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# GENDER FORUM

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## Gender Queeries: Queer Concerns

Edited by  
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## About

*Gender forum* is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

## Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to [gender-forum@uni-koeln.de](mailto:gender-forum@uni-koeln.de).

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

## Article Publishing

The journal aims to provide rapid publication of research through a continuous publication model. All submissions are subject to peer review. Articles should not be under review by any other journal when submitted to *Gender forum*.

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## Editorial

1 The contributions to **Gender Queeries** explore conceptualisations and representations of queerness in recent literary works and contemporary philosophical thought.

2 Anja Müller-Wood and Ulrike Tanke's essay "The Hidden Misogynies of Queering 'light': The Case of *The Hours*" reconsiders Michael Cunningham's novel, which has recently been turned into a film by Stephen Daldry. Although it was praised and marketed for its queerness and gender transgressions, Tanke and Müller-Wood argue that the book displays both misogynist traces and conventional gender patterns, and thus performs only a superficial queering "light" of gender identity.

3 In "'Femme(inine) Diaspora': Queering the lesbian femme," Chris Michael contributes to the queer and feminist debate on the figure of the lesbian femme, whose subversiveness remains literally invisible from a point of view of gender performativity. Drawing on French feminist thought and recent queer theory, Michael uses notions of the subversive potential of the "feminine" and a diasporic model of queer identity and sexuality to develop an alternative account of the femme that conceptualises her subversive power.

4 Susanne Jung's contribution "Queering Popular Culture: Female Spectators and the Appeal of Writing Slash Fiction" explores slash fiction, a form of queer fan fiction which is almost exclusively written by female authors for a predominantly female readership. In presenting same-sex relationships of male TV characters, slash fiction strengthens the homoerotic subtext of popular TV series. Being a slash fan fiction writer herself, Jung offers a fascinating insight into the genre, which appears as critique not only of popular culture but also of heterosexual hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.

5 In her piece "*Aunt Mary*: The Dialectics of Desire," Dimple Godiwala calls attention to Pam Gems' early play *Aunt Mary*, which anticipated much of the queer thought of the following decades as early as 1982. Gems stages the shifting and fluid identities of three transgendered, transvestite, and transsexual characters, thus presenting us with a spectacle of drag and queer.

6 "People confuse personal relations with legal structures," says Canadian author Margaret Atwood in Susanne Gruss's interview. Atwood not only talks about her novels, particularly the latest science fiction *Oryx and Crake*, but also reflects on the meaning feminism has for her and argues for a more specific definition of "feminist."

7 Following the interview with Julia Pascal published in **gender forum's** last issue **Anybody's Concerns II**, the fiction section of **Gender Queeries** features "Theresienstadt," a

short story by the British-Jewish author which depicts an uncanny visit of a Jewish-British woman to the erstwhile concentration camp.

8 Finally, a reading of Carol Shields' novel *Unless* as well as reviews of recent publications within the field of gender studies by Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran, by Sylvia von Arx, Sabine Gisin, Ita Grosz-Ganzoni, Monika Leuzinger, and Andreas Sidler, and by Jeffrey Weeks complete this issue.

## **The Hidden Misogynies of Queering "light": The Case of The Hours**

By Ulrike E. Tancke, University of Trier and Anja Müller-Wood, University of  
Mainz, Germany

### **Abstract:**

There is something enormously satisfying about a book that flatteringly addresses the readers' intellectual sophistication whilst leaving their deepest prejudices intact - this is queering "light" for those who want to seem in the know without knowing too much about themselves. In the end, nothing is truly "queered" - any aspects of the novel that may have invited transgression are subjected to the author's streamlining. At a closer look, it seems to be the very ingenuity of the novel's structure that is the source of its hollowness and explains why the frustrations with the book are so difficult to pin down: *The Hours* pretends to be what it is not (deep and subversive), cleverly trying to disguise the fact that it is nothing more than a sterile stylistic exercise not unlike those depicted (and condemned) in the novel.

"Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'" (Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 105)

1 If the praise-studded American paperback edition (1998) of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* is anything to go by, the novel is a postmodern epiphany. Front and back cover of the book cite a string of raving reviewers from Manhattan to LA, who extol the novel for its elegant style and clever structure, its thematic depth and intensity and its subversive gender politics (whereby "subversion" is seen as anything from a merely benevolent view of women to the radical transgression of gender polarities). Cleverly juggling three different plotlines that join the Modernist author Virginia Woolf and two fictional American women - one living in post-WWII suburban Los Angeles, the other in contemporary Manhattan - and thus, in bridging the gap between fact and fiction, connecting women across time and space, *The Hours* is celebrated as a treasure trove of incisive insights for readers and characters alike. So illuminating is the novel that, in the words of one particularly enthusiastic critic, it will make the reader "jump up from the sofa" (Ann Prichard on the front cover of Cunningham) - if it doesn't, something might be seriously amiss with him or her.

2 Critical enthusiasm for *The Hours* is partly based on the claim that the novel transgresses the traditional binary of feminine and masculine. Its unusual narrative situation would seem to support the view that this book is a presumably radical exploration of gender identity, an exercise in "queering." Here is a homosexual author writing about women, women of different sexual orientation to boot, who are, each in their own way, struggling with social expectations of femininity. Would this not entail particularly radical reconceptualisations of gender? Nevertheless, although Cunningham does put forward the idea of a non-sexual third gender beyond the limits of femininity and masculinity, he fails to

achieve the desired effect of transgression. If we take queer thinking to mean, subversively, "the resistance to regimes of the normal" (Warner xxvi), then *The Hours* cannot be awarded that fashionable label. For the ideas Cunningham develops under the cloak of gender bending are traditional if not plainly misogynistic, concurrently reiterating a hardly veiled veneration of precisely that masculinity which it claims to deny.

3        Given the general critical acclaim that the novel has gained, our verdict may seem inordinately harsh, if not conceited. Although the dust jacket encrustations in praise of *The Hours* may be nothing but symptomatic of an ailing publishing industry desperately trying to flog its products, it would seem forward to beg to differ with the unanimous barrage of critical bonhomie bestowed upon *The Hours*, especially if a more sceptical view of the novel were to be prompted by the film version of the book. However, far from watering down its source (as films, at least this is a prejudice common amongst literary critics, tend to do), Steven Daldry's cinema version (2002) enriches the book in a way that identifies those areas in the novel that leave a lot to be desired. Above all, it points to the book's blatant failure (or is it unwillingness?) to create characters that are not caricatured incarnations of certain ways of life, but human beings who call upon our empathy and understanding, and who - if one may resort to categories from the days of a more morally-minded literary criticism - deal with their guilt and responsibility in a believable way. It is true, through an apparently complex structure, *The Hours* enables the author to raise existential and potentially disturbing questions. Yet the novel suffers from weaknesses caused by precisely this stylistic cunning, which the comparison with the film might illuminate. In casting doubt over the ecstatic claims of the book's critics, therefore, the film may act as a catalyst for the exploration of the void underneath the text's acclaimed structural ingenuity - a void that belies any surface "queering" that the novel's undeniably clever setup so deceptively suggests. In so doing, the film prompts the kind of rigorous scrutiny that literary criticism is (or at least should be) all about.

4        This is not to disavow the book's undoubtedly ambitious intellectual scope, illustrated not least by the way Cunningham makes Virginia Woolf and her novel *Mrs Dalloway* the centre of gravity around which he has his different plots revolve: In the 1920s, Virginia Woolf is working on her novel whilst struggling with a mental illness that has forced her to retire to dull suburban Richmond for a "rest cure." In late 1940s Los Angeles, Laura Brown, mother of three-year-old Richard and pregnant with her second child, is trying to convince herself that she is satisfied with the life of a suburban "angel in the house" caring for her husband and children. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* keeps tempting her into a fictional world which voices her own unspoken depression. In New York, around the millennium, the lesbian publisher

Clarissa Vaughan is preparing a party for her friend and former lover, writer Richard Brown, who is dying of AIDS; it is also he who once gave her the nickname "Mrs Dalloway." Woolf's novel thus functions as the mediator between three very different female characters: Virginia Woolf is writing it, Laura Brown is reading it, and Clarissa Vaughan is being constructed as the fictional character's late-20th-century embodiment. Furthermore, Woolf serves as Cunningham's nexus also on a metatextual level, as is suggested not only by the fact that *The Hours* was Woolf's working title for *Mrs Dalloway*, but also by a plethora of allusions to that novel and its author and a derivative, quasi modernist style.

5        However, it is precisely the reliance of Cunningham's novel on the figure of Virginia Woolf that is its problem and goes against whatever formal and thematic subversion the book superficially seems to pursue. Precisely because Woolf is so central to Cunningham's argument and the novel's aesthetics, her role undermines the effect of the book's intricate structure. Although *The Hours* appears to bring together the lives of three different women in order to illustrate the significance of their experiences, their stories all channel back to the Modernist genius, only to vanish in her example.

6        Our quarrel, however, is not only with the distinctly elitist undercurrent of Cunningham's novel, nor with the way this quality paradoxically undercuts its stylistic specificity. What seems more problematic is the fact that this self-undermining mechanism seems to be rooted in Cunningham's singularly monocular and reductively idealising image of Woolf. Although this is a book about Woolf rather than the women upon whom she might have had a formative influence at one point or other, it still reduces the "real" Woolf to a fictional cipher. Cunningham simply doesn't seem to "get" Woolf (or might it be that he doesn't want to get her?), deliberately ignoring facets of her persona and/or work that would have made her portrayal both more complicated and more complex. The one aspect most strikingly absent from his version of Woolf is the political dimension of her thought, voiced above all in her non-fiction. An example of particular relevance for Cunningham might have been her essay "Women and Fiction," where she reflects upon the state of literature by women in the early twentieth century and analyses the socio-economic realities of writing in a way that is no less passionate and persuasive than her plea for independence in "A Room of One's Own." At the beginning of "Women and Fiction," Woolf challenges the distinction between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" women that underpins the class-ridden world of early twentieth-century England:

The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life - the number of her children, whether she had money of her own, if she had a room to herself, whether she had help



in bringing up her family, if she had servants, whether part of the household was her task - it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer. (Woolf, "Women and Fiction" 142)

This is only one manifestation of Woolf's pragmatic feminism<sup>1</sup> - what one might call her concern with "female solidarity." By emphasising the need to unearth the tangible history of "ordinary" women, she not only firmly roots the work of "extraordinary" women - in other words, her own - in reality; historicising herself, as it were. In so doing, she also brings home the fact that the limits of women's writing are material, i.e. linked to the realistic conditions in which they exist; a view which, although at odds with the Modernist ideal of transcendence she explored in theory (see "Modern Fiction" passim) and practice, is undeniably present in her perception of feminine identity.

7 Woolf's essay might well have given the cue to Cunningham's novel, whose complex structure of intertwined plots and subtle echoes and similarities conjoins the real extraordinary woman Virginia Woolf and two fictional ordinary women. Unbeknownst to each other, Laura Brown <fn>Another Woolf-reference, recalling her essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown."</fn> and Clarissa Vaughan are tied together by their common interest in Woolf, although in the case of Laura, for whom the author is a lifeline at a time of crisis, Woolf has a far more existential function than for Clarissa, whose pretentious use of "Mrs Dalloway" as her nickname ultimately suggests that the Manhattan high-brow is superficial at heart. In a more sinister way, the two women are linked to each other and to Woolf through death: Laura, whilst reading Mrs Dalloway during a bout of depression, contemplates putting an end to her life; Clarissa accompanies Richard during his battle with death and is the sole witness as he hurls himself out of the window. Over these experiences looms the fact of Woolf's own suicide in 1941, which is imagined, lyrically and at length, in the novel's prologue.

8 Yet whatever notion of female solidarity Cunningham seems to establish through the three women's shared confrontation with death, it also serves to separate his female characters into two very distinct groups. Opening his book on Woolf's suicide, Cunningham makes this event the inevitable telos of the author's life, surely so as to affirm her self-destructive act as a gesture of mastery, illustrative of and, in turn, made possible by her extraordinariness.<sup>2</sup> Her death determines the novel as a whole as a moment of absolute self-assertion and visionary

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf's feminism is a critical bone of contention that shall not be picked in the context of this essay. For a plausible defence of the author's feminism see Quadflieg 211-33.

<sup>2</sup> Another author whose suicide similarly functions as the magnetic point of attraction of her work is Sylvia Plath, as Sugars shows.

transcendence: note the adverb "purposefully" which grabs the reader's attention already at the beginning of the book's prologue, where Cunningham describes the minutiae of Woolf's suicide preparations. The adjective captures her fierce determination to destroy herself, an almost irrational candour that is illustrated most strikingly by the terribly reasonable death note she writes for her husband. It also paves the way for the almost miraculous sense of osmosis with the world that Cunningham's Woolf achieves by dying.<sup>3</sup> Through her intimate relationship with death, she is set apart from the novel's other, "ordinary" female characters. Death, as Cunningham views it, is far from a great leveller; to the contrary, it is used as a wedge separating Woolf and other women. The novel's premise and structural principle, her suicide is the yardstick which all other characters must - and yet cannot but fail to - live up to.

9        Already in the first chapter dedicated to Virginia Woolf, Cunningham has her voice a thinly disguised hint at her craving for suicide by imagining herself in a different, immaterial state of being. When her sister Vanessa's children bury a dead bird in her garden, Woolf realises that "[s]he would like to lie down in it [the deathbed] herself" (119). Death would allow a wished-for escape from reality and herself, "an angular, difficult woman," enabling her to become mere matter, "a foolish, uncaring thing - like an ornament on a hat, maybe" (121). But Cunningham is careful to separate such fantasies from a charge of morbidity and reimagines them as moments of agency and authority. As a writer, Woolf has a surprisingly active and outward-directed engagement with death, commanding her fictional characters' lives and deaths at will. In the early stages of writing the novel of which she as yet does not know that it will be called *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf is depicted thinking with the ruthlessness that presumably befits the creative genius that "Clarissa Dalloway will die, of that she feels certain, though this early it's impossible to say how or even precisely why. She will, Virginia believes, take her own life. Yes, she will do that" (69). A very similar self-confidence marks her abrupt volte face a little later, when she suddenly realises that "Clarissa [...] is not the bride of death after all. Clarissa is the bed in which the bride is laid" (121).

10       That Woolf's active attitude to death is not only empowering but also deeply gendered has been made clear a few pages earlier, when Cunningham has her reflect upon the different attitudes men and women have towards death: "Even now, in this late age, the males still hold

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<sup>3</sup> Cunningham's description clearly denies the fact of death, depicting Woolf as almost alive still, maybe even more so than she had ever been before: "Here they are, on a day early in the Second World War: the boy and his mother on the bridge, the stick floating over the water's surface, and Virginia's body at the river's bottom, as if she is dreaming of the surface, the stick, the boy and his mother, the sky and the rooks. An olive-drab truck rolls across the bridge, loaded with soldiers in uniform, who wave to the boy who has just thrown the stick. He waves back. He demands that his mother pick him up so he can see the soldiers better; so he will be more visible to them. All this enters the bridge, resounds through its wood and stone, and enters Virginia's body. Her face, pressed sideways to the piling, absorbs it all: the truck and the soldiers, the mother and the child" (8).

death in their capable hands and laugh affectionately at the females, who arrange funerary beds and who speak of resuscitating the specks of nascent life abandoned in the landscape, by magic or sheer force of will" (119). Other than Clarissa Dalloway, who at best is one item amongst the paraphernalia of a funeral - a passive, silent receptacle - Woolf holds death in her hands and thus, on an associative level, styles herself as masculine. Where Clarissa literally is the very "foolish uncaring thing" into which Woolf craves to transform, the Modernist author is prevented from being reduced to the merely material by her exceptional creativity, which emphasises that she is neither an ordinary woman nor an ordinary human being.

11 But Cunningham's gendering of Woolf's view of death has further implications. For who ought to be the person worthy of death? For one thing, he or she "should be a greater mind than Clarissa's" (154):

someone else, yes, someone strong of body but frail-minded; someone with a touch of genius, of poetry, ground under by the wheels of the world, by war and government, by doctors; a someone who is, technically speaking, insane, because that person sees meaning everywhere, knows that trees are sentient beings and sparrows sing in Greek. Yes, someone like that. Clarissa, sane Clarissa - exultant, ordinary Clarissa - will go on, loving London, loving her life of ordinary pleasures, and someone else, a deranged poet, a visionary, will be the one to die. (211)

Death is the domain of the genius, the artist, the eternal victim of a world brutal in its banality. From the outset, precisely because he focuses so strongly on Woolf's suicide, Cunningham primes the reader to see her only as "a deranged poet, a visionary," destined to be destroyed by the world (or to destroy him- or herself), not as a woman who on some realistic level connects with other, "ordinary" women, irrespective of class and background (see Quadflieg 217). Significantly, those in the novel who are capable of a similarly momentous gesture of ultimate (self-)mastery are male: Woolf's own shell-shocked protagonist Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* and Cunningham's dying writer-hero Richard Brown in *The Hours*. The three form an extraordinary elite of social misfits located outside easy and straightforward sexual and gender categories; a third sex existing in a third space of unincorporable otherness.

