Ambiguous Selves

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Contesting Gender Binaries in Literature, Film and the Media

Edited by

Barbara Braid, Ewa Glapka
and Malwina Siemiątkowska

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Part III: Blurring the Lines

Introduction

Contesting (Gender) Binaries

Barbara Braid

From Plato's concept of the ideal vs. the actual, through Biblical multiple images of good and evil and Buddhist *ying* and *yang*, to Descartes with his duality of mind and body and the Nietzschean Apollonian vs. Dionysian principle,[1] philosophy has used dichotomic thinking as a "hermeneutic aid, (…) structuring our thoughts, (…) shaping and finally constraining our understanding."[2] For structuralists, binary oppositions were the key concept governing language and, by extension, thought—the meaning of words, being ultimately arbitrary, could only be held down by defining them in relation to their opposites. Even our genes are helical and dual in their structure, and our machines are based on the binary code of zeroes and ones.[3] Peter Elbow (2000) quotes G. E. R. Lloyd in order to suggest that dichotomous thinking is inevitable, built into our reality, into the universe that surrounds us and our own microcosms:

> many prominent phenomena in nature exhibit a certain duality: day alternates with night; the sun rises in one quarter of the sky and sets in the opposite quarter; in most climates the contrast between the seasons (summer and winter, or dry season and rainy season) is marked; in the larger animals male and female are distinct, and the bilateral symmetry of their bodies is obvious.[4]

However, in the quotation above, Lloyd seems to fall into the same trap that many essentialists fall prey to—an assumption that the way humanity

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[1] Lurie, Peter. "The Rush to Judgment. Binary Thinking in a Digital Age." *CTheory*, March 30, 2004. http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/the-rush-to-judgment-binary-thinking-in-a-digital-age/.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Lloyd, qtd. in Peter Elbow, *Everyone Can Write. Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 48.

organizes reality (into seasons, or a calendar, into two genders, etc.) stems from the essential nature of this reality. Yet, from the structure we impose on surface phenomena—to use structuralist vocabulary—does not follow that this structure is natural or inevitable. Therefore, our divisions of phenomena into dichotomous categories does not evidence the fact that reality is built on binaries, but only that we impose binary thinking onto reality.

Post-structuralists, and especially Jacques Derrida, have contested oppositional thinking and the possibility of pinning down meanings in language. For Derrida, the hierarchy embedded in dualities and expressed in language is responsible for the logic of exclusion and marginalisation that has prevailed in the history of human thought. The danger of binary thinking, as Elbow has also noted, is that "difference and diversity is eliminated;"[5] therefore "[d]econstruction seeks to undo all oppositions that, in the name of unity, purity, order, and hierarchy, try to eliminate difference."[6] Prokhovnik (1999) has identified four key features of binary thinking, which also describe a process which leads to hierarchisation of one element in a pair. First, a difference between two entities becomes an opposition; secondly, the hierarchical relationship is established between two parts of a binary; then, an assumption is made that these two opposites are everything there is and there is nothing beyond it; and finally, the subordinate half of the pair can only gain more power in this hierarchical relationship if it becomes more like the other part of the binary, that is, transcends itself.[7] Yet, this final stage does not eliminate binaries, but instead, strengthens them: "Even when people try to overturn or reverse the traditional dominance in a polar opposition […] it just means that the underdog is redefined as overdog, and we are still left with thinking in terms of dominance or hierarchy."[8] Overturning hierarchies does not eliminate them altogether. Therefore, Elbow proposes embracing the Bakhtinian "not a dialectical either/or, but a dialogic both/and,"[9] or finding a Hegelian "higher category that represents a transcendent reconciliation or unity: thesis and antithesis are always harnessed to yield synthesis,"[10]

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[5] Elbow, *Everyone Can Write*, 49.
[6] Culler, qtd. in ibid.
[7] Prokhovnik, qtd. in Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: Sage, 2004), 24.
[8] Elbow, *Everyone Can Write*, 49.
[9] Clark and Holquist, qtd. in ibid., 50.
[10] Elbow, *Everyone Can Write*, 50.

or, the best solution to his mind, "[a]ffirm[ing] both sides of the dichotomy as equally true or necessary or important or correct."[11]

As gender studies, and, consequently, queer studies also revolve around the problem of dual thinking about gender and sexuality, the possible resolutions offered by Elbow could be compared to the history of the feminist thought, struggling with the issue of hierarchical dualism of the male versus the female. Helen Cixous wrote about it in *The Newly Born Woman* (1986):

> Thought has always worked through […] dual, hierarchical oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. […] Theory of culture, theory of society, symbolic systems in general—art, religion, family, language—it is all developed while bringing the same schemes to light. And the movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time, a war is let loose.[12]

Feminism, however, has not proposed the table turning in that war, in ways that would make female dominant over male in a binary pair. Instead, it has advocated equality of both binaries in the male/female pair, in the spirit of Bakhtinian dialogue evoked by Elbow in the quotation above. Gender and queer theory, on the other hand, offers yet another route: "to reframe the conflict or analyze it in more detail so there are more than two sides."[13] Therefore, since their formation in 1990s, postmodern feminism and gender studies, and more importantly, queer studies have not only criticized "[d]ichotomous thinking [that] forces ideas, persons, roles, and disciplines into rigid polarities, [as] [i]t reduces richness and complexity in the interest of logical neatness, and in doing so, it distorts truth."[14] They also offer a continuum of concepts—of gender and of sexuality—instead of extreme polarities.

