

---

# Navigating silences, disavowing femininity and the construction of lesbian identities

Sarah Cefai, Gender Institute, London School of Economics, [S.Cefai@lse.ac.uk](mailto:S.Cefai@lse.ac.uk)

---

## Navigating Silences

As an undergraduate student in geography at the University of Edinburgh, I eagerly traced “geographies of sexuality” references, drawing maps and locating myself within them. I had never before come across such an earnest confrontation, in public discourse, with the rawness of social exclusion as it is experienced by many lesbians. It was not long however, before the sense of social exclusion that the geographical literature spoke of, became the very sense that I associated with my attempts to feel included as a subject of those representations. This sense of exclusion further resonated with my life experiences of the lesbian spaces that were being represented, and perhaps because I so sought inclusion there, seemed especially pronounced in the spaces of gay bars.

At the heart of these exclusions was a profound sense of displacement from lesbian identities and spaces, as well as an equally profound sense of the discursive silence that surrounded it. This displacement was no doubt refracted through different aspects of personal history, but, above all, I could not get over how femininity kept showing up as *the* reason why I did not feel included as a subject of representation. To get close to the pleasures of identification, as a “straight looking”<sup>i</sup> woman (who had never looked in the mirror and seen anything “straight”), I needed to cast off, to disavow, my attachment to, and desire for, femininity. The sense of exclusion that I experienced in lesbian bars, and in relation to lesbian magazines, iconography and so on, similarly seemed to pivot around “femininity” as somehow a marking of my outsider status within those spaces or representation.<sup>ii</sup>

In many ways, my undergraduate dissertation functioned as a conduit for my frustration at the silence surrounding these related exclusions. By enabling me to explore exclusionary notions of what it meant to be a “lesbian” as necessarily socially constructed, I was given a platform from which to explore how it was that inclusion in “lesbian spaces” was not actually contingent on “being” lesbian, but rather, on other socially constructed, interrelated practices of identity.<sup>iii</sup> Some of these frustrations stay with me, and my revisions of them have been more recently influenced by my participation on the MSc Gender programme at the LSE. As I hope will become clear then, this paper has been written as a “reply” not only to “geographies of sexuality”, but also to gender and queer studies more broadly.

In the first section of this paper, I will further illustrate what I mean by my claim that “geographies of sexuality”<sup>iv</sup> are exclusionary of feminine lesbians. In the second section, I situate this exclusion as an effect of the ways in which representations of feminine lesbians are framed by dominant forms of identity politics and queer theory. I focus on how femininity as been positioned in relation to notions of a) heteronormativity, b) visibility, and c) queer culture, in ways which fail to recognise the re-privileging of masculinity as problematic for subjects of queer or feminist desire. In the last section, I argue that the disavowal of femininity is *the* historically contingent structure of lesbian identity in contemporary Western cultures, and that, on this basis, attempts to ground ethical feminist knowledges in preconceived notions of lesbian identity need to be problematised.

## Passing Geographies of Sexuality

“[...] its origins as a form of lesbian style lie not in a reaction against heterosexual hegemony but in a political backlash against the ideological rigidity of lesbian feminism and androgynous style . . . The realisation that

the hyperfeminine woman is a lesbian may be surprising and therefore disruptive but it does not undermine the power invested in patriarchy.”  
David Bell, Jon Binnie, Julia Cream and Gill Valentine (1994: 42-43)

“[...] some lesbians appear to negotiate a sexual identity either by deliberately ‘playing’ a heterosexual role or by unconsciously ‘fitting in’, not admitting or representing their homosexuality and therefore effectively projecting a heterosexual identity through the way they present themselves physically to others.”  
Gill Valentine (1993b: 241-242)

“[...] there is a danger of the aestheticization of politics wherever style is used as a mode of transgression . . . significant social change requires organised action in the public sphere and access to various resources, including the media, rather than individualistic, privatised action.”  
Nancy Duncan (1996b: 138)

