This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them."[39] During this time the crouching person *is* his act, with no reflective "outside" as Sartre terms it. He goes on to state specifically that this situation cannot be described as a consciousness in a subject-led sense: "In this sense - and since I am what I am not and since I am not what I am - I cannot even define myself as truly *being* in the process of listening at doors."[40] This key moment from *Being and Nothingness* disrupts the non-thetic looking with a *constituting* recognition of another who "catches" the looker, or Sartre's "me:"

> But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me. What does this mean? It means I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modification appears in my structure - modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective *cogito*.[41]

Sartre cautions against a misreading and oversimplification of this situation. He makes clear that what he means to express through the example is not merely that "I" see myself in and through the Other's eyes, because "they" see "me." This way of expressing it is not wholly exact, according to Sartre, and furthermore, does not capture the radical concept that he intends the example to illustrate. In Lacan's reading of this he goes to the heart of how exactly the notion of the gaze that emerges from Sartre's formulation might be articulated. For Lacan, the gaze that is imposed by the rustling footprints of the other originates not in the other person (as has been assumed in many subsequent readings). In his reading it can never be reduced to this; can never be pinned down, reduced to the accusatory and structuring look of the other as judge. Instead, what matters according to both Sartre and Lacan, is the internal, imagined shame that the gaze induces. This, not the gaze itself, becomes a constitutive structure of subjectivity:

> The gaze sees itself - to be precise the gaze of which Sartre speaks, the gaze that surprises me and reduces

> me to shame, since this is the feeling he regards as the most dominant. The gaze I encounter - you can find this in Sartre's own writing - is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.[42]

This reading places the gaze in a different dimension to that commonly utilised in film theory. Joan Copjec argues that in both Sartre and Lacan, the gaze is utilised as a theorisation of the possibility of the existence of others, the grounding of the self within an objective landscape: "The problem, it turns out, is one raised by the very assumption from which we have been proceeding, that the world exists only in relation to me, as subject, and comes into being only though my perception of it."[43] Thus, the gaze is not a "purely formal notion which refers to an omnipresent, infinite subject *for whom* I exist."[44] Put differently, the gaze is theorised as an attempt to grasp the other, predicated on the subject gazed at rather than constituted as structuring the subject from outside. For Copjec, it is this distinction that film theory makes in placing the gaze within a particular concept of transcendence that provokes a misreading:

> And yet film theory, which consistently confuses the gaze with a single point of eye totally outside and transcendent to the filmic space, a point from which the space is unified or mastered, chose from the beginning to understand the gaze in the precise manner against which Sartre warned. For film theory, the gaze is a unifying or regulative category of my experience.[45]

There is a fundamental dichotomy between these two conceptions of the gaze that I attempt to reach beyond by offering a suggestion of a possible reworking of contemporary cultural approaches of the gaze, based on the Sartrean/Lacanian position outlined above.

A way to approach this is to think of the conception of the object. Objects, it could be argued, look back on us in their radical self-presence. Theorised in this way, the notion of the object can be thought outside of an appropriating (or indeed, gendered) subjectivity. Lacan describes the gaze as that feeling of being watched, even when this is not predicated on any specific viewer:

> I feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not even discern. All that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there. This window, if it gets a bit dark, and if I have

> reason for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straight-away a gaze.[46]

In this way of reading, the gaze is removed from its subjective function and becomes, instead, an object that is "not on the side of the *subject* but on the side of the *object*."[47] The point of this, the Lacanian reading of the gaze, is that it exposes the difficulty of appropriating and controlling the visible world. In other words, the object, here the gaze, is read as fundamentally outside the structuring control of the subject, causing instead an uncanny disruption in the smooth running of psychic intentionality: "Far from assuring the self-presence of the subject and his vision, the gaze functions thus as a stain, a spot in the picture disturbing its transparent visibility and introducing an irreducible split in my relation to the picture."[48]

In Lacan's theoretical formulation, the concept of foreclosure is distinct from denial or repression, insofar as the latter requires a relationship to the Law. In this sense, foreclosure is a psychotic stance that eludes the Symbolic, simply refusing its existence: "we now see what differentiates foreclosure from repression. The latter has established the symbolic relationship and forgotten it. It will, then, be possible to re-establish the forgotten relationship."[49] It is filled in where absence usually occurs, through the gaze at oneself in the mirror that always contains within itself a missing element, or lack: "the horror of coming face to face with my double is that this encounter reduces me to the object gaze. In other words, the part missing in the mirror image of myself…is my own gaze, the object-gaze which sees me out there."[50]

The concept of suture helps to clarify the relationship between the mirror scene and external reality:

> In order to appear as a consistent whole, external reality has to be 'sutured' by a subjective element, an artificial supplement that has to be added to it in order to generate the effect of reality, like the painted background that confers on a scene the illusion of 'reality.' An interface takes place on this level: it is the internal element that sustains the consistency of the 'external reality' itself, the artificial screen that confers the effect of reality on what we see. This is the *objet petit a* for Lacan: the subjective element constitutive of objective-external reality.[51]

This echoes Sartre's construction of the scene of the voyeur peeping through the keyhole, with the emphasis placed on the notion of encounter that occurs when the individual is "caught" in the act of looking: "The first thing to notice is that the encounter prevents us from thinking "emptily" about the Other."[52] That which Sartre terms the structure of "being-for-others" is initiated by and through the encounter with the other which, although remaining a dialectic of conflict (most famously expressed as "hell is other people"[53]), is the absolute bedrock of human relationships. Sartre emphasises the place of vision in the construction of the subject, perceived as negative and destructive.

For Sartre the concept of shame is introduced through the visual dimension of the keyhole scene: "Now, shame…is shame of *self*; it is the *recognition* of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging."[54] His particular conception of shame is based on two interrelated premises. On the one hand, that shame implies sin, or the recognition of sin as a key element of subjectivity: on the other, the fundamental "sense of shame" as an abstract principle. However, both strands of shame imply the conception of guilt, insofar as "I" am ashamed of myself before the Other as a grounding principle of the recognition both of the existence of others and "my" place as an object by and for others.

5. Towards a Conclusion

Lacan argues in "The Eye and the Gaze" that this visual metaphor stands for the split of the subject. The gaze, for Lacan, represents the imposition of a contingent, uncertain future as subject to the Symbolic:

> The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes anxiety. The eye and the gaze – this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field.[55]

For Lacan, the dialectic between the eye and the gaze exemplifies the tragedy of the Symbolic that is predicated on loss and the impossibility of completion: "When in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that - *You never look at me from the place from which I see you*. Conversely, *What I look at is never what I wish to see*."[56] Implicitly drawing on Sartre's "voyeur" scene, the gaze, for Lacan, is the way the subject *comes to light*: "It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its affects."[57]

Notes

1. "Historically, Seminar XX has been known to many (if not most) readers as Lacan's treatise on feminine sexuality. While this fact is

clearly overdetermined by current disciplinary and broader cultural preoccupations, it can be attributed in large part to the delay in *Encore's* complete translation. Existing English language scholarship on Seminar XX has been based, until quite recently, on the snapshot of the Seminar provided by partial translations of two chapters in *Feminine Sexuality*." In Suzanne Barnard, "Introduction" to *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, eds. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink, (SUNY series in Psychoanalysis and Culture: State University of New York, 2002). Fink points out that there are eleven sections in *Encore*, only two of which were translated and published in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds. *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, translated by J. Rose (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1982)

2. Ibid., 6.

3. Ibid., 6.

4. Ibid., 58.

5. Lacan, 6.

6. Barnard, 10.

7. Ibid., 11.

8. Ibid., 11.

9. Ibid., 7.

10. Colette Soler, "The paradoxes of the symptom in psychoanalysis," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 89.

11. Ibid., 89.

12. Renata Salecl, "Love Anxieties" in Barnard and Fink, *Reading Seminar XX*, 96.

13. Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 10.

14. Ibid.

15. Renata Salecl, "Love Anxieties," in *Reading Seminar XX*, 96.

16. Ibid., 10.

17. Paul Verhaeghe, *Does The Woman Exist? From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine* (New York: The Other Press, 1999), 39.

18. Colette Soler, "What Does the Unconscious Know About Women?," in *Reading Seminar XX*, 99.

19. Ibid., 100.

20. Ibid., 102.

21. Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety: Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2004), 146.

22. Ibid., 62.

23. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Anxiety 1962-1963, Book X*, (this text is an unpublished transcript of the seminar, translated by Corman Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts, available to purchase only from Karnac Books), Part I, 1.

24. Sigmund Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,” in *P.F.L.10: On Psychopathology* (London: Penguin, 1977), 296.

25. Salecl, 2004, 21.

26. Charles Shepherdson, “Foreword” to Roberto Harari, *Lacan’s Seminar on Anxiety: An Introduction* (New York: The Other Press, 2001), xlvii.

27. Salecl, 2004, 20.

28. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Anxiety*, Seminar X, no.X, 1.

29. Ibid., 1.

30. Shepherdson, xxxi.

31. Ibid., xxii.

32. Ricky Emanuel, *Ideas in Psychoanalysis: Anxiety* (London: Icon Books, 2000), 54.

33. Shepherdson, xxxii.

34. Ibid., xxxii.

35. Lacan, Seminar X, no. XII, 8.

36. Shepherdson, xiv.

37. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 (1975), 7.

38. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* translated by Hazel Barnes (London: Methuen, 1969), 259.

39. Ibid., 259.

40. Ibid., 260.

41. Ibid., 260

42. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York, Norton, 1981) 84.

43. Joan Copjec, *Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, (Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 1995), 209.

44. Ibid., 209.

45. Ibid., 209.

46. Lacan, *The Seminar Book 1: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York, Norton, 1981), 215.

47. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 125.

48. Ibid., 125.

49. Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* translated by David Macey (London: Routledge, 1977), 233.

50. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 126.

51. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzystof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 55.

52. Copjec, 210.

53. A view expressed by Garcin, a character in Sartre's 1944 play, *Huis – Clos.*

54. Sartre, 261.

55. Lacan, 1981, 72.

56. Ibid., 103.

57. Ibid., 106.

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Eroticism, Postfeminist Melancholia and the Cross-Generational Romance

Diane Negra

Abstract

This essay analyses the similarities between three recent films (*P.S.*, *Birth* and *The Door in the Floor*, all 2004) that link a midlife melancholic female protagonist to an unruly eroticism. The films' suspicions that new postfeminist rhetorics of age may disenfranchise women rather than empower them are articulated through the shared plot device of the cross-generational romance. Strikingly, all three films address themselves to topical postfeminist concerns but modulate these concerns so as to interrogate the matrimonial, maternalist cornerstones of postfeminist culture and place a stress on the prospect of female psychological autonomy. **Key Words:** postfeminism, eroticism, melancholia, cross-generational romance.

1. Postfeminist Uses of the "Older Woman"

As Yvonne Tasker and I have argued elsewhere, "postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the pastness of feminism, whether that supposed 'pastness' is merely noted, mourned or celebrated."[1] As a dominating contemporary cultural mindset postfeminism withdraws the contemplation of structural inequities fostered by feminism, and one way that it does this is, by highlighting matrimonial and maternalist models of female subjectivity. Indeed, as Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels observe, "The new momism has become central justifying ideology of what has come to be called 'postfeminism.'"[2]

In examining how postfeminist culture keynotes a set of themes deemed central to contemporary women's experiences and concerns, one of the most arresting recurrent elements is the celebration of a new age flexibility in which traditional distinctions between youthfulness and adulthood are seen to be dissolving (even while the disapprobation accorded to the "aged" female body has intensified). Postfeminism emphasises the rhetoric of "aging well" as a cover for the class and wealth bifurcation that enables a minority to tap into a growing marketplace of products and services to forestall and camouflage the effects of the aging process. Postfeminist media culture aggressively tropes femininities, with a predilection for etymologising them into (a frequently extended) girlhood or maternity. At the same time, postfeminism has raised the cultural profile of single women while reinforcing traditionalist views of single femininity as a state of abjection/desperation. The single woman is thus often conceptualised as ready to violate the codes of sexual propriety at any moment through her perverse, ungovernable sexuality.

Given the striking adherence of mainstream media to the precepts of postfeminism in general, I want to ask what (if anything) may be changing in Hollywood's depiction of midlife female eroticism? Certainly, age conflict is a regular feature of postfeminist representational culture with countless contemporary "chick flicks" depicting the older female professional as a bad woman, an anti-role model for the protagonist and a figure of calculation, deceit and insecurity. However, in several lower profile films (*P.S.*, *Birth* and *The Door in the Floor*) a representational permutation arises that mediates between the polar extremes of postfeminist culture and adds depth and ambiguity to some of its age tropes. My concern here is specifically with the midlife woman who features in a cross-generational romance plot, thus doubly defying postfeminist precepts that insist on demographic propriety and the dichotomisation of women's experience into pre-motherhood and motherhood. The set of films showcasing that plot have appeared in the midst of a rather pronounced cultural preoccupation with the eroticised "mature" woman or mother. Popular culture in the early 2000s regularly invokes the figure of the "yummy mummy," or (less politely) the "MILF" (mother I'd like to fuck) in television and in popular music. Two pop hits of the period are notable in this regard, Fountains of Wayne's "Stacy's Mom," which as its name would imply speaks of the lust of a teenage boy for his friend's mother, and Bowling for Soup's "1985" about a nostalgic suburban mother fixated on her memories of the 1980s. Youth films from *American Pie* (2000) to *8 Mile* (2002) have also showcased the desirable mother as a staple of the coming-of-age story.[3]

The films under discussion here are very much to be differentiated from those examined by Kathleen Karlyn in her astute analysis of the prevalence of the incest theme connecting midlife males and young girls in recent popular cinema. Karlyn notes:

> Incest provides a narrative structure – derived from Freud's work on the subject – that ideologically inverts the social realities of white male privilege. This structure redirects sympathy toward beleaguered midlife heroes by portraying them as victims of unhinged and vengeful wives, seductive and manipulative daughters, or both. Not surprisingly, this narrative structure has been bolstered by an anti-feminist backlash against the working mother/wife. Paradoxically, however, films with this structure also make use of the increased

> acceptance in mainstream culture of young girls who, under the banner of Girl Power and third-wave feminism, are claiming the sexual entitlement boys and men have always enjoyed.[4]

Postfeminism has fully restored the (only very slightly dented) respectability of the young woman/older man couple through such legitimising discursive terms as “trophy wife” and “starter marriage.” Other paradigms of retro-masculinity currently circulating include the harem style male patron (Hugh Hefner) and the swinging male bachelor, even if lightly critiqued, as in the *Austin Powers* franchise (1997, 1999, 2002) and recent remake of *Alfie* (2004). The sexual prerogatives of masculinity are apparently being extended to women in the cross-generational romance, though further analysis of the specific representational features of that romance is in order, as I will show. Certainly, there are other aspects of the popular culture landscape that reveal the intransigence of paradigms of disgust and moral condemnation in regard to midlife female sexuality “run amok.” For instance, the romance of the older female teacher/male student has become an over reported template for moral panic in U.S. broadcast media; the standard bearer here is the now decade-old case of Mary Kay LeTourneau, the Seattle elementary school teacher who fell in love and had two children with her young student, a case that has maintained an unlikely longevity in print and broadcast journalism. Meanwhile public scandals over older women-younger men relationships like the case of Debra LaFave, a Florida schoolteacher charged with having sex with a 14-year-old student, continue to be featured with some regularity. Set in this context, it may well be that some of the fictional cross-generational romances are converting cautionary postfeminist narratives into exemplary ones.

In recent years an aggressively postfeminist representational culture has intensified the sexual visibility of midlife women. Grandmothers can now be attributed with “grey glamour,” romantic comedy heroines are played by female stars in their late thirties and early forties, and as noted above a variety of slang terms have emerged in popular speech to designate sexually desirable mothers, feeding a popular culture that encompasses everything from pop hits to Hollywood films. Arguably, this trend is culminating in the phenomenal popularity of the ABC primetime hit “Desperate Housewives,” (2004) a series which has revived the careers of three aging TV actresses and showcases the hyper femininity of the suburban stay-at-home woman.[5] As plastic surgery and other cosmetic technologies adjust the sliding scale of age-based conceptions of **f**eminity, the correspondence between the new sexualities and the depreciating capital of female maturity deserves fuller examination.

Stephen Katz and Barbara Marshall have ably shown how contemporary lifestyle culture is shifting the meanings of aging with "market and lifestyle industries creat[ing] an idealized culture of 'ageless' consumers and active populations."[6] Entangled rhetorics of individual empowerment and consumer agency increasingly camouflage the diminishing of state care for the aging and vulnerable in a fantasy of age transcendence that rests, in fact, on an intensified stigmatisation of those who show the effects of an aging process. As Katz and Marshall argue, vocabularies of risk and loss increasingly supplant any notion of the benefits of maturity. I am interested here in how postfeminism cooperates with "the new aging" and its emphasis on marketing, consumerism and personal responsibility for fending off the aging process.

Postfeminist representational culture is acutely age conscious. A variety of "chick flick" fictions from *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001) to *13 Going on Thirty* (2004) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) have shown themselves to be exceedingly precise about the ages of their twenty and thirty-something protagonists. Meanwhile, the cult of youth is being technologically facilitated on a variety of fronts with myriad forms of reality television dedicating themselves to rejuvenating transformations and the fantasy that aging can be managed away through plastic surgery, exercise and diet. In this context, the representation of the postfeminist female melancholic takes on a particular significance – in a cluster of recent popular film representations, the story of aging uncertainly but inexorably out of youth is marked by a deep and sustained melancholy.

The cross-generational romance is emerging as a regular formula in recent popular film with emphasis on the particular status of the "older woman" in the romance. In addition to the films under discussion here, other contemporary examples include *Prime* (2005) and the forthcoming *I Could Never Be Your Woman*, a May-December romance featuring Michelle Pfeiffer, Paul Rudd and directed by Amy Heckerling. However, my focus is on a cluster of films from the early years of the new millennium that seem to push against the trend toward unproblematic celebration of youthfulness. Like *New Yorker* critic David Denby, I couldn't help noticing the distinctive similarities across several films dealing with this subject matter that were released in 2004.[7] These films centralise an adult woman whose erotic connection to a much younger man or boy arises from a stalled relation to the past. In *Birth* a widow who has just become engaged is pursued by a young boy who tells her he is the reincarnation of her husband; in *P.S.* a college admissions officer becomes romantically involved with an applicant who bears the name and identical physical appearance of her dead former high school boyfriend; and in *The Door in the Floor* a grieving mother has a sexual relationship with a much younger man who reminds her of the sons she has lost. In these films the experience of erotic intimacy by a female protagonist is defined purely as an access route to the past. With their connotations of necrophilia, paedophilia and incest the films disturb the conventions of the romance in striking ways. This chapter will examine how the films' suspicion that the new rhetorics of age may disenfranchise women rather than empower them is articulated through the plot device of the intergenerational romance.

