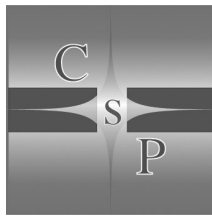


Bound and Unbound

Bound and Unbound:
Interdisciplinary Approaches to Genders
and Sexualities

Edited by

Zowie Davy, Julia Downes, Lena Eckert,
Natalia Gerodetti, Dario Llinares
and Ana Cristina Santos



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

THE EDITORS

The lines that allow us to find our way, those that are “in front” of us, also make certain things, and not others, available. What is available is what might reside as a point on this line. When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and orders remain or even become out of reach. (Ahmed, 2006: 14)

The idea for this edited book has developed from the themes, connections and disjunctures that emerged from a two day postgraduate conference held in June 2006 at the University of Leeds. Hosted by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies (CIGS), the conference was dedicated to *Thinking Gender: The Next Generation*, and was organised by a committee of postgraduate students and staff. It attracted a vast number of international participants who joined us in thinking about, along, beyond and with gender and its intersections with other dimensions. The book here combines a number of accounts and perspectives on an increasingly dynamic, multifaceted and contested topic of study and research which had a strong presence at the conference: gender and sexuality. Whilst the book is interdisciplinary in intent, the contributors work in social science or humanities disciplines such as cultural geography, cultural studies, English, gender studies, musicology, social anthropology, social history, social psychology, sociology, and theology.

This edited collection is a continuation of an ongoing tradition of theoretical engagements with theories of gender and sexuality and intends to integrate a collection of work and conceptualise how they intersect and connect. Theorising gender has become institutionalised at many universities since the late 1980s through women’s studies and gender studies programmes, as well as individual modules in various disciplines. Theorising sexuality has a somewhat shorter history of institutionalisation but is increasingly important in its own right as well as within gender studies. This book contributes to an investigation into the ways in which genders and sexualities are representative of various forms, positions and subjectivities. The interdisciplinary character of the analyses emerging

from the chapters has highlighted the increasingly problematic nature of the boundaries of gender and sexuality. There have been a number of seminal books which have considered the boundaries of gender and sexuality that have tended to be disciplinary bound or take up particular themes such as heterosexuality, the body (Holliday & Hassard, 2001), the sociology of gender and sexuality (Beasley, 2005), race and ethnicity (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1993), homosexuality (Weeks, 1995).

Influential to many chapters in this book is the idea of contesting essentialist notions of gender or sexuality and, instead, favouring social constructionist and/or deconstructionist approaches to look at the ways in which gender and sexuality derive meaning through experiences and representations (Plummer 1995, 2004) as well as wider social and political contexts. This continues to open up previously under-theorised notions, such as masculinity or 'man', in order to critically investigate their social construction. The endeavour to investigate beyond the established is reflected in the emergence of gender studies as a trans-disciplinary and interdisciplinary set of critical approaches that question taken for granted and hegemonic understandings of genders and sexualities and which underpins the rationale for this book. Deconstructionist methodologies, which have emerged from these debates since the late 1980s, have provoked repeated inquiries into the understanding of the materiality of gender and sexuality. These approaches have also fostered assertions of difference within categories, and it has become increasingly difficult to make claims, socially or politically, for fixed notions of categories, such as 'woman' or 'man', 'gay', 'lesbian' or 'trans'.

Bound categories have therefore become problematic although they remain strategically or temporarily used and the chapters in this book will consider and interrogate how gender and sexuality are bound and unbound resulting in 'genders' and 'sexualities.' In invoking the notion of bound, we refer to understandings or perceptions of categories, concepts and identities, which could be seen as fixed by social and political institutions and practices. Unbound, not by contrast but rather concomitantly, questions, confronts and ruptures the legitimacy of bound categories. Throughout the book there is an attempt to highlight how these bound and unbound categories influence and control us, how these concepts are fought against and rejected, how new boundaries and identity positions are formed and how boundaries are opened up and traversed.

Structured along four thematic strands, *Encountering*, *Contesting*, *Embracing* and *Redefining*, the book thus attempts to capture the continuous doing of 'boundaries', highlighting encounters with and critiques of experiences, values, ideals, representations and views of

gender and sexuality within a range of disciplines. Each thematic section allows for the development of a sequence of arguments, even when the views of one author are pitted against those of another. In doing so, the book brings together interdisciplinary chapters on the ways in which gender and sexuality can be understood as ‘bound’ and ‘unbound’, or, in other words, as constructed and temporarily fixed or as contested and deconstructed.

The chapters in the sections *Encountering Boundaries* seek to understand the various ways in which gender and sexuality have come to be systematically categorised, thus creating grounded modes of identity into which individuals are placed according to institutionally ascribed understandings. The boundaries of these categories and identities are reinforced through various systems of power and oppression, which perpetuate the supposed naturalness of these identity positions. The progressive and systematic creation of a coherent and all encompassing framework of gender and sexuality arguably developed from the sexological fervour of nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. Historical categorisations have not only made certain gendered and sexual behaviours problematic but have also brought to the fore concepts that have produced ‘knowledge’ and set precedents for theorists and lay people that have followed.

Anna Tijsseling in her chapter entitled *Innocent Boys and Unruly Women – Professional ‘Oversights’ in Sex Crimes* utilises a collection of data on sex crimes retrieved from the district court of The Hague to investigate the ways in which notions of femininity and masculinity informed sexual transgressions and how the perpetrators were prosecuted. Tijsseling offers insights into the narratives, which subjects relayed in various situations. She argues the uncertainty of the outcomes in sex crime cases produced a play on different notions of sexual transgression arguing that hetero and homosexual sex crimes were viewed significantly differently. Tijsseling suggests heterosexual sexual crimes were often defended with an apologetic rhetoric, whereas homosexual sex crimes were represented through (im)moral and biological metaphors.