I have chosen these three excerpts because they illustrate the way in which the representation of feminine lesbians within “geographies of sexuality” is framed by a particular discussion on identity politics. Literature within the field of “geographies of sexuality” demonstrates how gender, sex and sexuality are “spaced” (Probyn, 1995). Far from neutral, space is shown to be highly constructed and contested, emanating heteronormative and patriarchal power relations (Duncan, 1996b; Valentine, 1993a). Geographies of sexuality have thus consolidated (around) representations of lesbians and gay men in space, with particular regard to the ways in which these are revealing of, and contingent upon, other organisations of space and identity, such as those determined through constructions of nationality, race and gender. As a major contributor to this field, Gill Valentine (1993a; 1993b; 1996) has traced lesbian articulations of space, demonstrating that even though the hegemonic performance of space is heterosexual, spaces are “rarely being produced in a singular, uniform way as heterosexual” (Valentine, 1996: 150). From this perspective, public displays of affection between women render tangible not only lesbian desires and identities but, through the possibility of non-heterosexuality, the fractured and unstable nature of normative heterosexual singularity. As Valentine (1993a) notes, lesbians are subjected to heterosexual authority through both the direct policing of (public) affections and also, the policing of gender norms that are seen to regulate sexual behaviour. It is within this perspective that the policing of gender must be challenged specifically in terms of the always already decided upon complicity between femininity and patriarchy, that feminine lesbians are placed.

In these excerpts, the very exclusionary premise of identity politics that queer theory seeks to jostle, resurfaces, feeding the perspective that on the basis that they “pass” as heterosexual (whereas lesbians whose femininity is more ambiguous or “less” normative might not) feminine lesbians are more complicit with patriarchy and therefore, less adversely affected by heterosexism; less excluded by the cultural and epistemic violence of the “heterosexual contract” (Wittig, 1980) or “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, 1980). Thus, the only way that the “adoption” of feminine “style” can be conceived of in resistant terms, is as a “backlash against the ideological rigidity of lesbian feminism and androgynous style” (Bell *et al.*, 1994: 42, my emphasis). Beyond the possibility of “contributing to the *disintegration* of the lesbian feminist project (and spaces)” (*ibid.*: 43, my emphasis), further ramifications of even this (tapered) reading of feminine lesbians are not considered.

It is these claims that lead me to ask why it is that feminine lesbian identities are positioned contemporarily as a “backlash against”, as anti-lesbian, as temporary – ahistorical beyond a second wave feminist context – and as in opposition to the emergence of lesbian cultures around the time of second wave feminism? Why is it that they are not seen as necessarily historically contingent upon, and intimately connected with, the lives of (perhaps feminine) lesbians throughout different contexts and times? Why does it go *unnoticed* that the historical emergence of queer masculinity<sup>v</sup>, the ways in which contemporary representations of boyish and butch lesbians are historically connected with the “invert” of sexology discourse, necessarily has implications for the ways in which lesbian femininities can then (not equally) be the subjects of representation? Why is it that feminine lesbian solidarity is negated as an outcome of “individualistic, privatised

action" (Duncan, 1996b: 138), whereas "looking like a lesbian", reinscribing visible signifiers of being or becoming lesbian, are thought to already contain an inherent political integrity resistant to heteronormativity?<sup>vi</sup> Why should a feminine lesbian be defined by her stylistic transgression any more or less than any other member of a lesbian community? Why is it that from a queer perspective lesbian femininity is so easily discussed as gender normative privilege (which of course, in many ways, it is), whereas lesbian masculinity is never problematised as a possible form of privilege, both in the sense that techniques of "masculinity" (as defined by patriarchal culture) are techniques of power<sup>vii</sup> and that within lesbian communities female masculinity is an historically privileged site in the construction of lesbian identities (Walker, 2001)? In short, why is it that the excerpts cited above orient a discussion on lesbian femininity around second wave (white, straight, Western) feminism (which in some respects saw "femininity" as *the* feminist problem) as the centre, as the true measure of feminist resistance? What is the possibility of approaching femininity from other centres?

## Beyond Geographies of Sexuality

### 1. Femininity and Heteronormativity

These questions return us to an integral point of departure for queer and feminist thought, which is the further theorisation of the specificities of "gender" and "sexuality" in a variety of cultural contexts.<sup>viii</sup> Specifically, we need to explore the ways in which the terms "gender" and "sexuality" - theorised as discrete at certain ontological and epistemological moments, yet collapsible at others - shape the ways in which feminine lesbian identities can be thought.<sup>ix</sup> The policing of lesbian sexuality through the policing of gender identity (what is defined as normatively feminine/normatively not feminine in any given cultural and historical context) has been a popular subject of critical discussion among many queer feminist theorists. What is continually neglected within this discussion, is the way in which the deployment of gender as a signifier of, yet not reducible to, sexuality, also structures a rift, a slippage, that as a feminine lesbian I seem to fall into, yet must simultaneously negotiate as I propel myself into the images it offers, of a legitimate "lesbian in space".

