Coherent deviants: Transformation and transition in life-stories of once-married women who chose to live as lesbians

Ruth Preser
Gender Studies Program, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 52900 Israel

A R T I C L E  I N F O
Available online 2 March 2011

S Y N O P S I S
Married women who choose to live as lesbians in Israel are expected to perform a transition. In a culture that maintains a system of binaries by classifying heterosexuality as opposite to lesbianism, lesbian women are expected to 'cross' discursive borders, to abandon heterosexual identity, desire and kinship and to emerge as 'natural' or coherent lesbians. They are also expected to explain the 'scandal' that lies at the very foundation of such a 'transformation,' and to maintain firmly situated belief systems that do not confuse the 'old' and 'new' identities. The purpose of this paper is to map discursive sites where transition and transformation are expected in order to establish a coherent life story. The study analyzes life stories of once married Jewish–Israeli women who chose to live as lesbians. Following the notion of a life story as a cultural device for structuring experience into socially shareable narrative and the notion of identity as performance, I discuss the ambivalent response to the expectation to construct a coherent narrative of transition.

Introduction

Sociological and cultural studies categorize Israel as a pro-natal and pro-family culture, where gender roles are defined according to marriage and reproduction (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1999; Izael, 1999; Kahn, 2000). In her study on families in Israel, Sylvia Fogiel-Bijaoui (1999) claims that the family continues to be central to Israeli culture and is one of the most prominent characteristics of the Jewish community in Israel. 'Familism,' namely, the centrality of the normative family in private and public life is produced and reproduced daily as the foundation of the social order and as a national asset. The family is institutionalized by the centrality of heterosexual marriages according to religious imperatives and laws, gender inequality in the job market and the construction of marriage as the legitimate space for childbirth and childrearing (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1999, 135). Accordingly, the normative families in the Jewish majority in Israel are heterosexual nuclear families headed by two working parents, who are legally married by orthodox Jewish law, have two or three children, raised mainly by a 'working mother,' which means that her salary and career are secondary to that of her husband's and to her role as mother and wife. Divorce is perceived among Jewish Israelis, even among secular people, as a failure or unwelcome deviation that requires therapeutic intervention (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1999, 161). As Fogiel-Bijaoui stresses, Israeli Familism does not characterize solely the 'non-western,' 'traditional,' or 'non-modernized' groups in Israel. Rather, Familism forms the normative structure of Israeli–Jewish kinship.

However, in spite of, or I should say, in light of the Israeli Familism, the past two decades have witnessed an increase in gay visibility in the State of Israel. Liberal litigation, mostly promoting equal rights for gay families, parents and partners, in addition to gay parades, LGBTQ activism and academic and
popular writing on gay issues in Israel have become part of the Israeli public discourse.1

The past two decades have also witnessed an abundance of writing of her-stories (Abbott & Farmer, 1999; Cassingham & O’Neil, 1993), none in Hebrew. Carren Strock’s (2008) book, ’Married Women Who Love Women,’ brought the stories of women discovering their sexual orientation within marriage, those deciding to dissolve their marriage and those deciding to remain married, by either leading a clandestine life or working out new arrangements and structures with their families, spouses and she-lovers. However, the theoretical and empirical discourse that investigates coming out of married women (and men) resides almost completely in the domain of human sexuality, family practice and community health.2 As a result, most of the theoretical debate focuses on the clinical and therapeutic aspects of coming out and the role of the community, health services and practitioners in supporting the newly-born gay person, her family and her children, if she has any.

This paper aims to explore the production of narrative coherence, and more specifically, the production of a life story, in light of the expectation of a transformation story line and a transformed identity.

An ‘other’ (life) story

As kinship structure and choices are so vital in Israeli culture, women are urged to declare, to give a headline to their family position as part of their ‘intimate narratives,’ a term coined by Ken Plummer (1995, 7). Intimate narratives reflect a domain of intimate desires and intimate being that constructs a moral self, and that bears a concern regarding the public sphere and traditional citizenship, turning the most personal and private into the most public property (Plummer, 1995, 9, 151). Narrating one’s own life story is a practice that emphasizes the overlap of public and private, and how the most private decisions are increasingly subject to public scrutiny and are bound up with public institutions, which attempt to regulate intimate behaviors (Plummer, 1995, 152).

Indeed as Charlotte Linde (1993) asserts, ‘in order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story’ (Linde, 1993, 5). According to Linde, life stories reflect presuppositions about what can be taken as expected, what the norms are, and what common or special belief systems are necessary to establish coherence (Linde, 1993, 190, 219). Thus, life stories involve large scale systems of coherence by which the actions narrated can be culturally understood and examined. Linde examines how narratives of career choices structure coherence and demonstrates several narrative strategies that serve to achieve this goal, including common sense systems reliant on shared beliefs; semi-expert systems that rely on popularized formal theories and ideologies; and coherence principles, such as narrative causality and narrative continuity. All are employed in order to establish the narrators as persons who lead a proper professional life, especially when career choices are difficult to justify and involve inadequate causality or insufficient continuity.

Yet, even if stories of lesbian transition produce proper causality, they do not end with the establishment of the narrators as persons who lead proper lives, not when narrated in light of gendered and Familist culture. Coming out stories are at risk of producing a potentially violating identity (Butler, 1993a), since women who identify as lesbians who dissolved their heterosexual marriage, are breaching both gender and Familist norms. Adequate causality and continuity that produce the coming out story are bound to establish the narrators as coherent deviants. Thus, the urge to ‘come out,’ and produce a coherent continuity that ends with the emergence of a lesbian identity collides with the need to establish oneself, through the life story, as ‘good’ and ‘normal’.

