Article

SEXUALITIES

Abstract This article is based on empirical research using video diaries to explore the performance of sexual identities in work, domestic and social spaces. The diaries allow respondents to show the clothes they wear on different occasions, and to talk about the process of performance. The article focuses on the ways in which identity as a concept functions within 'academic', 'political' and 'subcultural' discourses of sexuality, and draws on diarists' discussions of comfort and discomfort in performing their (differently inflected) identities in these spaces, linking this to theories of performativity and reflexivity.

Keywords comfort, performance, sexual identity, video diaries

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The Comfort of Identity

In this article I examine material from video diaries which were undertaken by a number of people in 'queer communities'. I am interested in the ways in which identities are performed in different times and spaces – which I call work, rest and play – and also how these performances become mediated by academic, political and 'subcultural' discourses of sexuality. I do not propose these definitions as immutable, rather as organizing concepts with which to frame the empirical material. I aim to explore the similarities and differences in respondents' accounts, and want to chart their *experiences* of identity. In so doing I hope to illustrate some key aspects of theoretical debates around identity whilst also considering how far people's experiences of their own identities mirror the fractured selves currently described by academics (for example Hall, 1996) or the theoretical insights of notions of performativity in relation to identity (Butler, 1990): are identities outside the academy experienced as more or less fixed or more complex than these writings suggest? I would also like to examine how far academic discourses filter into and inform political discourses and what their relevance might be to 'subcultural' constructions of the self. In my analysis, then, there are three levels to theorize: the academic, and by this I really mean queer theory in this context; the political, usually conceived

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of as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender politics; and the everyday, which I call the subcultural (I define these terms in more detail later).

Performing identities for the camera

My research has involved giving respondents camcorders and asking them to make 'video diaries'. In the brief for these, respondents were asked to demonstrate (visually) and talk about the ways in which they managed or presented their identities in different settings in their everyday lives. The participants were asked to dress in the clothes they would wear in each situation, describing them in detail and explaining why they thought these self-presentation strategies were appropriate. This technique was designed to make sure that participants were as explicit as possible about the presentation of their identities in different spaces – at work, rest and play. Theoretical themes were then developed as they arose from the data, according to the significance that respondents afforded them and the frequency with which issues arose across all of the respondents' accounts.

I would like to stress the importance of the video diaries in capturing the *performativities* of identity in ways which are qualitatively different from other sociological research methods. In one sense, the self-representation is more 'complete' than the audiotaped interview, which only provides aural data. Ongoing debates around qualitative social research generally, and feminist research within that more specifically, have opened up space to consider modes of research which produce accounts of respondents' social worlds that are radically different from quantitative and survey-based studies, and my use of video diaries here reflects those debates (see for example Stanley, 1993). Moreover, the visual dimension of the construction and display of identity is obviously more easily gleaned through this method. The use of video as a *process* in the research is equally important (compared with, say, the use of still photography), not only in allowing a representation of the performativity of identity to show through, but also in running that alongside the narrativization of identity (through respondents' commentaries) and in reflecting the selection, editing and refining that constitute identity and performativity as process in all our lives.

In many ways video diaries currently have a common currency, largely due to their recent extended television coverage (in the UK at least), which makes them a familiar form to respondents. In theory (if not necessarily in practice) video diaries afford respondents the potential for a greater degree of reflexivity than other methods, through the processes of watching, re-recording and editing their diaries before submission, and because each diarist has at least one month in which to create their diary. Regardless of the 'accuracy' or 'realism' of the diaries, then, they do at least afford

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the potential for the respondents to more fully represent themselves than other more traditional research methods. For example, Gill[1] says about the process:

> Why am I telling you all these things about myself? . . . um, because I think that it's important and I think I've got things to say . . . The least favourite bit of my body is this little bit in here, because I've got a fat bit there, and a front-on picture of my belly, although I let a bit of that be shown earlier and viewed that to see if I was going to let it stay in.

This implies that making a video diary can be a reflexive and even empowering process, since it offers the subject greater 'editorial control' over the material she chooses to disclose – and because she feels she has 'important' things to say that are here given a space to be said.