This slippage produced in "geographies of sexuality" is also constructed in Judith Butler's (1990; 1991) theory of performativity, upon which the theoretical basis of many spatial approaches to the performance of identities have been based (for example, see Bell and Valentine, 1995 and Duncan, 1996a).<sup>x</sup> For Butler, the policing of sexuality *through* gender is testament to the fact that gender and sexuality are interrelated primarily through relationships of prohibition; "If gender is more than a "stigma," a "tag" that one wears, but is, rather, a normative institution which seeks to regulate those expressions of sexuality that contest the normative boundaries of gender, then gender is one of the normative means by which the regulation of sexuality takes place" (1997a: 27). Following Wittig (1980) and to a lesser extent Rich (1980),<sup>xi</sup> Butler formulates the regulatory function of the heterosexual matrix as an effect of the assumption "that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (1990: 151n6). At the regulatory heart of this discursive matrix of intelligibility, is the socially constructed "fiction" of an *a priori* "sex." Thus from this perspective, rather than reinvest in heterosexuality or homosexuality as stable and foundational identities which reproduce "sex" as a determining factor of sexual, emotional and political life, the desired effect of queer practice is to "reveal the original [heterosexuality] to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and original" (ibid.: 31).

In its hegemonic constitution, there is no outside to gender; our very "existence is already decided *by* gender" (Butler, 1993: x) and as such, relations of heterosexual desire amongst men and women do not require signifying practices separate from those already contained within the construction male/female. Effectively then, discourses of gender through which we come to be, do not lend us signifying practices beyond those particular to heterosexuality. In the absence of signifying practices specific to being and becoming lesbian, lesbians only have available those normatively gendered (i.e. heterosexual) signs to reconfigure and reinscribe relations of desire as specifically lesbian or queer. As Other is to Self, "femininity" always already contains the spectre of masculinity and as such, the

oppositional structure of heterosexuality.<sup>xii</sup> This spectre goes unrecognised unless femininity is reconfigured as distinct from its "normative" constitution. Given that feminine lesbians perform "normative" femininity, lesbian femininity can only ever be interpreted as a (parody of) heterosexual femininity. In setting up transgendered lesbian identities as oppositional to, and subversive of, normative heterosexuality, Butler not only confines the possibility of subversion to female masculinity as a destabilising binary move (Prosser, 1998), but does not connect the disavowal of femininity that sustains this move as necessarily implicated in the disavowal of feminine lesbian's claims to lesbian identities. Thus, the feminine lesbian is figured as an archetypal Foucauldian "docile body" (Foucault, 1980), a subject of perpetual failure who reinvests the very systems that deny her existence, authenticating their regulatory capacity to determine the ways in which she can live her gendered self by claiming them as her own.

Further to this, the hegemonic effect of heterosexuality determines that any reconfiguration of normative femininity can occur only in relation to masculinity, that subversion is always recuperated by the oppositional site masculinity. This mode of transgression always foregrounds the sexed binary male/female. The intention to signify lesbian desire has to recall masculinity and thus has the effect of constituting masculinity as the mode of lesbian desire. So, although the constitution of lesbian identities can and does signify a subversion of heteronormativity, it is only through the reconfiguration of "normative" femininity. Such a model of "lesbian identity" re-privileges masculinity and masculine formulations of desire as oppositionally predicated in gender difference (in the subordination and objectification of femininity), rather than in other kinds of difference (for example, age or nationality). Consequently, feminine lesbians are not only necessarily excluded as possible subjects of transgression, but any such experiences of exclusion fail to be recognised as the very condition of masculine privilege.