I should add that these films are not wholly without representational precedent. In fact, the postfeminist melancholic has appeared in popular film for a while although she has not always been centralised in the fictions in which she appears. Several such characters are depicted in late 1990s films where their emotional status is noted but is then subject to correction. In a set of highly generationally self-aware films including *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997) and *Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion* (1997) the open nostalgia of the high school reunion narrative prefigured the nostalgia plots of the more recent romances. There are also moments of postfeminist melancholy in numerous "chick flicks" and I want to carefully stress the difference between such moments in conservative recuperative romantic comedies and the films I will deal with here. Locating the postfeminist melancholic requires a distinction between this figure and the numerous wistful, whimsical heroines of print, cinema and television romance. While wistfulness is a politically and socially disengaged mode that serves postfeminist ideological aims by substituting mild emotions in favour of sharp ones and working to put across the recognition that the heroine is not "angry" or "shrill," it is fundamentally different in character from melancholy. I want to begin to theorise the difference between these two modes, observing that of late the postfeminist melancholic has a habit of appearing in reincarnation romances. Across a small spectrum, three films (*Birth*, *P.S*, *The Door in the Floor*) particularise the time travel romance by showcasing the ambiguous return of a deceased boy or man whose loss the heroine has never quite gotten over,[8] and all feature an accomplished thirty, forty or fifty-something female star (Nicole Kidman, Laura Linney, Kim Basinger) paired with a far younger unknown or lesser-known actor.[9] In part this chapter will examine how these films participate in a general shift in postfeminist culture toward constructing femininity as romantically/sexually desperate, how such desperation is generationally marked and where the postfeminist melancholic stands in relation to these dynamics.

2. *P.S* and the Youth Romance Fantasy

Reviews of *P.S.* often compared it unfavourably with director Dylan Kidd's previous film *Rodger Dodger* (2002) which also bridged a generation gap but one between male characters. Likewise, *Birth* was accounted a moderate disappointment for director Jonathan Glazer after his first film *Sexy Beast* (2000). As both of these directors' first films were about the entitlements of midlife masculinity and their second films about melancholic femininity, it is hard to avoid the clear implications about "quality material" and gender that arise.

P.S. focuses on Louise, an admissions officer for Columbia University's graduate programme in art, and a woman in her late thirties whose social life consists mainly of platonic "dates" with her ex-husband Peter and visits home to her mother's house. At work one day she receives a package from an applicant named F. Scott Feinstadt, the exact same name of her high school boyfriend who had been killed in a car accident. Riveted by the coincidence, Louise contrives for him to come in for an interview although this is not normally part of the application process. The young man who appears, not only shares a name with her earlier boyfriend but also looks, acts and speaks like him. Scott and Louise have sex at Louise's apartment and although she does not initially tell anyone about it, this action seems suddenly to unlock revelations from those around her. Peter confesses to Louise that he is now dating a much younger woman but that during their marriage he suffered from an addiction to sex and was repeatedly unfaithful with both women and men. To recover from his addiction he sought out the counsel of Louise's brother Sammy who not only kept Peter's secret but also tells Louise later in the film that any consequences arising from her ignorance of the state of her marriage were her own fault. Just as Louise's intimacy with Scott seems to bring on this string of revelations from Peter, her high school best friend Missy intuits that something has changed in Louise's life and flies in from Los Angeles where she installs herself in a luxurious hotel and tries unsuccessfully to seduce Scott away from Louise.

In the midst of this Louise makes a visit back home to her mother's house where the inequities of her life appear in concentrated form. Although while he was a drug addict Sammy stole from his mother and abused her trust, she now maintains a state of readiness in case he visits, baking a pie should he choose to stop in at the house. Louise asks why her mother doesn't do the same for her and her mother suggests that Louise doesn't eat pie because she must watch her figure. In a conversation in the garden where Louise tells her mother about Peter's revelations, her mother dreamily discusses her love of gardening as a seeming metaphor for acquiescence and acceptance. "Do you know why I love it out here?" she asks her daughter. "All I'm responsible for is this little piece of dirt. No more saving the world, no more fighting injustice, just me and my babies (indicating her flowers)." With this section of the film contrasting maternal retreatism and male power plays, Louise has a conversation with Sammy in which he harshly dispenses advice and tells her to "Find the pattern and put yourself in a position of profit when the pattern repeats itself."

Louise goes to Scott and tells him about the uncanny resemblance he bears to her high school boyfriend. He rejects her desire to conceptualise him in this way, saying that everyone has their heart broken at that stage of life and telling her that his real first name is Francis (for Francis Scott Key, in fact!) and he's usually known as Fran. Missy leaves to return to Los Angeles, telling her friend as she goes that "Some people just refuse to let anything good happen to them." The film suggests that with this Louise restores order and balance to her life and we see her working out at the gym, calling her brother to tell him that she's proud of him and seeking out Peter to decisively tell him "You and I are never going to work." Louise and Fran meet at Columbia where she gives him an acceptance letter and an ambiguous exchange of "Okays" between the two at the end suggests either a continuing friendship or the tentative further exploration of romance.

The film version of *P.S.* maternalises Louise in ways that contradict the novel upon which it is based. Louise's cherished painting by her high school boyfriend has become not just a random abstract but also a mother/child embrace that constitutes "proof" that Scott Fienstadt envisioned a maternal future for her, and in the film (unlike the novel) Scott makes an immediate post-coital phone call from Louise's apartment to his mother while Louise squirms. Most remarkable is a key conversation between Louise and Missy which presumes that one is either in perpetual longing for one's girlhood or one is a mother. Missy speaks of trying to access "the real me, the one I'd forgotten about, not the one that drives the kids to school in a fucking SUV" – and bitterly tells Louise "You are just not a mother." In the film, Louise is attributed with a miscarriage that is not there in Helen Schulman's novel. In the voiceover commentary the film's director suggests that Louise has long been mourning this miscarriage. The link the film needs to supply between postfeminist melancholia and frustrated maternity is an important indication of its conservatism.[10] Despite Louise's resonant speculation "Maybe that's what's wrong with the world. Everybody's just moving on," the film ultimately insists that Louise had better move on or subject herself to the inequities and brutalities of a postfeminist culture.

The limitations of *P.S.*'s response to postfeminism are suggestively linked to its updating of the conservative critique of the melancholic Generation X member. The film's suggestion that Louise is out of step in her life cycle links her to the arrested state of development so often attributed to Generation X, whose members may give voice to resonant critiques of existing institutional, economic and ideological systems but in the end are made to accede to them in the name of "facing reality," and "moving on."[11] *P.S.* is thus linked to a trend toward accelerated nostalgia in/around this generational cohort.

3. *Birth* and the Reincarnation Romance

Birth is the most credulous of the three reincarnation narratives I am analysing here. In the film's first scene the death of an adult man named Sean is paralleled with the birth of a baby who we shortly meet as a ten-year-old boy. When that boy presents himself to Anna, the man's widow, and announces solemnly that he is her reincarnated husband, the film bluntly proposes that a revived romance (though on the most unlikely terms) with her first husband may be more meaningful for Anna than the marriage she is about to embark upon with her new fiancée, Joseph. Such a view is reinforced by the smothering over closeness and control of Anna's family who close ranks against the boy they perceive as a threat to their intimacy and stability. Despite the closeness of the family circle (Anna and Joseph live in her mother Eleanor's opulent apartment, the site of repeated family gatherings through the film) the film links family life to anger and intransigence. Eleanor, a stoic matriarch, seems most concerned that her family appropriately reflects her own affluence and grandeur, while Anna's heavily pregnant sister Laura is so offended by the boy's claims and the prospect that he may draw Anna into something unseemly that she at one point aggressively uses her own body to block her sister from going to see Sean.[12] In ways that are similar to *P.S.*, and as we shall shortly see in *The Door in the Floor*, this most extreme version of the cross-generational romance constitutes a radical disruption of family values and an interrogation of the postfeminist trope of "moving on" in the direction of marriage and procreation. Anna herself is candid in discussing her own state of mind and inability, even after ten years, to forget her husband. She tells friends, "It's taken me this long and I can't get him out of my system. I can't, I can't. It's not gotten any easier for me."

Anna's increasing belief in Sean's reincarnation claims is highlighted at a classical music performance given at Eleanor's home. When Sean repeatedly kicks the back of his chair in a little-boy challenge, Joseph explodes in anger, finally barricading the boy and himself in an adjacent room and begins to spank him. This dramatic rupture in their domestic propriety deeply shocks the family and their guests and causes Joseph to pack his things and move out. Yet, Anna exchanges a kiss with

Sean out on the street moments later. The film takes a turn, however, when Clara, a friend of Anna's, reveals to Sean that she had been having an adulterous affair with Anna's husband and contends that if the boy were truly reincarnated he would have known this. Sean is crushed that the ideal romance he believed he was restoring to Anna was actually highly tarnished and he sits in a tree in the park all night, contemplating his options. When Anna proposes that they run away together and in eleven years' time get (re)married, he abruptly tells her that he is not her husband after all and that he had been lying. At this point, Anna follows her mother's advice, seeking out Joseph and telling him that all she wants is a happy, peaceful life. The film's return to emotional austerity and Anna's fulfilment of her family's wishes culminates at the conclusion with Anna and Joseph's wedding.

When compared to the relentless celebration of the wedding in contemporary female genres and the broader hyper matrimonial turn in popular culture, *Birth*'s closing sequence, depicting Anna's bereft state on her wedding day registers as both stark and powerful.[13] The sequence highlights the presentational and performative work of weddings as social theatrical events, placing a strong stress on photography and image making. Married in compliance with her mother's request to hold the event at the beach house that was the scene of her parents' wedding, Anna at first, appears content and tranquil. She is seen in long shot surrounded by her bridesmaids while her mother, sister and other female relatives look on in satisfaction. Yet as the photographer continues his work and the film's own camera takes up a closer position, we see Anna's struggle to maintain her composure and at last she flees the scene, running onto the beach and into the waves in her wedding gown. Throughout this section we hear the ten-year-old Sean in voiceover reading a letter he has sent to Anna. Although ostensibly a repudiation of his actions and assurance to her that he is back at school and behaving appropriately for his age, the letter is nevertheless sprinkled with rather knowing references including one that hints at his disruption to Anna's family's behavioural norms ("Tell everyone I'm sorry I made a problem for them") and closes with the offhand but resonant "Well, I guess I'll see you in another lifetime." The effect of the voiceover is heightened by intercutting between Anna posing for the photographer at her wedding and Sean having his school photo taken – as the flashbulb pops, he produces a generic schoolboy smile that contrasts markedly with the solemn, precocious demeanour he exhibits through the film. The clear suggestion of this linkage is that both Anna and Sean have elected to perform their appropriate social roles in defiance of their actual emotional desires. Sean's recollection earlier in the film that he first met Anna at the beach further dimensionalises the significance of Anna's breakdown there. Moreover, this sequence culminates a set of birth references that have appeared throughout the film, seeming to suggest that Anna wishes she too might be reborn.

Birth's horror film aesthetics - its sustained camera shots and depth of field call to mind the films of Stanley Kubrick and Roman Polanski[14]- heighten its sense of the uncanny while the film's austere tone and the ghostly demeanour of the little boy Sean feed the suggestion that he appears only as a manifestation of Anna's own unconscious wishes. The need to retrieve a pure, uncontaminated version of masculinity that runs rampant in postfeminist fiction is pushed to its limits in the formula of the cross-generational romance. In *Birth* the pushing past those limits seemingly caused the film to be rejected by both audiences and critics (reviews largely lambasted the film) with the radical age variance between the adult Anna and the ten-year-old Sean leaving it open to the rhetoric of disgust that accompanies moral panic around the "misdirected" sexuality of adult women.

4. *The Door in the Floor* and the Cathartic Cross-Generational Romance

The Door in the Floor focuses upon a couple still grieving years after the deaths of their two sons in a gruesome car accident. Despite the birth of another child conceived in an effort to solidify their marriage, Ted and Marion are deeply (though not acrimoniously) estranged and about to start a trial separation. This film differs from the two previous examples in that it does not generate a (quasi)supernatural explanation for the symbolic return of a lost, loved male figure. In fact, the arrival of Eddie is quite prosaic, with the strong suggestion (one which is openly spelled out near the film's conclusion) that Ted Cole has hired him as his assistant very deliberately as a surrogate for one of his lost sons. The film has a habit of undercutting Ted's intentions and sense of patriarchal centrality, however, and there are suggestions early on that associate Ted's masculinity with the ridiculous and the pathetic. Roused out of bed when his daughter hears a noise in the middle of the night, he carries her back to her room in the nude and the little girl observes: "Your penis looks funny." "My penis is funny," Ted replies.

Eddie's attraction to Marion is cemented from the first moment he meets her as she collects him at the ferry. Expecting Ted, it is clear that when she speaks to him he believes/hopes an attractive older woman is propositioning him. He takes a photograph from a hallway "shrine" to the dead boys and tapes paper over the images of her sons, isolating Marion as the only visible figure and symbolically de-maternalising her. When she discovers him using pieces of her lingerie to masturbate and becomes aware of his attraction, she speculates about whether her sons ever had sex before they died and then initiates Eddie into lovemaking. Ted, having deduced what is going on with his wife and his assistant, is ambivalent. The self-destructive and angry behaviour he manifests through his own adulterous relationship with a neighbour, Mrs. Vaughn, intensifies and is explained by Marion who relates to Eddie the stock pattern of her husband's relations with other women.

An author and artist, Ted begins by sketching conventional portraits of a mother and a daughter, then sketches each alone, with the mother nude in representational phases that move from innocence to degradation. Ted's obsessive need to render maternity as sexually sordid is contextualised in a key sequence when he explodes in anger as Eddie tries to turn off a rap song on the car radio about female sexual degradation. "I love that song," he yells at Eddie, and then proceeds into the house channel surfing on television to images of violence and sexuality, including notably an advertisement for *Girls Gone Wild*, the video franchise in which "regular women" are induced to flash their breasts and other body parts at the camera.[15] At this point postfeminism enters the film directly as it illustrates that Ted's management of the losses in his own life through the disparagement of women is culturally authorised and supported by a popular culture that increasingly features women showcasing their own desire for debasement. This section of the film is deeply sad, however, and intercuts Ted's behaviour with Eddie and Marion making love for the last time, her eyes fixed on a portrait of her dead sons and tears streaming down her face. While Marion recognises that she has to interrupt the patterns of dysfunction and emotional frigidity that characterise her marriage and makes a choice to leave, Ted is locked into a cycle of repetitive behaviour. Chased out of her house and down the beach by a furious Mrs. Vaughn when she realises how Ted has abused her, Ted finds refuge in a small bookstore where he is fawned over as a literary celebrity and encounters a mother and a daughter who he lines up for his next series of portraits. The film concludes with Marion gone and Ted and Eddie briefly left alone. Ted tells the boy the story of the car accident in which his sons were killed and when he does so, it calls to mind an earlier section of the film in which we have also seen him in the role of storyteller. At a public reading of one of his children's stories (one which Eddie calls his favourite) Ted recites "The Door in the Floor," a fiction about the repression of terror and horror in the world in the form of a mother/son narrative. As Eddie leaves we last see Ted on his squash court alone, opening a hatch door in the floor and descending, it would appear, into the horror his short story has chronicled. In this way, the film flips its original image of Ted as a stoic father and Marion as a woman traumatised by grief. Ted is caught up in a cycle of repetition in which his image of himself as an artist and a father is predicated on the degradation of adult women. Though he tries to present himself to Eddie as a procurer and thus diminish the relationship Eddie had with his wife, the film insists that not only was that relationship legitimate and cathartic for Marion but that in no way was it managed by Ted.

Further evidence of the centrality of the semiotics of the aging female body to postfeminist culture can often be culled from review and fan discourses. It is telling to discover that when one looks up *The Door in the Floor* in the Internet Movie Database, the most extended strand of discussion about the film centres not on its major characters or plot but rather on the aging body of actress Mimi Rogers who, as Mrs. Vaughn, is glimpsed in one of Ted's sketching scenes in full frontal nudity. This posting strand includes a full forty-seven posted comments on this subject as well as nine messages deleted by the system administrator (presumably for sexual content deemed offensive). The evaluations of Rogers' body, the shape and sag of her breasts and so on, come in for detailed analysis here with postings that range from assessments that the actress ought to have cosmetic surgery (in fact the leadoff posting reads "Mimi Rogers – the surgeon is waiting") to numerous defences of the beauty of women's natural bodies and several testimonies ranging in degrees of explicitness to the desire to have sex with Rogers. Many of the postings deploy postfeminist sexual terminology in which the woman's subjectivity is erased, sex is figured as an act of dominating violence and a woman's body is openly a thing (several posters expressed their sexual interest in Rogers with colloquial phrasing like "I'd beat it up," and "I would so hit that!"). Another striking feature of the postings is the absolute certainty with which audience members discriminate between bodies that have had plastic surgery and those that have not. Notably, one poster specifically calls Rogers "a total MILF [Mother I'd like to fuck] in this movie."

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined a cluster of film representations that modify some of the formulas of postfeminist temporality in popular culture. The films examined here represent merely one strand within a larger cultural weave of women's genres preoccupied with reincarnation and time travel. Higher-profile romances that engage these themes continue to proliferate from *Just Like Heaven* (2005) to *The Lake House* (2006). And though she functions somewhat differently there the postfeminist melancholic is also a feature of other more conventional "chick flick" time travel narratives including *Kate & Leopold* (2002). It is worth observing that the time travel theme has become ubiquitous in recent popular print fiction as well as in cinema (notably in bestsellers such as *The Time Traveler's Wife*). In highlighting *Birth, P.S.* and *The*

Door in the Floor in my discussion I have not taken up other proximate examples which would include films such as *The Good Girl* (2002) and *Unfaithful* (2002) both of which also feature older woman/younger man romances, though ones in which the age difference in the couple is not as pronounced.

My sense is that these three films raise the stakes above the miraculous/magical interventions of recent time-traveling romances like *Kate & Leopold* and *13 Going on Thirty*, interrogating to varying degrees some of the precepts of postfeminist culture in ways those films do not. *P.S.* is least able to break from the conventions of maternalism, *Birth* occupies a melancholic middle ground and *The Door in the Floor* is most direct in its use of a non-romanticised cross-generational relationship to free the protagonist from a stalled and impossible family life. In two of the films a transitional cross-generational romance works to move the protagonist to a new stage of her life, while in *Birth* Anna's tragic accommodation to gender and class norms belies her own desire for a greater, more intimate life. All three films look to the cross-generational romance in an attempt to devise solutions for their protagonist's predicament when the conventional institutions of intimacy leave her dissatisfied.

Interestingly, all three also highlight male anxiety, aging and co-dependency through a character proximate to the romance (Peter in *P.S.*, Joseph in *Birth*, and Ted in *The Door in the Floor*) whose emotional limitations and weakness have exerted a controlling, limiting impact on the protagonist. The midlife woman/younger man romance unlocks this state of affairs in an increasingly decisive way from *Birth* to *P.S.* to *The Door in the Floor*.

At their best these films begin the project of adapting mainstream conventions to alternative ideological ends. In so doing they also feature a marked and explicit eroticism not regularly found in vehicles for mainstream female stars. In these films women are legitimately melancholic about their respective predicaments as single, widowed and unhappily married women in a postfeminist culture. Their erotic encounters with phantasmatic boys figure their own unlocking of stalled states and ways of accepting and facing what they know about their own conditions. In this way the films begin to find a means for bypassing the pervasive postfeminist typologisation of contemporary culture.

Notes

1. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," Forthcoming in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by

Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

2. Susan J. Douglas & Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women*, (New York: Free Press, 2004), 24.

3. They certainly did not do so in strictly uniform ways, although (not surprisingly) a threat of Oedipal anxiety runs through the majority of such films. In *8 Mile* (2002) Rabbit is deeply troubled by his mother's sexual relationship with a man his own age and one of his rap lines refers to sleeping with a competitor's mother. It is worth noting that prior to *The Door in the Floor*, Kim Basinger had previously played older women involved with younger men in both *8 Mile* and *L.A. Confidential* (1997).