Perhaps the most interesting issue to emerge from this research process, however, was precisely the *lack* of reflexivity that many participants displayed in examining their self-presentations. This was slightly uneven depending on the context, as one might expect. For example, participants were very sensitive to the demands placed on them by uniforms and dress codes at work, and far less self-conscious when it came to their 'leisure wear'.

Uniforms

Dressing is intricately linked to queer employment patterns throughout contemporary history. There are many recent rediscoveries of women who cross-dressed or lived as men in the 19th century in order to pursue male careers which were not open to them as women (Garber, 1992). Moreover, during the first half of the 20th century, especially around the two world wars, the armed forces created opportunities and possibilities for queer men and women to earn money and leave home, to inhabit single-sex spaces, to engage in non-sex-specific occupations, and to dress in a particularly codified way – in uniform.

Uniforms can alleviate some of the problems of dressing. For example, one respondent in Rosa Ainley's (1995: 137) study explains:

> I didn't realize at the time, when I went into nursing, how much I would hide behind the uniform and how comfortable I felt in a traditional female role, where I could be totally hidden. Never mind that I used to walk with a bit of a sway or anything like that, I was in a dress with a little cap perched on my head. It wasn't really until I left the health service for another job that I realized I did not know how to dress, I did not know how I wanted to look. Or I did know how I wanted to look, but might well be accused of being lesbian and that bothered me.

Uniforms can thus be a mask (experienced either positively or negatively)

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or a marker of sexual identity. Even now uniforms (navy and police, for example) have a certain affectionate place in lesbian, gay and bisexual cultures, and lesbians continue to be attracted by careers in the army, police force, and prison service, for example (Ainley, 1995).

The freedom to be able to 'express' one's sexuality, or to 'be oneself' at work in terms of dress, is frequently cited as a motivation towards particular forms of employment. Take the examples of Seb and Jo. Seb, a bisexual psychiatric nurse in his early 30s, lives with his partner Gill (also in nursing) in a large communal house shared with six others in a city in the English Midlands. Both he and his partner are non-monogamous and have relationships with other men and women. Jo is a lesbian and a hospital technician who lives with her partner Sue (a trainee teacher) in an ex-council house in a small south Midlands town. Neither Seb nor Jo are 'out' at work, and both are obliged to wear uniforms in the workplace. They actually subvert these uniforms to a greater or lesser degree. In both cases they are required not to wear jeans, which they both *do* wear, although they only wear black and not blue ones. Jo is also required to wear a white tunic top which she does but always covers over with a jumper or sweatshirt. Seb is not required to wear a tie but to wear 'a shirt which would facilitate the wearing of a tie'. To this he responds by wearing a collarless shirt. He is not required to wear 'sedate' colours, but all his workmates do so. He prefers to wear bright colours: green, red or orange shirts and brightly coloured trousers.

Steve is gay and the part-time manager of a clothing shop. He is in his early 20s and also studies law at a local university. He lives at home with his parents but has a partner, Patrick, at whose house he spends much of his time. At work Steve is obliged to wear suits from the store's range. He thus has separate wardrobes for work and for leisure, one comprising dark suits and the other with brighter and much more varied attire. As he explains:

> People who join the job don't necessarily know I'm gay. It is never necessarily spoken about. Everyone knows. Me and my close friends there go to clubs together and they all know Patrick, he comes in every week, it isn't a problem. But it does make you far more firm. The job itself requires that, but in terms of sexual identity, people don't necessarily associate that firmness with a gay man . . . I think you should dress appropriately for what the occasion is but hopefully the person has the good sense to apply their individualism to what they're wearing . . . it's part of the job and you have to accept it . . . I quite enjoy the whole feeling it gives to you of authority and control and feeling that you were dressed properly for the job.

Steve is less critical of his 'uniform' than Jo and Seb, as it is this which confers upon him the authority he fears will be presumed is lacking if his sexuality is equated with a weaker management style. Further, because the

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suits are not a uniform *per se*, and can be selected from a range, this allows an element of 'individual expression' through choice. For Jo, Seb and Steve, then, the tampering which they do with their uniforms is seen as a battle for queer individuality within a homogenized workplace. For example, Seb says:

> Although I don't think that the clothes I wear are an expression of my sexuality, as my confidence with my sexuality has increased my clothes have become brighter. I don't think my clothes say that I'm bisexual, but they do reflect my confidence in my identity.