## **2. Femininity and Visibility**

I would like to further explore the ways in which representations of feminine lesbian desire always seem to invoke a masculine referent,<sup>xiii</sup> in terms of the contingency of the relationship between visibility and desire. My point of departure is that the conceptual lines that demarcate "sexuality" from "gender" coincide with those drawn along a visible/not visible axis.<sup>xiv</sup> That sexually specific bodies are known as male or female (or even both/somewhere in-between) is a relation of knowledge specific to the ways in which it is afforded by sight. Foucault's notion of "bio-power" (1976) is of much insight here, given that it is the inscription of social norms upon the surfaces of bodies, combined with the ability of social and medical scientific discourses to claim authority over the meanings of "sex", that marks for him the direct exercise of power on our bodies. Amongst other things, what "sexuality" contains for us is precisely what cannot be seen - a kind of irrational, emotional, erotic excess to gender - and it is perhaps on this basis, that sexuality is subjected to the controlling function of other identities, namely, gendered ones. The designation of sexuality as an impasse to the kind of knowledges afforded by sight can therefore be taken as a culturally specific context for the ways in which gender gets taken up as a signifier of sexuality at the level of identity. To clarify then, gender pertains to sexuality at the level of identity because, simply put, you cannot see lesbian, gay or bisexual the way that you can see masculinity and femininity (or the corollary "man"/"woman"). Within Butler's theory of performativity, irrespective of her intentions, a feminine woman is necessarily seen to parody the idea of female feminine heterosexuality. Thus, on the basis that her so called parody is invisible as anything other than "straight acting" she is both denied her queer identity and positioned as politically valueless for a queer project. I contend that it is because queer challenges to the heterosexual matrix are theorised from within this visibility paradigm of identity that "normative" femininity can only ever be recognised as heterosexual.

The visibility paradigm of identity is also problematic in that it does not challenge masculinist objectivity as the historically privileged site of knowledge production. Masculinist objectivity conflates disembodied "vision", ways of seeing abstracted from material context, with authoritative claims to rational knowledge (Haraway, 1991; Rose, 1997). As such, subjects of knowledge are conceived of as politically neutral and divorced from the implications of their knowledge production in social contexts. It seems therefore, that ethical feminist knowledges need to problematise visibility as the grounds of knowledge claims, with respect both to the subordination of other kinds of knowledges that

are not rendered visually tangible, as well as to the perspectival nature of vision, which cannot help but reproduce the political investments those who are looking, as well as those are seen, in the construction of politically interested knowledges.

If we return to Butler's definition of the heterosexual matrix, she tells us that gender is "oppositionally and hierarchically defined *through* the compulsory practice of *heterosexuality*" (1990: 151n6, my emphasis). Thus, could it be argued, that the performance of gender across relations of non-heterosexual desire is already, in itself, a contestation of "normative" gender? It seems that if transgression can only occur through *exteriorising* the disruption of the coherence between masculinity/femininity and male/female bodies (Prosser, 1998), this is because "gender" is split off from "sexuality" (in a way that echoes the sex/gender distinction, whilst claiming to revoke it), precisely at the point when it becomes visible to us. This means that feminine lesbians are always positioned in an abstracted regime of gender codes, rather than within a matrix of desires, political consciousness, ethnic ties, queer belongings, class and cultural locations and so on. It is the negation of all the ways in which feminine gender identity is produced from within specific contexts of struggle and resistance that enables her representation as essentially passive.<sup>xv</sup> Clearly, that feminine lesbians do not *visibly* disrupt normative gender, renders the meaning and direction of desire insignificant and external to "femininity" as an always already subordinated term.

### **3. Femininity and Cultural Contingency**

Sexuality studies literature traces material and historical culturally defined notions of being a lesbian, having a lesbian identity and looking like a lesbian. Historically, since the emergence of the "invert" (Doan, 1998; Munt, 1998; Vicinus, 1992) and more recently, since the emergence of butch-femme cultures during the 1940s (Munt, 1997; Walker, 2001), lesbian identity has consolidated around the image of the butch. From the 1950s onwards, representations of lesbian and gay resistance to the institutionalisation of heteronormativity have been characterised by the celebrated reversal of negative stereotypes (Walker, 2001). This has been interpreted as a political backlash against the construction of discrete and categorical sexualities as deviant, and the ways in which these have then come to signal the existence of different kinds of subject, by medical and scientific discourses since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Walker, 2001), or against the rise of, what is known in Foucault's terms, as "bio-power" (1976). What remains to be explored, is the way in which the subjection of feminine lesbians to a gaze that is culturally and historically invested in the production of lesbian identities as visibly "lesbian" informs their social exclusion.<sup>xvi</sup>