The notion of narratives in encountering boundaries is also explored by Fabienne Jung in *‘The Truth Is...’ - Lesbian Narratives of Gender*. Jung discusses the problematic relationship between the notions of ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ when collecting stories for social research purposes. Basing the enquiry on a collection of stories written by gay-identified women on the idea of ‘performing’ gender, she asks how a sense of self is negotiated in a time of radically diverse gendered identities and social and cultural expectations and how women relate to, oppose or reconstitute

contemporary narratives of Western femininity. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Anthony Elliot she suggests that the gendered self is constructed between the dichotomy of 'truth' and 'fiction' and that gay-identified women, because of their perceived position as 'other', are able to recognise the acute artificiality of gender categories.

An exploration into the problematic nature of essential categories of gender, based on fixed sexual differences is provided by Lena Eckert's *Ethnographical Research into Intersexuality – Bound to the Third* where she employs an ethnological approach to the study of intersexuality. She identifies and theorises the emergence of a specific notion of the 'The Third' which is placed outside traditionally rigid categories of sex and gender. Eckert argues that the concept of 'The Third' has been ontologically constructed as an exclusive category. While this may have been provisionally beneficial as a political tool, she suggests there are certain theoretical and political limitations in perpetuating such a category. Moreover, Eckert suggests that the emergence of 'The Third' does not in itself question biological and cultural/social differences between 'male' and 'female' and indeed serves to validate 'normal' sexual differentiation.

Boundaries of deterministic, biological modes of understanding are investigated in *Contesting Boundaries* in order to open up space for contesting enquiries. The chapters in this section deconstruct and analyse normative narratives of gender and identity to challenge the oppressive nature of established structures of power. These chapters question the authority of essential subject positions, drawing on the legacy of critical, feminist, social constructionist and queer theoretical approaches founding new contestations of boundaries. They further add to and widen the basis for new theoretical debate surrounding gender and sexuality. This section demonstrates the many diverse techniques and themes through which an attempt to question the authority of essential subject positions is made.

Tam Sanger looks at changes in social, cultural and political discourse for the benefit of marginalized 'others', seeking to problematise the binary understandings of gender and sexuality. Focusing on Transpeople's intimate partnerships Sanger reflects on how these specific relationships tend to make processes of discourse production around gender and sex more clearly visible than more socially accepted partnerships. *Transpeople's intimate partnerships and the limits of identity politics* questions the political impact and limits of identity politics and discusses the discourses and counter-discourses surrounding Trans-identities. The chapter considers the Gender Recognition Act and Civil Partnership Act of 2004 to contest that identity cannot be conceptualized as static and straightforwardly unproblematic.

In *Contesting the Astronaut as a Masculine Ideal: Narratives of Myth in Tom Wolfe's "The Right Stuff"* Dario Llinares utilises *The Right Stuff* as a discursive framework to examine the many elements that have come to reinforce masculinity including control, embodiment while acknowledging these themes as highly polemic and contradictory. He argues that despite these oppositional paradigms the forging of a masculine 'mythology' is created through as the lexicon by which 'the astronaut' is conceptualised which effectively posits masculinity as transcendent and dominant. Llinares questions the boundaries of historically fixed and coherent readings of masculinity as the starting point for a gendered critique and argues that a more sophisticated appropriation of gendered representations is required to theorise dominant forms of masculinity.

Susannah Cornwall draws on James M. Murphy's sculpture 'Christine on the Cross' and the tradition of *Christa's*—representations of a female figure crucified in place of Christ—to consider theological and ethical implications of bodies. In her chapter *Ambiguous bodies, Ambiguous Readings: Reflections on James M. Murphy's 'Christine on the Cross'* she looks at the protests and criticism of these alternative and often sexualized representations revealing boundaries of gender and sexuality. She contests how and why there is still body fascism endemic whereby 'undesirable' bodies—those of the inter-sexed, elderly, people with disabilities—are concealed from view. This is characterised in magazines such as *Zoo* and *Nuts*, which enforce acceptable ways to be male and female and further marginalise those who do not fit with these ideals.

In *Embracing Boundaries* authors ask whether it is possible for the subject to reject all boundaries of identity so as not to be constrained by one identity position. In practical terms an individual's connection to the 'reality' of identity involves coming to terms with a particular subjectivity or subject position, which one seeks to occupy and define. The contributions attempt to reveal and elucidate new and often alternative boundaries of identity which oppose traditional modes of thought and offer a space through which subjectivities can be explored. Although one could argue that this could create further exclusionary categories it is perhaps the most logical and relevant way for individuals to be agents of their own identity.

The chapter by Zowie Davy, *Bound To The Dual-Sex/Gender System: (Trans) Gendering And Body Modification As Narcissistic Self-Regard* employs a reworked theory of narcissism, in order to theorise transsexuals' body modification practices as a positive enterprise. Davy argues that the medical model constructs authentic transsexual embodiment based on the modification of genitals; however, using empirical evidence, Davy

considers the phenomenal transsexual body and psyche, which rely on a bounded gender identity without the constraints of a consistent dimorphic body. Davy posits that transsexuals do embrace a male or female gender identity and thus require some body modifications in order to balance their ego with outer cultural influences. These modifications are worked out through deep reflection on, and the usage of various modification practices, which are not necessarily genital alterations. This reflective process stabilises the ego and furthermore, contests the bounded gender dysphoria label and pathology constructed by the medical profession around the transsexual subject.