This is interesting because, of course, it is not just sexuality which creates 'individuals' in the workplace. One has to look no further than the university to find examples of 'eccentric professors' who create a certain 'individual' style. However, in Seb's case his individuality is clearly tied to his sexual identity; thus, although he has not expressed it categorically, he feels individual within the (presumed) monolithic heterosexuality of his workplace. That this individuality is expressed through the wearing of colours is thus unsurprising given that heteromasculinity's uniform is grey, navy or black (McDowell, 1997).

Furthermore, Jo suggests that dress codes would certainly have an impact on what kind of job she might apply for. She says:

> I could never get a job where I would have to deal with the public. That would mean skirts and frocks and high heeled shoes and I'm not the kind of person that spends hours in front of the mirror in the morning.

Thus, her non-identification with the conventional patterns of femininity, combined with her recognition of the way in which this is exploited in the interactive service encounter, might prevent her from making certain career choices. This is an important point, since her comment is not about a definite choice from the position of sexual identification to work in the pink economy, but rather speaks of the incompatibility between subcultural dress codes and certain kinds of rigidly gendered employment practice.

A slightly different perspective on this issue is suggested by Carl, a gay nurse working in HIV and AIDS information and care, when he says:

> I get up at seven most days to get ready for work. This is what I wear, just the usual shirt and tie jobby [sic]; I prefer white shirts as they look smarter. I'd prefer to be wearing a suit, but I don't actually have the money to buy a decent suit, so I just wear a shirt and tie. I wear this because it's smarter. A lot of gay men doing my sort of work in the community – for example a friend of mine tends to wear Adidas T-shirts and a pair of jeans, and that's what he feels comfortable in, but I don't, I don't feel comfortable in that sort of stuff . . . except on a Friday when I tend to dress down a little bit as it's the start of the weekend.

Not everyone is able to 'power dress' in the way that Steve describes,

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even if this is what they desire. For Carl, the wearing of good suits to work is simply not an option given his access to economic capital. Thus we must not forget that the performance of identity is frequently far from the ideal one we might like to portray, and is often constrained by limited access to disposable income.

The politics of comfort

Clothing used to express identity in leisure time was viewed much more favourably and much less reflexively by respondents. Several of them, when dressing in their 'going out' or 'staying in' clothes, expressed as the primary motivation in their choice of these clothes the ideal of 'comfort' – that they had chosen the clothes that they were wearing because these were the most comfortable. In some cases participants were completely unable to add anything to this motive for buying and wearing these clothes, and here lies the key to the (limited) possibilities of identity performances I hope to explore.

Additionally, there was some attempt to pass over the question of 'labels' of clothing which clearly have social meanings in specific contexts at the time of writing. The clearest example of this is when Jo explains the purchase of an 'original' Adidas tracksuit top. She expresses the motive for this purchase as being about comfort and liking the look of the white stripes down the sleeves, but later in the diary provides a slightly different interpretation:

> I think I look at other clothes that other people wear and if they look nice and comfortable, then I choose to wear them. I mean I saw a woman in [a gay bar] that had an Adidas top on, and it really suited her, it looked really nice . . . so that's probably why I choose to wear Adidas tops . . . Plus she was damn sexy [laughs].

Thus what Jo initially describes as an acquisition for comfort we now discover to be a highly inconvenient purchase (it had to be an original Adidas garment, only available from particular second-hand shops) precipitated by a fleeting flirtation in a highly specific location.

The *social* meaning of such purchases is perhaps reinforced through a quote from Carl. He is about the same age as Jo and also frequents 'trendy' gay bars:

> I wear trainers now, rather than boots. Adidas trainers, very important, because they're quite fashionable at the moment and if you're going to be accepted on the scene, you've got to dress right.

