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Vanishing Act: Non-straight Identity Narratives of Women in Relationships with Women and Men

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Abstract This research examines how women who experience a change to a partner of a different gender make sense of this shift both to themselves and to others. Specifically, the study draws on 32 interviews conducted with self-identified lesbian, bisexual and queer women who have moved from relationships with female partners to relationships with male partners. None of the women interviewed sought to identify themselves as straight or heterosexual. Many, instead, tried to negotiate non-straight identities. We conclude that women, in doing their non-straight identities, mainly rely upon a strategy of narrative, including narratives of attraction, choice of men and challenging homophobia.

Keywords Sexuality · Narratives · Identity

Introduction

> [...] it was really hard for me to feel like if I started dating men again, then in a way, I become invisible because as a lesbian in a way I'm automatically in people's faces because they see me holding hands with another woman or kissing another woman. When I'm dating a man ...[t]hey're reading me as straight. And so I vanish.
>
> *Heather, 41, White*

Heather has identified as lesbian for most of her adult life and has consistently dated women. For the past year, however, she has been in a serious relationship with a man. Currently, she identifies as neither heterosexual, nor lesbian, nor anything else she can easily name. Heather's decision to both abandon her lesbian identity and reject a heterosexual alternative can in many ways be understood as the postmodern struggle for self-definition. Despite being a self-identified woman in a relationship with a self-identified man, Heather finds enough fluidity in her current understanding of sexuality to negotiate an

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identity that is grounded in neither her, nor her male partner's, body. That is, her quest is for a (sexual) identity that is not defined by the mere "hetero-pairing" of the bodies involved; in fact, she actively resists the assumptions of heterosexuality that her current relationship triggers.

Although theorists differ in their assessment of the unbounded and fragmented nature of identity in the contemporary world—some celebrate its unshackling (Gergen 1995; Queen and Schimel 1997), others worry about the loss of meaning that accompanies it (Baudrillard 1995; Lyotard 1984)—they generally agree that the changing nature of identity is rooted in the larger social transformations that mark the transition from modernity to postmodernity, or late modernity; this transition heralds an unprecedented increase in mobility, the destabilization and fragmentation of the social institutions that previously helped stabilize identity, and more fleeting encounters and temporary relationships (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Bauman 1996). The consequences of such changes for identity are that individuals are no longer bound by the modern institutions of family, community, and work and, hence, are free to, or required to, define who they are without reference to such external guideposts (Bauman 2009). Seen in this light, Heather's refusal to let neither her relationship choices define who she is nor her identity define her relationship choices expresses a rejection of the demands placed on identity by potentially stabilizing external forces.

And yet, the discomfort expressed by Heather about what she has lost—visibility—as well as her struggles to name herself anew, signal a desire for a more stable and coherent identity than anticipated by either herself or postmodern identity theory. That is, even though Heather feels free to traverse the identity landscape in ways that defy solidity and permanence, her choices still do not amount to an avoidance of fixation in all respects (Kempny 2002). This observation points to an unresolved dilemma in postmodern identity theory concerning the relationship between stability and change (Lifton 1995). Not only are some aspects of identity more impervious to change than others (e.g., the language we speak, the bodies we are born with, the skills we acquire) but the very ability to change—to try on new identities, or stretch the boundaries of old identities—is in many ways linked to the availability of relatively stable and meaningful identities to embrace, reject, trouble or evade. Moreover, in so far as some identities are stickier than others (O'Brien 2002)—exerting a greater force on us, such as collective identities like gender and sexuality—it follows that transformations implicating such identities are likely to be more challenging, and require more investment, than those implicating less weighty aspects of the self. If this is the case, and if gender and sexuality are among the stickiest of identities, as many scholars suggest (Simon 1996), then Heather's struggle to maintain her sense of visibility, which in her mind is contingent upon a rejection of heterosexuality, illustrates an identity struggle that simultaneously depends on and pushes the boundaries of relatively stable identity categories. From a theoretical perspective, then, Heather's experiences with identity lead in two different directions. Both the shedding of her lesbian identity and the refusal to adopt a heterosexual identity point to the fluid nature of contemporary identity, but the fact that Heather remains non-straight despite the partial vanishing she experiences, captures stability in the midst of change.

Exactly how these elements of change and stability are to be understood requires an empirical investigation. That is, despite significant theoretical advances of these past 20 years, relatively few empirical studies have been undertaken to examine how individuals make sense of who they are in the postmodern world. Our work attempts to serve as such a case. Focusing on the experiences of women who previously identified as lesbian, bisexual or queer, but who are now partnered with men, we show that the women do indeed feel free

to embody their identities in ways that at least partly align with the idea that "anything goes." However, they also vacillate between the freedoms afforded to them by post-modernity and the barriers imposed by the very institutions and communities that some postmodern theorists argue have lost their capacity to bind, resulting in limited access to certain identity categories for the women.