Scout Burghardt's chapter *Embracing Victim Status in German Memorial Debates – Identity Politics Reloaded* examines the contemporary German gay movement's position in the discourse on Nazi Germany's persecution of gays. Using the campaign *Remember the homosexual victims of National Socialism*, which lobbied intensely for a memorial dedicated to the gays murdered by the Nazis, Burghardt asks how German identity is negotiated in this context and how gay identity is constructed in the context of contemporary German society. These questions are explored in relation to the parameters of identity politics model and by situating them in a victim/perpetrator dichotomy. Burghardt focuses on the limits of inclusion in these efforts and considers how discourses around these questions alter the boundaries not only of the concepts of victim and perpetrator but also of identity politics itself.

Fiona Philip explores the impact which cultural censorship had on POOL's 1930 silent film *Borderline*, and, more specifically, how the almost contemporaneous banning of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) informed its production. Philips reads the film—a text concerned on multiple levels with the issue of imposed and self-censorship—as an attempt to 'speak back' to censors, in a political and social climate which was heavily policed. She examines closely how the masculinity of the manageress gestures specifically to the newly iconic Hall, and how this was a performance through which POOL were attempting a representational politics by means of a veiled disclosure which simultaneously revealed to the cognoscenti what must remain concealed from the censorious audience at large.

The *Redefining Boundaries* section explores the ambiguity and fluidity of the constitution, experience or representation of gender and sexuality. These chapters address the ways in which bound categories of gender and sexuality not only have shortcomings but pose severe limitations. The bounded ways in which gender and sexuality have been conceptualised have led to dichotomous categorisations, often binary categorisations. The

chapters in this section of the book ‘expose’ such binaries and deconstruct any stability associated with such categories. They transgress or traverse boundaries and, by doing so, address gender and sexuality ‘unbound.’ The contributions here look at gendered and sexual identities in particular contexts and show how bound subjectivities become unbound and how subjects actively seek out and inculcate processes of change which transgress socially accepted norms of gender and sexuality. Redefining bound perceptions and experiences of gender and sexuality is, in these chapters, applied in a variety of frameworks. The chapters rely on politically sensitive histories and queer manifestations of political activism. This section aims to offer deconstructionist approaches, which highlight transgressive or ambiguous (re)readings, which further demonstrates the unbound nature of categories of gender and sexuality.

Danny Beusch looks at a particular expression of gay male sexuality in relation to fetishism which conjures a political dilemma. In *“It’s Not a Political Thing for Me - Just Sexual”*: *Gay Men and Nazi Fetishism* Beusch looks at cyberspace and the anonymity it bestows in providing a relatively safe haven for sexual experimentation. In particular, he looks at the plethora of pornographic websites as well as forums and groups who eroticize Nazi images and Nazism and asks how these sexual subjects negotiate the boundaries between sex and politics. Beusch explores how ‘gay’ men who are members of a forum that is centred on the fetishism of various forms of Nazi aesthetics dis-identify from Nazism and how are these dis-identifications framed. He does this by illustrating how the proximity of dangerous ‘Others’ in this forum necessitates forms of boundary maintenance and he evaluates whether sexual identity is as much about ‘who/what you are not’ as it is about ‘who/what you are’.

In *‘Let Me Hear You Depoliticise My Rhyme’*: *Queer Feminist Cultural Activisms and Disruptions of Conventional Protest*, Julia Downes inquires into how the institutionalisation of feminism has established its own rules and boundaries which has led to the marginalisation and silencing of other more unconventional ways of being and doing feminism. She investigates assumptions of what being “authentically political” means and considers the potential of feminist and/or queer interruptions which are and do radical activism differently in the UK. In particular, Downes focuses on the discursive interruptions that radical feminist and/or queer communities of resistance have employed to transform and challenge authentic ideas of doing activism and producing knowledge.

In *Transgressive Bodies: Textual Constructions of the New Indian Woman* Shari Daya uses two textual sources to assess the discursive

production of the Indian female body. She argues that contemporary novels by Indian women and a weekly magazine entitled *India Today* highlight how bodily transgression emerges as a means by which women can become unbound from traditional constraints. She outlines a dichotomy through which freedom/oppression can be mapped onto modernity/tradition but complicates this model by suggesting that contemporary Indian women embody contradictory forms of sexual liberation, influenced by the West, and traditional Indian cultural identity. The iconography of the New Indian Woman therefore produces a highly complex and contradictory discourse through media representation.

The book and its sections are finally drawn together by an epilogue by Sasha Roseneil who offers a reading of the intersectionalities of the chapters in this book and their contribution to theories of gender and sexuality.