4. Kathleen Karlyn, "'Too Close for Comfort:' *American Beauty* and the Incest Motif," *Cinema Journal* 44 (Fall, 2004): 71.

5. The series extends a discourse of "housewife chic" that has been intermittently at work in U.S. media for several years and which celebrates the affluent, white mother who opts out of the workplace and largely out of the public sphere in favour of a reconnection with essential femininity that is deemed to only be possible in domestic settings.

6. Stephen Katz and Barbara Marshall, "New Sex for Old: Lifestyle, Consumerism, and the Ethics of Aging Well," *Journal of Aging Studies* 17 (2003): 3.

7. In a review essay dealing with *Birth* Denby wrote, "What's going on out there? This is the third Hollywood movie in the past six months in which a beautiful woman falls in love with a boy who reminds her of someone else," 147.

8. *White Noise*, a 2005 film starring Michael Keaton, varies the formula by providing an example of a failed reincarnation romance. In that film, Keaton's deceased wife communicates from beyond the grave and he seeks to interpret her signals to prevent further deaths in an ongoing supernatural conspiracy. Other proximate films would include *The Good Girl* (2002) and *Lovely and Amazing* (2001) in which female characters played by Jennifer Aniston and Catherine Keener carry out affairs with teenage boys, although without any sort of reincarnation plot in effect.

9. Specifically, Basinger was 51, Linney 40 and Kidman 37 at the time of these three films' release in 2004.

10. In deeming *P.S.* a conservative film, I want to stress that I do so largely because of the film's need to attribute female melancholy to unfulfilled maternal desire. In another context, such as the one provided by Susan Felleman in her book *Art in the Cinematic Imagination*, the film seems more progressive. Felleman is concerned with the long trajectory of Hollywood's depiction of male necrophilic desire and she charts a

spectrum of films including *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (1951), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Obsession* (1976) in which a male protagonist obsessively focused on a dead love object has an uncanny encounter with a female revenant. For Felleman, *P.S.* breaks this narrative mould, and she hails the film as “a welcome answer in this echo chamber of love and death.” She notes that *P.S.* treats “a male object (revenant?) of female desire with almost exactly the same type of morbid and erotic fascination that his female equivalents have received, and situates him in the glare of the desiring female gaze,” 52-53.

11. The term Generation X is used imprecisely but often refers to the group of people born between 1963 and 1978. This generation has been the subject of a number of psychological profiles, many of which define it as exhibiting a frustrated sense of idealism and a distrust of mainstream institutions. Arguably, many members of this generational cluster have turned inward over the last ten years, manifesting behaviours that prioritise the rewards of family and a corresponding sense of withdrawal from the public sphere.

12. The malignancy of family ties is further suggested by the presence of an unnamed aunt who takes it on herself to ruin the moment in which Anna had planned to tell her mother about setting a wedding date by blurting out the news first. This same woman is identified by Sean as the person who spoiled Anna’s happiness as a child by telling her the truth about the fictional identity of Santa Claus.

13. One of the few representational precedents for linking a concluding wedding with ambivalence, uncertainty and despair is Nancy Savoca’s 1989 film *True Love* in which a young Italian-American couple realise at their wedding reception that they have sharply different views of marriage and commitment. For a discussion of contemporary Hollywood’s devotion to bridal culture see Cele Otnes & Elizabeth H. Pleck’s *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

14. *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) is a significant intertext for *Birth*. Kidman’s pixie haircut causes her to resemble Mia Farrow while the emphasis on interior space in a grand New York apartment building calls to mind the earlier film’s setting.

15. *Girls Gone Wild* is so conspicuous a manifestation of postfeminist exploitation culture that Ariel Levy begins her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and Raunch Culture* with a discussion of the soft-cover video empire and the expansion of the brand into clothing, music and restaurants.

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Re-occupying the Erotic Body: The Paintings and "Performance" of Pauline Boty, British Pop Artist (1938-66)

Sue Tate

Abstract

Pauline Boty (1938-66), colleague of David Hockney and Peter Blake, was one of the few women artists to engage with Pop Art. She found a visual language to picture a female erotic imagination despite working within a genre that has been castigated for objectifying and reifying the sexual woman. She posed naked with her own work and performed a knowingly sexualised, popular culture construction of artistic identity. In so doing, she aimed to collapse the binary opposition between "sexual woman" and "serious artist." This transgressive and innovatory practice had no discursive resonance at the time and has, until recently, been marginalised or excluded from both mainstream Pop and feminist art history. Second wave feminist art theory only validated women's work that subverted mass cultural imagery but this imperative to subvert means a denial of the real pleasures experienced by women, leaving them as tenants in bodies that signify only sexuality for men. Changed discursive and historical circumstances now allow a re-evaluation of feminist understandings. Boty's practice provides a model of how the erotic body might be re-occupied that has great relevance to current debates. **Key Words:** women pop artists, Pauline Boty, feminist art, feminism and sexuality, British Pop Art.

1. Introduction

The depiction of the sexual woman is deeply problematic and for several decades, since the emergence of second wave feminism in the 1970s, has been the centre of controversy and contestation. Feminist art historians and cultural commentators have exposed the damaging and misogynist effects of imagery formed in and for the male gaze where the erotic female body operates as a sign or vehicle, not for female sexuality itself, but for male sexuality, as sexual for men. The problem might be seen as most acute in the context of mass cultural imagery: ubiquitous, ideologically influential and often overtly demeaning (with pornography as the extreme example). While the ideological exposure of the working of this imagery, and its deconstruction and subversion, was an imperative for second wave feminism, it leaves unresolved the issue of how women might find expression for an autonomous female sexuality. This is an ongoing, and it will be argued, an increasingly acute concern. Pauline Boty, British Pop artist, working over forty years ago within the tropes and representations of mass culture, provides an example of a way in which, without relinquishing a critical awareness, the erotic body might be re-occupied.

Although innovative, radical and prescient, the work had no discursive resonance at the time and was lost to cultural view for over thirty years. Boty, and other women working in Pop, have been deeply destabilising to both mainstream Pop and feminist narratives and were, as a result, excluded or marginalised, only recently returning to notice. This chapter will present and explore some of Boty's work and then go on to consider the reasons for feminist art history's inability to embrace it, arguing that this denial can (and must) be understood in terms of the historically located needs of second wave feminism as a political project. However, in changed historical and discursive circumstances, I will argue, it is possible to go beyond the imperative to subvert mass cultural images of the sexual woman in order to explore and find expression for women's affective, pleasurable experience. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the relevance of Boty's work to contemporary debates around sexuality and the model it can provide to a current generation in overcoming dilemmas in feminism.

2. Pauline Boty: Pop Artist

Pauline Boty was one of the very few women artists to engage with Pop Art. She trained at the Royal College of Art in London and was a friend and colleague of Peter Blake and David Hockney, with whom she exhibited. She established a reputation as a Pop artist before her premature death from cancer in 1966, aged only 28. She spoke of "a nostalgia for the present" and adverts, lyrics of pop songs, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers, the Beatles, as well as New Wave film stars, Jean Paul Belmondo and Monica Viti, all make appearances in her vibrant body of work. Radical in her politics, she also dealt with contemporary issues such as the Vietnam War, the Cuban revolution and President Kennedy's assassination. A knowing and sophisticated artist she was acutely aware of issues of sexual politics. She was also a sensual, beautiful woman who identified with popular culture, relishing its desires and pleasures. In her work she can be seen reaching for a visual language to represent an autonomous female erotic imagination, a female subjectivity within the imagery of mass culture.

Pop Art has been characterised as an art of objects.[1] In Christopher Finch's words: "since man is an object amongst other objects, he too may be investigated on this plane."[2] However, as so often happens with the term, "man" does not mean man per se. In Finch's list of examples, as in Pop in general, it is overwhelmingly woman (and usually the sexual woman) who is so treated. In images appropriated from mass culture the sexual woman and her reified body parts (lips, breasts, high heeled foot) are constantly pictured. Brigit Bardot and Marilyn Monroe appear repeatedly as indexical signs for sexuality. In lists of "objects" deemed suitable to and defining of Pop,[3] the "pin up," "strippers," and film stars are always included, alongside automobiles, machines, clothes and food. Sexualised commodities, they appear conflated and interchangeable with a refrigerator, a toaster or a carburettor.

Clearly, women artists would be differently positioned in relation to Pop's subject matter (a cultural not an essentialist argument). At the time they were still struggling for acceptance in a male dominated world of high art. With so much invested in being equal to (the same as?) men,[4] few wished to deal with such sexualised, commodifying imagery. Understandably, most simply turned away.

Yet, women did (and do) have pleasurable experiences within mass culture. Ignoring the subjective female experience leaves it unexplored and unexpressed. The site of the erotic female body is evacuated, or at least the freehold is rendered up, leaving women as tenants in bodies that signify only sexuality for men.

Pauline Boty resisted that evacuation. Acquiring the sobriquet "the Wimbledon Bardot" at her first art school, she explored the role, making and posing in a Bardot-esque dress. Later, at the Royal College of Art, she sang and performed as Marilyn Monroe in college reviews and in a range of photographs, she can be seen inhabiting Marilyn's persona. However, she identified with these sexual icons without relinquishing her serious intent as an artist. As a student she was also busy absorbing the lessons of Modernist painting, working alone on her innovative collages, reading Proust and Genet and becoming knowledgeable about film, both continental New Wave cinema and Hollywood. As she developed her Pop Art style and iconography, she used those knowledges and skills to find painterly equivalents for a female experience of mass culture.

Marilyn Monroe features in a number of works and is the subject of three large paintings. However, unlike the "cool," detached exploration of "image as sign" found, for example in Warhol's photo-mechanical screen prints, in these paintings Boty renders the affective experience of the fan. In *The Only Blonde in the World* (Fig. 1), purchased by the Tate in 1998, she eschews the slick closed surface of many Pop works. Appearing to split open a flat, abstract painting she takes the viewer beyond the picture plane into the imagined world of Hollywood glamour where Monroe shimmies in a still from *Some Like It Hot.* Just as pop culture fans use their imaginations on such images, Boty brings the monochrome photo to empathetic life with licks of colour, flesh tones in the legs, yellow in the hair. The brushwork gives a tactile immediacy, evoking the shake of the hips, the flounce of the tassels on the dress, the movement of the legs.

Figure 1: Boty, Pauline, *The Only Blonde in the World* (1963) (detail) © Tate, London, 2007. Courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London.

Boty's close identification with Monroe can be seen in the similarity between her painting of the star in *Colour Her Gone* and a photograph of the artist by Geoff Reeves. Whether the photo is modelled on the star or the painting on the photo is neither here nor there, the similarity between the two is striking**.** However, as Richard Dyer has cogently demonstrated in his study of Hollywood stars, while the media turned Monroe into "a reference for sexuality in everyday speech,"[5] her image actually represented sexuality "*for* men." It was no more than "a vehicle for male sexuality." He pointed out that when Marilyn referred to her own body, "she is not referring to the body that she experiences, but rather to the body that is experienced by others, that is by men."[6]

Boty was not unaware of this problematic. In an interview with Nell Dunn, she rejects the clichés of pornographic writing to assert the vital importance of the lived experience of sex:

> It's to do with everything...[it] can be as varied as being alive is varied...one of the most terrifying things about the Puritanism that still exists in England today is that people are guilty about sex.[7]

In one of the witty monologues she delivered on a radio magazine programme, *Public Ear*, she explicitly linked the suppression of women's sexuality to their social and political oppression,[8] and many anecdotes attest to the unusually overt and challenging performance of her own sexuality.[9] Derek Boshier, her Pop art colleague, was continually struck by how "upfront" she was on sexual matters, which, he stressed, was "so unusual at that time…blokes would be really taken aback." She wrote to a friend of her "roving eye" and her pleasure in indulging in sexual fantasies around Belmondo. In the Nell Dun interview she discusses her "ugly cunt" or men who "just want a quick fuck" with a directness and language that presaged much later usage.

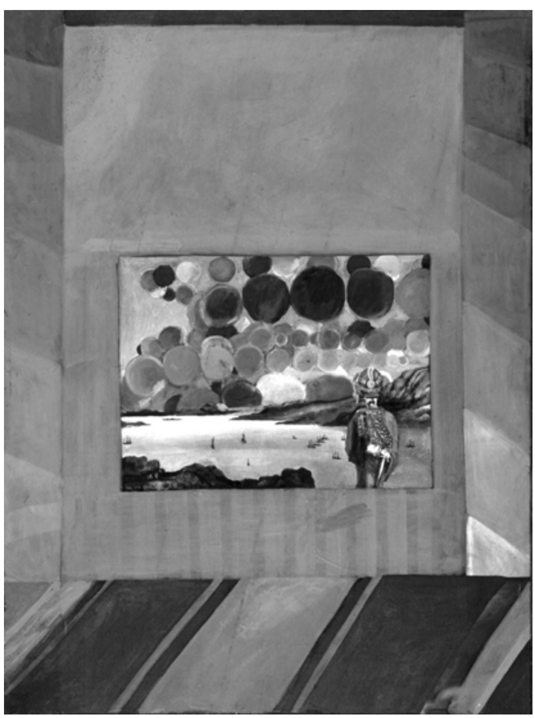

Figure 2: Boty, Pauline, *Red Manoeuvre* (1962). Courtesy of Whitford Fine Art, London.

She was also aware that she needed to find a visual language for the body she experienced, rather than the "body experienced by others." She discussed, with her boyfriend Jim Donovan, the fact that no one had tried to picture the female orgasm and described hers as a series of orange circular shapes, streaming outwards, with (for her) an audible "pop, pop, pop." She painted him a sketch, which he reproduced for me just before his recent death. With this code to hand it is clear that she encrypted that visualisation of her orgasm in *Red Manoeuvre* (Fig. 2) in the streams of orange balloon shapes pouring over the sky of a landscape set within the saturated red ground, which often stood in Boty's work for sexual arousal, and framed by Pop style candy stripes. The soldier, in Sergeant Pepper type uniform, is clearly a phallic figure and he stands at the head of a watery inlet, his hat distinctly glans-like**.** The work was shown in London, alongside all the major players in British Pop, at an important group exhibition *New Approaches to the Figure*.[10] I like to imagine Boty taking pleasure in observing the silent shout of her orgasm in the flow and chat of the opening. A "new approach to the figure" indeed, but not one that could be openly articulated.

Figure 3: Boty, Pauline, *5-4-3-2-1* (1963). Courtesy of Whitford Fine Art, London.

In 1963 she produced an overt statement of sexual desire in *5-4-3-2-1* (Fig. 3); the yellow banner on the right unequivocally declaims *O For A FU..* This was truly transgressive. Two years later, when Kenneth Tynan said "fuck" on British television, questions were asked in the House of Commons. *5-4-3-2-1* was the Manfred Man song which opened Ready *Steady Go*, a generation defining, Friday night, pop music TV show. A carefully picked "trendy" live audience danced in the studio. Boty and Derek Boshier, were granted "dancers' badges" and often appeared. In this work Boty finds painterly equivalents for that pop culture experience and the pleasures of sexual anticipation that it brought. Again, she takes us beyond the picture surface, here defined by the hard edged fairground lettering, into the looser handling of, first, the banner and a girl's face thrown back in laughing abandon, then deeper still to a diagonal stream of what might be a fur coat and a rose. In earlier work Boty had introduced the red rose as a symbol of female sensuality and it often reappeared as such in her later paintings. In this piece the rose is overtly sexual, elongated and painted in fleshy tones that have been deliberately cross-hatched over a richer red; there is more than the suggestion of labia, clitoris and pubic hair. This is a visual language that speaks within the tropes of mass culture yet, tactile and rendering an embodied experience, bears no relationship to the lexicon of media signs for, or pornographic representations of, female sexuality.

Boty also reversed the usual dynamic of the sexual economy by turning her female gaze on male objects of desire. In *With Love to Jean Paul Belmondo* (Fig. 4) she taps into the Dionysian passion of the female fan for pop or film star. Pleasingly bringing together her lust with her "serious" interest in New Wave movies she described Belmondo, in a letter to a friend, as "the dish with the ravey navel…in [*Au Bout de Souffle*] oh indescribable joy and lechery and slurp, slurp, he's lovely just lovely".[11] As the object of her desire she surrounds his image with saturated oranges and reds, his left cheek beginning to be overwhelmed by the luscious strokes of her paint. The sheer enormity of the red rose quivering over his head and the jaunty, clichéd, red, orange and green hearts, are reminders of the playfulness of the piece, a knowing indulgence in seductive media pleasures.

In *Portrait of Derek Marlowe with Unknown Ladies* (Fig. 5) Marlowe is rendered in monochrome, in photorealist style, his dark phallic form stands out against the cool, blue background and other phallic shapes enter his part of the composition from the left. It is a wonderfully seductive portrait in which Boty has captured the allure of a highly attractive, charismatic man and that frisson of pleasure experienced in the first moment of sexually charged eye contact.

In these works Boty finds affective expression for a female sexual subjectivity: embedded, embodied and empathetic.

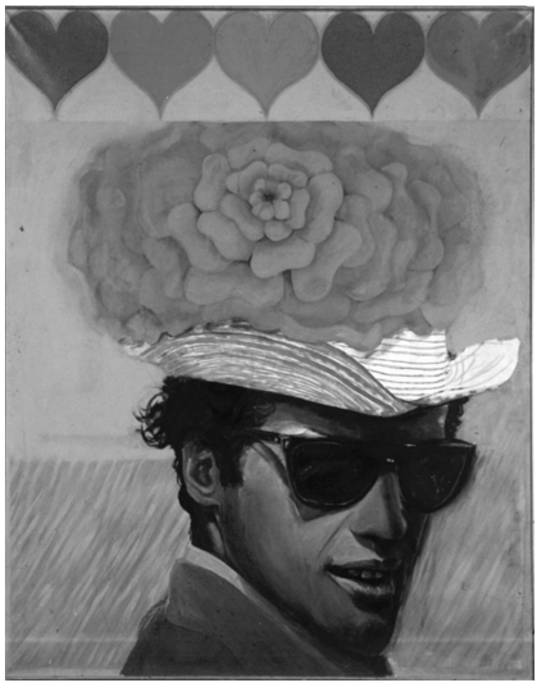

Figure 4: Boty, Pauline, *With Love to John Paul Belmondo* (1962). Courtesy of Whitford Fine Art, London.

Yet throughout her oeuvre, in works beyond the remit of this chapter, runs a critique of sexual politics. In *Portrait of Derek Marlowe with Unknown Ladies* the critique is expressed simultaneously with the affirmation of pleasure. The "unknown" ladies, drawn from magazine images, are crushed into a red band that runs across the top of the picture, desperately thrusting their pouting faces at the viewer. Painted in a style that contrasts shockingly with the cool photorealist rendering of Marlowe, crude swipes of paint render their faces as grotesque, mask-like parodies of fashion poses. Here, Boty is using the codes of painting to comment on sexual politics. She represents and critiques the power imbalance between the generic, anonymous women and the individual proactive man while simultaneously picturing the felt pleasures of heterosexual attraction. She inhabits the space of the desiring, sexual woman as intellectual cognitive artist.