The Modern Self in the Postmodern World

Identity in the postmodern world, according to recent theorists, involves "the deconstruction, and reconstruction of the self as fluid, fragmented, discontinuous, decentered, dispersed, culturally eclectic, [and] hybrid-like" (Elliott and du Gay 2009, xii). In a world that no longer binds us as effectively as before to either institutions or locales, we are inundated by sources of identification, and hence experience self-multiplication, or the capacity to be present in many places at once (Gergen 2000). This results in a saturation of the self which makes long-term identity commitments not only less desirable but also near impossible to sustain (Bauman 2009). As Denzin argues, because the self draws on social sources for identity formation and those sources are multiple in postmodern times, the self has lost its connection to the social structure (Denzin 1991). Two consequences follow for our understanding of identity: First, the traditional notion of a stable self (self as object) has been replaced with a fluid self (self as process) (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Gergen 2000; Hall 1996); second, the unleashing of identity from the social structure has produced an identity map where "anything goes" and where the traditional sources of verification have melted away, leaving individuals free to represent themselves in any way they please (Gergen 2000; Denzin 1991). Such a conception, taken to its extreme, suggests that identity "is analogous to a fashion item….that can be picked up and jettisoned or changed, unhindered and in the blink of an eye" (Layder 2007, 5) (Table 1).

The postmodern self, then, is a Protean self, constituted by "an interminable series of experiments and explorations, some shallow, some profound, each of which can readily be abandoned in favor of still new, psychological quests" (Lifton 1995, 131). It is important to note, though, that despite many outward similarities the "Protean Man" of the postmodern world is not like the "Confidence Man" (Halttunen 1982) of the modern world. Whereas the nineteenth century con man knew he was play-acting and deliberately concealed who he really was, the Protean self, as envisioned by Erik Erikson, is equally true and authentic in all its iterations, making it a self perpetually stuck in the experimental phase of the teenager (Erikson 1968; Schafter 2005). In other words, the increasingly uncertain and fragmented world can neither hold us still long enough for a stable self to develop, nor provide the kind of verification that would allow those around us—and even ourselves—to reject our identity claims as inauthentic, or as confidence games.

Other theorists, while agreeing that the sources of identity have changed, are less convinced that the social world has lost its capacity to bind us. "Identity is constructed," Lamont argues, but still "bounded by the cultural repertoires to which people have access and the structural context in which they live" (Lamont 2001, 171). The stories people tell, about who they are and how they got to where they are, are constructed within the confines of available cultural scenarios, or scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973; Simon and Gagnon 2000). Individuals dive into the cultural repertoire of scripts, or the cultural tool-kit, to pull out stories that can account for, and make sense of, their experiences (Swidler 2001). Even though the components of an available script may not fully correspond with how a person would like the account to be constructed, elements of the available script may be used to

Table 1 Research participants

Alias	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Sexual ID, past	Sexual ID, now
Meg	30	White	JD	Lesbian	Queer
Jenny	29	Iranian	MD	Lesbian	Straight
Pam	38	Black	BA	Lesbian	Straight
Karen	29	White	Associates	Lesbian	Married
Jill	31	White	PhD candidate	Bisexual	Lesbian
Chloe	27	Other	BA	Lesbian	Queer/Lesbian
Anne	28	Caucasian	MA	Bisexual	Bisexual
Ayana	28	Puerto Rican/Cuban	BA	Bisexual	Queer
Riley	24	White	BA	Queer	Queer
Sue	39	Caucasian	BA	Bisexual	Bisexual
Ari	27	White/Jewish	BA	Queer	Queer
Heather	41	White	MA/JD	Lesbian	Bi/Queer
Beth	30	White	MA	Dyke	Dyke
Pennie	23	Caucasian	BA	Bisexual	Bisexual
Alia	25	Caucasian	Associates	Bisexual	Bisexual
Holly	23	Caucasian	working on BA	Bisexual	Bisexual
Hope	22	White	working on BA	Bi/queer	Queer
Mabel	23	White	working on BA	Lesbian	Queer
Claire	43	Black	High school	Lesbian	Bisexual
Skyler	25	Chinese	MA	Lesbian	Nothing/Queer
Margaret	39	“Mixed”	MA	Bisexual	BiSexual/Queer
Juliana	24	“Mixed”	working on BA	Bisexual	Fluid
Madeline	33	White	PhD candidate	Lesbian	Queer
Nala	22	Greek-American	working on BA	Bisexual	straight
Kara	20	Arab-American	working on BA	no-label	no-label
Tina	38	White	PhD	Lesbian	Pan-Sexual
Abigail	30	White	MA	Bisexual	Bisexual
Amy	36	White	PhD Student	Bisexual	Bisexual
Emily	32	White	MA	Lesbian	Queer
Nadia	37	White	BA	Lesbian	Bisexual
Celia	33	Caucasian	PhD student	Lesbian	Bisexual
Jennifer	39	White	PhD	Lesbian	Bisexual

tell the story nevertheless. Thus individual narrators are what Claude Levi-Strauss calls “bricoleurs;” that is, they use components of the available scripts for as long as they serve the purpose of telling a particular story before discarding them and picking up other scripts (Levi-Strauss 1966). The difference between Levi-Strauss' bricolage' and Gergen's “anything goes,” is that the bricoleur depends on the availability of pre-existing scripts. That is, narrative identity scripts need to be available in order to be used and discarded, and what makes scripts available is precisely a socio-cultural environment that is stable enough to generate meaningful scripts. From this perspective, then, identities are neither firmly lodged in social positions nor completely boundless. Rather, they are narratively constituted (Ezzy 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Jamison 1998), and as such are subject to

verification, not ultimately in terms of veracity but in terms of persuasion—how well the story is told (Garro and Mattingly 2000). This means that what the narrator, the "I" of the story, accounts for is not a single true self, but the "routes" it has taken (Hall 1996). In this sense, it is the story itself that produces the gel that binds identity, even as the story is assembled with the help of tools provided by the social environment.

