

"Femme(inine) Diaspora": Queering the Lesbian Femme

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Abstract:

"Femme(inine) Diaspora" forms part of a continuing discussion between feminists and queer theorists in the sex/gender/sexuality debates and the politics of gender performance. Some feminists have argued that the greater emphasis placed on sexuality in this approach obscures the axis of gender and its specific relationship to women. This particular concern is exemplified in the butch/femme relationship. Whilst gender performance is able to articulate the subversion of the "butch" to heteronormativity, by cross-gender identification, it is unable to conceptualise the dissidence of the lesbian femme leaving her vulnerable to accusations of "passing." This article offers an alternative model for theorising the femme by drawing on French feminists' explorations of the subversive potential of the "feminine" as well as recent queer appropriations of "diaspora" and the politics of borders to the representation of (hetero)normalised (sexual) identity. This model concentrates on the space between "sex" (female) and "gender" (feminine) and suggests ways in which such a framework is able to create an alternative dialogue of both distance and nearness to the "body."

1 Gender performance theory, such as the work of Judith Butler, rejects the concepts of internal essences and sexual "origins" and theorises gender identity as socially and culturally produced through the repeated performances of gender discourses. Some feminists have argued that the greater emphasis placed on sexuality in this approach tends to obscure the axis of gender and its specific relationship to women. This particular concern is exemplified in the "butch/femme" lesbian relationship. Whilst gender performance theory is able to articulate the subversion of the "butch" to heteronormativity, by cross-gender identification, it is unable to conceptualise the dissidence of the lesbian "femme" leaving her vulnerable to accusations of "passing."

2 This article attempts to theorise the lesbian "femme's" subversion of heteronormativity by using a model of "femme(inine) diaspora" and thus forms part of a continuing dialogue between feminists and queer theorists in the sex/gender/sexuality debates. The term "diaspora" usually refers to particular ethnic groups not located within their land of "origin" who have transferred a sense of identity and culture across national borders to a place of resettlement. The concept of "diaspora" within a queer framework is an attempt to challenge any sense of fixed (sexual) identity that locates an "origin" within bodies or national borders: "Sexuality is not an essence, not timeless, it is also not fixed in place; sexuality is on the move" (Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2). A diasporic model emphasises the contingency, multiplicity and fluidity of identities and sexualities formed *between* "official" borders by accentuating the transition or *space between* "departure and arrival" (Eng 31). It is the continual movement *in-between* officially designated locations that ensures these liminal

spaces to remain in a constant state of flux and challenge any nostalgic attachment to stable and located identity.¹

3 For the purpose of this article, I wish to appropriate the term "diaspora" not just in a "queer" sense but to use it as a way of thinking about the complexities of gender ("feminine") and its relation to the body ("female"). I argue that the female body is not the "origin" of the "feminine," however, the apparent cohesion between these two separate axes is produced as an effect of institutional practices deployed and dispersed in a multiplicity of ways. This theoretical model attempts to move the "feminine" *away from* the female body, in order to challenge those discourses which seek to fix the "feminine" within specific bodies or places as justification of "natural" (hetero)sexual "origins."

4 I will be drawing on psychoanalytical theory, in particular, French feminists' explorations of the subversive potential of the "feminine" as well as recent queer debates of diaspora and the politics of borders in the representation of hetero)normalised (sexual) identity. I will primarily explore how power relations and signifying practices depend on fixed gendered borders to create a stable *inside* and an abject *outside*, mapping "normal" and "deviant" bodies and sexualities. Julia Kristeva's concept of the "semiotic" and Luce Irigaray's metaphor of the "two lips" of the labia are explored to show how the "feminine" can disturb fixed boundaries and rigid gender identities that serve to distance and differentiate the female body as "abject" or "other." I argue that a "diasporic" relationship based on the continual *movement between* official borders can be used to create space between the "female" and the "feminine" and a dialogic, contingent relationship based on *distance* and *nearness* to the "body."