Therefore, if we visualise the binaries as two opposite points with an unlimited space in between, then the role of deconstructive feminisms, gender and queer theories is to examine the queer space between the binaries. On the other hand, if dichotomies are two frontiers divided by a hard, unbreakable borderline, then the queer task would be to transgress or

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[11] Elbow, *Everyone Can Write*, 51.
[12] Hélène Cixous and Susan Sellers, *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 37-8.
[13] Elbow, *Everyone Can Write*, 51.
[14] Sherwin, qtd. in Serena Parekh, "Feminism, Structural Injustice, and Responsibility," in *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader and Alison Stone (London: Routledge, 2017), 621.

blur this boundary and roam from one dichotomy to another. These two images are at the core of this collection of essays offered to the readers; their authors discuss a number of ways to roam the boundaries separating male from female, normative from non-normative, heterosexual from homosexual, etc., or, at the same time, to pinpoint various ways in which the queer space stretching between these dichotomies can be experienced, represented, understood and valued. Moreover, gender and queer theories note the biopolitical consequences of binary thinking, as it leads to an assumption that "behaviour that is gender appropriate is considered normal; anything else (…) is considered 'gender deviance'."[15] Thus, for gender studies—and, as shall be seen, for the authors of texts collected in this volume—it is worthwhile to research both the deviance (the in-between spaces of gender and sexuality binaries), but also what (and how, and why) is "normal."[16]

Thus, for the authors of the chapters in this book, the purpose is to show the solution to the hierarchical divisions into the deviant and the normal, by "thinking *relationally*,"[17] which enriches "the relationship, the connection, the interdependence between two parts."[18] The cure to the rigidness of hierarchical binaries is, Pilcher and Whelehan state, the "complexity, plurality and heterogeneity (or 'difference')"[19]—and this plurality is expressed in this volume by the variety of proposed outlooks, methodologies and concepts. The titles of the three parts of this book— "contesting norms", "performing selves" and "blurring the lines"— delineate the necessary action that is part of the queer celebration of difference and deviance: pinpointing the limitation of assumed norms and subverting them, celebrating the fluid and ambiguous self that springs from the contestation of those norms, and then repeatedly transgress and, as a result, obscure the limits that separate the normal from the abnormal.

Each of these parts is divided into five chapters, discussing a plethora of cultural and social fields, types of experience, representations and artistic expression. The first section opens with two chapters discussing female press. In Chapter One, titled "'There's me this big feminist…' Ambiguities and Ambivalences of the Feminine Subject," Ewa Glapka

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[15] Judith Lorber, "Beyond the Binaries: Depolarizing the Categories of Sex, Sexuality and Gender," in *Contemporary Feminist Theory: A Text/Reader*, edited by Mary F. Rogers (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998), 16.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Pilcher and Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, 25, emphasis in the original.
[18] Prokhovnik, qtd. in ibid.
[19] Pilcher and Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, 25.

discusses bridal magazines, which represent a conservative outlook on gender, combined with a new, "postfeminist rhetoric of personal freedom and pleasure."[20] Yet, as she proves, the relationship of the magazines' readers to this discourse is not necessarily uncritical. The readers contrast the representation of femininity offered by those magazines with their own experience, as researched by Glapka. Their ambiguous position to gender representations shows that identity work, even if not transgressive, may still be subversive. The second chapter, "Contesting Woman: *Spare Rib. A Women's Liberation Magazine*," penned by Maria Micaela Coppola, even though it also concerns female press, focuses on a very different kind of a magazine: *Spare Rib* of 1970s, a counter-culture feminist magazine which aimed at popularising feminist activism, using the strategies of the mainstream press for women. This magazine focused on the importance of inclusivity in the female movement, as Coppola shows, contesting and problematising definitions of "woman", thus being the forerunners of the post-feminist awareness of intersectionality. While in Glapka's research the conclusion showed that questioning traditional and conservative ideas about femininity happens in the eye of the beholder, here Coppola depicts a case where this contestation is a conscious choice on behalf of those who created this magazine.