The contention between the need to identify as a lesbian and the need to produce a culturally coherent and socially inclusive life story is reflected in the following excerpt from Lily’s3 life story:

I really don’t know, last week I sat with my teacher. I told him [my life story] more or less, and he said: “What an interesting life you have.” And this really stunned me, because my life is so square, mundane, so bourgeois, that I cannot exit the square of the square of the square. As a lesbian… [Because] as a married woman, my life was so wild, so undomesticated, and indeed, back then, I did lead an ‘interesting life.’ [And] everyone reckons that this [lesbian] life is actually interesting. People use peculiar words. I don’t know. I wake up in the morning, go to work, go to the grocery, walk the dog, tidy the house, cook, sometimes we go to see a show, sometimes to the theater; sometimes, I don’t know, friends. They [the friends] also, you know, people and their mundane troubles, buying a car, changing the car, renovating the apartment. I don’t understand what’s other. That instead of a ‘he’ there’s a ‘she?’ That’s all. So I don’t understand. I don’t understand what’s different. (Lily)

The cultural script for coming out stories assumes a scandal, or ‘interesting life’ and is the predominant meta-narrative. It is interesting to note that at the end of the excerpt, Lily used the Hebrew word for ‘other,’ [‘acher] while the grammatically correct usage would have been the Hebrew word for ‘different,’ [‘shoneh] which she used correctly in the second instance. Lily did not ponder about what is different in her lesbian life, because ‘different’ is too soft a term, too subtle and relates to so many minor and major differences that can be claimed by different persons in different contexts. Here, the narrator used a word that stresses an experience of becoming, in the eyes of her occasional listener, an ‘other,’ emphasizing the pendulum shift between the urge to identify, the violating sign ‘lesbian’ and the cultural coercion to produce a transformation story line and a scandalous or at least an ‘interesting’ one.

I will take this opportunity to present the narrators’ ambivalent responses to the narrative imperative to produce a coherent coming out story that announces the emergence of a coherent lesbian. To do this, I shall present three discursive sites that emerged in the analysis of the life stories as sites where transformation is expected. These sites are: ‘crossing’ to lesbian desire and sex, ‘crossing’ to lesbian kinship, and shifts in and out of closets. When I say ‘emerged,’ I refer to the...
texts the narrators chose to create within open ended interviews that were contextualized by the research framework of which they were informed at the beginning of their interviews (Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, & Lieblich, 2008). The grounded theory analysis technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) employed in this research aimed to map meta-narratives by exploring cultural presuppositions about what can be taken as expected; what the norms are; which common or special belief systems narrators used to establish coherence; how narrative blueprints serve for social positioning; and how narrators experienced and represented the contexts against which their life stories were narrated (Benjamin & Ha'elyon, 2004; Linde, 1993; Zilber et al., 2008). Meta-narratives reflect cultural themes and beliefs that give a local story its coherence and legitimacy (Zilber et al., 2008, 1054). The emerging categories serve as the building stones for the reading I offer to the coming out stories of 10 Jewish Israeli lesbian women, a reading that explores the question of coherence and the feasibility of creating it in deviant life/stories. I will claim that the narrators, while producing the expected scenes and blueprints of coming out stories in the expected sites of transition (erotic, kinship and coming out), destabilize and counter the narrative imperative of ‘crossing’ and turn the scandalizing story-line into a means of knowing and agency.4

And one final epistemological note: I do not pretend to draw the profile of the once married woman who chose to live as lesbian, nor to establish an analytic category of a distinct identity. What I would like to do is to employ a queer analytical framework by looking at the ‘multiple ways that sexual practice, sexual fantasy, and sexual identity fail to line up consistently’ (Marcus, 2005, 196) while recognizing the pejorative sting of the term ‘queer’ and its explanatory power (Marcus, 2005, 197). I intend to achieve this epistemological aim by employing the category of once married women who chose to live as lesbians as a temporary category that allows me to look at the narrators’ shared experiences and narrative lines as a set of specifications, which, even though they exist, do not construct a coherent identity (Halperin, 2002). At the same time I intend to inquire into the meta-narratives that are at their disposal when coming to construct a life story.

The hailing power of desire

As Adrienne Rich (1980) asserted, lesbianism has been frequently reduced to its ‘clinical ring,’ limited to its erotic potential and to the sexual act, while setting the erotic apart from female friendship and comradeship (648, 650). Indeed, the erotic stimulus appears as a powerful site of crossing, performatively speaking, into a different set of values and identities. In the life-stories, sexual desire works as a powerful signifier that indicates the borders of identity and cultural intelligibility and serves to both reinforce and destabilize cultural prescriptions of identities. The following section is dedicated to the exploration of crossing to lesbian desire, and its effect on the narrators’ own sense of identity, belonging and storytelling.

In the following life story excerpt, Shani provides an account of a transformation from supportive sisterhood into a totally different story:

There was this woman, a mother of a child in my daughter’s nursery school, absolutely straight. I did not understand my first attraction to her. It was physical and emotional. We formed a very special relationship with the dynamics of a commune. If I finished work first, I would pick up her kids from nursery school and vice versa. We would then spend the afternoons together. We got to the point where we complained when our husbands came home. It felt like a hunters and gatherers culture, where the men’s return forced the women to part [...] [it was] like a women’s mutiny against the men in our lives, a commune and a deep emotional attachment. I did not relate it to lesbianism at the time. [After a while] she became physical with me, nothing erotic, just affectionate touching while talking. And from the moment this incidental touching began, I became confused. I drew lines in my mind: a line separating a deep emotional friendship with a woman, a legitimate relationship, a normal relationship, a straight one, from a relationship that could exist by crossing the line. [Questions churned around in my head, such as] do the effects of her touch – the erotic stimulus I felt – imply anything about me? And if so – what does it imply? And I panicked. (Shani)

The lesbian existence of a supportive women’s environment was penetrated by the erotic stimulus, breaking under the weight of the touch and forcing Shani to wonder who or what she was becoming. Erotic stimulus acts as a performative hailing (Butler, 1993a, 122–124), positioning the narrator outside the boundaries of heterosexual intelligibility. The ‘normal’ that tolerates the ‘hunters and gatherers’ women’s commune and the lesbian existence in its broader sense cannot embrace the touch and its hailing power.