When it comes to theories dealing more specifically with gender and sexual identities, the tensions between the weightlessness of postmodern identity constructions and the tugs on identity generated by modern social institutions are clearly evident. Here, even the most celebratory expressions of postmodern notions of gender and sexuality—captured nicely by the term PoMoSexuals (Queen and Schimel 1997)—clearly demonstrate the uphill battle that some identity pursuits require. In other words, as long as gender remains a social institution (Martin 2004) and as long as heteronormativity "shapes the production of identities, relationships, cultural expressions, and institutional practices" (Ward and Schneider 2009), the forging of identities that traverse the stubbornly persistent categories of gender and sexuality are particularly challenging. This is so in large part because identities like gender and sexuality are *collective* identities which, in comparison with individual identities, are more "rigid, fixed, and stable" (Kempny 2002, 7).

Plummer (2003) argues that postmodernism applied to sexuality is queer theory, which at its core holds that identity is not derived from the body. This, however, does not mean that preexisting categories of gender and sexuality, as Butler (1990) has shown, no longer need to be reckoned with. That is, while notions of gender as performative accomplishment (Butler 1988) or as something we "do" rather than "have" (West and Zimmerman 1987) are far more open-ended and filled with possibilities than the essentialist notions they replaced, neither correspond with the "anything goes" of postmodern theory. On the contrary, both notions are founded in a conceptualization of the larger social context in which individuals perform and do their identities that is much less forgiving, and much more present, than the fluid and discontinuous social landscape observed by postmodern theorists. But here the postmodern sensibilities that queer theory has brought to the study of gender and sexuality are less immediately helpful. As Stein and Plummer argued some time ago, it is not enough to theorize about identity, we also "need to look at how identities are constituted in the cultural practices of everyday life" (Stein and Plummer 1994). This is precisely what this study is all about. The women who are the subjects in this study exercise a decidedly postmodern sense of freedom when they refuse to identify as heterosexual, despite being female and being partnered with men. But they also demonstrate the ongoing work involved in combating assumptions of heterosexuality. Everywhere they go, they are assumed to be heterosexual; no matter how much of a queer turn they take, their bodies, and those of their partners, still weigh them down. How, then, do the women resist the imputation of heterosexuality and where do they find alternate sources of identification? The strategies the women use clearly show how they balance a desire to be free of modern identity assumptions—that a relationship between a female bodied person and a male-bodied person always adds up to heterosexuality—with a longing to be connected to those same modern institutions that may limit their identity claims. Of particular interest is the fact that the strategies the women use to combat heterosexuality are not all aimed at external audiences. That is, in some instances, the women's claims to a non-straight identity are directed at themselves or, rather, to the story they tell about themselves.

Our work suggests that the impact of postmodernism on identity needs to be couched in the experiences of real individuals. In this way, we connect with Plummer (2003), and empirically show that postmodernism as it relates to sexual identity does not amount to an "anything goes" identity strategy. Not only are individuals limited in the claims that they

can make because of the identity resources available to them, but they also place limits on themselves in order to maintain a sense of connection to modern institutions and, thereby, to make their self-stories intelligible.

Finding Those Who are Gone

This study draws on narratives of 32 women who at one time in their lives were in partnerships with women and at the time of the interview were in partnerships with men (Table 1). Recruiting participants for the study was uniquely challenging since the labels women use to define themselves are part of the matter under investigation. Hence, we had to find a way of defining the criteria for inclusion clearly enough so as to gain access to the population we were interested in but without basing those selection criteria in particular identity outcomes. That is, we could not simply ask for the participation of "lesbians" or "bisexuals." We also could not limit the language too much since we did not want to make assumptions about what language would actually be specific enough to invite the people we were interested in (Rothblum 2000). We settled on a rather broad invite, focusing on relationships. Using several different strategies, including snow-ball sampling originating in personal networks, postings on the websites of various organizations (including lesbian and bisexual organizations), and calls for volunteers posted on various online social networking sites and woman-centered listserves,[1] we asked for the participation of women who were once involved with other women and are now involved with men. This way, we remained open to any number of identity possibilities (lesbian, bisexual, queer, straight, or something else) both prior to and following their involvement with men. As Table 1 shows, there is indeed great variety in the women's identity choices, both before and after their involvement with men. These identity choices, as we discuss below, should not be taken as set in stone; that is, the women express quite a bit of ambivalence in naming themselves. And yet, it is noteworthy that so many of them determined that their involvement with men required some sort of identity reevaluation.

