2006

Place, sexualities and community: theorising the constitution of 'lesbian' identities

Karen Lambert
University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation
NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
Place, sexualities and community: theorising the constitution of ‘lesbian’ identities

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Karen Lambert

Bachelor of Education (Physical and Health Education)
Master of Health Science (HIV Studies)
Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies (Higher Education)

The Faculty of Education
August 2006
I, Karen Lambert, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Karen A. Lambert

16th August, 2006
I would like to acknowledge with thanks and appreciation the following individuals who have supported me over the past 3 years.

Jacqui, Maree, Nell, Tabitha, and Scout – I could never give you praise, words or gifts that would ever express my gratitude and appreciation for agreeing to participate in this research. It was ‘our’ lives, we co-wrote this story, and now I give it back to you to share it with the world. You will never know how much your involvement has affected me, or what it has meant to me - I love you each dearly.

Billie and KJ – you know I now write this with tears rolling down my cheeks, we all know how it has been. The relief on my face is brightened by the love on yours. I can tell you right now there is no way this would have been written had it not been for your constant encouragement, ongoing faith in me, and belief in what I was doing. I still don’t know what ‘normal’ is, but hope this helps out. Mwah! Smiles to Kylie too for support from afar.

Kellie - For all the Kelli-ness, the critical feedback and endless conversation about how we are in the world to ourselves and others. Beyond the obvious literary and scholarly advice I cherish your place in my work and my life, and also my heart.

To my supervisors: Jan Wright – thankyou for your insightful feedback at the times when I most needed guidance and advice. I felt safe in your expert, steady hands. Valerie Harwood – thanks for your meticulous editing, provocative ideas, and critical questioning. All of which helped me through some hard theoretical miles. A special thanks to Mary Lou Rasmussen for your encouraging comments and critical feedback when ideas got lost or needed extending.
A very special call out to all *The Kimmies* and in memory of our shared moments in the 2002 Sydney *Gay Games* - without which this thesis would not have started.

To my family, thanks for stopping asking me ‘is it in yet?’ Special thanks to mum for the meals, red wine, the *Da Vinci Code* (the only novel I have read in 4 years), and the silent, tearful retreat in late 2005 when all seemed lost to me. To my dear sister-come-editor-literary critic Sally ‘Bek’ Lambert, I send out a huge thanks for listening and letting me practice my ideas with you. The confidence you instilled in my poems over shots of coffee in Narooma lays in print for a lifetime.

Special thanks to Gill Valentine, Steve Pile, Lynda Johnston, Ali Grant, Doreen Massey, and John Cameron for your advice, ideas, and questions in the early days of my thesis imaginings.

This work is dedicated to all those people who have perished at the hands of others who refuse to see their faces as their own. Maybe now I can do something for you …
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines, using queer theory - and in particular the work of Judith Butler - the ways in which five women re-construct and re-tell stories of importance to their notions of sexual self. In this process we learn about the complex ways in which they actively story and construct their sexual ‘selves’ over time and place, which in turn exposes the constrictive heteronormative discourses they draw upon in order to make sense of their lives as ‘lesbians’. In short, it explores how significant ‘things’ like coherence, loss and place come to matter to those attempting to live on the sexual margins, and in a world where sexual difference is all too often problematised and pathologised.

Some research in queer theory tends to ignore the more material experiences of ‘queers’ in favour of asserting affirmative politics which seek to rupture normative discourses. Whilst there is little doubt that dismantling the discursive force of heteronormativity is the primary aim of such research, this is sometimes at the expense of those for whom having an identity, and perhaps even desiring to be ‘normal’ is an important aspect of their “sense of self”. I take on this paradox by engaging with strongly empirical work in feminist and human geography in an attempt to find a theoretical middle ground capable of working with the complex data collected, and of suitably making an account of both the discursive and ‘real’ matters attached to sexual identity. A particular aim in this thesis is to challenge and stretch what queer theory can do in order to identify broader destructive discourses speaking through the participants’ words.

This approach to theory not only offered alternative ways in which to think about the ‘things’ that mattered most to the participants, but also encouraged creativity in collecting, analysing, and writing up the data. More specifically this influenced my choice of semi-structured life story interviewing and poetic forms of representation.
The research reported in this thesis draws mainly upon data gathered from semi-structured life story interviews. The five women recruited were involved for two years, during which time they participated in up to five interviews. The participants were purposively recruited from members of my Sydney Gay Games soccer team of 2002. Each woman was well known to me, and researching friends raised interesting methodological questions explored in Chapter Three and Four. As a focus for each interview, the women were asked to identify three critical moments during their lives in which they were, or became acutely aware of, their sexual identity as not being heterosexual or they sensed their sexual identity to be emerging or developing. These identity accounts were listened to, recorded, and analysed using deconstructive methods associated with poststructural theory. Other theoretical resources were also drawn upon in the design, conduct, analysis, and writing up stages, including psychoanalysis, ethnography, phenomenology, and poetic forms of representation.

From the data collected three ‘things’ came to matter to the participants. Firstly, the importance of affirming a coherent and essential sense of ‘lesbian’ identity as a way in which to survive in a world where coherence is valued, and incoherence is pathologised. Secondly, loss also mattered to these women, and of importance in this research is the ways in which loss is incorporated as a form of melancholic subjectivity. A particular focus in this thesis with regards to loss is working with what remains of experiences of loss, and re-configuring loss from a position of presence rather than absence. In short examining moments of melancholic agency. Finally, place matters and experiences of and in place appear to be constitutive of sexual identity. Experiences in and with place feature strongly in the participants’ stories with ‘sense of place’ emerging as a useful way in which to explore the mutually constitutive nature of place and sexuality.

By dealing with and acknowledging the material ‘things’ that matter most to these women, this thesis provides a number of unique ways of theorising about, sensing, experiencing, placing, and writing about sexualities and identities within a queer theoretical framework. The criticality of this framework is its focus not only on the discourses of binaries, absence,
lack and loss, but also on the possibilities of material disruption, resistance, agency, adequacy, and presence. As such this thesis extends literature in queer theory and feminist geography by providing an understanding of the complex ways in which these women engage with, are ‘made’ by, and deploy particular discourses of power associated with sexuality and gender as active processes of living their lives with pride and respect, and often simply as a matter of survival.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: [BRACKETING MY(SELF): A PLACE FROM WHICH TO LISTEN AND SPEAK]  

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION  

INTRODUCTION  4  

LOCATING THE RESEARCH  6  
Nurturing research questions  8  
Identifying research gaps  11  
  Queer theory  12  
  ‘Feminist geography’  14  
Overview of the research processes  17  
‘Queering’: playing in the cracks, dealing with the tensions  18  
  Dealing with theoretical tension  19  
  Sense of place  21  

LOCATING THE RESEARCHER  23  
Being positioned in ‘modernist’ discourse  23  
  Am I queer enough?  25  
Shifting positions: where is this heading?  26  

CHAPTER MAP  27  

CHAPTER TWO: ‘THEORIES’ AND ‘QUEERIES’  33  

INTRODUCTION  33  

‘THEORIES’  34  
Poststructuralism  35  
  Power and discourse  38  
  The ‘heterosexual matrix’  40  
Queer  42  
Queer theory  44  

‘QUEERIES’  47  
‘Queer’ tensions  48  
  Being versus doing queer  49  

DOING COMES TO MATTER  52  
Crafting ‘theories’ and ‘queeries’  53  
  Queering: dealing with tension  55
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frames and framing</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ‘queer’ frame emerging</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUEER METHODOLOGIES</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s gone before?</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer research methodologies and methods</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-framing a ‘queer’ methodology</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researching friends</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematising our ‘queer’ and sexual subjectivities</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODS</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants and participant recruitment</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interview process</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcribing</td>
<td>87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research design</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situating the methods</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life story vs life history</td>
<td>91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life story interviewing</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The critical moment or epiphany</td>
<td>95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artefacts of life</td>
<td>98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Queering’ the life story interview</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poststructural discourse analysis and deconstruction</td>
<td>109</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: REPRESENTATIONAL COMPLEXITIES</td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGICAL COMPLEXITIES</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview complexities: shifting between methodological and theoretical concerns</td>
<td>118</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Knowing’ and ‘known’ participants</td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confessional effect</td>
<td>124</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapeutic effect</td>
<td>130</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing complexities: not just an issue of representational style</td>
<td>133</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Touching us where we live’</td>
<td>134</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEALING WITH THE COMPLEXITIES</td>
<td>137</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Poetic representation

_A question of ‘quality’_

The ‘production’ process

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER FIVE: ‘QUEER’ SUBJECTIVITIES AND PASSIONATE ATTACHMENTS

INTRODUCTION

AFFIRMING COHERENT ‘SELVES’

Identities matter: Fuss, Sedgwick and Butler

Natural born lesbian: constructing a coherent ‘lesbian’ identity

Collective identities: ‘I’ at the junction of who ‘we’ are

A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

Passionate attachments

Troubling _The Trouble With Normal_

  _What is ‘normal’?_

  _What’s the trouble with ‘normal’?_

  ‘The possibilities for a livable life’

CHAPTER SIX: WORKING WITH WHAT REMAINS

INTRODUCTION

THEORISING MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA

A line is drawn: _Mourning and Melancholia_

The Butler Twist

  _Melancholic subjectivity_

Butler in mourning

WHAT REMAINS?

  ‘New’ questions, representations, and alternative meanings

Bodily, ideal and spatial remains

BODILY REMAINS

Tabitha

  ‘Acting like a boy was first nature for me’

  _Becoming Huck Finn_

  _I’m not like them_

  _Returning to the remains: imagining and mourning the boy_

Scout

  _A boy who could fly_

  _Imagining and reclaiming loss_

IDEAL REMAINS

Scout
It is important to say the names of who we are, the names of the places we have lived, and to write the details of our lives …

We have lived; our moments are important …

Recording the details of our lives is a stance against bombs with their mass ability to kill, against too much speed and efficiency. A writer must say yes to life, to all of life …

We must become writers who accept things as they are, come to love the details, and step forward with a yes on our lips so there can be no more noes in the world, noes that invalidate life and stop these details from continuing.

(Goldberg, 1986: 44)
PROLOGUE:

[BRACKETING] 1 MY(SELF): A PLACE FROM WHICH TO LISTEN AND SPEAK

This thesis is set against a very significant and dark backdrop in terms of natural and human histories of loss, mourning, devastation, hatred, and power. Five significant worldwide events have coincided with my writing in this project and in many ways have transformed and moved me inexplicably. This project has evolved against and within a ‘manmade’ War on Terrorism and the rarely disclosed deaths of over 100 000 Iraqi civilians. It was dulled by the genocidal blood of over one million Sudanese people, and a million more displaced. It has witnessed overt political racism in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and has been sickened by a Western alliance consummated by oil and bodies that do not matter. It has sunk into the murky waters of the Indian Ocean as 100s of 1000s of humans were away into the sea while I drank a beer at the Newport Arms Hotel.

1 The process of phenomenological reduction (Kvale, 1996) or bracketing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Lawler, 1998; Van Manen, 1990) involves suspending ontological judgement upon the existence or non-existence of the content of an experience. All attempts to make sense or draw meaning from what is said of the experience is suspended. Kvale suggests that [bracketing] can be pictured as taking out the subjects attempts to give meaning or make meaning of the experience. It involves suspending (neither negating nor doubting the existence of world or self) “their own presuppositions, prior knowledge and espoused viewpoints” and engage in an open and “single-minded effort … to allow the data to speak for itself … [the result being research that] emerges as an exploration, via personal experiences, of inherited and prevailing cultural understandings” (Crotty, 1998: 90). Kvale (1996) sees this practice as placing the common sense and scientific ‘knowledge’ about the phenomenon in brackets (out of action) in order to arrive at an unbiased description of the essence of the phenomena. It also involves the identification of the taken for granted assumptions and the situational features that are the determinants of the experience (eg age, gender, historicity, the place, spatiotemporal factors, social setting) (Graumann, 2001). By doing this, the world and the self are reduced to mere phenomenon (Kvale, 1996), and the words that describe the experience provide a picture in our mind of the experience unhindered by layers of pre-supposed meaning (from participants’, researcher and through language and discourse). In this way it is thought that as close as possible rendering of the experience, event or moment is permitted to stand alone unencumbered by analytical or theoretical tools. I use [bracketing] for three reasons: firstly, as a way in which to bracket my own experiences of the phenomenon under investigation; secondly, to allow the reader to view my various experiences, beliefs and biases; and thirdly in order to highlight and bring to the surface my own subject positions through the suspension of my ontological and epistemological judgements as author, writer, researcher, friend and ‘queer’. In this way I am also attempting to engage in a philosophical and writing method which initiates a process of identifying and making overt where I am coming from, why, how and in what ways. [Bracketing] Myself: A place from which to listen and speak is the bracketing of my experiences and feelings at the time of commencing and writing this thesis.
Upon reflection these events are filled with deep human suffering and a kind of loss almost beyond expression, comprehension and imagination. This type of worldwide melancholia is symptomatic of the loss of people, objects, places and ideals. I could not begin this academic venture without acknowledging the death, destruction, horror, fear and blackness I see, sense and feel all around me. I have been connected both viscerally and intellectually to ‘others’ through their suffering, and now I mourn with those who can, with those who remain. This emotional connection has served to place me within my work and within a stream of humanity that at the same time ignites and repels me.

In late 2004 I attended a rally in support of the people of Fallujah who in their 10s of 1000s had fled their homes of rubble across rivers of bullets to so called ‘liberation’ and Western Imperial ‘freedom’. At the rally I bought a copy of *Green Left Weekly* featuring the ‘battle of Fallujah’ on the cover and reporting on the unknown plight of millions of Sudanese on the back cover. I write in a time where fear, violence, loss and indifference manifest through bullets, religion, economics, oil, blood and politics, and where hope, love and acceptance are ideals that socialists cry and speak about but fall on partially turned away, silenced, silent and frightened ears. At this present time I am feeling both transformed by, and a transformer of, power.

On the 27th December 2004 I felt my white, middle class privilege so acutely that I questioned all that I had been engaged with over the past two years. Suddenly to analyse and critique identity became mundane and offensive when laid over and placed above a ‘natural’ loss of life, place and identity. As I theorised about mourning I was thrown into the words via a lived and felt experience of tremendous worldwide loss. This prologue is my first writing after the Indian Ocean Tsunami and I wonder how it will change from now till December and if I can actually put into words how I am feeling as a researcher and a human. I avoid the news and sit here now with tears glazing my eyes, all the while in the back of my head I hear “just write, it’s just an assignment, get it done, don’t worry”. My task is simple really - in this process that is called a thesis or a PhD I have to prove that I am a worthy scholar and researcher. I have to show what I know and can do. This is my
job, this is what I do, I have done it before. I will get it done. So in reality this text, this work, this thesis - all of it - is about me and always has been. I am in some ways buoyed by the idea that my observations, views, interests, and values are guided by world images and human suffering, but in other ways I’m disgusted by this. Perhaps I am just heavy from the hypocrisy of writing in this dark time?

I feel like a selfish fool perched here in my beautiful house having taken twelve months off work to indulge myself in writing. The arguments in my head continued today until my sister sent me an SMS text suggesting that we sponsor an orphaned child in Indonesia because she couldn’t stand to see them “have no food or education or be sent off to child prostitution just because their parents died” (Bek SMS, 10:04 am, 4/1/05). Or then strangely in the minutes before that message that another friend just had to share a quote with me from a book she was reading, “it is not what we accumulate in the world but what we give” (Lou SMS, 9:39 am, 4/1/05). My sponsored child’s name is Maria, she is nearly 3, she lives in East Timor.

And so it seems as though the world and others have conspired against my sadness and self pity and forced me to again remember why I am doing this, what I have to offer to others and what I would be able to do as a result. This thesis is not the end for me, it is a beginning, a story, and clearly the events that shape me will also shape it. I cannot take my emotions and feelings out of this work … I have never intended to do so. To theorise about identity and the relationships between people, places and events is to continuously and consciously ask questions about who and how we are as humans, and in many ways to transform humanity from what remains of loss, disaster, mourning, and frailty. The constant presence and under current of these events, the plight of the people and the destruction of places has guided my analysis in ways that only extreme devastation and loss of life can force an academic to step beyond their own privilege and words and actually try to do something.

Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other.
And if we’re not, we’re missing something. (Butler, 2004a: 23)
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Nell: I think as I get older I realize how gay I am and how comfortable I am with it, you know, six years ago I probably didn’t feel as comfortable as I do now but I was younger and I was growing and I was learning about the person that I was and I was learning about whether it’s okay to express that. And now I just feel so good about expressing who I am and I do it every day in my work place and in my home place. I don’t feel afraid of that. I want to do that and I’ll do that.
Int: So your sexual identity is an important part of you.
Nell: It is a very important part of me.

I can do everything with my language, but not with my body. What I hide by my language, my body utters. I can deliberately mold my message, not my voice. (Barthes, 1998: 44, italics in original)

Our sense of place is memory qualified and deepened through imagination. Memory and imagination depend on experiences and take place in our bodies, which act as sensory mediators of, and witness to, this experience. There is a unity between bodily sense and place. (Hillis, 1999: 83, italics in original)

INTRODUCTION

This thesis begins and ends in paradox, and the above quotes set its paradoxical tone. The quotes speak in paradoxical ways of identities, bodies, meaning, language, experience, sensing, memory, and place. They are, all at once spatial, material, theoretical, discursive, idealistic, imaginative, and important. For me the quotes immediately signal the elusive question that many of us pose to ourselves - ‘who am I?’ In this sense I draw on the term paradox to signal contradiction, complexity and ‘messiness’. I suggest that each of the above terms or concepts, individually and in combination highlight the inherent contradictions and complexities of research, as well as the colourful and necessary ‘messiness’ of our lives. I maintain that to start and end in paradox acknowledges the ‘messy’ and fluid ways in which we continually make sense of our experiences, our place(s), and our selves – over and over again. This thesis then offers a space that remains
open to ongoing and continual revision because the beginning and end are not finite or conclusive, and the space in between seeks to nurture not solve.

The main aim of this research is to speculate about the nature of the relationship between sexual identity and place, and so these terms are each integral aspects of this thesis. This involves empirical and theoretical approaches. Empirically it involves collecting stories about material experiences of self and place. Theoretically, the thesis is concerned with ‘lesbian’ identity and the ways in which a particular group of lesbians understand themselves as viable sexual subjects in relation to each other, others, community, and place. Inextricably linked to this is an exploration of the normative discourses that give meaning to one’s sense of self. As such it is concerned with processes of subjection, and the complex ways in which our experiences and understandings of sexual identity matter very much to our sense of self and, sense of place. The quotes speak strongly to the notion that bodies matter, so too do identities, and places. This work is therefore heavily informed by the ideas of Judith Butler.

The quotes also signal this research to be interdisciplinary. Whilst it is strongly based within the theoretical traditions of poststructuralism and queer theory, and the empirical work of human and feminist geographers, this thesis stands out as a space which

---

2 Because of the complexity associated with the language involved in this research and the necessary ongoing maintenance of identity categories I ask the reader’s indulgence to use identity categories as a way in which to describe the participants (and others) in this research. Lesbian was used as an identity category for the purpose of the recruitment of women who were physically and emotionally primarily attracted to women. Other sexualities were not addressed in this research. Participants were asked to self identify their sexual orientation if they wished to on a preliminary participant information form. It is interesting to note that the women variously opted for fixed and stable identity categories such as “GAY”, “Lesbian/Gay”, “Lesbian or queer”, “Homosexual”, “Gay!” These ‘identifications’ are an interesting aspect that will be explored in later chapters. In order to avoid an essentialist conceptualisation of sexual orientation I also acknowledge that physical and emotional attraction between women does not constitute a lesbian and that lesbian identities are as diverse as other identities. As such, at times. throughout this thesis I use ‘lesbian’ in scare quotes to denote lesbian (as a noun and verb) as an unstable identity category (I use ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ in the same ways).