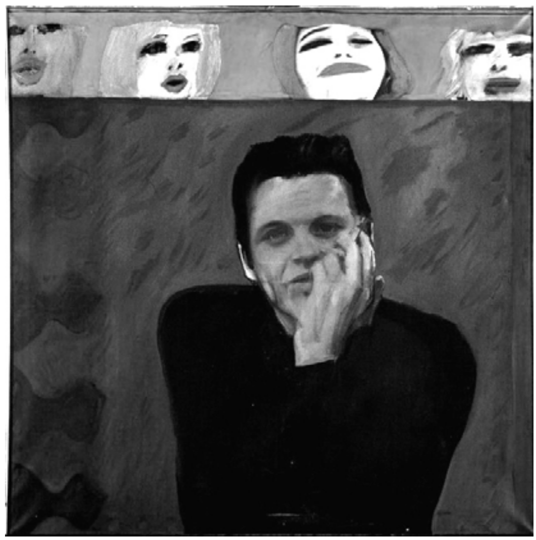

Figure 5: Boty, Pauline, *Portrait of Derek Marlowe with Unknown Ladies* (1962-3). Courtesy of Laura Boothby.

In her performance to camera, Boty challenged cultural hierarchies and laid claim to a proactive sexual energy normally the prerogative of the male artist. With a certain inevitability, given her looks, she had been offered acting work on TV and stage, usually in sexually provocative roles. She accepted, although always clear that painting was her core concern, and appeared in mass circulation papers as a starlet in stereotypical poses. But when *Town* and *The Evening Standard "Show Page"* sent top photographers Lewis Morley and Michael Ward to conduct photo-shoots, she participated in the sessions to produce images that conduct a wonderful play on gendered constructions of artistic identity. It was the year of her first solo exhibition. She had found her Pop voice and was full of confidence that she could "speak" within the photographic discourse of the time in a manner that would challenge and re-shape prevailing stereotypes.

For Morley, Boty posed naked with her Belmondo painting. Throughout the history of Western art, the naked female body has been the object of the male artist's vision. Naked, with her own work, Boty challenged normative gendered subject/object positions. She seems to be declaiming: not *ecce homo*, but *ecce femina*, behold: the woman *is* the artist. In a cheerfully libertarian spirit, she inhabits the model of artist as a sexually energetic being, which had long been naturalised for men.[12] In some images she mimics famous nudes from art history: Louise Murphy, Louis XV's mistress, in Boucher's painting (Fig. 6) or Velasquez' *Rokeby Venus*. But where Murphy was the sexual possession of the King, Boty poses with her own picturing of the object of her own sexual desire. And in the place of Velasquez' reflecting mirror (sign of woman's vanity) we see Belmondo's smiling open mouth. Mellor writes of the "scandalous bodies" populating Morley's work which, in Bahktian, carnivalesque manner, turn the world upside down.[13] Boty, re-occupying those well known erotic bodies, but as an artist with her own work, overturns long established gender hierarchies and performs a collapse of the binary opposition between sexual woman and serious artist prefiguring later postmodernist practice.

Figure 6: *Pauline Boty posing as Louise Murphy.* Photograph by Lewis Morley (1963). Courtesy of Lewis Morley.

Posing for Ward, wearing a straw hat and dark glasses like Belmondo's (Fig. 7), she identifies with the subject of her portrait, yet, with bared shoulders and exposed cleavage she does so as a woman. In another of her radio monologues she compared Belmondo to Brigitte Bardot, describing him as "a masculine, and potent extension of the kind of myth that Bardot engendered:" amoral, anarchic and lawless, "full of a marvellous kind of wild energy."[14]

In 1959 Simone de Beauvoir, in trying to understand the animosity, hostility even, that was expressed towards Bardot, identified in her an unsophisticated, sincere, amoral and ultimately aggressive sexuality: “She does as she pleases and that is what is disturbing.”[15]

Figure 7: Pauline Boty posing with *With Love to Jean Paul Belmondo.* Photograph by Michael Ward (1963). Courtesy of Michael Ward.

Bardot, de Beauvoir argues, spurns the fake trappings of femininity (jewels, high heels, girdles) in order

> to assert that one is man’s fellow and equal, to recognise that between the woman and him there is mutual desire and pleasure[16]…The character she created challenges certain taboos accepted by the preceding age, particularly those which denied women sexual autonomy.[17]

In the early 1960s it was transgressive and "taboo breaking" for a woman to claim this kind of full bloodied, assertive sexual autonomy: a shock to the social order. But it is just such a claim that, in a gender-bending identification with Belmondo, Boty is making in this photograph.

Morley's photographs were, however, never published. In November 1964, Ward's image of Boty, semi-naked with the Belmondo portrait, was used as the cover image for *Men Only*, a popular magazine offering soft porn pleasures to a male audience. But there is no contextualising text to anchor her identity as an artist, so the claim to an anarchic sexual autonomy is inaudible. The sexual woman was returned to "her" place in the dominant signifying practices as a vehicle for male sexuality.

Figure 8: Boty, Pauline, *It's a Man's World II* (1965-6). Courtesy of Whitford Fine Art, London.

The following year Boty painted *It's a Man's World II* (Fig. 8): her comment on the difficulty of getting the transgressive voice of the sexual woman heard. Drawn from the life class and soft porn magazines, these are depictions of woman as sexual object, and the red rose, Boty's expression of the subjective experience of female sexuality, is gone.

Although there was talk of an exhibition of her work after her death, it was never realised. In 1977 her still grieving widower, Clive Goodwin, died of a cerebral haemorrhage. The paintings became the property of their daughter, who was still a child. Narrowly escaping being thrown out by the family, a number of the pieces ended up in an outhouse on the Sussex farm of Boty's brother, where they mouldered for decades. Not one work was exhibited between 1966 and 1993.

3. Problems in Feminism

The exclusion of Boty (and most other women Pop artists) from Pop exhibitions is perhaps not so very surprising. Giving expression to an affective, female experience, their work was deeply destabilising to the narrative of Pop which was built around masculinist assumptions and an imperative for "detachment." However, the absence for so long of this innovative oeuvre from the feminist canon speaks of problems within feminism. At the heart of this lies feminism's struggle with the depiction of the sexual woman, particularly as she appears in the trivialising, commodifying and reifying imagery of mass culture, the source material of Pop. In order to understand and address this difficulty, feminism needs to be seen as a historically produced and changing discourse. It has always been both a methodology and a political practice and as such it is inevitable and only proper that it has been shaped by political needs. Recognising and unpicking those needs will allow an understanding not just of the past, but of the needs of the present. This way of seeing the issue allows respect for and understanding of the interventions of an earlier generation while opening the possibility of a changing feminist discourse.

The second wave of feminism that gathered in the 1970s and found full expression in academia in the 1980s confronted the huge problem of overcoming the acute cultural marginalisation of women. A major task was to win a place for woman at the high table of culture. To sexualise women was to trivialise them, to reduce them to the unprivileged in the Cartesian binaries that informed thinking and value judgements: mind versus body, culture versus nature. The representations of the sexual woman formed in and for the male gaze, most especially when found in mass culture, locked women into all that was culturally and intellectually devalued. Second wave feminism was deeply and necessarily invested in escaping these derogatory associations if women were to gain intellectual respect and if their voices were to be heard in academe.

A central plank in the feminist strategic platform was a critical engagement with issues of representation. From the (gendered) Western tradition of the nude to the mass produced imagery of the contemporary world, the misogynist and oppressive effects of representation, framed in and for the male gaze, was exposed. And these were not ivory tower debates. As Lisa Tickner pointed out:

> Representations enter our collective social understandings, constituting our sense of ourselves, the positions we take up in the world, and the possibilities we see for action in it.[18]

Women artists of the previous generation might be seen as adopting a "surrogate male" strategy. In order to gain acceptance in the male dominated art world, they strove to play down their gender difference. Second wave feminists, however, wanted to explore, embrace and celebrate being women. To combat the impact of millennia of patriarchal imagery, some writers, like Barbara Rose in *Vaginal Iconography* (1974),[19] promoted the adoption of alternative, positive imagery of women (the "good" vagina). But others, notably Griselda Pollock in a key essay *What's wrong with Images of Women,* pointed out "the impossibility of challenging imagery without an adequate theory of ideology and representation."[20] Attempts to picture female sexuality were naively essentialist and doomed to failure, as they would be drawn back into the dominant, phallocentric signifying system. The semiotics of representation were to be tackled: imagery was not intrinsically "good" or "bad" but needed to be understood discursively and then challenged and deconstructed in order to rupture ideology. It was the latter, deconstructivist strand that became dominant in the academy.

In the invigorating battle to throw off patriarchal oppression there was an urgent need for theoretical writing and art practice that deconstructed and subverted the phallocentric meanings of the sea of imagery in which women were living, and within which their subjectivities were formed. It was a strategic necessity if new "possibilities for action" were to be energetically pursued.

Male Pop Art, with its objectification of women and the reification of their body parts, was, understandably, condemned by feminist art history. In this context it was also deeply discomforting for feminist art historians to acknowledge women Pop artists who might be seen to be working *with* rather than subverting or deconstructing mass cultural imagery. Their practice, most especially when dealing with representations of the sexual woman, risked being re-appropriated in patriarchal meaning structures. When major swathes of cultural territory were being contested, including the right to be in the contest at all, a more complex, feminist engagement with potentially perilous imagery was an unaffordable, even an irrelevant luxury.

Although understandable in the socio-historic conditions of the time, this evasion left unresolved the problem of how the affective, pleasurable and often erotic experiences that women did have within mass culture might find expression: these experiences remained suppressed or denied.

In the 1980s the impact of structuralist and poststructuralist thought on feminist art practice built to a "crisis in representation." Artists like Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke (both of whom worked with their own naked bodies) were increasingly marginalised and heavily criticised in feminist discourse. They were charged with a naive essentialism or complicity with male scopic pleasures that failed to acknowledge poststructuralist/deconstructivist understandings and strategies. Schneemann countered with an accusation of

> prudishness and puritanical fear of the erotic/ecstatic (which) means that feminist critics can't recognise how the use of the body creates a particular and authentic female meaning. They're working only within the pejorative; it's always a defensive position.[21]

She demanded to know: "Are there structures of evasion within feminist analysis?"[22]

Yet if we acknowledge the political needs of academic feminism in the 1980s, still struggling for recognition in a cultural field shaped by binaries that placed the sexual woman in opposition to the (male) proactive, artists/theorists, then indeed, defensiveness and evasion might be seen to have been an ongoing necessity.

Feminism, however, has always been a broad church and voices were raised in the 1970s and 1980s that ran parallel with and challenged the mainstream deconstructivist position, providing a different theoretical continuity that can now be tapped into. For example, in 1978 Lisa Tickner, while acknowledging the acute problem of using any cultural forms, as *none* are value free, offered Carolee Schneemann's work as "a timely reminder that in rejecting men's view of us, we cannot afford to lose also an authentic joy in the very real pleasures of the body."[23] And Kathy Myers, in her important essay *Towards a Feminist Erotica* of 1982 (noting "a resistance which speaks of a fundamental dilemma in sexual politics") argued that the

> assumption that it is the act of representation or objectification itself which degrades women...can lead feminism into deep water…[denying] women the right to

> represent their own sexuality, and [sidestepping] the whole issue of female sexual pleasure.

She also predicted, quite rightly, that “[t]he exploration of female sexual pleasure through imagery will remain politically controversial.”[24]

In the 1990s it became possible to reflect back on the historical development of second wave feminist theory, to see it as a historically produced discourse that could be critiqued. For example, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (1997) offered a reconsideration of the charges of essentialism made against Chicago by feminist theorists because of her use, among other things, of an openly vulvic image to celebrate famous women throughout history. The editor, Amelia Jones, aimed to provide a re-evaluation of the apparent opposition between 1980s poststructuralist theorisations and the “essentialist” practice they critiqued. And she did this not by rejecting those understandings but by employing her “specifically poststructuralist suspicion of interpretations that pose as ‘objective’ and of exclusions put in play by the formation of restrictive historical narratives.”[25]

The sexed body has always been a central concern in Irigaray’s work. In 1985 she had warned that

> if we don’t find our body’s language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We shall tire of the same ones and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealised.[26]

Rejected in the English speaking feminist world as essentialist in the 1980s, in the 1990s her work was granted a more complex and nuanced reading and has become increasingly influential in understandings of women’s art.

In this changing theoretical context of the 1990s, there was a growing critical interest, as Croft and MacDonald writing in *Women’s Art* in 1994 observed, in “the contradictions of desire, pleasure, power and sexuality.” [27] They use the appearance and disappearance of work of Carolee Schneemann (who was Boty’s near contemporary, their births being only one year apart) as a marker of this development “celebrated in the 60s and early 70s as the ‘sexual revolution’ in performance…forgotten or condemned in the late 70s and early 80s and rediscovered in the 90s.”[28] With unquestionable transgression artists, like Cosey Fanni Tutti and Annie Sprinkle, used their own naked bodies to interrogate the language and gestures of pornography. Although their work was, and remains, disturbing to many feminists, it has been theorised in “high art” texts, like Rebecca Schneider’s *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997):[29]

testimony to a shift in feminist approaches. This different theoretical continuity links directly to a renewed interest, in feminist studies of the last decade or so, in phenomenology and concepts of corporeality and embodiment,[30] which have informed the study of women's art.[31]

This developing feminist debate opened up new spaces for thinking about how an autonomous female sexuality might find expression. But the specific locus of mass cultural imagery remained problematic. Boty was rescued from oblivion in 1993, not by a feminist scholar but by a man, David Mellor, when he included some of her work in his show *the sixties art scene in London* at the Barbican.[32] The exhibition brought considerable attention to Boty and her work in art magazines and the broadsheets. But feminist art history and cultural criticism was still slow to respond until, finally, in 1997 Sarah Wilson brought a serious analysis to the issue in her essay *Daughters of Albion: Greer, Sex and the Sixties.* However, she raised the central dilemma that Boty's work still presented to feminism, asking "to what extent was [she] genuinely subversive and to what extent complicitous with the essentially phallocentric constructions of Pop Art." And her complicity lay, it would seem, in the taking of pleasure "As participant in the carnival she enjoyed the masquerade that signified her own subjection." [33]

In 2001 Boty was finally given a place in the feminist canon in Phaidon's hefty *Art and Feminism*. The text recognises that she "constructed an alternative narrative within the male dominated British Pop Art scene…[offering] the promise that bodily pleasure could be liberating."[34] But the paintings chosen for inclusion were *It's a Man's World I* and *II* (Fig 8) which, the text sternly informs the reader, "are a critical portrayal of the spaces of male power which continue to ensure that this promise is denied."[35] The choice of images and the text allows Boty's work to be accommodated in a feminist art history still structured, as it was in Wilson's essay, round the imperative to subvert and critique. Denying an exploration of the women's subjective, especially pleasurable experience, this imperative blocks an engagement with contemporary debates and feminism's current needs.

4. Contemporary Debates and Current Needs

We are now living in changed historical and discursive circumstances, not least those brought about by feminism itself. Women have won a place (in the academy and elsewhere) at the table of high culture, and, from institutional and other platforms, a voice that is heard, even if the position is more limited than might have been hoped and still problematic.

A generation of women that has grown up in the cultural landscape of second wave feminist theory and practice is heir to a greater assertiveness and sexual confidence (for which the second wave might be justly proud) which needs to find cultural expression.

A major concern, in the resurgence of feminist debate seen in the U.K. media recently, is the damaging effect on young women of the sexualisation of culture. In Britain there is a particular anxiety around the rampant misogyny found in the emergence and popularity of soft porn "lads mags".[36] Ariel Levy's recent book *Female Chauvinist* Pigs has been a focus for these debates.[37] Distressed by what she terms "the raunch culture," she sees a perversion of feminist claims to empowerment where young women perform in a highly sexualised way but with "affectless boredom" mimicking what popular culture holds up as sexy. Throughout the book she reiterates second wave feminism's critique of masculinist and sexist forms of representation, but to combat them she argues that women now need "to allow ourselves the freedom to figure out what we internally want from sex."[38] Natasha Walters' response in a Guardian article headed "Still one of the guys" reinforces this strategic need, asking "when will women be free to play up to their own fantasies, not men's?"[39]

Deconstructivist tactics, though still an important weapon in feminism's armoury, do not fulfil the current need. The insistence on subversion disallows an exploration of women's affective experiences, without which a cogent response to current issues and the misogyny of "lads mags" cannot be found. It also exacerbates the very real danger to feminism of a generational divide. Older feminists can be critical of what they see as the complicity of the young who, in turn, can be ambivalent about the perceived Puritanism of the older generation.

In the current context, rather than using energy to ward off or maintain distance from "the sexual woman," the need is to find ways of inhabiting a sexual self that is integrated with the cognitive and intellectual. Addressing this need is now possible, because the position of women in society is less vulnerable, and necessary, if the project of feminism is to progress and the generational divide is to be overcome. How to do this remains unresolved but the attempt does not constitute a rupture in feminism. Rather, in Walters' words, it will be "about feminism's unfinished revolution."[40]

5. Conclusion

With wit, and often a gleeful enjoyment, Pauline Boty reached for an affective expression of an autonomous, female sexual pleasure. That she did this as a *Pop* artist within the tropes and representations of mass culture makes her very pertinent in a postmodern environment. She experienced and expressed her sexuality not as some essentialist, pre-cultural instinct, but as mediated through and finding form in the always/already mediated representations of popular culture. She placed what might be seen as the "naive, essentialist" icon of the rose (which might have been celebrated by Barbara Rose and castigated by Pollock) in mass media contexts. For example, in *5-4-3-2-1* the rose appears in its most openly vulvic form, a statement of female physicality (the "good vagina"). But it is in the pop cultural context of *Ready Steady Go* that arousal is found. Dancing to the latest discs, anticipating orgasmic release (*Oh for Fu...*), was a highly charged, sensuous experience that could be fully occupied and Boty sought to capture it iconographically. Posing naked with her own work she lays claim to the kind of potent sexuality that has traditionally been the prerogative of the male artist, and in work such as *With Love to Jean Paul Belmondo* she turned her lustful gaze on male objects of desire. In these ways she found expression for an autonomous female sexuality that owes nothing to male scopic demands.

Produced over forty years ago and silenced at the time, this oeuvre has such contemporary resonance that it transcends the generational divide. In the words of her friend Jennifer Carey, Boty was trying to "re-establish what it was to be a woman."[41] In her sophisticated use of iconography, style and colour and knowing performance to camera, she asserted and celebrated a lived and libidinous experience, re-occupying the erotic body as serious, generative artist: not either/or, but and/also.

Notes

1. See Christopher Finch, *Pop Art: Object and Image* (London: Studio Vista/Dutton, 1968); Lawrence Alloway, "Signs and Objects," in *American Pop Art* (New York: Collier Books, in association with Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974), 24-51; Marco Livingstone, *Pop A Continuing History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 15.

2. Finch, 64.

3. Finch writes of the "archetypical icons of Pop Art...pin ups, car stylings, motor cyclists" (Ibid., 87), and specifically in Phillips' work "The automobile, the machine, scientific diagrams, glamour poses" (Ibid., 93). Lippard offers a similar list: "bric-a-brac, gaudy furnishings, ordinary clothes and food, film stars, pin ups, cartoons:" *Pop Art,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 82.

4. Achieving "equality" through being "the same as" men leads, I would argue, not to "liberation," but to women acting as "surrogate males." This is, obviously, particularly problematic in the arena of sexuality.

5. Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1986), 21.

6. Ibid., 41.

7. Nell Dunn, *Talking to Women* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1965). Chapter 1, “Pauline Boty,” 11-31

8. Unpublished transcript of monologues delivered on fortnightly BBC radio programme: *The Public Ear*, from October 1963 to March 1964.