Taking seriously the observation that individuals have a desire to construct non-random life stories (Gergen and Gergen 1997), we used a grounded theory approach to analyze the interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In so doing we paid particular attention to how the women accounted for events that seemed to conflict with previous choices or events that required them to redefine their identity. To use Goffman's (1974) words, by uncovering the "frames" that the women use in telling their stories, that is, by paying attention to the ways in which they construct their stories, we become aware of how they organize their reality. We begin to understand who they believe themselves to be and how they make sense of the change to a partner of a different gender.

At a glance, it may seem that identifying as bisexual is the most attractive identity outcome for women in this study, because it is readily available. Out of the 32 women interviewed, 13 identified as bisexual after their involvement with men. And yet, stating that nearly a third of the women are now bisexual would be misleading. Although many women responded "bisexual" to the question about their current sexual identity, it soon became clear that the label is in many cases not adequate. Nevertheless, bisexuality is a

[1] In addition to the narrative strategies, a few women also used their bodies to showcase a non-straight identity, by manipulating their dress and hairstyles to echo those socially read as lesbian. We address this aspect of the identity negotiation in another manuscript.

significant concept in the identity negotiations of these women. As the women engage with the bisexual label, common stereotypes emerge as part of the baggage that they have to come to terms with (Christina 1997), including Switch-hitters, Swing both ways, Fence-sitters, AC/DC, etc. (Esterberg 1997). As Esterberg states, individuals can resist identification, but others will identify them regardless (1997, 171). The risk of being read as bisexual forces these women to contend with the perceptions of bisexuality even if they fail to identify as such. Nonetheless, individuals need a way to anchor themselves in the sexuality discourse. In order to speak, one needs a space from which to speak. Bisexuality works as a temporary place marker for some of the women, but not for most.

Although none of the women specifically chose the label "non-straight" to identify themselves we have nevertheless chosen to designate the women's identity struggles as efforts to achieve a non-straight identity. This is because all women, regardless of the particular identity they have chosen (if any), not only expressed frustration with available identity categories but also overtly rejected "straight" as their identity. Therefore we conclude that not being read as "straight" was a more important goal to the women than finding a pre-existing label or identity category that felt right. Hence, we utilize the term non-straight identity.

How to Construct a Non-Straight Identity

It is through the stories the women tell about who they are that they situate and (re) construct their identities. In this sense, the story itself is part of their identity work; that is, their identities are constituted in the narratives they construct and, as such, are productively viewed as narrative accomplishments (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). This does not mean, however, that all stories are equally persuasive, including to the narrator herself. Of particular significance here is that none of the women who had previously identified as lesbian chose to retain their lesbian identity. Far from signaling a rejection of their previous lives, the decision to abandon their lesbian identity was filled with regret and ambivalence (Raymond 1997). In fact, it was precisely their loyalty and attachment to the lesbian community that, in their view, made it necessary for them to forgo their lesbian identity (Tabatabai 2010).

If we truly lived in a world where "anything goes" there would be no need for the women in this study to reevaluate their identity after the switch to a male partner. That all the women did engage in such reevaluations, albeit in different ways and with different outcomes, speaks to the persistent influence of external identity pressures on the construction of self-narratives (Davis 2000). In this case, what loomed especially large was the pervasive assumption of heterosexuality that all women had encountered once they partnered with men and, in all but two cases (the two women who had adopted a straight identity), had been troubled by. According to the women, most people assume that they are straight. In fact, most people think most other people are straight. As one of the respondents observed, "There is the default of heterosexuality" (Chloe, 27, "Other"). The assumption of heterosexuality is so pervasive that, as Claire states, no one actually needs to verbalize it, "'cause nobody comes up to say 'hey, you're straight'" (Claire, 43, Black). It goes without saying, so to speak.

That the women are read as straight is not a product of what they are doing. In fact, none of the women reported that they had made any fundamental changes in their self-presentation to go along with the partner change. And this, fundamentally, is at the root of their identity distress. The strategies that in the past had facilitated their passing as non-

straight were wholly ineffective once they were partnered with men. Thus, their experiences are tied directly to the notion of heteronormativity, the fact that everyone is read as straight, unless they have managed to mark themselves as otherwise (Menasche 1999; Rich 1980; Rowe 2005; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Wittig 1992). Being straight in a sense is being "nothing." Having a "sexuality" means being gay or lesbian, and in some cases, bisexual or queer. Judith Butler highlights a similar dynamics with regards to gender. According to Butler (1990), having a gender, or being gendered, implies being female even though men too obviously have a gender. Lesbian and female are "marked," and straight and male are, in that sense, unmarked. What the women in this study have to contend with, then, is the shift from being marked to unmarked. If they do nothing, the compulsive nature of heterosexuality ensures that they "pass" as heterosexual. Hence, in order to come across as non-straight, the women have to make a concerted effort. They have to construct narratives that challenge the assumption of heterosexuality. In this way, the women's identity narratives are by nature counter-narratives; that is, they are positioned in opposition to the assumption of heterosexuality. Their primary identity goal, accordingly, is to *not* be read as heterosexual. It is for this reason that so many of them are unsettled about which particular non-straight identity fit them the best (e.g., bisexual, queer, pansexual).