12 Admittedly, Cunningham here draws on the idea that "death is defiance" explored by none other than Woolf herself in *Mrs Dalloway*.<sup>4</sup> But his adaptation of this theme immediately raises the question of appropriateness. To what extent can an author be read from traces of her or his work? Furthermore, it urges the reader to explore the purposes of such an appropriation; in this case, Woolf's co-option to Cunningham's own, far from uncontroversial

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<sup>4</sup> "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death" (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 196-97).

gender politics. He aligns Woolf with her fictional character, Septimus Smith, not least so as to blend her with his own brain child, Richard Brown, whose bisexuality, poetic genius and suicide echo Woolf's own extraordinariness whilst emphasising his distinction from others. As such, Richard is the vehicle for the many grudges Woolf bears the world - the servants defying her authority, the Richmond flaneurs taken aback when they encounter her lost in her monologues - giving her isolation and suffering a contemporary meaning. In turn, through the association with Richard, Woolf is drawn into Cunningham's torch song, becoming another icon of sexual ambiguity to whom the world responds, if not with hostility, then at least with bewilderment.<sup>5</sup> Both are united by a sense of victimisation that further deepens Cunningham's rigid differentiation between the extraordinary and the ordinary. According to Cunningham's logic, the world is to blame for this suffering. And this destructive world is feminine or effeminate,<sup>6</sup> represented by individuals of either sex who not only falsely believe themselves to be indifferent to death, but who turn out to be death's handmaidens, executrices of a cruelly dispassionate world. In a nutshell, the novel sets up a disturbingly simple equation: ordinariness equals perpetrating cruelty equals femininity; extraordinariness equals being a victim equals masculinity. What resounds in this equation is an age-old (and far from subversive) terror of the feminine.

13 This terror is by no means alleviated or excused by the fact that Cunningham, through token gestures of gender transgression, also associates men with this dangerous effeminacy: structurally, his view remains deeply misogynist.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, his anger at the world weighs down with particular vehemence on Clarissa and Laura; unlike others, who fight and are vanquished by their terrible battles, they are survivors. The image of the soldier is a pervasive one in this novel and, although Cunningham suggests that this is an identity available to people independent of their sex, he still retains a traditional distribution of gender-roles. Clarissa, for instance, is the passive albeit loyal witness of Richard's defeat by AIDS. Superficially, she appears as Richard's healthy, still youthful and, above all, sane other - his benevolent nurse, the one true friend who has been sticking by him throughout his illness, the one who attempts to give his flat the same stylish sterility that characterises her own,

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<sup>5</sup> "It is only after knowing him for some time that you begin to realize you are, to him, an essentially fictional character, one he has invested with nearly limitless capacities for tragedy and comedy not because that is your true nature but because he, Richard, needs to live in a world peopled by extreme and commanding figures. Some have ended their relations with him rather than continue as figures in the epic poem he is always composing inside his head, the story of his life and passions; but others (Clarissa among them) enjoy the sense of hyperbole he brings to their lives, have come even to depend on it, the way they depend on coffee to wake them up in the mornings and a drink or two to send them off at night" (61).

<sup>6</sup> The novel's weak men are Richard's fellow-writer Walter Hardy and Louis, Richard's one-time lover. Both share a highly superficial take on the world and an escapist infatuation with young and beautiful men.

<sup>7</sup> The connection between homophobia and misogyny is pointed out by Sedgwick (20).

generously showering him with exclusive gifts and flowers. Nurse, mother-surrogate, carer, she resembles Woolf's fictional Clarissa; sane and sober like her, she too can be little more than a part of the aesthetic framework for the decline of her former lover - a bed for the bride of death, not a warrior bravely confronting the inevitable.<sup>8</sup> Her denial of death becomes particularly apparent at the climactic moment when Richard throws himself out of the window before her eyes, an act that leaves her unaltered. Even at its most material and brutal, death does not lead to a moment of true insight, or at least self-reflection on Clarissa's part, whom Cunningham only grants fleeting moments of self-scrutiny in intermittently inserted half-sentences (e.g. 201).

14 Laura Brown, too, at first sight appears to be immune to death. Her suburban home is a safe haven from the memory of the not too distant World War in which her husband fought and was briefly believed to be dead, and the confrontation with illness that strikes others. While she can relatively easily keep her husband's war experiences at bay, death comes shockingly close (but not too close) with her neighbour Kitty's cancer scare. And when death approaches in the form of her depression and climaxes in confrontation with the possibility of suicide on the bed in a hotel room (where she has checked in to read - who would have guessed it? - *Mrs Dalloway*), Laura wards this off with a characteristic gesture of pragmatic determination:

I would never. She says the words out loud in the clean, silent room: "I would never." She loves life, loves it hopelessly, at least at certain moments; and she would be killing her son as well. She would be killing her son and her husband and the other child, still forming inside her. How could any of them recover from something like that? Nothing she might do as a living wife and mother, no lapse, no fit of rage or depression, could possibly compare. It would be, simply, evil. It would punch a hole in the atmosphere, through which everything she's created - the orderly days, the lighted windows, the table laid for supper - would be sucked away. (152)

Laura's affirmation of life goes hand in hand with a confirmation of her housewifely ordinariness. Suicide is only a mind game one plays to have a brief respite from reality; not, as in the case of Woolf, Septimus and Richard, a realistic option, a way of dealing with - indeed: a way of facing - the world. However much she might toy with the idea - just as she toys with the idea that there might be a grain of extraordinariness in her<sup>9</sup> - her chosen self-image is one of plainness and simplicity. This is confirmed by Clarissa's judgement that she is "an ordinary-looking old woman seated on a sofa with her hands in her lap" (221).

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<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, Louis, Richard's former lover, sees her as a soldier (cf. 128); but since he is a negatively connoted character, his judgement in this instance is distinctly unreliable.

<sup>9</sup> "She, Laura, likes to imagine (it's one of her most closely held secrets) that she has a touch of brilliance herself, just a hint of it, though she knows most people probably walk around with similar hopeful suspicions curled up like tiny fists inside them, never divulged" (42).

15 This statement is crucial and revealing, not only as regards the figure of Clarissa but the strategy of the novel as such. For Clarissa is wrong: Laura Brown is not just any frustrated housewife tinkering with the idea of putting an end to her boring life. She is, as will become clear to the reader by that point, Richard's own mother, who decades previously had abandoned her family in an act of egotistic self-fulfilment; in Clarissa's words: "the lost mother, the thwarted suicide ... the woman who walked away" (221). Thus, in emphasising Laura's ordinariness, Clarissa does not belittle her; in fact, she draws attention to the collateral damage left in the wake of Laura's self-centred decision. In leaving her family, Laura did not choose the lesser of two evils, as she thinks; she did indeed "punch a hole in the atmosphere" (152) that ultimately "kill[ed] her son and her husband and the other child, still forming inside her" (152). However passive she may seem to be, Laura possesses a murderous energy that is confirmed by her solitary position at the end of the novel, which almost cynically counterpoints her self-chosen isolation. The sole survivor of the family she had chosen to abandon, Laura is punished by an absolute loneliness which, the novel seems to be saying, is what happens to women who want their cake and eat it too.

16 The psychoanalytic undertones of Cunningham's argument do not diminish the harshness of this Puritanistic logic of crime and punishment, they merely confirm Laura's terrible potential. Laura's abandonment causes an absence that is as painful as it is creative, a loss for which Richard tries to compensate with work or love. Laura is the trigger both for the desperate quest for words that describe his feelings and for human beings that satisfy his craving for love - a quest whose deadly outcome lies at the centre of Cunningham's book. Desire, for Cunningham, is death. Who is responsible for this desire, however, is a different question altogether. Whilst in his one, underestimated novel, Richard ends up killing mummy, in real life it is mummy who is responsible for his death. Again the world - read: the destructively feminine - is to blame for the suffering and ruin of the male genius. Even if put forward by way of critique, this puerile logic shapes the novel's notion of gender and thwarts whatever subversive avenues the author might have initially wanted to pursue.

17 It remains puerile because the women thus accused never get the opportunity to acknowledge the potential with which they are charged. Like Laura herself, Clarissa adamantly denies the older woman's destructive potential. Her belittling of this maternal praying mantis emphasises a destructiveness she embodies herself; a characteristic which surfaces ever so often from underneath Clarissa's self-image of ordinariness (cf. 10; 129). Her portrayal emphasises the voyeuristic relish with which she watches Richard die; the morbid fascination with which she takes in the "squalor" (53) of his apartment block and the filthiness

of his chair (54f.). True intellectual that she makes herself out to be, Clarissa aestheticises decay like everything else in her life, turning the abject into art. For her, there is no substantial difference between the homeless in the street and the bunches of flowers she purchases, between Richard lying in a "puddle of blood, dark, almost black" (201) and the artfully arranged nibbles that are left over from his aborted party (223-224). Looking at his dead body she notes in a moment of outrageous superficiality the slippers she once gave him as a gift (201), reducing her former lover to a surface onto which she projects her view of the world. These instances of unwitting, self-centred cruelty point back to and thus confirm the gist of several proleptic hints carefully planted in earlier chapters. Thus, at the beginning of the novel Clarissa is depicted as "walk[ing] over the bodies of the dead" (14) as she is crossing Washington Square on her way to shop for flowers. Although a clever hint at the historical stratification of the geographical space of Manhattan, the passage does not historicise - and thus humanise - Clarissa; instead, it associates her with the perpetrators of human suffering throughout the ages. Similarly, the novel takes up and realises Richard's earlier prophetic insight that his one-time lover is a "suburban housewife" at heart, who in despite of all her ingrained ordinariness will be "the cause of much suffering" (16) - first and foremost his suffering, of course.

18 But Cunningham's misogyny does not reside so much in his persistent association of women and cruelty as in his rejection of the powerful implications of this association. The acknowledgement of the darker strata of human emotions and relationships is, after all, maybe the most interesting aspect of his novel. Disappointingly, however, he fails to explore it further. Except for Woolf, his women figures remain lifeless and wooden. Especially Laura is little more than a bourgeois machine ventriloquising her author-idol; her very emotions seem to be gleaned from books rather than actually and authentically felt. Laura's marginalisation in the novel becomes all the more apparent when compared with the film, where the character gains presence not least because of actress Julianne Moore's skill in making Laura's suburban isolation painfully credible. Whilst the film thus manages to raise the question of individual agency and responsibility also with regard to its "ordinary" women, the novel refrains from exploring this issue. Instead, *The Hours* upholds the age-old "regimes of the normal" supposedly challenged by queer thinking, reproducing the notion that women lack a fully-fledged identity and, simultaneously and paradoxically, depicting feminine ordinariness as a threat to masculine individuality.

19 Cunningham cuts short his own acknowledgement of the brutality of the everyday and ordinary when he has the novel close on Clarissa's lame concluding observation that "we live

our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep - it's as simple and ordinary as that" (225). The novel's conciliatory finale papers over its more unsettling insight that "ordinariness" may be the very cause of suffering with a soothing and reassuring, yet ultimately meaningless phrase. Rather than facing the darker shades of human experience, the material reality of pain and death and the disturbing and eternal fact of human responsibility, the novel forces the reader to accept a make-believe, sugar-coated world of insubstantial commonplaces. Having the ordinary have the last word, Cunningham does not emphasise its dark qualities: he affirms its comforting, but ultimately insignificant banality.

20 The enthusiastic responses on the part of critics suggest that it is precisely the purely technical trickery which fans of *The Hours* are after: it is this, not the novel's underlying complexities, that attracts, impresses - maybe even comforts them. There is something enormously satisfying about a book that flatteringly addresses the readers' intellectual sophistication whilst leaving their deepest prejudices intact - this is queering "light" for those who want to seem in the know without knowing too much about themselves. In the end, nothing is truly "queered" - any aspects of the novel that may have invited transgression are subjected to the author's streamlining. At a closer look, it seems to be the very ingenuity of the novel's structure that is the source of its hollowness and explains why the frustrations with the book are so difficult to pin down: *The Hours* pretends to be what it is not (deep and subversive), cleverly trying to disguise the fact that it is nothing more than a sterile stylistic exercise not unlike those depicted (and condemned) in the novel: Laura Brown's arty birthday cake for her husband or Clarissa Vaughan's carefully styled apartment. Contrary to what might have been Cunningham's more serious aims and intentions, this is a novel where, to use Virginia Woolf's words, "life escapes" ("Modern Fiction" 105) - leaving the reader to wonder what she would have made of Cunningham's version of herself and her work.



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# "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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 phallogocentrism, 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 phallogocentric 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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# Queering Popular Culture: Female Spectators and the Appeal of Writing Slash Fan Fiction<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

The advent of the internet has provided a larger forum for and brought increased visibility to a number of alternative writing practices. One of the more curious ones is slash fan fiction, a particular type of queer fan fiction which is written almost exclusively by women of all sexual orientations for a predominantly female audience, featuring same-sex relationships between (mostly) male TV characters. In my essay I argue that this particular type of fan fiction is a communal and grass roots critique not only of popular culture but also of heterosexual hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.

1 The advent of the internet has provided a larger forum for and brought increased visibility to a number of alternative writing practices. One of the more curious ones is slash fan fiction, a particular type of queer fan fiction which is written almost exclusively by women of all sexual orientations for a predominantly female audience, featuring same-sex relationships between (mostly) male TV characters. Often sexually explicit, it has been celebrated by science fiction novelist Joanna Russ as early as the 1980s as "pornography by women for women, with love."

2 Fan fiction itself is not an altogether recent phenomenon. A number of nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers wrote stories based on the characters of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, contributing to the popularity of Carroll's tales. Today's fan writers explore the adventures of characters from *Star Trek*, *The X-Files* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Writing about media characters can itself be seen as a subversive move, challenging the economy of consumer/producer capitalist entertainment. Fan fiction writers refuse to be mere consumers, producing their own "poached" versions of texts.

3 Slash fan fiction, which posits same-sex relationships between the (mostly) male series protagonists, originated with Kirk/Spock fan fiction in the 1970s; the term slash derives from the "/" employed to denote a specific romantic pairing (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 186-7). Slash fan fiction has been discussed by a number of academic writers (cf. the work of Henry Jenkins, Constance Penley, Camille Bacon-Smith, Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith). It has been described as "romantic pornography," as a critique of traditional

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Ingrid Hotz-Davies for providing me with the opportunity to write this essay and for constructive suggestions on several of its drafts. I would also like to thank the various people with whom I had the chance to discuss slash fan fiction over the last few years. The present essay would not have been possible without you.

masculinities, because quite often traditionally "feminine" traits such as nurturing and the open declaration of feelings are extended onto the male characters, or as a utopian vision of a continuum of male homosocial and homoerotic desires, because the most popular formula of slash writing sees two men who were formerly best friends suddenly discover their physical attraction to each other.

4 My essay combines a creative with a critical approach to slash fan fiction. It was inspired by a story I myself had written using the characters of another American science fiction series, *Stargate SG-1*. In this story, which was in turn inspired by queer theory and which is available online,<sup>2</sup> I sent a set of late twentieth-century characters to an alternate reality, confronting them with a utopian society which had overcome our current straight/gay divide, a society beyond heterosexual hegemony. In my discussion of slash fan fiction, I draw on my own story as an example of a popular slash narrative, the "first time" story. My story follows certain tropes established by the slash writing community, which allows me to analyse both the story and the genre of writing it represents at the same time.

5 I will then go on to discuss some of the less than favourable reactions to slash fan fiction by straight men, analysing why dominant culture should be so troubled by the concept of women writing about gay men and especially about gay male sexuality. Slash writers, I argue, tackle not only the primary binarism of homo/heterosexual definition, but also other binarisms influenced by that dichotomy such as knowledge/ignorance, masculine/feminine, high/low cultures of writing. Most revolutionary, perhaps, and most troubling for dominant culture is the pornographic aspect of slash writing. In reinscribing conventional tropes of pornography - pornography as gender inequality - onto two male bodies, slash writers can be shown to be playfully deconstructing the Lacanian concept of sexual difference as an exclusionary position of either "having" or "being" the phallus. Another popular mode of pornographic writing which focuses on the sensual exploration of bodies and an economy of equals can serve to illustrate Butlerian notions of the reappropriation of the phallus as the primary signifier in an erotic exchange. Slash fan fiction, I posit, is a communal and grass roots critique not only of popular culture but also of heterosexual hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.

### **Living in Utopia**

6 Analysing one's own story has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. As the author, I cannot be sure if what I have tried to convey in a scene will be recognized by the

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<sup>2</sup> "The Spring Garden" at <http://www.tenthplanet.org>.

reader. At the same time I am not able to read the story from an assumed reader's point of view. I can, however, in analysing my own work analyse the process of writing itself. The first part of this essay will therefore not attempt to provide an outsider's reading of the text but will endeavour to combine a reading of the text with looking into the process of creation and my own relationship with the text and its intended readership.

7 When I set out to write "The Spring Garden," I knew one thing: I was going to depict a utopian society which had overcome our current straight/gay divide, a society beyond heterosexual hegemony. I chose to operate with the characters and settings of an American mainstream television series, in the mode of a genre of predominantly female underground fan writing that sets out to subvert mainstream culture by posing same-sex relationships between the main screen characters. My premise was to send a set of late twentieth-century characters into a parallel world beyond the "crisis of homo/heterosexual definition" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 1), portraying the same characters in different realities. I asked myself, what would a reality look like that did not have our notions of femininity and masculinity any more, a society in which accordingly the discourse of sexuality would not be entirely dominated by the gender of the sexual object?