5 Important, too, is the relationship of power in visual representations of the erotic whereby the white, heterosexual male becomes the norm against which the female and the black body are visibly differentiated. Moreover, in representing heterosexual erotic interaction, the authority of the masculine/male is confirmed by his ability to produce a *visible difference* on the female body. I argue that the very premise of visible subversion from "norms" reconstructs the heteronormative logic that creates "invisible," "closeted" or "passing" identities. A model of "feminine diaspora" redirects the focus away from borders to the space *between* inside/outside, visible/invisible to an unstable position of subversive uncertainty that serves to undermine the authority of the border in (sexual) identity construction.

¹ For more information on queer theory's appropriation of "diaspora", see Patton, Cindy & Sánchez-Eppler (eds.), *Queer Diasporas*. London: Duke University Press, 2000.

Mobilising the '(femme)inine' within a diasporic framework

6 Joan Nestle, a self-identified lesbian femme, adopts a discourse of exile to articulate her distance from traditional (hetero)sexual identity boundaries:

[W]omen do not have models for having power, and so they derived their own [...]. I am trying to say that as femmes we found a way to create a sexual space for ourselves that made us different from the traditional woman and yet let us honor our women selves. We exiled ourselves from one land but created another. (Nestle cited in Martin 30)

As she states, the femme's choice to take up a performance of "femininity" is rendered *invisible* and *appears* to identify her with a "traditional [heterosexual] woman" making her sexuality as a lesbian femme appear as an *absence*. The social and political axes of power mask the gap between "sex" and "gender," fixing the "feminine" within the "female" body and *appearing* to locate the femme *inside* the borders of compulsory heterosexuality. This seeming *absence* of sexual subversion has also left the femme exiled from some feminist and lesbian communities and vulnerable to accusations of "passing." The lesbian femme has a particularly "queer" relationship to gender performance; she is an anomaly, an exile marking the "gap" within a theory of anti-normativity. This would suggest that although a strategy which "queeries" the normalising processes of the social and political axis between sex/gender/sexuality is fundamental to an anti-normative politics, it must also question the normalised *modes of representation* that subversion can take.

7 In "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias," Biddy Martin raises concerns over the antifoundationalist project of queer theory that has promoted the transgression of sexuality by grounding feminism and the "feminine" within the female body. Martin's critique of Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, argues that Sedgwick reduces her definition of gender and feminism to a question of who has control over women's reproductive capacities. It is this lack of conceptual clarity between sex/gender that leads her to collapse the two terms into a misogynistic slippage in which "gender" is negatively associated with the containment and "miring" of the female body. By contrast, queer theory focuses on "sexuality," which is attributed to the *mobility* or agency of the "masculine" able to transcend or escape the "drag" of "gender" associated with the female body. The implications being that, "lesbians, or women in general, become interesting by making a cross-gender identification or an identification with sexuality, now implicitly... associated with men, over against gender and, by extension, feminism and women" (Martin 16). Following this logic, "gender" ("feminine") becomes fixed within the borders of "sex" (female body) and stabilised within the discourses of "femininity," heterosexuality and the maternal. Gender, Martin

argues, "is both more and less than we make it" (32), it is neither something that can be fixed in the body and transgressed through performance nor is it the glue which holds a stable identity together. Martin urges both feminists and queer theorists to make "gender" the subject of closer investigation and to "put into motion" the concept of "femininity" by directing it away from its association with fixed and restrictive discourses of sex/gender (33).

8 This article takes up Martin's challenge to *mobilise* the "feminine" through a framework of "feminine diaspora" in which the "feminine" can be conceptualised as "a siteless locale with no territorial sovereignty" (Eng 31). Sex/gender/sexuality are always already implicated in heteronormative models of power and nationalism whereby the "feminine" metaphor is grounded within the "body" of the land to indicate colonial domination and the penetration of national borders. I am proposing that "feminine diaspora" attempts to (dis)locate "gender" from "sex." This framework relies on a certain slippage of the signifier "body" as the female body and/or a body of land which is informed by Western binaries such as male/female and culture/nature. Secondly, it both questions and explores the signifier "feminine" whose signified remains constantly deferred, allusive, and *lacking* in both clarity and visibility. Whilst "gender" cannot be finally fixed or located within the body, it can neither be entirely separated from it. The "feminine's" relationship to the "female" lies in the *space between*, in a position of subversive uncertainty oscillating between both a *distance* and *nearness* to the "body." In effect, "feminine diaspora" can create a space between "sex" and "gender" that metaphorically mirrors the *movement* between the land/body of origin and place of settlement. It is this movement between the borders that constantly reinforms their relationship to each other.