If, in certain Western cultural spheres, this gay visibility has at least debunked the assumption that all women are heterosexual, it has also re-authenticated the category of the sexual invert as the only, or more, genuine subject of queer desire. The ensuing notion that less feminine women might also be less heterosexual, also seems to be inevitably validated by the kind of subversion that Butler advocates. I worry that if the homophobic notion "lesbians look like men" has been succeeded by the notion that "lesbians look like lesbians", we are drastically failing to destabilise the power relations that essentialise identity categories through stabilising their meanings at the surface of the skin. Along with Sue O'Sullivan I agree that "there is just enough, just about enough, consciousness of the possibility of lesbianism, to make it just about possible to sexualise uncertainty" (1999: 472). The possibility of this "just enough" though, is refracted through a politics of gender, lending itself more easily to those women who "look like lesbians".

### **Disavowing Femininity**

The representation of feminine lesbians must be both queer and feminist, in that categories of sexuality, as with those of "the body", are not gender neutral, but figured through the binary and hierarchical opposition of male/female (Grosz, 1995). It can therefore be said that if "lesbian" is taken to be gender neutral, the subsuming of gender to sexuality in representations of sexual subjectivity will always overlook the prioritising of masculinity and subsequent disavowal of femininity as *the* historically contingent structure of lesbian identity in contemporary Western cultures. Put another way, it is what has the

*appearance* of historical presence that gets taken up as the legitimate grounds for mobilising an identity politics, and as long as this goes unrecognised, feminine lesbians can only ever be positioned as history-less, as lacking historical validity. My contention is that unless otherwise stated, knowledges grounded in "lesbian" and "dyke" identities cannot help but repeat the disavowal of femininity that is invested, historically, in positioning feminine lesbians as marginal to the emergence of lesbian cultures. It is only through the identity "lesbian femme" that feminine lesbians can be positioned contemporarily within a queer trajectory. Yet, even then, "femme" identities inevitably recall a butch/femme coupling as the source of their visibility and authenticity, for which the possibility of active desire looms close in the masculinity of the butch, whose image alone, can mark lesbian desire in ways that images of femmes, simply do not (O'Sullivan, 1999).

For queer feminist studies, resistance to mainstream images of "Woman" for, and defined by, men consolidates around the contestation of rigid codes of dress and behaviour, often invoking female masculinity (or its possibility). The argument that boyish and butch lesbian identities politicise gender through their denaturalisation of patriarchal definitions of femininity therefore draws wide consensus and has been one of the founding points for the emergence of destabilising geographies of gender and sexuality (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Chouinard and Grant, 1996; Duncan, 1996b; Valentine, 1993a; 1993b). These challenges to patriarchy not only coincide with the cultural visibility of lesbianism, but have become mutually constitutive with the ways in which representations of lesbians are discursively produced and normatively experienced (for examples, see Atkins, 1998).

These are also not the *only* challenges to patriarchy; I would like to see a more varied exploration of the heterogeneity of queer subjects, that does not foreclose the plurality of resistance around a particular assumed nature of "visibility" and a corresponding particular assumed nature of "patriarchy" that get conflated through an abstracted, universalising representation of "power" that only ever allows us to theorise "feminine women" as oppressed. This politics of location approach that foregrounds the situatedness of power relations would enable us to think through the ways in which lesbian femininity is spatially and temporally contingent.<sup>xvii</sup> This would mean that, rather than stabilising "femininity" as an identity abstracted from, or mapped into, different contexts, by working "more deeply in and against . . . the local" (Probyn, 1990: 186), contexts could be explored for the ways in which they *produce* femininities. This might prevent the ways in which femininities are lived from being reduced to singular notions of identity reproductive and reflective of already decided upon types of people.<sup>xviii</sup> As such, understanding the performance of different femininities ("high" or "working class" femme, for example) in different spaces (for example at work or in a gay bar,) could begin with the question of how different identities, knowledges, or differences (such as "race") produce different kinds of femininities. Taking differences seriously therefore, means focusing on the ways in which exclusion always takes place through the situated connectivity of multiple axis or effects of power, that cannot be deduced to abstracted notions of linear or totalising domination. This approach might have the effect of producing representations of resistance that capture the multilayered, multifaceted, contradictory and unpredictable ways in which power struggles are lived.<sup>xix</sup>