In what follows we describe the three main strategies used by the women to simultaneously combat the assumption of heterosexuality and lay claims on a non-straight identity. The first strategy, *attraction*, is used by the women to account for the change in the gender of their intimate partners. As a strategy it facilitates the women's efforts to construct a coherent self narrative, a non-random story (Gergen and Gergen 1997), in which the potential disruption in the switch to a partner of a different gender is contained by their insistence that "attraction" has always been the basis for their partner choices. Moreover, in emphasizing their continued attraction to women, they distance themselves from straight women. A second strategy involves *queering the men* they are with, which serves the dual purpose of protecting the authenticity of their previous involvement with women and confirming their non-straight identities. Finally, in *challenging homophobia* the women take a public stance against discrimination and intolerance. Although this strategy may not look like a claim to a non-straight identity—after all, straight people too speak out against homophobia—it is clear from the women's accounts that they themselves think it is different to speak out, as they do, on the basis of their own experiences of intolerance. Taken together, the analysis of these three strategies shows the tension between the women's efforts to simultaneously disentangle themselves from external identity expectations and carving out a non-straight identity that is weighted by authenticity but no longer reinforced and sustained through their involvement in the lesbian community.

Attraction: *I Don't Just Like You, I* Like *Like You*

The notion of attraction as the basis on which to build romantic partnerships has deep roots in modernity, and is also a central component of heteronormativity (Wolkomir 2009). The pervasiveness of attraction as a cultural script to account for partner choices is also evident in research on lesbians, in that attraction to other women is the first step on the path to identifying as lesbian or bisexual (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000). In this sense, attraction emerges as a central building block of an entire identity project, at the same time as it provides an explanation for specific partner choices. It is for this reason that the notion of attraction—to both men and women—plays an important role in the women's identity narratives.

For heterosexuals, the need to account for the gender of their romantic interests is entirely subsumed under the assumption of heterosexuality—that is, no account is necessary—but for the women in this study it is precisely the gender of their partners that needs warranting. We return to this issue in the section about the queering of their male partners, but here it important to simply point out that attraction is the dominant—in fact, the only—explanation the women offer for their involvement with men. Not surprisingly, given their previous identities, the attraction to men is generally presented as unexpected but also, at least in relation to the particular men they partner with, as too strong to control. And yet, while the women experience the shift to a partner of a different gender as a drastic and monumental change, the use of attraction as the foundation for the shift allows them to nonetheless weave a narrative that repairs the disruption. They do so in two ways: First, by invoking attraction (*to* women, and *not* to men) as the root of their prior non-straight lives and, second, by emphasizing that they still feel attraction to women. It is this second way that emerges as a distinct strategy used by the women to claim a non-straight identity.

Attraction to women, they are convinced, sets them apart from straight women. Asked what makes her different from a straight woman, Abigail invokes the “little crushes” she still gets on women.

> I mean, my experience for one thing. I guess that’s a major thing for me and not just like the fact that I had those experiences but I guess of how they changed me, like I still get little crushes on women. I guess that’s probably different than a straight woman. (Abigail, 30, White)

In order to establish her claim on a non-straight identity, Abigail does not rely on something that has only happened in the past, that is, she does not rest her claim on her previous partnerships with women. Instead, she rests it on her current and ongoing attraction to women, as do most of the women, including Ayana and Mabel, who are quoted below.

> If I still see a beautiful woman, like I still get mesmerized, you know. The imagery, the erotic imagery still turns me on, when it’s women. (Ayana, 28, Puerto Rican)

> Because I’m still attracted to girls. Like a girl will still walk by and I will still think she’s cute or sexy or attractive or whatever, so I guess that’s why. (Mabel, 23, White)

In other words, it is evident that their persistent attraction to other women plays an important role in their thinking of themselves as non-straight. This is how Amy describes it:

> I’m still attracted to women. And if something where to God forbid happen to my husband, I would probably date women as well, again. I just happen to believe in monogamy right now. You know, I mean, I made this commitment and part of that commitment, for both of us, was, we’re gonna be monogamous, so, to all of a sudden, say something happened to my husband, to all of a sudden say well, I’m bisexual again, seems kind of disingenuous. (Amy, 36, White)

In addition to emphasizing her persistent attraction to women, thus laying claims on a non-straight identity, Amy invokes her monogamous commitment to her husband to signal a continuous identity element that carried her seamlessly from relationships with women to her current relationship with a man. To Amy, then, the identity disruption prompted by her falling in love with a man was at least partly preempted by a commitment to monogamy that, in her mind, was as much a characteristic of her prior relationships with women as of her relationship with her husband. Hence, it is her commitment to monogamy, not her loss of interest in women, that prevents her from acting on the attraction she continues to feel for women.

Emily—a 32-year-old White woman—similarly, holds out the possibility of future relationships with women. According to Emily, "I definitely still meet women that I have, definitely have attraction and it's just not an option right now because I'm in a relationship."