The next two chapters lead us away from journalism towards contemporary literary studies, focusing mostly on masculinity performance. In Anna Pilińska's Chapter Three, titled "Not Quite Virile: Nabokov's Male Characters," its author discusses how Vladimir Nabokov contests hegemonic masculinity in his best acknowledged novels, including *Lolita* (1955) and *Pnin* (1957). Nabokov's male characters—homosexuals, nympholepts, madmen, unattractive males and failed fathers—illustrate how Nabokov's representation of men questions those values that are the building blocks of hegemonic masculinity, as understood by R. W. Connell. As a result, his characters are often demasculinized, as Pilińska shows, not only by their looks or abnormal behaviours, but also by contrast with "unfeminine" women, that is, strong female characters. Similarly, such a contrast pinpoints the strategies of masculinity performance in Graham Swifts *Wish You Were Here* (2011), as discussed by Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz in Chapter Four, titled "Re-Conceptualisation of Gender in Graham Swift's *Wish You Were Here*." She uses narratological analysis, focusing on novelistic techniques, mainly narration and focalisation, to examine how gender is depicted in Swift's novel and to what extent this representation is conventional. The author of this

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[20] Ewa Glapka, in this volume, 5.

chapter concludes her analysis by stating that the images of females in the novel are more conventional, only slightly modified or updated. However, Puschmann-Nalenz states that when it comes to male characters, Swift's novel questions the models of masculinity as it becomes affected by trauma, as evidenced best in the character of Jack. Thus, the multiple images of transgression employed by the novel symbolise the issue of gender non-normativity.

The final chapter in this section, "Making America Jewish Home Through the Cultural Representations of the Ghetto Girl Stereotype" by Brygida Gasztold, concerns the Ghetto Girl stereotype in American culture of the early 20th century. This image of a young female Jewish factory worker is a result of the cultural changes brought about by a large wave of Jewish immigration to the US in that era, and is characterised as a young Jewish woman who is quickly and eagerly Americanized, embracing the new country's consumerism and free expression of gender and sexuality, thus subverting the status quo of gender in Jewish-American population. Gasztold discusses this stereotype on the example of Anzia Jezierska's novel *Bread Givers* (1925), showing the limitations and misogyny these young Jewish girls faced when contesting social boundaries, both due to their class position in the American society and their gendered position in their Jewish communities.

The second part of this volume, focusing on positioning, performing and representing the ambiguous identities that do not fall into neat binary categories, opens with yet another discussion of a literary text, offered by Izabela Morska in Chapter Six, titled "The Public as Devouring Mother: *The Agonized Face* by Mary Gaitskill and *Slammerkin* by Emma Donoghue." She reads Mary Gaitskill's short story "The Agonised Face" (2009) in the perspective of J. M. Coetzee's 1996 essays *Giving Offence* to discuss the main character's—and, at the same time, narrator's— "suppressing […] of her own erotic ambivalence."[21] As Morska shows, the narrator of the short story does not allow herself to feel (erotic) pleasure and maternal/filial connection to the feminist author whose lecture she is attending, which becomes a parable of the inner struggles within the feminine community in the middle of the feminist sex wars. The synecdoche of "the agonised face" represents "sex and woman's pain" of an actress in a porn movie.[22] This leads Morska to a discussion of another literary text, Emma Donoghue's novel *Slammerkin* (2000), to interpret the figure of a prostitute as a rebel against patriarchy, "an alliance between

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[21] Izabela Morska, in this volume, 119.
[22] Gaitskill, qtd. in Morska, in this volume, 122.

queer and slut,"[23] in the spirit of Jack (Judith) Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), where "not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures."[24] Morska warns, however, against romanticisation of the prostitute figure, pinpointing in her conclusion the economic inequalities that push some young women into sex work.

Like Gasztold in Chapter Five, Marta Olasik in her chapter titled "Transgressing the Lesbian: Sociological Reflections on Lesbian Stereotyping in *The L Word* and *Queer as Folk*" discusses a stereotype—that of a lesbian. Yet, Olasik's sociological analysis concerns a self-stereotypisation that reflects the internal conflict within the queer and/or lesbian group, showing its non-homogeneity: there is not one, stable definition of a lesbian or how it should be represented. In the light of her discussion and deconstruction of a stereotype of a lesbian and its internalisation, Olasik manages to rehabilitate the television series *The L Word* (2004-2009) that has been accused of glamorising and normalising a queer experience. Olasik refers to Derrida's logic of supplementarity—which has been evoked at the beginning of this introduction – in order to discuss the position of women and lesbians in the hierarchies of gender binary pairs as an explanation of the source of this internalised cultural stereotype. The following chapter by Ludovic Foster, titled "The Tomboy Guise: Misrecognition and Ambiguity within 21st century Depictions of Young Non-Binary Tomboy," also concerns a filmic representation of a queer figure. This time, however, these are movies (*XXY* from 2007 and *Tomboy* from 2011) which depict queer childhood. The gender non-conforming, ambiguous characters shown in these films subvert the traditional concepts of childhood and gender; yet, the sensual visualisations, as Foster argues, allow the audience to excavate their own memory of their childhood, resulting in an empathic reaction to the characters' experiences, hereby de-orientalising the queer Other. Thus, in both Chapters Seven and Eight, their authors discuss ambiguous, queer identities and their definitions in order to better understand their lived queer experience.