8 My set-up of the different realities was a rather simple one. My story would focus on two male characters, the two male protagonists of the feature film *Stargate* which was subsequently turned into the television series *Stargate SG-1*:<sup>3</sup> Daniel Jackson, archaeologist, linguist, anthropologist, a character trained in inhabiting different cultures, aware of the workings of prevailing discourses; bisexual, I assumed, with an unrequited crush on his best friend. Someone who would not differ too much in the two realities, apart from being more self-assertive in a society that did not require closets and the connected experiences of internalized homophobia and shame. He would also be the main focalizer of the story, the traveller to whom readers might attach their sympathies and let themselves be guided through the clashing cultures.

9 My second main character and other half of the main romantic pairing was to be Jack O'Neill, colonel of the U.S. Air Force, a man's man, whom I took to be heterosexual in the sense that he had not seen it necessary to question his own sexual preferences since they appeared "natural" within the conditions of heterosexual hegemony. His character offered the

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<sup>3</sup> According to the original MGM and Showtime press kit, "Stargate SG-1 follows a unique team of a Special Operations Colonel, an Archaeologist, an Astrophysicist and an Alien Warrior on their missions through an ancient 'gate' to new worlds where they encounter fascinating, but sometimes dangerous cultures. This team, known as SG-1, works under the auspices of a covert agency known as the SGC, a division of Air Force Intelligence that is highly classified; only the President and the Joint Chiefs know of its existence." Stargate SG-1 started airing in 1997 and currently comprises eight seasons. In the timeline of the series, "The Spring Garden" is set some time after the first episode of the fourth season, entitled "Small Victories."

opportunity to push twentieth-century masculinity beyond the straight/gay divide and explore what might happen if he suddenly found himself confronted with a reality that did have a male homosocial-homoerotic continuum, the living proof being he himself in that reality.

10 A secondary set of characters introduced in the alternate reality were to challenge a few preconceptions of the reader: Sergeant Jones, female officer, whom Jack O'Neill mistakes for a man in his first encounter. Sergeant Jones, whom I pictured as a baby butch, was supposed to date Nurse Barbara. The set of female SGC officers is completed by Colonel Carmen Alvarez, female butch version of Jack O'Neill. Introduced in an alpha-female, lesbian setting, I hoped the reader would assume her to be gay, which as it turns out is the case in our reality where, as Daniel learns, she has been discharged from the Air Force in the 1980s on the grounds of homosexual conduct. However, in the alternate reality I intended her to be in a relationship with a man, thus opening up the straight/gay divide from the other side.

11 My second main romantic pairing consisted of Major Samantha Carter and Janet Fraiser, MD, who together with adopted alien daughter Cassandra form an alternate version of family to the bourgeois male/female/biological child "ideal" perpetuated in our society since the seventeenth century. Sam Carter further offered the opportunity to deconstruct the TV show itself, in which she appears to be the obligatory love interest for a number of recurring male characters, most of whom are alien and thus regularly unavailable for the next few episodes until they eventually die. As it is, the alternative the writers of the show have to offer appears to be to portray Sam as pining away for her commanding officer. However, some parts of the female fan community feel that this scenario does not do justice to Sam as a strong and independent female character. What if, I suggested therefore, Sam Carter is not looking for a man at all?

12 With Jack's neighbour Ben and his parents, Eddie and male partner Nick in the alternate reality, Eddie and wife Darlene in our reality, I introduced a second family, directly contrasted as I set them up (somewhat melodramatically maybe) with completely different family dynamics. Ben in the alternate reality is a playful, happy, open ten-year-old, who - apart from being a plot device to get Jack and Daniel to share a bed for the night - serves the purpose of confronting Jack O'Neill with his other self and his other self's relationship with Daniel, whereas the Ben in our reality, despite being raised in the "ideal" nuclear family, is a shy, wary child, aware of the necessity of hiding from his homophobic father certain parts of his life, most notably his friendship with Jeff (whose mother is in a relationship with another woman). His father Eddie in our reality epitomizes homosexual panic, the necessity for the male heterosexual subject to abject his homosexual Other. With what the reader knows about

him from the alternate reality, Eddie himself may not be entirely straight, yet presumably refuses to accept his same-sex desires, becoming deeply distrustful towards everything that defies his norms and terrorizing his wife and son instead. By juxtaposing the two realities I tried to question both the supremacy of the heterosexual bond over other social bonds and the myth of the nuclear family as the fundament of the sanity and health of civilization.

13 But what exactly is different in my utopian society so that compulsory heterosexuality could cease to be normative? I decided - somewhat naively, maybe - that politically a more successful history of the 1960s liberation movements might have had the desired effect, involving a non-assassinated Martin Luther King, a number of more liberal U.S. Presidents and no homophobic backlash in the wake of AIDS. As for society as a whole, I gathered that a less rigid system of sexualities would be entrenched in a less rigid system of genders, a society with less rigid gender interpellation, which would not need to uphold current signifiers like dress and "masculine" and "feminine" behaviours in order to tell the sexes apart (and make sure the "right" sexes get paired off). Such a society, I felt, would also not feel the need to insist on the primacy of a Western phallogocentric discourse and would educate its children accordingly. This is why I had the alternate reality Ben relate to Jack and Daniel what he has learned in school about the system of genders and sexualities in non-Western cultures (thus rendering visible that our current sex/gender system is just another construct among many). As far as the art of storytelling is concerned, I realize now that this is probably a rather crude attempt at educating the reader by educating Jack. Yet I think educating the current and next generation about the existence of a multiplicity of discourses historically and culturally, and questioning the supremacy of one set of constructs over all others is the only way to actually overcome current binarisms.

14 A little anecdote: a strange thing happened to me while I was writing this story. It is the prerogative of the writer that during the process of writing you can "become" one or several of your characters and step into the world you created. For the two months of writing "The Spring Garden," I was able to live in a world where neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality as we know them existed. Towards the end of this time period I happened to be sitting at a bus stop, when I noticed a couple, a man and woman, kissing and holding hands in public, and I thought, "how strange they look! A man and a woman." To me, a couple consisting of two men or two women would at that moment have felt more "natural." I do not relate this incident in an effort to argue for the primacy of homosexuality over heterosexuality, but in an attempt to describe how up to that point, without even having been aware of it and in spite of being out as a queer woman in most parts of my life, compulsory

heterosexuality was apparently constantly at the back of my mind, that feeling of being "a copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real" (Butler, "Imitation" 20). Only by its sudden absence did I suddenly realize its otherwise constant presence. My hope is that some of that feeling of having truly been in a land "somewhere over the rainbow" for a while will also communicate itself to the reader, regardless of gender or sexuality.

### **Beyond Binarisms**

15 In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that "many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured - indeed, fractured - by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" and goes on to show how this crisis of definition has infused a whole set of binarisms underlying our modern thinking (1). Meanwhile, all over the world, since the 1970s, a culture of underground fanwriting has emerged, mostly by women, which offers a cultural critique of what is offered to current audiences as popular entertainment, trying to challenge some of these binarisms. "The Spring Garden" belongs to this genre and exhibits many of its typical features.

16 The prototypical plot for a slash story, as characterized by Henry Jenkins, involves "a series of movements from an initial partnership, through a crisis in communication that threatens to disrupt that union, toward its reconfirmation through sexual intimacy" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 206), with the "initial partnership" usually referring to an on-screen friendship between the (mostly male) protagonists, or, less often, an antagonism between the hero and his nemesis. Slash writers thus centre their stories around homosocial bonds which are already established in the primary text, the TV series itself. Underlying these bonds, they suggest, is a homoerotic subtext or, as Constance Penley puts it, one that is "easily *made* to be there" ("Brownian Motion" 137). In *Between Men*, Sedgwick introduces the notion of "male homosocial desire" to denote an entire spectrum of men's relations with other men, a spectrum which may at different points in history take different forms. Following Claude Lévi-Strauss' and Gayle Rubin's notion of patriarchy as a male "traffic in women," she proposes that "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power," a relationship which may "for historical reasons [. . .] take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two" (25). She hypothesizes the "potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual - a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society is

radically disrupted" (1-2).

To put it in twentieth-century American terms, the fact that what goes on at football games, in fraternities, at the Bohemian Grove, and at climactic moments in war novels can look, with only a slight shift of optic, quite startlingly "homosexual," is not most importantly an expression of the psychic origin of these institutions in a repressed or sublimated homosexual genitality. Instead, it is the coming to visibility of the normally implicit terms of a coercive double bind. [. . .] For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being "interested in men." (89)

17 This subtext of male homosocial desire can of course also be found in the narratives of popular entertainment. Drawing on Sedgwick's theories, Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* argues that "slash turns that subtext into the dominant focus of new texts. Slash throws conventional notions of masculinity into crisis by removing the barriers blocking the realization of homosocial desire; slash unmasks the erotics of male friendship, confronting the fears keeping men from achieving intimacy" (205). He characterizes the genre as a whole as representing "the conscious construction of a male homosocial-homosexual continuum" (206).<sup>4</sup>

18 It is perhaps not surprising that this genre of writing seems to be produced almost exclusively by women, for whom the concept of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual bonds, between "women loving women" and "women promoting the interests of women," is still intelligible. As Sedgwick puts it, "the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men" (*Between Men* 2). While the majority of slash stories focus on same-sex relationships between men, this may be at least partly attributed to the fact that there still are not many television series which feature strong female pair bonds, while strong male pair bonds - and interesting, three-dimensional male characters - seem to abound.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> An earlier exploration of slash and homosocial/homoerotic desire is provided by Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith. In their discussion of K/S (the original *Star Trek* slash) stories, they characterize slash as the creation of "a universe that contains androgynous heroism and transcendent romantic love" (237). In these stories, Kirk's and Spock's relationship is portrayed as an almost fusional union of two strong equals who nevertheless both exhibit equally "masculine" and "feminine" traits. Lamb and Veith point to the similarity of the transcendent, mystical bond between these two characters (a human and a Vulcan) with Leslie Fiedler's description of the mythic quality inherent in the interethnic male bonding found in American literature, and with the female romantic friendships described by Lillian Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men*. "K/S stories," they argue, "remove gender as a governing and determining force in the love relationship." Disillusioned with the inequality inherent in their own contemporary gender relations, Lamb and Veith suggest, these stories provide for their authors "a vision of a new way of loving and especially a vision of new possibilities for women" (255). For an extended reading of K/S with regard to Fiedler and Sedgwick see also Penley, *NASA/TREK* (132-45).

<sup>5</sup> This has changed to a certain extent in recent years with the *Star Trek* spin-offs *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine*, and series such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In what follows, I will be focussing almost exclusively on m/m slash fiction, simply because this is the genre I am most familiar with. One of the main reasons why I personally prefer m/m slash to f/f slash is, I think,

19 "The Spring Garden" follows the narrative formula of slash in that it starts out with the solid if slightly strained friendship of the two series protagonists in the wake of a mission gone wrong, in which Daniel was forced to order a torpedo launch that would have killed O'Neill had it not been for the intervention of alien allies. The psychological fall out of this situation is complicated by Daniel's having fallen in love with Jack, a development Jack is up to that point blissfully unaware of. While I set up Daniel as a character who for himself has no problem travelling from one end of a proposed male homosocial-homoerotic continuum to the other, Jack O'Neill was to be the straight male character who in a series of moves was to be pushed across the gap of homosocial and homosexual desire. The on-screen version of the Jack and Daniel friendship already exhibits a number of characteristics which are perceived as "slashy" by fans, i.e. as having great potential for a slash pairing. Among them are comfortable banter, a tendency to finish off each other's sentences or talk simultaneously, an obviously comfortable occupying of each other's personal space (necessitated in part by the film medium itself), a number of hugs and an apparent lack of selfconsciousness about touching each other.

20 My first move then included a scenario referred to in fan writing as "smarm": our two heroes comforting each other in a situation where one or both are physically or psychologically harmed, usually involving lots of bodily contact and reassurances about how much their friendship means to them. Smarm does not necessarily have to have an element of sexual tension. Rather, it tries to imagine a different idea of masculinity, one in which traditionally feminine traits such as nurturing and the open declaration of feelings are extended onto male characters. It can, however, serve as a starting point for a sexual relationship in a slash story. Mirna Cicioni discusses similar instances of comforting in her analysis of the "hurt/comfort" genre which she characterizes as an "eroticization of nurturance." With one partner satisfying a basic need of the other - providing warmth, food or emotional reassurance - elements like warmth or food, "although not specifically sexual in themselves [. . .] are eroticised because they give a physical dimension to the closeness of the bond between the partners and lead to, or become a part of, an intimacy that also has a sexual component" (163). In "The Spring Garden," I had Daniel relive the traumatic experience of his having to issue the order that would ultimately kill Jack in a nightmare, resulting in Jack, who at this moment conveniently shares his bed, comforting him both by his physical

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because for me, the writing or reading of a slash story, especially a first time story, is an almost ritual enactment of making dominant culture admit to its disavowed homosexual Other and by extension acknowledge my existence as a queer woman. This is, of course, most successful in a story revolving around the representatives of dominant culture themselves, the male protagonists.



presence and by his reassurance that Daniel could not have acted any differently under the circumstances and that Jack was aware of how the incident had affected Daniel. Ultimately, Jack acknowledges the depth of Daniel's feelings for him (if more on the level of friendship than on the level of sexual attraction) and demonstrates that he cares for Daniel. The friendship has been restored; the traumatic experience has allowed Jack to openly demonstrate his affection. Fully informed about the true extent of Daniel's feelings, the reader understands the scene as part of the build-up towards a different sort of relationship, anticipating greater intimacies to come.

21 My story departs from the usual slash plot in that sexual intimacy between the characters does not mark the point at which all conflicts are resolved and friendship naturally segues into undying love. Instead, I appropriate a different male gender stereotype to bring about the ultimate conflict between the two characters: the notion that it is "natural" for men (but not for women) to separate sexual acts from love. His exposure in a parallel world to a society which promotes both men and women as potential sexual objects for men allows Jack to perceive his friend as a possible object choice, which combined with a protective, bordering on possessive streak towards Daniel brings about their first sexual encounter in Jack's shower. The ultimate conflict is reached when it becomes apparent that the same act has different meanings for both men (Jack's "we both needed to get laid" vs. Daniel's admission of his feelings, "those Friday nights, I never came for hockey, Jack"). Not until he sees another Daniel through the eyes of his differently socialized counterpart by means of the other Jack's holiday video tape can this Jack O'Neill make the leap from regarding Daniel as a friend to imagining him as a potential lover. The crisis is resolved with Jack admitting to his feelings after drunkenly pondering the nature of his relationship with Daniel, and receiving a blow to the head from a loose plank. As regards the ending, strictly speaking I did not adhere to the slash plot paradigm which demands the story end with a another sex scene. The occurrence of sex is merely hinted at in the epilogue. Instead, I opted for afterglow: the reader leaving Jack and Daniel lounging on Jack's deck in post-coital bliss; the (virtual) camera pans out to the sound of the pride anthem "Somewhere Over The Rainbow," another intertextual reference to the original product, the TV series itself, which alludes to the motion picture *The Wizard of Oz* in a number of episodes.<sup>6</sup> And thus, a previously straight Colonel Jack O'Neill

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<sup>6</sup> Most often it is Jack O'Neill who delivers quotes from *The Wizard of Oz*, ranging from "Let's follow the yellow brick road," and "We're off to see the wizard," to Dorothy's "Auntie Em! Auntie Em!" which somehow out of Colonel O'Neill's mouth never sound camp. Both Judy Garland, who played Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz*, and the movie itself have acquired a cult status in the gay and lesbian community. The story of the small town girl who escapes into a wonderful Technicolor world mirrors queer people's own search for self-acceptance and a community where they can openly be themselves. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," has been adopted

has been incorporated into a proposed male homosocial-homoerotic continuum. While the prototypical first time story as outlined here is not the only plot explored in slash stories, first time stories of this sort form a dominant subgenre of slash fan fiction.<sup>7</sup>

22 How does dominant culture react to this transgressive form of rewriting original texts? Reactions range from puzzlement to amusement to painting slash writers as perverts who need to "get a life" (thus referring to William Shatner's original dismissal of "trekkies"). The fans are accused of being escapists, refusing to engage with society proper, and at the same time posing a threat to society (that is, the heterosexual order) with their depiction of homosexual love stories.<sup>8</sup> The argument most often evoked by critics is, of course, the possibly bad influence of pornographic (male) same-sex stories on the mental health of children who might happen upon certain websites on the internet. Slash is not uncontested even among fan fiction writers themselves. There are those who deem the portraying of a character as homosexual or bisexual as disrespectful to the (fictional) character and by extension to the actors who lend their bodies to these characters. More than anything else, these arguments reveal the deep-seated homosexual panic prevalent in our culture. If modern masculinist culture requires the scapegoating of male same-sex desire for its maintenance, as Sedgwick argues, then slash writers do indeed pose a threat to carefully constructed male heterosexual identities by envisioning a society in which the boundaries of homosocial and homosexual desires have become blurred. A whole system of thought becomes unhinged if "the homosexual" is incorporated into an economy of homosocial desire. The abjection of the slash genre and its writers becomes another instance of that "paranoid insistence with which the definitional barriers between 'the homosexual' (minority) and 'the heterosexual' (majority) are fortified, in this [the twentieth] century, by nonhomosexuals, and especially by men against men" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 83-4).