The crossing potential of desire is further elaborated as Shani recounts how a woman to whom she was attracted during her military service,5 moved in with her and shared a room and a bed:

I had two more years of service, but from that moment, I hardly slept. I spent the nights guarding myself against crossing the line that signified the middle of the bed; watching it and understanding, or more accurately, making an effort not to understand, how it affects me. (Shani)

The hailing power of desire binds the narrator to transgression. Rich’s (1980) assertion that lesbianism as a concept and as a definition has been reduced to its erotic corporeal affect and effect is emphasized in Shani’s effort to avoid bodily contact; as if postponing the body might postpone consequences for identity. However, the delineation of the imaginary line between the bodies, and between ‘normal’ and inconceivable, is incomplete, as heterosexual coherency cannot be restored.

Crossing to lesbian desire sparks a chain reaction affecting multiple identities, including one’s identity as lesbian and feminist. Indeed, heterosexual identity is not the only identity to be at risk by the hailing power of lesbian desire. The Israeli radical feminist ideology, as reflected in the narratives, expresses clear ideological guidelines regarding lesbian sex and its political role in manifesting woman identification. When radical feminism becomes a metonym of woman
identification, lesbian sex is expected to be the site for the materialization of feminism:

To my surprise, I found that I was very attracted to a woman who was not a member of a feminist group; she was a non-feminist butch, something I wasn't aware of at the time. But I was really attracted to her. [...] I was very excited. It was like discovering 'America' at the age of 44. [...] I did not see it as passing from heterosexuality to lesbianism; I saw it as including another 50% of humanity in my world. I liked the concept. [...] And sexually, it was a revolution. The woman was an amazing lover. I already forgot sex could be like this. [...] She was totally butch [...] It was all about giving ME pleasure, making love to ME, but hardly allowing me to switch roles. [...] Very quickly, it became clear that we had formed some kind of subordination (also out of bed). [...] Suddenly, I found myself in a female embodiment of a patriarchal relationship. [...] And I was shocked, because I had a clear concept in my head, that lesbian relationships are a sort of love affair and are essentially different, more equal, more tender, and more communicative. I was not aware of the possibility of imitating the patriarchal world among two persons from the same sex. (Naomi)

It seems that crossing into lesbian desire holds the power either to reinforce or destabilize feminist values. Here, the ideology reinforced is the radical feminist ideology that rejects sexual practices involving gender roles, masculine properties and power relations. These practices are perceived as an imitation of and subjugation to patriarchal norms. Thus, they should not be manifested between women lovers and cannot be tolerated by those identifying as feminists. BDSM, pornography and butch-femme dyad were historically condemned and rejected by the radical feminism that determined them as a mere imitation of the patriarchal order (see: Pratt, 1995; Kendel et al., 1997; Ziv, 2004). Feminism, according to Naomi, is indistinguishable from woman identification, and sex between women should manifest both. And while naturalizing the feminist ideology that perceives the erotic site as an additional space for manifesting sisterhood, one can also displace it:

'I've always wished that a real lesbian would fall in love with me. Why? Because all my experiences with women were with women like me, women who were not lesbians but were open to experiencing lesbian sex. So I felt we had some kind of sex, but didn't really know how the REAL thing feels. The thought itself was incredibly naive, that if a lesbian sleeps with me she could teach me real lesbian love-making. And then, a real lesbian did sleep with me. And my first surprise was that I knew more than her about both sex AND lesbianism. (Shulamit)

The desire is political as much as the political is desired. Here, making love to women does not necessarily signify one as a lesbian, although lovemaking reinforces lesbianism as an established and coherent identity by using the term ‘real lesbian’ as opposed to women who are open to experience, in other words, liberals. It also reinforces the expectation of initiation into lesbianism, to cross, at least in the erotic sense, by wishing to experience ‘real’ lesbian sex with a ‘real’ lesbian. But the crossing could not be completed, as feminine identification and feminist inauguration do not necessarily guarantee the fulfillment of a more feminist or simply an ‘other’ desire or sexual knowledge.

In order to establish lesbian desire as a distinct category as well as a ‘natural’ woman-identified practice, the narrators compare it to heterosexual desire. In the next excerpt from Naomi's life story, we can find ‘America’ used again as a metaphor for the sensational discovery of lesbian sex, ‘ejaculation’ as a metaphor for heterosexual and patriarchal sexual practice and ‘intimacy’ as a metaphor for feminist lesbian sexual practice:

Sexually, I discovered ‘America’. [...] Really, really, the lack of obligation, really, and I highlight the word obligation, to satisfy the other and (instead), the motivation to do so. [...] Sex, which is simply part of the relationship, and more than that, intimacy. Because in addition to the act of love making par excellence, of touching, and stroking and licking and whatever, there are other kinds of touching, such as holding hands when watching TV, reading with legs crossed, or stopping in the middle of cleaning, or cooking, or reading in order to hug, just because. There's a lot of skin to skin. [...] and I'm very happy to be free of that previously internalized obligation to satisfy the phallic need for ejaculation of someone inside me. (Naomi)

‘America’ and ‘revolution’ are the two metaphors that Naomi employs to describe lesbian sex. At first glance, ‘America’ and ‘revolution’ seem to be two sides of the same coin: America is a delightful discovery that might harm the narrator's identification as a feminist, as seen in Naomi’s previous excerpt; America is also a feminist manifestation of lesbian sex that includes intimacy and ‘skin to skin’ practice. To this polarized setting, Naomi adds the hetero-normative scheme by employing the term ‘ejaculation’ to describe the instrumental role women are often forced to play in the context of a sexual culture that measures sexual satisfaction in terms of men’s rather than women's pleasure. This triangle of: a) feminist lesbian sex b) patriarchal-imitative lesbian sex and c) patriarchal heterosexual sex situates ‘America’ in an awkward position, opposing both the heterosexual ejaculation-centered practice and the feminist-oriented ‘skin to skin,’ while associating to both. The she-he lesbian relationship previously described did include power relations and gender roles that some would identify as subversive and others as imitative of patriarchal erotic, but the she-he setting was not centered on the ejaculation of the stone-butch, quite the contrary, as Naomi described: ‘It was all about giving ME pleasure, making love to ME’.