On the scene – in queer social space – fashion enunciates identity, then, but this carries a premium; the fact that 'you've *got to* dress right' reiterates

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the issue of access to capital and credit as crucial determinants of who can wear what, and thus who can *be* what.

The naturalizing discourse of comfort is, in fact, shot through with both political and subcultural resonances. If we trace some of these resonances, we may be able to build up a picture of what comfort means in different contexts. Although there are many possible readings at this level, a brief consideration of two gives us a way into considering how comfort works politically.

In a queer context, then, comfort might be read as embodying *resistance* to the hegemonic discourses of 'proper' feminine behaviour and attire. This discourse reproduces itself on the surface of the self as a return to the *natural* body, which, ironically enough, is displayed by a rejection of unnatural (i.e. culturally produced and enforced) femininity via feminism. For men, however, the rejection of accepted patterns of masculinity may mean subjecting oneself to exactly those technologies of the body from which feminists have struggled to emancipate women:

> I'm shaving my legs [on camera]. Because I get quite long hair on my legs and gay men don't like that. At least I don't anyway. And I don't feel comfortable with it . . . This is an important part, I s'pose, of me and my identity. In that, I don't feel comfortable being me if I've got quite long hair, because I do get quite long hair, all over really, on my arms and legs and chest. I don't know if you can see [pulls up arm hairs to demonstrate]. And the image at the moment is quite young and fit and smooth. So you feel quite out of it if you're not young and fit and smooth. And as I'm not young and fit, the closest I'm going to get is smooth. I cut my hair really, not shave it; if I ever get a body, as in muscles and stuff, I might get my chest waxed. But at the moment I can't see the point in spending all that money, because I don't show my body, and I'm not going to show my body until I feel comfortable with it. That's one of the problems of being gay I suppose. (Carl)

In this quote the dynamic of comfort is quite clearly contradictory, then; whilst Carl does not feel 'comfortable' going out on the scene unless he attends to his body, he is quite clearly uncomfortable about having to do it.

Comfort also signifies the comfort one feels from the degree of fit between the outside of one's body and its inside (not blood, guts or organs, but the 'imagined' or 'true' self) – the way in which identity is mapped onto the body. Comfort means in this case expressing externally that which one feels inside. In other words, there is a wish to close the gap between performance (*acting*) and ontology (*being*), a desire to be self-present to both oneself and others. Comfort in this case derives from being 'recognizably' queer to both oneself and others.

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Performing bodies

In the video diaries a number of respondents talked about a certain 'discomfort' when going out 'on the scene'. This tended to be expressed as a feeling of being watched or stared at; not being 'cruised' but being in some sense 'evaluated'. In fact Jo said that she sometimes felt more comfortable in 'straight' spaces than in queer ones, and Carl talked at length about wanting to wear clothes that he felt unable to on the scene because he did not have the necessary muscular body on which to wear 'skimpy' items of clothing:

> This is what I plan to wear. It's all black which makes me feel comfortable because it slims me down. I feel a bit chubby. Although I quite fancy the blue, which is very clingy and tends to show any lumps and as I've got them I don't think I'll wear that. This is what I want to wear one day. It's my favourite top ever. I've never worn this out yet. It's wonderful. I bought it in the gay part of New York – Greenwich Village. I think that it's really nice, I love this, but I don't actually wear it so far, basically because I don't think I've really got the body for it, so until I feel comfortable wearing that it'll be going back to the wardrobe. But hopefully by the end of this month I'll be able to wear it.

This gaze is not one of desire, then, but rather a disciplinary gaze, a policing of body shapes and styles of dress, which left several of the respondents feeling some kind of inadequacy in what they felt to be 'their own' queer spaces.

The diarists' accounts make clear the power at work within the so-called 'emancipatory' discourses of queer. This does not imply that the discourses of lesbian and gay culture are as destructive as homophobic ones (it is unlikely that one would get beaten up for poor fashion sense), but they are powerful and do constitute disciplinary technologies on the bodies of their subjects. These technologies in turn produce performativities of lesbian and gay identities which locate their performance exactly in the idea of the biological or psychological self. As Lauren Berlant (1997: 17) summarizes:

> [Poststructuralist theorists] . . . have shown how sexuality is the modern form of self-intelligibility: I am my identity; my identity is fundamentally sexual; and my practices reflect that (and if they don't, they require submission to sexual science, self-help, or other kinds of laws).