23 The explicit nature of most slash stories appears to be a particular source of unease for dominant culture. Again, male heterosexual identities, this time the heterosexual readers', are

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as a slogan by gay and queer activists, and the rainbow flag, a symbol for the gay community's diversity and multiculturalism, is also popularly associated with Judy Garland's rendition of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Judy Garland, who had several gay husbands and many gay friends, became an icon for oppressed, closeted gay men in the 1950s and 1960s. The term "friend of Dorothy" then served as a code for closeted gays to identify each other in mixed company.

<sup>7</sup> I did not feel the need to go to such great lengths plotwise with the Sam/Janet romance since, in line with Sedgwick's notion of a relatively smooth female homosocial continuum, I felt that mere curiosity on Sam's part would suffice as motivation for her to take up Janet's offer. For a discussion of other types of slash narratives see also Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (206-19). Mirna Cicioni provides an insightful analysis of "first-time" stories, the "hurt/comfort" genre, and what she terms "virtual marriage" stories, as well as a reading of slash narratives alongside conventional heterosexual romance fiction.

<sup>8</sup> Constance Penley draws parallels between contemporary society's dismissal of slash writers and the sentiments expressed towards the nineteenth-century community of American domestic novelists, in the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, that "d---d mob of scribbling women" (*NASA/TREK* 132-5).

at stake. For straight male readers of a m/m slash story, the "homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts" becomes "a terror over losing proper gender."<sup>9</sup> Particularly distressing to such readers is, of course, the fact that the vast majority of these stories are written by women. An analogy put forth quite often by female slash writers to puzzled straight male friends - that maybe gay male sex is as intriguing to some women as lesbian sex is to straight men - apparently regularly fails to convince the friends in question. It seems that another central node of current thought is potentially being disrupted, a node which has the powerful binarism of knowledge/ignorance at its centre.

24 If knowledge, as Sedgwick drawing on Foucault argues, has since the late eighteenth century become conceptually inseparable from sexual knowledge, "so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance sexual ignorance" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 73); and if sexual knowledge has consequently, and especially with the growing split between "public" and "domestic" spheres and the subordination of women under the companionate marriage ideal, been the prerogative of men, then women writing about sex for a predominantly female audience is indeed a transgressive move, troubling for dominant culture. Women writing about men having sex is then doubly transgressive in that it not only violates the notion of female sexual ignorance but also has at its centre that sexuality which since the end of the nineteenth century has been "constituted *as* secrecy" (73), (male) homosexuality. For the politically motivated, slash writing can then be both, the insertion of queer content into popular culture, and a feminist act. Precisely the transgressive nature of slash writing can then become one of the thrills of writing the genre.

25 Not only our current understandings of sexual orientations or identities are overturned when women of all sexual orientations choose to write about (mostly male) same-sex desires. Notions of masculinity and femininity, of maleness and femaleness are being challenged as well. Much has been argued about whether the characters portrayed in m/m slash are still "men," are still meant to be male.<sup>10</sup> I, for one, while writing the scene where Jack comforts

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<sup>9</sup> For this I am borrowing Judith Butler's words from *Bodies That Matter* (238).

<sup>10</sup> Lamb and Veith propose slash as an exploration of truly androgynous characters, while Jenkins stresses its potentiality for a critique of traditional masculinity. An avenue that, to my knowledge, has not been explored so far is the notion that slash may be offering the female writer/reader the opportunity to "put on male drag" for a limited amount of time and thus explore her own masculinity. Judith Halberstam offers a history of literary and cultural traditions of female masculinity in her book of the same title. She describes her project as "a seriously committed attempt to make masculinity safe for women and girls. Although it seems counterintuitive that such a project should be necessary in the 1990s, it has been my contention that despite at least two decades of sustained feminist and queer attacks on the notion of natural gender, we still believe that masculinity in girls and women is abhorrent and pathological" (268). She asks: "Why are we comfortable thinking about men as mothers, but we never consider women as fathers? Gender, it seems, is reversible only in one direction, and this must surely have to do with the immense social power that accumulates around masculinity. Masculinity, one must conclude, has been reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies. And this is not to say that all things being equal, all female-bodied people would desire masculinity, only that the protection

Daniel after his nightmare, was constantly asking myself whether my characterization was not possibly slightly off. I still wanted the characters to be recognizably male, to operate with what is culturally propagated as "male" behaviour. I did not want the reader to point out to me that Daniel, as I had written him, was really a woman in disguise. Yet, if the reader came to that conclusion, would I not have achieved what I wanted, exposing the ultimately performative nature of gender?<sup>11</sup>

26 The topic is a highly debated one among slash writers. Like any other genre of writing, slash is in flux, is constantly being renegotiated. Slash writing is diverse, conventions change. It has been demanded - especially since the advent of the internet and its easy and anonymous access to information of all sorts - that there should be more of an effort to portray "real" men in slash, to include gay culture, write "realistic" gay relationships (*not* the romantic vision of one true love and the monogamous couple who live happily ever after), "realistic" gay sex. Yet the enthusiasm is not shared by all fan fiction writers. For some, this obligation detracts from their enjoyment of the genre. "Why is it our duty to accurately reflect the gay male experience? Is it the duty of gay male writers to accurately portray the lives of spinster librarians?" asks slash writer Lezlie Shell. And Barbara Tennison adds, "a story about men in a tight relationship, as a metaphor for how women see love, can illustrate that both sexes need affection and support, that the need is simply human" (qtd. in Green, Jenkins and Jenkins).

27 Along with prescribed models of masculine and feminine behaviour, slash writers break down binarisms regarding the genres of writing which the two genders are expected to prefer. If women supposedly get emotional satisfaction from romance novels and men supposedly get off on pornography, then slash writers offer a curious mixture of the two, a "romantic pornography," (in the case of SF slash) "radically shaped and reworked by the themes and tropes of science fiction" (Penley, *NASA/TREK* 102). It is a genre which includes sexually explicit scenes, but also one in which the sex scenes fulfil narrative functions; they

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of masculinity from women bears examination." (269-70) While her book analyzes masculinity mostly in lesbian contexts, she maintains that the general concept of female masculinity may prove useful for all women. She furthermore suggests that "when women lack powerful images of masculine women, they cross-identify. The results of such cross-identifications are fertile productions of lesbian James Deans, butch Marlon Brandos, and dyke renditions of male masculinity" (276). Halberstam concludes that, living in a society that stigmatizes gender deviance and "cut off from the most obvious rewards of masculinity - political power and representation - many masculine women have had to create elaborate rationales for [ . . . ] their decisions to live explicitly masculine lives. They have had to imaginatively recreate masculinity through writing and other forms of cultural production" (276). The same may hold true, I propose, for some female writers of slash fan fiction.

<sup>11</sup> In her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler illustrates her notion of gender performativity using the spectacle of drag: "Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself." (21)

further the plot or are used as a tool for characterization. Furthermore, they are embedded in the characters' pasts, present and futures as provided by TV "canon," i.e. the character background provided by the actual television series. The contemporary gap in the male homosocial-homosexual continuum meanwhile provides an ideal backdrop to a male same-sex romance, a perfect obstacle to true love. The slash reader highly appreciates the amount of work a fellow writer is willing to put into conceiving a convincing way to get the characters together and ultimately into bed. Jenkins is reluctant to characterize slash as mere "erotica" or "pornography," since "sexually explicit sequences often constitute only a small section of lengthy and complex narratives." He argues that "slash is not so much a genre about sex as it is a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity." Yet at the same time he admits that "most slash fans concede that erotic pleasure is central to their interest in the genre" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 190-1). Jenkins, I think, fails to acknowledge the way the two elements, narrative and porn, are inextricably linked. For the average slash reader, the 15,000 word build-up to a sex scene is as much part of the erotic reading experience as the actual sex scene itself. In this sense, and bearing in mind that its writers and readers are for the most part women, slash may be truly a kind of revolutionary "female pornography."

28 Finally, there are a number of binarisms not only the slash writers but the fan fiction writing community as a whole sets out to undermine. Fan fiction writers refuse to be mere consumers of mass-produced goods, producing their own "poached" versions of texts. Jenkins draws on Michel de Certeau's analogy of active reading as "poaching," a raiding of primary texts, ultimately a "type of cultural bricolage through which readers fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprints, salvaging bits and pieces of the found material in making sense of their own social experience" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 26). In fandom, this form of reading ceases to be a solitary activity but becomes a communal process, resulting in a "participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community" (46). Fan fiction writers also rally against a dichotomy of high vs. low cultures of writing, both in refusing to accept the inferiority of texts based on the narratives of popular culture, and by encouraging writers of all levels of technical skill to participate in their community. A community in which writers are readers and readers are writers, it is nonetheless visible in its current form only due to the possibilities of anonymous publishing on the world wide web. Many fans use pseudonyms, aware of the fact that their "hobby" may not stand well with friends, family or employers. Slash writers in particular are very reluctant

to disclose their activities to their real life environment. The term "to come out of the slash closet" has thus been coined to describe such an outing to family or friends, an activity fraught with danger and experienced by the slash writer with the anxiety and apprehension associated with any other form of coming out. Meanwhile, inside the closet, slash writers celebrate the safe environment they have created for "poaching" mass-produced culture and exploring the needs and desires of its participants.

### **Slash, the Lesbian Phallus and Phantasmatic Identification**

29 "Pornography by women for women, with love." This is how Joanna Russ celebrated slash fan fiction in the mid-1980s (Penley, "Brownian Motion" 138). Needless to say, not every slash fan fiction writer felt herself included in Russ' terminology. It was, after all, the middle of the sex wars; "pornography" was not necessarily what every writer saw herself as producing, self-identified feminist or indeed not.<sup>12</sup> Attitudes have changed to some extent since then, as have tropes of writing sex scenes in slash (this especially in the wake of internet publishing, and the call for more "realistic" gay sex). Yet the majority of stories still conform to the model Jenkins describes: "While the stories may provide detailed descriptions of specific acts, the emphasis is much more on the emotional quality of the sex than on physical sensations." Sex is a "meaningful exchange between equals" rather than being depersonalised, and the "focus is often on sensuality [. . .] rather than on penetration and ejaculation" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 192). Together with a rewriting of female sexuality onto male bodies, this may indeed result in some slash writing in the depiction of seemingly unrealistic gay male sex. I would like to argue, however, that this portrayal constitutes rather a conscious reworking of technologies of the body on the part of the slash writer, performed by mostly female authors, aimed at a predominantly female audience and written mostly over male bodies - a reworking of the heterosexist scripts available in conventional pornography, of "a heterosexist version of sexual difference in which men are said to 'have' and women to 'be' the phallus" (Butler, *Bodies* 88), offering a resignification of the phallus and challenging the heterosexual matrix. It is in this sense - and not in the least by the very act, as a woman, of

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<sup>12</sup> Camille Bacon-Smith discusses some of the reactions - not all favourable - to Russ' article in the slash writing community (242-4). Note that I am using *pornography* and *erotica* interchangeably for describing sexually explicit material; this usage is, however, not uncontested among slash writers. In this respect the female slash writing community mirrors conflicting contemporary - and not only exclusively feminist - contentions over what, exactly, constitutes pornography and whether or not, apart from being for the most part deeply misogynistic, it is harmful. For an extended discussion on the subject I refer to two essay collections which offer a variety of viewpoints, Drucilla Cornell's *Feminism and Pornography* and Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh's *Sex Exposed*. Among the academic writers who have discussed slash, Cicioni, for instance, is reluctant to describe slash as pornography. I should also mention at this point that there are many slash stories which do not contain explicit sex scenes.

writing sexually explicit stories itself - that slash writers regardless of sexual identity (or even gender) can be understood as wielding what Judith Butler has termed "the lesbian phallus."

30 In *Bodies That Matter* Butler draws on Lacan's discussion of ego formation through identification with an idealized specular image, the child perceiving its reflection in the mirror; the "mirror stage" coincides with its entry into language and the symbolic order. In the perceiving of the idealized body, some body parts "become the token for the centering and controlling function of the *bodily imago*" (77); the result is a signifying chain centred around a privileged signifier, according to Lacan, the phallus. Butler reveals Lacan's idealization of the phallus as masculine narcissism, a "wishful transfiguration" (79). The phallus is not the origin of signification but "the effect of a signifying chain summarily suppressed" (81). For Lacan, the phallus is a signifier, symbolizing the penis (or the clitoris). Yet Butler asks why the phallus has to require "that particular body part to symbolize" (84). For her, the phallus becomes a "transferable phantasm;" its "naturalized link to masculine morphology can be called into question through an aggressive reterritorialization" (86). If the phallus as an imaginary effect can be reterritorialized, can be employed by those who neither "have" nor "are" the phallus (this is where the lesbian phallus comes in); if it can symbolize other body parts - or even, as Butler suggests, alternative fetishes, discursive performatives - then anatomy and the dichotomy of sexual difference (dividing the sexes into those who "have" and those who "are" the phallus) becomes also open to resignification. Sexed bodies, the anatomical, is, Butler argues, "only 'given' through its signification" (90). The body in the mirror is only a "delirious effect" (91). Butler's notion of the lesbian phallus (a reterritorialized phallus that can be employed by anyone, not just lesbians) allows for "a displacement of the hegemonic symbolic of (heterosexist) sexual difference and the critical release of alternative imaginary schemas for constituting sites of erotogenic pleasure" (91).

31 This reterritorialization of the phallus is, I think, to some extent realized in the tropes of "romantic pornography" prevalent in m/m slash. This is also what I was aiming for in the depiction of a flashback scene in which the Jack O'Neill from the alternate reality remembers a trip to an uninhabited alien planet, involving swimming in a forest lake, the ingestion of psychotropic fruit, and sex with Daniel. I tried to write a sex scene involving both a sensual exploration of bodies and penetration, but a scene that does not revolve around the penis as a primary phallic referent. If I were to attribute "phallus" - as privileged signifier in this erotic exchange between men - to specific body parts, I would like the reader to have understood that this fluctuates throughout the scene - a case can be made for various body parts as referents of a phallic signifier. The penis as the only phallus imaginable is deprivileged, the

phallus resignified; there is no stable hierarchy of significant body parts any longer. It is thus that this Jack O'Neill does not experience the penetration of his own (male) body as a threat to his masculinity; his "bottoming" ceases to be a "bottoming," as "bottom" and "top" have lost their signifying power - in a displaced phallic economy, the signifiers could as well be employed reversed.

32 I apparently felt the need to place this scene in as remote an environment as I could. The scene takes place between two men raised in an alternate culture, inebriation is involved and the setting is an alien planet. I think I felt that in order to describe this alternative erotic exchange, I had to employ alternate reality "men." I certainly chose the alien location in an effort to step outside culture, outside heterosexual hegemony and the symbolic order - into a void where we (I/you/the characters) can create an "alternative imaginary schema of erotogenic pleasure." Within the story itself, a sentient alien creature is present to witness this novel exchange: an alien bird-like animal is hovering above Jack and Daniel, "poised motionless in mid-air, bright wings shimmering, illuminated by the light of an alien sun," possibly an alien discourse. "What are you doing?" the creature appears to be asking when looking down at the two men. "We call it love," explains Jack, thereby creating that which he names, a performative speech act which puts into effect a new symbolic order beyond heterosexual hegemony.

33 But what happens if one were to retain the penis as a primary phallic referent in the depiction of gay male sex; if one were to use the conventional scripts of erotogenic pleasure for male bodies, but if one were a woman writer writing for a female audience? What about those sex scenes in m/m slash fiction that try to depict not an alternative vision of masculinity and masculine pornographic discourse, but opt for "realism," a more accurate depiction of "men" having sex with "men"?

34 The second sex scene between Jack and Daniel falls, I think, into this category. Reading the sex scene in the shower a considerable time after I have written it, it strikes me how close this scene comes to typical porn cliché - the location (the shower), the voyeur (Jack, from whose point of view the scene is narrated, and by extension, if s/he is so inclined, the reader), the first unsuspecting then willing object of Jack's lust (Daniel). If it were not for Daniel being a man, this scene would follow rather closely the misogynistic scripts Catherine MacKinnon criticizes in conventional pornography; pornography as objectification, an institutionalisation of "the sexuality of male supremacy, which fuses the erotization of dominance and submission with the social construction of male and female" (148). One of the appeals of slash writing for women may be that this genre allows for exploring scenes of



dominance and submission in a safe environment - over equal, preferably male bodies, as these have never been constructed as sites of subordination the way female bodies have. Without invoking institutions of gender inequality, the (female) reader is free to choose to identify with either the dominant (Jack) or the submissive male (Daniel), switch identifications during the exchange, or simply remain voyeur to the scene. These multiple identificatory positions as well as the high popularity of switching points of view in the narration of slash stories - trying to get inside both character's heads almost at the same time - attests, I think, to a tendency among slash writers to question or even renounce the cultural construction of sexual difference as either "having" or "being" the phallus. Taking up the tropes of pornography as gender inequality but rewriting them over male bodies is more than just a female "traffic in men," although it may at times be a tongue-in-cheek revenge for centuries of male "traffic in women;" and this role reversal is, as we have seen, highly disconcerting for dominant masculine culture. It is written from the perspective of someone who knows. Of someone who is wielding a phallus she is not entitled to on a body not culturally "meant" for it. Of someone who is aware of the mechanisms of gender inequality in conventional pornography and also of someone who knows *why they have to be there*.