9. Evidenced in interviews by author with a number of Boty’s friends and colleagues.

10. At the Arthur Jeffress Gallery, London, 28 August to 28 September 1962.

11. Letter dated Saturday, 15 July. Probably 1961.

12. See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988), 48.

13. David Mellor, “Scandalous Bodies,” in Terence Pepper, *Lewis Morley: Photographer of the Sixties*, 1989 (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1989), 17. See also Mikhail Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World*; translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

14. *The Public Ear,* 17 November 1963.

15. Simone de Beauvoir, *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1972, copyright 1959), 21.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 36

18. Lisa Tickner, “Sexuality and/in Representation,” in *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, eds. Max Almy, Kate Linker and Jane Weinstock (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 19.

19. Barbara Rose, “Vaginal Iconography,” *New York Magazine* 7 (11 February 1974): 60-61.

20. Griselda Pollock, “What’s wrong with ‘Images of Women?’” *Screen Education* 24 (1977): 25-33.

21. W. Peterson, “Of Cats, Dreams and Interior Knowledge; An interview with Carolee Schneemann,” *Performance,* 59 Winter (1989-90): 10-23.

22. Carolee Schneemann, “The Obscene Body/Politic,” *Art Journal*, 50 (Winter 1991): 28-35.

23. Lisa Tickner, “The Body Politic: female sexuality and women artists since 1970,” *Art History*, 1 (June, 1978): 236-49.

24. Kathy Myers, “Towards a Feminist Erotica.” First published in *Camera Work* 24 (1982). Reprinted in *Visibly Female,* ed. Hilary Robinson (London: Camden Press, 1987), 283-296.

25. Amelia Jones, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 24.

26. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, translated by Catherine Potter and Carolyn Burke (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985), 214.

27. S. Croft, and C. Macdonald, "Performing Postures," *Women's Art* 57 (March/April, 1994): 11.

28. Ibid.

29. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body In Performance,* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

30. For example, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

31. For example, see Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) and, more recently, Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

32. David Mellor, *the sixties art scene in london* (London: Phaidon/Barbican, 1993), 136.

33. Sarah Wilson, "Daughters of Albion: Greer, Sex and the Sixties," in *The Sixties: Britain and France 1962-1973,* eds. David Alan Mellor and Laurent Gervereau (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd. 1997), 78.

34. Helena Rickitt and Peggy Phelan, eds. *Art and Feminism* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2001), 54.

35. Ibid.

36. A group of weekly magazines in the U.K., typified by *Zoo* and *Nuts,* launched in 2004 by Emap and IPC respectively. Their staple selling point is images of semi-naked women in poses influenced by pornography. Their success (*Nuts* averages sales of 305,000 per issue) has influenced the content of men's magazines in general. See "Dirty Young Men" in *The Guardian Weekend*, 22 October 2005, 28-37.

37. Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs. Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Free Press, 2005).

38. Ibid., 200.

39. Natasha Walters, "Still One of the Guys," *Guardian Saturday Review*, 18 February 2006, 9.

40. Ibid., 9.

41. Interview with the author on 6 January 1997.

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Sexuality in Extremity:
Trauma Literature, Violence and Counter-Erotics

Marie-Luise Kohlke

Abstract

Representations of sexuality in trauma literature risk the collapse of ethical witnessing into pornographic voyeurism and spectacle. Nevertheless writers repeatedly locate desire in the midst of public and private horrors, including the Holocaust, slavery, civil war, disease and domestic violence. This paper explores sexuality's complex narrative functions vis-à-vis trauma, ranging from escapism and consolation to the construction of a powerful counter-erotics via re-humanisation, sociopolitical critique and a sexual sublime. **Key Words**: trauma, sexuality, violence, the sublime, Margaret Atwood, Liana Badr, Pat Barker, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, D. M. Thomas.

1. Introduction: Sexuality, Trauma and Ethical Risk

Representations of sexuality jar disconcertingly when juxtaposed with extreme human suffering in trauma literature, which focuses on the violent woundings of human bodies and psyches, their disruptive after-effects in the lives of individuals and communities, and forms of personal and historical witnessing thereof. Whether fantasised, enacted through choice, or constituting a further violation, the sex act's proximity to scenes of brutality, pain, and degradation casts doubt on authorial intentions and reader responses. As Patricia Yaeger asks: "Why is it so customary to mix our pleasures with our horrors?"[1] Sex in trauma literature raises spectres of salacious voyeurism and titillating pornography, as well as the quasi cannibalistic consumption of others' agonies, what Yaeger describes as "tast[ing] the deads' bodies" and "put[ting] their lives in our mouths."[2] It calls to mind Theodor W. Adorno's maxim regarding Holocaust writing that "[t]he so-called artistic representation of naked bodily pain…contains, however remote, the potentiality of wringing pleasure from it."[3] If aesthetic pleasure derived from human suffering is inappropriate, then sexual pleasure seems even more so.

Sex threatens to undercut trauma literature's ethical impulse, what Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw call writing/righting wrongs,[4] by subsuming moral, ideological, and political concerns under a text's aesthetic and affective effects and, ultimately, its saleability. Even if viewed as representative of humanity's natural "drives to…collective survival,"[5] producing the descendants necessary for the perpetuation of memory from one generation to the next, sex still jeopardises trauma literature's witnessing function. The inclusion of erotic encounters risks relegating the working through of the past to the narrative background, introducing distractions from harrowing truth-telling. Nevertheless, many texts stage explicit sexual encounters in the midst of horrors, engendering disturbing intimacies in locating desire at the very heart of atrocity. Indeed, since it explores the disintegration and attempted reintegration of both personal and communal identities that are predicated at least in part on sexual orientation, sexual mores, and issues of reproduction, trauma literature cannot avoid addressing sexuality altogether. *How* it does so, however, remains a thorny issue.

Close readings reveal a surprisingly wide range of sexuality's narrative functions in trauma literature, not all of which can be dismissed as ethically suspect. This paper consequently has a threefold aim: to attempt a more differential reading of sexuality's controversial role in trauma literature; to explore the sex trope's possible grounding in a humanist ethics of care, a politics of resistance, and social critique; and to analyse both the liberating energies and inevitable limits of a subversive sublime counter-erotics to discourses of violence and dehumanisation. D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel* provides the paper's primary focus, supplemented with comparative examples from both canonical and lesser known trauma texts by Margaret Atwood, Liana Badr, Pat Barker, Toni Morrison, and Arundhati Roy. While concentrating mainly on sexuality in terms of man-made public traumas such as the Holocaust, war, massacre, and slavery, the paper also addresses sexuality in the more private contexts of disease, domestic violence, and child abuse.

2. The Problematics of Representation

Criticism of representations of sexuality in trauma literature focuses on three interrelated aspects: instrumentalisation, compensation and reaffirmation. If instrumentalised, sex becomes spectacle, repeating the trauma sufferer's objectification and victimisation, as the body in pain is replaced with pleasurable images of consumption for writers'/readers' gratification. Deceptively, sex-as-spectacle may operate under the ethical guise of bringing historically marginalised atrocities to public consciousness with unsanitised objectivity. Pat Barker's *Double Vision* presents a stark critique of this process, albeit displaced from text to photographic image. In war torn Sarajevo, the correspondent Stephen Sharkey and photographer Ben Frobisher discover the body of a young girl in a stairwell: "Eyes wide open, skirt bunched up around her waist, her splayed thighs enclosing a blackness of blood and pain."[6] Reflexively, Stephen draws down the skirt to give the corpse a semblance of decency. Years later, Stephen views his deceased friend's archive and finds a print of the girl, exposed as she was first seen:

> Obviously Ben had gone back the next morning…He'd restored her skirt to its original position, up round her waist. It was shocking. Stephen was shocked on her behalf to see her exposed like this, though, ethically, Ben had done nothing wrong. He hadn't staged the photograph. He'd simply restored the corpse to its original state. And yet it was difficult not to feel that the girl, spreadeagled like that, had been violated twice.[7]

Stephen experiences the sexualised image as the girl's re-victimisation for the benefit of the morally outraged viewer. Horror is deliberately heightened via the literal and symbolic exposure of violated common decency denied her by the perpetrators, but also by Ben. Sexual violation turns into visual spectacle under the guise of realist documentation.

Alternatively, if romanticised or sentimentalised, sex promises a false compensation for irredeemable suffering, contributing to a sanitisation of past trauma by defusing/deflecting its full horror. Finally, sex may misleadingly reaffirm the very individualism and humanity negated by perpetrators' "demolition of the human" to borrow Jonathan Morse's expression.[8] In this case too, sex becomes complicit in a doubtful palliative consolation for victims' suffering and any secondary phantom pains involved in writing/reading trauma. The erotic ending of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* exemplifies these quandaries. Roy reserves the transgressive union of the high caste Christian Ammu and her untouchable Hindu lover Velutha for the final pages, even though chronologically the sex act precipitates the text's greatest brutality: Velutha's beating to insensibility by the police and his subsequent death. This event in turn catalyses the further traumas of Ammu's exile from her children, Estha and Rahel, her premature death in destitution, and the loss of her twins' childhoods and their cruel separation. Roy turns back time and in part suspends the weight of suffering that can never be made good, implicating sex in escapism. Velutha "drew [Ammu's] hair around them like a tent. Like her children did when they wanted to exclude the outside world."[9]

The novel's end consolingly reverses the demolition of Velutha's humanity, revivifying his desired/desiring body, earlier reduced to "smashed and broken" flesh, his penis crushed by a police boot.[10] The twins' final vision of Velutha as a grotesque, unrecognisable bloody mass is followed by a narrative autopsy, clinically anatomising the body's injuries. Roy's closing chapter, however, accords the reader a different final vision of Velutha as "a luminous man," once more individual and whole, as Ammu erotically explores, consecrates, and itemises the beloved body: "His neck. His nipples. His chocolate stomach. She sipped the last of the river from the hollow of his navel. She pressed the heat of his erection against her eyelids. She tasted him, salty, in her mouth."[11] Via a palliative sleight-of-hand, Roy can, after all, deliver the life and self affirming happy end already rendered impossible, offering her readers a consolation of sorts for her novel's multiple traumas.

3. Bodily Pain and Reader Pleasure

Closure inevitably poses structural and thematic difficulties in trauma writing, since trauma remains essentially open-ended, inscribing periodic repetition and return rather than cessation, much like sexual desire itself. So too in D. M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, which provides a useful limit case for the problematic dialectic of sex and trauma in literature. Analogous to Roy's ending, Thomas' final chapter resurrects his heroine as desiring subject following her graphic sexual violation and genocidal murder at Babi Yar. As a result, Thomas' novel attracts criticism for all three narrative abuses outlined. Yet it also underlines the increasing prominence of the sex trope in trauma writing more generally, representing a modulation from oblique allusion or absent presence to explicit focus, even superabundance, a shift only in part attributable to the centrality accorded to sexuality in modern-day culture, society, and identity. Rebecca Scherr, for instance, identifies a shift from "almost non-existent" representations of sexuality in Holocaust testimony to eroticism's repositioning as "the central trope" in later Holocaust fiction such as *The White Hotel*.[12]

On Scherr's reading, sexuality in Thomas' novel becomes a self-gratifying "end in itself," exhausting any subversive or political charge. Turned into a screen for lurid projections of the author's misogynistic "sexual paranoia," the protagonist Lisa Erdman's material body is replaced with images of consumption. Sexuality is voyeuristically instrumentalised, as "it is through watching these sexualised bodies that the reader/viewer participates in navigating between sex and violence and sex and death." Scherr contrasts Thomas' exploitative technique with that of actual Holocaust survivor memoirs, which configure sex acts as "deliberate acts of resistance" by strategically asserting individuals' desiring humanity against Nazi constructions of Jews as "nonsentient things." Survivor memoirs, Scherr argues, denature and de-eroticise sex via the threat of participants' imminent annihilation, thus maintaining a critical distance from the act and refusing to facilitate narrator/reader pleasure from its representation.[13] Implicitly Scherr situates the body *in pain* - rather than the body as conduit to and for *pleasure* - as the only legitimate site of sexuality-as-resistance.

The same assumption underlies Miller and Tougaw's assertion that "[t]he term 'trauma' describes the experience of both victims - those who have suffered directly - and those who suffer with them, or through them, or for them, if only by reading about trauma."[14] Pain is construed as the only appropriate response to trauma literature, with readers transformed into fellow sufferers. Any consideration of readers' active pursuit of (albeit second-hand) suffering via reading is conveniently circumvented; so too the suspect ethics of over-investment in victimhood. As Dominick LaCapra stresses, "[i]t is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject position,"[15] or, indeed, their suffering.

Yaeger proposes an alternative interpretation of trauma narratives as "seek[ing] an infusion of *pleasure* by instigating a powerful and satisfying 'out-sourcing' of pain."[16] Instead of empathetic over-identification with the suffering Other, Yaeger appears to posit a *negative* identification, whereby the active subject rejects and distances its living/reading body-of-potential-pleasure from the traumatised Other-in pain as its abject *not-I*. The nearly/already-dead corpse validates the still-alive body, situating the "I" at what Julia Kristeva calls "the border of my condition as a living being," from which "[m]y body extricates itself, as being alive."[17] Sexuality, I want to suggest, problematically destabilises this border between self and Other, between alive desiring/reading body and nearly/already-dead corpse/corpus-to-be-read.

While sexuality may, of course, include a passive dimension, its capacity for pleasure indicates an inherent active potential (and thence agency, will, and issues of consent) as in the sense of giving or taking pleasure. In ordinary usage, the formulation "to suffer pleasure" would be deemed an oxymoron. Scherr's earlier cited dictum, for instance, could be usefully rewritten as follows: "it is through watching the sexualised bodies that the reader/viewer also participates in navigating between sex and *pleasure* and sex and life." As in rape cases, where defence teams frequently raise doubts about genuine resistance and implied consent, the assumption of active potential complicates representations of sex in trauma narratives, especially when the act is conterminous with threats of extinction.

"Active" sexuality in trauma writing disturbingly blurs the distinction between *Thanatos* and *Eros*, as if every sex act symbolically expressed a death wish. In *Regeneration*, the first of Pat Barker's World War I trilogy, Billy Prior's initial attempted seduction of Sarah Lumb takes place on a tombstone in a graveyard. In *The Eye in the Door*, the sex act likewise evokes death. Poised above Sarah, seeing "the stretched mouth, the slit eyes, the head thrown back until it seemed her spine must crack," Prior finds himself remembering "other faces. The dying looked like that."[18] The *petit mort* of orgasm, the metaphorical dying of the self into physical union with another, stands in for and collapses with, even as it temporarily delays, the self's actual annihilation.

In these terms, the bayonet-rape of Lisa Erdman at Babi Yar reads like a wish-fulfilment of her earlier brutal sexual fantasies in poem form. In the opening "Don Giovanni" section, Lisa's and her lovers' orgasms are repeatedly intensified by the cries of the dying and their mourners. Lisa revels in being "split open" and "impaled" as fellow hotel guests drown and burn.[19] Her corsetière friend reaches orgasm in time with a deadly avalanche, and witnessing the cable car disaster only quickens Lisa's arousal. Natural disasters and accidents are framed in terms of sublime vistas of nature (majestic storm, flaming sunset, mountainous panorama) and art (opera, a ballet of falling bodies), so that pleasure is literally wrung from Adorno's aestheticisation of bodily pains. Even more so, as both catastrophes and violent sexual encounters function as proleptic symbolic analogues of the Babi Yar genocide and actual injuries Lisa sustains there. The SS man's jackboot enacts Lisa's dream of a breast sheared away; the guard Demidenko's bayonet blade literalises her fantasy of impalement.

4. Sexual Guerrillas and Sociopolitical Critique

Rather than a narrative abuser, however, Thomas could also be seen as a "moral pornographer" or "sexual guerrilla" in the terms outlined by Angela Carter, namely someone who operates:

> in deep political water for he will begin to find himself describing the real conditions of the world in terms of sexual encounters, or even find that the real nature of these encounters illuminates the world itself; the world turns into a gigantic brothel, the area of our lives where we believed we possessed most freedom is seen as the most ritually circumscribed.[20]

Deliberate parallels between the "Don Giovanni" poem's sadomasochistic pleasures and the Babi Yar scene underline that, like Carter, Thomas conceives sexuality as wholly culturally conditioned and circumscribed. Instead of a freely chosen self-affirmation outside of social ideologies (of female propriety, Christian morality, racial inferiority), Lisa's self-chastising abandonment pre/re-enacts those same ideologies in all their coercive force. Her fantasised violent union with the son of Freud, himself Jewish of course, reflects her society's internalised anti-Semitism, even as it seems to reconcile her with her despised half Jewish identity from her father's side. At Babi Yar she is destroyed for "sins" of impurity, equally in terms of her active sexual desire and her mixed blood. The symbolic imagination in Thomas' novel thus constitutes what Geoffrey H. Hartman, in a different context, calls an "uncanny intensification" of the "literal or referential" rather than its depoliticising denial or screening.[21]

In Barker's novel, Prior's bisexual relations likewise replicate rather than elide the harsh realities of working-class lives and life at the Front. Sex reproduces individuals' objectification to cogs in the machines of state and society, perpetuating an ideology of force. "Soldiers home on leave had to be given a good time; they mustn't be allowed to remember what they were going back to."[22] Prior condemns the war as "a wanker's paradise" and recalls military training as "one long stream of sexual innuendo. *Stick him in the gooleys. No more little fritzes*."[23] Sexually abused as a child by the authority figure of the family priest, Prior resents purchasing sex, because he recognises that he already pays in subtler ways for his own and his community's desires. He views the world in terms of Carter's gigantic brothel. Symbolically apt, the Ministry of Munitions, cover for Prior's employer Military Intelligence, occupies the former Hotel Metropole, whose staff had been trained to show no surprise "when the sixth couple in succession turned out to be called Smith, or when prosperous-looking gentlemen, entertaining their curiously unprosperous-looking nephews, requested a double room."[24]

Material reality permeates desire, and social power relations vociferously reconstitute themselves within the private sex act. As Laurie Vickroy notes, "Prior's sexual life emulates the social body."[25] His cynical detachment and self-conscious sexual parody complicate any pleasurable response on his own or the reader's part, as in his first encounter with his upper class, fellow officer Charles Manning:

> Prior ran his fingers through his cropped hair till it stood up in spikes, lit a cigarette, rolled it in a particular way along his bottom lip, and smiled. He'd transformed himself into the sort of working-class boy Manning would think it was all right to fuck. A sort of seminal spittoon. And it worked. Manning's eyes grew dark as his pupils flared. Bending over him, Prior put his hand between his legs, thinking he'd probably never felt a spurt of purer class antagonism than he felt at that moment. He roughened his accent. 'A' right?'[26]

Even the homosexual sex act, still criminalised at the start of the twentieth century and thence inherently transgressive, replicates society's modes of oppression. Appropriately, the men's union takes place not in the master bedroom but in the servants' quarters in the attic, the kind Prior's mother once occupied as a domestic. In spite of having dominated Charles, Prior's first thought after sex is of exploited maids rising at dawn to begin work in a house where, if they encountered one of the family, they were required to turn and face the wall, forced into public invisibility like homosexual men. Prior's sexual sadism constitutes both a traumatic symptom of society's sanctioned inhumanities and an enraged rebellion against them, expressed in "dreams of mutilation and slaughter … accompanied by seminal emissions."[27]

5. The Body as Sex-Text: Reading and Resistance

While Barker's sexual discourse unmasks material conditions implicated in historical, gender, class, and sex based trauma, Thomas' language initially decontextualises the facticity of suffering. *The White Hotel* defuses physical violence into symbolic language, that of poetry by Lisa and that of psychoanalysis by Freud, her analyst. Yet unlike Prior's body, remodelled by himself into working-class boy fantasy, Lisa's body is rewritten for her as psychoanalytical sex-text, becoming what Yaeger, in a different context, calls "*an effect of reading*."[28] Freud masterfully "reads" his patient's mysterious breast and womb pains as sexual guilt and repression, caused by Lisa's denied lesbianism and obsession with her mother's incestuous infidelity. As Laura E. Tanner demonstrates, Freud's analysis thereby reproduces Lisa's "attempt to appropriate the violent tragedies…within a personal psychological landscape that reduces violence to a metaphorical extension of her sexual pleasure."[29] He replicates his patient's deceptive techniques of sublimation and displacement.