Between the Borders of the (In)visible

9 It is important to emphasise that a politics, which only recognises radical potential in the visible, is ensconced in an oppressive ocularcentricism informing both heteronormative models of subjectivity and a racist discourse of physiognomy. Indeed, Martin remains sceptical about the motives informing the very foundations of gender performance and its potential to mask a masculinist bias. She notes, "There are connections between and among the emphasis on visible differences from norms, the evacuation of interiorities, the reduction of subjectivity to effects of power, and the invisibility or fixity attributed to the femme or to femininity. Women fade again in the face of visible signifiers of difference from norms" (Martin 14). Indeed, Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One*, maintains that it is the economy of phallogocentrism informing the logic of the same that leads both Freud and

Lacan to define "masculine" sexuality through the visual possession of the penis/phallus. In the process of tying "sex" to "gender" it also divides sex/gender into those who have the penis/phallus and those who *have not*, the so-called "lacking" female body. Lacan states that the penis is chosen as the privileged signifier as it, "stands out as most easily seized upon in the real of sexual copulation [...]" (Lacan in Mitchell 82). The female and the "feminine" can only be rendered *invisible* when the signifiers of difference are based on visibility, or when practices of defiant cross-gendering make individuals "stand out." By contrast, the dispersion or movement of the "feminine" away from the "body" enables differing perspectives and alternative dialogues between the two. It is the singular perspective of phallogocentricism, a refusal of *movement* that has created a foreshortened and fixed location of the "feminine" within the female body.

10 The positive representation or conceptualisation of specific and active female or "feminine" desires has been a constant challenge for many feminists. Within a Western heteronormative culture, women's bodies are (hetero)sexualised and enshrouded in phallic anxiety and suspicion precisely because they have been constructed to oscillate on the very borders of (in)visibility. According to patriarchal myth, women's bodies are saturated with a sexuality, which must remain hidden from them and coded; it is men that hold the "knowledge" of woman's secret and the power to unleash or awaken these desires through a privileged access to the phallus. Whereas men's sexual excitement is clearly visible in the erection and climax, women's sexual excitement remains "hidden" or "invisible" to a phallocentric culture. The codification of women's pleasure is displayed on her body primarily through gestures read as "orgasmic."

11 The visual display of women's pleasure, clearly and unambiguously initiated by men, is central to pornographic genres. This is not because they are concerned that women are sexually fulfilled as men but because they signify and reconfirm the ultimate and privileged power of the "real" "masculine" (therefore heterosexual) man to both initiate and satiate the desires of "real" women. However, the very fact that sexual pleasure can be *displayed* through a code or gesture means it can be faked. In the Imaginary of male pornographic genres, the association between the signifier (the facial expression or groan) and the signified (sexual satisfaction) is unquestionable and concrete because of the presence of the privileged signifier (the penis/phallus) which is able to fix or penetrate meaning. However, according to Lacan, the phallus can only play its role "veiled" within the realm of the Symbolic therefore the signified (sexual satisfaction/unity/Truth) is constantly evaded and questioned (Lacan in Mitchell 82).