She also notes that bisexuality has not made it fully into 'the sexual star system' because it is hard to *express* bisexuality. Similarly, Fraser argues that since bisexuality has been largely absent from queer discourse, then bisexuals may not be subject to the same disciplinary technologies of the self as lesbians and gays (Fraser, 1997). However, as one bisexual diarist who was becoming disillusioned with the 'bisexual scene' said:

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> If I meet one more man with a beard, dressed in tie dye, who wants to hug me, I shall be sick.

Clearly, then, regulatory frameworks of dress, gesture, and even facial hair do exist in bisexual networks, implying that there may be much the same disciplinary technologies exerted on the body within bisexuality as elsewhere.

What this subcultural surveillance creates is a situation in which participants in queer culture have no language or concepts with which to express their discomfort at certain times. Instead of affording a recognition of the hierarchical power relations which exist within the culture, and thus a way to verbalize and transgress some of its more regulatory aspects or perhaps even lobby for change, people often resort to dismissing, for example, the 'bitchiness of the scene', or to setting up alternative gay groups such as gay conservatives and non-scene or anti-scene groups, a manoeuvre which individualizes sexual subjects and divides queer community.

Social identities, individual selves?

This brings me to another point about the empirical material presented here – that the link between the comfort of the outside of the body with the 'naturalness' of the inside ('self') prioritizes the individual over the social. Individuality is stressed in opposition to the uniform of work, but also in relation to the 'uniform of queer'. The misrecognition of oneself as an individual in opposition to uniform, fashion and subculture, denies the place of social interaction in the construction of identity positions. In Jo's case, for example, her choice of tracksuit top comes from a kind of queer aesthetic with which she identifies. Thus the desired object produces her physical and aesthetic comfort since it reflects her identity, and also allows her to 'express' it.

The scene may be 'uncomfortable' for certain people at certain times, but it is not only here that the social operates. For many people, most discussion about their sexuality takes place in the 'comfort' of the home, rather than in the frenetic atmosphere of 'the scene'. At rest, as opposed to at play, performativities may be less intense – or at least deflected from the body onto the home itself. All of the lesbians, bisexuals and gay men in the diaries used signifiers of identity in their interior decor; for example, Jo uses posters of lesbian icons such as kd lang and Jodie Foster, and a naked woman with a large whip, as well as lesbian safer sex posters produced by the Terrence Higgins Trust. Carl says that his Patsy Cline, Bananarama, Madonna, Janet Jackson and Eurovision CDs are indicative of his sexuality. Seb's house includes a cross-dressed mannequin as a central feature of his decor. Even Steve, who lives with his parents, has a tacit understanding with them that

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his bedroom is a private space which his father should not enter. His walls are adorned with posters of River Phoenix, Madonna and other gay icons, along with photographs of his boyfriend.

This is not to say that in the home the queer subject returns to a private 'backstage' self, or indeed to a place of privacy and security. Carl, for instance, found it necessary to turn up his music whilst talking on the video diary about non-monogamy in case he was overheard by his partner or his partner's friends. Similarly, as Johnston and Valentine (1995) show, lesbians living in the family home may be at best encouraged to perform heterosexuality, at worst may be physically harmed by family members for failing to do so. Furthermore, the lesbian home may come under the pressure of surveillance by neighbours (who may overhear through badly soundproofed walls or overlook from the garden fence or window) and visiting family members, for which 'de-dyking' strategies may be required – removing signifiers (and signifieds) from the home in preparation for such visits. The over-protected home risks the insularization of the lesbian relationship, creating additional pressures and feelings of confinement and social exclusion, and possibly domestic violence. Turning the home into a largely social space where visitors are frequent can also have its disadvantages, reinstating the pressures of lesbian performance through surveillance from other lesbians. As Johnston and Valentine state:

> 'Political correctness', which has come to haunt the lesbian feminist landscape, or other 'othodoxies', can be invoked by some women to regulate the performative aspects of others' lesbian identities within the domestic environment. (1995: 109)