Analogously, at Babi Yar, the seductive language used to describe the bayonet-rape of Lisa refigures her suffering body into orgasmic text:

> he found the opening, and…inserted the bayonet, carefully, almost delicately. …Still very gently, Demidenko imitated the thrusts of intercourse; …the woman's body jerked back and relaxed, jerked and relaxed. But after those spasms there was no sign of a reaction and she seemed to have stopped breathing.[30]

Lisa's text-body has been emptied of pain in lieu of a surfeit of pleasure. Her agonised death is recast as gratifying *petit mort*, the body's dead weight rendered eerily weightless. Historically specific acts of atrocity are subsumed into a surreal view of reality as monstrous sexual fantasy. The same transformation occurs in Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*. Researching a series of articles on pornography as art, the journalist Rennie dispassionately views a collection of sex objects and violent pornographic images seized by police, believing herself to be witnessing purely symbolic acts of sexual violence. Her complacent conviction that "it was all done with ketchup" is ruptured by a video of a rat appearing from a woman's vagina, calling into question the nature of the real. "Rennie felt that a large gap had appeared in what she'd been used to thinking of as reality. What if this is normal, she thought, and we just haven't been told yet?"[31] Here the representation of sexuality more closely approaches Scherr's concept of sex-as-resistance as a denaturalisation and short-circuiting of potential pleasure.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arhundhati Roy achieves a similar effect by ironically staging the sex abuse of Estha by the paedophile drinks vendor in the cinema foyer against the background of the model family values film *The Sound of Music*. With frightening matter-of-factness the barman "hand[s] Estha his penis" as he gets him a free drink - "Now if you'll kindly hold this for me" - and carries on an inane conversation with the boy during masturbation.[32] The linguistic disjunction between act and speech, combined with Estha's naïve tragicomic focalisation, shifts the scene from the erotic realm into the grotesque, changing sex into a parody of mutual gratification and economic exchange. Orgasm becomes a "gristly-bristly face contorted," semen "hot and sticky…egg white…Quarter-boiled," the penis a "shrivelled…empty leather change-purse."[33] Although Estha's childish consciousness cannot maintain Scherr's demanded critical distance, internalising the physical soiling of his hand as a sense of unclean self, his body symbolically enacts his dissociation for the reader: "He held his sticky Other Hand away from his body. It wasn't supposed to touch anything."[34]

In Liana Badr's *The Eye of the Mirror*, relating the 1975-6 siege of the Palestinian refugee camp Tal el-Zaatar during the Lebanese civil war, sexuality-as-resistance operates on still more complex levels. Thinly veiled erotic fantasies about the freedom fighter George afford the teenage Aisha temporary escape from the realities of political and domestic violence, but are brutally quashed in her arranged marriage to another man. Preparations for Aisha's wedding night prefigure her defloration in disturbing images of consumption, violence, and slaughter. "[I]ntruding between her organs as though she were a doll made of dough," the neighbourhood women "plucked her like a chicken, leaving deep blue bruises on her body. The spotted marks…resembled those left by her father's leather belt when he had beaten her."[35] Establishing a logical connection between sexuality and male violence, Badr constructs a resonant social critique of gender oppression in Palestinian society, as well as women's inadvertent complicity therein. As their callous "dirty jokes" about "the blood that would flow" imply, sexuality becomes a source of inescapable trauma, rather than a site of resistance, for women in Aisha's community.[36] Aisha's first sexual encounter takes the form of marital rape, alienating character and readers from the wholly de-eroticised experience, which resists figuration: "He's killing me. Killing. Removing, pulling, pressing, holding down…Something evil, lethal, disgusting. She cannot understand or explain it. The man burst into her, assaulted her body. She was lost and lost herself."[37]

Badr's representation of sexuality highlights continuities between male violence in the private and public spheres. Aisha's wedding eerily foreshadows the fall of the camp and the dehumanisation of its inhabitants. Fear leaves Aisha "choking like a slaughtered rooster," and she chops off her hair in a protest of self-mutilation, so that she goes to her husband resembling "the torn hides of calves at the butcher's shop."[38] Her identification with animal carcasses is recalled by the description of fleeing civilians burdened with useless things, intended to "convinc[e] themselves that they were still human beings…not lost animals waiting to be slaughtered."[39] Likewise, the marriage feast, with its "*kubbeh* discs" of dough and mince, "the slaughtering of lambs," the smell of cooking meat, and "patches of crimson blood caked onto the walls," is echoed in a later scene of prisoners being tortured by the Christian militias.[40] First pounded with hammers - "the stone pestles used in stone mortars to grind wheat and mix it with raw meat for *kubbeh* dough" - the men then have crosses burnt into their stomachs, filling the air with "[t]he smell of charred flesh."[41] Aisha's sexual violation is transfigured into political and ethnic violence against the social body, a symbolic rape of the Palestinian people.

Like Thomas, Badr strategically appropriates the violated female body to represent a people's fate, as underlined by the fate of George's fiancée Hana, a signals operator for the resistance. Recognised by a Lebanese militiaman during the camp evacuation, Hana finds her way barred by a bayonet. As in Thomas' description of Lisa's bayonet-rape, Badr's soldier's language is seductive, sexually inviting rather than overtly violent: "we've taken a fancy to you. Come on with us."[42] Hana, however, interprets it correctly as the final assault on her female subjectivity and Palestinian identity: "Isn't all that you've done to us enough. Now you're here to…our honour."[43] Knocked unconscious, Hana vanishes into historical oblivion, like Lisa Erdman does at Babi Yar.

6. Bodily Consolation and Sexual Healing

Whereas Badr circumspectly removes Hana's body from view, Thomas focuses in close-up on Lisa's violation. Instead of voyeuristically cancelling the bodily real, however, Thomas' strategy produces an irrepressible sexual excess that spills over into a quasi epilogue, which resurrects the body as material source of desire. In the final "The Camp" chapter, the revivified dead and still-living are reunited in a veritable promised land of milk and honey, their individual and communal identities as desiring subjects restored. Just as the Babi Yar scene recycled the opening poem's brutal sexual imagery, "The Camp" echoes earlier images of erotic succour and plenty, particularly the scene of Lisa's breasts miraculously bringing forth milk, enough to refresh not only her lover and the priest, who sucks at her bosom craving his mother, but all the other guests at the White Hotel also. Overflowing with breast and milk imagery, the sexual tenor of the final chapter is consoling and regenerative. Recognising the priest as an image of Freud, Lisa thinks of inviting him to "tak[e] a glass of milk with her," admits to "feeding and comforting" a crippled soldier at her breast, and, reunited with her own mother, engages in reciprocal sensuous breastfeeding.[44] From implicit death wish sexuality is transformed into an affirmation of life and humanity. The novel closes with Lisa's realisation that her breast pains have disappeared.

Situating the desiring/desired body as some sort of bedrock of identity, however, presents its own problems, since bodies too are cultural constructs and ideological texts. As Carter remarked, "our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does," and we deceive ourselves if we believe that "we fuck stripped of social artifice."[45] Consequently the trauma victim's hoped for reconstitution of identity and self-worth through sex remains fraught with contradiction. Nevertheless, trauma writers continue to represent such efforts, because as Hartman argues, "[p]erhaps the only way to overcome a traumatic severance of body and mind is to come back to mind through the body."[46] Yet rarely are such efforts portrayed as optimistically as by the ending of *The White Hotel*.

More typical is Rennie's experience in *Bodily Harm*. Following invasive surgery for breast cancer, she fears her scar coming undone and dreams of an out-of-body experience in which her spirit cannot rejoin her flesh. Rennie pursues sex with different partners to combat her growing sense of self dissociation and disintegration. After several failed attempts, she succeeds with a mysterious stranger on a Caribbean working holiday, but only tenuously so. The reawakening of her body comes with the recognition of desire's inevitable extinction in death:

> Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before. Nobody lives forever, who said you could? This much will have to do, this much is enough. She's open now, she's been opened, she's being drawn back down, she enters her body again and there's a moment of pain, incarnation, this may be only the body's desperation, a flareup, a last clutch at the world before the long slide into final illness and death; but meanwhile she's solid

> after all, she's still here on the earth, she's grateful, he's touching her, she can still be touched.[47]

Similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, Estha and Rahel seek desperate consolation in each other for twenty-three years of separation and internalised guilt for Velutha's death. Yet "what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief."[48] Their incest only breaks the so-called Love Laws once more, revivifying the past's multiple traumas.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Paul D and Sethe's first erotic contact likewise takes the form of a bodily consolation, an attempt to reintegrate the traumatised alienated subject with its unbearable memories. Paul D comfortingly cradles Sethe's breasts, from which her mother milk was brutally stolen by white men, and tenderly explores the scarring left on her back by her one-time masters. Yet their consummation proves a failure, turning Paul's desire to disgust at Sethe's sagging breasts and disfigured back. Sex only reconstitutes the agonising public and personal histories from which the lovers seek release. Paul concludes that "[n]othing could be as good as the sex with her [he] had been imagining off and on for twenty-five years" ever since Sethe's arrival at the Sweet Home plantation, as "the new girl" the male slaves "dreamed of at night and fucked cows for at dawn while waiting for her to choose."[49] For Sethe, lovemaking evokes memories of her "choosing" her "husband" Halle. The circumstances of their marriage, pointedly described as a coupling, unblessed by any priest, meaningless before the law, and only made possible by their owners' permission, resurrect the slaves' traumatic choicelessness, the extent to which as property and breeding stock they neither owned their sexuality or its biological issue - the very historical conditions, in other words, that led to Sethe's desperate murder of her infant daughter. Ironically, even as it critiques racist constructions of African-Americans as animals, sex resurrects slavery's dehumanising frames of reference, producing a painful critical distance between participants/readers and the act itself.

As in the case of Hana's violation in *The Eye of the Mirror*, white usurped slave sexuality remains unseen, protected from reappropriation through indirect figuration. The only visible sign of Sethe and Halle's union is the rippling of the cornfield above the lovers. Analogously, the chain-gang prisoners' sexual violation is screened by the mist in which the men kneel, displaced into aural and olfactory rather than visual imagery ("smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts"), and shrouded in metaphor that reveals perpetrators' sanitisation of violence, while refusing to show it outright (enforced oral sex becomes "the whim of the guard" or "breakfast").[50] Morrison depicts the process of dehumanisation without negating the prisoners' humanity once more.

Frequently, the sex act in trauma writing expresses the impossibility of reconstituting a full and vital individuality in the face of absolute negation, while nevertheless figuring the attempt as a necessary part of surviving as human. Paul D, for instance, describes his seduction by Beloved as “a brainless urge to stay alive,” an overwhelming “life hunger”[51] that in itself could be read as a form of resistance. Barbara Foley describes the typical aim of Holocaust memoirists as “not to convey a rich and unique particularity, but to delineate that process of dehumanization and anonymity that aimed at producing in the victim a negation of self.”[52] Sexuality in trauma literature, however, aims to accomplish *both*. In *The White Hotel*, Thomas counterpoints total self-loss in the anonymous victimhood of Babi Yar with the resurrection of Lisa’s embodied subjectivity in all its sensuous particularity in a visionary Palestine. In *Beloved*, Paul D’s final reunion with Sethe likewise balances Foley’s opposing strategic objectives. As he offers to bathe her, Sethe, like Rennie in *Bodily Harm*, fears coming undone: “Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?”[53] To Paul D’s conviction “You your best thing, Sethe,” she responds doubtfully, “Me? Me?”[54] Simultaneously, self-negation is resisted by recalling their fellow slave Sixo, who asserted his humanity even at the point of extinction, singing and laughing because “his Thirty-Mile Woman got away with his blossoming seed.”[55] Sethe’s abjection is juxtaposed with Paul D’s memory of Sixo’s construal of desire as a reconstitution of bodily integrity: “The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order.”[56] The novel’s ending repeats the dual inscription of self-negation and desiring subjectivity, balancing the erotic denial of “no clamor for a kiss” with the affirmative longing of the final word “Beloved.”[57]

7. Conclusion: Towards a Sexual Sublime

Although sexuality frequently constitutes part of trauma, it also provides the means for characters, authors, and readers to work through it, though never to overcome it completely. It reconstructs demolished humanity, by emphasising an ethics of care for the other. This ethics partakes of a sacred element, frequently figured through the quasi worship of the maternal principle, imbued with restorative manna-like qualities. Sexual healing potentially transforms the individual body from what Vickroy calls “a historical marker to unspeakable experience” into “a marker for potential change,” as in *The Eye in the Door*, where Prior joyously fucks Mrs Riley, who nursed him as a baby when his mother was unable to do so: “feeling every taboo in the whole fucking country crash round his ears, he sucked Mrs Riley’s breasts.”[58] More problematically, the valorisation of the maternal can be linked to what Granofsky calls "the cultural [and arguably personal] effort of denial that would move from experience to innocence in the only way possible: by reversing time in order to expunge memory."[59] The sex act, then, can also constitute an attempted evasion of pain and responsibility, a longed for annulment of history. Along these lines, Rahel and Estha in *The God of Small Things* seek to return to an embryonic state of innocence and oneness in the womb, "before Life began" and Estha "led her (swimming) through their lovely mother's cunt."[60] The maternal erotic comes dangerously close to offering a depoliticised placebo consolation, an empty promise of redemption from suffering where none is possible.

Yet the maternal body as original source of desire further points to a wider linking of sexuality with the sublime in trauma literature, offering glimpses of possible reintegration of the abject non-self not only with the self, but something greater than the self. Kristeva pertinently points out that "[t]he abject is edged with the sublime."[61] In *The Eye of the Mirror*, on George's flight through the wilderness, hunted like a beast, he experiences a pantheistic revelation of his beloved lost Hana - reminiscent of Heathcliff's Romantic sublime apperception of Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* - transfigured into Mother Nature:

> He had not stopped seeing her all the way. He had seen her in every stone, pebble and passing cloud. He had spoken to her a lot, promising to teach her the meaning of life. …Life is finding a drop of sugar allowing you to live with a lover or friend. Only then could hope be fulfilled.[62]

In *The God of Small Things*, Brinda Bose suggests, Ammu seeks not only to touch the Untouchable man, but also "to touch the Untouchable" through him.[63] Likewise in Morrison's novel, Beloved's lovemaking allows Paul D a fleeting vision of a womblike source of wholeness, though irrevocably lost: "he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to."[64] The sexual sublime assumes a form of "grace" which Gilles Deleuze points out is, etymologically, another name for desire itself.[65]

Consequently, the sexual sublime cannot simply be read as a false and glorified compensation in the face of trauma victims' powerlessness to put the past to rest. It constitutes much more than a "utopic indulgence," because as Bose argues:

> Utopias are not devoid of politics, and a deliberate validation of erotic desire as an act of transgression

> probably cannot be dismissed as a momentary lapse from the politicisation of one's being…the sublimely erotic experience is also the pursuit of a utopia in which ideas and ideals, greater than what a momentary sexual pleasure offers, coalesce.[66]

Desire underlines rather than elides trauma literature's attempt to address and redress wrong. Sexuality contributes to a subversive counter-erotics that contests violence and dehumanisation, a politics in-and-of the flesh that reclaims pleasure, as well as pain, as an ethical response to trauma and its literary representation. Like the dangers of dubiously "fetishised and totalising" trauma texts, the dangers of sexuality may finally reside in "*prematurely* (re)turning to the pleasure principle" to promote consolation, harmony, or recuperation, rather than in the (re)turn to pleasure *per se*.[67] In the face of the failure of spoken/written language to fully encompass trauma, sexuality opens alternative routes to witnessing via what Roberta Culbertson calls a "wordless language," a "body language" resistant to the "process of disembodying memory" involved in narrativising trauma.[68] Sexuality offers one way to reconnect with and "render body memories tellable,"[69] ultimately facilitating rather than detracting from truth-telling by ensuring as much as possible of the material body is retained and *felt* in the telling.

Sexuality contributes to a vital self-conscious questioning as to how and why we read trauma literature. If as Miller and Tougaw claim, "[t]he shame of our modernity is due in part to the ease with which world horror seems to vanish before our very eyes,"[70] sexuality and its complex, often disturbing figurations enact a strategic resistance to such vanishing. Sexuality holds the individual human body squarely before our vision, refusing to let its suffering be wholly abstracted, dematerialised, or promiscuously universalised. Sexuality functions as a primary source of what Dominick LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement," which "involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place."[71] On one hand, sexuality reminds us of the human body's vulnerability to potential violation as well as pleasure, which we all share. As Rennie realises in *Bodily Harm*: "Nobody is exempt from anything."[72] On the other hand, our newly vulnerable reader bodies in all their distinct singularity counteract unqualified identification with the sufferer's physical location/incarnation, which would vicariously appropriate his/her pleasure and suffering as our own.

We can never transfer trauma's imprint on living flesh between bodies, so that our experience of others' pains (and pleasures) always calls for recognition of the limits of our knowing. Opened up to and by desire, the sexual body nevertheless remains the recalcitrant, foreclosed place of mysterious longing, which trauma literature can never fully penetrate.

Notes

1. Patricia Yaeger, "Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," in *Extremeties: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 25-51, 46.

2. Ibid., 29.

3. Theodor W. Adorno, "Engagement", in *Noten zur Literatur III* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965), 125-126, 127, trans. and quoted in Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 1.

4. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, eds., "Introduction," in *Extremeties: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 1-21, 14.

5. Ronald Granofsky, *The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depictions of Collective Disaster* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 16.

6. Pat Barker, *Double Vision* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 52.

7. Ibid., 121.

8. Jonathan Morse, "Words Devoted to the Unspeakable," *American Literary History* 5 (Winter 1993), 715-734, 724.

9. Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1998), 336.

10. Ibid., 309.

11. Ibid., 336.

12. Rebecca Scherr, "The Uses of Memory and the Abuses of Fiction: Sexuality in Holocaust Fiction and Memoir," *Other Voices* 2:1, February 2000, (31 October 2005).
<http://www.othervoices.orh/2.1/scherr/sexuality.html>, no page numbers.

13. Ibid.

14. Miller and Tougaw, 2.

15. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 78.

16. Yeager, 47, italics added.

17. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

18. Pat Barker, *The Eye in the Door* (London: Penguin, 1994), 180.

19. D. M. Thomas, *The White Hotel* (London: Phoenix, 2003), 20 and 23.

20. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1993), 19 and 21.

21. Geoffrey H. Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," *New Literary History* 26 (1995): 537-563, 547.

22. Barker, 1994, 6.

23. Barker, 1996, 177 and 1994, 159.

24. Barker, 1994, 42.

25. Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 199.

26. Barker, 1994, 11.

27. Ibid., 71.

28. Yaeger, 43.

29. Laura E. Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 64.

30. Thomas, 219-220.

31. Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (London: Vintage 1996), 210.