The penultimate chapter in the second section of this volume, "What's Sex Got to Do with It? Sex, Citizenship and Identity," penned by Ephraim Das Janssen, departs from a discussion of fictional representations of queer identities and instead focuses on the philosophical, legal and political implications of being a queer citizen. Chapter Nine thus concentrates on the issue of gender and citizenship in government documentation, which is an issue especially crucial for non-binary, queer

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[23] Morska, in this volume, 123.

[24] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

and transgender subjects. Janssen discusses the enforced coherence of identity within the bureaucratic machine, where failing to conform leads to an illegitimate citizenship for those who do not fit in the construct of these coherent identities. For Janssen, this tension stems from a discrepancy between the theory of what gender is supposed to be, originating in Western philosophy, and what it actually is, which he discusses as "prescriptive haecceity" (that is, "thisness") and descriptive facticity[25] respectively. Finally, in his chapter Janssen examines the limitations and dangers of the binary gender system assumed as a civil norm.

Justyna Stępień's final chapter in this section, "Nomads, Queers and Postcolonial Rhizomes in *My Beautiful Launderette*" also discusses identities that are elusive and hard to pinpoint, and goes back to a discussion of filmic representations of queer selves, as it examines Stephen Frear's film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), an adaptation a novel by Hanif Kureishi. On the basis of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, the characters in this film are discussed by Stępień as nomadic subjects in the state of interbeing, "in-betweenness" as conceptualised by Homi Bhabha. In this chapter, Stępień posits multiplicity of postcolonial subject formation and fluidity of the nomadic subject, in the mode of Rosi Braidotti's "acute awareness of the non-fixity of boundaries."[26] Thus, nomadism becomes a form of resistance, and the titular laundrette is interpreted by Stępień as a space of in-betweenness, "a classless space of intercultural celebration"[27] which offers an escape from socio-cultural norms.

The third section of this volume opens with Aleksanda Hołubowicz's chapter titled "Going Beyond Fe/Male Dichotomy" on intersex characters in three texts: Michel Foucault's account of the life of Hercules Barbin (1980), Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *Middlesex* (2002) and 2011 film *XXL*, already discussed earlier in Foster's chapter. The intersex characters, which blur the lines of a binary understanding of sex and bodies, are shown in these cultural texts as coming of age and coming to terms with their identities. Hołubowicz rightly notes their varied historical and geographical contexts and discusses the influence of these cultural and social settings on the characters' understanding of themselves. The stories of all three characters, as Hołubowicz shows, underline the role of the language as constitutive of identity, the disciplinary practices evoked by the characters' respective societies, and medicalisation that is often employed as one of those disciplinary practices. In her conclusion,

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[25] Ephraim Dan Janssen, in this volume, 188.
[26] Justyna Stępień, in this volume, 206.
[27] Ibid., 213.

Hołubowicz notes that the identity crisis of an intersex subject may be a productive rite of passage moment, as it is the case with the main characters of *Middlesex* or *XXL*, yet it may also have tragic resolutions, as is evident in the life story of Hercules Barbin.

In Chapter Twelve, titled "Queering the Mad(wo)man: Disrupting Gender Binaries in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*," Barbara Braid offers a discussion of a madwoman's literary figure as a queer signal of subversion. As it is the case with drag in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), the madwoman represents incoherence—of gender, sex and sexuality, or of social roles and norms in general—and pinpoints the binary logic of heterosexual matrix as both performative and impossible to preserve. Insanity, like gender or sexuality, is yet another term which depends on the logic of supplementarity: what is not normal, that is, mad, depends on what we define as normal. A madwoman motif, therefore, is a queer one, as it represents the blurring of the lines between binary terms; the Victorian madwoman even more so, as her mental deviance is directly linked by contemporary medicine and sexology to sexual and gender contestation of norms of femininity. In this light, Braid examines a Victorian sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon as an example of a text that offers a discussion of madness as a queer motif, especially as it questions the binary logic of gender, class and sanity/ insanity. Another novel, Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989), discussed by Agnieszka Kotwasińska in Chapter Thirteen, titled "Freakish Normalcy or Normal Freakery: Attitudes Towards Non-Conforming Female Bodies in Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*," also comments on the relativity of binary terms. This time, however, the text seems to question the transgressive potential of non-normalcy, by depicting a family of freak show performers, the Binewskis, for whom the tables of binary hierarchies did turn: the non-normative, disabled bodies of the Binewskis are perceived in the novel as superior, while the able-bodies of the "norms" are depressingly average and inferior. Thus, the novel seems to be making a comment on the relativity of the terms and hierarchies involved in the logic of opposition. Yet, as Kotwasińska states, here the subversion of the titular freaks ends; the way men treat women in the Binewski family, and the way female characters are imprisoned in the gender norms and the reproductive realities of their bodies show that other hierarchies in the world of the novel's freaks remain intact. Thus, in Dunn's novel, a grotesque body with its transgressive potential does not guarantee a truly progressive and subversive possibility for identity construction.