3 I have been influenced by the more critically theorised work of human, cultural and feminist geographers. It is not within the scope of this work to tease out the historical differences between these concepts. In this thesis from here on I use the term ‘feminist geography’ to encompass my interests in humanist, cultural and feminist approaches to geography which have been influenced in the main by poststructural thinking about difference, identity, power, the body, subjectivity, knowledge, politics, and representation.
consistently aims to ‘trouble’, meld, and extend the limits of each discipline. The main purpose of this is to use the data collected in order to ‘craft’ robust theoretical and methodological resources that are transportable, flexible, malleable, and responsive. In this sense I strive to critique and ‘trouble’ theoretical concepts and methodologies at the same time as deploying them for specific analytical purposes.

This introductory chapter serves to set the scene for the research and this thesis, and as such performs three functions: firstly it locates the research; secondly it locates the researcher; and thirdly, it provides an overview of the chapters to follow.

LOCATING THE RESEARCH

Nell’s opening quote typifies the long thought out debate about whether we are ‘born’ or ‘made’ who we are. On the one hand sexuality, like gender, is assumed to be the inevitable outcome of a ‘natural’ set of pre-given biological and/or psychological characteristics - or just ‘who I am’ - which has linked the assumption of ‘naturalness’ to a belief that sexual desire, behaviour, and identity can be joined together, melded, and also named. On the other hand, we hear that individual characteristics, like gender or sexuality, are acquired or learned through social conditioning (‘I was growing and I was learning about the person that I was’). Nell’s comments also speak to Butler’s (1999a) theorising of performativity where it is suggested that neither gender nor sex (or sexuality) is ‘natural’, but each is, rather, a repeated stylisation of normative concepts. By beginning with the theoretical notion that both gender and sexuality are performative acts, both producing and produced by discourses of regulatory power (Butler, 1999a), this thesis sets out to explore the discourses associated with sexual subjectivity rather than the people who articulate them. In

---

4 In the following thesis I draw upon a German term Verfremdung or troubling, and the Foucauldian notion of critique in an attempt to disturb and question the taken for granted discursive practices and categories of subjectification. Foucault, according to Salih (2004: 302) “characterises critique as a mode of ethical self-questioning that is akin to virtue, where virtue does not denote obedience to the law but its opposite – a critical and questioning relation to the norms by which subjects are constituted” (italics in original). In rethinking Foucault’s question ‘what is critique?’ Butler proposes that critique be viewed “as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing” (Salih, 2004: 307).

5 This is also deployed within modern lesbian and gay politics.
Nell’s words I hear a need to repeat her identity in order to affirm it and have it validated as ‘normal’ (‘I was learning about whether it’s okay to express that’). I also sense the inherent difficulties of doing this given the discursive resources available to make such assertions. That said this work also concerns itself with the very ‘real’ ways in which the participants make sense of, experience, feel, and describe their gender and sexuality as important aspects of their everyday lives. Contrary to Butler’s argument that there is no pre-discursive subject, but consistent with her understanding that to ‘seek’ coherence is a relatively ‘normal’ thing for most people to do, this position also assumes a body within discourse that can feel, speak and act. So faced with the contradictions implicit in Barthes’ quote above, and embedded in the data, I propose to maintain tension throughout this work by refusing to theorise in ways which either delegitimise or valorise sexual desire, behaviours, or identities. Rather, I contend that at issue is an examination of the participants’ passionate attachments to various notions of a ‘lesbian’ identity, and considering the kinds of work this identity does for them. Viewing this as performative puts regulatory discourses under the microscope.

So where do these ideas now leave this work? Basically I hope this thesis is situated within the spaces in-between. When I look at Nell’s comments I see theoretical contradiction and ambiguity, but I also see material resilience, strength, and resistance. I therefore wish to begin to locate this research by acknowledging that much of what follows is, like most conversations about identity, ‘messy’. I do not claim to be able to ‘solve’ this messiness rather I aim to nurture it and ‘deal’ with some of the tensions it presents. In the first instance, this involves a wary respect of what theory can do; in the second, a rejection of binary terms in favour of a focus on the space in-between historical discourses and the complicity of such terms; and thirdly, an appreciation of the very ‘real’ ways in which the participants went about their everyday lives. Simplistically this means that Nell can take up and draw meaning from both positions, but then asking what is at stake if she does not take up either position? Or takes up both from time to time? This view maintains that individual sexuality(ies), like other individual characteristics, are situated within, and are the product of, various levels of circulating historical, cultural and social definitions, rules, and practices of (hetero)sexuality. As such the individual (and collective) meanings given to
sexualities (behaviours, desires and identities) are open to individual interpretations that are always contextualised (placed), and highly contingent.

These initial concerns and ‘messy’ ideas (plus my own subject position discussed in a moment) led me to pose a loose set of questions about sexual identity, place, and subjectivity.

**Nurturing research questions**

In this research I put off setting specific research questions for a long time because I sought to keep the process open in order to allow the participants to guide the investigation and tell me the themes from which I could work back and organise the research and interview questions. The hunches I started with were very specific and I did not want to be limited to them or create positivist/reductive assumptions about ‘what or who lesbians are or do’. This is about the impossibility of objective ‘truth’, and the theories I chose to draw upon make deconstructing this notion an ongoing challenge in this thesis. I developed the research questions after: reflecting upon my own experiences, consulting the literature and finding some gaps, after the preliminary interviews, and in response to the interview situation and the participants. This allowed me to mix intuition and feelings, with theory and data. It also required me to return to the literature after each interview, and to refine my approaches accordingly.

The process of nurturing research questions for this thesis began some time ago when I started to reflect upon my own life experiences, and to think about who and how I was I in the world. Part of this process was engaging with ‘my community’, ‘my places’, and my past. Through experiences of place I felt as though I was ‘coming out’, that I was experiencing my(self) for the first time in my life. I looked around me and started to wonder was I alone? Had others, have others or do others experience the same things as

---

6 Maybe this was naïve, perhaps it was cheating but I wanted the data to speak about the experiences and stories not to have stories presented in response to broad research questions with me all the time manipulating the participants’ words towards my own ‘answers’.
me? How did I come to be here? What life experiences effected how I felt now and how I may feel in the future? Has anyone ever derived the same liberating experience of engagement with place, and an emerging sense of self and sexuality? Is there a link between place and sexuality? These questions were the early beginnings of my PhD thesis imaginings.

The more I thought, the more I questioned. It dawned on me that the sadness I had felt at the loss of love may have been eased by a place based experience, and an emerging sense of (my)place. I looked out into my place(s) and felt attached, grounded, protected, ‘at home’. I wondered, did this happen to everyone? I had a hunch it might.

When I looked beyond my places I saw a social, political, structural and theoretical space that did not understand, accept or value me; a social world that excluded and isolated me; a big space where I was not even acknowledged let alone appreciated, and where my gender and sexual non-conformity positioned me daily as ‘different’. My questions started to become more refined and purposeful, the hunches more in need of support and inquiry. In the face of my own observable and felt biases, binaries and inconsistencies I asked:

- How is it that ‘lesbians’ came to constitute themselves and their sexualities?
- What meanings do they make of their experiences of self and sexuality, especially within the constraints of heteronormativity?
- What discourses do they draw upon to make these meanings?
- How do experiences of self, others, places, events, agencies and institutions impact upon the emergence, refinement, maintenance, creation and existence of notions of identity, subjectivity, self and sexuality?

Put simply I asked a fundamental question about how we come to be who and how we are, and what social factors, discourses, agencies and institutions hinder and or facilitate this process of becoming or being? And in juxtaposition to all this - is there such a thing as a ‘lesbian’ identity? Do we really become anything? If not, why are we so compelled to affirm an essential ‘lesbian’ identity and a sense of coherence? What is at stake if we do
not? These are the main research questions posed in this thesis and explored, refined, and extended in the chapters to come.

An exploration of these questions is a study of the ways in which a particular group of women come to constitute themselves as a particular type of coherent sexual subject over time and place(s). Associated with this is considering what this subject position is, how it comes about, and how speaking, feeling, acting subjects have the potential to confront, challenge, and shift the very discourses on which they draw to carefully constitute themselves. This involves exploring the limits of subjection and the agentic potential of the women in this research and sexual subjectivities in creative ways, and careful consideration of the places from which they speak, feel and act. The women in this research constitute themselves for a variety of reasons associated with their desire for coherence. Some of these investments were conveyed as positive and worthy of celebration, whilst others were conveyed as negative and indicative of intense and indescribable loss. Each utterance is tied to understanding the discursive fields from which the women operate or have ever operated. This requires thinking about how power and knowledge are implicated in processes of subjection, as well as the participants’ investments in these processes. These directions also present yet another personal quandary as I consider the privileges associated with speaking from my own white, middle class, academic position, sitting safely inside discourses of research and theory.

My feelings, ideas, hunches, questions and reading brought me intuitively to queer theory, and human and feminist geography. I am seeking a place where philosophy and theory can meet tangible, lived and located experiences; a kind of place where queer theory bumps into the historical traditions of geography (humanism, phenomenology, ethnography and feminism). In front of me two distinct spheres of literature rose: strongly theorised queer literature, and empirical, experiential, embodied and sensual geographical literature. My ideological leanings and own experience had brought me to this place viscerally and intuitively. I had starting concerns with some of the literature I was reading and its ability to adequately help me to deal with the data, and so a few small cracks started to emerge. These cracks presented some gaps in the literature and signalled a place where I could slip
in some of my own questions and ideas. My research fills some gaps between these fields of literature and in the following pages I identify the ways in which each field informs the other, and the research more broadly. More specifically I explain the contributions this thesis makes to both queer research and theorising, and ‘feminist geography’.

**Identifying research gaps**

The discussions that follow deal with notions of queer (re)presentation and (re)presenting queer in terms of ‘definitions’, theory, practice and research, as well as ways of thinking, *being*, and *doing* both queer and queer theory. This research is located within some of the compelling, but often contradictory contemporary conversations about what constitutes the words, meanings, actions, and intentions behind queer and queer theory. In the following section I briefly critique queer and queer theory in order to determine what kind of work each can do in this thesis. I have some problems with some queer concepts and identify these as gaps in terms of what queer theory can do in the context of this research. I am also quite drawn to many aspects of queer and queer theory and use these ideas, and the gaps, to cultivate one of the key terms I use in this thesis, namely *queering*.

After the discussion of queer theory I then move on to critique research by human, feminist and queer geographers who examine lives and experiences (predominantly of gay men and lesbians) in relation to place and space. This melded discipline (feminist geography, sexuality and gender studies, and queer theory) presents some wonderful and insightful empirical and theoretical work.

These discussions are necessary for three reasons. Firstly, they identify the gaps in the literature I draw from and signal places of entry for this research. Secondly, by examining

---

7 I have made deliberate attempts to ask contemporary questions and seek out current research and literature which does not dwell within or on historical discussions of queer theory. I find it counter productive and counter intuitive to keep going back over genealogical mappings of queer theory. I am more interested in exploring how queer and queer theory can be an applied theory, and a liveable, usable ontological praxis today; and that whilst having a colourful and interesting epistemological past has the potential to be applied to everyday settings.

8 This discussion is elaborated in Chapter Two and Three.
what has been done I am able to ask what each of these disciplines can do. This discussion nurtures ambiguity and keeps tension on the key terms and resources of this investigation. Thirdly, this discussion deals with my concerns that neither field could adequately, separately, take account of the data that had been collected.

*Queer theory*

Queer theory is compelling because it has revolutionised research and discussions of sexuality by providing a critical lens to scrutinise identity and interrogate social and cultural production, and discourses. This interrogation shatters, by deconstruction and politics, the positivist, biological and heterosexist assumptions which differentiate people based on sex or sexuality, and to a lesser extent, gender. Queer cracks the heteronormative façade by de-centering regimes of ‘truth’, knowledge, and power which construct notions of sexual ‘normalcy’.

The term *queer* offers many (including lesbians and gay men) a number of alternative, non-restrictive gender and sexual identities all of which are directly opposed to the ‘norm’ - heterosexuality (Spargo, 1999; Warner, 2003). This itself is an act of political defiance not just against heterosexuality, but also against the gay and lesbian movements (Jagose, 1996; Seidman, 1996a, 2004); and, as Spargo (1999) suggests serves as a specific and deliberate act to upset the status quo everywhere. Thus the choice of the word *queer* is important at the personal level in terms of inclusiveness, and at the political level in terms of activism against heteronormative discourses of difference.

*Queer* can be seen as an intellectualised category, an identity, a theory, or as a process of critique of fixed notions of identity, associated norms and assumptions. As a single word

---

9 Throughout this thesis I deploy the term *queer* in a number of ways. I use queer, and queer theory (not in scare quotes) as proper nouns that relate to the ‘usual’ definitions, understandings and deployments of each term. I use ‘queer’ (in scare quotes) in three ways. Firstly, I use this style to imply an unstable identity category. Secondly, I deploy it in order to represent and highlight the terms many ambiguous understandings and deployments, and necessary ongoing resistance to definition. Thirdly, I deploy ‘queer’ as a verb, as doing opposed to being; and hence ‘queering’ will also, often, appear in scare quotes. Where I italicise terms I
*queer* has multiple meanings and it is its primary un-categorical appeal that matters most to those who take it up as a personal and/or political position, including myself in this research.

Whilst queer theory has a distinct legacy it is also not without its critics, and drawing upon it poses five problems for this research. Firstly, I am concerned that in the process of creating a ‘queer’ identity, a binary identity, ‘non-queer’, is established. If queer theory is *anti*-identity, *anti*-assimilationist, *anti*-material, and radical, I wonder how this binary can be dealt with, and actually how *queer* is queer? It seems an idealistic view focussed on yet another identity category (added to the list LGBT …), and whilst queer theory raises “questions regarding strategies of political engagement, beliefs about individual efficacy, and social marginalisation” (Rollins & Hirsch, 2003: 292), it also specifies who can fit under the ‘queer’ umbrella and who can not.

Secondly, queer is not the way the participants in this research explained, lived or felt their lives. Neither the term nor the identity has little relevance to their everyday experiences and they do not relate to, or identify with it. So to theorise only using queer theory seems to be at odds with the data and the participants. I wonder whether queer can be something more tangible than politics and theory?

Thirdly, I am concerned that queer theory cannot take into account the practical, embodied and material nature of the regular and everyday social interactions of the participants. Much of the work in queer theory seems polemic, elitist, and out of touch with the ‘realities’ of the participants, and with little empirical ‘evidence’ of the materiality of ‘queer’ identities or lives. The participants spoke about themselves in essentialist ways, and I now deliberate about how to reconcile their decidedly *un*-queer ways of *being* with queer theorising.

Fourthly, queer and queer theorising has been much criticised for who and what it includes and speaks for (white, male, middle class, academics, capitalism, Eurocentricity), and who usually do this for additional emphasis. Finally, when I use either ‘queer’, ‘queering’ or *queering* I do so in order to connote my own theoretical or methodological reading of, use of, or deployment of each term.
and what it excludes and remains silent for/about (women, colonised, lesbians)\textsuperscript{10}. It is a constant criticism that queer theory fails to acknowledge, address or suitably deal with the specific problematics introduced through material bodies that are raced and classed\textsuperscript{11}, gendered\textsuperscript{12}, and sexed \textit{beyond} homosexuality\textsuperscript{13}. Again I am concerned about the data and how the participants’ multiple subjectivities can be \textit{materially} accommodated.

Finally, many feminists are critical of queer theory and suggest that a focus on discourse combined with the academically exclusive language make it a limited political resource against heteronormativity, oppression and violence against women\textsuperscript{14}, and the corporeal experiences of identities of difference. I am frustrated that queer theory offers such resistant potential but find little evidence of queer in everyday action\textsuperscript{15} and lives, that is, \textit{doing} what it was supposed to do, and rupturing heteronormative discourses. Hence a major reason for turning to ‘feminist geography’ is because the field has a strong sociological and phenomenological basis which provides something more material to play with.

\textit{‘Feminist geography’}

In the main sexuality research in geography is compelling because it offers a material, felt, social, spatial, and everyday picture and perspective of how the participants in this research experienced their sexual identity through and with places and events. Whilst not a separate field within geography, sexuality research\textsuperscript{16} emerged from the recognition by human and feminist geographers that many important aspects of humans’ lives that shaped the social,

\textsuperscript{10}See for example: Dilley, 1999; Edwards, 1998; Gamson and Moon, 2004; Jackson, S., 1999a; Khayatt, 2002; Martin, 1998; Morton, 2001; Walters, 1996.
\textsuperscript{12}See for example: Jackson, S., 1999a; Khayatt, 2002; Walters, 1996; Weedon, 1999; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996.
\textsuperscript{14}See for example: Grant, 1997; Hennessy, 1993, 1994, 1995; Jackson, S., 1999a; Jackson and Scott, 1996; Medhurst and Munt, 1997; Walters, 1996.
\textsuperscript{15}I don’t consider shopping centre ‘Kiss-ins’ or street ‘Die-ins’ to be everyday ‘queer’ acts.
\textsuperscript{16}It was mainly those working from within ‘feminist geography’ who started to ask questions about sexuality and place. From here on I use the term ‘feminist geography’ mainly because there is no field called ‘sexual geography’ or ‘queer geography’ (though some geographers do refer to themselves as ‘queer’).
political, economic and cultural geographies of interaction and spatial occupation were being omitted from research (Bell & Valentine, 1995a). This includes considering the impact of gender, ethnicity, class, and finally sexuality, on humans, places and spaces. In terms of this thesis, ‘feminist geography’ provides a resource for asking questions, collecting data, and for understanding, interpreting, and analysing the data collected in terms of sexuality and place.

As an analytical resource this strongly empirical field grounds the data collected in material experiences of identity and place. The work of ‘feminist geographers’ deals with, and tells stories about the multitude of ways in which the participants (and myself) occupy, create and interact with spaces and places, and the feelings derived from various places and our interactions in place. Importantly it prioritises what it feels like to have or perform a ‘queer’ identity or body in both queer and non-queer spaces. Hence ‘feminist geography’ is able to make an account of the complex material and social experiences, and ‘truths’ about living as a ‘lesbian’. It makes our experiences seem ‘real’ and ‘valid’, and something to write about.

The work of many ‘feminist geographers’ is based upon early studies of gay urban sociology (Levine, 1979); gay ‘ghettos’ (Park, 1928; Wirth 1928), lesbian and gay migration patterns (Harry, 1974); lesbian and gay communities and neighbourhoods (Castells, 1983; Castells & Murphy, 1982; Weightman, 1981; Winchester & White, 1988); and lesbian and gay places (like bars) (Achilles, 1967; Gagnon & Simon, 1967; Harry, 1974; Weightman, 1981) (all cited in Bell & Valentine, 1995a). Most of the findings of this research deal with the ways in which sexualities are spatially organised and how so-called queer experiences (but mainly of gay men) are mapped onto the landscape. Much of this work stresses the importance of asserting some kind of essential (‘gay’, ‘lesbian’) identity or place, in terms of developing a sense of community, solidarity and belonging within normative spaces. By focussing only on ‘gay’ places and/or ‘gay’ identities an important
factor is ignored, namely that places, spaces and identities are (hetero)sexualised\(^{17}\), and
gendered\(^{18}\). This suggests a tendency to ignore the ways that discourses of
heteronormativity constitute identities and places, and in the process reinforces binaries
(queer/non-queer, heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman, insider/outside) (Knopp, 1994;
Nast, 2001; Rose, 1993; Valentine, 1998), and stable identities and places.