35 In psychoanalytic understanding, sexed positions are assumed by the masculine subject by imaginary identification with the father, motivated by a fear of castration embodied by the mother. Butler shows this assumption to be a heterosexual construct, based on the abjection of the homosexual Other. Lacan's law of the father, which is where the threat originates, is not on a prior authority but an effect of citational practices. The embodying of a sex is for her "a kind of 'citing' of the law." However, "neither sex nor the law can be said to preexist their various embodyings and citings" (Butler, *Bodies* 108). The gender dynamics portrayed in conventional pornography mirror the assumption of sexed positions as enforced by the Lacanian symbolic. Men have to occupy a dominant position, otherwise they would be in danger of being castrated; the male body is constantly in danger of being negated. Women are the embodiment of this threat of castration and "obversely, the guarantee that the threat will not be realized" (264). This is why they have to remain submissive, object not subject in this heterosexual exchange. But, says Butler, "castration could not be feared if the phallus were not already detachable, already elsewhere, already dispossessed" (101). This masculine fear of castration, which the female slash writer knows to be unwarranted, is what she plays with when applying tropes of conventional pornography to an m/m sex scene. To reinscribe "pornography as gender inequality" - ultimately nothing more than another instance of citing and thereby producing the symbolic law - onto two male bodies is then to mock male

castration anxiety, to question the validity of this phallogocentric, heterosexist reasoning of the assumption of sexed positions. Slash writers illustrate what Jacques Derrida posits when he writes:

She who, unbelieving, still plays with castration, she is "woman." She takes aim and amuses herself (*en joue*) with it as she would with a new concept or structure of belief, but even as she plays she is gleefully anticipating her laughter, her mockery of man. With a knowledge that would outmeasure the most self-respecting dogmatic or credulous philosopher, woman knows that castration *does not take place*. (61)

Slash writers can thus be shown to be neither a bunch of "scribbling women" nor rabid TV fans who need to "get a life." They are instead critical consumers of modern entertainment who in their writing question essentialist notions of gender, sex and sexuality, playfully deconstructing the main paradigms of Western heterosexual hegemony.

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## ***Aunt Mary: The Dialectics of Desire***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper seeks to analyse the roles of the three transgendered characters of Pam Gems' play *Aunt Mary*. Sinfield and other western metropolitan theorists' 1990s discovery via Other (mainly Eastern) cultures that there are "radically different ways in which [gay] people can conceive their subjectivity and focus their desire" is an issue pre-figured by Pam Gems in *Aunt Mary* by nearly a decade. Written as far back as 1982, the drama anticipates much of the gay, transgender and transvestism theorizing of the 90s and the present day. Gems is on the pulse of cultural iconology by having written this piece so early and what is interesting is that the characters escape easy definitions and tidy categorizations. This is a performance of the identity of drag and queer framed by a play: the shifting and fluid space in which the identities of the players locate themselves is a study in the psychology of transgendering, transvestism, and transsexualism.

"[T]o take sex out of transvestism is like taking music out of opera" (H. Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*).

"It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game" (Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*).

1 A dramatist as prolific and talented as Pam Gems ought not to need an introduction. Her plays have been celebrated feminist additions to English drama in the Long Twentieth Century.<sup>1</sup> In *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980* (Godiwala 2003), I introduced the work of Pam Gems. Unlike the other feminist dramatists who were the concern of my previous work, Gems is cannily on the pulse of the cultural moment and she proves it time and again in her work. It was once said of Marina Warner that she was able to spot cultural pre-occupations before they became part of the cultural zeitgeist. Gems' dramaturgy pre-figures many such cultural moments, now reified by prolific academic theorizing on the subject.

2 *Aunt Mary*, first produced in 1982, anticipates by more than a decade the prolific output of queer theorizing in the Anglophone world. The triad seems to be an appropriate answer to the destructive potential of the nuclear family as theorized by Deleuze in the 1970s: "Oedipus is the figurehead of imperialism, 'colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony, and we shall see that even at home ... it is our intimate colonial education.'

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<sup>1</sup> The Long Twentieth Century extends the twentieth century into the present day, continuing the influences of the late twentieth century in terms of ideas, style and form. See my book, *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980* for the multiple transgressions wrought by feminist dramatists on patriarchally inherited forms and styles.

[...] Oedipus is everywhere" (Deleuze xx).

3 Gems' white mythologies are *herstories* but also histories:

Metaphysics - the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the *white man* takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason. *Which does not go uncontested.* (Derrida 213)

Contesting the *logos* and *mythos* of male reason, Gems creates characters, both women and men who debunk the stereotypes of western culture. Significantly, she also challenges the domination of *white man* as she brings in the Other. Not only is Woman cast as the Other, Freud's dark continent of otherness, but Other cultures, eastern and western are brought into play with characters from "home." White man too is rendered in all the shades of his beingness: straight, gay, transgendered, bisexual.

4 To say that *Aunt Mary* is a play about three gay people would be misleading. The transgendered identities and triadic domestic arrangements of this 1982 drama challenge the notions of traditionally gendered space and the nuclear family. Pam Gems is on the pulse of the gender theorizing of the 90s well before it happened: she pre-empted the transgendered spaces of gay and queer theory in the early 80s when fledgling lesbian theory had not given way to queer and gay theorizing quite yet. Gender here is set against a heterogeneous social background to give us "Aunt" Mary, a middle-aged gay man, Muriel, a bisexual middle-aged woman and Cyst, an aging transvestite male, who star in this three pronged drama about love, sexual relationships and privacy. When Alison who works for a media mogul wants to take the eminently saleable lives of this threesome into the glare of the public eye of television, they refuse to give up the privacy of their provincial lives. Indeed, the subtitle of the play is *Scenes from Provincial Life*, making the metadramatic statement of performing exactly what Alison the media person wants: putting the three transgendered people into the frame of the stage and bringing into confrontation the difference from the normative in contemporary Britain. This is a performance of the identity of drag and queer framed by a play: the shifting and fluid space in which the identities of the players locate themselves is a study in the psychology of transgenering, transvestitism, and transsexualism, which perform versions of a variously gay identity space.

5 The play avoids the easy exclusions that the new identity positions place on people named gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transvestite/transsexual (TV/TSS). As Alan Sinfield theorizes, the notion of the subject as defined by these, albeit fairly new, cultural terms, is a constraint. He notes that these terms may prove a hindrance to activists and analysts rather than an aid (Sinfield 150). Although the term "transgender" is currently used to encompass

the subjective identities of all TVs and TSS, Jay Prosser explains that "transgender" was used initially to denote a stronger commitment to living as a woman than "transvestite" or "cross-dresser," and without the implications of sexuality in "transsexual" (Sinfield 163).

6 Cyst, Mary, and Muriel defy definitions of constraint through this play by occupying different positions within exclusivity and difference. Although certain behaviours sound conventional in the play such as cross-dressing (Cyst enters from within, wearing a half-made dress. Mary follows, tape measure round neck. Sc. iv), so-called "effeminate behaviour" in the literary space of their café and a manufactured masculinity (Mary with a cigar and in trousers) tempers gay behaviour to be socially acceptable in the triad of wo/men.

7 Alan Sinfield and other western metropolitan theorists' 1990s discovery via Other (mainly Eastern) cultures that there are "radically different ways in which [gay] people can conceive their subjectivity and focus their desire" (Sinfield 164) is an issue anticipated by Pam Gems in *Aunt Mary* by nearly a decade.

8 Transvestism (TV) and transsexualism (TSS) were traditionally diagnostic terms for categories of mental disorders (Docter viii and Chapter 2). More recently, in "self theory" where the self is a hypothetical construct, the concepts of identity, gender identity, and cross-gender identity are conceptualized by Richard F. Docter as "subsystems of the self." Docter et al hypothesize that the self has a capacity to "share control, and even [...] be 'overthrown' by subordinate units of the self" (vii). One approach to transvestism is the *intrapsychic/psychodynamic* model. According to R. F. Docter, the best of psychoanalytic models of transvestism "describe this as a disorder of the self stemming from major difficulties in early object relations. Women's clothing are said to be symbolic ties with the mother and to serve as transitional objects providing security and anxiety reduction." Docter opines that "this theory seems more in harmony with the developmental behaviour of a transvestite than the earlier 'phallic woman' model that drew mainly on castration anxiety and the oedipal complex as explanatory theses." The *developmental/learning* model "attempts to explain transvestism and transsexualism based on the principles of learning and the process of socialization. The idea is that these behaviours are acquired through classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and modeling and imitation, just as are so many other behaviours." Since the different models explaining TV and TSS conflict with each other, Docter devises four thematic constructs in order to view these behaviours conceptually. He seems to ignore the *biological* or medical model entirely and favours developmental psychology. The four constructs are: *sexual arousal* and sexual excitement at cross-dressing; the *pleasure* associated with cross-dressing in the sense of its mood-altering power; *sexual scripts* which

guide complex behaviour; and *cross-gender identity* which is switched on and off by the act of cross dressing (Docter 1-3).

9        There seem to be two main explanations for transvestism: one is that it is a means for achieving sexual pleasure and arousal; the second is that transvestism is part of a personality struggle stemming from trauma and conflict. Docter aims to go beyond these two theories to question "how identity and gender identity are formed, how arousal and pleasure are generated, how sexual scripts are learned and rehearsed, and how intense envy and fear of women may contribute to becoming a transvestite" (Docter 6).

10      It does seem that even contemporary analysts see transgendered behaviour as abnormal or problem behaviour though their terminology is couched in a more progressive and acceptable language of analysis. The formation of gender and sexual identity, the generation of pleasure and the playing out of sexual scripts are not peculiar to transgendered people, and these can be as differently and variously constructed and enacted as there are gender and sexual identities. In the play we see the three transgendered wo/men play out these various sexual scripts. The female impersonator in *Aunt Mary* is "Cyst." Her favourite impersonation is the character of Blanche DuBois, a favourite of the cross-dressing community, perhaps because in *A Streetcar Named Desire* she symbolises the dichotomy between inner and outer self, the core of self and the façade of self, lending the cross-dresser the "magic" of Blanche's outward coy femininity masking the "realism" of the impersonating male self. Here we see the self has a capacity to share control, and even be "overthrown" by subordinate units of the self: transsexualism.

I don't want realism. [...] I'll tell you what I want. Magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! - *Don't turn the light on!* (Blanche in Williams 204).

Cyst hates the real light of day as does Blanche, perfectly in character and also quite apt psychologically as she is an agoraphobe who never leaves the environs of the house and the garden. Cyst enjoys women's clothing which serves as a transitional object providing security and anxiety reduction. Cyst is the impersonating wench.

16      Barbin's memoirs were written as a study of what Michel Foucault saw as the essentialist position of the "*true sex*."

Do we *truly* need a *true sex*? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a "true" sex in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures. (Foucault vii)



Foucault brings into question the persistence of the Western practice of perceiving the sexes as a duality. "[I]t was a very long time before the postulate that a hermaphrodite must have a sex - a single, true sex - was formulated." Sexuality for Foucault was always constructed within matrices of power as Butler reminds us (97). In the play we have Cyst as an indefinable space in the text, the gay cross-dressed actor or indeed a transsexual actor who responds to Aunt Mary's masculinity but also provides a female/feminine power of "his" own. They function in a two-pronged matrix of power relations as they finally include Muriel into a triadic domesticity which is, in a subversion of the Deleuzian oedipal-nuclear triad, a benign power relation. In a metadramatic twist we see the characters of Cyst and Mary "perform" for us, as they reject in a final gesture the beckoning materialist temptation of media celebrity and exposure. They are not, in the play, public impersonators but privately, a gay couple leading a "provincial life." As in *Franz into April* their life unfolds in a theatrical space, as the theatre doubles as a private (confessional) and public (performative) space which contains the flows of their desires. An understanding of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* sheds light on the central gestus of this play. The triadic arrangement which closes the play is a line of flight from heteronormative institutions of repression; it is also a flight from gay sexual constraints by the acceptance of bi-sexuality, deemed "natural" by some essentialist theorists such as Hélène Cixous. The triadic union of male impersonator-as-woman, a gay man and a woman in a legitimized marriage is the triadic answer to Deleuze's critique of the nuclear family (and capitalism) as source of all repression as well as a solution to the repressed feminine of the male-male bonding of conventional gay sexuality. It is the realization of "freedom in difference and through differentiation, the principle of permanent revolution made possible in the universal history inaugurated by capitalism" (Holland 121). The rejection of society's bad organizations, capitalism and the nuclear family is achieved by this Deleuzian triad by rejecting media exposure and entering into a bonding which defeats both, the nuclear family as well as homosexuality's rigid sexual apartheid. The media seeking to undermine the stability and force of free-form desire is rejected as they achieve their status as the Deleuzian schizos emerging at the end-of-history as the principle of freedom in permanent revolution. As Holland points out, schizophrenia [Deleuze's schizo] is not merely the principle of permanent revolution: it is also the process of revolution itself. It is the *modus operandi* of subject groups, subjugated groups (here, the triad of Mary, Cyst and Muriel), whose very existence and form of operation subvert the dominant mode of organization (in Gems' play it is the nuclear family, gay binary coupling and capitalism, as there is a consensus to reject materialistic public exposure in the media). As

Holland puts it, "the chances for realizing permanent revolution [...] stem from neither individual lines-of-flight nor the operation of subject groups occurring in isolation, but from the intersection and assemblage of individuals and groups into a critical mass whose combined effect it would be to lift the mortgage of the infinite debt and finally liquidate capital and the barriers it poses to freedom and enjoyment" (Holland 123).

17 *Aunt Mary* then is a performance of this permanent revolution acted out in a private provincial space occupied by three people who form a beneficent triad which replaces or supplants the Deleuzean Oedipal triad. We have here the Barthesian "*unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game." The refusal to play the game (of media exposure and capitalistic exploitation) and the risk of the game of triadic arrangement (a line-of-flight) puts Gems on the pulse of cultural iconology here as her dramaturgy predates the prolific theorizing on gay, bisexual and transgendered bodies in the 90s.

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## **“People confuse personal relations with legal structures.” An Interview with Margaret Atwood**

by Susanne Gruss, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany

**Margaret Atwood** was born in Ottawa, Ontario in 1939, and grew up in northern Quebec, Ontario, and Toronto. After living and working in many different cities and travelling extensively she now lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson. Her posts include Lecturer in English at the University of British Columbia, Assistant Professor of English at York University, Toronto, M.F.A. Honorary Chair at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Berg Chair at New York University, and Writer-In-Residence at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas. Atwood is the critically acclaimed author of more than 30 books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays and the editor of various anthologies. Her work has been translated into more than fifteen different languages. Prizes for her fiction include the Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin*, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Canadian Authors' Association Novel of the Year (both for *The Robber Bride*), the Giller Award for *Alias Grace*, and many more. Other books by Margaret Atwood shortlisted for the Booker Prize include *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *Alias Grace* and *Oryx and Crake*. She has been inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. She has been awarded the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit, the French Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and is a Foreign Honorary Member for Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Follow this link for a more extensive list of Margaret Atwood's works.

Atwood's most recent novel, the speculative fiction *Oryx and Crake*, depicts a world in which the human interest in genetic engineering has gone horribly wrong - in a post-apocalyptic scenery, first-person-narrator and survivor Jimmy/Snowman tells us in flashbacks how the catastrophe could happen - and how the "Children of Crake," the new, genetically "improved" race of men came into being. *Oryx and Crake* was shortlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize and longlisted for the 2003 WH Smith Fiction Award. For more information, see <http://www.oryxandcrake.co.uk> or <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/atwood/index.html>.

For further information on Margaret Atwood see Atwood's homepage <http://www.owtoad.com>

**Susanne Gruss:** I'll start with a question you've probably heard a hundred times by now ... . Why is *Oryx and Crake* your first novel with a man as its main protagonist?

**Margaret Atwood:** Why not? (*laughs*)

**Q:** That's the obvious answer of course, but I guess people still ask you.

**MA:** They do. You couldn't write that story from a female point of view, quite simply. Why not? How many girls do you know who spend their adolescent years hunched over their computers, playing interactive video games on the net, and interactive net games and, watching porn shows?

**Q:** You're absolutely right of course - I don't know any.

**MA:** They actually did a study of this. They were trying to see whether playing these games increased your visual abilities, and they found that the answer was yes when it came to aiming and things like that. But they could only find one girl who had done the requisite number of hours per week to be able to participate in the study. So it doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that girls do a lot - they would rather play relational games of various kinds. Nor are they very big on huge plans to redesign the world.

**Q:** That comes close to what I wanted to ask you next: There is a new human race that is created in *Oryx and Crake* - the Children of Crake. When Crake designs them trying to improve humankind, he also wants to remove the "G-spot" from their brains, which is to say the neurons that are capable of belief or faith, but *he* is not very successful because he becomes their God-figure, their creator-god in their own creation-myth. So why does he fail?

**MA:** We don't know... There are several other things he tried to remove as well. He tried to get rid of music. He tried to get rid of dreams. So, we don't know, but some of the things seem to be built in at such a level that you can't fool with them without creating zombies. Now, we haven't tested this proposition experimentally yet, but we do know for instance that animals dream and that quite a few life forms other than us communicate with musical tones, so it's not just a human thing. We don't know about the G-spot. We know that there are people who don't have it or claim that they don't. We also know that there are people who are tone deaf and colour blind.