The final two chapters of the book concern the topic of female appreciation of male homosexuality in popular culture of the East and the West. A discussion offered by Zuzanna Baraniak-Hirata and Agata Włodarczyk in the chapter titled "Bending Gender in Japanese Arts: Queering Girls Culture, Takarazuka Revue and Boys' Love Manga" concerns the gender-bending practices in Japanese girls' culture (*shōjo bunka)*, and more specifically, in the Takarazuka Revue in the early twentieth century and boys' love manga today, which both present gender performance as fluid. The Takarazuka Revue appeared in 1913 in the context of stricter gender norms and binary understanding of gender, resulting from an opening of Japanese culture to Western concepts of sexuality in mid-nineteenth century. Gender performance is treated literally in Takazuka theatre and follows gender stereotypes and norms to the dot, both in the performance of femininity and masculinity, conducted in both cases by female actors. It therefore led to a paradox of both liberating actresses—especially *otokoyaku* (male role performers)—yet, at the same time, imposing even more rigidly conventional female and desexualised gender performance in their private lives due to the necessity to challenge the accusations of lesbianism among *otokoyaku.* Yet, these representations of ideal male lovers on stage gained *otokoyaku* many female fans, and as a female-oriented form of entertainment is perceived by Baraniak-Hirata and Włodarczyk as a source for the contemporary practice of *yaoi* manga*,* or boys' love. It stems more directly from early *shōjo* manga, where androgynous representations of masculinity and romanticised historical European settings allowed the readers to enjoy the manga without guilt. Yet, as the authors argue, in boys' love manga male homosexual relationships are appropriated for titillation of their female fans. What both Takarazuka Revue and boys' love manga have in common is creating a fantasy space where female desire is safely coded, and later released in a conventional ending, which allows girl fans to return from the gender-bending space into their girlhood. A similar practice of appropriating male homosexual desire in the Western popular culture is the tradition of slash fiction, going back to fan zines in the late 1960s. Alicja Mazur in Chapter Fifteen, titled "'What Happens When You Take Away the Glass': Introducing Slash Fiction" discusses this phenomenon in fan fiction as a "radical female appropriation" of popular culture, where women get a chance to "resist, negotiate, adapt."[28] Mazur enquires about the reasons for slash fiction's popularity, arriving at the conclusion similar to that proposed by Baraniak-Hirata and Włodarczyk:

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[28] Penley, qtd. in Alicja Mazur, in this volume, 316.

that male-on-male erotica, in contrast to more conventional popular culture, offers women a narrative of a relationship of equals. Therefore, these types of texts—both boys' love manga and slash—have a subversive potential inasmuch as they are liberating for their female fans, offering a disruption of heteronormative patriarchies evident in conventional romantic fiction and a safe outlet for female sexuality. Mazur, however, ends with a caveat that slash fiction represents an idealised, "utopian" vision of a homosexual relationship, and, like any appropriation, risks hijacking the topics and issues that are significant in lived experiences of queer subjects.

The variety of fields, methodologies, themes and cultural texts discussed in this interdisciplinary book constitute a celebration of difference, ambiguity and contestation of binary thinking, particularly in the construction of (gendered) identities. This is done, among other things, via a recurring theme of subversive figures—stereotypes or characters—that become the focal points which magnify and problematise the identity construction, particularly that of gender and sexuality. These subversive figures that follow in the footsteps of a Butlerian drag queen will also include any queer figure, such as a transgender subject, discussed in this volume by Foster and Hołubowicz; this also includes lesbian vs. slut discussion proposed by Morska, where a lesbian represents failure both at femininity (as Monique Wittig said, "lesbians are not women"[29]) and at masculinity, while a slut in this continuum stands for the surplus of femininity, its excess.[30] Yet, these subversive trickster figures may also include a madwoman, as argued by Braid, or a freak discussed by Kotwasińska. This variety of subversive figures opens a possibility to see queer studies as a much wider field than that concerning gender and sexuality only.

What also transpires from this summary of the chapters included in this volume is the importance to look at these issues in an intersectional way. The reader might see it in Coppola's chapter, where the importance of the complication of the term "woman" by intersections of class and race is acknowledged by *Spare Rib* magazine. Puschmann-Nalenz, on the other hand, discusses how concepts of masculinity and femininity are affected by class, especially in the construction of masculinity that aspires to a hegemonic model. Similarly, Gasztold discusses the Jewish community in the early 20th century America, which negotiated both newly American and traditionally Jewish identities, in terms of both gender and class, when

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[29] Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 1 (1980), 110.
[30] Morska, in this volume, 128.

facing Ghetto Girl stereotype. Identities therefore cannot be seen as a simple male/female or masculine/feminine dichotomy, as they are obfuscated by those aspects of the self that relate to nationality, race, or ethnicity, class, embodiment, sexuality, etc., which, in turn, also implicate complex social hierarchies dependent on the social and cultural contexts.