The multiple systems of belief eradicate any possibility of crossing anywhere when it comes to lesbian desire. ‘America’ is creating a set of rules that cannot be reduced to either lesbian or heterosexual, subversive or imitative. Butler conceptualizes this as a crisis in referentiality (Butler, 1993a, 139–140), a production of conflicting sets of sexual expectations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick conceptualized this as circuits of intimate denegation and consolidation (1990/2008, 61), and claimed that such dynamics are not epiphenomenal to identity politics, but constitute it. What seems to be an unambiguous ‘line’ between patriarchal and feminist, lesbian and heterosexual, becomes a narrative of
un-resolved crossing, while constituting what seems to be a proper sequence of ‘before’ and ‘after’ lesbian desire.

**Families we choose and those we don’t**

Doing heterosexual kinship as opposed to doing lesbian kinship is another space where doing or undoing is supposed to signify identity:

_I was not yet acquainted with this world. So she introduced me to some of her friends and there was this extremely radical group, feminist radical group, lesbian feminist radical group. And they made me feel very special for allowing me, (a still-married woman), spoil... How did they put it? allowing me to draw from their lesbian energy. I don’t know; they had these weird concepts, I did not understand anything about it, but I didn’t mind, as long as they let me be there._ (Lily)

Crossing into the lesbian community asserts a new matrix of affiliations that constructs the lesbian identity. Here, lesbianism is like energy, a distinct environment where you might or might not belong, might or might not be allowed in, all according to rules that shape the boundaries of kinship, as alternative as it might be. Not yet labeling herself as lesbian, the still-married Lily enters a distinct ‘world,’ a radical feminist environment that acknowledges lesbianism according to family status and perceives heterosexual kinship as opposing lesbian energy. The built-in suspicion towards the patriarchal institution of marriage that is expected to draw energies from the sisterhood echoes Adrienne Rich’s (1980) notion of woman-identification as a source of energy and the institution of heterosexuality as a power that restricts and utilizes this energy. It also echoes gay kinship ideology that refers to friendship as family (Weston, 1991, 1995). It is important to point out the fact that Lily, who was at risk of being banned on account of being ‘too’ married to participate in the group’s meetings was engaged in relationships with women while she was married and at the time of joining the group described above. So she did perform lesbianism in some areas of her life, but as mentioned earlier, nothing can be more ambivalent than the hailing power of desire. Here, the transition expected from a woman standing on the threshold of lesbianism is like energy, a distinct environment where you might or might not belong, might or might not be allowed in, all according to rules that shape the boundaries of kinship, as alternative as it might be. Not yet labeling herself as lesbian, the still-married Lily enters a distinct ‘world,’ a radical feminist environment that acknowledges lesbianism according to family status and perceives heterosexual kinship as opposing lesbian energy. The built-in suspicion towards the patriarchal institution of marriage that is expected to draw energies from the sisterhood echoes Adrienne Rich’s (1980) notion of woman-identification as a source of energy and the institution of heterosexuality as a power that restricts and utilizes this energy. It also echoes gay kinship ideology that refers to friendship as family (Weston, 1991, 1995). It is important to point out the fact that Lily, who was at risk of being banned on account of being ‘too’ married to participate in the group’s meetings was engaged in relationships with women while she was married and at the time of joining the group described above. So she did perform lesbianism in some areas of her life, but as mentioned earlier, nothing can be more ambivalent than the hailing power of desire. Here, the transition expected from a woman standing on the threshold of lesbianism is in marital status and kinship ties.

This standpoint that recognizes kinship as a material property of crossing is articulated also by the heteronormative culture and its prominent speakers, husbands and fathers. The reaction of male kin to the newly born lesbians in their families reinforces the assumption that being a lesbian or choosing to live as one is not about what one erotically or emotionally ‘does,’ or about the gender of the person she does it with. Rather, it is about what one ceases to be doing:

_I had my first experiences with women while I was still married with kids and I didn’t hide it. I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. I couldn’t lie and he sensed it immediately. When I ended my marriage, it was my decision, he was completely astonished. […] I think he didn’t imagine I would dissolve the marriage. He wouldn’t have ended the marriage because there was another woman, he could have lived in parallel systems._ (Rona)

It seems that Rona’s husband does not perceive lesbian desire as ‘crossing.’ It is Rona’s ambition to dissolve their marriage that is perceived as crossing and thus surprises her husband, particularly since she is given an outlet in the form of ‘parallel systems,’ as demonstrated also in the following excerpts from three life stories:

_I shared the feelings [I had toward this woman] with my husband at the beginning [of the process]. He was very understanding and said: “So what’s the problem? We can have a woman in our bed from time to time.” And since he worked abroad, and was away for most of the week, he felt comfortable knowing that I had someone to be with, so he could get on with his work without feeling guilty about leaving me on my own._ (Danit)

_It was clear that as long as the house was functioning well and there were flowers and a cake on the table, and the kids were neat and clean and well looked-after, it (my relationships with women) could go on._ (Shifra)

_And there are many who make a choice and say: “I will marry and the society will mark me as ‘OK’ and underneath all that, I can do whatever I want.” And this was my father’s solution as well. He told me to “stay married and do all kinds of things from time to time;” kind of an in-between solution, and I could not believe that my father was telling me to cheat on my husband, which I wouldn’t do, I’m not a disloyal person. Even when I was seeing my lover, my husband knew about it. I told him what was going on and he wanted to stay (married)._ (Danit)

_This story between me and her went on for a month or so. It got to the point where every evening, at seven o’clock, we would meet in the chat room and the house started to look as if I was in love. My husband wasn’t used to seeing dirty laundry or dust or unwashed dishes. He understood instantly that something was going on. And he was not happy about it, to say the least._ (Shani)

The breach of norms does not lie in having a lesbian relationship or in having it within a marriage. Monogamy seems to be a secondary or a non-issue. The breach of norms lies in preferring lesbianism over the institutionalized arrangement. It seems that the institution of heterosexual kinship is capable of spreading to include many variations, as long as the arrangement is formally kept. Here, the arrangement can be elaborated by Gayle Rubin’s (1975) definition of the sex/gender system: ‘a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied’ (158). According to the narrators, the needs answered by lesbian sex are erotic (stimulus), economic (production of capital) and domestic (roles). Here, sex between women is part of the heterosexual men’s erotic imaginary and serves their pleasure, as articulated by Danit’s husband’s fantasy of lesbian sex. Lesbian sex also provides the hinterland for the husband who travels on business and is happy that his wife has a companion while he is away. The notion of a peaceful and well-functioning domestic hinterland is also articulated by Shifra, who can pursue lesbian affairs in exchange for a well-maintained house and children, or Shani, whose virtual lesbian affair contests rather than serves her husband’s needs, and thus, disturbs her marriage.
The fulfillment of lesbian desire does not undermine the production of normative heterosexual gender. Moreover, lesbian sex and relationships do not only not undermine heterosexual kinship or mark a transformation of identity, but may also be perceived as potential enhancers of the institution of family. As long as the narrators maintain their domestic roles, the house is clean, the children are well cared for, and the husband can work away from home without worrying, ‘it’ could go on.