**Q:** There are also many allusions to current natural sciences and of course the internet which plays a very important role in *Oryx and Crake*. Did you perhaps intend *Oryx and Crake* to be a political novel?

**MA:** Political novel for me has to do with who you vote for in an election or what party platform you support. In that sense it's not a political novel. If what you mean is, does it have to do with how people relate to one another and the kind of world they find themselves in -

sure. But all novels are political in that sense. What we usually mean by that, probably what you meant, was, how come it's not like Jane Austen, which is what we think of as the mainstream novel, as a finite set of people who exist in relation to one another and fall in love or have fights, and through their reaction to these things we discover their characters. It's not that kind of novel, that's true.

We have fallen into the habit of thinking that that's what all prose fictions either are or should be. But in fact, for hundreds of years before the emergence of that kind of novel at the end of the eighteenth century in essentially a bourgeois milieu, there were many other kinds of prose fictions. There were knights on adventure quests, or there were rogues, there were the picaresque novels, so you went from one event to another, but you certainly didn't stay with a small group of people and interact with them in a country-house somewhere or even in an apartment in New York. So there are many prose fiction traditions, including many that go way back, that we would probably say are not really... is *Gulliver's Travels* a novel, for instance? It's a prose narrative. It's a fiction.

**Q:** ... or *The Pilgrim's Progress* ...

**MA:** Is *The Pilgrim's Progress* a novel? People keep trying to find proto-novel elements in it. You know, the hero has "a character" (*laughs*). But I see no reason for confining oneself as a writer to just one tradition of prose fiction. Although it does lead some people to say: How come this isn't a small group of people interacting with one another so we can see how their characters are drawn out, etc.

**Q:** I guess you could say that, nevertheless, *Oryx and Crake* is in a sort of tradition. One could perhaps say it is in a dystopian tradition?

**MA:** It's not a real dystopia. A real dystopia would examine more fully the structure of the society. It would be more like *1984*, more like *Brave New World*. As it is, *Oryx and Crake* is about an individual person, Jimmy. It is the story of his life. He does go through some cataclysmic events, but unlike a lot of adventure story heroes who have no parents, he does come with a family, a childhood, an adolescence, so you might say it's a kind of very peculiar *Bildungsroman*.

**Q:** You wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is more clearly dystopian.

**MA:** It's more like a *real* dystopia. It does go into the structure of the society more, so it's more like *1984*. From the point of view of Julia, the female character in *1984*. So yes, it's more like that.

**Q:** I thought that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* were quite alike in their approach to a future society. I got the impression that you didn't invent a future, but that it was just a

sort of reaction to what was probably currently going on.

**MA:** Like *Brave New World*, like *1984*. You can't actually write about the future because you haven't been there. Not any more than Dante could write about the Inferno... He hadn't been there, so he couldn't. We know right away that we're not dealing with a person who thinks he actually met Vergil in the woods and went to hell with him. We know it's a different kind of story. So when you set something in the future, it's setting it in a realm of the imagination. Although, in this case, it's one that's based very firmly on known events, just as Dante put into hell people that he had known, that he felt belonged there (*laughs*). So he didn't make up a bunch of imaginary people and put them in there, he put in some real people. As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, I didn't put in anything that we haven't already done, we're not already doing, we're seriously trying to do, coupled with trends that are already in progress such as the results of global warming, the results of the fragmentation of society into those with and those without - which are accelerating - and the opening of the great big fun-with-the-genome project we seem to be doing right now. So all of those things are real, and therefore the amount of pure invention is close to nil.

**Q:** There's a collection of headlines on the *Oryx and Crake*-homepage where you can see the process you have just described. [see "Facts Behind the Fiction: A Time Line of Headlines" on the American *Oryx and Crake*-homepage hosted by Random house: <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/atwood/index.html>, August 2003]

**MA:** Yes, exactly.

**Q:** What I always liked about your books was that I always did think you were a feminist writer, but also went beyond that description. Do you have a "feminist agenda?"

**MA:** Feminism has been used so often and in so many different contexts that it's practically meaningless - unless you can specify. People say, "Are you a Christian?" Now what do they mean by that? Do they mean Catholic, do they mean people dancing with poisonous snakes to prove their faith. Where are we on this spectrum? I'm perfectly in favour of women being human beings, but that comes with risks. It means, for instance, if they're human beings, they're not perfect - no human beings are. Just for starters.

**Q:** You also have created some women characters that aren't really "popular," one might say...

**MA:** They're not nice. They're not angelic, they're not good...

**Q:** ...they're not likeable...

**MA:** Actually some people like them quite well!

**Q:** I do, too. They just take what they want. You wrote a short story called "Unpopular Gals,"



in which the "unpopular gals" in literary history - like the evil stepmother - get their say, and what she says is, "I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it."

**MA:** Well, let's say that unpleasant events of one kind or another drive plots. It doesn't have to be a female character, it can be an invasion of werewolves.

**Q:** Why do think that some people act or react so negatively when a female figure does not behave in a "feminine" way?

**MA:** I think the number of people who have reacted in that way you could probably count on the fingers of one hand. Most people now are quite a bit more sophisticated than that. When I was first doing it, in the seventies, we were still in a position of, "You shouldn't say those things because it could be used against us." That sort of attitude. The very same kind of attitude that causes any group that feels itself under pressure to cover up crimes committed by its own members. But surely we're past that now, and if you're a woman you've met women you don't like. Women who've been nasty to you...

**Q:** And I've met men I like - and would still call myself a "feminist."

**MA:** Well, I think people confuse personal relations with legal structures, and they're quite different things...

**Q:** Yes, I met people who've said things like, "You are a feminist but you have a boyfriend"...

**MA:** ...and that's got nothing to do with it. What I'm in favour of is being able to vote, equal pay for equal work, equality under the law, you know, all of those things that were the bones of contention for years, being able to have an education, being able to own property. Those all come under the law. And if you want an interesting survey of how the laws were changed against women over the years, many many years, you should read Marilyn French's three-volume survey called *From Eve to Dawn*. That doesn't focus on human relationships, it focuses on laws. Laws of course affect human relationships. A law that says that in case of separation the husband gets the children - which was the case in the 19th century - is going to affect your life if you're a woman, and if you have children, and if you separate from your husband.

**Q:** Another problem seems to be that many people read your books autobiographically, at least to a certain extent. People look at your works and say, "Well, I think, Tony in *The Robber Bride*, that's Margaret Atwood," or, "Iris Chase, that's obviously Margaret Atwood." How do you deal with that?

**MA:** People do that to all writers. There's never been a writer who has not had that experience. It's a normal thing to do, it's a compliment to your craft because it means people think the story must be real and must therefore be about the person who wrote it. But I would

point out that if it's autobiography, and only autobiography, I would have had to have been an anorexic, a very fat person, and a man.

**Q:** You do not only have different selves as the writer and the person, but you also have different literary selves, in Germany for example you're probably best known as the author of novels, whereas in Canada you were first known as a poet. How does the approach to your works differ? Which difference is there between being a poet and being a novelist, or being a lecturer, for example?

**MA:** You're more likely to be able to make a living out of novels.

**Q:** And how about being a lecturer? Is that also something you also enjoy?

**MA:** You mean giving these lectures?

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**MA:** People do that to all writers. There's never been a writer who has not had that experience. It's a normal thing to do, it's a compliment to your craft because it means people think the story must be real and must therefore be about the person who wrote it. But I would point out that if it's autobiography, and only autobiography, I would have had to have been an anorexic, a very fat person, and a man.

**Q:** You do not only have different selves as the writer and the person, but you also have

different literary selves, in Germany for example you're probably best known as the author of novels, whereas in Canada you were first known as a poet. How does the approach to your works differ? Which difference is there between being a poet and being a novelist, or being a lecturer, for example?

**MA:** You're more likely to be able to make a living out of novels.

**Q:** And how about being a lecturer? Is that also something you also enjoy?

**MA:** You mean giving these lectures?

**Q:** For example.

**MA:** They were actually quite hard to do, and the hardest part is getting permission for the citations.

**Q:** Did you manage to get them all?

**MA:** We did, but a couple of them were dicey, and in one case I simply took one out because the trust fund in charge of this person's work was being ridiculous. And of course, it pushes you in the direction of using only dead people, only very dead people, because after a certain amount of time work goes out of copyright. So you end up using very dead people or your friends. So that part is hard, but I think there's a difference between writing a piece which purports to be attempting to tell the truth, and writing a piece of fiction where your duty is fidelity to the work, internal consistency. I write journalism, too.

**Q:** I know. Is that something you do because it's *different*?

**MA:** Oh, I think there are various reasons for doing it. Each reason is specific to the piece.

**Q:** You also talk about the relationship between the reader, the writer and the book. The writer and the reader never actually meet. Do you think that what you're going to do, tonight, reading to an audience, maybe reading to people who have read your books can help to form an actual triangle?

**MA:** No, because I'm not that person who wrote the book. They would have had to have been with me, every minute of every day about two years ago; that would be the person who wrote the book. Time moves on.

**Q:** So there is no possibility to form a triangle...

**MA:** There is a triangle, but A and B can only encounter each other through C.

**Q:** Right. So it's more like... I think you described it as a "V" with the book at the top... or the bottom?

**MA:** Or the bottom, it doesn't much matter. The book is in between, so there's no direct connection between A and C.

**Q:** What you say about the reader, for example that each reader has his or her own

interpretation of the book when he or she reads it, reminded me of reader-response criticism. Is that something you're interested in?

**MA:** No. It's of no use. It's of absolutely no use unless you're making a commercial product. If you're writing romance novels, then they can have encounter-groups, you know, they can have little reader groups, they can give the book to a representative number of readers and say, "What do you think about Chapter 6?" "We think that he should be taller." "Okay, make him taller." Now that's if you're tailor-making a commercial product which is pitched to a very well-known niche group of readers, and it's no different from designing cornflakes packages. That's a commercial enterprise. But it's no use to me to know afterwards what people think, it's not gonna influence what I do. The book has already been written. It's out there taking its own chances.

**Q:** Are you interested in what people *do* with your work? For example turn it into films?

**MA:** I really have no control over it except for turning it into films I can say no to that. Once you say yes it's out of your hands. You can have the very very best director, actor, screenplay, everything of the best, and it can still be a lousy film. It can be an unknown book, a director nobody has ever heard of, a bunch of new actors, it can be wonderful. There's no way of determining that. A set of lucky circumstances. Or unlucky ones.

**Q:** Right. But are you *interested* in people writing Ph.D. theses about your works, for example?

**MA:** Good luck to them, I hope they are enjoying themselves, it keeps them off the streets. Otherwise they might have to work in a chocolate bar factory.

**Q:** Or drive a taxi...

**MA:** Maybe they're happier doing that. But again, I have no control over it, and I shouldn't, really, have anything to do with it. It's an autonomous activity which has its own rules.

**Q:** You've already talked about romance novels, for example, and romance is of course something that appears in many of your novels. There's a gothic romance authoress, there are detective novel readers, there is a science fiction novel within a novel within a novel... and then of course there's the sort of "official" distinction between highbrow literature and there are other genres which are "not really literature." I guess you probably wouldn't say that this distinction is something that's valid...

**MA:** It's not valid.

**Q:** Could you comment on that? Why do people think that a detective novel or a science fiction novel is not "good literature," but a Margaret Atwood-novel with a science fiction novel in it is literature. Where does that distinction come from?

**MA:** I think you'd probably have to ask them, but if you took a broad survey of a wide group of readers and got them to pick their favourite books of all time, I can guarantee that, if it were in England, Sherlock Holmes would be among them, certainly George Orwell, no question. So it's not really a question of genres, you know genres have become very leaky, by the way. You know, Jane Austen writing today would probably put in some murders or at least some inheritance problems, something like that.

**Q:** Have you heard about the book *The Eyre Affair*?

[Jasper Fforde, *The Eyre Affair*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001. Followed up by *Lost in a Good Book* (2002) and *The Well of Lost Plots* (2003).]

**MA:** No.

**Q:** It's by a Welsh author called Jasper Fforde and he writes about a future, utopian society, where people take books really, really seriously, and there's a sort of book police.

**MA:** Well, he *is* dreaming. (*laughs*)

**Q:** Oh yes, he is. His heroine is working for this police office, and she jumps into *Jane Eyre* at one point in the narrative and changes the ending, because in the version the people had in that society, Jane Eyre goes off with the missionary, and doesn't get to marry Rochester, so his heroine jumps into book and she changes the ending. So that the book is also very much about how leaky genres really are.

**MA:** She changes it back to the original?

**Q:** Right. But for the people in the book it gets changed completely. So that is also about genres. One of the bad guys is caught in "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe and dies a horrible death.

**MA:** Oh oh. Well, there's a story by Woody Allen dating from years and years and years back, probably the 60s. It's a short piece, and in it a man has invented a machine that can put you into any novel of your choice - he's the mad scientist. And then he has a friend who is a Jewish businessman from New York who is quite a romantic, and he finds out about this machine and says he longs to be put into *Madame Bovary* just before she meets the first lover. So they try it out, they put him into the machine, they twirl the knobs and bingo, he's in *Madame Bovary* and everybody reading the book thinks, "We don't remember this! Who is this guy?" And Madame Bovary finds him ravishing, and he spins her tales of New York and they have a wonderful affair, but she begs and pleads, "New York sounds so wonderful," she wants to go back with him and see New York. So he gives in and back they go, and people reading the book are surprised that Madame Bovary has vanished from *Madame Bovary*. She has disappeared - just a lot of blank pages. Meanwhile she is in New York, and he is married

with kids and he has to do something with her. So he puts her into a hotel room and gives her his credit card - big mistake! She goes on a shopping spree and starts spending him out of house and home, so he lures her back into the machine and gets her back into *Madame Bovary*, and the readers breathe a sigh of relief. He says to his friend, "Oh, I'll never do that again, I've learned my lesson." But he can't resist. He comes back several months later and says, "I have to be in *Anna Karenina* just before she meets Vronsky." (*laughs*) The guy says, "Well, no, actually I haven't perfected this yet, you know I'm quite a little worried about it all." "No, please, please, I really have to do this." So into the box he goes, they twirl the dial and the box explodes. He's gone.

**Q:** And does he reappear in *Anna Karenina*?

**MA:** No, he's certainly not in *Anna Karenina*. Meanwhile, across a rocky, hot desert, he's being pursued. He's gotten into a Spanish grammar by mistake and he's being pursued across the desert by the active and large hairy creature that's the active form of the verb "to seize." (*laughs*)

**Q:** That's actually quite similar to the novel I just talked about.

**MA:** Well, I wonder whether he ever read the Woody Allen piece. ... It's in a collection of Woody Allen pieces that goes way, way back, short pieces.

**Q:** It really does sound similar. One very, very last question. Is there anything you're working on at the moment, or are you just busy with the book tour?

**MA:** Book tour things. I'm thinking... I'm thinking.

**Q:** Thank you very much for the interview.

**MA:** Thank you.

The interview with Margaret took place at the Göttinger Literaturherbst in October 2003.

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**Jeffrey Weeks: *Sexuality. Second Edition.* London: Routledge, 2002.**

By Georg Brunner, University of Vienna, Austria

1 For this new edition of his classic *Sexuality*, British historical sociologist Jeffrey Weeks updated and rewrote every chapter in order to include new issues that have emerged in the past twenty years (such as newer debates on gay marriage) - a period within which sexuality has turned into a mainstream topic. But Weeks also points out that his views have not changed since the first edition was published in 1986. The main point of his book remains the same: It is an argument against the idea of "sexuality" as something only "natural." The book facilitates access to complex theories. Weeks provides a good overview over different ways of conceptualizing sexuality within social sciences; one of his main purposes is to denaturalize sexuality: "Yet it is the task of sociology and the other social sciences to 'deconstruct' naturalism, and to determine how actions are given their meaning and significance via social interaction" (VII).

2 Weeks explains how and why so-called "essentialist" concepts of sexuality are too simplistic. Drawing on a range of theoretical approaches - from Freud to Foucault, from Rubin to Dyer - the book shows how sexuality is socially constructed and produced only within social relations. For Weeks, no natural meaning is inherent to sexuality. Rather, sexuality gains meaning through social interaction; therefore, no fixed meaning can be attached to sexuality, or to how people perceive "their own" sexuality. The author argues that sexuality is not determined by one social totality like capitalism or patriarchy. Quoting different examples, he explains how sexuality is interwoven with discourses of gender, class, race, and other social categories. Weeks points out that these categories cannot really be separated from each other and that none of these categories determine what sexuality is, e.g. that sexuality is not determined by "gender."

3 Using Foucault's theory of power, Weeks discusses how sexuality can be conceptualized as something that does not exist outside of "relations of power" and of society and gains significance only through these relations. Foucault argued that power is a relation and therefore cannot be possessed. His main argument is that power does not work by repression only, but also as a mode of production. By quoting some discussions on contemporary social and political issues - the AIDS crisis for instance - he provides examples of how this social construction of sexuality works within relations of power, how sexuality is regulated and produced, how sexuality is to be perceived as political.

4 Weeks also offers a historicist view and tries to explain how changes in our way of

thinking (about sexuality) challenge the way it is lived. Again drawing on Foucault, he argues that what we now call sexual identity (defining oneself along a homo/hetero axis) has existed only since the 19th century. While before people were "sexually defined" by their "good" or "bad" acts, they have since become individuals with a sexual character.