The Erotic Embodiment of Difference

12 In *Private Affairs*, Phillip Harper devotes a chapter to the exploration of the West's cultural investment in the mythologising of "The Kiss" as a signifier of *the* erotic relationship that is always heterosexual. The most famous icon of this practice is Auguste Rodin's sculpture "The Kiss". He notes that in this heterosexual embrace, the man assumes a "stolid" and protective stance whilst the woman is "utterly moved" and swoons across the male figure in a limp and passive manner (Harper 2). This encounter is heterosexualised not purely because it depicts an anatomically defined male and a female but in addition it reiterates gendered stereotypes of "masculine" activity and "feminine" passivity. Harper suggests that it is the interplay between sex/gender differences and their ultimate "fusion" which is characteristic of the romanticised heterosexual encounter in the West. However, it is interesting that the difference *between* "sex" and "gender" is evaded (i.e. that female does not necessarily imply "feminine") and "filled in" in order to complete the socially and politically prescribed sexual equation that ties sex-to-gender-to-sexuality. Rodin's sculpture literally fixes, by "setting in stone," the "purity" and beauty of erotic desire able to overcome the *differences* between the (white) masculine-man and the (white) feminine-female. However, this need to "overcome" differences through fusion is misleading as difference is visually marked through the body's relation to power. Indeed this is more clearly exemplified in Harper's analysis of Gustav Klimt's paintings of "The Kiss" and "Fulfillment" in which the face of the man is hidden from the viewer whilst the woman's is clearly visible. This visual construction of the (hetero)sexual encounter places the man in a position of power not only because he is able to produce the visual *evidence* of women's "secret" sexual desire but he is able to deny the privacy of the female whilst maintaining his own.

13 This Western icon of romance does not just delimit sexuality but also the social axis of race. Martin argues that like gender, which is associated with the female body, "race" is determined by its difference from whiteness and also appears as an identity located within the body and incapable of ambiguity. The overall result is to give the impression that the white male is able to transcend the problematic of identity located in the body so that, "men do not seem gendered and whites are not racialized" (Martin 18). Indeed, Rodin's "The Kiss" depicts love and romance as a property of "whiteness," which is marked not just in the physical characteristics of the couple, but within the very material and form of the sculpture itself. The "whiteness" of the marble signifies the "purity" or "naturalness" of a specific sexuality that appears racially determined whilst its neoclassical form delimits the aesthetics of beauty modeled on the physical attributes of the Caucasian race. Whilst the "fusion" of gender

difference becomes the focus of the romantic embrace, racial difference *between* the couple appears to be totally *absent*. Inter-racial "fusion" or miscegenation threatens the coherence of "whiteness" as marker of "purity" against which race is mediated. In this sense the erotic "fusion" relies on an interplay between the (in)visibility of gender difference and the (in)visibility of racial "sameness" located at the level of the body. It is the power of the white patriarch to name and differentiate "Otherness" that enables the heteronormative bias of "whiteness" and the potency of (masculine) heterosexuality represented in "The Kiss" to apparently transcend racial and sexual politics and to stand in for *the* Western mythology of love.

14 The political imperative to mark difference at the level of the body has informed the discourses of sexual and racial science. Within such discourses the black female body has been constructed as *pure difference*, as a site of deviance and "animal" sexual aggressiveness in an effort to differentiate "blackness" from the "cultured" and "civilised" white body. Patricia Hill Collins argues that, "Race becomes the distinguishing feature in determining the type of objectification women will encounter. Whiteness as symbolic of both civilization and culture is used to separate objects from animals" (Collins 170-1). For example, she argues that the public exhibition of Sarah Bartmann's semi-clad body in the early nineteenth-century served to both titillate the Parisian elite and to create a distance between white and black bodies. Even after Bartmann's death, her buttocks were removed from her body and displayed as a spectacle of sexualised racial "deviance" (Collins 168). Whilst white women may be represented as "objects" in heterosexual pornography their race ensures they remain just within or on the very borders of culture. In contrast, black women's bodies are presented in such a way as to signify an animalistic insatiability that sits radically opposed to "culture."