As part of a ‘parallel system,’ lesbianism functions as a heterotopic site, a concept Foucault (1986) employed in order to contest the notion of linearity. Heterotopies are social spaces (sites) that while being in relation with all the other sites, also neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. A both real and unreal spaces that are outside of all spaces, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality, because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect, much like the mirror which is a placeless place but which reflects a place that do exist in reality. The mirror functions as a heterotopic site in the sense that it makes the place that one occupies when one gazes at oneself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with the space that surrounds her, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is ‘over there’.

And such are lesbian relationships; connected to the surroundings through the narrators’ experience, while perceived by their kin as an unreal image in the sense that it should have no effect on gender roles and the institution of marriage, which functions as the ‘real.’ Foucault gave the example of the bedrooms that existed on the great ranches of South America, where every farm had an entry door to a bedroom for those who traveled across the lands. These bedrooms were such that the traveler that entered them never had access to the family’s rooms. The traveler was a guest but not an invited one. Foucault conceptualized it as a heterotopy of exclusion where we may think that we can enter a farm had an entry door to a bedroom for those who traveled across the lands. These bedrooms were such that the traveler that entered them never had access to the family's rooms. The traveler was a guest but not an invited one. Foucault conceptualized it as a heterotopy of exclusion where we may think that we can enter a place, but as soon as we enter, we are excluded. Thus, the penetration of lesbian relationships into heterosexual kinship does not undermine anything. The radical transformation that lesbian desire and relationships are expected to inflict on the narrators seems not to threaten the heterosexual partner, at least, on the condition that the domestic chores are performed, or that the woman does not wish to dissolve her marriage.

What happens then, once the marriage does come to an end? What kind of crossing is being narrated once the sex/gender system (Rubin, 1975) is supposedly no longer sustained in the form of normative heterosexual marriage and joint property?

(Many years after the divorce) and still, most of the ricochets that I get from the kids, are quotes from their father. That I'm a sick woman, that all my friends are sick. I had three partners, and each and every one of them became an object of hatred and demonization. During the divorce process, he would draw up drafts of separation agreements. He wouldn’t see a lawyer. He would draw up these separation agreements and there was always this paragraph that stated that if one of us was involved with a person from one’s own sex […] he or she would instantly lose any right to see the children. And there was also physical violence, not serious, but it existed, nevertheless, and emotional violence as well. The truth is, I did not imagine it would be so hard. And it isn’t normal for it to continue for so many years – this pressure – most men loosen their grip eventually. (Tal)

Dissolution of a marriage does not ensure crossing. In societies of control (Deleuze, 1992), simply passing from one distinct environment to another does not banish the mechanisms of control; one does not start all over again. One cannot start all over again, as one is never finished with heterosexual kinship. Transferring to families one chooses, leaving the heterosexual family, does not ensure starting from zero in terms of hetero-normative controls, as power is like dispersed gas (Deleuze, 1992), and so are the controls:

And I told him I was a lesbian, although everyone warned me not to say this because [it reduced] my chances of getting custody of the kids. But the divorce was good. He never used it [against me], he hoped the kids wouldn’t suffer too much, but he never used it as a weapon, which I say to his credit. (Rona)

As opposed to crossing the boundaries of desire or of monogamy, attempting to cross the boundaries of kinship initiates the birth of The Lesbian. The sexual and relational practice that had no effect on the narrators’ identity and cultural intelligibility in the eyes of their beholders as long as the parallel worlds were sustained becomes injurious:

At this stage, the rabbinical court [the matrimonial court in Israel] had appointed a social worker who was more like a probation officer. Her role in my life was to determine which of us would have custody of the girls. She was supposed to recommend to the court which of us would make a more competent parent: custody evaluation — one of humanity’s most despicable terms, custody evaluation. Her work was designed to prove that I was not a competent mother. She had no grounds on which to prove him a competent father. She was motivated to prove why I wasn’t. […] This marriage ended after two years of turning friends and family against me and interrogating our daughters as to where I was and with whom, and whether my partner used to touch me or hug me and whether there were other women with us. (Shani)

Husbands, rabbinical courts and welfare agencies — all are mechanisms of control that simultaneously produce crossing while preventing it: Shani is not allowed to cross from institutional marriage while ‘becoming’ The Lesbian. It is important to note that in the vast majority of cases in Israel, judges, social workers and psychologists who are involved in custody cases assume that the mother would be the custodian, and sole maternal custody still remains the dominant model, unless the mother has a proven deviance (Hacker, 2005). Crediting one’s husband for not using lesbianism as a whip in divorce procedures demonstrates the common knowledge that associates lesbianism with deviant motherhood. The connection between lesbianism and deviant motherhood is reinforced by the home-made divorce contract, in which Tal’s husband tries to persuade her to sign an agreement depriving her of access to the children should she ‘cross’ to same-sex relationships. Dissolving the hetero-normative marriage does not guarantee a crossing between modes of kinship. When women do attempt to cross kinship boundaries, the lesbian desire and relationship that
were of no consequence in the ‘parallel life’ arrangement become potentially dangerous acts of hailing, especially to mothers. Thus the dissolution of marriage generates both the lesbian and the deviant mother. Indeed, motherhood is a space that by no means is being crossed when one chooses to dissolve a marriage and live as a lesbian. Transforming into a ‘bad enough mother’ is another injurious hail, deployed in a hetero-normative effort to re-naturalize gender-bending women, either by employing legal measures or by demanding that they manage their relationships and closets properly:

[My ex] comes to see the kids once a week, but not every week. [...] He takes them during the holidays and every other weekend, but now that they are teenagers, they prefer to stay here and be near their friends. [...] I had one relationship in which he reproached me for the fact they were too involved, too quickly. I told him that I do not have the privilege of keeping something secret for months, to see if it’s working. I live with them; they experience my falling in love and my broken heart. I buffer as much as I can, but still. And they experience my mistakes. He had the privilege of presenting his new bride after they had been involved with each other for a year. We women can’t do that. (Rona)

Preferring the lesbian existence, refusing the heterotopic arrangement of parallel lives is an upsetting act of agency. The heterosexual monogamous family is neither heterosexual nor monogamous. The scandal lies not in breaching a gender or monogamy norm. It lies in the narrators’ insistence on public admission of the act, in spite of being granted an outlet by their husbands and fathers. It is the preference for lesbian lives that is countered with coercive re-inscription of gender (Butler, 1993a, 131), forcing women to produce the desired social values.

In her reading of Antigone, Butler (2000) asserts that although Antigone does not achieve another sexuality which is not heterosexuality, she does undermine heterosexuality by not doing what is necessary in order to stay alive and marry Haemon, ‘by refusing to become a mother and wife, by scandalizing the public with her wavering gender’ (Butler, 2000, 77), by claiming a position within kinship which is not a position, not according to social intelligibility, and yet showing how kinship might continue to signify outside its conventional constraints (Butler, 2000, 78). Since one cannot completely cross, not even when dissolving her marriage, lesbian kinship cannot produce a kinship standpoint external to the institutionalized one; neither when having an undisclosed affair within marriage, nor when attempting to dissolve the marriage. Indeed, by refusing, and refusing publicly, to continue to be wives, the narrators position themselves outside of intelligibility. But like Butler’s Antigone, despite dissolving their marriage, they do not speak strictly outside of kinship, and while narrating a tale of marriage dissolution, they cannot establish coherent transition.

Closet talk

Coming out is recognized as psychologically and politically healthy, an act that is contingent upon the development of the gay movement and that makes it possible to claim rights and struggle for equality (D’Emilio, 1989; Plummer, 1995). Yet both theory and practice question its power of crossing. Coming out is never-ending and never really achieves the light of illumination (Butler, 1993b; Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1990/2008), as it cannot reveal a true identity or enable a life of inclusion. Foucault (1978/1990) asserted that the confession — the ‘formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does’ is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of statement within power relations where sex is the privileged theme of confession (Foucault, 1978/1990, 60). The confession has become so deeply ingrained in us that we no longer perceive it as an effect of power, but as a liberating practice (Foucault, 1978/1990, 63). Although a detailed debate on the closet and coming out experience in narratives of once married women who chose to live as lesbians is not in the scope of this paper, the narrative expectation for a crossing in the domain of self-disclosure and ‘coming out,’ is.

Lily describes moving in with her partner and the presence of a lesbian relationship in her life and home:

My children used to come over, sleep over [...] but they did not have a clue. [As if] the fact that we sleep together, me and her, didn’t imply anything. Children can’t perceive their parents as sexual beings. Not even the fact we take showers together. I mean, don’t good friends take showers together? Very strange indeed. We lived together normally, me and her, the children used to come, and sometimes stayed for long periods, and we lived normally, we never concealed anything. I don’t know how they didn’t figure it out, and they were already grown up children. (Lily)

Cohabitation, sharing a bed and a shower, as well as other intimate representations cannot provide a clear crossing, not when lesbianism culturally occupies a heterotopic space. One might argue that living together ‘normally,’ meaning performing rites of Coupledom of everyday life, might not be perceived as a full ‘coming out,’ since in this case, it did not include an explicit and verbal confession of the scandalous nature of the relationship. One might also argue that living together ‘normally’ cannot be perceived as hiding or being closeted since all the Coupledom rituals are carried out publically. The performative non-verbal utterance, as emphasized in living ‘normally,’ cannot produce a crossing or validation in the eyes of Lily’s beholders. It is a speech act of silence (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1990/2008, 3) a form of unsaying which is neither a full hideout nor a full confession, as Rachel asserts:

I’m not worried, the neighbors know me. We form the building’s committee. Ilana and myself are the only ones in the neighborhood who take pains to make this place look nice, the garden and everything, so everybody appreciates us. And in spite of all this, even yesterday, one of the neighbors passed us, looked at Ilana and asked her: “So when are you going to get married?” So it doesn’t penetrate, there’s a barrier that it can’t cross. (Rachel)

By using the adverb ‘worried,’ Rachel recognizes the public characteristic of her lesbian relationship and the possible consequences. The worries are relieved by paying a tribute,
an act of reconciliation, to her community, offering exemplary citizenship by attending to the neighborhood. The implicit social contract might be articulated in the following way: one might breach gender and sexuality norms and might be allowed to do this publicly, but one should also pay tribute to society by becoming a good citizen; by so doing, one could not expect acknowledgement. However, one might expect to be relatively safe and should not be ‘worried.’ What happens, then, when the un-saying is replaced by a full verbal confession?