In this paper I hope to have demonstrated that the ways in which we theorise "gender" and "sexuality" are always political, always already invested in privileging the authenticity of some experiences of identity over others. Specifically, I have argued that the framing of "femininity" within dominant versions of queer theory and identity politics problematically re-privileges masculinity as *less* invested in heteropatriarchy, as a more liberated mode of desire and identity. I also hope to have drawn your attention the ways in which particular framings of gender (that often reproduce an unethical and unhelpful theory/practice divide), work to obscure the locations of knowledge production, enabling scholarship to reproduce its authors as the Subjects of (masculine) knowledges through the construction of its (feminine) Others. The question of how feminine lesbians should be represented requires us to think carefully about the relationship between queer and feminist theory, reminding us that a feminist lens sensitive to the historical privileging of masculinity and, that a queer lens sensitive to the fluidity of difference, especially gender difference, are both necessary to understand the ways in which relations between "women" are power inflected, thus contesting "Woman" itself, as an assumed, monolithic subject. I am, of course, also calling for the possibility of representing feminine lesbians

as subjects of knowledge and struggle, but without allowing the “feminine lesbian” to be stabilised as an(other) abstracted, singular identity.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to say thanks to Kath Brown and Jo Sharp for their helpful suggestions, Mike for listening during undergraduate days, Laura for doing much the same now, and Clare for her supportive reflections on the issues raised in this paper.

### References

- Atkins**, Dawn (1998) *Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender Communities*, London and New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Bell**, David and Gill **Valentine** (1995) (eds.) *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Bell**, David Jon Binnie, Julia Cream and Gill Valentine (1994) 'All hyped up and no place to go' *Gender, Place and Culture*, 1 (1): 31-47.
- Butler**, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge.
- (1991) 'Imitation and gender insubordination' in Fuss, D. (ed.) *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, London and New York: Routledge: 13-31.
- (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London and New York: Routledge.
- (1997) "Against proper objects" in Weed, E. and N. Schor (eds.) *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1-30.
- Camilleri**, Anna and Chloë Brushwood **Rose** (eds.) (2002) *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*, Arsenal Pulp Press: Vancouver.
- Chouinard**, Vera and Ali **Grant** (1996) "On being not even anywhere near 'the project': Ways of putting ourselves in the picture" in Duncan, N. (ed.) *Bodyspace*, London and New York: Routledge: 170-193.
- Crocker**, Elizabeth and Laura **Harris** (1997) *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Doan**, Laura (1998) "Homosexualities: Introduction" in Bland, L. and L. Doan (eds.) *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, London: Polity: 41-72.
- Duncan**, Nancy (ed.) (1996a) *Bodyspace*, London and New York: Routledge.
- (1996b) 'Renegotiating gender and sexuality in public and private spaces' in Duncan, N. (ed.) *Bodyspace*, London and New York: Routledge. Chapter 8: 127-145.
- Frankenberg**, Ruth and Lata **Mani** (1992) "Crosscurrents, crosstalk: Race, "postcoloniality" and the politics of location" in L. Grossberg *et al.* (eds.) *Cultural Studies*, Routledge: 292-310.
- Foucault**, Michel (1980) "Body/Power" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Brighton: Harvester Press. Interview, June 1975. Edited and translated by Colin Gordon.
- (1976) *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, London: Penguin Books. Translated from French by Robert Hurley, 1998 publication.
- Grosz**, Elizabeth (1995) *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Halberstam**, Judith (1998) *Female Masculinity*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Haraway**, Donna (1991) "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective" in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, London: Free Association Books.
- Hemmings**, Clare (1999) "Out of sight, out of mind? Theorising femme narrative" *Sexualities*, 2 (4): 451-464.
- (2001) "Partiality, feminist and queer research", 'Feminism – Sexualita – Gender', special issue of *Cargo: A Journal of Socio-cultural Anthropology*, 3 (4).
- Johnston**, Lynda and Gill **Valentine** (1995) 'Wherever I lay my girlfriend, that's my home: The performance and surveillance of lesbian identities in domestic