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CHAPTER ONE

“THE TRUTH IS...”–
LESBIAN NARRATIVES OF GENDER

FABIENNE JUNG

The chapter is based on work that examines the ways in which a variety of gay-identified¹ women relate to, oppose and/or reconstitute the most current socio-cultural narratives of femininity in the West through their own gendered stories and practices. How do they construct their own genders in a time of “new gender regimes” (Walby, 2002) when there is (supposedly) no more clear “other” (in the form of “heterosexual femininity”) to identify themselves against? It is a narrative study that takes the women’s stories and the complex interplay of connections between narrative, identity and everyday practices as its object of investigation. In *Concepts of the Self*, Elliott (2001: 2) emphasises that “[a]s directors of our own self-narratives, we draw upon psychic frames of memory and desire, as well as wider cultural and social resources, in fashioning the self”. Similarly, Plummer (2001: 43) points out that “[w]e come ‘to story’ our lives through the culture we live in, and we use this very culture as a way of ‘writing’ into ourselves who we are.” From as early as the 1950s, a number of social theorists have been talking about the “staged” (Goffman, 1959), “discursive” (Foucault, 1985), “performative” (Butler, 1990) and “storied” (Plummer, 1995) nature of identity in general and gender in particular. Conceptualising (gender) identities as “storied”, however, is “to sense an invented world of fantasy: of fiction, of fabrication, of ‘making up’” (Plummer, 1995: 167), which is far removed from the “pre-given inner core” naturalist approaches were keen to

¹ I use this term after careful consideration of the wishes of the women I interviewed. A number of them do not comfortably identify with the term “lesbian”, for various reasons, but all of them are happy to be called “gay”.

discover. Nevertheless, even as social scientists have conflicting views on the exact relationship between (personal and socio-cultural) stories and identity (see Andrews et al., 2000; Frosh, 1999, for examples), narrative scholars now largely agree that there is at least some correlation between the two and that it would be wrong to understand the storied self as necessarily “untrue” or inauthentic. Rather, they have recognised the need to transcend simple dualistic thinking and to re-define “truth” and “fiction” in the analysis of (storied) constructions of the self (see Plummer, 1995; Malson, 2000; Lawler, 2001; Evans, 2005; for examples).

As Lawler (2001: 254), amongst others, points out, conventional ideas of “truth” as applied in the positivist social sciences are not useful in this context. Plummer (1995: 171), for instance, distinguishes “narrative truth” from “historical truth” and highlights the impact the former can and does have on the individual psyche and gender practices. He points out that “the concern is less directly with matters of truth, and more with matters of consequence” (1995: 172). It is not the historical “facticity” of stories that counts so much as the way these stories influence particular interactions between individuals or groups of people in particular contexts. Even the most obviously fictional accounts or presentations of the self are meaningful, and therefore “true” on some level, if they enrich people’s imagination (Plummer, 1995: 171). Furthermore, the storied identity becomes authentic through the “frequent repetition” of particular stories and practices (Lawler, 2001: 252; Edwards, 2005: 6) and the “truth effects” (Malson, 2000: 156) this creates. Butler (1990: 43), for instance, talks of “gender performativity” as “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the *appearance of a substance*, of a natural sort of being”. In this sense gender identities are neither optional nor natural (Chinn, 1997: 300) and their authenticity depends on the frequency with which they are practiced rather than on some inner core that needs to be uncovered. A third point narrative theorists agree on is that the storied identity needs to be conceptualised as “momentarily true” rather than as “true” for all time and within any context (Plummer, 1995: 169; Lawler, 2001: 254). Analyses of the particular moments individuals choose to change their stories to better reflect who they think they have become are invaluable, because they reveal something about the relationship between individuals and the society they live in.

Talking about identities as storied, then, only becomes meaningful if we acknowledge that “truth” and “fiction” cannot easily be separated in the construction of the gendered self. In this chapter, I would like to contribute to the literature here introduced by concentrating on the

personal accounts of a number of gay-identified women who demonstrate an awareness of the of the “fictional” nature of many aspects of stories around gender, including their own, while acknowledging the impact these can and do have on their lived experiences because of the “truth effects” (Malson, 2000: 156) they create. The aim is to examine to what extent daily stories of the self reflect theoretical work on the permeable boundaries between “truth” and “fiction”.

The data illustrating the observations, arguments and reflections developed in this chapter were generated by collecting “topical life stories” (Plummer, 2001: 25) from 35 gay-identified women aged between 17 and 59 in 2004/2005². The 6 accounts here presented reflect the experiences of 5 women of a white British background and of one woman of Afro-Caribbean decent. All of them are educated to university level. I contacted them by advertising my research in *DIVA* magazine (05/04), through email-lists and snowballing. The interviews were carried out in the home of the participants, in my office or in public locations of their choosing. All interviews were tape-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Names and other details that would jeopardize the women’s anonymity in any way have been changed.

Gender Presentation as “Truth Effect”– Amy’s Story

Amy (27, academic) is keen to convey a strong and independent sense of self. Unlike many women, she does not understand existing gender “fictions” or gender stereotypes as a threat to her identity. On the contrary, we shall see that she consciously uses these to her advantage even as her own sense of self may be more ambiguous than she first admits.

I don’t really subscribe to the idea that there is masculine and feminine behaviour. I think these ideas are constructed and all the rest of it [...] I’ve never given much thought to my gender identity. I mean I am a woman, I was a girl, and I don’t challenge that in any way... I think I would probably find being read as a boy or getting funny looks in the ladies’ loos a lot more difficult if I didn’t have a clear idea that I am a woman and that I am a lesbian and that’s for me who I am. I have a strong sense of who I am. So it doesn’t bother me at all. It is not something I take very seriously.

² Rather than trying to grasp the fullness of these women’s lives, the aim was to get them to talk about their experiences of and beliefs about current socio-cultural narratives of femininity.