32 . Roy, 103.

33. Ibid., 104.

34. Ibid., 105.

35. Liana Badr, *The Eye of the Mirror*, trans. Samira Kawar (Reading: Garnet, 1994), 99.

36. Ibid., 99.

37. Ibid., 103.

38. Ibid., 101 and 102.

39. Ibid., 101, 102, and 230.

40. Ibid., 94, 100, and 95.

41. Ibid., 232.

42. Ibid., 235.

43. Ibid., 235, ellipses in the original.

44. Thomas, 227 and 235.

45. Carter, 9.

46. Hartman, 541.

47. Atwood, 204.

48. Roy, 328.

49. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1998), 25 and 20.

50. Ibid., 108 and 107.

51. Ibid., 264.

52. Barbara Foley,. "Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narratives," *Comparative Literature* 34 (Autumn 1982): 330-360, 338.

53. Morrison, 272.
54. Ibid., 273.
55. Ibid., 228-229.
56. Ibid., 272-273.
57. Ibid. 275.
58. Vickroy, xiii; and Barker, 1994, 118.
59. Ronald Granofsky, *The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depictions of Collective Disaster* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 62.
60. Roy, 93.
61. Kristeva, 11.
62. Badr, 255.
63. Brinda Bose, "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati *Roy's The God of Small Things*," *ARIEL* 29 (April 1998): 59-72, 64.
64. Morrison, 264.
65. Gilles Deleuze, "Psychoanalysis and Desire", in *The Delueze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 105-114, 114, quoted in Bose, 66.
66. Bose, 59-60.
67. LaCapra, 78, italics added.
68. Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self," *New Literary History* 26:1 (1995): 169-95, 170, 178, and 179.
69. Ibid., 179.
70. Miller and Tougaw, 5.
71. LaCapra, 78.
72. Atwood, 290.

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Reading For Monsters: Transgressive Corporeality in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

Jules Sturm

Abstract

In her book on the performative effects of language (*Excitable Speech*) Judith Butler draws our attention to the fact that, as linguistic beings, we become somatically involved in the process of subject formation. Butler contends that the body instantiates an individual's social becoming by being named as "girl," "boy," "black," or "other." The body hence originates a specific relationship between language and a subject's place in the world. In this chapter, I take a closer look at the somatic dimension of *reading*. The process of reading is analysed as a performative event in which the reader's body initiates the production and the re-production of meaning. Reading hereby becomes an act of "writing" or co-authoring cultural knowledge. Specifically, the aim is to reveal the reading body as a significant agent in the construction of monstrosity or sexual "otherness." With this objective, I *read for monsters* in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. I suggest a particular reading experience with this novel concerning the cultural production of monstrosity. The literary monster here figures as a trope for the performative enactment of linguistic representations of transgressive corporeality. I argue, that it is the relationship between *what* is read in *Nightwood* and an affective reading experience of the novel that makes its reader complicit in the construction of monstrous embodiment. **Key Words:** monster, body, performative reading, transgender corporeality, queer.

1. Introduction

When we read, a world of text unfolds, and the text becomes a specific world experience with its own horizon. The black characters on white paper are taken in, swallowed, digested and transformed. The letters become words, the words are formed into sentences, phrases and paragraphs. In the event of reading, the text becomes the readers' text. It becomes alive in its readers, as they re-enact it through cultural recognition, through reciprocal identification and an individual negotiation between themselves and the text, as well as through the readers' desire for narrative plot, character identification and textual pleasure.

By coming alive in the reader, a text not only means what it says, but it embodies a scope of possible meanings that are realised in and through each reader's specific *place* of reading. The place of reading corresponds to the reader's ontological location in history, environment and culture, and is enacted through his or her physical presence in time. The reading body brings with it its own situated perspectives, its specific cultural knowledges and identity formations which give a meaningful *con*text to the text. The words are performed and actualised by the reader. Through such a performative reading and by bringing themselves, as reading subjects, to the text, readers become involved with what they read. They become what the text means for *them* on the cultural screen of their bodies.

In this chapter I will engage in the specific relation between the reading as meaning-making and the textual production of monsters. My interest in the monster in connection to the reading body is motivated by the fact that monsters in textual, conceptual or any other form are excessively physical. The most prominent feature of monsters is their obtrusive corporeality: Monsters *are* deformed, ugly, animalistic, overly sexual, big and powerful *bodies* - rather than *subjects*. The monster's intrusive corporeal presence, and hence its scariness, establishes a special connection to its reader. She or he is (physically) affected by reading monsters.

My aim here is to read *for* the monster in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. The book is not a classical monster narrative, but it bears striking similarities to commonly known textual productions of monsters like *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*. *Nightwood* is concerned with how subjects are created by their respective "others" and how, by being hailed into certain socio-cultural conditions, they *become* "deviant" or "otherworldly." I specifically want to explore the role *Nightwood*'s reader plays in imagining the novel's main protagonist Robin, a gender-ambiguous, attractive and desirable, yet monstrous personality. I contend that Robin is made *subject* through the other characters' social interpellation of her. But she is also made *monster* by her readers' embodiment within a social system marked by the exclusivity of binary oppositions and fixed identity categories.

In Judith Butler's theoretical account of the formation of political subjectivity, she insists that, as linguistic beings, we are inevitably called into existence by socially sanctioned forms of address.[1] These forms of address put us in "our" place by naming us according to the categorisation of certain genders, races, classes and cultures. Putting us into place, these forms of address (such as "girl" or "monster") not only designate us as persons, but also as bodies. Butler specifically stresses the somatic dimension of the "linguistic" process of becoming a subject. It is namely on the site of the body that our subjectivity is alternately sustained and threatened through modes of address. The possibility or the foreclosure of social existence in this sense is enacted through our bodies. And in this corporeal manifestation of language the performative character of speech acts becomes evident. The "acting out" of speech results in physical effects, it hails our bodies into social existence, it prompts our cultural sense for our bodies and it offers or denies these bodies social recognition. In the context of Butler's analysis of hate speech, in which she employs Althusser's concept of social interpellation, she states:

> Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible…The address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, in abjection.[2]

Language here *does* what it says; it performs what it means on the screen of our bodies. The body hence induces the *dramatisation* of language. It re*produces* the linguistic and social conventions of its time and place. It thereby becomes an actor who reads and interprets the script of everyday speech situations.

On this background, Butler explores how gender is constructed through particular corporeal acts and how, through these acts, transformations of gender norms can be effected. She ascribes to the body the ability to realise possibilities greater than those conceptualised by a binary gender system, when she says: "…the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives."[3] If the body can be seen as an actor, staging and actualising linguistic conventions, it can equally be seen as performatively enacting the "other" in language, the speechless excess of language. The "other" body, the "other" gender and even the "unsaid."

The "other," or that which is unsaid in language, can only come alive by being recognised within language. It is only through the recognition of the silent content of language that linguistic conventions can be performed in favour of unrealised imaginations and new forms of gender expressions. The silent text needs to be dramatised or actualised by a *reading body*.

In *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, Garrett Stewart engages with the reading body.[4] He inquires into the reading body as the place of reading through which the soundless or silent reception of a text is evoked. While Stewart, like Butler, claims the body's import in the re-enactment of meaning, he, in contrast to Butler, conceptualises the reading body as the "passive register" in the process of meaning production .[5] He, nevertheless, conceives a dramatisation of language by the body through what he denotes as "phonemic reading."

Stewart's theory then is a different account of the performativity of the linguistic body and provides another insight into the analysis of reading the monstrous body in *Nightwood*. As the reader's sensorium, the body lends itself to the text as interpreter or as voice of the silent substance of this text. The important matter here is not the presence of voice *in* the text, but the possibility of "evocalising" a multiplicity of, as yet, silenced speech in the process of reading. This is what Stewart calls phonemic reading. Phonemic reading is inner audition, it allows a reader to "hear" the phonemes that are neither contained nor containable by the script.[6] Phonemic reading consequently sensualises the reader's reading and accounts for the potential of teasing the rigid lexicality of words into a perceived activity of meaning. Or, through phonemic reading, as *performative* reading, the reader generates a play between words that is then negotiated between text and reader.

Stewart hereby emphasises the performative character of our bodies' relationship to language. He writes:

> The recognition of such a somatic quotient in the reading of writing…carries indirect but profound implications for the relation of subjectivity to text production, of consciousness to language.[7]

Overall, Stewart's conception of the reading body accounts for the shifting and turning of cultural meaning production by giving voice to a silent text. In this way, the body of the reader plays its own part and it is discussed here as a significant agent in the reading process of *Nightwood*.

Butler's and Stewart's analyses of the performativity of the linguistic body both offer ways to claim a physical and a sensual dimension in the process of reading. Further, they help to establish a relation between the written text, the reader's body as the place of reading, and the meaning production in reading. But, in order to fully account for my reading of *Nightwood*, I want to take the negotiation between text and reader a step further: I argue that the reader of *Nightwood* is not only drawn into a physical, sensual and subjective engagement with the text, but that she or he is compelled to acknowledge co-authorship for the textual constructions of the characters' monstrosity. When reading Djuna Barnes's novel, the reader is drawn into the narrative life by its charmingly perverse characters who perform a disturbing, but nonetheless, gripping freak show. This text makes its reader part of its plot, as spectator. It assumes her or his watching and participating in the world of symbols presented to the reader. *Nightwood*'s story makes its reader complicit with the characters' grotesque and lovingly naive exhibition of themselves. It is not performed for a general public, but for the novel's reader.

In order to illustrate the nature of this mutual relationship between *Nightwood*'s characters and their reader, I will draw upon Judith Halberstam's reading of *Frankenstein*. The analogy to this Gothic monster novel might seem far-fetched, but it discloses an informative correlation between cultural imaginations of monstrous bodies and a reader's investment in their construction. It is, as I argue, the very "nature" of the monstrous that transforms the reader of *Nightwood*'s story into a writer. Monstrosity unsettles boundaries between linguistic categorisations (such as between human and beast, or woman and man, or between reader and author), it questions differentiations between self and other, and it consequently affects a reader's distance to her or his interpretation of a text. In connection to Halberstam's reading of *Frankenstein*, she asks herself: "Do I read or am I written? Am I monster or monster maker? Am I monster hunter or the hunted? Am I human or other?"[8] *Nightwood* also confronts its readership with these kinds of questions.

With these points of departure, I hope to show how Djuna Barnes's novel negotiates questions of identity with its reader. While addressing each reader's individual place of reading, the novel challenges social constructions of monstrosity and provokes performative acts of transgressing conventional scripts of bodies and genders.

2. *Nightwood's* Affective Spectacle

Nightwood was first published in 1936, after having been shortened radically to make it "suitable" for publication. The novel does not have a well-articulated story line or a clear narrative structure. It has been criticised as tangled and obscure, since its breaks and ruptures in the course of events disorient and unsettle the reader. The novel's setting changes constantly in time and space, taking place in the different characters' pasts and memories. It is as if Djuna Barnes created *Nightwood*'s protagonists from clay and inspired them with a life independent of their author's writing: they seem to produce their own muddled story without what a reader of a novel might expect, namely a kind of bird's eye view of the unfolding fictional incidents. The reader is enveloped in the narratives told by the characters in the novel. They describe and accompany a journey through the life-stories of various lives, loves, desires and bodies.

The "plot" of *Nightwood* is mainly set in Paris during the inter-war period and unfolds in a series of conversations, mainly dialogues and monologues, for the largest part held between two protagonists at a time. Robin Vote, a young American expatriate in France, is the leading yet most invisible character in the novel. She is the spirit, the motor, the cause for the story. All the narratives told in *Nightwood* seem to have come into existence merely in order to conjure up Robin. Paradoxically, Robin seeps out of the narratives built around her and vanishes from the scene, the more the other characters in the novel talk about her. Four of these other characters stand out for their capacity to bring Robin to light in the shadowy narrative of *Nightwood*: Felix Volkbein, of Italian-Austrian descent, tries to escape from his Jewish roots by pretending to be a pure-blooded "Baron," marries Robin and is father to her only child. Nora Flood is an American lesbian with whom Robin shares a desperate love relationship. She is devastated when Robin leaves her for Jenny Petherbridge who is a devious and hysterical collector of other people's approval (also Robin's) and societal gossip. Dr. Matthew O'Connor appears as the most prominent figure in *Nightwood* by dominating the novel's discourses with long drunken tirades of self-ascribed wisdom. He is a cross-dresser, formerly an Irish gynaecologist and functions as spiritual advisor for Nora, Felix and Jenny. Their lives are intricately woven together almost out of utter chance. What brings them together is their various complicated and shifting relationships to Robin Vote. And these relationships are the novel's story. The book describes how they all, except for Matthew, fall in love with Robin, how she engages with them for short periods of time and how she leaves them behind, devastated, on her search for her "self."

In this chapter, I specifically focus on the "mainspring" of the novel: Robin Vote. Robin is a paradoxical character. She stands in the centre of everyone's attention and desire, yet she does not perform her ascribed role according to common stage rules. She hardly ever speaks, nor is she regularly spoken to. Rather, the other characters speak *of* her. Moreover, the reader does not get to *see* Robin even though she is represented through the ever-searching eyes and words of her lovers and the doctor, who has a specific impersonal but understanding soul-relation to Robin's ambiguous and ever-shifting identities. My focus on Robin is based on the discrepancy she evokes between never quite being visible to the reader and at the same time "touching" him or her emotionally, almost physically. Robin drifts into anonymity and loses her sense of self. In "Loss of Self in Djuna Barnes's 'Nightwood,'" Ernst van Alphen reads *Nightwood* as an affective experience.[9] He connects Robin's loss of self to her lost relationship to the world that is emphasised by her love for the night and its anonymous shadows. The reader of *Nightwood*, in van Alphen's account, is subjected to a sensual engagement, which is initiated by the main character's affective display of pain and desire. He writes:

> Reading should be considered as an example of imagination rather than pain. Because reading is by definition object-oriented - since we read a text - it comes close to the situation of imagination. Yet this is precisely what *Nightwood* seems to disturb. Reading this novel is closer to the situation of pain…[10]

This engagement with the novel results in a touching relationship between reader and character, producing a loss of self in the reader, since, as van Alphen contends, "touching takes place on the undecidable edge between inside and outside."[11] I would even say that this corporeal exchange occurs between self and other as well as between fiction and reality.

3. Becoming Monster

As the narrative's heroine, Robin enters the story only through her different engagements with several of the other characters, as well as through her "touching" relation with the reader. However, she is never *really* present, she does not have a narrative voice of her own, she is silent and evasive. The only actions that characterise her are fleeing, wandering and straying. She suffers from loneliness and is obscurely enigmatic to the people surrounding her. At the end of the novel she turns into a *beast*. Even before her radical transformation towards dauntless nature, her husband Felix, when trying to imagine what kind of creature she is, describes her with these words:

> She was gracious and yet fading, like an old statue in a garden, that symbolises the weather through which it has endured, and is not so much the work of man as the work of wind and rain and the herd of seasons, and though formed in man's image is a figure of doom…Thinking of her, visualising her, was an extreme act of the will.[12]

In another instance, Dr. O'Connor finds himself confronted with Nora's desperate wish to know more about Robin, who had left her for another lover, and he tells her that

> Robin [is] outside the 'human type' - a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain.[13]

Even though Robin, here, is situated in a woman's body, the reader is confronted with the difficulty of pinning her down to a fixed identity category. Her being "caught" in her own skin makes Robin a wild thing, a monster. One can picture her as a naked creature squirming within an outer skin that doesn't fit her body, mind and soul: a grotesque, unpleasant, yet touching image. Robin also exhibits traits such as her wild desire for nightly excursions into a gloomy underworld, her arbitrary sexual attraction to men, women, nature and animals, as well as her boyish physiognomy even after having given birth. These features combined make her a sexual deviant, a queer and gender-crossing creature. Her loneliness, her wandering and not belonging, her evasion of visual categorisation identify her as neither quite man nor woman, neither hetero- nor homosexual, neither human nor beast.

The characters surrounding Robin are drawn to her very lack of a stable identity. They expect her to take on the identities they create for her. Felix wants her to be the wife and mother he longs for. Nora imagines Robin to be the stable partner she needs to cope with her anxieties. Jenny projects her own devious and rejected existence onto Robin. To them she figures as an empty sign that is filled by whatever they like to see in her. Even her body shifts from what they identify as a boy's anatomy to a pregnant woman's, and finally Nora equals Robin to her dog. Robin comes to inhabit a multiplicity and polysemy of identity categories, gendered norms and sexual desires. And, in the eyes of those who desire her as whole, singular and unchanging, she becomes a "freak" or a freakish "monster." Robin neither conforms to the characteristics of a self-identified *subject*, nor does she reciprocate any desire. She becomes what I call a "monster" in the process of being desired and by not meeting the requirements of love. Monsters are characterised by being *apart*, by being viewed as spectacular *objects* and by having a body that does not approximate to corporeal norms.[14] At the end of the narrative Robin ultimately seems to find a home in her "monster" guise, a perverse human-beast creature that figures as the sexualised "other:"

> …Robin began going down. Sliding down she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out…on all fours now, dragging her knees…Then she began to bark also, crawling after the [dog] barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching.[15]

As such, Robin is staged in the novel as dramatically distant to the characters who seek her out, but dangerously close to what they desire. Her role (in fiction) creates space for self-identification of the others projected unto her. On the one hand, Robin is the clean slate on which the others can reinvent their selves. On the other hand, *she* and her world are (re)modelled by them individually and in various fashions. Their identification does not mean that they want to *be* her, rather than wanting to be part of her world and reinventing it according to their needs and desires. Her world is liberated from categorisation and positively sexualised by a beastly renunciation of the "normal." In Robin's world, created for her by Barnes, she grows into a body "beyond words," a still but wild body:

> Sometimes she slept in the woods; the silence that she had caused by her coming was broken again by insect and bird flowing back over her intrusion, which was forgotten in her fixed stillness, obliterating her as a drop of water is made anonymous by the pond into which it has fallen.[16]

Robin's anonymity makes her a being without a name, without a history, without a place of self - a beastly creature. According to Butler's analysis of the performativity of language, Robin cannot be hailed into social existence. As an anonymous and unspoken life form, she loses the privilege of being interpellated as a social being. In this sense, she suffers from what Butler terms "loss of context,"[17] not knowing where she is or where she belongs. Butler states that when one loses one's context by being exposed to linguistic or physical violence, one is threatened to also lose one's *corporeal* place in the world. Robin, however, is not devoid of a place in the world, but of a place *of her own*, a place in which her body can sustain a *self*. Robin hence lacks a context as well as a self. Both absences are brought about by her failure to be held in place, to inhabit a singular body, to conform to a social role or to live just one form of desire. In *Nightwood*, Barnes liberates Robin from the grasp of, and at the same time dispels her from participation in the linguistic practice of social interpellation and shared recognition. *Nightwood*'s linguistic or narrative representation of Robin also makes the reader create a transformative, context-dependent self for the fictional figure that emerges from Barnes's written words. The reader so *performs* Robin, providing her with a context and a selfhood from the actual world in which the novel is read.