5 Chapter 2 is the most important one. Here, Weeks provides a short overview of the "history of sexuality." He then explains how sexuality is socially constructed, e.g. within kinship and family systems, economic and social organization, and how it is socially regulated and politically intervened into. While elaborating on sexuality and power, he introduces Foucault's theory of power and explains how it can be applied to the complex relations between race, class, and gender. Chapter 5 gives crucial insights into Weeks's point of view. Here, he poses the question as to what consequences a non-essentialist conception of sexuality has for (sexual) politics. He positions the topic within a breakdown of tradition, liberalization, and capitalism, and discusses the absolutist and the libertarian position towards sexuality.



**Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran (eds.). *Scenes of the Apple. Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2003.**

By Aldona Pobutsky, Oakland University, USA

1       Recent critical theory has demonstrated that food and its preparation exceed a mere quotidian function in women's lives, in order to represent the inconspicuous marker of their position within the micro- and macro-structures of power. Discipline and the surveillance of the body, that panoptical male connoisseur which resides in female consciousness, as well as the constraints of heterosexual economy in general, stand in stark opposition to the question of satisfying women's appetites and ambitions. This collection of essays highlights women's encounter with food and writing, from the Victorian era to the present. Following Hélène Cixous's focus on the biblical scene of the apple - where Eve's defiant eating of the forbidden fruit was seen as paradigmatic of female rebellion against the invisible patriarchy - the editors associate the process of eating with the desire to speak, gain prohibited knowledge, transgress, and, eventually, claim authorship. The process of eating and/or fasting is thus interrelated with female hunger, aspiration, self-denial, and nurturing; it reflects on women's complicated relationships within the networks of power and their ways of voicing and validating their own choices.

2       *Scenes of the Apple* is organized around three main rubrics: Appetite and Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Cultural Politics; Grotesque, Ghostly, and Cannibalistic Hungers in Twentieth-Century Texts; and Food and Cooking: Patriarchal, Colonial, Familial Structures. According to the editors, the late eighteenth century marked the time when food and embodiment became charged issues for women. Under the influence of capitalism, domestic ideology defined a segregated home and workplace, promoting an ideal of womanhood which deemphasized female sexuality, while underscoring women's spiritual power as a moral guide at home. Lustful Eves with appetites were relegated to the streets, whereas virtuous females could experience eating only vicariously, by nurturing others rather than the self. This ideology of a self-effacing female angel, lady-like weakness, and anorexia was strongly linked with the middle and upper classes, while buxom, hungry females were consigned to lower social spheres. Such a dichotomy was not clear-cut, however, since the ideal woman was expected to possess the qualities characteristic of these mutually exclusive paradigms; an incredibly narrow waist reminiscent of an emaciated urchin and broad, healthy hips, an indicator of reproductive capacity. This combination of the thin and the robust, delicate and

strong, was one of many self-contradictory ideals which confused and limited women.

3 The three essays in the first section deal precisely with these conflicting and competing messages. Adrienne Munich's article, "Good and Plenty: Queen Victoria Figures the Imperial Body," explains how Queen Victoria's round body and remarkably healthy appetite were signs of feminine transgression and imperial plentitude at the same time. On one hand, the empress's round figure went against the grain of Victorian assumptions about the slender and self-sacrificing female. Since enjoying food in an unrestrained fashion was an indication of woman's moral depravity, only famished bodies connoted moral superiority. This immediate correlation between decency and light weight did not destroy the opulent queen, however. Quite to the contrary, the widespread acceptance of her image demonstrated that the monarchic body was truly above the prescriptive fashions of the times. Ironically, it is Queen Victoria's hearty self - clearly reinforced by the prosperous and steady imperial economy of the time - that has contributed to her even larger popularity. Thus, in the end, it could be argued that her body took on a symbolic meaning at the forefront of a feeding frenzy, on one hand giving nourishment to her own vast population while, on the other, swallowing up entire colonies. Plump and voracious, she became the epitome of English prosperity, a metaphor for the Industrial Revolution's penchant for voracious consumption and output.

4 Pamela K. Gilbert's "Ingestion, Contagion, Seduction: Victorian Metaphors of Reading" focuses on the sensationalized fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the writer's position within the literary marketplace. In general terms, the essay traces prevalent views on the effects of popular fiction in Victorian times. It was thought that unwholesome sensationalism was quite like poisonous food, likely to mobilize in the reader an uncontainable and possibly calamitous desire. Thus popular novels were considered adulterated and prurient goods, and their female authors were viewed as prostitutes, since they gave the fruit of their efforts to many. The dangers of reading "corrupt" texts echoed the perils of sexual activity or the ingestion of toxic food. Reading for pleasure exerted a highly negative influence not only on young minds but even more so on their bodies. The author concludes that society's excessive concerns for one's reading options attests to a strong patriarchal surveillance of minds, bodies, and their boundaries.

5 Linda Schlossberg's "Consuming Images: Women, Hunger, and the Vote" highlights the figure of the hunger-striking suffragette. The author argues that deploying the strategy of starvation was a conscious political act for both the visual and written propaganda of the women's movement. Scenes of forcible eating executed on purposely starving female inmates

by the prison's (male) officials were often portrayed in strong graphic images both in pro-suffrage and conservative periodicals. This titillating image of oral penetration of physically restrained suffragettes testifies to their confinement executed by the opposite sex. The relentless effort to shut the female mouth turns this body part into a contested site, as it grows to stand for women's desire to nourish their political appetites and ambitions. Ironically, argues the author, manipulating their food intake and appetites only did a disservice to the women's movement, since it reinforced the restrictive image of women as morally superior only insofar as they transcended appetite and passion.

**Sylvia von Arx, Sabine Gisin, Ita Grosz-Ganzoni, Monika Leuzinger,  
Andreas Sidler (eds.). *Koordinaten der Männlichkeit: Orientierungsversuche*.  
Tübingen: edition diskord, 2003.**

By Isabel Karremann, University of Erlangen, Germany

1 The essays collected in the volume *Koordinaten der Männlichkeit* (2003) represent a critical investigation into the psychoanalytical concepts of masculinity. A selection of papers given at the Psychoanalytisches Seminar Zürich (PSZ) in the winter of 2001/2002, the collection brings together essays written by Austrian, German, and Swiss scholars and practitioners in the field of psychoanalysis. All contributions had been invited in order to redress the still deplorable lack of studies on masculinity in psychoanalysis as well as in fields working with and influencing psychoanalytical concepts - ethnopsychanalysis, sociopsychology, sociology, and literary criticism (7). While this gives the volume an interdisciplinary feel, most of the essays remain firmly within the pale of "psychoanalysis proper" and are not influenced by post-Lacanian re-workings of Freud which have had such a significant impact on feminist and gender studies.

2 The study's main focus is on the conjunction of male sexual identity and violence. Since the editors had not specified a consideration of masculinity under this particular aspect, the question arises whether masculinity must primarily be understood in terms of violence, aggression, and threat (12). Most contributors find the answer to this question in the psychopathological outcomes of the (positive) Oedipus complex gone wrong due to an overbearing mother and an absent father. While this is probably accurate to a certain extent, only the last essay by J. C. Aigner asks if this conjunction of masculinity and violence is typical of Western culture. It suggests that this association is a problem whose sources lie not only in our ahistorical, universal psychological make-up but just as well in the culturally and historically very specific structures of our society.

3 Ralf Pohl explores masculinity in its correlation, indeed, its "alloy" (15) with sexual aggression and violence as a basic characteristic of male sexual identity in general. He attempts to mediate between the rather essentialistic notion of inborn sexual drives and the concepts of object-relation theory. Pohl starts from the well-established psychoanalytical thesis/assumption that each sexual act is only a re-enactment of the infant's desire for its first object, the mother (24-26). This desire, however, is experienced as a debilitating unmanly dependence because the alluring mother/woman is a threat to the phantasm of phallic autonomy. This fundamental dilemma is at the heart of male sexual identity and erupts in

times of crisis in sexual aggression towards women (for the psychopathological structures of mass rape see 35-39). Pohl maintains that this alloy of sexuality and violence is deeply engraved in the male psychosexual make-up as well as in the symbolic overdetermination of the penis as sexual organ, sign of power (phallus) and "sexualized weapon."

4 Concentrating more narrowly on the Oedipus complex, Bernd Nitzschke traces the conjunction of male sexual identity and violence back to the harmful impact of a mother-son dyad that relegates the figure of the father to the margins. The permanent absence of the father from the scenes of early childhood, produced by the bourgeois gendered division of labour, corresponds with the overbearing presence of the mother. Triggered by the need to differentiate oneself from the omnipotent female, this imbalance can lead to an aggressive and denigrating behaviour towards women in a triumph of the man's phallic identity over castration anxiety.

5 The pre-oedipal bond between mother and son can, however, also lay the foundation for a different relation between the sexes. In the second half of his essay, Andreas Benz explores the possibilities of a male sexual identity based on the notion of an "our two selves"-relation (*Selbender-Beziehung*) formulated by the Hungarian Zoltán Erdély. In this concept, the early mother-child dyad provides the first experience of an "our two selves"-relation which proves deeply satisfying to both partners. This experience can provide the model for adult relationships in which the relation between the sexes is not one of aggressive and one-directional appropriation but one of sharing and mutual enjoyment. Benz closes with a utopia of (heteronormative) bliss in which both partners find their mutual fulfillment in a complementary relationship that both realizes and cherishes the respective strengths and weaknesses of femininity and masculinity.

**“*Unless* we realise, *Unless* we change, *Unless* we speak.....” Carol Shields:  
*Unless*. London: Fourth Estate, 2002.**

By Samantha Hume, University of Cologne, Germany

1 Carol Shields' novel *Unless* is an investigation into the notion of goodness. It both illustrates the ways in which goodness is taken for granted as a feminine attribute and criticises this as being restrictive with the potential to oppress women and inhibit their development. *Unless* is also about language, voice and especially silence. Its critical perspective is very much a feminist one, but this does have to be sought after. It is not clear whether Shields intends to make her readers angry, which she does, or whether this is a byproduct of the frustration of recognition of the fact that her characters do indeed reflect many contemporary, middle-class, educated women's lives and readers may be forced into a self-reflection which can be uncomfortable.

2 The plot of *Unless* deals with the plight of Reta Winters' (née Summers) teenage daughter Norah, who has dropped out of life and now sits on a street corner wearing a sign around her neck with the word "goodness" on it. This withdrawal from life takes its toll on the idyll that is her well-balanced, well-cared for family. The perfect family home on a hill with a beautiful garden, peace, prosperity and above all harmony and predictability is suddenly ruptured by her disappearance. Her parents are devastated and fraught with worry and incomprehension. Her sisters try to maintain the noisy jolliness of their home knowing, however, at all times, that this is merely a superficial attempt to pretend that nothing has happened. But it is her mother's reaction which is the central focus of the text. Reta embarks on a journey of discovery trying to find the reasons for her daughter's drastic behaviour. In the course of her journey, Reta discovers a great deal more about the notion of goodness and what far-reaching consequences it has for women in general, not only for Norah. Norah, in fact, is simply the catalyst for the development and eventual insight experienced by Reta. She drifts in and out of the text to remind the reader that Reta's quest is to understand the possible motivation for her daughter's action. Reta is shaken into a state of reflection on her own life, her mother's, her daughters' and her friends' lives and even her husband's. This reflection also encompasses a critical perspective on a wide range of feminist topics including herself as a woman, her career, women's careers in general and on the fate of women in the world, their invisibility, their voices and their silences. From a narrative perspective, it seems at first as though Reta were distracted by disjointed sorties into various experiences throughout her life; however, closer inspection and extrapolation at the end of the text reveal that these apparently

isolated events are indeed the interwoven threads that create an intricate potential explanation for her daughter's despair.

3 Goodness seems to be very much an attribute of femininity, of womanhood. Women are the nurturers, they create homes and care for others. Motherhood, as a concept, entails self-sacrifice and goodness. Since motherhood is part of definitions of femininity, it is not surprising that this creates expectations of women's behaviour which in turn pressurise women into conforming, into being good. Goodness, unfortunately, is set up as an antithesis of aggression and anger. There is no place for hostility in goodness, no space for fury and rage. Reta introduces herself as a writer, a translator. She lists all the publications she has and how she has managed to write so much despite having had and brought up three children. Her list, however, reads like a catalogue entry. Reta does not describe her achievements with any sense of praise or pride, but rather constantly apologises for the periods of time which she describes as "lost" when she had to look after Tom and the children. She seems to define herself first and foremost as wife and mother, who also happens to write. Her obligations of childcare, cooking, cleaning and creating the idyllic happy home seem always to take precedence over her ambitions as a writer.

4 As a child of the sixties with an awareness of feminist issues and translator of feminist works by Danielle Westerman, she is well-informed about feminist theory. Westerman is the Simone de Beauvoir of Canada; she has published widely, "a woman with twenty-seven honorary degrees and she's given the world a shelf of books. She's given her thoughts, her diagram for a new, better, just world" (223), and, at the age of eighty-six, proves herself to be still capable of change and development. She functions as a kind of mentor for Reta and although single, fiercely independent and non-conformist, through her writing and their conversations, it becomes quite clear that she does have an effect on her. Reta does have the obligatory room of her own, but it is a small attic room with no central space in the house unlike the "big blocky desk that Tom uses for personal correspondence" (50) which is in the large space at the entrance to the house. This is almost a stereotypical view of what much of male-dominated society would define as a woman's role. She may be anything she wishes as long as it is invisible and does not detract from her role in the family. This is an extremely irritating characteristic of Reta and ultimately one which has contributed to Norah's withdrawal. So much goodness and self-sacrifice sparks memories of the ubiquitous "angel in the house" syndrome, which feminists have been trying to kill off for more than thirty years. But Reta at the beginning of the text is yet to be enlightened and Reta at the end of the text, while still striving to reinstate the idyll and harmony, does offer some hope of having moved

forward out of this restrictive identity. She comes to realise that the intellectual role model and the actual role model she presents as mother are two highly divergent images. She illustrates to her daughters that her role as mother is the most important thing in her life and at the same time wants to infuse in them the independence of thought and ambition that she would like them to have in order to gain access to all areas of life. However, the power of actions is often more commanding than that of words. Norah's goodness and self-sacrifice for others underpins this. She sits in silence, invisible, not complaining, not demanding space for herself, not demanding access to the world, handing over all that she is given in her begging bowl to others who live on the street and completely denying her existence and right to be seen and valued.

5 Reta's development in the course of the text is illustrated by her growing criticism of the way that the many issues that affect women in their daily lives are dealt with in society at large. She begins by deciding to refuse to be patronised by journalists who ask her about her husband and how he feels about her writing, as though this had any bearing at all on the text they are discussing, and feels justified in doing so by commenting that "[r]ude and difficult people are more likely to be taken seriously" (64). In the course of the rest of the novel, she begins to write a series of irate letters of protest about the systematic exclusion of women as great thinkers or the solvers of moral dilemmas or as great writers. She protests about women writers being allocated only the role of miniaturism, apparently incapable of addressing universal themes and about the achievements of women being denigrated even in their obituaries, while those of men, be they ever so minuscule or inconsequential, are expounded upon as somehow being imbued with greatness. The fact that a man read books in the last days of his life is seen in his obituary as some kind of notable event jars with the story of Lois, Reta's mother-in-law, who won a prize for a cake, but whose winning blue ribbon was simply thrown away in an attic clearout. The assignation of hierarchies to male or female accomplishments, whereby those made by women are almost invariably inferior, is an enduring aspect of male-dominated social power mechanisms. The exclusion of women and the persistent attempt of literary critics, media and philosophy to continue to render them invisible by not giving them the same exposure as their male counterparts comes to a head in Reta's final letter, which, with an unbridled and scathing criticism of Russell Sandor, a short story writer, illustrates how women's lives and especially anything to do with their bodies is overlain with disgust and denigration by much male-dominated discourse. Sandor's protagonist is a philosophy professor whose horror and disgust at seeing a mastectomy bra hanging in a shop window is symbolic of innumerable men who would have women's issues,



especially those pertaining to bodily functions, purged from public view. Reta has never sent any of the letters of protest she has written until this last one, which she ends with her real address and signs with her real name as opposed to the pseudonyms used in the others. It is fitting that, at the end of the novel, Reta is finally able to vent anger openly and voice the outrage she has suppressed for so long.

6 *Unless* is also a novel about language. The focus on language, language use and silence is a fundamental feature of the text. The chapter headings consist of adverbs, conjunctions and prepositions, linguistically termed "relational elements," linking devices for isolated events, and in Shields' words, "odd pieces of language to cement them [isolated events] together" (313). Arguably, one might define the roles of women in social discourse as similar to these pieces of language. They hold families and societies together, they are the appeasers, the members of the traditional family unit who are responsible for family gatherings, maintaining contact between generations, and caring for the rituals of bonding such as organising birthday parties, anniversaries, or weddings, christenings and burials. Reta has a similar function in this novel. The desire to reestablish contact to her daughter drives her to find the links which will solve the mystery of her behaviour. Reta's criticism of issues which affect women, the way women are ignored as intellectuals and great thinkers, as writers and philosophers and as half of the population of the world, sensitises her to the possibility that these apparently "isolated events" may in fact be drawn together to present a holistic image of women in society and thus also the motivation for a young woman to despair at it and wish to withdraw so completely from it.