Amy's story suggests that her strong sense of self is not threatened by the way other people read her. While she is aware of popular Western narratives of gender and acknowledges that these "fictions" may be problematic for people who do not have a clear idea of who they are (and thus influence their gender practices daily), she states that her own gender identity is not at the forefront of her mind because she does not "really subscribe to the idea that there is masculine and feminine behaviour". At a first glance it may therefore seem that current gender "myths" do not have an impact on her sense of self at all, and she suggests as much. Indeed, she repeatedly implies that she knows she "is a woman and [she] is a lesbian" but that these identifiers do not have any meaning to her beyond some basic recognition of her physicality as a woman and her desire for other women. Nevertheless, while she may not struggle with or conform to Western gender expectations to the same extent as some of the other women I interviewed do, it soon becomes clear that even she does not occupy a clear position outside of recognisable gender "fictions". For example, Amy's admission later in the interview that being read incorrectly "is quite entertaining" to her suggests that her opposition to these gender "fictions" is not as detached from them as she here assumes. While she may not be participating in them directly, she nevertheless identifies herself against them in this instance. As Goffman (1961: 280) points out, "[i]t is...*against something* that the self can emerge". This self cannot easily be described as either "real" or "fictional", but rather as relational.

That Amy is aware of the relational nature of many gendered practices becomes clear from the following:

I am me, but I know that I am a lesbian and readable as a lesbian and I make a conscious effort to be readable as a lesbian. [...] I mean being read is about being able to tap into certain networks and... to make friends with people that you know you are gonna get on with, that sort of thing.

Amy here confirms that rejecting recognisable gender "fictions" at all costs is not always advantageous. She knows how to use the "truth effects" gender stereotypes create to her benefit. Her sense of agency is not lost (see highlights), even as existing *lesbian* gender narratives affect her lived experiences in a very real way. On the contrary, she uses them as a means to have access to spaces in which it is easier for her to express her sexuality more positively and to "be her" in a more meaningful way. Goffman's concept of "dramatic realization" comes to mind here. As Branaman (1997: Ixv) explains, "[d]ramatic realization is the process whereby individuals infuse their activity during a particular interaction

with signs to convey facts that otherwise might remain obscure”. Amy’s statement that she “makes a *conscious effort* to be readable as a lesbian” may be an example of this. Arguably, she is taking this “dramatic realization” one step further. She does not only invoke “signs to convey facts” about her “real” self that she wants others to be aware of, but she consciously presents herself in a way that complies with current lesbian gender “fictions” to convey these “facts” about herself. This “fictional” gendered *presentation* of herself only becomes meaningful to her because it ironically helps her reveal something about her identity that she feels is “true” on a deeper level. She hopes to find like-minded individuals who will embrace her as the person she understands herself to be. Again the permeable boundaries between “truth” and “fiction” are exposed. Mary Evans (2005: 44) talks in this context about the need to re-conceptualise our stories about our lives “in terms of accounts of negotiation, rather than definitive stories” and that only “then, perhaps, clearer understandings of individuals might emerge”. In other words, our stories and performances of our gender are never created in a vacuum, but in relation to other individuals, whole communities and cultural scripts that all help create gender “fictions” while at the same time infusing them with meaning and thus making them “real” to those that are affected by them.

Gender as Shifting and Relational – Jenna’s Story

Jenna, a white British filmmaker, was almost 30 at the time of the interview. Her account of her search for a sense of individuality when she first came out is a good example of the shifting and relational nature of gendered expressions of the self. Her relationship with her own mother and how it affected the way she expressed her gender identity is particularly interesting. Her mother is also gay-identified and raised her in an inner city queer community. Like many young women’s stories, Jenna’s revolves around the need to differentiate herself from her mother³. Coming out within a queer community in which gender and sexual politics converge made this quest for a sense of self even more important.

The thing is my mum always looked like a dyke. [...] When I first came out... I was very conscious of kind of like getting rid of a lot of like... [...] I guess in my late teens I was very femme. [...] I guess it was some kind of rebellion against where I came from.

³ See Friday, 1977; Kincaid, 1985; Steedman, 1986 for other examples of literary and academic texts on mother-daughter relationships and young women’s struggle to find a voice which is independent from their mother’s.

Although Jenna's message is fragmented and leaves a lot open to interpretation, her concern to express her gender differently from her mother at that time was not only an attempt to find her own voice or a sense of individuality, but also influenced by her desire to gain access to a world she had thus far felt excluded from – the heteronormative world⁴ many of her friends belonged to. Unlike many other young gay women I interviewed, Jenna did not need to be visibly gay when she first came out to be recognised/accepted as such and to gain access to a safe space where she could explore her sexuality. On the contrary, adopting a more recognisably feminine gender identity made her feel more accepted by her straight peers and their “normal families” as she saw them at the time, something which was important to her⁵. Whether consciously or not, then, being “femme” meant she challenged traditional views of the boundaries between “true” and “constructed” expressions of (lesbian) gender. While her gender practices were clearly influenced by a desire to rebel “against where [she] came from” and to gain a sense of self distinct from her mother's⁶, they also allowed her to live her life in a way that was at that time more meaningful, and therefore “true” to her. Choosing to express her gender that way further meant she exposed popular narratives of the “necessarily masculine” lesbian⁷ as less certain than commonly assumed (i.e. “I was very conscious of like getting rid of a lot of like...”). As Plummer (2001: 194) suggests in this context, “[i]t is not just what one *is*, but the whole panoply of responses from defining self and others who help shape the life cycle and the shifting sense of who one becomes”. In other words, who we are at any given moment depends on how we are understood and how we understand ourselves in relation to other individuals and the culture we live in. Even if we feel that our sense of self

⁴ I use this term here to express Jenna's desire to differentiate herself from the non-heteronormative aspects of the community she grew up in, rather than from its members' sexual identities.

⁵ Her interpretation of these families as “normal” is interesting. Even as it is not uncommon for teenagers to prefer their friends' families to their own, it seems plausible that Jenna had at that point internalised cultural narratives of acceptable family practices and was uneasy about not seeing her own experience reflected in them.