However, in most cases for the diarists home was the place which they *experienced* as most comfortable, where they could 'slob out', wear comfortable clothes (not neutral clothes in terms of their identities, but perhaps less communicative ones). In one's home one most often has at least some control over who enters, who one spends time with, and how one's home is organized. Also, issues of sexual identity are here criss-crossed by the day-to-day things with which all householders must deal – paying bills, cooking and eating, and in some cases the care of children. Especially for middle-class respondents, there was some effort to find homes close to other lesbian, bisexual or gay households. In one case, some friends – a lesbian couple and a gay man – had moved in next door to one another. Also, for a lesbian respondent with children, living in a catchment area for a school that employed equal opportunities policies for the children of lesbian parents was an important factor in the choice of the location of her home. The choice of house, its interior decor, the way in which queer identities are expressed within the home, then, are not individualized, private decisions but rather highly social ones.

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It is in the interplay of different discourses and social spaces, including the home, that people come to negotiate and formulate 'comfortable' identities. These comfortable identities might be equated with Foucault's ideas on the care of the self. *The Care of the Self* (Foucault, 1986) offers an ethics which guides the subject in different spatial spheres or contexts. This work is done in the interplay of the 'soul' (that part of the self which lies beyond discourse, which one might access through private contemplation), the social, and the political. It is perhaps this process which occurs in Seb's earlier statement – that wearing bright colours as he becomes more confident with his sexuality marks his 'individuality' in his workplace. Through political discourses on sexuality Seb recognizes himself as an 'individual' in a workplace which he sees as hegemonically heterosexual. This in turn creates an ethics of the self which produces a bodily critique of that hegemonic norm. Bright clothes, as one aspect of his performative identity, help display his sexuality to those in the know, but are also a political statement and critique of the rigid dress codes enforced by heteronormativity. The body is politicized in line with the social and political soul. Thus, though Seb clearly has the possibility of acknowledging his sexuality, whilst simultaneously conforming to conventional dress codes at work, he negotiates these oppositional discourses, creating an ethics of the self which aligns his body with his soul – ensuring that, rather than performing separate identities in different spaces, there is in fact a high degree of continuity of identity in moving between them.

Similarly, Jo clearly believes that she performs her lesbian identity at work without having to 'come out' in the political sense. Both Jo and Seb stress that they do nothing to hide their sexualities at work. For example, in the video diary the camera pans around Jo's workspace, focusing on two photographs of partially clad or naked 1920s style women pinned up on the wall next to her desk. She explains:

> Even with pictures like that on the wall, people still have no idea. You can be almost blatant and people still don't know. I never talk about men. I never talk about boyfriends. Whatever I do, that seems to be OK. Although I haven't told anybody here, there seems to be almost an understanding that I am [a lesbian]. I think they know, but nothing is ever said. But then again, sometimes they say some really homophobic things and I think they couldn't possibly know. But sometimes I say things to people here and I think I'm really surprised I get away with it. Sometimes it's really filthy, and I keep doing it. And I think sometime or other they're bound to get an idea, but they just don't.

In this way responsibility for being 'out' is shifted from herself (the author of her bodily text) to her colleagues (her readers). If they cannot recognize the signs of her identity then her failure to be out is in effect their fault, a product of their stupidity rather than her own lack of courage (as some more rigid political discourses might suggest).

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The body as text

Identity is spread over the surface of the body, the outward text of the inner ethics of the self. As Elizabeth Grosz (1995: 20) explains, drawing on Derrida's notion of the signature:

> the paradoxical and divided position of the subject in and beyond the text, involves the necessary and irreducible trace of the one within the other, the implication of the text's outside with its inside, and of its inside with establishing its borders and thus the outside, in short, its fundamentally folded, 'invaginated' character.

Thus, the inscription on the body of the text of a subject's identity is an individual inscription which also at once signs the subject as a product of other texts. In this sense, then, the queer body is the signature of queer textuality. It is not static or constant, but is shifting, like the signature, never manifesting itself twice in identical ways, yet at the same time carrying the mark of both its author and the texts which produce it. Card's (1985) outline of Aristotle's notion of 'family resemblance' is useful here. The term resemblance can be applied to anything which is called by the same name but does not 'possess any one characteristic in common' (p. 213).