A critical review of literature in ‘feminist geography’ suggests that geographical questions
about sexuality are ideally investigated using a combination of empirical work about
‘queer’ experiences of place(s), and theoretical approaches which attempt to explore the
discursive socio-cultural meanings of spatiality (Nast, 2001). This requires a focus on
explaining how marginalised identities are experienced and lived out as well as theorising
about how they are constituted, negotiated and contested. These matters have been dealt
with by a handful of critically theorised ‘queer’ explorations\(^ {19}\). Such research offers a
critique of subjectivity and place(s) in ways that refuse the valorisation of identities or
places, and seek to disrupt normative notions of identity and place. The present research
seeks to contribute to both the empirical and theoretical richness of ‘feminist geography’. I
intend do this by deploying queer theory theoretically and materially, and more specifically
by playing with the notion of ‘sense of place’\(^ {20}\), as it is rarely, if ever, specifically

\(^{17}\) See for example: Bell and Valentine, 1995a, 1995b; Binnie, 1995; Chouinard and Grant, 1996; Costello and
Hodge, 1999; Davis, 1995; Duncan, 1996; Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter, 1997; Kirby and Hay, 1997;

\(^{18}\) See for example: Aitchison, 1999; Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1997; Richardson, 2001; Rose, 1993; Waitt,

\(^{19}\) For more theoretically oriented research about place and identity see: Bell, Binnie, Holliday, Longhurst and
Peace (2001); Johnston and Valentine (1995); Johnston (2005); Keith and Pile (1993); Longhurst (2001); Nast

\(^{20}\) ‘Sense of place’ has been obliquely, not explicitly, explored in relation to sexualities, hence my interest in
investigating sexual identity and place in terms of ‘sense of place’. I draw a long bow by suggesting the
following possible links between ‘sense of place’ and ‘feminist geography’ research with gay men and
lesbians. Related research with gay men includes: gay ghettos and gay place-making or communities
(Almgren, 1994; Bell & Valentine, 1995b; Castells, 1983; Costello & Hodge, 1999; Davis, 1995; Forest,
1996; Taylor, Kaminski & Dugan, 2002); sexual practices and health (Brown, Maycock, Van de Ven,
Prestage, Langdon & Shaw, 2004; Brown & Maycock, 2005; Flowers, Marriott & Hart, 2000; McInnes,
Bollen, Couch & Dowsett, 2000; ); and sexualised economic consumption and capitalism (Binnie, 1995;
Knopp, 1987, 1990, 1992, 1995). In relation to lesbians ‘sense of place’ could be inferred from research
examining: lesbian places and communities (Adler & Brenner, 1992; Bouthillette, 1997; Chao, 2000;
Chouinard & Grant, 1996; Costello & Hodge, 1999; Eves, 2004; Farquhar, 2000; Grant, 1997; Kuntsman,
examined in a queer context in terms of identity and geography. I aim to examine ‘sense of place’ theoretically, empirically, and sexually from a ‘feminist geography’ perspective.

This discussion about the disciplines and the theoretical potentials each provides opens up three paths. Firstly, it identifies the gaps in the literature I am drawing from and signals places of entry for the questions in this research. Secondly, by asking what both queer theory and ‘feminist geography’ can do, the previous discussions nurture ambiguity and keep tension on the key terms and resources of this investigation, thus enabling alternative deployments from within each discipline. Thirdly, I can now effectively deal with my concerns that neither field could adequately, separately, take account of the data collected. This prompts me to consider what work I can and cannot do with each discipline, and to begin to ‘craft’ a research process capable of suitably dealing with the tensions created by sometimes static disciplines but always ‘messy’ data. This latter aspect is dealt with later under the heading ‘queering’, but before proceeding to this important concept I would briefly like to lay out the research process.

**Overview of the research processes**

For this research I recruited and interviewed five women from my 2002 Sydney Gay Games soccer team. Five interviews were scheduled for each woman with three21 focussing on critical moments at any time throughout their lives in which they were, or became acutely aware of not being heterosexual. These identity accounts were listened to, recorded, explored, analysed and theorised. The research method of life story interviewing permits a focus on experiences from the past that require both a retrospective and concurrent sense

---


21 Interview one was on *The Gay Games* and Interview five was conducted in small groups and offered a chance to discuss and reflect upon the research process.
making process. The interview questions and responses highlight the sensuous and spatial nature of lived experience, and the ambiguous ‘truth’ of such experiences in the context of historical and cultural discourses of sexuality.

This research speaks of five stories that are problematised by and through their discursively situated non-heterosexual speakers operating within, and attempting to negotiate an encompassing heterosexist context. Throughout I endeavour to put normative discourses and heterosexuality under the microscope rather than the lives of the participants. Hence I employ theories that help to identify the broader discourses and power speaking through the participants’ stories, and can therefore suggest alternative ways in which to re-read the participants’ words in productive ways. A key to this is nurturing a workable concept of ‘queering’.

‘Queering’: playing in the cracks, dealing with the tensions

This thesis explores a series of significant lived experiences that constitute particular types or stylisations of ‘lesbian’ identities\(^2\). It is as much about becoming a ‘lesbian’ as it is about being one. It is also about exploring the problematics associated with the very notion any of us become or be anything at all, and what is at stake when coherence is (neither) articulated nor (en)acted. This work is also about place. Place as a concept related to discourses of both identity and geography. Deployed metaphorically in this way, and in terms of ‘sense of place’, this research explores the ways in which the participants and their places ‘craft’ and draw meaning from one another in a process of ongoing mutual constitution. Both of these aspects are theoretical in nature drawing heavily on queer ways of thinking, researching and theorising. As such I aim to identify the discursive resources, conditions, and practices the participants draw upon in order to make sense of being a ‘lesbian’ and their investments in, and attachments to this identity. This will be explored

\(^2\) I do not assume there is a ‘lesbian’ identity or that lesbians have a collective identity, though I suspect the participants may, at times, sense this to be so. The participants in this research appeared to sometimes be ‘searching’ for, or at least interpellating an essential individual and collective ‘lesbian’ identity in order to explain how they are and to normalise their place in society. This leaves this research primarily concerned with how experiences and events (and the people, place and feelings associated with them) come to constitute a sense of one’s sexual identity.
via the collection and analysis of empirical data about their experiences of identities and places.

Throughout my reading of the literature I found a widening fissure between heavily theorised queer theory and the more empirical work in ‘feminist geography’. But I had a hunch each field was relevant and that my concerns and dis-ease with each could be dealt with. I surmised I need a concept that can do three things. Firstly, I need a concept that enables me to freely play in the cracks and gaps and to challenge, critique and extend each discipline, but also in the space where each intersected. Secondly, I need to be able to deploy a robust theoretical and methodological resource to adequately deal with the complexities presented by the data collected. Thirdly, I want to be able to apply pressure at every junction and turn, and so I require a way of doing this research that is critically responsive, transportable, and malleable. Hence I chose the term queering in order to attempt to deal with the multiple tensions that emerged from my readings.

_Being with theoretical tension_

In order to develop the concept of ‘queering’ and to determine what it can do, I firstly have to work with the concept of queer. In this ‘working out’ I have in the foreground a distinctly consistent caveat about queer, that is, its emergent and ongoing mobile nature, its elasticity, its indistinguishability, and its associated resistance to definition (Dilley, 1999; Edwards, 1998; Elder, 1999; Halperin, 1995; Jagose, 1996; Salih, 2002; Sedgwick, 1990; Turner, 2000; Walters, 1996). On this notion Nikki Sullivan (2003: 43) cautions that to attempt to define queer “would be a decidedly un-queer thing to do”, and this from E.J. Rand (2004: 303), “any efforts to undermine the ‘proper’ meaning of queer or to establish normative criteria for its use denies the contradictory impulses that have been imbedded within it” (italics in original). This is also supported by queer theorist David Halperin (1995: 113) who remarks, “the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer ‘queer theory’ can plausibly claim to be”. I am thus placed on notice that in postmodern fashion queer is, “a rather amorphous term and still emergent enough as to be vague and ill defined” (Walters, 1996: 830). And that it is, “by definition
whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*” (Halperin, 1995: 62, italics in original). It is in the spirit and confusion of these comments that I come to favour an approach to queer (and queering) that allows me to ask ‘what can I do with queer’? Turner (2000: 35) is supportive of this position explaining queer as, “a relatively novel term that connotes etymologically a crossing of boundaries but that refers to nothing in particular”. This leaves the term and its multiple meanings open to contestation and ongoing revision (Turner, 2000), thus satisfying points one to three previously mentioned, and supporting my subsequent use of ‘queer’ (in scare quotes).

As a result of the idea of ‘queer’ as ‘nothing in particular’, throughout this thesis I use ‘queer’ predominantly as a verb, a *doing* word which is resistant to definition and containment, and that can rupture, trouble, question, expose, and critique the normative *ways of being* and *doing* that repress one individual or group over an(other). A central concern with this circles around the differences, if any, between *being* and *doing* ‘queer’. Sullivan (2003: 44) settles this somewhat when she states, “whilst queer is not an essential identity … it is nevertheless a provisional political one”, and thus introduces the notion of ‘queering’ as positionality, a place from which one speaks and/or acts, and ‘queer’ in terms of *doing* rather than being, and this includes doing ‘queer’ politically. Again this deals with points one to three above.

Taking this stance on ‘queering’ permits me to take some theoretical and methodological liberties. This is exemplified by my refusal to be tied down to the ‘usual’ ways of doing research, and a certain disloyalty to tradition. This impulse initially came from the work of Judith Halberstam (1998) on female masculinity. In her work Halberstam (1998: 10), like myself, makes use of ‘queer’ fluidity and resistance to definition by explaining ‘queer’ methodology as an intermingling of a variety of epistemological and methodological frameworks when she says,
I call this methodology “queer” because it attempts to remain supple enough to respond to the various locations of information on female masculinity and betrays a certain disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods.

This approach deals with my own itchiness with queer theory and ‘feminist geography’, and also with my desires to play with (and be disloyal to) conventional theories, methods, and styles of representation and writing. Halberstam’s theorising sits closely beside the spirit of ‘queer’ as indefinable, immutable and disruptive whilst consciously edging us closer to an opening out and a dis-location of normative social imperatives and conventional practices by going against the grain. This relative ‘disloyalty’ necessitates a highly reflexive approach to the research which is simultaneously engaged with, and by, the complexities of researcher subjectivity (and especially so in my case due to my close relationship to the participants and my own investments in the research).

On a practical level, and because of my own interests in the notion of ‘sense of place’, I use the concept of ‘queering’ to develop ‘sense of place’ as a ‘queer’ workable space in-between each discipline which permits and fosters the inherent contradictions of each. This idea presents a significant research opportunity for me. My readings suggest that not only could the notion of ‘sense of place’ draw together the sometimes disparate fields of queer theory and ‘feminist geography’, but it also seems relevant to the stories told by the participants, as well as my own experiences of sexual identity and place.

Sense of place

In the opening quote from Paul Hillis (1999) the idea that bodies and places are united through sensory experience, witnessing, memory, and imagination emerges as a crucial concept from which to work and direct this research. It connotes an imaginable and tangible space infused with sensory memory and sense making. In short, following Hillis, perhaps this space offers a ‘sense of place’?

---

23 In Chapters Two through Four I explain in detail and display how I have deployed ‘queering’ theoretically and methodologically.

24 One may also argue this to be the ‘queerspace’ that Ingram, Bouthillette & Retter (1997) describe.
In geographical literature ‘sense of place’ has emerged as an overarching concept which generally describes the relationships between humans and spatial settings (Shamai, 1991, cited in Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001), meanings derived from interactions and attachment to and in place (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001), and as promoting a sense of security, feeling ‘at home’ and belonging, and which may even be an anchor for one’s identity (Hay, 1998). This broad concept and these themes resonate with much of the data collected. Pretty, Chipuer and Bramston (2002) go a step further arguing that location alone is not enough to create a ‘sense of place’ because it only emerges from interactions between people, between people and places, and from within human interpretations of the setting. Thus ‘sense of place’ involves connections and reciprocal processes of interaction that are made sense of and given meaning by various human and non-human elements.

The early work of phenomenological researchers (for example Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1979) has additionally provided a sensitive and affective dimension to ‘sense of place’. Drawing upon each of these ideas, I argue that the connections, meanings, and attachments elicit human responses based upon multiple experiences in place, and result in affective attachments to place via shifts or changes in identity (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Relph, 1976). Further, the notion of a ‘sense of place’ suggests that place and identity may be thought of as mutually constitutive. This contention relies on dual aspects of a ‘sense of place’, namely that it varies between individuals and over time (Bird, 2002; Hay, 1998; Martin, 1997; Pretty et al., 2002;), and also that it is closely linked to emotions and identity.

The first aspect is spatial, temporal, and individualised and relates to the many interactions between humans and places (places and humans) over time, and the emotive meanings and feelings derived from such interactions. The second aspect relates to how identity is

---

25 Also see: Cantrill and Senecah, 2001; Engwicht, 1999; Ingram et al., 1997; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001; Knox and Pinch, 2000; Stefanovic, 1998; Waitt et al., 2000; Winikoff, 1995.

‘sensed’, and the idea experiences in and of place create affective attachments to place that constitute identity. Broadly speaking this is about ‘finding one’s place’. I suggest this includes the sense or feeling humans get when they feel comfortable, safe, protected, respected, ‘at home’, and relates to a sense of belonging or fitting with others, and the affect these things have on sense of self, or who and how we are. Nell’s quote is indicative of this aspect of sensing one’s (sexual) place. I consider my use of ‘sense of place’ in these ways to also be an example of ‘queering’.

LOCATING THE RESEARCHER

I am not uninvolved in this research, this research is not uninvolved with me, and so it is important to consider my own starting points, subject positions, and interests, and how each of these impacts upon the research context. My interest in studying sexual identity and place did not emerge by chance, it was deeply attached to questions I had about my own sense of self. In the Prologue I have shared much about ‘where I have come from’, and in the discussions to follow I share ‘where I speak from’, and how the afore listed research questions emerged from this. I then trace out where I hope to be heading. By critically exploring my own positionality here (and indeed throughout this thesis) I try to negotiate a place for myself (and hence this research) that takes into account my own values, beliefs and ideologies, my variously shifting subject positions, and my close relationship to the research and the researched, as well as my personal imperatives and investments in the ‘results’.

Being positioned in ‘modernist’ discourse

I write this thesis from within the context of disciplinary and regulatory power which under ‘modernist’ assumptions privileges and legitimates some research (methods) over ‘others’. I see myself as an(other) in both personal and academic terms. In this thesis I have tried to remain theoretically grounded and follow the ‘rules’ and ‘regulations’ but at times they have seemed more than a little constrictive. This research, and now thesis, represents and mirrors my ongoing struggles and negotiations with regulatory power and creative
expression. I am hopeful that the extreme self-reflexivity in this thesis is not viewed as self-indulgence but rather as a dialectic between my own ethical obligations and responsibilities as researcher and friend, and between theory and data. It is a documentation of my attempt to come to terms with the fact I can never fully realise the effect of my various subject positions on others. Cannella (2004) understands both the regulatory power and paradox associated with researching from a poststructural feminist perspective when she poses the question, “can a feminist poststructuralist engage in research oversight?” She discusses her personal and theoretical struggles with the ways in which the academy positions itself as all knowing and as a saviour of ‘others’ and warns, “these issues are not easily addressed and require a continued vigilance” (Cannella, 2004: 239). Cannella sees research as paradoxical and self-contradictory especially as it relates to the construction of certain types of knowledges. She suggests it is precisely the regulatory power inscribed through the modernist systems of knowledge (for example universities or disciplines), which dictates what is considered ‘good’ (read legitimate) research, and “the ways that regulation literally constructs power over others” (Canella, 2004: 239).

In this thesis I am both theorising and theorised. I am simultaneously constituted by theory and constituting it. Whilst this sounds evident it is an important theoretical conception because of the relationships I have with the people within and beyond the research, and the established theories I am drawing upon as a researcher and participant in life. As suggested below by King (1999) I am an integral part of both the research process and product, and as such the acknowledgement of the places from which I speak and act provides the potential for my own forms of resistance, transformation and agency, if handled with care.

It is clear that we are part of our research processes and products. Our assumed stances are also built into this. Being systematic, being forthright about stance, or at least acknowledging it, is a productive start. It is another issue to deploy a stance as an act of resistance. It can be productive, oppressive, transformative, and stultifying. (King, 1999: 488)

In response to the research questions and my theoretical concern for reflexivity, ethics, and care, I will craft a theoretically stable research methodology which draws from a diverse
range of disciplines, theories, theorists, methods and representational styles. My main theoretical influences come from a combination of poststructural feminist theory and queer theory, and particularly the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. My main empirical influences come from human and feminist geography, sociology and ethnography. I cannot say whether one of these is more involved in this work than another but this has been precisely my conundrum from the start. This notion of ‘lack of fit’ has required me to ‘pick and chose’ from a range of resources, and in the process concoct a highly reflexive, blended theoretical and methodological approach that keeps the tensions overt as it ‘deals’ with the data. This stance begins to unravel the process of ‘queering’ that I seek to iteratively develop throughout this thesis, and includes my own ambiguous ‘queering’ along the way.

Am I queer enough?

Staring at her own reflection in the glass, 
Stephen would feel just a little uneasy: 
‘Am I queer looking or not?’ she would wonder. 
(Hall, 1990: 73; original 1928)

In line with poststructural and feminist theorising I have carefully considered my positionality and subjectivities by asking a similar question to Stephen in Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1990) - ‘am I queer looking or not?’ Indeed I do wonder. My response would probably be yes, I have been ‘queer’ looking all of my life, but does this equate with ‘queer’ being and doing? I am not queer, don’t think I ever have been, but maybe I will be one day. At the moment, and not surprisingly, I am resistant to any identity category. So in my own reflection I see a number of subject positions which could be used to ‘define’ me, that I take up, maintain, create, speak from, and deploy. In this research, as in my everyday life, I am white (I can be relatively ‘sure’ of this); ‘female’ (not so sure); ‘lesbian’ (for want of a better word to describe a preference for female sexual and intimate relationships); able-bodied (most of the time); middle-class (though very cognisant of my working class roots); educated, agnostic, dreamer, urban dweller, traveller, Arian, lover, student … the list goes on … and on. Issues of difference and sameness infiltrate my subject positions in relation to the participants, raising questions like: To what degree am I
like them? Different from them? For whom can I and do I speak? How might these things effect the research process? The research product?

Whilst the discursive epistemological choices associated with poststructural feminist and queer theory influence the research processes (directions, questions, participant choice, methodological choices, data analysis and representational style), ‘who I am’ influences the nature of the data generated and collected, and the engagement of the participants in this research. The five women in this research are my close friends, and am overawed by the depth of their attachments and involvement in this research. I am continually asking myself - why are they doing this?  

Shifting positions: where is this heading?

The charge of self-indulgence has been levelled at me at times during this adventure. In the main I guess this is the result of regularly exposing my own feelings, explorations and articulations of self and subjectivities through this research. I walk the same line as the women in this research, it is difficult to stay unemotional and unattached from their words or their intentions, and it is not my desire to do so. Personally, and in line with my commitments to non-traditional re-appropriations of poststructuralism, queer theory and ‘queering’, I prefer the term ‘self-reflexive’. The acknowledgement of my own ‘messy’ subjectivities, emotions, investments and beliefs is integral to this research precisely because it both invites and disruptes theoretical and methodological conventions. I am not alone in my nervous suspicions of research traditions and conventions, and join a growing band of qualitative researchers who foreground and explore researcher subjectivity and intersubjectivity simultaneously with the subject positions of the people researched. In short they deal with ‘real’ experiences and issues of representation in sensitively theoretical

---

27 These ideas are explored in detail in Chapter Five in relation to passionate attachments and investments in identity.
ways (see Chapters Three and Four).

Following the lead of Susanne Gannon (2004a), I wish to posit myself as a poststructurally and ‘queerly’ inflected subject who writes from inside competing discourses, whilst engaged in a perpetual process of questioning what it is to be, and to occupy, ‘friend’, ‘researcher’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘other’ subject positions in this research. Citing Cixious in her own search for her place, Gannon turns to researchers and theorists who take up writing the self and ‘others’ as “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought” (Cixious, 1981: 249, quoted in Gannon, 2004a: 109). In this thesis I attempt to use the wonderful messiness of human experience and subjectivity as ‘a springboard for subversive thought’. I work with contradictions and paradox because I believe that is how most of us try to survive and make sense of our daily lives within the boundaries and assumptions of an unstable modern world.

My approach to ‘queering’ is an attempt to open out another space for subversive thought as it accommodates multiple contexts and positionalities, individual difference and sameness; and fosters contradiction, tension, bucking the system, and questioning in ways that attempt to resist regulatory power from within repressive discourses. Importantly, this underlying approach or position also allows me to take care of my friends - the women in this research who have given me much more than they will ever know from simply reading this thesis.