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PART I:

CONTESTING NORMS

CHAPTER ONE

"THERE'S ME THIS BIG FEMINIST…"
AMBIGUITIES AND AMBIVALENCES
OF THE FEMININE SUBJECT

EWA GLAPKA

Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to investigate women's discursive engagement with the hegemonic ideologies of gender in the context of media reception. Whilst the paper considers that the majority of popular media reproduce inherently conservative and regressive gender discourses, the chapter posits that individuals' relationship with the discourses (e.g. their support or disavowal of them) should not be taken for granted. Therefore, the discussion looks into women's interpretative engagement with the discourse of a bridal magazine. In the analysis, their talk is examined in terms of how in the interviewees' sense- and self-making the media discourse is refracted through their lived experience of getting married. In particular, the study looks into the management of subject positions. Juggling them, the participants are found to produce an ambiguous and dynamic relationship with the dominant discourses of gender. Apart from identifying the positions of complacency with the discourses, the discussion demonstrates that hegemonic discourses can be contested in mundane identity work, even if the work does not seem overtly transgressive.

Keywords: bridal magazines, discourse analysis, feminism, media discourse, media reception, subject position

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Introduction

The media discourse is at the forefront of the public discourses which have shaped the common understandings of femininity and masculinity around fixed binaries. Women's magazines are a ready example of the media's tenacious perpetuation of the binaries. Although with the arrival of the new (not necessarily less gender conservative) media women's

magazines have lost much of their original appeal and popularity, they are still widely read and continue to contribute to the reproduction of the dominant gender order, wherein masculinity and femininity are treated as unproblematic dichotomies, mutually defining and complementing. The magazines continue to shape consensual images and definitions of gender through messages that emphasise, among others, physical beautification (along with the prescriptive norms of beauty and objectification of women) and heterosexual romance,[1] which reinforces sexually normative notions of masculinity and femininity.

Indeed, many critics note shifts in the media's representations of gender, such as the acknowledging of new versions of femininity and masculinity as well as of their socio-culturally dynamic nature.[2] As noted by Carter and Steiner, "[a]lthough many clearly gendered stereotypes still inform media content today, the rigidity of such hierarchical feminine gendered identity has nevertheless begun to break down. An increasingly varied array of feminine images and role models are now available, some of which offer progressive and sometimes challenging alternatives."[3] Nonetheless, I propose, the counterhegemonic discourses of gender have predominantly been used in media as a token—embraced insofar as they ward off criticism of feminists or feminist-minded readers. What is more, used side by side with other discourses such as those of neo-liberalism and masculine/anti-feminist backlash, the discourses have often been falsified and undermined. Also, even though the media representations of femininity have become more inclusive and heterogeneous (race-wise, age-wise, etc.), they are not willing to acknowledge all femininities—the absence of disabled women and the discourse of "compulsory heterosexuality"[4] are perhaps the starkest manifestations of media practices of exclusion. Moreover, while the media often encourage women to work on a positive self-image and acceptance,

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[1] Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London: Pandora, 1987); Ellis D. Evans, Carmela Sather and Charli Turner, "Content Analysis of Contemporary Teen Magazines for Adolescent Females," *Youth and Society* 23 (1991): 99-120; Kate Peirce, "A Feminist Theoretical Perspective on the Socialization of Teenage Girls through *Seventeen* Magazine," *Sex Roles* 23 (1990): 491-501; David Gauntlett, *Media, Gender and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[2] Rosalind Gill, "Powerful women, vulnerable men and postfeminist masculinity in men's popular fiction," *Gender and Language* 2 (2014): 185-204.

[3] Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner, *Critical Readings: Media and Gender* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2003), 13.

[4] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660.

the discourse of unconditional approval and self-love is dwarfed by the enduring, all-pervading imagery of ageless and small-size models.[5] Finally, post-feminism, although originally set on the recodification of traditional femininity, has been found misappropriated by the media industry, with media implying normative and restrictive concepts of femininity based on the postfeminist rhetoric of personal freedom and pleasure.[6]

Importantly, whilst it is vital to demand that media become less entrenched in the regressive gender discourses, the point made in this chapter is that the contestation of gender should not only be explored in terms of the contestations in the public representations of masculinity and femininity, but also in terms of the ways in which the public discourses of gender are related to by women themselves—in how they live the discourses in their everyday social worlds. Consequently, the current discussion aims to investigate the micro level of individuals' sense- and self-making wherein the macro-level, media discourse is refracted through standpoints grounded in the embodied experience of femininity.

Epistemologically, this study is premised on the critical realist belief that while reality (e.g. one of gendered experience) cannot be denied, it cannot be approached otherwise than through discourse.[7] The multiplicity of discourses and their covert links with ideologies[8] make the experience of reality and identities, which are mediated by the discourses, take on their intrinsic qualities of ambiguity and fluidity. Sexuality and gender, which are after all one of the most widely known and extensively examined socio-discursive constructs, are perhaps ones of the most prominent examples of how indirect and contestable the discursive mediation of social life is. In line with the idea that discourses mediate multiple realities rather than reflect the objective, extra-discursive reality, the interpretative analysis below suggests that femininity lived by embodied subjects is not directly and unambiguously linked with the media-prefabricated versions of womanhood inscribed in the media texts. Specifically, positioning

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[5] Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 47; Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London: Doubleday, 1999).