My brother is a religious man and whenever I visited him, I tried to make him understand that I am a lesbian woman, and for years, he never reacted. So one day, while sitting at his place, I drew a picture of Angela and said: “Reuben, you know how I always talk about Angela.” And he said, “Yes,” rather suspiciously, and I went on: “So, look,” and I handed him the photo. He took it and I said: “So this is Angela, my partner, because I am a lesbian,” and his wife grabbed it and yelled: “Don’t look at it, Reuben!” and handed it back to me. And I had such a good laugh. So we don’t really talk about it. But when they come to Israel, they treated her nicely, politely, and even warmly in the superficial sense of the word. A few years later, on one of his visits here, I said to him: “Reuben, I want to thank you so much for” uh, how did I put it? ‘Acceptance,’ I think, “of Angela,” so he turned to me and said: “Don’t push me on it.” Then I understood that this was as far as I could go. (Rachel)

While the non-verbal performative utterance is met with silence, the explicit confession is met with an explicit rejection. Transferring to a verbal dimension of interaction turns the diverted gaze into a demand not to ‘push’ it. Butler (1993a) asserts that being hailed in injurious terms allows one to enter discursive life, and provides an opportunity for affirmative response to violation. But what if one cannot be hailed? Which ‘I’ can be produced without any calls? As Foucault (1965/1988) noted, the dungeon, chains, sarcasm, being a continual spectacle, were the very elements of the liberty of the madman. These were means that could not dislodge him from his truth. The language of indifference and silence on the other hand, silence that is chained to transgression, is the very language that puts one in non-relations to others (Foucault, 1965/1988, 261). Confinement and torture, being hailed in injurious terms, all are engaged in dialog with those whom the institution attempts to banish. It is the no-language that prevents the dialog (Foucault, 1965/1988, 262). The cultural coercion to confess, to ‘come-out’ is contested with a cultural denial and a diverted gaze that banishes the possibility of crossing out of the closet. The no-language mechanism forces the confession while actively depriving any language or relation to others. It is a careful management of ignorance (Kosofsky-Sedwick, 1990/2008, 6) applied both by the narrators and their significant others and communities.

Not being allowed to cross while being expected to tell a story of crossing, the narrators deploy the coming out meta-narrative as an act of knowing. In response to the cultural coercion to confess and to identify, and the management of ignorance when such confession takes place, the narrators utilize their coming out in order to expose dangers and to map the limits of liberalism and acceptance in their own communities:

I used to come out to teachers in my kids’ schools. So if something would happen, they would know and would notify me. Let’s say, if someone made a nasty remark to one of my kids. I wanted the teachers to understand the context. And I wanted to know if it happened. That was my aim, although it never happened. (Shifra)

When we moved to the new neighborhood and the new school, I called their teacher and came out to her. It wasn’t an act of pride or feminism, it was a practical matter. I wanted the teacher to know my kids’ life context. It also served as a kind of test, to see how a straight person, who had no prior acquaintance or attachment to me, would react. (Shani)

By coming out, the narrators are able to map potential dangers and dangerous environments for themselves, but also for their children. Rachel’s story that follows underlines motherhood as a site of accountability for lesbian mothers (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004):

She [my daughter] had an event with the youth movement and I was supposed to be at a pride event and both events occurred on the same weekend and at the same place. So she came to me and said: “Listen, all my friends will see you and they will figure it out.” So I asked her: “What would you like me to do?” And she came back to me and said: “I gave it some thought and I’d like you to say that you are a reporter and that you came to cover the [pride] event. I told her that I was willing to do that if it would make it easier for her, and that’s what I did. From the beginning [of living as a lesbian] to this day, I have never pushed her to be out. And yesterday, she told me that she hosted a friend and that this friend’s sister is a lesbian and at the end of the conversation I asked her if her friends, my daughter’s friends, know that her mother is a lesbian, and she is 29 years old, OK? And she said to me: “Only those who are really close to me.” And I thought to myself: “Wow, she has never been able to accept it, not even now.” And I think it was right, not to push her to be ‘out,’ I don’t regret it, but I am sorry that she can’t accept it. And she was very good with both of my partners who were like half-mothers to her, hugs and lots of love. Yet, in a certain way, she still must think it is not right. (Rachel)

The act of coming out or staying put, in the stories of Shani, Shifra and Rachel, cannot be reduced to an act of obedience to the regulating powers of confessions. The choice of where, when and how to come out is also an act of caring, in addition to it being an act of accountability. Being held responsible for the implications of one’s own choices for one’s children is only part of the story. The caring guidelines initiate two motions that aim to protect one’s own children in a potentially hostile environment: a motion of self-disclosure in order to map dangers and a motion that blurs one’s own lesbianism in order to respond to the children’s fears and worries and in order to preserve community and family relationships. Here, the silence that is chained to transgression, is the very language that allows one to be in relation to others. As Dana Rosenfeld (2009) asserted, achieving convincing heterosexual front is a complex production of
heteronormativity as enduring by virtue of normative persuasion but also as enduring by virtue of the strategic and agentic use of its core premises to produce particular selves and to manage relations (12, 18).

The narrators develop their own guidelines for coming out, guidelines that reveal the variety of shades and meanings: silence might be hostile and serve as a homophobic reaction, but it could also be employed to protect significant others and their relationships with them (e.g., Rachel’s brother); speech acts might expose them to dangers, but could also be employed to map potential dangers. Sedgwick conceptualized it as a vulnerable management of information ‘to such a contradictory array of interdictions, that the space for simply existing as a gay person […] is bayoneted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden’ (1990/2008, 70). But this vulnerability is also an epistemological space (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1990/2008, 77). Things happen there. And this binarism of coming out/staying put ‘makes it possible to identify the sites where coming out is performed as sites that charged with potential for powerful manipulation — through precisely the mechanisms of self-contradictory definition (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1990/2008, 10). Coming out produces a map of the domains in which it is advisable to come out while destabilizing the ideological foundation that prescribes coming out as a ‘good’ or desirable stage. Indeed by coming out to teachers the narrators expose the false expectation of self-liberation. Through this epistemological move, the narrators expose the full hostility that lies at the very foundation of the promise of freedom. Rather than liberating the narrators, coming out, with all its oppressive potential, and its flooding of fears and caution, liberates homophobia and helps the narrators navigate in hostile waters.

Coherent deviants

Erotic practice, breaking kinship boundaries and coming out are the sites where transformation and transition are expected in order to establish a coherent life story and identity, within the coming out story genre, a genre that announces the emergence of a newly born lesbian. While these sites are presented with the needed ‘befores’ and ‘afters,’ the life stories fail to organize coherently around the oppositions that are supposed to construct the transformation. Rather, they could be read as a model that is not designed to enable comparison between the before and the after, at least not on the grounds of similarity or difference (Friedman, 2001).