CHAPTER MAP

In the main this thesis is structured in standard ways - theory, followed by methodology, analysis, and conclusion. After this introductory chapter I present the research processes of this thesis in three chapters. Chapter Two discusses the two key theories of identity, place, and subjection which guide the research process, namely queer theory and poststructural feminist theory. The aim of this chapter is to explain the blends and mixes, inclusions and exclusions, and tensions generated from these perspectives, in order to begin to formulate a theoretical notion of ‘queering’ as a way in which to deal with the contradictions inherent
in the data and each theory. This discussion is extended into Chapter Three where I have a dual focus. Firstly, I justify the research methodologies and methods used by explaining the steps involved in the data collection and analysis process. Secondly, I explore some of the dynamics emerging from the interesting researcher-participant relationships in this research. This chapter also further refines the notion of ‘queering’ by considering the question, is there such a thing as ‘queer’ methodology? In Chapter Four I justify my use of poetic forms of representation, and use a number of poems to discuss and examine the complexities associated with issues of representation.

The next three chapters (Five to Seven) form the ‘results’ or analysis section of this thesis. This section differs slightly to the ‘usual’ thesis format, in that rather than providing a lengthy chapter focussed on reviewing all of the literature relevant to this thesis, throughout each of the analytical chapters I introduce relevant research, concepts and terms, and theoretical research and ideas in order to further theorise the thematically organised data. I do this so as to align relevant empirical and theoretical research to the topics under investigation in each chapter. These chapters are simultaneously general and specific, empirical and theoretical. In each chapter I seek to place and map the subject in a number of ways, but I do not assume this placing to be only about someone’s actual location in place or time, nor is it free of metaphorical, imagined or discursive significance. In these chapters I embark upon an imaginative philosophical and theoretical analysis of the interview data predominantly using the work of Judith Butler. I immerse myself in the data, play with it, and consult a range of theories and theorists which help me to explore the simple analytical question ‘what is going on here?’ It is with this question in mind that I extend ‘queering’ to include data analysis in line with Butler’s (1997a) call for a critical analysis of subjection. Butler (1997a: 29) states that such an analysis should involve,

(1) an account of the way regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, visibility, and place; (2) recognition that the subject produced as continuous, visible, and located is nevertheless haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation; (3) an account of the iterability of the subject that shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned.

28
Chapters Five through Seven of this thesis attempt to explore these three points. The key questions of this research have been underpinned by a desire to consider the ways in which sexual identity is constituted, constructed and maintained within and by discourse, and also over time and place. Of interest in this discussion are the ways in which regulatory power functions to subordinate sexual minorities, and the ways in which subjects are constituted, constitute themselves, and are paradoxically invested in, and simultaneously wield power around these things.

In Chapter Five I focus on providing a broad thematic analysis of the interview data with a focus on the themes of sexual identity, discourse, and regulatory power in relation to each participants’ propensity for speaking about and affirming coherent ‘lesbian’ identities (this relates strongly to the opening quote from Nell). I discuss what is at stake when theory and practice (or data) are asynchronous, and then consider the various spaces for subversion and disruption of the regulatory powers of heteronormativity. The main aim in this chapter is to both trouble and extend the limits of contemporary queer theorising by asking not so much what queer (theory) is, but rather challenging what queer (theory) can do. In this chapter I contend that whilst the participants’ words and acts may well appear to be essentialist that a ‘queer’ approach to the data (and queer theory) allows me to consider their words and acts as productive\(^{29}\) and to view coherence in different ways, thus opening the data to interesting re-readings. I argue that in order to quiz heteronormative discourses it is important to ask why the participants use and deploy essentialising discourses to constitute themselves, and what is at stake if they do not? I do this by laying Michael Warner’s (2003) *The Trouble With Normal* beside the data not so much as a ‘queer’ critique but rather as a critique of queer, and especially Warner’s account of ‘normal’. Whilst these discussions provide an account of the ways in which regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination it also challenges both Butler and Warner by suggesting that affirmations of some kind of coherence need not always be viewed as problematic (in terms of queer theory) or as

\(^{29}\) Here I use three views of productive. Firstly, as useful in terms of positive, practical and constructive; secondly as creative, that is industrious, dynamic and fruitful; and thirdly as generative, having both an effect and affect, and as producing something (either ‘good or bad’).
lacking or non-productive in some way. Instead, following Butler (2004a, 2004b) I argue, that the participants affirm themselves in productively ‘queer’ ways as a matter of everyday survival rather than as a process of normalisation. Viewing their stories of identity as relational, and as an imperative to come to ‘matter’, or to simply survive, suggests that despite postmodern theories of individualism and subjection, the women in this study are engaged in an ongoing and dynamic ‘crafting’ of themselves in-relation to others, as opposed to asserting or searching for, an individualistic or essential self. Engaged, as they are, in this ‘messy’ process of becoming, means living as a ‘lesbian’ is played out in very distinctive and often ‘queer’ ways. A ‘queer’ approach to coherence, as proposed in this thesis, invites this kind of analysis.

In Chapter Six I work with Butler’s point (2) by asking questions of the interview data in terms of notions of loss, mourning, and melancholia. In this chapter I briefly trace the turbulent discursive history of melancholia, thus situating the term itself as unstable, ambiguous and open to re-reading. I then engage in a simultaneous critique and engagement with the work of Butler in order to shift the ‘traditional’ view of melancholia as negated and some how lacking. In this chapter, following the advice of Eng and Kazanjian (2003), I embark upon an exploration of whether melancholia does indeed mark “the limits of subjectivication” (Butler, 1997a: 29). In order to do this I again stretch queer theory to mould a theoretical resource that is more responsive to the data, with an emphasis on working with what remains of melancholia, namely the feeling, memories, emotions, and mourning.

A number of researchers suggest that spatiality is central to constructions of identities30. So in Chapter Seven I explore the underlying imperative of this thesis: Are place and sexual identity mutually constitutive? In this chapter I introduce non-representational ‘theory’ (Thrift, 1996, 1999) which I deploy in order to challenge queer theory to take account of the material, embodied, and very ‘real’ ways in which humans and places interact and are

---

intimately connected to each other. The chapter examines the many ‘queer’ ways in which the participants’ and their places are in the making. In this chapter I push queer theory to do some very particular kinds of work in relation to ‘sense of place’. This enabled me to: imagine ‘giving over’ agency to place; explore the affective dimensions of experiences of place; tease out moments of agency, subversion and resistance; and to develop an argument that sexual identity and place are indeed mutually constitutive. This was enabled by a close examination of the ways in which the participants engaged with, described, ‘haunted’, and took meaning from spatialised events, places and venues. This chapter contributes to explorations of Butler’s point (1) by acknowledging that whilst space is normatively gendered and heterosexed that ‘queer’ visibility in place(s) has great subversive potential.

Ideas about agency and subversion, and challenging normative discourses criss-cross each chapter. In Chapter Five I argue that ongoing and regular essentialising affirmations of coherence does particular kinds of work for the participants. A similar ‘queer’ view of agency in Chapter Seven sees the participants emerge as both involved and invested in rupturing hetero- and homo- normative space. They do this by actively (and successfully) parodying gender and sexuality, and in so doing reclaiming and transforming social space in ‘queer’ ways. In Chapter Six I explore the ways in which the participants have resisted the terms that attempt to normatively ‘hail’ and constitute them as ‘perverse’ and ‘abnormal’ by offering a theoretical perspective which claims heterosexuality is founded on the foreclosure of same sex desire (Butler, 1997a). This idea posits heterosexuality as ‘problematic’. This also highlights the performative nature of gender in that the ‘acts’ of masculinity and femininity depend upon the ongoing and pervasive disavowal of homosexuality in order to keep masculinity and femininity ‘normal’. In Chapter Six I suggest that agency can be productively teased out from what remains of melancholic subjection.

Chapter Eight offers a ‘conclusion’ but is more a way of drawing the work back in and revisiting the research purposes by posing the question: What are the implications of the findings in this research? This chapter is not meant to be final or conclusive, in fact in going back to the beginning it resists ending. Chapter Eight takes forward some of the ‘big
ideas’ flagged in Chapters One through Three, questioned, researched, analysed and written about in Chapters Four through Seven, and that ultimately emerge on the other side of this thesis. In short, it discusses how and why the findings in this thesis are able to thoughtfully and productively contribute to research and theorising across each of the fields under investigation. Importantly, this chapter keeps alive my wishes to refuse closure and containment, and to work in, with and through the complexities and paradoxes of our lives.
CHAPTER TWO:
‘THEORIES’ AND ‘QUEERIES’

INTRODUCTION

A crucial undertaking of this chapter is to cultivate the tensions which are created when the everyday words and deeds of the participants are theorised via poststructural analysis and the lens of queer theory. The primary goal in this chapter then becomes twofold. Firstly, I am interested in what these ‘theories’ bring to the data and what kind of analytical work each approach enables. With regards to this discussion it is not so much my intention to explain what these theories are but rather what they can do and what they allow me to be able to do with the data collected. This is not such a straightforward task as these theoretical choices also pose a number of problems, and so the second imperative of the chapter shifts into a closer examination of the tensions and ‘queeries’ generated through the deployment of these two theoretical frames (but particularly queer theory) in the context of this research. I base these discussions upon my contention that one does not have to be ‘queer’ in order to do queer (theory). Further, whilst not identifying with the word queer, the participants in this research do a lot of ‘queer’ work, and at times read and constitute themselves as ‘queer’. Ironically, and at times simultaneously, they also read and constitute themselves as ‘normal’. In this chapter I draw upon the work of Judith Butler (1993) and explain how her readings of queer theory have enabled me to ‘deal’ with tensions such as this, and have guided me towards an explication of my own approaches to queer theory and what I mean by ‘queering’ in the context of this research. I have also been heavily influenced by the work of postcolonial queer theorists who have helped me to develop an appreciation for the kinds of work queer theory can and cannot do with the data collected.

A central theme in a number of Butler’s books is the concept of ‘matter’. Butler uses this concept to trouble the assumed indisputability and authenticity of bodies, genders and sexes
when she poses questions like, ‘why does difference matter?’ and ‘why do some bodies matter more than others?’ Throughout this chapter, and others, I draw upon Butler in order to theorise the ways in which difference, gender and sexuality come to ‘matter’, and are ‘said’ and ‘done’ within the context of what Butler (1997a) calls ‘the heterosexual matrix’, and more specifically how Butler’s take on queer theory has emerged as a critical resource through which to do some ‘queer’ work. For instance, her ideas maintain and cultivate the tensions of this research because they foster my own attempts to discern “the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose” (Butler, 1993: 241). This notion of power as promoted and opposed troubles binary categories because it implies that subjects are invested in their own subjection (Butler, 1997a). By offering a critique of the subject in this way Butler exposes the power differentials and inconsistencies of claims that sex and gender identities are given, ‘real’, authentic, and ‘natural’. Butler (1999a: 44) instead posits these ‘categories’ and the discourses which form and maintain them, as “regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression”. I contend that Butler’s view of queer theory opens up the data to a greater variety of productively ‘queer’ re-readings whilst simultaneously opening up queer theory to ongoing critique. In this sense, by exploring the ‘theories’ and then the ‘queeries’ I am both deploying and critiquing (queer) theory, and at times the work of Butler. I engage with this task more fully in later analytical chapters.

‘THEORIES’

In this thesis I examine the discourses of gender and sexuality the participants use to make sense of their experiences and their sexed and gendered identities. The particular stories told and discourses drawn upon painted some quite distinct pictures of the ways and means by which the participants constitute themselves over time, and develop a sense of self and of their sexuality. The questions asked focussed on gathering descriptions of the participants’ experiences of sexual and gender identity, community, belonging and place. This also brought to the surface the processes they used to draw retrospective meanings

---

31 I am not assuming here that Butler’s work and queer theory are synonymous. Rather I am interested in how Butler ‘reads’ queer theory.
from these things. This necessitated turning to epistemological approaches focussed on identity, subjectivity, gender, sexuality, power, meaning, sense making, language and discourse in the ways I was personally most drawn to but which also suited the questions I was asking, the people I was researching, and the data collected. The above themes and the obscure ‘truths’ around them are the key areas of philosophical and theoretical interest in this thesis, and they help to explain my choice of poststructural theory and queer theory. Together, and separately, these theories offer a variable but focussed mix of approaches upon which to ‘hang’: the research design; methods and methodology; data collection, analysis, theorising and interpretation, and also the writing of this thesis. They also provide a critical epistemology which seeks to question, challenge and disrupt practices and discourses which exploit, silence and/or repress particular subjects or subject groups (Harris, 2001). In the following pages I tease out the specific work that poststructural theory and queer theory allow me to do with the data. This also involves a brief discussion of discourse and power.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is a useful resource in this thesis because it can be deployed to dislodge and make suspect the construction and use of identity categories based on gender, sexuality, race, and class. Such categories are viewed as constructed and manipulated for the purpose of regulatory control and are used to construct certain types of knowledge (Butler, 1999a; Foucault, 1978), and to maintain power in the interests of capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy and xenophobia. Poststructuralists are critical of grand narratives, such as distinct identity categories, and “the logic that they attempt to (re)produce and/or legitimate on the grounds that they lead to totalising or universalising discourses and practices that leave no room for difference, for complexities, or for ambiguity” (Sullivan, 2003: 40). So rather than reproducing the dominant logic, poststructuralists seek to rupture it by analysing difference and the ways in which difference is discursively constructed and lived (Sullivan, 2003). Sullivan presents Foucault’s (1978) cultural and historical analysis of sexuality as an example of this. Foucault consistently shows how grand narratives, or normalising discourses, “constitute difference solely in terms of degrees of difference from the norm
that is ideal” (Sullivan, 2003: 40) by implying that all individuals in this or that category (for example ‘lesbians’) share the same identity and perhaps even similar qualities. Following Butler (1999a), Sullivan suggests that in this way it is easy to see why homosexuality is legitimised as abhorrent when it is positioned discursively in contrast to the norm/ideal, heterosexuality.

Poststructuralism directs me to consider the ways in which language, ‘truth’ and meaning are called upon and used by people in order to construct meaning in their lives and make sense of who and how they are (Grbich, 2003). It focuses on the notion that ‘the person’, ‘self’ or subject\(^\text{32}\) (or even the idea of the person or self) is “collectively and discursively constituted” (Davies, 1992: 62), thus challenging a long history of humanist assumptions about identity, and opening up the discourses upon which the participants in this research form ideas of their ‘selves’. By questioning ideas about the veracity of the subject or subjectivity, “the givenness of the world, the transparency of language, the nature and status of the individual subject, subject-object relationships, the nature of power and the possibility of accessing truth” (Weedon, 1999: 4), poststructural analysis is able to open up a space for alternative voices, political potency, new forms of subjectivity, and new interpretations, meanings and values, via the deconstruction of metanarratives (Butler, 1997b, 1999a; Weedon, 1999). In short it enables a re-working of discursive scripts.

Foucault (1981: 31) has described poststructuralism as a resource, a tool or “an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is” rather than what “needs to be done”. In this way poststructural insights are linked to action (Laws & Davies, 2000) and agency (Butler, 1999a), and for Trinh (1991) offer an instrument for cleaving open binaries.

\[
\text{Discontinuity begins with} \\
\text{non-cleavages. Inside/outside, personal/impersonal, subjectivity/objectivity. (Trinh, 1991: 57)}
\]

\(^{32}\) In poststructuralism the term subject is used to refer to the ways that social, political, ideological and cultural structures and discourses shape the way we are and the meanings we make.
I similarly deploy poststructuralism as both a theoretical and methodological resource that can cleave binaries as well as offering disruptive sites of resistance and agency.

Through the work of Trinh I have found a feminist approach to poststructuralism that has enabled me to do some additional work with the data. Feminist concerns with the manner in which women experience the world in gendered ways within powerful patriarchal and masculinist discourse enables me to prioritise the discursive and ‘real’ life contexts of the participants firstly as women, and secondly as a further ‘oppressed’ group of women. According to Davies and Gannon (2005), poststructural feminist theory sprang from feminist discomfort with essentialism and the apparent disappearance of notions of difference and plurality representative of liberal and radical feminism. It is concerned with examining the ways in which discourse and power are implicated in the subjection of women.

Poststructural feminist theory has specifically invited me to challenge “the universal and oppressive nature of biological and patriarchal truths” (MacDonald, Kirk, Metzler, Nilges & Wright, 2002: 13). A poststructural feminist perspective allows me to emphasise and deal with problems of “the social text, its logic, and its inability ever to represent the world of lived experiences fully” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 21) by exposing what is left out in patriarchal and heteronormative discourse, that is, primarily issues of gender but also of race, class and sexuality. This provides a building, analytic and deconstructive framework for exploring stories, ‘truth’, meaning, identities and the processes by which we are all ‘made’ certain kinds of (gendered, raced and sexed) subjects. In this research a poststructural feminist approach provided a focus on how the category ‘lesbian’ has come into being, and remains, necessarily, in a process of obscure becoming. It also allowed me to explore the particular ways in which the participants have narrated changes in their gendered and sexed identities, and made meaning over the course of their life stories – in short how they have been both subordinated by power but also made a subject through and of power (Butler, 1997a).
Power and discourse

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power … on those one supervises, trains and corrects, over madmen, children at home and school, the colonized, over those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives. Foucault (1982: 214)

In Foucault’s eyes and words our souls and bodies are entrapped within a grid, schema or structure of power produced by and as discourse. In relation to sexuality, Butler (1999a) calls this the ‘heterosexual matrix’. Notions of power and discourse form the cornerstone to both Foucault’s and Butler’s thinking about subjectivity (within and through the multiple workings and power relations of the ‘heterosexual matrix’), and so below I briefly explain my use of these terms before moving on to discuss them in relation to the ‘heterosexual matrix’. This, and the subsequent discussions of queer and queer theory, set the scene for my later considerations of Butler’s work on the dialectics of subjection in The Psychic Life of Power in Chapters Five and Six.

Following Foucault (1978) I treat discourses as complex, multiple, discontinuous and unstable bodies of knowledge and social practice, and therefore as strongly linked to understanding processes of subjectivity. Foucault doesn’t view discourses as simple or singular, but as polyvalent, that is, multiple and circulating and routinely produced by power. Foucault (1978) uses the concept of ‘polyvalence of discourses’ as a way of understanding sexual practices and subjectivity. He states,

we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. (Foucault, 1978: 100)

In this quote Foucault makes an instrumental link between discourse and power which begins to expose the unstable notions of each by which we constitute ourselves, as well as
forming a bridge between the two from which to resist or shift power and discourse. By reconceptualising power in this way and viewing discourse as both an instrument and effect of power, as a hindrance and a stumbling block, Foucault (1978: 101) invites an exploration of points of resistance within power and discourse and thereby the opportunity to identify a “starting point for an opposing strategy”.

Foucault (1978) very carefully points out that power is not merely a mode of subjugation, a method of ensuring subservience or system of domination of one group over another, it can also be productive and is not simply oppressive or repressive. A Foucauldian understanding of power considers it to be neither institutional or structural, nor a particular kind of strength. Rather power, in the Foucauldian sense, is a network of relationships, and power is a word which “one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault, 1978: 93). Understood in this way, power can be deconstructed (poststructural and Foucauldian style) in its apparent dichotomous logic, that is, in terms of binaries (Sullivan, 2003). This is particularly important in the context of ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer’ identities because an essentialist position as advocated by, and through identity politics thrives on the notion that ‘homosexuals’ and ‘queers’ are oppressed and repressed by power and hence rendered powerless. Foucault (1978: 95) contends that “where there is power, there is resistance” because of the “relational character of power relationships”. For Foucault resistance is never exterior to power, and so by refusing to separate resistance from power Foucault initiates multiple points of resistance from within the system.