[6] Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[7] Margaret Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Margaret Archer et al., eds., *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[8] Ruth Wodak, *Language*, *Power and Ideology* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989); Robert Hodge, Ian Vere and Gunther R. Kress, *Language as Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

themselves as women, individuals reflexive of their location in gender culture hardly ever (if ever) identify themselves fully and explicitly with the culturally available discourses.

The study

The study presented in the current discussion was driven by the curiosity of the interface of macro- and micro-level discourses of gender[9]. To this end, the investigation was a two-stage process in which the critical discourse analysis of a sample of British bridal magazines was followed by a series of individual, qualitative ca. 1,5 hour-long interviews with 11 middle-class, heterosexual women who were their target readers (brides-to-be), previous readers (married women who used to read the media genre) as well as women who have never read or did not intend to read any women's glossies. The diversity of the sample, hence, was not only age-based but also rendered a wide range of standpoints upon women's media and the popular discourses of gender which the media reproduce. The participants were given an issue of a bridal magazine before the interview and asked to browse it so that during the interview they would share their ideas about it. So as not to bring gender to the participants' immediate attention (hence skew the data), they were informed that the purpose of the meetings was to learn as much as possible about the ways in which British women get married, and the magazine would be used as a point of reference in the conversation about the country's wedding culture. Consequently, each interview interweaved questions about the British wedding culture and the participants' personal bridal experience with their comments on the magazine and other self-disclosures occasioned by the interaction.

The main organising theoretical and analytical concept of the current examination is one of a subject position. The distinction between the self and subject position has been used in the research tradition aimed at contending the humanist idea of self as structured, unified and pre-determined. The basic premise of the anti-cognitivist, poststructuralist viewpoint has been that of a discursively mediated identity, the on-going positioning to discourses whereby self is negotiated.[10] This conceptualisation

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[9] Ewa Glapka, *Reading Bridal Magazines from a Critical Discursive Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

[10] Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré, "Positioning and Personhood," in *Positioning Theory*, ed. Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhøve (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 32-52; Carla Willig, "Reflections on the Use of a Phenomenological Method," *Qualitative*

implies that any utterance entails taking up a specific position available in discourse, depending on the context of the utterance. The contingent linguistic self, as opposed to the "core" identity which pre-exists the moment of identity work is experienced as the occupation of specific subject positions. Therefore, multiply situated, self cannot be reduced to but one, determined self. Because of its multiple locations identity often appears contradictory and incoherent. In the current chapter, the distinction is therefore used as a premise of exploring the situated practices of positioning to the dominant discourses of gender in which identities disperse into multiple and complex subject positions out of which no coherent and single feminine self can be seen to emerge.

Crucially in the context of this volume, such an approach demonstrates that the dominant, traditional ideologies of gender can be contested in the mundane identity work that does not necessarily seem overtly transgressive. The aim of the discussion is to show that the hegemonic discourses of gender can be defied by the individuals who situate themselves within the traditional binaries of masculinity and femininity. To this end, the analysis below follows the identity work of women who do not wish to move beyond the traditional notion of femininity but negotiate (and hence expose) the tight and reductive modes of being which the notion implies. In the analysis, this is demonstrated in the context where participants engage with a magazine that hails them via several popular discourses of femininity.

Following Foucault, submission to the discourses of power is inevitable as people internalise discourses unawares and therefore with no sense of being externally regulated. The dispersed system of power is, following Foucault, based on the "regimes of truth," i.e. on sets of normative knowledge.[11] With reference to the media-based discourses of gender, this means that individuals submit to the regulatory power of the dominant discourses of gender when, upon exposing themselves to media texts, they give the media-popularised claims concerning femininity the status of truth. Conversely, Hall,[12] inasmuch as he agrees with Foucault's idea of discourses as based on truth claims, goes further than to simply posit that people are invariably "duped" by them. Specifically, with reference to

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Research in Psychology 4 (2007): 209-225; John M. Winslade, "Utilising Discursive Positioning in Counseling," *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 33, no. 3 (2005): 351-364.

[11] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

[12] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979* (London: Routledge, 1996), 128-138.

media discourse, like Foucault (as well as Gramsci), [13] he sees media discourses as the hegemonic practices of imposing meanings which are given the status of "truth."[14] The status is legitimated and reproduced *if* the audience take up the subject positions from which specific meanings are read as true and coherent. Read from the "dominant-hegemonic position," media texts seem congruent because in such cases their recipients share the same subject position as the producer. However, the position of complete acceptance, Hall posits, is but one possible reaction. Audiences can also relate to media content from "negotiated" or "oppositional" subject positions,[15] the former entailing partial acceptance, the latter—rejection of media discourse. In the study discussed here, this view of positioning is extended from the study of media consumption onto the analysis of positioning to the socio-culturally available discourses (not necessarily the identity work done in direct relation with media reception).