Elspeth Probyn sees this 'family resemblance' as an ensemble of images which are written on the body, drawing on the Deleuzean notion of productive desire:

> The similarity of bodies, is a matter not of similar origins but rather is compelled by a similarity of desire to arrange one's body, to queer oneself through movement. As I see the configuration of my body as image on her body, I also can feel the configuration of hers on mine. However, this is not a constant or immediate fact; it has to be made, to be configured through the desire to conjoin images. (Probyn, 1995: 15)

This configuration is not total, however. Not all lesbians desire all lesbians (or look like all lesbians), rather it is the social configuration in conjunction with the individual signature mapped onto the body, or parts of the body, which marks out individual desires; something in the interplay, as Probyn puts it, between bodies and representations. Thus, queer identities are constructed 'family resemblances', mapped onto the body in different ways. They might be more or less subtle; they are mediated by the physicality of bodies, by the interplay of other identities and by the appropriateness of dress codes for particular spaces.

However, this is only part of the story – a story is created not only by writers, but also by readers. A given bodily text can convey its intended meaning only if its readers read it in the way the author requires. 'Family resemblances' can only be spotted by those who 'know' the 'family', and

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therefore there are infinite possibilities for the queer body to be misread. A short anecdote from one diarist illustrates this point exactly. He was at college, arriving late one day:

> I walked in and this bunch of girls were going 'Martin's gay, Martin's gay' – Martin is this straight guy in our class. And Martin says, 'Yes, and for all you know Steve [the respondent] could be my lover'. And the girls said, 'Oh, don't be stupid, we *know* Steve isn't gay, you're the one who's gay because you're obsessed with your appearance, always looking in the mirror'. So I said '*Au contraire!*', and gave them my big 'I am gay' speech, because I've worked hard for this reputation and I'm not about to lose it. And they said 'Oh Steve, you're so funny, you're such a wit and a wag, I've told my parents all about you!' . . . They wouldn't believe me!

This causes Steve amusement, but also dismay. There is an extreme discomfort in being read against one's signature (his reputation which he has worked hard for). The misreading of cultural codes by his straight audience invokes a reaction where Steve attempts to re-fix the meaning of his bodily text, supplementing it with the intertextuality of gay political and subcultural discourses. When this too is misread, the discomfort of the lack of homology between his self and his body leaves Steve bemused.

Discomfort in this case, then, derives from the momentary dislocation of an essentialist narrative: if I am gay, then I am comfortable dressing gay, and therefore others will recognize that I am gay. Comfort follows from being a writerly rather than readerly text, although what is written may be highly context-specific. The disruption of this 'natural' flow of essentialistic discourse leads to a hyperperformativity of sexuality, the 'I am gay' speech – the momentary power of the confessional which is subsequently reinterpreted or ignored.

Conclusion

Different spaces afford subjects more or less critical distance from the performances of identity in which they engage. As suggested earlier, for example, work spaces may provide a vantage point from which to examine the disciplinary technologies of the self employed there. However, rejection of hegemonic discourses may be expressed as individuality, rather than the 'other' social in which one is implicated. Subjects are likely to be less critical of such technologies which operate on the 'scene', reducing ontological contradictions and negative experiences of regulatory regimens to individual faults such as 'bitchiness'. The space diarists are least critical of is the home, the perceived safe haven in which one can truly be 'oneself'.

Comfort for the diarists is ultimately produced in the harmony of self-explanations and self-presentations – the degree of fit between one's *explanation* of/for oneself and one's *expression* of that self – matching the inside

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and outside of one's body; becoming a writerly text. Where some disjuncture appears between these discourses, discomfort is produced. Not having enough resemblance to one's 'family', for instance, is often disconcerting. Prevailing cultural and political discourses only offer such harmonies through fixity and conformity, in the Foucauldian sense 'knowing thyself' – the alignment of the self with situated discourses (even if these are subcultural rather than hegemonic). This fixity or definition, as Butler points out, is always at the expense of an included but 'haunted' subjectivity (by the ghost of the excluded 'other' or 'otherness').