Following the above point, throughout this thesis I maintain that the participants regularly stand in resistance to power. The key thing to consider (and search for) in the data collected is the point at which the participants turn away, and seek to resist or challenge the processes that constitute them, or upon which they constitute themselves. For Butler (1992: 13) the “subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process”. This shifts the central concern of subjectivity from resistance to
subversion (responsibility and action) or agency, by posing the question: To what extent do we have the capacity or ability to change ourselves and society? This question requires careful consideration of our ability to shift and challenge the mythical ‘vessel’ in which discourses of power circulate and subjugate - the ‘heterosexual matrix’.

*The ‘heterosexual matrix’*

Butler (1999a: 42) (following Rich, 1986) terms Foucault’s powerful schema a ‘matrix’ and goes on to describe the ways in which gender is discursively produced as “the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through compulsory heterosexuality”. Salih (2002) interprets Butler’s ‘heterosexual matrix’ as a ‘structure’, ‘mould, ‘grid’ or “scheme that effectively contours the body” (p. 61), but cautions we should keep “in mind that the matrix is itself produced and consolidated” (p. 52) in, by and through discourse and power. Of interest in this thesis is Butler’s (1999a: 30) claim that the work of the ‘heterosexual matrix’ institutes the appearance of “compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality” through the regulation of binary gender relations “in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire”. Further, this act of differentiation of binaries “results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire” (Butler, 1999a: 30).

This is implicitly linked to notions of gender and sexual identity, and further to the ways in which regulatory practices and power are complicit in forming attachments to identities and desires to affirm coherence (gender, sexual or otherwise). This is a key concept throughout this thesis and is explored in detail in Chapter Five. If, as Butler (1993: 8) claims, “there is no singular matrix that acts in a singular and deterministic way to produce a subject as its effect”, then the potential for resistance and subversion is everywhere simply because self-constitution is never complete. So perhaps even a shaky and uncertainly hailed ‘lesbian’ identity can both resist and subvert power?

---

33 In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler (1997a) criticises Foucault “for neglecting the subversive potential of the psyche in his accounts of power” (Salih, 2002: 120).
In what follows I will show that within queer theory there is a lot of talk about the constraints (problems or troubles) associated with articulations of coherence. There, and in Chapter Five, I argue (from the data) that such articulations (and acts) can provide productive opportunities even as they are necessarily problematised.

In their everyday lives the participants in this research did not always take up normative discourses, and so the potential always exists for “tension between the discourses and practices available and the subject’s interpretation and use of them” (Sondergaard, 2002: 199). This makes available to the participants a variety of subject-positions from which to be, speak, act or resist, and thus remain engaged in fluid and contesting processes of self-subjection in relation to multiple discourses. In this sense I maintain that taking up particular subject-positions via essentialising affirmations which are always contextual and contingent, can and does challenge normative discourses and practices. In short, and in keeping with Butler’s idea that the subject is constantly open to negotiation, the data demonstrates that whilst the participants’ tend to use essentialising discourses they really do not ‘know’ who they are or what they are supposed to be, and it is this knowledge or acknowledgment, and their confusion about what to say about themselves which can, and does, provide spaces and occasions for opposition and resistance.

Similar to poststructuralism, queer theory shares concerns regarding power, discourse, language, and subjectivity. However where it differs is with regards to its very specific focus on sex and sexuality (sometimes gender is included and this is where a poststructural feminist approach to queer theory is instructive). Before proceeding with a discussion of how queer theory is deployed in this research, I first need to tease out what has been said about the contentious little word, ‘queer’, and how I would like to use it.
In the explication of ‘what I mean by queer’ I draw upon a diverse range of literature and research which variously tries to define, explore, explain, develop, critique, prescribe, and describe what authors, researchers and theorists, as well as activists, think queer might be or at least what it means to them. As I explained in Chapter One I have found much contention and conjecture, and am reticent to verbalise ‘what I mean by queer’, but a queer quip would be that that is precisely the purpose of queer, nothing is definable, nothing is ‘normal’. Thus the work of queer involves critiquing and destabilising the very notion of ‘normal’. So with trepidation I pose the question, ‘what is queer?’ I much prefer to start this discussion with the counter question, ‘what or who isn’t queer?’ because like Gretchen Phillips I know a lot of ‘queer’ people who have a lot of ‘queer’ fun, and there seems to be a lot of ‘queer’ things going on around me lately. In this sense I desire to trouble the concept of queer ‘straight up’ and so propose the following discussions be read in line with Tamsin Spargo’s (1999) notion that queer is simply a popularised oddity; a way of keeping us all walking along the ‘straight’ line. She argues queer is a word that has new currency in keeping the distance between ‘queers’ and ‘non-queers’ intact (albeit humorously and glamorously at times) rather than in dismantling the normative thinking and practices that separate them. Hence my development of ‘queer’ and ‘queering’ in scare quotes.

The term queer can function as a noun, an adjective or a verb (Dilley, 1999; Spargo, 1999), so it can be considered as a kind of naming, being or doing word. As a noun queer names communities, places, events, individuals, groups, identities, and differences. As an

---

34 I do not put queer in inverted commas here as I wish to explicate its deployment in this thesis from a series of commonly used definitions. I do this in order to refuse singular ways of describing queer in favour of conglomerates of concepts that develop a concept of ‘queer’ and ‘queering’ for this thesis.
adjective, queer points to those who are named ‘not normal’ or ‘perverse’ (that is, not heterosexual). As a verb queer provides a place from which to speak, theorise, reflect, and act. The process of taking back the word or name from those who have in the past used it as an insult is thus seen as a powerful personal and political act (Butler, 1997b; Grace & Benson, 2000; Jagose, 1996; Salih, 2002). Queer also describes a diverse range of practices and priorities with regards to gender, sex, and desire.

Some kind of queer is also hip, or so it would seem. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that in a strange process of resignification queer appears to be infiltrating the mainstream social conscious, at least popular culture (as a measure of social conscious). Discussing ‘queers’ or ‘queering’ pedagogy in my education classes prompts heated discussions rather than eye rolling and innuendo. Students stimulate class workshops and media deconstructions with clips from Miriam, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *L-Word*, or images of lesbian weddings or Courtney Act35 (need I be concerned that few have articulated the word queer out loud?). Popular culture’s fixation on and with sexualised lifestyles appears to do more than buy into the pink dollar and pink consumer culture; it is also striking a cord with ‘non-pink’ viewers in a kind of ‘queer’ makeover. Thus like ‘gay or lesbian’ chic in the past, in many ways perhaps queer (or maybe ‘queer’) could be said to be(coming) normative. For example, my friends repeatedly call on me to join the ‘lesbian’ revolution by watching the *L-Word*, and through this ‘call’ they present to me their own investments in popularised concepts of themselves. Nell (participant) recently (and seriously) suggested that we should do a show of all our friends and our own lives. I politely pointed out that it had already been done over two series through *Foxtel*. This met with rapturous laughter as she nodded in agreement – yes indeed, the *L-Word* was her life!

---

35 *Miriam* was a television dating game screened in 2004 where the ‘woman’, Miriam (who is transgendered) got to choose her perfect ‘man’ (unknown to the men) over a six week season. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is a television programme involving five ‘gay’ men who do home and personal make-overs of dirty, scruffy and/or socially dysfunctional ‘straight’ men. *L-Word* is a television show portraying the lives of a handful of beautiful ‘lesbians’ with two seasons bought by *Foxtel* (arguably for its largely heterosexual male viewers) after the screening of one episode in the USA. Courtney Act is the stage name of a young male to female gender illusionist, Shane Jenek (23) who made it through to the final eight in our first *Australian Idol* competition.
If the social fascination with sexualised lifestyles suggested by the everyday uses of queer is any indication of a shift in acceptance then it could be argued that the mainstream might be ‘turning’, and that queer is becoming a part of everyday sexual vernacular. That said, assimilation is not the aim of queer theory or queer activism so mainstream re-appropriations are simply not queer at all. This leads me to suggest that perhaps it is some ‘queers’ who are turning – turning normative, that is. For instance, Michael Warner (2003: 62) is particularly vitriolic about the ‘troubles’ that arise when ‘gay’ men and ‘lesbians’ no longer act queer and instead opt to be ‘normal’ by staying at home and “making dinner for their boyfriends”. So it is probably more likely that the populace is not ‘turning’ queer at all, and everyday reality checks such as those regularly provided by government sanctioned attacks on those outside of heterosexuality, and everyday acts of discrimination, abuse and vilification add weight to this contention.

**Queer theory**

Either: queer theory is elitist, incomprehensible, narcissistic, tautological, hopeless as a political engine and has wrought, single-handedly, the destruction of thirty years of feminist and lesbian political, economic, and theoretical gains. It represents a betrayal of core feminist principles by an entire generation of historically obtuse, theoretically abstract, frivolous, lipstick-wearing, bourgeois grrrls whose rush to forsake the claims of an identity based politics bespeaks ignorance at best and, at worst, the most pernicious implications of normative complacency. Postmodern feminists, alienated from their materialist political project, have fallen prey to a patriarchal bait and switch, allowing not only their young but their theory to drift dangerously into a white-male-identified epistemological coupling.

Or: queer theory is the logical extension of a rigorous thirty-year feminist interrogation of the limits of language, identity politics and social control. Its attack is levelled at the most fundamental premises of epistemology itself, and it represents a serious and deeply ethical attempt to theorize sexuality in the context of mutually

---

36 By this I refer to recent incidents in Australia. Specifically: the Australian governments’ refusals to consider rights for same-sex partners, recognise same-sex marriages or consider same-sex adoption options; the uproar caused by a screening on *Play School* of a family with two mummies; state government shock over the publication of a primary school children’s book based upon the two mummies; Commonwealth government intervening on and over turning Territory legislation recognising same-sex relationships; the violent and hateful abuse four friends were hurled whilst shopping in a country town; and on a personal note my most recent experience of intensely vitriolic gender and sexuality vilification by a patron at a local bar. I am sure many queers can add their own ‘story’ to these.
constitutive terms that include gender, race and class. Allowing for continuous, shifting multiplicities of social location, it presents an unprecedented chance to achieve a strategically coalitional, even pragmatic progressive politics. (Dever, 1999: 413-414)

I do not think an understanding or appreciation of queer theory is quite as straightforward as the dichotomous either/or pairing suggested above, queer lives are far more complex and nuanced than this. But the statements do provide a useful starting point as they signal a wide range of contradictory views in the literature around queer theory. This relates precisely to discussions in Chapter One and above where I foreshadowed the impossibility (and undesirability) of pinning queer down, and through this reinforced both the elusiveness and practicality of queer, and what it can do. In many ways it is the space between and outside the either/or, or the ‘slash’, that is both the subject/object of ‘queer’ critique and which guides my later analysis.

Queer theory is far from being a universal or uniform theory. It is a loose set of ideas and impulses based around the notion that identities are not fixed, ‘natural’, essential or stable and so do not determine who we are. In this thesis I draw upon queer theory because it opposes those theories and practices which draw people in and clump individuals collectively based on shared characteristics or categories (such as ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘Asian’, ‘lesbian’, ‘butch’); oppositions (such as man vs woman, heterosexual vs homosexual) or equations (such as sex = gender) (Hennessy, 1993). The way I seek to use this theory also questions the veracity and intelligibility of these so-called ‘obvious’ and ‘natural’ categories and deconstructs the terms and the normative notions associated with them and upon which the existence of the categories actually very heavily rely (such as heterosexuality or ‘normality’). In short it provides a resource to play at the boundaries, between and outside words, and on the ‘slash’. The principal method of doing this, drawn from poststructuralism, is exposing and deconstructing the ways in which identities are discursively formed in often strategically or intentionally normative ways. This is done in order to disrupt the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality by providing a counter-discourse as opposed to buying into it, as affirmations of a distinct ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ identity are often seen to do. As such a ‘queer’ approach conceives identity as something that can be played
with, moulded, created, discarded; is fluid, shifting, changing, and potentially subversive and strategic.

According to Warner (1993: xxvii), queer politics oppose society itself by protesting against “not just the normal behaviour of the social but the idea of normal behaviour” altogether. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven I suggest that many ‘acts’ and words of the participants are acts of subversive ‘queer’ politics. On this point Gamson (2000: 402) suggests that by taking up, conjuring up and embracing the label of perversity, queer “calls attention to the ‘norm’ in ‘normal,’ be it in hetero or homo … Queer does not so much rebel against outsider status as revel in it”. The words and images presented throughout this thesis seek to call attention to discourses of ‘normality’. Here, as elsewhere, queer politics stands in resistance to normalising assimilationist practices, agents and ideologies (Seidman, 2001; Edwards, 1998; Morris, 2000). “Queer politics”, says Seidman (2001: 327-328),

is also about creating new forms of selfhood and intimate solidarity, and re-shaping a culture of eroticism … about rethinking democratic citizenship and remaking individual and collective life by imagining bodies, selves, and intimacies that are formed and organized in non-normalizing social order.

In later chapters I argue that the participants’ strong and passionate attachments to, and investments in, identity, community, place, and belonging signify a notion of ‘queer’ citizenship as much as ‘queer’ community or solidarity. Further, that through their actions and words the women in this research are engaged in an ongoing process of constructing, managing, and organising their lives in non-normalised ways that I consider to be ‘queer’.

In summary, my reading and deployment of queer theory is simultaneously as a mode of inquiry, a frame, a lens, a politic, a performance, a performative, a resource, and a state of

---

37 Butler’s (1997a) extension of the Freudian concept of passionate attachments is very important in this thesis. In this chapter I have chosen not to tease out a precise theoretical application for two reasons. Firstly, I wish to have that description and theoretical resource close to the data that I am analysing. Secondly, I don’t consider it to be necessary to include this resource within the context of the critique of theories in this chapter. In this chapter and Chapter One I state that the participants appear to be passionately attached to their identities, and I believe that is all that is necessary in the context of the discussions in these chapters.
body and mind. Queer theory deals with a range of subject positions that when theoretically considered enable queers and queer theorists to ask ‘new’ and different types of questions. Queer theory, because of its historical roots, doesn’t predict particular kinds of answers, nor is it invested in ‘answers’. As a research basis I draw upon queer theory in order to ask questions that in the past may have appeared seemingly unimaginable. It encourages me to ask questions which challenge assumptions whilst tolerating (indeed propagating) ambiguity and remaining open and against premature closure. Queer theory is also able to nurture the paradox between history and culture, and experience and reality, by deconstructing discourses and systems of power/knowledge. My kind of ‘queer’ research is less interested in “knowledge or the production of knowledge than it is a pragmatics, and interruption in the production of knowledge” (Haver, 1997: 284) – and this includes queer knowledge.

‘QUEERIES’

Thusfar in this chapter I have explained how I have drawn upon poststructural and queer theory in ways that have helped me to design this research and analyse the data collected. In the main I have drawn upon these theories because each operates to deconstruct hierarchical categories of knowledge by disrupting the power nexus created by the social and political manipulation of language and ongoing production of limiting discourses. These theories have provided me with a resource to expose the limits, and what I contend to be the toxicity of discourses which seek to structure specific types of identities in specific kinds of ways. In short these theoretical approaches have encouraged me to seek out and rupture heteronormativity and power at the site prior to the emergence of the subject – language - through the process of deconstruction. My main purpose then, in the following section is to work through some of the tensions, ambiguities, contradictions, and ‘queeries’ that these two theoretical frameworks have brought to this research in light of the data. What seems to matter most in dealing with the ‘queeries’ is the kind of work that a ‘queer’ approach permits and encourages. In the final section of this chapter I loosely explicate how I have proceeded from the tensions by describing what I mean by theoretically queering this research. This will then begin to give rise to a number of possibilities for
considering the ways in which queer is re-imagined and re-deployed in later chapters as ‘queer’. In the coming pages my main concerns are with developing the idea of ‘queer’ and determining what is it that queer theory can do with the data; this also encompasses a consideration of poststructuralism.

‘Queer’ tensions

I believe that ‘queer’ does not simply represent a multitude of ways of looking at or doing research, it also offers a way of living in and looking at the world. Add to this the embodiment of a personal and political ‘taking on’ of these concepts and one sees ‘queer’, and queer theory also emerging as a way of being in the world. This critical concept is at the heart of much theorising and talking about queer theory and identity politics, and relates to the idea that I intend to develop throughout this chapter regarding being versus doing queer. It also relates to debates around essentialised identities (including queer ones). What queer brings to this project (whether in terms of the personal, political or research) is always and necessarily weighed up against what it does not bring and what it does to one’s thinking and doing. Up until two years ago queer held no personal meaning or value to me, and whilst it stands to reason that a research study such as my own should be queerly situated I cannot discount or forget the nagging feelings of discomfort created by the knowledge that neither myself nor the participants in this research comfortably identify with or as queer. I deal with this tension in more detail in Chapter Five where I pose the question can an essentialised lesbian identity be considered as productive?

After carefully considering the literature and research, my own personal experiences of the world, and the spoken experiences of the participants in this research, I came to the point where I need to formulate my own definitions and modes of deployment of queer, queer theory and ‘queering’ in this research. Linked to the idea of an essential (‘queer’) identity is the difference, if any, between being queer and doing queer. On a linguistic level it may well be the difference between a noun and a verb, to name or to do, but what does it mean on a practical level especially with regards to participants who don’t identify as ‘queer’ and instead speak passionately of the ongoing need to affirm a coherent ‘lesbian’ identity?
this matter I don’t think I can pretend to be queer, despite the fact that many may think I am. The notion of being anything makes me entirely nervous.

**Being versus doing queer**

In her introduction to the 1991 special ‘Queer theory’ edition of *differences: a journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Teresa de Lauretis problematises the relationship between queer theory and queer activism by suggesting that the concept of queer in queer theory is often too radical for those who desire to deploy it as (queer) activism. My view of this is that there is a dichotomous logic between being and doing queer which is tied up in the confusing language of queer theory and what exactly constitutes ‘queer’, and queer activism and subversion. I contend that the participants be and do ‘queer’ (things) all of the time, and that this represents for them a refusal of the either/or option (that is being/doing and queer/non-queer).

Sullivan (2003) also struggles with the being/doing dichotomy but by drawing upon Jakobsen (1998: 516) she is able to suggest that, “one way of avoiding the problems associated with the notion of queer as an identity” is to “complete the Foucauldian move from human being to human doing” (quoted in Sullivan, 2003: 50). This concept nicely captures the way in which I would like queer theory to work with the data. For me this permits a careful and tentative reading of the embodied (‘lesbian’) experiences and stories of the participants as implicated in doing rather than being. This shifts the focus of queer theorising and critique outside the notion of a queer identity per se (that is queer the noun, being ‘queer’) and onto the range of normative discourses that position particular subjects in particular ways, as for instance, gendered, sexed, raced, (dis)abled, or simply ‘othered’ subjects (that is queer the verb, doing ‘queer’). By looking at queer in this way Sullivan (2003: 50) posits ‘queer’ as “a deconstructive practice that is not undertaken by an already constituted subject, and does not, in turn, furnish the subject with a nameable identity”.

This is a useful comment because later it allows me to critique the discourses drawn upon by the participants and their passionate attachments to essential, ‘natural’ or authentic identities rather than the identity itself (always remembering that one cannot be an
unconstituted subject, and one cannot speak from an unconstituted place). This encourages a more subtle exploration of how subjectivities are taken on, given meaning, and ‘performed’. Hence suggesting how queer can be potentially re-configured through understandings and experience as a productive political and personal resource, not just as (an)other term - to which the participants do not relate. These discussions re-confirm the two main purposes for doing queer theory, namely radical deconstructionism and/or radical subversion (Green, 2002). For Green (2002), each of these positions has inherent problems which in his eyes can be dealt with by taking a sociological view of sexuality and recognising the limits of both poststructuralism and queer theory (which I have done and propose). He argues that in order for scholars to take account of “erotic subjectivities, practices and communities” they must be able to “more fully engage the social landscape in which erotic actors are situated” (Green, 2002: 524). In short I wish to work with a theoretically and socially robust concept that is flexible enough to cater for essentialising discourses of coherence but rigid enough to oppose heteronomativity and homonormativity.