- environments' in Bell, D. and G. Valentine (eds.) *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, London and New York: Routledge: 99-113.
- Martin**, Bidy (1998) "Sexualities without genders and other queer utopias" in Merck, M., Segal, N. and E. Wright (eds.) *Coming Out of Feminism?*, Oxford: Blackwell: 11-35.
- Mohanty**, Chandra Talpade (1988) "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses" *Feminist Review* (30): 61-88.
- (1992) "Feminist encounters: Locating the politics of experience" in Phillips, A. and M. Barrett (eds.) *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, California: Stanford University Press: 74-92.
- Munt**, Sally R. (ed.) (1997) *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender*, Cassell: London and Washington.
- (1998) *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space*, London and Washington, D.C.: Cassell.
- Nelson**, Lise (1999) 'Bodies (and spaces) do matter: the limits of performativity' *Gender, Place and Culture*, 6 (4): 331-353.
- O'Sullivan**, Sue (1994) "Girls who kiss girls and who cares?" in Hamer, D. and B. Budge (eds.) *The good, the bad and the gorgeous: popular culture's romance with lesbianism*, London: Pandora: 78-95.
- (1999) "I don't want you anymore: Butch/femme disappointments" *Sexualities*, 2(4): 465-473.
- Probyn**, Elspeth (1990) "Travels in the postmodern: making sense of the local" in Nicholson, L. J. (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, London and New York: Routledge: 176-187.
- (1995) "Lesbians in space. Gender, sex and the structure of missing" *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2 (1): 77-84.
- Prosser**, Jay (1998) *Second skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rich**, Adrienne (1980) "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence", *Signs*, 5 (4): 631-660. First appeared in the UK as a pamphlet published by Only women press.
- Rose**, Gillian (1997) "Situating knowledges: Positionality, reflexivity and other tactics" *Progress in human geography*, 21 (3): 305-320.
- Sedgwick**, Eve Kosofsky (1991) *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Valentine**, Gill (1993a) "(Hetero)sexing space: lesbian perceptions and experiences of everyday spaces" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 11: 395-413.
- (1993b) "Negotiating and managing multiple sexual identities: lesbian time-space strategies" *Transactions in the Institute of British Geographers NS*, 18: 237-248.
- (1996) '(Re)negotiating the 'heterosexual street': lesbian productions of space' in Duncan, N. (ed.) *Bodyspace*, London and New York: Routledge: 146-155.
- Vicinus**, Martha (1992) "They wonder to which sex I belong": The historical roots of the modern lesbian identity" *Feminist Studies*, 18 (3): 467-497.
- Walker**, Lisa (1995) "More than just skin-deep: fem(me)ininity and the subversion of identity" *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2 (1): 71-76.
- (2001) *Looking like what you are: Sexual style, race, and lesbian identity*, New York University Press: New York and London.
- Weaver**, Lois (1995) "Sheila dances with Sheila" in S. R. Munt (ed.) *Butch/femme: Inside lesbian gender*, Cassell: London and Washington: 64-73.
- Wittig**, Monique (1980) "The straight mind" in (1992) *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

---

<sup>i</sup> Lisa Walker (1995) draws attention to the distinction between being looked at (subjected to) rather than looking at (subjecting others to), as marking the failure to represent feminine subjects as agented subjects of resistance.

---

<sup>ii</sup> This footnote should not be taken as a note on terminology distinct from, or as a sideline to, the project of the paper. In fact, through tracing their use, this paper is precisely intended to problematise the terms "lesbian" and "femininity" as abstracted or self-explanatory. I follow a Foucauldian perspective that it is the way in which these terms fix each other through location that determines their hierarchical meanings, their different cultural sentiments and attachments and their discursive and institutional effects (Probyn, 1990). As such, through their use, the terms gay, lesbian, dyke, queer and homosexual pertain to differently historically contingent values and engage power relations particular to this historical specificity. I am particularly torn over the use of the term "femininity", especially given the universalising tone of its singularity and the way in which its use seems to close down the need to ask, *what is femininity anyway? What do we mean when we say "femininity"? Why do we call something "feminine" and not something else? What is any given understanding of the feminine contingent upon?* At the cusp of the intersection between queer and feminist struggles in/over language is the difficulty and absolute necessity of speaking about masculinity and femininity as always connected with structural relations of power, yet as fluid and never fully deterministic of those power relations, or our experiences of them.