Although it is clear that both Amy and Emily use attraction to women as a strategy to hold on to a non-straight identity, because they do not act on it, it remains a "private" and invisible strategy, deployed more for their own sake than to convince those around them. The one caveat to this observation is, of course, that they deployed it in the course of the interview, thus at least momentarily publicizing it and naming it, but without jeopardizing their commitment to their current partners.

For those in somewhat less committed relationships, this strategy could also be used to make a public claim on a non-straight identity. Juliana—a 24-year old woman, who identifies as racially "mixed"—for instance, provides the following example of how she might let people around her know that she is attracted to women. At the time of the interview Juliana, who was not in a committed relationship, stated, "I'll be vocal about it, like I'll be like 'she's hot', you know."

To conclude, attraction to women is a key strategy for women seeking to do non-straight identity work. The use of attraction is complicated on several grounds, however. First, the women establish attraction as a natural precursor to establishing relationships with men. In letting their attraction to men, or at least one particular man, override their prior identity commitment to the lesbian and/or queer community, the women follow a relationship script that is rooted in heteronormativity. As one of the women said, "I think the people who just know me as being with guys, like they never think she's straight because they haven't thought anything else" (Sue, 39, White). By simultaneously invoking their persistent attraction to women, however, the women more or less overtly seek to subvert the identity implications of their current relationships by distinguishing themselves from straight women and laying a foundation for their claims on a non-straight identity.

Queering the Men

A second strategy the women use to construct a non-straight identity narrative is to describe the men they date or are married to in terms that place them outside of the reach of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005; Heasley 2005). This means distancing them from the idealized form of cultural masculinity, which include such features as physical force, patriarchy, and heterosexuality (Nyland 2004). By emphasizing the "female" qualities and/or uncertain sexuality of their male partners, in other words, the women simultaneously claim a non-straight identity for themselves, despite the fact that others may still read them as a heterosexual couple. Celia, for example, in describing her male partners, highlights his gentleness and softness.

> He's very gentle and he's tiny and he's soft and the things that I like about him are the things that remind me of a woman, you know, like I feel like I have to justify why I'm with a man, sometimes. (Celia, 33, White)

In addition to taking note of her partner's woman-like qualities, Celia directly asserts that her partner reminds her of a woman. He may be a man, she seems to argue, but he is more like a woman. Claire speaks about her partner's sexual behavior in similar terms.

> I make love to men like I'm making love to a woman, like I do all the same things. So, and this one guy makes love like a woman. I think that's why we like each other

> and I told him, I was like "you're a lesbian. You make love like a woman." (Claire, 43, Black)

Again the point that Claire makes is that this man is somehow different from other men. Even during sex, he remains "like a woman," as does Tina's husband.

> You want me to get personal? I'm not trying to be rude or ugly, you can stop me, whenever… like vaginal penetration does nothing for me, really, I can live without that. So, being a lesbian was good. I didn't have to worry about that, but, I don't know my husband is not so much into that either, I mean, I don't know, what we do works for both of us and so, it was really bizarre. So, guys in general I probably wouldn't go out with, he's just different. And there's some chemistry between us that works really well. (Tina, 38, White)

When recounting the story of introducing her male partner to her family, Jennifer recalls that her friends and family thought "he was gay." The story Jennifer tells is one in which Tom is, once again, not like other men. He is so much not like other men that despite the fact that he accompanied Jennifer to meet her family, they still thought he was gay. We are unable to speculate as to why Jennifer's family thought Tom was gay. Maybe it was because Jennifer had previously identified as lesbian and her family had not yet come to terms with what they may have considered an identity breach. Regardless of why they made that assumption, the point of interest is that for Jennifer, sharing this story is an important part of her identity work.

Of course, it is not only that their partners can be read as gay, but also, in some cases, that the partners themselves identify, as Alia put it, as "not fully straight." Amy says that her partner's sexuality is "not set in stone." Anne explains this point in more detail by noting the ways in which her partner is feminine and not like most men and linking those qualities to his sexual identity.

> He's just really different than most men that I'm around and most men that I know and he's sensitive. He's open, and I think a lot of the qualities, I mean he is feminine in some ways actually. He does have some of the sort of his mannerisms and he's a manly man but he's feminine and he's gentle and like those are some of he same things that I think I would experience with a woman that loving-ness, the full acceptance. Like he just accepts me, just accepts my body, he wants me to be healthy but he loves that I'm a curvy person. He, I just think that those are some of the things that I would get from women, that full acceptance that I just said… he's just really different than most men… Yeah and it's interesting because he's bisexual. (Anne, 28, White)

Beth too uses all of the different themes mentioned above. She compares her partner to lesbian, states that he is not like other men, and even implies that he is often read as gay. She explains that he is read as gay because he does not perform masculinity in a culturally recognizable way.