In developing this idea further I have not only been drawn to feminists like Butler. A number of postcolonial queer theorists\(^3\) have also offered a number of ways in which to explore the complexities of subjectivity represented in data. For these postcolonial queer theorists, ‘queering’ research requires a committed, deliberate and sustained focus on the ways in which race, masculinity, gender, ability, embodiment and sexuality are constituted on both global and local levels (through a multitude of discourses, practices, institutions and places, such as schools, media, politics). These researchers provide an approach which tries to account for intersections of subjectivity, within the confines of often limiting definitions of queerness. In the main I am interested in how these theorists do queer theoretically and how they deal with the contradictions that I have struggled with. What is useful in their work is an approach to researching and theorising that drops the tendency for adopting a Western metro-sexual reference point in favour of widening the frame in order to critically analyse the discursive sites of (colonial) masculinity, (homo)erotic desire, and

---

(hetero)sexuality by adding the ‘real’ and material complexities of multiple subjectivities (race, religion, culture and gender) to the mix (Jackson, 2000a, 2000b; Spurlin, 2001).

Queer theory is able to problematise this mix and the notion of fitting or belonging by suggesting that none of us fit into any normative categories, even those who take great pains to re-inforce normativity. In some way to see everyone as ‘queer’ is to begin to deconstruct the very conditions under which subjectivities are so painstakingly upheld. It also makes me feel a part of some mechanism that is denying and problematising (in)difference. In this way ‘queer’ can be deployed to challenge many discreet identity categories, including ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’, and so accordingly and necessarily, ‘queer’ itself (Butler, 1993). According to Spurlin (2001: 186) such a position requires,

acknowledging that queer inquiry needs comparative, relational, historicized, and contextualized understandings of “queer,” engaging localized questions of experience, identity, culture, and history in order to better understand the processes of domination and subordination.

In research terms this requires planning and conducting empirical research that presents ideas and practices that enable, activate and nurture notions of ‘queer’, ‘queers’ and ‘queering’. This is achieved by creating new spaces for ‘queer’ visibility, identity and cultural practice whilst simultaneously offering the opportunity to critique the heterosexist biases of postcolonialism and the Western biases of academic queer theory (Spurlin, 2001). Spurlin and others39 demand researchers self reflexively examine their own imperialist and homogenising impulses as an essential component of this.

As a verb ‘queer’ draws upon its outraged political and activist roots, is always situational and temporary and so hints at a process of uncertain becoming, but never quite getting there; and of doing and acting. The notion of doing (verb), forms the basis of my reading of queer and my subsequent analysis of ‘queer’ subjectivities in this thesis. This reading is based upon Sullivan’s (2003) suggestion that to queer is a verb which involves quizzing,

---

ridiculing, spoiling and putting out of order. In this sense one can *do* queer without necessarily *being* queer. There is no one reading of queer or queer theory and I do not wish to close off the data to critical resources which may allow me to carefully theorise in ways that do not valorise either queer or non-queer identities. Instead I am to open the data to productive rather than reductive methods of critique – this signals to me the kind of work that queer theory can *do*.

**DOING COMES TO MATTER**

In the final chapter of *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) expresses a kind of melancholy about how her words have been mis-read in *Gender Trouble* (1999a), this exemplifies how queer can get turned back on itself. In other words queer and queers have equally the potential to undermine as to liberate. This final chapter stands out in a text which predominantly engages with psychoanalysis because Butler deliberately re-cites the terms ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ in an effort to undo the claims of authenticity that these categories unknowingly lay upon us. “In this sense”, says Butler (1993: 229), “it remains politically necessary to lay claim to ‘women,’ ‘queer,’ ‘gay,’ and ‘lesbian,’ precisely because of the ways these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing”. Through this idea Butler calls on us to ‘take back’ the terms that others use to oppress and suppress.

In this final chapter Butler (1993: 230) provides an entry point for ‘queers’ when she considers how the materiality of ‘queer’ performativity is not simply changing one’s clothes or un-doing one’s gender, rather it involves the ongoing critique of the terms *queer* and *queer subjectivity*, because whilst queer emerges as a necessary form of affiliation, “it will not fully describe those it purports to represent”. In the following quote Butler (1993) issues a reminder about both the linguistic historicity and conceit attached to terms (such as ‘woman’, ‘lesbian’, ‘queer’) which seek to self-name or posit a pre-discursive subject. Below I quote Butler at length in order to develop the concept that at times queer may need to step aside if, and when other ‘terms’ can contest heteronormativity in more politically potent ways.
If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. This also means that it will doubtless have to be yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. Such a yielding may well become necessary in order to accommodate – without domesticating – democratising contestations that have and will redraw the contours of the movement in ways that can never be fully anticipated in advance. (Butler, 1993: 228)

For Butler queer is both problematic and productive, and whilst she is indifferent to the idea of identity categories per se, she does affirm a need for caution and an appreciation of the inherent risks in asserting any category (including ‘queer’) which represents a false unity based upon difference.

By working creatively with Butler’s ideas and the data collected I have been able to explore the participants’ investments in identity categories by considering how these categories have come to matter to them, and how it is that discourse functions to create the normative view that some bodies and identities matter more than others. What matters most to me about queer theory is what it is able to do. Butler’s point of view enables me to investigate the possibility that the moments when a coherent identity is ‘performed’ or cited can have political potential. This is possible because these moments (in time and place) provide a critique of the ‘queer’ subject; and, this can be considered as productive when queer (and the queer subject) is viewed as a discursive site “whose uses are not fully constrained in advance” (Butler, 1993: 230). In this way queer theory opens the data to various modes of ‘queering’ in terms of doing, and doing becomes what matters most about ‘queer’. This re-working of queer theory, via Butler, is an important theoretical idea that I nurture and extend throughout this thesis as an analytical resource.

**Crafting ‘theories’ and ‘queeries’**

In the first half of this chapter I have shared two aspects of the theoretical approaches in this thesis. Firstly, in the section ‘theories’ I explained what poststructuralism and queer theory usually bring and could bring to a research context such as this. Secondly, building
upon my arguments in Chapter One, I began to weigh up what these ‘theories’ bring to research against some of the complications or problems that emerge when data is introduced and poses particular kinds of ‘queeries’ to the ‘theories’. It was at this point that I became aware that it was not productive to make the data fit the theory, and so in the latter part of the above sections I began to tease out what work the ‘theories’ could do. What has come to matter most about the theoretical choices is the concept of doing, and each aspect of this research has been driven by the idea that if this is what these theories bring, what is the work I desire them to do? In this way I have maintained a kind of ‘troubled’ stance towards theory (queer theory in particular). By critiquing queer (theory) I have determined how I intend to deploy it, thus offering queer theory as both a malleable and transportable theoretical resource. I am not proposing an alternative view of queer theory or an alternative theory, but rather my theoretical aim has been to ‘craft’ a particular way of doing and thinking about this research and the data which allowed me to stretch and test the boundaries of it in order to deal with the complexities introduced by the participants’ words. In a moment I explain ‘queering’ as a dual process of dealing with these tensions and ‘queer(ies)’, and of doing ‘queer’ work.

My re-working of queer also draws on Butler’s (1999a) genealogy of gender and sex as performative and as the effects rather than the causes of discourses and practices - effects that we are each compelled to repeat (over and over) in order to constitute a sense of identity, coherence and belonging, but that are also powerfully scripted in order to appear ‘natural’. In this sense Butler is also trying to deal with notions of being and doing, in her case gender and sex. For Butler (1999a: 33),

*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence … gender proves to be performative – that is constituting the very identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (italics in original)

By describing gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a
natural sort of being”, Butler (1999a: 43-44) is able to view sex and gender not as something that we are, but rather as something that we do, and are compelled to do, over and over again. Further, by stating that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”, Butler (1999a: 33) challenges researchers to vigilantly critique the processes of subjection in terms of doing rather than being. In this thesis I take up this challenge in two ways. Firstly, I wonder whether any of us have to be anything at all. As such a key task when dealing with notions of ‘real’ or authentic identities becomes critiquing the discourses which compel us to say such things, as well as investigating the kind of investments tied up with such claims. Secondly, following Butler and Foucault I am interested in the ways in which the participants are both constituted by power and wield it. This involves asking what work do articulations of essentialising discourses do for the participants? And further, how can I re-read this in ‘queer’ ways that take account of their passionate attachments to coherence? My answer on both accounts is to step back and take a ‘queer’ approach.

**Queering: dealing with tension**

From my readings, and after sitting with the data, five tensions or concerns emerged for me with regards to the work queer and queer theory could do. The approach I wish to use and name as ‘queer’ deals with each of my five concerns to follow (and my theoretical concerns in Chapter One) by drawing from and moulding aspects of queer theory which resonate with the words and acts of the participants. ‘Queer’ therefore emerged as a process of doing that was certainly attached to identities, but not necessarily and always a definitive ‘queer’ one. There are many things that queer (theory) can do, but my concern is with what it could

---

40 Given the poststructural basis of queer theory my concerns are also with poststructuralism, and in particular its focus on language, signs, and signification, and claim there is no pre-discursive subject. Whilst poststructuralism provides a serious and useful method of interrogating the ways in which bodies are socially moulded and provides insights into the workings of power and knowledge, I am concerned that at times it looses the body and its sensate experiences. Citing Lash (1991), Hughes and Paterson (1997: 334) state that in poststructuralism the body disappears into discourse and language, becoming “a surface to be written on, to be fabricated by regimes of truth”. In short they argue that “post-structuralism replaces biological essentialism with discursive essentialism” (Hughes & Patterson, 1997: 333). This criticism also relates strongly to my fifth concern and my own interests in phenomenology.
specifically do in this research, with these participants describing themselves and their lives in some very particular (and often in supposedly un-queer) ways.

My first concern is that a queer identity (being ‘queer’) could be seen as essentialist, and hence hierarchical and binarised, and not so queer at all. Secondly, a queer identity and politic was too radical for the participants in this research. Thirdly, queer theory seems at times to miss out aspects of gender (with the exception of Butler’s work) which appeared to be important to the participants. Fourthly, queer theory seems to only irregularly be able to rupture heteronormative discourses and practices (usually in quite public or overt ways). It doesn’t seem to have done anything to change the participants’ lives, except continue to be unappealing and irrelevant to them. Fifthly, my reading of queer theory did not allow me to take account of the very ‘real’, sensual, and material ways in which the participants lived their lives, and made connections to place(s) and events. In the paragraphs to follow I tease out how I have used a ‘queer’ approach to adequately deal with these five concerns, and how I consider this to be an example of ‘queering’ in a theoretical sense.

Firstly, I deal with point one and two together. To name some thing or other ‘queer’, to use, deploy or theorise queerly assumes that there are other things to call or theories to use that are not ‘queer’. Queer in this case doesn’t appear to be inclusive or to disrupt but rather it performs the same function of all language - it creates a certain type of subject, and the term queer reifies a particular type of sexual subject based on the binary queer/non-queer. Many feminist theorists assert that just studying sex should be resisted because it cannot be understood outside its social relations to other subjectivities (Hennessy, 1994, 1995; Jackson, S., 1999a; Martin, 1998; Seidman, 2004; Walters, 1996; Weston, 1998). Following Butler (1993) I wish to resist deploying the complacent and over arching notions attached to identity categories, including queer. To do this Daniel Warner (2004) suggests that we stop adding letters and start questioning the assumptions underlying all identity politics and research of, by, for, and with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer,
questioning and Intersex (LGBTQQI) people and ‘others’. In this way ‘queering’ is not just a method for thinking through matters of sex and sexuality. The challenge here is for queer to expand its meanings and referents and to continually re-negotiate its own identity. Rand (2004: 303) describes this as a theoretical slant which draws in all types of people who engage “in the intentional rejection of traditional identity categories” through activism, visibility, writing, deeds, words, politics and simply by being in the world.

Queer theory has encouraged me to develop an approach to identity which is open and non-restrictive. So an essentialist view could stand beside a ‘queer’ one. I moved beyond my initial concerns that queer is just another letter on the LGBT… identity list by embracing the concept that ‘queer’ is indeterminant and resistant to definition. This encouraged me to consider and include essential identities under a ‘queer’ umbrella. In developing the idea of queer in scare quotes I am drawing upon the indefinability of queer (theory) in order to suggest that ‘queer’ and ‘queerness’ (doing ‘queer’) represents a failure to fit precisely in any category (including ‘queer’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘woman’). This failure is not so much about how people see themselves as fitting or how they use identity categories, but is instead more focussed on the notion of the inadequacy of identity categories altogether. In this way I have re-oriented queer (theory) to the needs of the participants who are queered by normative practices, and who also from time to time ‘queer’ themselves. This introduces a kind of everydayness to ‘queer’ words and acts that resonates more strongly with the participants’ ‘real’ experiences.

With regards to point three I have been influenced by empirical approaches of postcolonial queer theorists and feminist thinking. In the data Tabitha integrated her Jewish identity, and Jacqui her Maltese identity into their descriptions of self. Each woman also spoke from a gendered subject position. Whilst many feminists see the dissolution of the subject ‘woman’ as problematic, some have argued (for example Frable, 1997; Weedon, 1997, 1999) that the deconstruction of essential identities is “the necessary condition for an adequate understanding of the variety of social relations where the principles of liberty and

---

41 At times throughout this thesis I shall use the acronym LGBTQQI as a form of shorthand umbrella ‘category’ in order to capture diversity of sexualities.
equality should apply” (Mouffe, 1992: 371). As I later argue there is also a place, and productive potential in the strategic affirmation of coherence.

I have followed the lead of numerous postcolonial queer theorists by re-working ‘queer’ to be more inclusive of gendered and sexed contexts. For example by considering the context of: non-Western eroticism (Jackson, 2000a, 2000b, 2001); gender liminality and transgenderism (Hird, 2001, 2002; Humphrey, 1999; Roen, 2001; Towle & Morgan, 2002; Wilton, 2000); bisexuality (Humphrey, 1999; McLean, 2001); and ethnocentricity (Jackson, 2000a; McLean, 2001; Roen, 2001). Such a re-working can interrogate the ways in which researchers construct the objects of their inquiry and conduct their research. This involves re-imagining the theoretical and embodied relationship between gender and sexuality by developing a more generalised theory of gender and sexuality (Eves, 2004; Jackson, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2003; Jackson, S., 1999a; Walters, 1996) that takes account of other differences, and acknowledges discourse alone does not paint a picture of how identities are materially lived and experienced. This also requires re-formulating a notion of ‘queer’ in ways that allow for theorising of all eroticisms as gendered and all genders as eroticised (Jackson, 2000a).

My fourth concern relates to the claim that queer (theory) appears erudite and irrelevant (for instance, because of its history as a white, middle class, academic, and masculinist discourse). Lisa Duggan (1998) suggests it can be made relevant by reconceptualising our relationship to the state (law) and that this relies on changing laws, lobbying, linguistic warfare, and confronting public discourse – what could be thought of as Foucauldian forms of resistance. She proposes sexual identities be viewed in terms of dissent rather than as naturalised because this presents difference as oppositional, thereby highlighting the illegitimacy of heterosexist privilege. I agree, and further maintain that from this perspective affirmations of coherence can be both strategic and subversive. For example, it is OK to push for so-called ‘equal’ rights as part of a ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer’ politic. A
variety of oppressive factors fix identity, and these need to be challenged in productive\textsuperscript{42} and strategic ways, not just in ‘queer’, ‘gay’, or ‘lesbian’ ways. I suggest that sometimes these ways can be essentialising because deep articulations of lived identities and experiences (as presented in this thesis) can, and do confront, deconstruct and destabilise normative discourses, practices, agents and ideologies of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and male dominance (Gamson & Moon, 2004; Jackson, S., 1999a, 1999b; Walters, 1996). In this thesis this has involved identifying and exploring the material acts and words of the participants (however small) for agency and the subversive potential to attack the naturalised status of sexuality. For Honeychurch (1996) a queered approach to doing research requires researchers to analyse experience, situation or text in relation to normative discourses and practices by shifting one’s position (as also suggested by Halperin, 1995). Honeychurch (1996, quoted in Dilley, 1999: 458-459) argues,

A queered position requires an ontological shift comprehensively resistant in its exceptions to dominant normativity. A queering of standpoint in social research is a vigorous challenge to that which has constrained what must be known, who may be the knower, and how knowledge has come to be generated and circulated, … [and] queers participate in positioning themselves through both authoring and authorizing experience.

In this thesis I seek to consider the ways in which the participants speak about and experience the effects of (hetero)normativity in their everyday lives and places. I further offer discussions which suggest the participants have done, and continue to, disrupt normative discourses and metanarratives, by sometimes taking on essentialising views of themselves, affirming coherence, and seeking ‘normality’.

Finally, by refusing to reduce the body and its sensate experiences to the level of discourse I have drawn on queer theory in order to explore the affective, sensuous and felt dimensions of identities as both discursive and material presence. This involved considering and accepting shifting subjects and subject positions in ways that appreciate the ‘real’, felt and

\textsuperscript{42} I am not suggesting that ‘queer’, ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ are not productive terms or concepts, rather I am suggesting together they do important work, but sometimes when separated out they are pitted against each other, which has the potential to become non-productive.
everyday experiences of humans (Robinson, 2002; Sykes & Goldstein, 2004) as well as contributing to academic, political and social discourse. There is little doubt identity is experienced sensually as it involves bodies that watch, feel, sense, speak, move, and act. The embodied ‘feel’ of one’s sexual or gendered identity becomes a key site of theoretical deconstruction as much as it is a place for subversion and agency. For example, the interview questions in this research have been specifically designed in order to elicit sensuous responses. In later analytical chapters, theorising in this way has allowed me to do many things.

My main aim in later more analytical chapters is to share the ways in which I believe the participants have taken on ‘queer’ as “a way of life” (Foucault, 1996; Halberstam, 2005). By drawing upon Foucault’s comment that “to be ‘gay,’ I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual, but to try to define and develop a way of life” (Foucault, 1996, quoted in Halberstam, 2005: 1), Halberstam provides a compelling re-reading of queer (or a ‘queer’ re-reading) that more closely resembles the ways in which the women in this research feel, describe, explain, and live their lives. Halberstam (2005: 1) argues that this ‘radical’ idea incorporates and fosters “queer friendships, queer networks … relations in space and … time” and it marks “out the particularity and indeed the perceived menace of homosexual life”. These were the everyday things spoken about by each woman in each interview, I could not turn away from their sense of particularity and materiality (even if it was at times essentialist), nor could I fail to notice their sense of loss, shame and ‘difference’. Following Halberstam (2005) the later analytical chapters (Four, Five, Six and Seven) adopt an approach which considers ‘queer’ to be ‘a way of life’, a way of doing our lives as a mode of being ‘queer’, and at times this is done as a matter of survival. To paraphrase Halberstam (2005) this includes, but is not limited to, examinations of: ‘queer’ (subcultural) practices and ideologies; alternative alliances and friendships; forms of ‘queer’ embodiment (particularly with regards to gender, parody and performativity); ‘queer’ places, events, and communities; and ‘queer’ forms of representation.
Closely related to the concepts above is considering the ability of queer theory to theorise identity in relation to place. In Chapter One I described a major research aim to be ‘grounding’ queer theory, and ‘theorising’ ‘feminist geography’. I have turned to ‘queer’ geographers in order to deal with this balancing act. Queer theory has a great deal in common with geography. Many geographical metaphors are used to describe, explain or locate the ‘queerly’ theorised subject. Each field uses similar terms (location, positionality, borders, boundaries) for similar effect. Halperin (1995) suggests that because queer is about positionality (place) rather than identity, that it can be taken up by anyone, anywhere, anytime. Despite her own misgivings and reluctances about queer, Didi Khayatt (2002: 499) sees “its implied multiple locations” as a strength. What I draw from this is a concept of ‘queering’ which takes into account notions of place, including community, belonging, placelessness, ‘sense of place’ and displacement, alongside and in relation to notions of the subject as it seeks to transcend regulatory power and regulated borders. Khayatt (2002: 499) challenges researchers to seriously reconsider the term ‘queer’ by adopting its inclusive character, as well as by disrupting “its arrogant certainty, and [dealing] with its suggested multiplicity”. For Elder (1999: 88), a ‘queer’ geographer, theorising queerly provides a “delightful sense of unbounded chaos and uncertainty” which helps him to think about identity. In Elder’s (1999: 89) view, and my own, geographical ‘queerness’ involves “rethinking urban coalition politics, interdisciplinary intellectual work, and non-static visions of space and identity”, in an attempt to resist power and disrupt space (and place) by revealing the inconsistent social boundaries and discourses which shape subjectivity.