⁶ They are “fictional” in the sense that they emerged in relation to a community of practice and in interaction with other individuals who could have expressed their own gender identities in a multitude of different ways and therefore influenced Jenna's gendered expressions differently.

⁷ “Lesbian”, as an identity, needs to be used cautiously here too, of course. It is a term that means something slightly different to each individual and it is an identity that is not always permanent either.

is stable over time, the meaning of this self-expression will necessarily change within different social moments and therefore ultimately affect how we come to be known to others.

This idea of the self as “shifting” becomes apparent in Jenna’s account. She acknowledges that the way she conveys her gender identity has shifted several times over her life course. As she says, she does “not feel [she] need[s] to hold on to [just] one identity”. Her story thus adds yet another angle to the topic here discussed. It is a good example of the idea that at any given time gender identity is temporary or, more precisely, constantly being renegotiated and can therefore not easily be described as either “true” or “fictional” at any time. As Kenyon and Randall suggest, “restorying continually goes on within us” (Plummer, 2001: 187). While we may experience certain expressions of our gender as “true” at any given moment, these same expressions may soon become unsatisfactory and thus “fictional” to us. Thinking of gender in this way, however, is not useful in social research. Rather, the focus should be on why and when individuals change the stories they tell about themselves to better understand the correlations between individual identities, communities of practice, and society as a whole. Depending on her changing needs as an individual, to secure a sense of self-realisation (in relation to her mother, the queer community she lives in but also in relation to heteronormativity), Jenna’s expressions of gender shift to create “truth effects” which allow her to feel in control over who she is becoming. Whether or not these gendered expressions will feel “real” to her on a deeper level at any given time arguably depends on how successfully they provide her with a sense of individuality or comfort. It is therefore impossible to tell her gendered story in a meaningful way without trying to “transcend the habitual dualisms of Western thought” (Bradbury and Day Sclater, 2000: 198).

The Importance of Positive Stories – Alice’s Account

Alice (55, local government senior manager) who has lived a non-heteronormative lifestyle for over 20 years, recognises the need for new stories. While *she* has always resisted living her life according to the very few socio-cultural “scripts” available to lesbians⁸, she recognises the effects these have had on a lot of gay women’s life choices and experiences. For her, therefore, it is important to pass on her own “counter-stories” about her life.

⁸ It is impossible to know exactly to what extent the form this resistance takes, is influenced by these very “scripts”.

I like telling positive stories because things are very challenging for a lot of lesbians and I think that's horrible. The importance of my story is to say it does not have to be like that. We need positive stories. Then other people can see that these myths aren't true anymore.

By talking about her own, very positive (counter-normative) experiences Alice intends to influence other women's "imagined possibilities" (Evans, 2005: 44) and hence potentially affect some of their life choices (their "truths"). Her story and others like hers will help unravel the mythic nature of many cultural narratives of lesbian lives and make new, more positive collective life-stories possible. In this context, however, it will be important to raise a note of caution. While cultural and personal narratives undeniably contribute to shaping individuals' lived experiences in a myriad of ways, it would be careless to ignore the impact social and material realities can and do have on people's life choices. As Bradbury and Day Sclater (Andrews et al., 2000: 197) warn, "telling a good story does not, in fact, make everything ok". In other words, material realities can get in the way even as positive cultural scripts come into existence. Indeed, Alice's economic and cultural capital arguably make it easier for her to tell positive stories.

The Problem of "Narrative Fictions" and the Need for Alternative Stories – Katie's Account

While positive collective life-stories have been crucial for the emotional and sometimes physical survival of individuals of minority groups, Katie's (27, social researcher) account highlights the dangers of turning *any* version of lesbian life into a "meta-truth". Far from being unproblematic, even positive stories need to remain open to negotiation:

I had very idealistic ideals about lesbian relationships... there were aspects in my first relationship where, if she had been a man, I would have been more alert to some of the kind of power and control she tried to exert in the relationship. I don't think I would have let a man treat me in the same way.... So I think that it can be very damaging for lesbians in relationships to believe that there aren't gonna be any of these issues. They might not be fixed, they might not be attached to gender, because you're both the same gender, but it still exists anyway, you know.

Katie's story thus addresses the issue of inequality in same-sex relationships. Only over time did she realise that her ideals regarding her relationship with a woman did not match her own experience thereof. Kate

Millett's (1976/2000) *Sita* is a good example of the issues at stake here. In her auto/biography, she focuses on her plight after leaving her husband for a relationship she had idealised. While Millett was trapped by her own politics (Millett, 1968/2000), Katie's idealisation of her relationship with a woman 20 years on is also partly influenced by feminist writings of the 1970s that called for women-only spaces and romanticised female relationships. Whereas Alice's example above thus highlights the need for new, more empowering accounts to counteract the restrictive effects a multitude of myths around the lesbian identity have (had) on many gay women's lives, Katie's story points to the downside of (meta-)stories around identity politics. Here again a discussion of *Sita*, which is a powerful rendition of jealousy, obsessive, fading love and emotional blackmail, is useful. While reactions to it have ranged from “so powerful that it hooks the reader from the start” (Briscoe, [n.k.]) to calling it a “self-pitying drone”, what interests me here is that proponents of lesbian identity politics criticised it for expressing a version of lesbian experience which is *not* “uplifting”. Whereas the 1990s shift away from political definitions of lesbianism has opened up a space for multiple and fluid identities (Soenser Breen, 2002) which allows for a greater variety of both positive and negative accounts of lesbianism, a number of the stories still echo concerns about how to talk about lesbian relationships/genders without putting “the lesbian community” (which can be experienced as very “real” and necessary, but also as “fictive” and non-existent) on the line. Positive accounts are seen as crucial for both self-acceptance and being acceptable to a wider public. Several of the women I talked to expressed a fear of being seen as deviant. Katie's story, however, is a good example of the effects this fear to publicly address more negative issues around lesbian relationships/genders can have on real-life experiences. As she says, “we believe in things and because we believe in them they become true to us”. While narratives of lesbian relationships as egalitarian can have a positive effect on the way individual women understand their own relationships, which may influence these relationships and end up making them more egalitarian (the story becomes their truth), Katie's account reminds us of the dangers of any meta-narratives, no matter how positive they may be. They can make us blind to “real” situations, or worse, make it impossible for us to tell stories of abuse (or have them heard).