> He's basically a lesbian. A lot of people used to joke with him about that. 'Cause he was really like sensitive … Like, even though he is physically large and masculinly [sic] imposing, a lot of people have always read him as maybe gay. Like, sort of like, ambiguously gay, 'cause he doesn't raise his voice to people, he's never been an athlete. (Beth, 30, White)

In constructing their narratives, the women present their male partners in ways that further justify their claim to a non-straight identity. The assumption is that they may be in a heterosexual relationship, but if their male partners are not "conventional" men then, by implication, they are not "conventional" women. Put in stronger terms, and linking it to the earlier discussion about attraction, their attraction to these particular men, precisely because they are women-like, indicates that it is the men's gender that is an aberration, not the expression of their own sexuality, which in this narrative construction emerges as stable. This construction, then, allows the women a sense of continuity, and a more solid claim to an authentic identity. As Diamond notes, there is an "assumption among scientists and laypeople alike that authentic sexual orientation develops early and is consistent through one's life" (2009, 52). What is authentic is what is stable.

Challenging Homophobia

In response to the question of what they did to avoid being read as straight, several of the women answered, in part at least, that they challenged homophobia. That the women included challenging homophobia as an important theme in the construction of non-straight identity narratives may seem surprising. After all, straight people too challenge homophobia. As illustrated by Pascoe (2007) and others (e.g. Ward 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987), homophobia is a deeply entrenched aspect of heteronormativity. Thus, taking a public stance against homophobia is a political act that comes with a certain amount of risk, if by "risk" we mean exposing ourselves to a potential identity challenge and/or subjecting ourselves to the wrath or ridicule of others. To the women in the study, however, such "risks" are for the most part welcomed and embraced as opportunities to express their non-straight identities. Moreover, by personalizing—based on their own past experiences—the affront to all non-straight people that homophobia entails, the women are simultaneously speaking for themselves and on behalf of the lesbian community they still treasure but no longer feel a part of. In this sense, their challenges of homophobia are derived more from personal hurt, an attack on them personally, than a commitment to the protection of individual rights in general.

The importance of this strategy for the women is readily evident in Nala's—a 22 year-old Greek-American woman—response to the question of how she challenged assumptions of heterosexuality: "Well, my first impulse is to say like, whenever I hear someone, like gay-bashing, or using the word gay derogatively, in a derogatory fashion, I always say something about it." Abigail—a 30-year-old, white woman—who had just noted attraction to women as one of the reasons why she does not identify as straight, also points to her commitment to gay rights: "I also think, in terms of my politics, I definitely take it very personally when there's any kind of challenge to gay rights or, or anything like that." Abigail's use of the phrase "taking it personally" is important here. It is not just that she is offended by such challenges, as any other person might. She is affected by it on a personal level because of her own identity. Alia similarly speaks of challenging homophobia and ties this practice to her own "first hand experience."

> When it comes to supporting the gay and lesbian rights and things like that, I definitely feel like I do. I definitely speak out against the, the ban on gays in the military a lot. I speak out against that a lot because I have first hand experience. (Alia, 25, White)

A few of the other women make more explicit references to the disruptive potentials of speaking out against homophobia. Ayana, for example, feels strongly that part of living her

non-straight identity authentically is to challenge homophobia. In other words, a challenge to homophobia is one of the strategies or mechanisms by which she asserts her non-straight identity, and concurrently, her non-straight identity is validated by the act of speaking out.

> I just feel the need to butt in with my two cents when somebody makes some sort of narrow-minded comment. I do. […] And I think that I would be a fake, I would be a fraud if I didn't stand up for it because I still feel it to be very much a part of who I am. (Ayana, 28, Puerto Rican)

The same is true for Riley who feels that she would be "part of the problem" if she did not challenge homophobia.

> If I'm in this strictly heterosexual setting with heterosexual people, and somebody says that something is gay or anything like that, I usually make a note, a verbal note of just like calling that out, whether it be in a joking way or sort of seriously like "how is that homosexual?" you know, like "really?", or if like somebody uses like faggot or dyke or anything like that like I don't let it slide 'cause I feel like that's sort of being part of the problem. (Riley, 24, White)

Challenging homophobia is not an immediate indicator of being a member of the LGBTQ community of course, but the way the women frame such tactics in their narratives, as being derived from a place of personal hurt rather than general concern for others' wellbeing, speaks to their desire to have such action recognized as part of a non-straight identity narrative. Moreover, as both Riley's and Ayana's comments suggest, they sometimes use others' expressions of homophobia as opportunities to subvert the assumption of heterosexuality.

Gender and Sexuality

Here we briefly want to address the question of "Why?" That is, why is it important for the women to not be read as heterosexual. Why is being straight such an undesirable state? We explore this question below.

The findings from this study suggest that it is not so much an affinity to a particular non-straight identity but really a resistance to straightness that guide the women's identity projects. That is, the women construct non-straight identity narratives, not because they wish to be read as lesbian or any other specific identity but more so because they associate straightness with particular elements that they see as undesirable. More specifically, it seems clear from the data that constructing a non-straight identity narrative is as much about non-normative gender as it is about sexuality. In other words, because the compulsive heterosexuality that the women try to escape is so intricately linked with a binary and hierarchical gender system (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), their resistance necessarily implicate gender as well. Gender is constructed as a dichotomous system, composed of two "opposite" poles: male and female (Connell 1985; Kessler and McKenna 1978). Sexuality or desire is grounded in this system of two genders, where opposite attraction leads to heterosexuality, same gender attraction to homosexuality and attraction to both genders to bisexuality (Queen and Schimel 1997). It is the implications of this system that the women, in partnering with men, suddenly are confronted with and also actively resist. By actively refusing the sexuality category that their partnership with men otherwise invoke, the women are simultaneously resisting the expectations associated with being properly female, that is, being heterosexual female. Celia's thoughts are particularly illustrative of this notion.