7 The way in which language reflects power mechanisms is also highlighted. Shields cleverly illustrates the insertion of the letter "r" into the title *Ms* and thus immediately transforming the neutrality of the title into the relativity of the designation of "wife of" and the concordant meanings this entails. The associations of home, hearth and "baking tins" is a powerful device to detract from seeing a woman as an intellectual power and a voice that deserves to be heard. Shields' similar remarks on the accordance of power to males from birth simply because they have the Y chromosome which says "yes for ever and ever" (270) offers clear criticism of a status quo that disadvantages women purely on the basis of biology. Women like herself, her mentor and especially her daughters are all swept up into "uncoded otherness." The use of language to mirror power in interaction is further illustrated in the dialogue between Reta and her new editor Arthur Springer. His crassly patronising manner is typified in his total refusal to allow Reta to finish her sentences. His constant interruptions show him to be the subject and agent who is in control of the conversation. He disallows

Reta's opinions by invoking so-called truisms such as the hierarchy in literary criticism which considers popular fiction not serious literature. He ridicules Reta's female character Alicia whom he deems incapable of being the moral centre of her book, obviously, because she makes rice casseroles and writes fashion articles. The fact that she is a woman denies her access to universal themes. This devaluing of women's achievements is in the same vein as the derogation of women as great thinkers. They are capable of "goodness but not greatness," also a phrase which is reiterated at various points in the novel. Clearly then, language is power and the lack of access to language or the silencing of women's voices is an indirect criticism of social discourses which privilege men. Women's right to be seen as individuals and not as appendages, their right to have access to power structures which may affect their lives and women writers' right to determine that female characters are as capable of depicting universal issues as male characters are all represent criticism of a status quo which invalidates women. Interruptions in interaction as one means of silencing women's voices is not as powerful as the voluntary withdrawal and self-silencing of the women themselves. Norah's decision to fall silent in her anger and despair, Reta's use of letters to vent an anger which she never truly voices because she does not send them, and Lois, Reta's mother-in-law, who has also grown more and more silent in the realisation of her own powerlessness in her life, all maintain this status quo that oppresses them. Lois always saw herself only as the doctor's wife, with no other purpose and no other aim. Instead of open protest, the constriction of marriage forces her to flee into instability and mental illness reminiscent of Perkins Gilman's heroine in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Now in later years, she feels no longer able to stop herself from saying things that might be offensive, which is no more than a euphemistic way of saying that she cannot allow herself anger. One might then ask why it is that these women are all so easily silenced? The combination of frustration, helplessness and fear of the consequences may offer one answer, although it seems to be the message of this text that the realisation of the magnitude of the problems women still face, despite supposedly "having it all," is so great as to be unbearable. The recognition of how various oppressive structures are interrelated makes it difficult to tackle only one, but more importantly, seeing them all together is simply devastating.

8        At the end of the novel, Norah has returned home and a sense of normality seems to be returning to the family. Reta knows that things will not be the same. The cycle of seasons from the beginning of the crisis has run its course and she has arrived out of winter to a new spring. Shields' use of the ten month period does not seem to be chance. Norah's budding independence and maturity in summer, her withdrawal into despair in autumn, the cold winter

of loss and then the return in spring all point to a natural cycle of development. This is paralleled by Reta's own awakening and the integration of her intellectual knowledge into her own real everyday life. From a feminist perspective, the whole text is reminiscent of the wave of consciousness-raising novels of the 1970s and its message seems to be as clearly relevant in the new millennium as it was then: women cannot become complacent about their place in male-dominated social discourse. The mechanisms that have been in place for hundreds of years still operate and women must always be aware that it is easier to be seduced into silence than to vent rage even where it is truly justified, but uncomfortable. Mothers must see what roles they are offering their daughters and what restrictions they are perpetuating through their own silences. Carol Shields' *Unless* reveals all this to us in beautifully crafted prose. She provokes anger but also understanding. If set at the turn of the last century, this text would seem perfectly fitting. Placed, as it is, in contemporary Canada, it is a frightening reminder of how little has really changed and what still has to be done for and by women both on the individual level and the level of society as a whole.

## **Theresienstadt**

By Julia Pascal

After Sylvia married Michel in the small French town of Maubeuge they talked of driving east for their honeymoon. The Wall had been down for five years. All of Eastern Europe was before them.

They drove through Belgium, hot sun shining on the gold bands they'd bought in Paris. Sylvia looked at her new French husband. To get a middle-aged French mayor to leave his wife and his mistress was quite an achievement. One Bastille Day, he wrote identical letters to both saying he was leaving with Sylvia.

His guilt was double. In pained silence his wife of thirty-five years had waited patiently for Michel to leave the mistress. Equally, the mistress, who worked at the same school as the wife, expected she'd be Michel's retirement partner. Now this young foreign-looking woman had turned up to smash everything.

Without waiting for their rage, Michel escaped to London and Sylvia's bed. From the cool sheets he called his children and admitted all, as his deserted wife called her eighty-year-old mother-in-law to tell her Michel had run off with a 'Jewish dancer'. But Michel knew nothing of all this. He was numbed by his own daring and flew off with Sylvia to San Francisco. They crossed the Golden Gate and marvelled at the strange familiarity that was A-M-E-R-I-C-A-M-E-R-I-Q-U-E.

At the airport they hired a convertible white Mustang and just drove. When tired, they stopped off at roadside cafés and swapped stories with men who had been young at Omaha Beach. They met blacks liberated from a racist America by a racist war in Europe. Ah la belle France! they said, thinking of all those demoiselles who threw themselves willingly at the 'yankees' after four years of the 'bosch'.

In fractured English, Michel remembered being four years old on dusty paths out of Douai for the safety of the coast.

When he and his mother arrived exhausted in Boulogne, German soldiers were there already sunning themselves on the beach in that hot summer of 1940.

Michel and Sylvia continued the long coastal drive, listening to country music on the car radio, far from the anger of rejected women back in France.

Each night they stayed in a different motel, like people did in movies. Ahead was Monterey. Sylvia bought her tall, rangy Frenchman a cowboy's hat which looked odd with his continental designer specs.

MONT-ER-EY. The word was magic and they repeated it like a song as they walked down the pier, completely astounded by colonies of lazy sea otters, sleeping, flippers around each other, in the laze of the Bay.

After Monterey, Sylvia accompanied him back to Maubeuge for two years until her situation as the too dark-haired live-in-mistress became impossible. The people had been used to the man with the wife and the mistress. This new situation upset them. Sylvia was tiring of the endless questions. Older men and women would ask with a bite in their tone, 'Are you Madame or Mademoiselle?' while younger ones screamed across the street, ' salope'. Slut. Others spat 'Pasqua, Pasqua'. They had just learnt of Charles Pasqua's new laws against immigrants and when they sing songed Pasqua to her it meant 'foreigner, go home'.

It was exhausting to be hated as a supposed Algerian just because her hair was dark, when she was an English Jew. And, if Sylvia declared her true identity, there were jokes about Jews and money or comments straight out of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

*La Belle France* was beginning to stink.

Life changed when Sylvia stopped being Mademoiselle. Michel lost the hollows in his cheeks and wondered why he'd been so scared. Now he told everyone he was newly-married at nearly sixty, and boasted of his younger wife. In the Town Hall, she wore the simple white 1930s dress she bought in Vichy, as women his age pretended to be glad for him and silently wished the foreign, man-stealing bitch dead.

The drive east was hot. In the Czech woods, girls paraded in shorts, their buttocks hanging openly beneath the skimp. As Michel and Sylvia drove the smart Renault into Prague's suburbs, shacks offering *Zimmer Frei* made them think about bed.

They entered a shaky, old shed where an elderly couple were renting a cheap Prague apartment. Sylvia did the deal and wondered why, here in Czechoslovakia, the foreigners' language was always German. Dollars changed hands and, in the city centre, a large, dusty flat awaited them. The quasi-landlord showed them around, taking Sylvia to one side with a warning to say nothing to nosy neighbours. 'If you have to, say you are my cousin', he warned. 'From France.'

The owner probably made his living renting out to tourists. No tax. No receipt. No papers. They could be murdered in their beds, she thought, and who would know?

At eight they made sure they were dressed when the man arrived with yesterday's French newspapers, white rolls, ersatz jam and waxy cheese.

'Alles OK?'

'Alles OK'

That first morning, after breakfast, Sylvia said, 'Let's go to Theresienstadt.'

Michel looked up from *Le Monde*. 'What's Theresienstadt?'

They drove out of the city, through the countryside, and to their astonishment they saw how Empress Marie Theresa's city mirrored the town of Maubeuge. Theresienstadt was larger but it was how Maubeuge must have been before the Germans razed it in 1940. Both were barracks towns and both proved how Louis XIV's architect, Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban, was certainly a cross border success.

The Prague summer was stifling. Michel's Renault had no air-conditioning. Prague had no air-conditioning. Theresienstadt was clammy.

They parked where the railway line was grassed over, near a cemetery. The headstones had no names, only numbers. Theresienstadt's crematorium had been turned into a museum with a photo display of the 1940s Prague Jewish artistic elite. Sylvia stared at the stills from operas staged to fool the Red Cross. The Nazis had filled this camp with twenty thousand tulips from Amsterdam as part of the charade.

When the Swiss left, the opera singers and actors filled the next trains. Destination Auschwitz.

What happened to the flowers?

Sylvia watched Michel looking at the faces of the young men and women on the wall. The set designers, the painters, the composers.

What was he thinking, he whose childhood was American soldiers liberating Douai? He who first tasted corned beef from a black GI's cooking pot heated on a jeep engine.

On this strange Theresienstadt honeymoon, was he thinking of his first in Rome?

Sylvia knew all about the look of postwar Rome because, when he moved in with her, he arrived with bundles of old letters and photos. In Kodak black and white he was a new groom, gawkily holding the hand of a toothy girl in a headscarf and shirt-waister.

'I married too young', he told her. 'Even at the time I thought I could do better.'

Good. Better. Best.

He spoke of a secret knowledge that one day he would meet a woman with a foreign accent who would change his life.

And in Theresienstadt, she thought of how in Prague fifty years ago they could never have married. The love nights of Jew and Christian were *verboten*.

The museum had a lower level to this room. One step down led to the polished silver ovens where bodies were burnt.

Theresienstadt was not a death camp. It was an assembly point where people just died. If they

were lucky. Starvation. Typhoid. Beating. It was better to die in Marie Theresa's city than to be shipped to the gas chamber in Poland.

Sylvia removed the glasses she wore for distance and loaded her camera. If you look through a lens, you feel nothing. This she learnt in Spain at her first bullfight. There she had sat in the shade of the arena with women and children dressed in fancy frocks. Opposite in the cheaper sun seats sat their men. A communal Olé! filled the air as the matador pierced the bull. Sylvia was surprised at how the beast buckled into a bleeding mass, to be immediately dragged across hot dust by pure white horses. Behind the lens the event had seemed spectacular.

Without it, she was all vomit. Oh yes she needed the camera. Here there was no bull. Here there were rooms with shiny silver ovens to cremate the bodies. Behind the lens she made sure the ovens were in focus. She made sure she was thinking only about the frame.

At noon Michel and Sylvia left the crematorium because at noon the French stomach empties and the brain turns to sog.

On Theresienstadt Square there was one café, overlooked by the barracks. Sylvia ordered chicken and when it arrived she knew it was pork. For a Jewish atheist she had a fine nose for pork. As the meat entered her mouth it stuck like a stone. She spat it out as delicately as possible and looked up from her plate to see a crowd of elderly Israelis arriving on a coach trip from Prague.

They spoke Hebrew, but from their voices it was clear they had been born on this continent. Perhaps they had been prisoners here.

A guide with a voice like Golda Meir came over to Sylvia. Jew recognising Jew, she examined Sylvia's uneaten meat.

'Believe me, it's chicken. When they say it's chicken then it's not pork.'

Golda Meir looked at the Englishwoman accusingly.

'What is it? Are you kosher?'

'No, I'm not kosher', Sylvia declared angrily, and then wondered what business it was of hers and why she had replied.

There is an unwritten law between Jews.

You can always ask direct questions

*Who are you?*

*Who were your parents?*

*How did they survive?*

*Or die?*

'I was in Theresienstadt', Golda Meir said, 'as a young girl.'

She moved off with her party and Sylvia lost all appetite. Michel was keen to have pudding. She thought how, for a Frenchman, he was remarkably adaptable about food. As long as he ate at midday, what he ate almost didn't matter.

Normally they took a siesta after lunch, but today they could only walk to the prison area, past the gallows square and into lines of cells. The cells looked unchanged. They stank of death.

Overlooking the prison was a huge cross.

'Shit', she muttered loudly, 'Bloody Catholic Church is everywhere'. He didn't understand her English, but he understood her meaning. Why was she always angry?

The sun was setting and the ghost town was emptying. The Israelis got on to their coach and disappeared back to Prague.

Outside the prison, children played in the street and, in a half-hidden waste ground, old Soviet tanks were rotting in high grass.

As they got into the hot Renault for the drive back to Prague she noticed.

'Wait! My glasses.'

'Maybe you left them in the café?'

The waiter who had served pork was drinking coffee at a table and smoking a cigarette.

'No, not here, but the caretaker found a pair.' He pointed to an old man drinking a Bud.

'You got a car?' The old man's German was perfect.

Michel helped the caretaker into the back seat of the Renault and drove him half a mile to his grandson's flat to find the keys.

Sylvia asked questions and the caretaker, pleased by the attention, answered directly.

'Yes. I was here during the war. Not in Theresienstadt. The Germans evacuated Theresienstadt and we locals worked in another camp, a few kilometres away. When the Communists took over' (he said the word as if it defiled his mouth) 'the Czechs threw us out. Back to Germany. But we German Czechs, we returned.'

She knew about the other camp. It was a death camp. This man must have been a guard. In any event, he was clearly a collaborator or Czech German Nazi. Maybe he was part of the Czech SS.

They drove to a block of modern flats near the museum. The caretaker got out of the car and shouted to attract attention. A youth looked out of a fifth floor window, conversed with the old man in Czech and came down with the keys.

'My grandson.' The caretaker plumped up with pride.

Sylvia said nothing, her head full of the faces of the young men on the museum wall, the men who never had grandsons.



The caretaker took Sylvia into the locked museum while Michel waited in the Renault. She followed him into his office. He walked slowly. They were alone. He opened the drawer in his desk and, as he leant forward, she knew she could kill him. Sylvia remembered stories of women in London who lifted double-decker buses to save their child pinioned under the wheels. She did not want to save a child. She wanted to kill an old man. How easily he had told her of his work in the death camp. This old man had been an active part of the killing machine. A tiny part of the whole mechanics. And now he was given the position of caretaker in Theresienstadt. Showing Jews round this place he partially helped happen. She wanted to strangle him. To put her strong hands around his scragneck and squeeze him to death. She wanted to strangle him for having children and grandchildren. For coming back from Communist expulsion here and daring to be the CARE-TAKER of this place of dead Jews. And who would ever know? Michel and she would just drive off into Prague. Nobody knew where they were staying. There were no visas. No official papers. No record of their being here. They would continue east to Budapest and anonymity.

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She was sweating as she came back to the car with her glasses in her hand. 'Ça va?' Michel asked, sensing her change. 'Ça va', she lied. As she opened the car door, and got into the passenger seat, she looked behind. Nobody. 'Allons-y', she told Michel. 'Let's go back to Prague now'. He kissed her and turned on the ignition. As they passed the large cross and tracked by the grassy rail, the barracks town was disappearing from the back window. It was behind them now. Behind. Sylvia opened the window and breathed very deeply. She put her glasses into her pocket and told Michel, 'Drive fast will you'.

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## List Of Contributors

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**Julia Pascal** was born in Manchester, the granddaughter of Romanian and the great-granddaughter of Lithuanian Jews. After studying dance as a child she moved into theatre and was trained as an actor at E15 Acting School. After four years work in theatre, TV and film she read English at London University. After graduation, she joined the National Theatre where she became the first woman director with her adaptation of Dorothy Parker's writings, the Platform Performance *Men Seldom Make Passes* which ran over two years. She became Associate Director of The Orange Tree Theatre for a year directing plays by Fay Weldon, Bertolt Brecht, Alfonso Vallejo and Howard Brenton.

She formed *Pascal Theatre Company* and produced plays by Seamus Finnegan, Karim Alrawi, Thomas Brasch, Melanie Phillips, Carole Rumens and Yana Stajno. As a playwright she has written *Theresa*, which deals with the Channel Islands' occupation, *A Dead Woman on Holiday* set in The Nuremberg Trials and *The Dybbuk*, a new take on Anski's version. These three formed *The Holocaust Trilogy* which were produced at The New End Theatre. Other plays set in World War Two are *Year Zero*, *Woman in the Moon* and *The Yiddish Queen Lear*. Her adaptation of *The Golem* has been presented to young people and her *St Joan* was a response to the French National Front's presentation of Joan as a racist icon. All her plays are published by Oberon Books. Her radio play *The Road To Paradise* was broadcast on BBC Radio 4.

*Crossing Jerusalem*, set in the second intifada, was commissioned by The Tricycle Theatre and produced in spring 2003. Julia's next play is set in the Muslim communities of Lancashire and is commissioned by The Bush Theatre.