But how, if the reader creates Robin, can *Nightwood* still maintain a story in which she stays strange, animalistic, ambiguous and shadowy? Would not every reader give her a straight face, make her a costume embroidered with the luxury of clear boundaries and invent for her a coherent life story? Who would construct her as a monster, especially when being drawn to her fictional congeniality? When considering the performativity of language, as Butler conceptualised it, or the effects of performative reading, as Stewart identified it, this monstrous "authoring" is not surprising. A reader here necessarily becomes part of what she or he reads by hailing a text into her or his own meaningful context. The figures she or he creates in the process of reading cannot be wholly outside of the reader's own subjective reality. And, part of this reality is the construction or the imagination of the "other," the monstrous, in one's self. The notion of "otherness" relates to a subject's perception of her or his self. The "other's otherness" can only be seen through a reader's recognition of the "other" as "other," vis-à-vis a self-identified reading subject.

Robin Vote is staged, to be seen by an audience - her lovers - watching the freak show, but she is not visible without her spectators' identities, desires, sexes and genders assigned to her. And, the reader here brings her or his own view of the world into the production of Robin as monster. In other words: I, as reader, create Robin as monster with the desires I project unto her. Or as Judith Halberstam formulates it in another context: "The monster, in its otherworldly form, its supernatural shape, wears the traces of its own construction."[18] Robin becomes *visibly* a monster through our seeing *it* as such. In *Nightwood*, the fictional monster Robin merges with the actual reader in the course of the novel. This notion of merging or mutual contamination between reader and character is a dominant theme in recent analyses of the Western monster discourse.[19]

4. Per-*formative* Effects of Textual Monstrosity

When reading Robin's monstrosity against the background of her monstrous predecessors in Gothic literary productions such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, she likewise exhibits features of monstrosity that mix humanity with physical deformity and sexual deviance. Robin, like other monsters, also draws her reader into the spell of her transformative becoming - she is not born a monster in the novel, but becomes one in the process of reading. By reading Gothic monster narratives as *technologies of monstrosity*, Judith Halberstam claims "a kind of productivity for the text,"[20] which does not merely position the novel in a distanced discourse of "othering" the sexually deviant, the racially undesirable, or the gender erratic person, but allows for

> numerous interpretations, precisely because [the monster transforms] the fragments of otherness into one body. That body is not female, not Jewish, not homosexual, but it bears the marks of *constructions* of femininity, race, and sexuality.[21]

And consequently this monstrous body, as it is also depicted in *Nightwood*, calls attention to the plasticity or the constructed nature of its creation and calls into question the social practices that classify agents of deviance. Here, these agents are exposed as *inventions* of normative cultural powers instead of being ascribed to scientific *truths*. Victor Frankenstein's scientific experiment, which leads to the creation of a horrendous monster, is another example of the failure of the opposition of truth versus fantasy or imagination. The outcome of the experiment, which has been minutely planned with help of the supposedly infallible scientific knowledge about pure humanness, shows more likeness to the fearful imaginations of humans' wickedness than to the "normality" of a morally good person that should have been the model:

> Beautiful! - Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.[22]

Frankenstein's monster blends characteristics of the beautiful human being he should have been and the visual coding of the monstrous. He is more than simply human, animal or "other." In his mixture of clear-cut classifications Frankenstein's monster not only undoes the singular category of the monster as "other," but he also "throws into relief humanness, because [he] emphasises the constructedness of all identity."[23]

Likewise, Robin's comrade-in-arms - Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor, an Irish-American expatriate, unlicensed gynaecologist, tale-teller, resolute drunkard, transvestite, liar, choleric preacher of the night and expert in matters of sexuality - reveals coherent identity to be a fiction that only comes into existence through the repression of "otherness," of ambiguity and fluidity. Matthew's articulated narcissism and impatience with the other characters, however, also places him in a difficult relationship with the reader. He seems frighteningly aware of the staged character of identity and the performative powers of the very language that makes him speak. And he describes *himself* as a monstrous being, possibly created by the author's reading of him as an ugly man, when he would have liked to be seen as a flaming and proud maid:

> *Misericordia*, *am* I not the girl to know of what I speak? We go to our Houses by our nature - and our nature, no matter how it is, we all have to stand - as for me, so God has made me, my house is the pissing port…In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps it's that memory that haunts me. The wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future, and am I to blame if I've turned up this time as I shouldn't have

> been, when it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king's kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner? And what do I get but a face on me like an old child's bottom.[24]

In exposing social and discursive norms as limited to the construction of fixed identities, Matthew also addresses the reader and his or her re-enactment of normative gender categorisation. He thereby challenges the comfortable position a reader might find in the distance to the text, or in a declared narrative, and in his or her allegedly stable cultural and gender identity. Matthew as well as Robin - although with different means - both complicate their monstrous appearances as gender deviant subjects in relation to the reader. The difficulty to pin them down to clear classifications and their resulting invisibility in the narrative almost seem to accuse the reader of a certain blindness rather than suggest that monsters are difficult to grasp because they refute visual recognition.

In order to support my argument for a mutual relationship between the reader and *Nightwood*'s creation of monstrous bodies, I come back to Garrett Stewart's concept of "phonemic reading." Phonemic reading pronounces the act of reading as *performed upon an inscription*. The reading body, if analysed as producing cultural meaning in and through its interactions with the text, serves as medium to perform acts of identification in culture.[25]

Stewart's phonemic reading is giving voice to, or is articulating, that part of a text that resonates with the embodied subjectivity of the reader. It places the reader's body in interaction with the script and ascribes to the body an agency of seeing, hearing and giving meaning to a text. The language in the script is also accounted for in its unexpected twists and turns, which come to the surface only through the cultural and social sphere given to them through the body's presence in time and space. Textual meaning for Stewart presents itself in remarkably physical ways:

> In deed as in word, textual *meaning* is participial, progressive, transactive, the operation of signifying process in receipt by a reader. Language *asserts* as well as *exerts* itself in the interchange between a social sphere and any particular text…The *body* is the site of silent reading. It is a place not separable from the space of 'understanding.'[26]

Here, Stewart's recognition of the body as the social and relational site of reading allows for an analysis of reading as a somatic event. The conception of reading as signifying and bodily process suggests looking at *Nightwood* not as a ready *product* given to the reader, but rather as a corporeal co-*production* of the reader and the text together. At this point, we can observe the reader's collaboration in the text, again negotiated and *performed* in and upon the material body of the reader. And, if we want to push the term "collaboration" further we might as well call it "complicity." Complicity for me, here, implies an identificatory process in interaction with the text. The reading of the monster in *Nightwood* then serves as instantiation of the complicity in everyday enactments of gender. To elucidate this point in more detail, I will turn my attention to the novel's relation to *Frankenstein*'s monster-narrative and unveil the monstrosity of the gender ambiguous body in fiction, which is *as* constructed as the humanness of all other bodies.[27]

5. Reading for Monstrous Selves

Djuna Barnes's novel exposes its readers to a commonly experienced seduction of reading monster narratives. The seduction of reading stories like *Frankenstein* as well as *Nightwood* lies in the fact that one is not presented with clear-cut images. Reading the monster is always linked to an act of imagination, an act of will to visualise, thereby being allowed to conjure up one's own illustration of the text. Playing the role of the monster in *Nightwood*, Robin seduces her reader to enter an imaginary, fantastic world. Yet, she eludes visualisation due to her potential to transform from one thing into another. The first impression of her is that she is a woman who, married to a man, will live a mother's life. The next image her reader is confronted with is that she seemingly denies ever having given birth to her son and that she engages in a lesbian relationship. Here, she becomes a masculine woman as well as unpredictable in her desire's meanderings through the eroticised nightlife of Paris. Later, she blends with nature's landscapes and becomes almost indistinguishable from the animals and plants of the woods. Robin's character and her tendency of slipping from one body, gender and sexual identity into their opposites - as in woman/boy, human/beast etc. - likens her again to monstrous figures of Gothic narratives. Halberstam says about the latter:

> [The] tendency within Gothic fiction of one thing to slip into its opposite…makes mincemeat of any notion of binaries. This is one of the reasons that it becomes so difficult to pinpoint the political impetus of any given Gothic text but it also is what produces the multiple web of interpretations that mark Gothic as both highly readable and unreadable.[28]

The readability in Robin's case is located in the illusion that she is a painting. Her unreadability expresses itself in her fleeting and transforming nature. In the following passage Robin is depicted as a spectacular shape-shifter taking on the forms of a painting, a wild animal and an actor, moving also between the realms of the cultural and the natural:

> Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room…thrown in among carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of unseen *dompteur* (animal tamer), half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-wind render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness.[29]

In this sense, the figure of Robin renounces fixed categorisation. The text itself, or specifically her role, becomes desirable to read, while at the same time producing a multiplicity of ambiguous interpretations evolving around her monstrosity. Robin excites the reader's desire to understand her and thus to fill the void she leaves behind her as if it is a trace that the reader, like the characters surrounding her, is compelled to follow in order to make sense of her being. Without the familiar binary codes, through which we are trained to make sense of bodies and persons, meaning itself becomes monstrous.[30] In engaging with the figure of Robin in *Nightwood* we must, however, also be aware that the uncertainty she provokes is, as any ambiguity, built into binary categorisations. Her ambiguity refers back to the very oppositions between man and woman, human and animal, homo- and heterosexual by citing each of them simultaneously. And this reference to the "normal," which here shows its mocking side, might be experienced as the *real threat* of the monster - its disruption of fixed meaning. The disruption of meaning through monsters is more like the excess of meaning, which has its origin in the multiplicity of interpretations that monsters elicit. They cannot be contained in any fixed sense, yet they produce a new set of meaning by unsettling the stable ground of common norms of knowledge.

Within the realm of the monster's role in meaning-making, however, I want to differentiate Robin Vote from Gothic monsters. Monsters in Gothic narratives are produced as

> perfect figures for negative identities…They have to be everything the human is not and, in producing the negative of human, [Gothic] novels make way for the

> invention of human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual.[31]

Gothic monsters produce meaning in terms of categorisation through being normality's antithesis. Robin, conversely, is not so much a figure of negative identity than the creator of *non-identities* or of fluid, permeable, travelling and non-fixed selves. When Margrit Shildrick connects the history of the monstrous with postmodern feminist deployments of embodiment, she observes a certain productivity of social criticism precisely in emphasising the body's fluidity. She says:

> As long as we resist the impulse to recapture, as it were, those undecidable and fluid forms of embodiment that mark out the monstrous, then the encounter with the strange(r) will be the grounds for a radical rethinking of the concept of the selfsame.[32]

Comparably, Robin's renunciation of fixed identity opens up room for desires outside of the binary oppositions and not only challenges the "normal," but also makes her reader inventive of new, other identities evolving around her or his body and desires.

In Robin's case, the image of the deviant and sexual "other" turns into a pleasurable acting out of the perverse indeterminacy of queer or transgender identities. Her gender-monstrous body serves as the stage for paradoxical and spectacular events of love, desire, sadness, madness, bestiality and sexuality. Establishing and performing a link between ambiguous genders and the features of bestiality, *Nightwood*, as Dana Seitler puts it, produces

> equivalencies between animality and sexuality, [and] points to a *shared* project of making social problems identifiable and resolvable in the body that extends beyond the limits of generic convention.[33]

And the *sharing* here implicates the reader who, with her or his own bodily experience, brings the monster as a living creature to life in everyday culture.

Constructing Robin as a monster in the reader's eyes, *Nightwood* recalls the meaning production of Gothic monsters through the narrative devices of disrupting linearity in plot and structure, confusing the roles of author, reader and character, inverting the position of monster and monster maker etc.[34] In a different way, but not unlike the Gothic monster, Robin as *gender*-monstrous or *queer* body does not only represent horrible traits of the deviant "other." She also *affects* meaning around gender in a pleasurable way.

Here I would like to come back to Ernst van Alphen's "affective reading" of *Nightwood*. While van Alphen acknowledges a certain loss of self-reflexivity in affective reading, he also cautions us not to disregard its analytic merits for interpretation by merely calling it a self-indulgent reading. Rather, he contends, affective reading allows us to relate to our cultural object of analysis by *touching* it:

> For, whereas a reader, at least in a literal and concrete sense, stands outside the book she reads, she stands inside the culture within which that book makes sense. Touching the object, then is a way of taking part in that culture, in the strongest possible sense.[35]

Therefore, it is not only Robin's desirability or her loneliness that touches the reader, but it is foremost her ambiguity, her defiance of categorisation and her monstrous bodily experiences that are touching. The reader of *Nightwood* relates to this queer gender-monstrous being in ways that are linked to the *touching* relationship established between character and reader. This touching, which affectively suspends the borders between outside and inside, or self and other, allows also for transgressing borders between cultural determinates such as nationality, class and gender. The recipient of Robin's narrative life is thus taking part in "a conspiracy of bodies,"[36] as Halberstam puts it, through which she or he is not only able to touch the fictional monster, but through which she or he *creates* it. Consequently, the queer monster in literary works of art must be read as not only a culturally-specific, temporally-located and spatially-situated phenomenon, but also as affectively linked to the reader's own experiences in everyday cultural negotiations around gender.

In *Nightwood* Matthew makes a clear and shocking observation concerning not only the constructedness of identity in general, but the production of the "invert" or the deviant "other" in particular, when he says:

> You never loved anyone before, and you'll never love anyone again, as you love Robin…What is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl?…The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found?…And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace - neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan! We love them for that reason…They go far back in our *lost distance* where what we never had stands waiting; it

> was inevitable that we should come upon them, for *our miscalculated longing has created them*.[37]

Robin, the perverse "other," is created by our longing for her and for disowned parts of ourselves. And this creation draws upon the *lost distance* where *what we never had stands waiting*. The invert, here the sexually-miscellaneous and ambiguously-gendered Robin Vote, comes into existence through the reader's desiring *imagination*, specifically of the other as a whole, as a contained being to which she or he can more easily relate, making the reader put the different fragments of Robin's "otherness" and her or his own together in one body. This body can only be visualised through an *extreme act of the will* because it combines within it seemingly contradictory elements of identity categories. These elements projected onto and combined within the monstrous body, could be read as the offspring of our imagination or as the reproduction of our disparate inner longings and desires for the other in *us*.

In the traditional Western discourse on monsters, it is predominantly the maternal imagination, rather than the male gaze,[38] that gives birth to the monster. It is also the mother's/author's care for her offspring that is responsible for the continuation of the human race, monstrous as it may be:

> …The mother's desiring imagination, which founds the species and guarantees its legitimate descent, is solely answerable for every formal aspect of reproduction, whether normal or abnormal.[39]

The longing imaginative production of the monster is maternal in so far as it is *reproductive* of desires within us, which are so proximate to our selves that they have to be projected onto the image of the monster as other. What the monster figure consequently reflects back to us are the various fragments of "otherness" now unified into one body. The monster creatively visualises the disowned and feared divergent elements of ourselves. This might make us engage with, rather than shun, our own discrepancies.

The re-production of Robin as deviant "other," or monster, is enabled by the reader's projected longing for her *becoming*. In her desirability she touches us and implicates us in her construction. The unattainable that appears in the disguise of the deviant "other," the ambiguously gendered body of Robin. It is precisely the "miscalculated longing" that has created the monster which has been formed by denied parts of ourselves and which Robin demands us to reconstitute as positive constructions of ourselves. Ultimately, Robin and Matthew present us with the promise of monstrosity,[40] which insinuates prospects of alternative versions of the world and ourselves that are waiting to be realised.[41]

6. Conclusion

Robin, with her transgressive body, refuses to be tied down to a home, a gender, or a sexuality, and opens up the narrative to a range of affective possibilities. In her deviant corporeality but overt desirability, she appeals to the reader's response, to her or his filling the gaps of incoherent narrative, not with a linear cultural story, but with one's own "monstrous" or perversely ambiguous desires. She provokes the reader to make "sense" of her life outside of the regimes of unproductive oppositions between male and female, human and beast, body and mind.

Nightwood certainly offers itself to its readers in various disturbing but productive ways. Consequently, one is left to ask what the representation of monster-figures like Robin and Matthew reveal about *one's own* everyday perceptions and performances of perversion; or in what ways the so-called "perverse" bodies are *created* by one's own desire of reading them as such.

The monster as a literary trope for multiple "others" in our selves provokes acts of reading which performatively enact the reader as writer and co-author of monstrosity. While "*Frankenstein* sells reading to a public and advertises interpretation by presenting the text as a monster that must be identified, decoded, captured, and consumed,"[42] *Nightwood* teaches the reader to acknowledge authorship for her or his specific reading of the monstrous in the text. The novel communicates a narrative of disruption and ambiguity, which corresponds to the world it originates from. Matthew even prompts the reader to search for the meaning of this narrative, which, like a monster, threatens to decompose and constantly transform itself into new forms of deviance: "I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it."[43] Whether or not the reader of *Nightwood* succeeds in finding Matthew's - or Djuna Barnes's - narrative, the text offers a place of reading, which is as unstable as the fictional figures in it. It might promise a less restrictive place of reading, a place which emanates from a radical excess of meaning, a place for the reader's corporeal and desiring imaginations of the monstrous, and ultimately, a place for numerous productive ways of experiencing ambiguously-gendered bodies.

Notes

1. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

2. Ibid., 5.

3. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988), 526.

4. Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (University of California Press, 1990).

5. Ibid., 2.

6. A phoneme is defined as a “theoretical representation of a sound…without reference to its position in a word or phrase. A phoneme is the conception of a sound in the most neutral form possible and distinguishes between different words or morphemes. Changing an element of a word from one phoneme to another produces either a different word or obvious nonsense.” Contrary, or in addition to this definition, Stewart identifies an excess of phonemes in written language (originally soundless). These phonemes are enacted in the process of phonemic reading, they generate a voice in the reader and new sense. See “Phoneme,” *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoneme> (December 19, 2006).

7. Stewart, 3.

8. Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995).

9. See more on the touching effect that Robin evokes in her readers in Ernst van Alphen’s beautiful analysis of his own touching affection for *Nightwood* in Ernst van Alphen, “Loss of Self in Djuna Barnes’s ’Nightwood,’” in *The Practice of Cultural Analysis. Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, eds. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 151-170.

10. Ibid., 169.

11. Ibid., 170.

12. Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936/2001), 37.

13. Ibid., 131.

14. See Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 2002), 2.

15. Barnes, 152-3.

16. Ibid., 151.

17. Butler, 1997.

18. Judith Halberstam, “Technologies of Monstrosity: Bram Stoker's Dracula,” *Victorian Studies* 36 (1993): 349.

19. See Halberstam, 1995, 53-85; Shildrick, 68-86.

20. Halberstam, 1993, 336.

21. Ibid., 337 (*my emphasis*).

22. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1831/1998), 57.
23. Halberstam, 1995, 38.
24. Barnes, 81.
25. See Stewart.
26. Ibid., 16-17.
27. Halberstam, 1995, 38.
28. Ibid., 179.
29. Barnes, 31.
30. Halberstam, 1995, 179-180.
31. Ibid., 22.
32. Shildrick, 132.
33. Dana Seitler, "Down on All Fours: Atavistic Perversions and the Science of Desire from Frank Norris to Djuna Barnes," *American Literature* 73 (2001): 525-562.
34. Halberstam, 1995, 19-20.
35. van Alphen, 170.
36. Halberstam, 1995, 27.
37. Barnes, 123 (*my emphasis*).
38. Margrit Shildrick explains the function of the gaze as holding the monster at bay, rather than producing it: "The function of the gaze […] is in part to arrest such a process [of the monster's spreading its own confusion of identity] by fixing the other at a safe distance, but even so the monstrous is no respecter of boundaries." (68).
39. Marie-Helene Huet, "Living Images: Monstrosity and Representation," *Representations* 4 (1983), 74.
40. See more on the promise of monsters in Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 63-124.
41. See Shildrick, 129.
42. Halberstam, 1995, 51.
43. Barnes, 87.

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