The methodology of discourse analysis which was chosen as the most relevant to a study interested in the relations between identity process and power relations is (critical) discursive psychology. In addition to subject positions, discursive psychologists examine the relationship between self and power by means of interpretative repertoires, [16] i.e. consistently deployed sets of lexical resources which are socio-culturally established and therefore socio-culturally available (interpretable). In the discussion, I also demonstrate that the specific methodology is apposite in inquiries into the ambiguity of identity process, with its analytical tools such as ideological dilemmas and contradictions[17] as well as identity trouble offering the meta-language to talk about the complexity of the discursively mediated self. The latter occurs when specific identities projected in discourse are difficult to reconcile within one's auto-narrative[18]—troubled subject positions make

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[13] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1971).

[14] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 135.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay, *Opening Pandora's Box: A Sociological Analysis of Scientists' Discourse.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[17] Michael Billig, Susan Condor, Derek Edwards, Michael Gane, David Middleton and Alan Radley, *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking*. (London: Sage, 1988).

[18] Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton, "Biographies in Talk: A Narrative-Discursive Approach," *Qualitative Sociology Review* 2, no. 1 (2006): 25.

the self-narrative incoherent. Also, "[a] speaker may encounter trouble[19] in identity work by taking on, through the flow of discourse and its accompanying subject positions, an identity which in other contexts and in other discourses is negatively valued."[20] As regards ideological dilemmas, it is considered in critical discursive psychology that

> [t]he competing arguments and values which people draw on in making sense of their lives pose many dilemmas. Ideological dilemmas are linked with interpretative repertoires, since speakers work with the inconsistency in the repertoires they draw on and try to reconcile contradictory argumentative threads.[21]

Bridal magazines

Based on the extensive analysis of discourse of the sample of bridal magazines,[22] their texts and images hail readers into the subject positions which align with and reproduce both the traditional patriarchal ideology of gender and the neoliberal discourse of commodified femininity. For example, these positioning strategies can be found in the numerous interpellations of the reader as a woman who has always wanted to get married. The popular cultural storyline of a princess or a Cinderella tying the knot with the Prince Charming is perpetuated textually and visually, both directly and through numerous presuppositions and implicatures of this being the ultimate dream of every woman. The bridal identity emerging from the constructions is a hybrid identity of a "superbride,"[23] whose two

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[19] Margaret Wetherell, "Positioning and Interpretative Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-Structuralism in Dialogue" *Discourse and Society* 9 (1998): 387-412.

[20] Jill Reynolds, Margaret Wetherell and Stephanie Taylor, "Choice and Chance: Negotiating Agency in Narratives of Singleness," *The Sociological Review* 55, 2 (2007): 336.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Glapka, *Reading Bridal Magazines,* 52-112.

[23] Sharon Boden, "'Superbrides': Wedding Consumer Culture and the Construction of Bridal Identity," *Sociological Research Online* 6, no. 1 (2001): 1-14; Sharon Boden, "Consuming Pleasure on the Wedding Day: The Lived Experience of Being a Bride." In *Gender and Consumption: Material Culture and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life*, ed. Lydia Martens and Emma Casey (Hampshire UK: Ashgate Press, 2007), 109-122.

sub-identities (the childish fantasiser and project-manager) represent and legitimate heteronormative and commodified femininity.[24]

Another subject position widely available in the magazines is that of a member of a community of readers—women who share experience, knowledge as well as provide one another with emotional and "technical" support in the challenging process of getting oneself ready for the "big day." [25] The communal values, typical of the media genre of women's magazines, are clearly a powerful tool of reproducing both the consumer and gender practices as they carry the connotations of obviousness—they are constructed as ones of which "everybody" in the community knows and are therefore identity-forming. Finally, with its intense interpellation of readers as the consumers of wedding services and commodities, bridal glossies are an important part of the postfeminist media culture, [26] and reproduce many of its themes such as femininity construed as bodily (rather than as social or political identity), celebration of the stereotypical (pre-feminist) femininity, consumerism, commodification of difference, individualism and the neoliberal self-regulating subject, as well as the emphasis on the body surveillance and control (for example, the postfeminist makeover paradigm through which the latter theme is celebrated in the postfeminist media is frequently exploited in the bridal magazines in the articles such as "beauty countdown" which organize wedding preparations around the bride's bodily transformation).

The discussion below is based on extracts from two interviews which were selected for the current analysis with the intention of showing the complexity of gender contestations—as it is made manifest in discourse. The central question pursued in the current analysis is whether the interviewees accept the subject positions made available to them by media discourse, and if so, whether, while occupying them, the women indeed reproduce the media-based gender ideologies, or whether the ideologies are critically engaged with and/or refracted through the women's lived experience. Importantly, as mentioned, the examination described here probes women's relationship with the hegemonic discourses of gender not only on the level of media talk but also on the broader level of the

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[24] For similar findings in the American wedding magazines, see Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[25] Mary Talbot, "A Synthetic Sisterhood: False Friends in a Teenage Magazine," in *Gender Articulated: Language and Socially Constructed Self*, ed. Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz (London: Routledge, 1995), 143-165.

[26] Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 (2007): 147-66.