Richard Sennett, in his book *Flesh and Stone* (1994), shows how comfort has become linked with individualism. The development of comfortable chairs, carriages and trains in the 19th century, Sennett argues, effectively erased the everyday sociability of public space. Tables placed outside cafes in 19th century Paris 'deprived political groups of their cover; the tables served customers watching the passing scene, rather than conspiring with one another [for political reform]' (p. 345). These outside customers ceased to become social actors or political conspirators, becoming instead passive voyeurs or flâneurs.

> On the terrace, the denizens of the cafe sat silently watching the crowd go by – they sat as individuals, each lost in his or her own thoughts . . . the people on the street now appearing as scenery, as spectacle. (p. 346)

Sennett's argument at this point has much in common with criticism of new queer cultures, especially his discussion of cafes, which chimes with writings on queer spaces of consumption. The argument here is that the tables which spill onto the street prompt either a voyeuristic reaction from passing straights to which passive queers are subject, or greater social acceptability through a loss of political dynamism produced through a toning down of queer behaviour in order to be palatable to this voyeuristic public consumption (see Binnie, 1995).

In order to move away from these over-simplistic accounts I would like to employ Freud's (1914) concept of narcissism, and especially the narcissistic gaze. Unlike popular notions of narcissism (defined as self-love), Freud's position is not about desire for one's own reflection but for what the self would like to be: an idealized self. In another manoeuvre, one does not simply have desire for an object, the idealized self, but also an identification *with* the object – a desire to be it and to be desired by it. Thus, narcissistic desire is both desire *for* and desire *to be* one's idealized self (Lewis and Rolley, 1997; Probyn, 1995). If one maps this framework onto the social, then, queer subjects both desire the objects of their gaze (others whom one identifies with an idealized version of oneself) and want to be their desired object, to be objectified by them. This scenario explains how shared cultural codes, of dress and adornment in particular, circulate in

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queer subcultures. That is not to say that all lesbians desire all lesbians (Probyn, 1995), but that specific items of clothing and jewellery, or haircuts or body modifications come to have currency in specific queer subcultures. It explains very neatly Jo's motivation for the purchase of her Adidas top.

Finally, an important point to note here is that dressing up to go out on the scene is not simply a process of identifying oneself as a passive sexual object, but rather a double movement of having and being, creating an idealized self in the gaze of the other (object of one's desire). This explains one of the most fundamental and pleasurable *activities* of the scene: to look and be looked at (Bech, 1997). As Lewis and Rolley conclude (in relation to fashion magazines – but I feel the argument holds in this context):

> The importance of dress as a signifier of sexual identity, and of looking as a social, identifying and *sexualized* activity . . . coalesce to provide a supplementary pleasure in the activity of consuming [queer culture]. . . . '[L]ooking like what you are' in terms of self-presentation is crucial for a recognisable [queer] identity and structurally central to the theorisation of marginal identities. (p. 299)

The comfort of identity is thus far from an individual or individualizing state within queer culture. Rather it is always social, though it may sometimes be produced through the rhetoric of individualism.

There is a second part to Sennett's argument, however. He implies that comfort provides a kind of social detachment, a kind of separation from real connections with others. Being comfortable – as in comfortably off – implies a lack of necessity to worry about the world or one's position in it. Comfort is an easy, unthinking state. Perhaps, then, comfort means social and personal atrophy. The comfort gained through many uncomfortable years of political struggle, the comfort of a revamped scene, the comfort of a more liberal state and some protection from discrimination in the workplace have all produced a more comfortable (lesbian and gay) identity and politics. But perhaps comfort is to be feared since it is discomfort, displacement, disruption which moves (queer) politics (and selves) forward into a more complex and less exclusive or complacent place. As Sennett (summarizing E. M. Forster) states:

> Displacement thus becomes something quite different . . . from sheer movement . . . Human displacements ought to jolt people into caring about one another, and where they are. (p. 353)

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Note

1. The names of the diarists have been changed for this article.

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