Erotic potential and bodily expressions undermine the narrators’ identity and urge them to re-evaluate their self-identification as heterosexuals, feminists and lesbians, creating an appearance of crossing and transformation. In their accounts of crossing to lesbian desire, the narrators use woman-identification to simultaneously naturalize and de-naturalize it, and to destabilize the crossing between heteronormative and lesbian, between feminist and patriarchal, while narrating it. When feminist sisterhood jumps into bed, the expectation is that sisterhood should be manifested in bed just as much as the lesbian bed is expected to manifest sisterhood. The attempt to reconcile feminist values with lesbian desire does not always provide sustainable guidelines as to what is ‘good enough’ desire for a feminist. The power of desire to hail, to hail lesbians, to hail transgression of gender norms or feminist norms cannot provide a sustainable taxonomy. Although narrators refer to lesbianism as an energy that alters their self-perception and validation, crossing to lesbian desire cannot be reduced to a crossing story-line.

Indeed, that which is well-established as sexual orientation, sexual choice and sexual identity ceases to be sexual or identity. The sex and the sexual are of minor consequence to those who operate the gaze. The choice to be sexual with other women becomes a Choice, an Identity, a Deviation, only when it affects kinship position, making kinship, rather than sex, the focus of identity transformation.

The opacity that surrounds the ‘crossing’ culminates when the narrators narrate the act of telling, when they describe their attempts to come out, verbally and non-verbally, in the public domain. Although opacity is restored again and again, either by their communities, by their significant others, or by themselves, they keep coming out. It would be a mistake to identify the repetitive act of coming out as a simple matter of surrendering to the social imperative to confess. The coming out story and act of coming out are employed by the narrators in order to re-signify the act itself, disclosing its false foundation and liberating promises, displaying its role in discerning and regulating lesbians and re-employing it as a compass of homophobia, an alternative ‘gaydar.’ As Butler (1993a, 137) asserts coming out becomes an appropriation of dominant culture that ‘seeks to make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which repeats in order to remake — and sometimes succeeds’.

This remaking is manifested in the act of story-telling. On the one hand, the narrators yield to the story line of crossing and emerging as they produce a coming out story that seems to begin with heterosexuality and marriage and to end with lesbianism. On the other hand, they destabilize the map of crossing identities and kinship boundaries, and produce a thresholds story. By providing a transformation meta-narrative, by sketching a coming out life story, narrators establish themselves as culturally obedient and as coherent tellers and subjects.

But are life stories, always, already coherent? As Linde (1993, 5) asserts, ‘in order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story’. But what if coherence cannot be established? Or else, what if the only continuity and causality that constructs coherence, meaning, the causality and continuity that shapes the coming out meta-narrative, undermines the narrators’ cultural intelligibility and threatens social membership and inclusion? This work proposes to expand the notion of narrative coherence to include, in addition to the examinations of strategies for constructing coherence where coherence is at-risk, a queer, performative examination; one that seeks to abandon the opposition of coherence vs. incoherence; one that views the act of storytelling itself as a site where coherence cannot be resolved, or reduced to linguistic, structural or ideological questions. Rather than recovering incoherence, or serving as a means of recuperating cultural intelligibility, the category of coherence might serve as an analytic means for extracting knowledge, and the action of constructing coherence could be
perceived as an opportunity for narrative agency, narrative survival and narrative subversion.

Coming out is a delusive meta-narrative, the accepted and expected one that should explain a scandalous transformation on the one hand and that produces, re-produces and nurtures the scandal on the other. Yet, the ultimate crossing that the act of coming out promises is the exact crossing it cannot provide. Coming out stories of once married women who chose to live as lesbians are, in fact, coming into knowledge stories; the reframed concept of ‘crossing’ subverts the meta-narrative of transition and transformation, while employing the expected coming out storyline, manifesting narrative insubordination by playing by the rules.

Endnotes

1 Among many others, (see: Harel, 1999; Kama, 2000; Kaplan and Ben-Ari, 2000; Kutnstein, 2003; Zidiyaku, 2004; Frankfurt-Nachmias & Shadmi, 2005; Sembira, 2005; Rozin, 2005; Padva, 2006; Efrat, 2006).


3 Names have been changed to protect the narrators’ anonymity.

4 When using the category of agency, I am not referring to the humanist notion of the individual’s masculine notion of agency, i.e. the story-line of persons who encounter difficulties and conquer them (Davies, 2000, 56), but at the poststructuralist notion of agency that recognizes the existence of other ways of knowing, and other ways of being within the dominant order. Often, these forms of thought are not linear and rational or intentional (Davies, 2000, 58, 59). In employing the category of agency, I do not propose that access to discourses of resistance or to alternative discourses will undo the dominant or any other discourse (Davies, 2000, 62). Rather, I read the coming out stories as an act of authorship and as an act of speaking in ways that are disruptive of current discourses (Davies, 2000, 66). Thus the concept of agency in the narratives of once married women who chose to live as lesbians is read as fragmented, transitory, a position in discourse with emphasis on authorship, the capacity to speak, to be heard, and to articulate meaning from within and beyond the collective discourses (Davies, 2000, 68).

5 Compulsory military service is performed by most Israeli Jews after graduating from high-school. Women serve for a minimum of two years, men for a minimum of three.


References


Benjamin, Orty, & Ha’elyn, Hila (2004). Silenced reality: Power relations that are disruptive of current discourses (Davies, 2000, 66). Thus the coming out storyline, manifesting narrative insubordination by reframing concept of ‘crossing’ subverts the meta-narrative of transition and transformation, while employing the expected coming out storyline, manifesting narrative insubordination by playing by the rules.


**Ruth Preser** is a PhD candidate at the Gender Studies Program, Bar-Ilan University, Israel. Her principal research interests lie in the field of narrative inquiry of life stories, in particular, the construction of coherence and narrative sequence in stories of ‘deviancy.’ Ruthy combines post structural scholarship and critical theory with qualitative methodology. She won B.A. in History (summa cum laude) and M.A. in Gender Studies Program (magna cum laude). Ruthy is a teaching assistant at the Gender Studies Program, teaching feminist qualitative methodologies as well as feminist practice and activism. She is a feminist and peace activist and the editor of the chapter ‘Lesbians’ in the Hebrew edition of ‘Our Bodies Ourselves’ (forthcoming).