15 The relationship of power to visual representations of erotic desire becomes more problematic in the case of the lesbian femme as, "it requires a femme who visibly addresses her desire to another woman, because as a femme alone, her lesbianism would be invisible" (Martin 25). Martin notes that the cinematic representations of butch-femme relationships are usually coded through inter-racial difference whereby the femme is racialised as white whilst the butch is differentiated by her blackness. She writes,

Making lesbian desire visible as desire, rather than identification, requires an added measure of difference, figured racially. Disidentification from assigned gender is accomplished through darkness, as if whiteness and femmeness could not be differentiated and as if blackness were pure difference. Blackness or color in women is associated with phallic traces and femininity with whiteness once again. (Martin 25)

When difference itself becomes the object of desire, the absence of the male body as the embodiment of "masculinity" threatens the existence of desire itself. In cinematic representation, the lesbian femme needs a female partner with a "touch of colour" or difference to reconfigure her external appearance or relationship to the public who assume that her "sex" and "femininity" discloses her heterosexuality. However as Martin notes, the need to make lesbian desire visible and to flout heteronormative modes of representation actually deploys the apparatus of power used to value racial differences. She points out that, "it can obviously also seem at times to celebrate crossing and defend against passing at the level of gender by fetishistically deploying racial markers of difference" (Martin 25-6). The inability to visually guarantee differences between "sex" and "gender" betrays the mark of a heterosexist culture whereby difference is guaranteed within the body as gender. The visual representation of a same-sex encounter resorts to a racist discourse in which blackness signifies "pure difference" and is guaranteed by the black body.

Uncertainty and Subversion

16 Sexual identity is never just an issue of sex/gender/sexuality as race also figures in the operations of power and difference. It is the West's obsession with the visual that informs the very power relations of the public/private dichotomy. If difference is narrowly defined by visual markers or gestures played out on the body, the subversion of the lesbian femme appears to "pass" within a heteronormative framework. It is this regime of power that constructs the femme's sexuality as *hidden* and reconstructs it in the form of a secret. Similarly, if racial difference is mediated only by skin colour, and blackness signifies as "pure difference" against a "normalised" whiteness, then, as Harper suggests, the "white Negro" appears to be white and non-racialised (14). He also argues that it is only within this context that s/he can be conceived to be "passing" by making a secret of her "Negro" blood (Harper 14). Despite this, both subjectivities are subjected to the white heterosexual patriarch who, as the marker of "normativity," has the power to define difference based on visible markers. The pressure exerted on individuals to turn the invisible (private) into the visible (public) is an effect of an unequal power relation motivated by a need to control and to maintain the power of naming.

17 An accusation of "passing" depends on the recognition that power relations are constantly shifting within the very space of *difference* created by context and social relations. The femme is seen as less subversive by certain lesbians as she is able to use the comparative privilege of heterosexual acceptability whilst being a practicing lesbian. In a like manner, the

"white Negro" can enjoy the racial privilege of whiteness whilst "hiding" black ancestry. However, both the femme and the "white Negro" destabilise socially constructed issues of fixed, visual or "externally" codified identity. As Harper states, the "white Negro," "destabilizes the conventional link between socially constituted racial identity and the apparent biological fact of skin color" (14). Similarly, the lesbian femme unsettles the conventional associations binding the coexistence of the "feminine" within a "female" body to guarantee an inevitable and compulsory heterosexuality. Indeed, this inability to clearly define and differentiate between "conforming" or "deviant" bodies creates a subversive uncertainty which undermines the apparatus of power informing heteronormativity. The lesbian femme refuses to locate herself within either the *inside* or *outside* of these identity boundaries maintaining an *inbetween* position that somehow remains *both*. Martin writes:

The very fact that the femme may pass implies the possibility of denaturalizing heterosexuality by emphasizing the permeabilities of gay/straight boundaries. In a sense, the lesbian femme who can supposedly pass could be said most successfully to displace the opposition between imitation (of straight roles) and lesbian specificity, *since she is neither the same nor different, but both*. (22, *my emphasis added*)