Identities as Complex and Multi-layered – Louisa’s Story

Louisa (22, student) describes herself as “a sort of half Muslim, half Christian of a working class origin, Black” gay woman. As her account unfolds, it becomes clear that the way she expresses her gender and her sexuality gives her the opportunity to counter hegemonic accounts of the Muslim woman, the Black woman, the gay woman and Western femininity more generally. On a lot of levels, hers is the most obvious account of a clear recognition of the complex interplay of various positions in relation to race, gender, class and religious in understandings of the self. What is most interesting about her story in this context is that in order to make other people understand the full complexity of her gender, she feels she has to overemphasise certain aspects of her identity to create a “truth effect” which most closely resembles how she identifies:

My dad’s Muslim and my mum’s Christian. My dad’s never had much influence on my life, neither has Islam. Still... any time people ask me I always say I am Muslim as well, because I am... although I am not religious at all. But I think Islam obviously has these negative connotations at the moment. So in a sense I always say it because people don’t expect it. I can’t be because I’m gay and am in drag from time to time and don’t wear a headscarf. And I’m like “why can’t I be Muslim? Because I eat bacon sandwiches or what?” ...When I was born I was taken to a Mosque as opposed to a Church.[...] To me to be able to stand up and say I’m from African and Caribbean descent and I’m gay is important.

It becomes obvious that Louisa is anxious to convey a sense of the complexity of her identity. She is fighting stereotypes on several levels. In that sense, hers is a story of reclaiming agency. It is possible for her to express different aspects of her identity which most current narratives of race, gender, religion and sexuality would not allow her to. She is thus very clear about the fictitious nature of these narratives. Interestingly, in order to resist these and to tell a new, more accurate story (or to construct a gendered self that feels more “real” to her), she uses some creative license in her account. She is very aware of what is expected of Muslim women, and although she is not religious, it is important to her to fight the “myths” about Muslim femininity. Her way of doing so is by announcing she is half Muslim when it is least expected—in queer contexts, where she often presents herself in drag. Although this is important to her on a political level, to fight the “negative connotations” Islam is currently faced with, it is also important to her on a more personal, emotional level. It is “establishing a marker, saying that [she is] from mixed parentage and that

[she] can be a bit of everything”, something society often does not allow individuals like her to be. Indeed, Sylvia Plath’s protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, Esther, is a good example of someone who fails under this pressure. Unlike Louisa, Esther is at the conclusion of *The Bell Jar* “a person who has agreed to play a social role” (Evans, 2005: 3), to live within the constraints of the gendered “fictions” available to her.

Audre Lorde’s auto/biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is one of the most powerful literary examples of accounts which demonstrate the “tension between telling a story faithful to one’s own experience, and writing against the mythic structures or foundational “truths” of dominant social groups” (Soenser Breen, 2002). The term “auto/biomythography” is here used to reflect the dangers of (having to) draw(ing) a clear line between fiction and non-fiction in accounts of the self. Doing so can be damaging to that self. This becomes especially important if that self is placed in a political and socio-cultural climate that has specific expectations of certain identities. By allowing her Muslim identity to take prevalence, even though she admits that Islam has never much influenced her, Louisa modifies an aspect of her identity to benefit both her own subjectivity, and that of others in a similar situation. She resists dominant cultural narratives of race, gender and religion with an autobiographical account that “transforms a personal issue into a public one” (Riessman, 2000). As Portelli suggests, “[w]e may even know that some statements are factually wrong: and yet “such “wrong” statements [may] still [be] psychologically “true” and... this truth may be equally important as factually reliable accounts” (Plummer, 2001: 238-239).

As we have just seen, Louisa is not afraid to tell stories against the grain, (even if they are factually not entirely accurate) not only to convey a better sense of the complexity of her own identity, but also to contribute to “imagined possibilities” around Muslim femininity and gender more generally. At the same time, however, she acknowledges that from time to time it is “easier to just fall into the categories” people want you to fall into rather than “trying to deal with the politics of how to fit in”. While she is thus highly aware of the contradictory ways in which her “multiple selves” are stereotyped and consciously tries to convey a sense of the heterogeneous nature of her gendered identity, she is first and foremost looking for a good life. When asked whether it is ever important to her to fit in she says:

I think that I like to be on the inside but with the ability to step outside, just because it’s what I’m interested in. [...] I don’t necessarily want to be in a category that’s different from the rest of society. [...] I argue a lot with people about a lot of things to do with gender and sexuality [but] I like my

life to be easy. I have different groups of people that I hang out with and I will adapt my ways of thinking to deal with each set of people that I'm with. [...] I will change how I am depending on who I'm with just because it's easier. [...] It is quite easy to adapt. Because you have to. [...] It's always like my mindset will change [...] it changes into probably 4 or 5 different cycles of different levels about what sort of gender you'd fit into.