> I think just because society puts those expectations on, or puts those labels on you, versus when I was with a woman, it was, in a sense it was nice because there weren't the rigid gender roles, it was, you know, you did what you wanted because that's how you felt. Versus now, with [my partner], it's like I do these things because that's what the wife does and that's what the husband does. (Celia, 33, White)

To be straight, for Celia, implies performing her gender in a particular way. It is the rigidity that comes with the label that she is trying to resist. Being straight comes with a set of expectations that govern appropriate gender behavior. It is these expectations of behavior that the women try to resist. As Celia clearly communicates, straight implies specific gender roles, rigid labels and expectations to behave in a certain prescribed way, which may not always coincide with how she wishes to behave. It forces her to do "what the wife does."

> I don't think of love in like fairy tale terms. Or like my goals isn't like, oh let's get married. Like I'm not saying I'll never get married but you know or have kids but it's like not my agenda. You know, my top priority is like education, work, you know, and you know my family and my friends and then somebody else. There's like, seems like, well, at least for like my straight friends, like they have these rules for dating and like how they're supposed to act, like on the first date and on the second date and that just kinda bothers, like annoys me, you know, like, I don't know like, I don't know. I don't like that. (Juliana, 24, "Mixed")

Juliana touches on everything that she associated with being straight from expectation of getting married and having children to a particular way of having sex. These are the things that "annoy" her and she resists them by being clear with her male partners that she is not straight. Juliana explains that straight is heteronormative. It comes with specific notions of what a family is "supposed to look like." It also comes with prescription-like expectations of how to behave in intimate relationships.

For these women, straight implies traditional femininity, including such traditional notions as modesty and knowledge of how to run a home. Stating that they are not straight, then, allows the women to shrug off these expectations. They may be partnered and have sex with men, have children, dress in feminine ways, in some cases be married, and be publically read as straight, but they are not straight.

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined how women who leave relationships with women and take up relationships with men seek to construct non-straight identity narratives. Approached as a problem situated at the intersection of the liberating potentials of postmodern identity formation and the continued solidity of gender and sexuality categories, the findings of the study illustrate the active negotiations required by the women to carve out identities that do not correspond with the heteronormative expectations they are surrounded by. Hence, the case provides a poignant example of how individuals manage their identities at a time when resources provided for self-construction are more multiple and less tied to traditional institutions, and yet still not so fragmented that they no longer gnaw at individuals. Therefore it is perhaps more accurate to say, then, that contemporary society is at once traditional and postmodern (Plummer 2003). The achievement of a firm self obviously remains important to people but, as Holstein and Gubrium argue, it is increasingly "socially

dispersed" (2000, 215). The women in this study offer a way to conceptualize this social dispersion, and thus illuminate the complicated process whereby individuals simultaneously reinforce stability (by constructing an authentic identity) and erase boundaries (by refusing to stay bounded by traditional identity packages).

More specifically, the women narrate a non-straight identity by ways of a few distinct strategies that, according to the women themselves, also inform how they "do" identity in real-life situations. That is, although the women in many ways think of themselves as being the same as they have always been, the change in partner gender—which to them was construed as an unanticipated consequence of an irresistible attraction to a particular man and hence not as a result of a major identity reformulation—has placed them in an entirely new position vis-à-vis the pervasive assumptions of heterosexuality. These assumptions were obviously not new to the women, but the strategies they had previously relied on to counter those assumptions, including especially their immersion in a lesbian and/or queer community and their partnering with other women, were no longer available to them. Hence, new strategies had to be devised to resist, combat and/or subvert the constraints the women associate with heterosexuality. Those constraints, according to the women, were most acutely felt in relation to gender expectations. Even though their male partners were different from other men, especially when it comes to their expression of sexuality, the partnership brought the women into institutional settings—family gatherings, bar scenes, grocery stores, workplaces—where their hetero-pairing, sometimes reinforced by children, automatically triggered heteronormative expectations. It was these expectations, more than anything, that the women sought to evade by re-claiming a non-straight identity.

Thus, the findings of this study provide support for the notion that contemporary self-making is creative and dynamic, but still not completely boundless. It is clear that the women actively challenge that bounds of traditional identities—in term of both gender and sexuality—but it is also evident that they value, and work hard to accomplish, an authentic self that derives its authenticity precisely from its stability. It is here, then, that narrative emerges as a critical component of identity; it is through the stories we tell that we weave together a stable sense of self. We all carry our stories with us, like passports, because we might more often than in the past, find ourselves in unfamiliar lands.

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