Joan Nestle states in "The Fem Question," "lesbians should be mistresses of discrepancies, knowing that resistance lies in the *change of context*" (Nestle 236, *my emphasis added*). She argues that her appearance as a lesbian femme is "an erotic conversation between Deb [her "butch" partner] and myself," whose subversion becomes coherent and visible within the dialogue between herself and her "butch" partner, "it is the two of us together that make everything perfectly clear" (Nestle 237). It is easy, and tempting, to overlay a heterosexual framework to this statement: the "butch" is able to assert her lesbian identity autonomously by her cross-gendered "masculine" appearance whilst the meaning of the "feminine" is undeterminable and invisible except in its negative relation to the "masculine." Yet, this reading remains only partial as it completely ignores the erotic content of a same-sex relationship that disrupts and subverts a heteronormative *context*. The signification of the "feminine" in relation to the lesbian femme remains duplicitous and mobile and this constant oscillation between the inside/outside of the hetero/homo divide both ruptures and changes the signification of the "feminine" in relation to the female body.

18 The lesbian femme's subversion is clearly shown in her defiance of what Judith Butler terms, the heterosexual matrix, which serves to construct the West's cultural understanding of sex/gender/sexuality. According to Butler, the matrix forms a network of power relations delimiting gender "norms" within the very discourses that precede the subject. Sex and gender do not emanate from the subject; the subject is *subjected* to these "norms." The constant

iteration and reiteration of these gender "performances" "naturalise" the fixed relation between sex/gender/sexuality. This repetition produces the effect, "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" (Butler 151). However, Butler states that the subject can never meet the full expectation of the cultural matrix, as individual citations can never encapsulate the entirety of "gender."

19 These gaps between a signifying system and the individual's utterances or gestures are reminiscent of both the distance between self and "other" at the mirror stage and signification itself within the symbolic. "Feminine diaspora" highlights the *gap* in signification by ensuring that the signifiers "female" and "feminine" remain constantly deferred. The "diasporic" suspension produced between "sex" and "gender" resists and reconfigures erotic identification which in turn destabilises the heterosexualised discourses that attempt to ensure that "sex" is expressed through "gender." The lesbian femme disrupts the "natural" flow of (hetero)sexual discourse that locates "femininity" and heterosexuality within the female body. Her "passing" becomes a *slippage* within the gaps, emphasising the incoherence and excess that the very structure of the heterosexual matrix cannot contain.

Creating a dialogue of *distance* and *nearness*

20 "Feminine diaspora" is concerned with the movement *in-between* but what happens when the marker of "difference" (the "feminine" *gap, lack or castrated space*) is transgressed and turns a relation of *distance* into one of *nearness*? Irigaray explores this relation of proximity and the "feminine" in her analysis of a specifically feminine libido. It should, of course, be clear that in Irigaray's theory she explicitly locates the "feminine" within the female body, an argument that denies any space between "sex" and "gender." However, I feel it may be useful, though perhaps fetishistic, to remove and suspend the "labia" from the female body and explore its potential as a metaphor within a "feminine" diasporic framework. Irigaray states that the "two lips" of the labia are simply not definable within a phallogocentric economy of binaries as it/they are neither one nor two but their very proximity creates continual and excessive pleasures "without breaks or gaps" (213). The "two lips" mark the very *in-betweenness* of diaspora where movement against or across surfaces (geographical, psychological, semantic) pleasure and seduce borders into a polymorphous and constantly deferring fluidity. "Feminine diaspora" works to emphasise the subject's *mis-recognition* of its unified mirror image ("other") contained within body boundaries. By

accentuating the permeability of those boundaries, the subject/other relationship is suspended in a state of betweenness as neither the same nor different but somehow *both*.

21 The constant touching and moving within this indefinable space of betweenness creates secret and hidden pleasures which remain beyond the control or prohibitions of the "No-of-the-Father." Irigaray writes that a, "[w]oman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact" (24). The "two lips" metaphor also has associations with the mouth and a specific "feminine" language, or "womanspeak" (the language of the Other), that speaks the "unsayable" gap created within the "masculine" Symbolic economy that prohibits "feminine" pleasures. Again, it is possible to put aside the associations she makes between the female and the "feminine" and instead to focus on "womanspeak" as an alternative way of conceptualising the relationship that language creates between "sex" and "gender." To hear this "other" language speak this gap, the subject, "would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an 'other meaning'" (Irigaray 29). The detection of such a language requires an additional mode of perception that will hear the subversions of the lesbian femme but also an alternative understanding of language's relationship to the borders that separate the subject from the other.