<sup>iii</sup> My undergraduate dissertation research took place in London during the summer of 2001. It involved doing 5 in-depth interviews and taking brief ethnographic jottings in two lesbian bars, the Candy Bar and the Glass Bar. Research questions focused on how lesbian cultures were differently experienced by research participants, how notions of inclusion and exclusion were evoked, and on how the complex and frustrating nature of these experiences was discussed. Although this paper does not draw on this research, it was a significant location for the formulation of my ideas about lesbian identity.

<sup>iv</sup> Although this field is much broader that can be accounted for here, I have chosen the quotes below to indicate the specific parameters of the literature I am referring to through the terms "geographies of sexuality".

<sup>v</sup> See Laura Doan (1998) Judith Halberstam (1998), Sally Munt (1998), or Martha Vicinus (1992) for example.

<sup>vi</sup> Examples where this kind of resistance is inscribed as a stable component of identity are Gill Valentine (1993b) and Lynda Johnston and Gill Valentine (1995).

<sup>vii</sup> See Sue O'Sullivan (1999) for a further discussion of this question.

<sup>viii</sup> See Biddy Martin (1998) who considers the effects of queer theory for representations of femininity.

<sup>ix</sup> Elspeth Probyn (1995) also addresses representations of feminine lesbians in terms of how gender, sex and sexuality are theorised.

<sup>x</sup> See Lisa Walker (1995) and Lise Nelson (1999) for critiques of the use of Judith Butler's work on performativity in geographies of sexuality.

<sup>xi</sup> Butler is of course, also drawing heavily on Michel Foucault's (1976) vivid insight into the ways in which the proliferation of discourses around "sex" from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards marked the increased deployment of "sex" by the state and its institutions, in their regulation of the population through "bio-power".

<sup>xii</sup> In the introduction to *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler recapitulates her theory of performativity (as enunciated in *Gender Trouble*, 1990) in an attempt to clarify precisely how she understands gender to constitute subjects. She positions the subject within processes of social construction that demarcate boundaries of Self and Other through culturally specific processes of disavowal and repudiation.

It is in this sense that "the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means" (1993: 8), producing a discursive outside, tangible only at the boundaries of identity, of what *may* become human.

<sup>xiii</sup> An example of an exploration of the impossibility of the feminine sustaining desire for the feminine is Lois Weaver's (1995) use of the "mirror" as a metaphor of femininity, contending that, "the real question is do I want you or do I want to be you?" (ibid.: 69) and confessing that, "When I was a kid, I kissed the mirror and tried to understand what it would feel like [...] wanting you like that is embarrassing because it feels like wanting myself" (ibid.:70).

<sup>xiv</sup> Rather than describe sexuality in terms of "invisibility", Eve Sedgwick (1991) thinks of sexuality as containing a kind of "ambiguity" that gender does not.

<sup>xv</sup> I am thinking here of Chandra Mohanty's critiques of Western feminist discourse that deploy the abstracted and universalistic subject of "Woman" in non-Western contexts in such a way as to homogenise "Third World women" as essentially oppressed (1988). She formulates an "osmosis thesis" (1992) to describe the analytic elision between experiences of oppression and resistance to it;

---

an essentialist notion of “women” as oppressed forecloses the terms of resistance, having the effect of erasing the actual local contexts of resistance and struggle.

<sup>xvi</sup> Camilleri and Rose (2002), Crocker and Harris (1997), Hemmings (1999) and O’Sullivan (1994; 1999) have also drawn attention to the marginalisation of femme narrative.

<sup>xvii</sup> For an instructive politics of location approach to sexuality and gender, see Clare Hemmings (2001).

<sup>xviii</sup> See Clare Hemmings (2001) for epistemological and methodological reflections on doing research that does not presume to know, in advance, who will be the subjects of transformative feminist knowledges.

<sup>xix</sup> Again I am thinking of transnational feminist approaches to the construction of difference. For example, see Frankenberg and Mani (1992) for their deployment of a “feminist conjuncturalist” approach.