This also requires researchers to: acknowledge their own ‘queerness’; critically consider their research purposes; and, recognise their own unknown and unspoken ‘queer’ presence. In the first instance this can be done by asking ‘in whose voice do we speak? For whom do we speak or act?’ (Grace & Benson, 2000; King, 1999; Kong et al., 2002). Methodologically this means problematising and troubling, “the constitution of voice, visibility, knowledge and ignorance” (Talburt, 1999: 537), the researcher and research. For King (1999) this also involves ‘queering’ the text by bringing the authors’ (and speakers) ‘queerness’ to the surface in a process which reinscribes ‘queer’ meanings within and by the text.
In addition to dealing with the above five tensions, queer (theory) has also been able to accommodate some interesting and compelling methodological and representational choices. ‘Queering’ this research has enabled these choices to better cater for the dynamics of the interview, the participants, and my close relationships with them (explained in more detail in Chapters Three and Four). In this sense a ‘queer’ approach has involved employing ‘evolving’ and proactive methodological practices. This relates to Halberstam’s (1998) deployment of queer methodologies flagged in Chapter One, and my desire to see what queer (theory) can do. ‘Queering’, as explained in this chapter offers a different vantage point, way of researching, looking at data, analysing data, and representing the words of the participants. The notion of ‘queering’ is built upon in Chapters Three and Four with regards to methodological and representational choices.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this chapter has been to introduce the ‘theories’ and the ‘queeries’ attached to, and circling the theoretical choices of this research. By critiquing queer (theory) I have been able to identify my concerns with it and its benefits and limitations when deploying it in relation to the data. In this respect I have found queer (theory) both restrictive and expansive and so in the latter part of the chapter I suggest that what matters most to me is not so much what it is or isn’t but what it can do, and how it can help me to work with the data collected. Asking what queer theory can do is thus my key theoretical problem in this thesis. This chapter has addressed some specific details about how I have crafted a suitable theoretical approach to do this.

To this end, I explained how I have adopted the notion of ‘queering’ as a dual process of dealing with tensions and ‘queer(ies)’, and of doing ‘queer’ work. Here I reiterate Butler’s (1993: 241) call to engage in an ongoing critique of queer theory and the queer subject as a questioning of the “differences between the power we promote and the power we oppose?” In this way queer theory and the queer subject is always emerging and revised within discourse, and is in a constant state of becoming. For Butler this does not mean suspending
the term *queer* but nor does it mean taking the term for granted. What she does suggest is a notion of ‘queering’ which inquires into the historical discursive formation of homosexualities and “the *deformative* and *misappropriative* power that the term currently enjoys” (Butler, 1993: 229, italics in original). It is armed with this wariness that I embark upon further ‘queer’ theorising in later chapters.
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I chart the development of the methodological processes of this thesis. When I began this research I had some rough ideas around notions of sexual identity and place that I found personally interesting, the following discussions trace how I took these ideas and moulded them into a research study. I will from the outset confess I have found pinning down a or the ‘right’ methodology very difficult and as a result have grappled with many issues on practical and theoretical levels, for example is there such a thing as a distinctively queer methodology or method? A personal and theoretical commitment underlying this thesis has been its claim to interrogate and trouble identity concepts and subjectivities via the deployment of queer theory in interesting ways. In short to articulate the ways in which the participants deal with their lives and make sense of them in the light of their own subjectivities. At times I have found it difficult to remain faithful to this task, to believe my own assertions, or to take on the responsibility of disrupting the realist illusions of a coherent identity at the centre of the experiences of the participants. As part of this journey I have often felt trapped between a desire to work within the binaries and ambiguities inherent in research, subjectivity and writing, but also wishing to ride along and take my own course. This chapter focuses upon expanding my previous discussions of ‘queer’ and queer theory into discussions of methodology by continuing to develop a notion of ‘queering’ which most suits this research.

In order to deal constructively and theoretically with the tensions of this research I have at times called upon certain metaphors in order to guide the research process, my use of ‘framing’ in this chapter is one such metaphor. I begin this chapter with a brief discussion of how this metaphor has guided this research by considering frames as multi-purpose ways
or methods in which to view, conduct, theorise, analyse and represent research, data and people. This then leads into a discussion of the various methodologies and methods that are commonly used to conduct research ‘on’ or with ‘others’. My key aim here is to tease out the most commonly used research methods by ‘queers’ on/with ‘queers’, and thus elucidate a ‘queered’ methodological frame. Intricately related to this are my observations of the impact of researching friends on the methods chosen and deployed, and the impact that my own researcher subjectivities and investments in the research had on field relationships. In addition to exploring theories of method and research relationships this chapter also explains and describes specific research details about: the participants (demographic details, recruitment process and why); the methods used and why (life story interviews, artefact and document collection); the data collection process; and the analysis of data.

**Frames and framing**

Biographical studies should attempt to articulate how each subject deals with the problems of coherence, illusion, consubstantiality, presence, deep inner selves, others, gender, class, [race and sexuality], starting and ending points, epiphanies, fictions, truths, and final causes. These recurring, obdurate, culturally constructed dimensions of Western lives provide framing devices for the stories that are told about the lives that we study. (Denzin, 1989: 83)

This chapter uses the metaphor of framing in order to reinforce the notion that there is no one way of designing, conducting, theorising, interpreting, analysing or representing research. The frame metaphor should be read alongside my ‘queering’ metaphor.

In the above quote Denzin presents the idea that multiple layers of contextual frames act as devices which surround, encase, constitute and inscribe us as particular types of subjects, and which are in turn discursively framed socially and culturally. He flags biography as a useful device by which to explore (and frame) these various and multiple subject positions. Denzin uses a frame metaphorically to represent spatial context, positionality, relationality

---

43 The list of ‘others’ here includes minority categories or labels associated with or to emerge from: gender, race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, ability, geographical location, and age
(to others and ourselves), subjectivity (including gender, race, sexuality), Western discourse, research methods (for example biography), and theoretical resources. An interesting contrast to this view arrives through the film work of Trinh T. Minh-ha (1992) in *The Framer Framed*. Trinh explains the process of framing as one which involves framing nothingness (void) as a method of framing somethingness (form). She explains that framing to her means developing a picture or view that is “framed by void and framing nothing (or framing a nothing)” (Trinh, 1992: 211), and yet an image is present - the image of the framer and the framed. So for Trinh the frame offers a dynamic series of metaphors dealing with the ways in which the filmmaker creates and manipulates the scene and frames the subject. Trinh (1992: 119) is not interested in using films to express herself, “but rather to expose the social self (and selves) which necessarily mediates the making as well as the viewing (of the film)”. So rather than distort or warp the view, her frame(s) allow the viewer to somehow blur the lines between fact and fiction, thus multiplying the confusion created by seeping and moving boundaries which serve to create the illusion of an inside and an outside that both includes and excludes the framer and the framed. The notion of inside/outside and inclusion/exclusion consistently emerges in the data.

In this thesis I use the term frame in the multitude of ways suggested by Denzin and Trinh and consider this to adhere to a commitment to reflexivity and ‘queering’. I do this in order to paint a view of research, subjectivity, and theoretical frameworks that is not so concerned about objectivity and truth (because these are impossible) but which instead focuses on the practical and theoretical (im)possibilities of framing and the very idea of being able to ‘deal’ with any of these terms satisfactorily. This is all also a part of my own frame, part of the tensions of research, and of being both a framer and framed engaged in a process of displaying and interpreting form and emptiness (Trinh, 1992). In summary, I suggest that Denzin and Trinh offer me a metaphor which exposes the limits of epistemological and ontological certainties and marks a site of everythingness and nothingness which makes a ‘queer’ methodological framing of this research (im)possible.
A ‘queer’ frame emerging

In my mind a ‘queer’ frame is both visible and invisible, any and every colour, shape, size and style. It is at once part of the image and in direct contradiction and conflict to the image. This frame creates borders but also destroys them. My ‘queer’ frame is malleable and re-locatable, it is spatial and temporal - it has a place, and no place. It has a history that is encrusted with the past and a future twisted by social, political and economic inequity. It is inscribed with meaning and stripped bare of any words. This frame at times defies definition or language – it just is. It can inscribe or destroy any tellers’ or viewer’s reality, and then expose both the framer and the framed. With a ‘queer’ frame I am able to argue where it should be hung, whether it could be hung upon, or not put up at all. With this in mind it also becomes possible to re-cast or re-frame the vantage points from which people see their own lives and from which people like me theorise about them.

Via the frame metaphor, and in light of the following discussions of methodology, I also wish to consider the spatial aspects of framing and re-framing not only in terms of what is framed, but also with regards to what sits outside the frame in terms of people, spaces and places. Here I wish to borrow a view of gender and feminism from de Lauretis (1988) called the ‘space-off’. She describes the ‘space-off’ as “the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible” (de Lauretis, 1988: 26) (similar to Trinh’s notion of framing). The reading I would like to make of this requires considering theoretical and methodological frames to be only as useful on the inside to the extent that they are on the outside. This also follows Diana Fuss’s (1991) call to resist reinforcing the importance of an ‘inside’ because it comes at the cost of an ‘outside’. In so doing the binary inside/outside (of the frame) is rejected in favour of an appreciation of every-side or no-side (of the frame). In this way the spaces in and out side the frame are equally as mobile, malleable and porous to ‘queer’ and non-queer researchers, participants, methodologies, and contexts. This keeps the story re-told in a state of becoming.
QUEER METHODOLOGIES

Sitting in this writing moment, and within the broader task at hand, I am acutely aware of my collusion in constructing ‘others’ and of ‘othering’. I wonder how my class, gender, sexuality and body can be re-deployed to re-direct this passive and active act (if in fact it should), how and why. I seek to eliminate identity boundaries but at the very instant that I write or utter them they are re-created. To borrow a term from Michelle Fine (1994) I believe I am trying to negotiate my own personal and academic ‘zippered borders’ of gender, sexuality and class; and struggling with what bell hooks (1990) calls a ‘politics of location’ (quoted in Fine, 1994). In short I am struggling with ‘queering’ my methodology. These tensions are ongoing and necessarily evident throughout this thesis.

For now I simply want to note that my views, ideas, confusing positions, discussions, and senses of displacement have actually come from my past engagements and investments with research on, with, for and by ‘others’. I have always been drawn to research that troubled embodied identity concepts and complex subject positions (like gender, race, sexuality, age, disadvantage or ability). In the early stages of this thesis I consulted a wide variety of research in order to deal with my emerging methodological concerns about conducting research with/on ‘others’. I closely examined the specific methods and theories underlying such research by posing the following questions of it:

- What methods and theories were used, how and why?
- How do researchers deal with their own investments, emotions and subjectivities in research, and reflexivity?
- Who and what is being heard through the research? How do they come to be heard?
- How do researchers deal with the ‘other’ and in the process not re-constitute the ‘other’, or become the other?
- How do they write and represent their data?

In the next section I explain some of the ‘answers’ to these questions as I work towards developing a ‘queer’ methodological frame for my own research.
What’s gone before?

In a chapter titled *Queering the Interview*, Travis Kong, Dan Mahoney and Ken Plummer (2002) begin their discussions of queering the interview with the following quote. I would like to borrow it because it captures where I stand and the ‘new’ questions to emerge from previous research, as well as bringing ‘queer’ researcher subjectivity to the surface via the use of the term ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’.

> The challenge lies in what each of us chooses to do when we represent our experiences. Whose rules do we follow? Will we make our own? What is the nature of the “I,” that so many prohibitions bury? How can we unearth some of the inner worlds that we learn so very well to hide? Are we willing to do this within social science? Do we, in fact, have the guts to say, “You may not like it, but here I am.” (Kong et al., 2002: 239)

These type of questions, and the ‘in your face’ ‘here I am’ discourse has emerged as a result of shifts in broad medical, social and cultural views of same sex relationships and political activism in the late 1980s. In the main this was as a direct result of HIV/AIDS (Gamson, 2000; Kong et al., 2002; Lewin & Leap, 1996; Lupton, 1993; Timewell, Minichiello, & Plummer, 1992), and its associated exacerbation of class and ethnic tensions, and the worsening economic and social conditions of those most affected (Weston, 1996). The AIDS pandemic epicentre in the late 1980s and early 90s prompted radical re-thinking about ‘homosexuality’, disease, politics and activism, and as a result intensely politicised research. Research during this time emerged within a troubled, fearful and threatening frame that both demanded and precipitated radical action, and by association the need for subtle twists to established feminist methodologies. What emerged from this period and outlook, and as a result of increasingly more reflexive and personal feminist research and shifts in ideas about what constitutes a subject (poststructuralism), was an approach and attitude to research which began to situate politics and messiness at the forefront of discussions of identities as opposed to reifying discrete demarcations of an identity that necessitated political action. Whilst it is not in the scope of this thesis to chart the multitude of research to grow from the early days of HIV and AIDS it is important to acknowledge one of its legacies - queer theory.
In order to contextualise and develop my own research I turned to research that explored the lives and experiences of LGBTQIQI subjects. I used the previous questions to develop a snapshot of what had happened, and what was happening in the fields most closely linked to the type of research I was conceiving and people I was researching. To this end I gathered 30 to 50 empirical and polemic research papers, reports, and book chapters mainly in the areas of human and feminist geography, gender, sexuality and education (also in psychiatry, anthropology, medicine and nursing), that focussed on the lived identity related experiences of LGBTQIQI subjects and the meanings they made of these experiences. This literature ranged from the early 1990s through to 2005, and whilst just scratching the surface some distinct methodological trends emerged which are worthy to discuss here, especially in relation to how they informed my subsequent research choices.

**Queer research methodologies and methods**

All of the research reviewed was considered qualitative in nature by the researchers and various theoretical frameworks were utilised. I suspect more employed a mixed poststructural + queer theory framework due to the terms used in their work or to refer to the participants and also the types of methods used (for example discourse analysis), though they did not state it in the paper.

A number of studies were described as ethnographic in nature and three were phenomenological (Alderson, 2004; Langdridge & Butt, 2004; Parks, 1999). The research

---

44 Including feminism (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Farquhar, 2000; Humphrey, 1999; McLean, 2001; Myslik, 1996; Rhoads, 1997; Rothenburg, 1995; Schuyf, 1992; Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000); poststructuralism (Clarke, 1998; Nardi, 1992; Delph-Janiurek, 1999); social identity theory (Krane & Barber, 2005); symbolic interactionism (Rust, 1993; Shallenberger, 1996); constructivism (Abes & Jones, 2004); ecological theory (Alderson, 2004); queer theory (Costello & Hodge, 1999; Grace & Benson, 2000; Heaphy, Weeks & Donovan, 1998; Holliday, 1999; Jackson, 2000a; Paris & Anderson, 2001; Ridge, Minichello & Plummer, 1997; Roen, 2001; Rollins & Hirsch, 2003), or a combination of theoretical frameworks such as poststructural feminist theory (Brickell, 2000; Clarke, 1998; Podmore, 2001; Sykes, 2001, 2004; Sykes & Goldstein, 2004), or poststructural theory and queer theory (Eves, 2004; Rand, 2004; Sykes, 2004; Sykes & Goldstein, 2004; Talburt, 1999).

45 See for example: Dennis, 2000; Grant, 1997; Hindle, 1994; Jackson, 2000a; Kehily, 2002; King, 1999; Kramer, 1995; Myslik, 1996; Paris and Anderson, 2001; Podmore, 2001; Rhoads, 1997; Sykes and Goldstein, 2004; Talburt, 1999; Willis, 2003.
methods ranged from Medline content analysis (Boehmer, 2002) through to long-term ethnographic fieldwork employing multiple methods (Jackson, 2000). Some of the research used questionnaires or surveys either as the only method (Dempsey, Hillier & Harrison, 2001; Phillips, 2001; Rostosky, Korfhage, Duhigg, Stern, Bennet & Riggle, 2004; Rollins & Hirsch, 2003; Rust, 1993; Tomlison & Fassinger, 2003); or in combination with other methods (for example focus groups, interviews) (Clarke, 1998; Esterberg, 1996; Nardi, 1992; Skeggs, Moran, Tyrer & Binnie, 2004). Over time online research emerged as a ‘new’ approach but in the main was limited to recruitment (Dempsey et al., 2001; Tomlison & Fassinger, 2003; Sykes, 2004) or surveys (Dempsey et al., 2001; Tomlison & Fassinger, 2003). Textual analysis of varying types was used, including discourse, media, narrative, World Wide Web analysis, and archival history research (Brickell, 2000; Costello & Hodge, 1999; Forest, 1997; Jackson, 2000a; Kunzman, 2003; Langdridge & Butt, 2004; Paris & Anderson, 2001; Rand, 2004; Retter, 1997; Wolfe, 1997).

As was the case for minority group research the most salient feature to surface from this research was the researchers’ ongoing commitment to the use of the in-depth and/or semi-structured interview as a single main method or in combination with other methods. The life history, life story or life narrative interview method was also regularly called upon (Biott, Moos, & Møller, 2001; Heaphy, Weeks & Donovan, 1998; Norquay, 1999; Sykes, 2001, 2004; Sykes & Goldstein, 2004; Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000). Other interesting methods that many of the researchers explained as specifically chosen because of who they were researching (that is, LGBTQIQ participants) included video diaries (Holliday, 1999);

46 From my reading and database searching, the most commonly used method in research related to ‘others’ appears to be the face-to-face interview (Banister, 1999; Behar, 1993; Brettell, 1997; Dunbar, Rodriguez & Parker, 2003; Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Fine, 1994; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Hughes & Paterson, 1997; Reinharz & Chase, 2003; Tedlock, 2001; Walkerdine, 1990, 1997). In the main semi-structured approaches that ask about descriptions of experiences or events are the most popular, this includes the life history method, oral histories, biography, and ethnography (Behar, 1993; Biott et al., 2001; Brettell, 1997; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990; Norquay, 1999; Tedlock, 2001;Tierney, 2000).

hermeneutic phenomenological textual analysis (Langdridge & Butt, 2004); focus groups (Esterberg, 1996; Farquhar, 2000; Paris & Anderson, 2001; Skeggs et al., 2004); case studies of groups and/or organisations (Humphrey, 1999); and performance ethnography (Sykes & Goldstein, 2004). A number of the research papers focussed on exploring researcher subjectivities, most of these had queer theoretical leanings (Costello & Hodge, 1999; Grace & Benson, 2000; King, 1999; Rhoads, 1997; Khayatt, 2002; Elder, 1999; Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000).

This tentative overview, if taken as a reasonable cross section sample of research over a fifteen year period, lead me to conclude that research using semi-structured interviews with or without other methods was the most prevalent type of method used by researchers who wished to ask questions about the experiences and lives of LGBTQI identifying people. It appears that, over time, as epistemological changes occurred in response to issues of gender, race, sexuality, and class (that is, ‘difference’), so too did methodological practices. This would seem to suggest, and the literature overwhelmingly supports this, that there is no particular queer methodology that is recommended or used, but rather what is important is a ‘queer’ framing of the research.