22 The distinction between subject and object remains fundamental to coherence and signification and it is maintained by the construction of borders clearly marking the difference between an "inside" and an "outside." However, as Diana Fuss states in *Inside/Out*, borders are notoriously unstable precisely because of their necessary proximity and relation to an exiled difference. Fuss uses the example of the differentiation made between heterosexuality and homosexuality, "The homo in relation to the hetero, much like the feminine in relation to the masculine, operates as an indispensable interior exclusion- an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such" (3). Ironically, the transgression of borders is fundamental to the Symbolic's formation of a coherent and rational subject, yet this very transgression risks the subject's contamination with its outside - the incoherence and irrationality associated with the "feminine," the unconscious and the Other. However, the subject's location within the inside/outside model depends on relations of power between differing subjectivities. Masculinity holds a privileged space inside the power relation that both names the "feminine" as opposite and relegates it to the outside. The "feminine" is everything that the "masculine" is not: passive, "open" to penetration and domination, irrational, sexualised and lacking. Despite this, it is the very proximity and agency of the

"feminine" aspect of language that challenges and disrupts the "natural" flow of meaning guaranteed by the defining borders of the subject/object relationship.

23 Julia Kristeva identifies language as dualistic in that it has both a "masculine" and a "feminine" aspect associated with the Symbolic and the "semiotic" respectively. Although the "feminine" (semiotic) is marginalised by the "masculine," it constantly disrupts and threatens the position of the subject dependent on the inside/outside metaphor of border formation for its coherence and authority. This disrupting influence of the "feminine" constantly defers any guarantee of meaning or Truth within the subject and redefines its relationship to language as continually in process and subject to change. However, the semiotic and symbolic can never transcend each other's influence but rely on a borderline relationship - of distance and proximity, of visibility and invisibility - that constantly reinforms and reorientates the subject's relationship and authority within language. I would argue that the lesbian femme enacts this borderline relationship of distance and proximity to both "sex" and "gender" and also the heterosexual and homosexual divide. She distances herself from the associations of heteronormativity that define the relationship between the female body and "femininity" as purely heterosexual yet her very proximity to such practices makes her vulnerable to accusations of "passing." However, it is this very relation between distance and proximity that radically questions and disrupts the authority of the borderline as a basis for the production of meaning and identity construction.

24 Using a model of "feminine diaspora," I have attempted to develop a theoretical model that is able to specifically address the challenge that the lesbian femme creates to heteronormative models of (sexual) identity which does not rely on the visual display of difference to "norms." This model of diaspora has attempted to create a space in which an alternative subversion can be articulated, however, it is important not to romanticise or depoliticise the painful reality of exile and exclusion. Whilst I understand the importance of gay and lesbian visibility in challenging homophobic oppression, I have tried to articulate the specificity of women's relationship to gender and representation and how lesbian and/or non-white women are, in a sense, doubly exiled from the borders of heteronormative identity and signification.

25 I have offered this model as a possible way to conceptualise the "feminine" and its relationship to the female body by challenging rigid either/or categorisations and differences which objectify and exclude. This alternative model suggests that a mobile, oscillating (dis)location between the "feminine" and the body informs a dialogue of distance and nearness which has the potential to transform their relationship to each other. Within this

context, the question is not the location of difference but the reorientation or deference of difference. It is this in-between space, the constantly deferring difference that needs to inform and continue to agitate the debates between feminist and queer theorists in the creation of alternative discourses. Borders remain constantly fluctuating markers mapping the fault-lines of a culture's signification system. It is the persistent agitation of the space "between" the borders of language and representation, the constant shifting of the "feminine" in relation to those borders that creates the space for change and alternative possibilities.

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