Doing a degree in sociology and hanging around a London queer scene has helped Louisa develop her interest in and understanding of gender as constructed. Despite her fascination with the performative nature of gender, however, she does not want to be different by all means. While her desire to assert her Muslim heritage is important to her on a more publicly moral level (given the current images of Islam and Muslim femininity) as well as on a personal level (to stress the complexity of her identity), she prefers not to be permanently confrontational when it comes to issues around gender and sexuality. Given the many layers of her identity, however, asserting her "sameness" only becomes possible by tapping into various social networks that allow her to explore each one of her "many selves" separately. While these are analysed in more detail elsewhere (Jung, 2006), what is important here is that Louisa's story is a great example of the idea that our identities are multi-layered and constructed in interaction with other human agents, even though we are often expected as moral human beings to present our identity as a "unitary self". That these "coherent selves" can never be anything but fictional seems to become clear here. Interestingly, however, being able to present a holistic sense of ourselves is still often key to be seen as believable as a person. Louisa has learnt to adapt "just because it's easier" as she says. Even so, she never loses her agency. On the contrary, she seems to move with relative ease between these various situated contexts. Within each, she consciously taps into aspects of her identity that are expected and acceptable to avoid unnecessary confrontation. While all of them may be more or less "true" expressions of her gender identity, they are always just partial and therefore inaccurately reflect all the intricacies of her identity. Stories like Louisa's will hopefully help engender "knowledge that disrupts old certainties and allows us to glimpse something of the complexities of human lives, selves and endeavours" (Andrews, Day Sclater, Squire & Tamboukou, 2003). Her account should make us aware of the multitude of ways in which we foreground as well as hide aspects of our identities for self-protection.

The “Unitary Self” – Rebecca’s Story

For Rebecca (27, postgraduate student) too, issues of self-presentation are tied in with issues of self-protection and hence at the forefront of her mind. She is familiar with existing popular narratives around lesbian genders and the “truth effects” various ways of self-presentation can therefore create. While she is keen to experiment with various sartorial styles, it is important to her that the way she finally presents herself remains stable:

It’s really weird, you know. But depending on the length of my hair I feel like I have to hold myself and dress very differently. When I have long hair, I like my surfer gear and my whole attitude is a bit boyish. As soon as my hair is short, and I mean really short, I feel like I have to girl it up a bit, otherwise I feel uncomfortable. I guess I am aware of what these different looks express to others. I don’t want to look too dykey nor too feminine.

The different ways in which lesbian genders have been typecast and hence generally understood influence Rebecca’s choices of self-presentation. She is very aware that far from being neutral, her gender is constructed in interaction with others. She does not want to be seen as “too dykey nor too feminine”. We get a sense that it is important to her to express her gender in a way that does not comply with current stereotypes of femininity and of lesbianism, possibly because she feels that they do not fully express who she is. At the same time she likes to experiment with different styles. In order to be continuously read in a particular way, then, she consciously changes her behaviour to match her changing styles in a manner that does not influence the way other people relate to her. Rebecca’s account demonstrates the very subtle but complex ways in which it is possible to create the sense of a unitary, stable self, which is nonetheless ever changing.

Finally, then, “the Truth is...”

The stories discussed in this chapter demonstrate that as individuals, we engage with gender in a multitude of ways and that apparent non-fiction can include a great deal of fiction. As Stanley points out, “telling apart fiction, biography and autobiography is no easy matter” (1992: 125). Gay-identified women in particular, often have a heightened awareness of the artificiality of gender categories because they have long been positioned as “other” in this model. This means that gender becomes a highly reflexive project for these women. While Katie’s concern with narratives that

portray lesbian relationships as necessarily egalitarian shows how important it is to oppose meta-narratives (meta-fictions), as they can have a negative impact on women's lives, many stories here discussed show that it is possible to engage with gendered fictions creatively, as long as they are recognised as such and ever changing. This uneasy distinction between "truth" and "fiction" does therefore not necessarily have to be problematic. On the contrary, telling our lives through "auto/biomythographies" can lead to changing attitudes about (lesbian) genders and help individuals live a good life.

As already indicated, it is important to point out that political and material conditions can have a great impact on the success of narratives that aim to "meaningfully transform lives, selves and cultures" (Bradbury et al.: 197). Furthermore, as social researchers we have to acknowledge the importance of work that looks for aspects of identities that lie beyond the stories people tell about themselves (i.e. Craib, 2000; Frosh, 1999). The aim of this paper, was to demonstrate that cultural and personal stories can, and in these women's cases do, have an impact on how individuals define themselves and how they relate to others. Even if we understand the stories we tell about ourselves as "fictions", the accounts above demonstrate that these "fictions" influence our lived experiences in very real ways. That stories are not all "equally valid or invalid, truthful or deceptive" (Plummer, 1995: 169) should not deter us from "evaluating just what it is that is being constructed" (Plummer, 2001: 238) and how this determines whom we become.

Finally, conceptualising these women's stories as their "preferred stories/identities" (Riessman, 2000) opens up a space for debate about the researcher's own position as storyteller. While my access to their lives is limited to the stories they tell me about this life, my research aims will also shape the way I use these women's stories to tell my own. There is always necessarily a "performative element" to telling a story. Rather than revealing these stories as inauthentic, however, this "performative element" highlights that they are "situated, constantly re-negotiated and accomplished in social interaction" (Riessman, 2000: 6). As long as the research process is not obscured, conceptualising the researcher as storyteller seems to be useful.

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