**Re-framing a ‘queer’ methodology**

My discomfort in separating out a ‘queer’ methodology lies in the notion that by doing so I go against my own workings and deployment of ‘queer’ frames as open and inclusive. This is situated more within an ontological conundrum than in the epistemological ‘certainties’ claimed by and through the use of queer theory. If one is to take queer research as only research on, with, by or for LGBTQI people then there is probably no such thing as a distinctively queer methodology because queer researchers use the same methods as everyone else. I suggest singling out a queer methodology becomes exclusionary and elitist, and reinforces claims for essentialising identities. In this sense ‘queering’ simply becomes doing research on ‘queers’ or research by ‘queers’. This is not a way in which I choose to solely read queer, queer theory or queering as each term has far more nuanced possibilities that this.
In Chapter Two I attempted to tease out my concerns by ‘messing around’ with definitions of queer and hence developing my own understandings and uses of queer (theory). I continue this playfulness in this section as I attempt to articulate whether it is possible from the research above, other research and thinking, and my own formulations to distinguish, tease out, describe or define a ‘queer’ methodological frame, and if we can, what it might look like. From my readings I remain unconvinced that one distinctively ‘queer’ methodology actually exists or is necessary, or that queer research, researchers or participants require distinctively ‘queer’ methods. What I will suggest is that there are a multitude of ways for conceiving of ‘queer’ methodologies and therefore some distinct advantages to adopting, adapting and devising ‘queer’ frames and methods when preparing, conducting, analysing and writing about the lived experiences of ‘queers’. The idea of ‘queering’ seems useful in this discussion because it offers choice and multiplicity. This approach also takes into account the idea that it is impossible to pin down and/or establish ‘truths’ about sexual identity (Butler, 1993, 1997a, 1999a; Knox & Pinch, 2000; Seidman, Meeks & Traschen, 1999; Warner, 2004; Heaphy et al., 1998) or indeed any form of identity. The list of ways and methods by which identities are formed, dissolved, deconstructed and critiqued is endlessly varied. A ‘queering’ approach or frame takes into account the multiple ways in which identities can be taken up, described and given meaning, whilst problematising the discursive means by which identities are normalised, pathologised and essentialised. It also deals with the many ways available to conduct research. ‘Queering’ allows me to do something critically and methodologically with Daniel Warner’s (2004: 334) assertion that “there can be no one queer research methodology, but many methodologies”. This, in turn highlights the important link between queer theories, queer practices, and queer politics, and the necessary variability and ongoing indeterminacy of ‘queer’ and ‘queering’. My aim in the following pages is to describe a series of useful ‘queer’ ideas around methodology and methods in order to situate my own methodological choices. I draw from a number of theorists and researchers to describe and justify an amalgamated ‘list’ of approaches, frames or simply ‘things I thought about’ and deployed for the specific purposes of this research. In short the following paragraphs explain the ‘queer’ methodological frame for this research.
‘Queer’ methodologies guide choices at every junction of this research process, by asking ‘queer’ questions, this in turn opens up (un)usual ways of thinking about and doing research. For instance it affects choices around: participants; methods; data analysis; interpretation, representation and the writing up of the research. The research cited in this thesis resoundingly supports the use of qualitative research methods of inquiry and this represents my first heuristic assumption about ‘queering’. From the literature examined qualitative research methods appear better able to explore the experiences of people and the meanings derived from such experiences, because they often require analysis that is socially and politically aware and responsive. Secondly, and as an extension of this, ‘queer’ research methodologies must be aware of and reflexive to the various ways in which research constitutes the subject (Warner, 2004). A ‘queer’ perspective takes into account the many biases associated with research (for example heterosexism, patriarchy, embodiment, naturalness, objectivity and validity) by highlighting such biases exist and are therefore a necessary part of deconstructing the research process and methods. This includes interrogating researcher subjectivities, and this serves as the third ‘queer’ heuristic. From this perspective, it is imperative that the involvement of the researcher in the research remains overtly reflexive (Gamson, 2000; Heaphy et al., 1998; Kong et al., 2002; Warner, 2004). In this way ‘queer’ methodologies allow ‘queer’ researchers to write themselves into their texts, and as ‘queer’ texts (King, 1999) as a way in which to delineate, define, appreciate, expose and consider the inherent and always implicated subjectivities of the researcher. This involves a process of asking specific questions of ourselves that are then integrated into our research (Warner, 2004), and writing (King, 1999).

A fourth ‘queered’ methodological consideration relates to remaining committed to the participants, their words, their actions and their meanings, whilst at the same time (through questioning and theorising) offering a ‘queer’ way in which to view those very words, actions and meanings – alternative readings as it were. I argue methodologies should be employed which take into account the material complexities of lives, subjectivities, and communities as a way in which to bring about emancipatory social change (Warner, 2004). Warner (2004: 335) adds that this should involve more than adding letters to LGBTQQI
research by instead forming “a body of knowledge about how these categories come to be, and are lived, on a daily basis”. In the process this kind of research should not involve a search for an aetiology of sexuality by attempting to normalise pleasure and desire (Warner, 2004) or identity for that matter. ‘Queer’ methodologies are methodologies of pleasures and desires - for all people in all places - that take into account the performative nature of identity in everyday life. This type of ‘queering’ includes ‘heterosexuals’ as a way in which to destabilise heterosexuality. It offers a way in which to simultaneously theorise about gender, race, class, location, culture and ability, and to take these subjectivities into account alongside sexuality by acknowledging the places where subjectivities cross and collide – for instance the body and place. In this research this has involved a lot of mixing, blending and mingling, of theories, methods, and writing. By doing this I have sought to expose the frailties of theories, methods, discourses, research, researchers and participants in order to keep the resources open to the subtle complexities emerging from the data.

Finally, and relating to the previous point, I suggest ‘queer’ methodologies should allow the data to speak to how it should be represented, and this, in turn frees up the writing process for ‘queer’ forms of (re)presentation. This means writing from boundary-less positions and in ways that seek to interrogate and disrupt the margins and ‘rules’ of both identity and research. In this research I achieve this by writing with, in, on, and through a variety of margins, lens, styles and frames, some of which are less conventional qualitative research choices and blends (for example my attraction to phenomenology, ethnography and poetry) but all of which have allowed me free rein to find the words of the margins (Warner, 2004), and to remain committed to a process of ‘queering’. Later in this chapter I build upon these five points with specific focus on the ‘queering’ of the interview, but before proceeding there I consider the ways in which my close friendship with the participants may have influenced the interview process.

**RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS**

In order to more fully appreciate the dynamics of our layered relationships, my familiarity with the participants and their experiences, and the possible impact of this on the research, I
consulted research that examined the various roles researchers and participants ‘take up’ when entering into the research process. Some of these roles are unspoken, some are obvious, some may be dubious, and some cannot be appreciated until after the research has been conducted and through critical reflection. In order to think through these issues I turned firstly to ethnographic and anthropologic accounts of fieldwork, and then to research based in psychology. These disciplines offered research perspectives which allowed me to reflect upon the complexities presented by field relationships and issues of representation.

**Researching friends**

Throughout this project I have been aware that I could not separate out my own personal experiences from the research process. How we knew and related to each other was as much a part of the research as the questions I asked. It was *because* of my relationship with the women that I chose them, chose what to ask and what to hear, chose how to interview, and later chose how to represent their words. It was *because* of their relationship with me that they chose to participate, chose what to say, chose how to be interviewed, and chose how to represent their experiences and themselves. We were each engaged in common social activities, saw the same people, events, and went to the same places and, “like any intimate friendship, a situated friendship is potentially timeless, open-ended” (Douglas, 1985: 118). In some ways the research became an extension to our social worlds, but in other ways a separate, secret part. In the back of my mind I was thoughtfully reminded that field relationships “like all human relationships … can be immensely fulfilling, long lasting and intimate. They can also be fragile and potentially exploitative” (Coffey, 1999: 57). So whilst “the predominant situatedness of this friendship has some great advantages for research” (Douglas, 1985: 119), I was also acutely aware I had to tread lightly.

In considering my field relationships I was drawn to ethnography because it is intimate and interpersonal, and it relies heavily upon establishing and building relationships, and being open about attachments and emotions associated with the field and the people in it (Coffey, 1999). The focus for ethnographers is on immersion in the field and along with this
intimate involvement with participants. I am intimately connected and placed in this particular field; I also have significant personal investments in this research.

Contemporary approaches in ethnographic fieldwork have demanded researchers begin to ask critical questions about the impact of their presence, interaction and relationships on the field of investigation, including the participants. This demand for intense reflexivity and the admittance (and negotiation) of researcher subjectivities has been particularly confronting to ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘queer’ researchers engaged in ethnographic research (Blackwood, 1995; Bolton, 1995; Faulkner, 2005a; Kulick & Willson, 1995; Lewin & Leap, 1996; Murray, 1996). The unease here lies mainly in considering how to manage and negotiate a ‘homosexual’ or ‘queer’ identity in the field and what this means to one’s work in one’s field (in terms of notions such as validity, reliability), as well as what this process brings to the field (in terms of methods, relationships, and subjectivity). Linked inextricably to this is researcher erotic and sexual subjectivity, and of particular relevance to this research the acknowledgement that all researchers are erotic(ised) and sexual(ised) subjects. Through the work of Esther Newton (1993), Kulick and Willson (1995) insist that ignoring sexual subjectivity in research often conceals deeply rooted biased discourses which serve to reinforce the Western and positivist prestige of disciplines at the expense of the people they study. They call upon all researchers to scrutinise and problematise their own sexual subjectivity. I also suggest scrutinising and problematising all forms of subjectivity relevant to research participants48 – even if they are your friends.

**Problematising our ‘queer’ and sexual subjectivities**

Many researchers in the edited collections by Kulick and Willson (1995), and Lewin and Leap (1996) ‘come out’ about their sexualities, desires, fantasies, ethical dilemmas, fears, anxieties, positionality, professional gains and integrity, negotiations, identity, erotic attractions, political imperatives, gendered and raced subjectivity, emotions, behaviours,

---

48 For example: sexual, ethnic, gender, class, geographical, and others as relevant.
personal investments, and friendships in the field. By doing this these researchers posit identity management as an issue for all researchers, regardless of their perceived or actual identities and subjectivities. The specific reflexive ways in which researchers confront this issue becomes the cornerstone for reading, considering and ‘accepting’ their research. Their appeal is for all researchers to be more explicit about their motives, personal history and expectations whilst remaining acutely aware they cannot always predict how these factors will influence the field or how their reflexive subjectivities shape, direct or taint the research process and representation. This, in my mind, is a process of ‘queering’ which posits a queered research process as a practice of describing and interrogating the multiplicity of selves and experiences created or emerging (Blackwood, 1995; Bolton, 1995; Faulkner, 2005a; Kulick & Willson, 1995; Lewin & Leap, 1996; Murray, 1996; Newton, 1996; Roscoe, 1996; Talburt, 1999; Weston, 1991, 1996), whilst simultaneously questioning what is being done, seen, heard and described in and through the various research methods (Faulkner, 2005a; Kulick & Willson, 1995; Lewin & Leap, 1996; Kong et al., 2002; Talburt, 1999). It also insists upon an upfront and honest expression of one’s ‘queered’ sexual subjectivity (see for example Califia, 2005; Faulkner, 2005a; Queen, 2005).

A key shift in the researcher/researched relationship occurs when the researcher becomes, or is, the ‘us’ or the ‘we’ of the research (Coyle, 1996). Claims of researcher bias, lack of objectivity, legitimacy or validity, over emotionality and self indulgence echo loudly and hang heavily when researching one’s own subjectivities. In this research I do not claim to be able to represent the ‘other’; that I am also that ‘other’ simply makes my attachment and investments in the research different to other researchers. From both a poststructural and queer point of view this comes down to acknowledging, exposing and problematising my own subjectivities. I have continually done this both explicitly (describing my speaking positions and deconstructing my subjectivities) and implicitly (using language ‘my’, ‘me’, ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’).

49 See particularly: Altork 1995; Blackwood, 1995; Bolton, 1995; Moreno, 1995; Murray, 1996; Newton, 1996.
50 For a particularly personal account of this see Valentine (1998).
The issue of objectivity in being the ‘other’ can be fractured by considering that there is
difference in sameness; and, that inherent power related problems will always exist in
research. I am not like all ‘lesbians’, they are not like me; I do not claim this to be so, nor
do I intend to speak on behalf of them. Speaking from their own hybrid ethnic positions
Song and Parker (1995) support the idea of focussing on positionality because it offers a
way in which to explore the effect of culture on identities throughout the interview process.
These researchers are particularly interested in the ways in which commonality and
difference influence in-depth interviews, and conclude that ethnographic arguments around
‘insider/outsider’ are not useful when one is seen (by participants and researchers) as
neither (as perhaps a queer perspective could insist). They suggest researchers adopt and
nurture an interview space and style which permits the already present multiply shifting re-
positions and (dis)identifications to flourish rather than fostering a unitary sense of identity.
So whilst I seemed to share a common ‘lesbian’ identity with my participants their
fluctuating subjectivities (for example ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality and class)
signify a distinct difference between us, and have an equally as influential effect on the
research process.

I am also aware that I have been silently privileging our ‘sameness’ (Hurd & McIntyre,
1996) and what emerged as an important outcome of this research is not some kind of
valorisation but rather the potential for social change (Coyle, 1996; Griffin, 1996). In their
research as “non-white/non-western and non-white/western researchers in a non-western
research setting”, Thapar-Björkert and Henry (2004: 363) empower participants in the
research setting by suggesting that it is not always researchers who have the potential to
manipulate and exploit research, participants can, should, and do so as well. They
specifically challenge the concept that research participants (and especially non-western or
oppressed ‘others’, for example lesbians) do not “occupy only one axis of identity, namely,
‘oppressed victimhood’” (Thapar-Björkert & Henry, 2004: 363). This acknowledgement
requires a re-conceptualisation of the research process whereby the participants are re-
imagined as agents who can and do exercise power in both the research (Thapar-Björkert &
Henry, 2004), and their everyday lives. In terms of the present research this could be seen
as an act of ‘queering’ the interview because it involved encouraging the participants to
guide the interview process by stepping back from it, but simultaneously acknowledging
that a power imbalance will always, necessarily, exist between researcher and researched.
What I attempted to nurture, and what inevitably played out, was a complex interaction
between all actors. This resulted in the reconceptualisation of the binary constructions of
researcher/researched, powerful/powerless as well as the research process and final product
by interrogating the multiple and complex locations and positionalities of all involved.

METHODS

In the following section I describe and justify my choice of research methods keeping in
mind the previous explanations of my ‘queer’ research methodologies and methodological
frame. This section includes discussions of my choices around: participants; research
design and procedures; use of the methods of life story interviewing and artefact collection;
and data analysis. I also highlight some possible problems associated with these choices
and the impact these may have on the data gathered and overall tone of the thesis. Very
early in this research it became clear that there could be difficulties associated with being
researcher and friend, and that these subject positions would probably dictate my choices in
most areas of this research. I knew what I wanted to know or find out about, and so set
about establishing a research regime that would get me there. My choices were specific and
deliberate, based upon more established and related research methodologies (as discussed
above), objective goals, and also upon ‘queering’ as an exploratory method of ‘way
finding’.

Participants and participant recruitment

In this research I used purposive sampling to recruit the participants from amongst the
members of my Gay Games soccer team of 2002. Five women were chosen from the team
and invited to become involved in the research. I knew each of the women prior to the
research commencing (two for over 10 years, two for 2-5 years, and one I met during The
Gay Games). My friendship with them, and my shifts between researcher and friend seemed to have an impact on a number of aspects of the research but in the main created a reciprocally trusting and caring interview environment, with strong and supportive bonding after the interview.

I made deliberate and purposeful choices around the participants. I wanted to have a diverse selection of women in terms of age, ethnicity, class, how well I knew them, and their level of involvement and roles within the team and queer events. Like Wendy Hollway (1989) I had an intuitive sense of the types of participants I wanted and what they could bring to this research. I chose women whom I thought would be interesting, active, willing and engaged participants. I wanted reliable but also colourful, talkative, committed and reflective participants. Each of the women I invited to participate was capable of reflecting upon their pasts, I also knew something of their pasts and believed their experiences could tell me something more. They were very much like me in many ways, but in others quite different, and so we came together based on both sameness and difference. I knew them very well, I could relate to what they were feeling and saying, and so I knew what to ask, and how to ask it.

The women were also chosen because they were easily accessible to me at the time, and for ease of contact, recruitment and follow up. We had also shared a number of experiences related to sexual identity and place, for instance The Gay Games. As I was known to each of them in some way preliminary issues around familiarity, trust and rapport were substantially lessened. This made the interview process very open from the beginning. However, whilst the participants were generally very eager to share their experiences, at times they displayed and articulated discomfort with what we had shared during interviews, particularly when meeting up after an interview in a social setting or responding to their own words when they read the transcripts.

My desire was to speak to women who prioritised and organised their lives around ‘lesbian’ and/or ‘queer’ events and notions of community and belonging so as to tease out any subtleties of sexual identity and place (the key question in this research). All of the
respondents reported strong attachments to ‘the gay/lesbian/queer’ community in a variety of ways, and hence a sense of belonging was a key theme to emerge from the interview data. The extent to which each woman participated in ‘queer’ events varied but they had many events in common that were specifically designed and instigated to promote a sense of community and belonging (for example The Gay Games and other party events discussed in later chapters). None were political activists and none identified as or with the term ‘queer’, though one started to relate to the term during the interview process. Each woman agreed to be involved after they had read the Participant Information and Consent forms provided at our initial meeting (see Appendix A).

The sample in this research was select, and it in no way can be seen as representative of all women or indeed all ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ identifying women (who play soccer at the Gay Games). Via the research of others I was aware that I could never obtain a true random or representative sample of ‘lesbians’ because there is no conceivable sampling frame to do so (Eves, 2004; Heaphy, Weeks & Donovan, 1998; Martin & Knox, 2000; Seidman et al., 1999; Whisman, 1996). I have not been terribly interested in generalising the findings of this research to other ‘lesbians’ anyway. I had some questions, a purpose, and an idea I wanted to pursue which guided my intuitive and deliberate choice of participants and methods. I was interested in exploring some of the identity related experiences of ‘lesbians’, the ways in which they made sense of their experiences, and the meanings they drew from these experiences within limiting heterosexist discourse. At this point I also found myself in a quandary, on the one hand I was needing to create an identity label so as to frame a research project and recruit participants but on the other trying not to essentialise. I therefore needed to select women who had as their primary partner other women or who self identified as ‘lesbian’ (or ‘queer’ or ‘gay’).

---

51 Ethical approval for this research was granted from the University of Wollongong Ethics Committee. In the consent forms and at each interview participants were reminded that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Further to this and so as to prevent harm, I called each person after and before their interviews to discuss any concerns. In the pre-interview space I also asked how everything was going for them in the research and in their lives in general. This gave me an indication of where they were ‘at’ at the start of the interview and what possible topics or questions to avoid (four had break ups or other significant personal upheavals during the two years).
At the time of writing this thesis the women in the research were aged 31-37 (at start of project 28-34). Their chosen names for the study were: Scout, Maree, Tabitha, Nell and Jacqui. At the time of the interviews they all lived in the Sydney metropolitan area, three in the inner city with partners or flatmates, one 40 km away from the city with her partner, and another moved between a family home (30 km from the city) and friends (for work and social aspects of her life). Three of the five were home owners, one rented and one lived at home (part time renting). One woman was from a Maltese background, one of Dutch decent, and the other three were white Australian. One woman identified as Jewish the other four gave no religious affiliation. With regards to class, three women described (my interpretation) working class backgrounds as children, and two middle class backgrounds. One of the women could now be described as working class the others as professional and middle class. Three of the five have university or college degrees, one has recent Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualifications, and one was a ‘high school dropout’, but has gone on to become a marketing executive and the highest income earner of the group.

The participants displayed an eagerness to be involved in this research from the outset and at all stages gave a great deal of themselves and their past in their stories. There was an initial need for me to curb this enthusiasm somewhat by providing a more focussed approach during interviews via specific questions to guide the interview process, and by providing ideas for them to prepare for their interviews. In this way the interviews had a degree of structure but remained open to their individual interpretation and exploration. Each woman reported being surprised at the ease at which they were able to involve themselves in the research and also during the interviews. They also commented they believed they had an important role to play for others through this research, and that they viewed this as a great opportunity to ‘help’ (guide, inform, advise, ‘warn’) others.

All names are pseudonyms chosen by the interviewee or the interviewer at the time of the first interview.
Procedure

This research shares an array of lived, situated, temporal and historical experiences as told by five women. The main research method involved five life story interviews (discussed below) that ranged from one to two hours in length. Each interview was audio-tape recorded, transcribed and then the tapes were stored securely. A copy of the Research Project Instructions and Interview Questions used to guide each interview appear as Appendix B and C respectively.

The interview process

All participants, except one, had five interviews. Scout had only four interviews as she believed she had told me all she wanted to tell me and stated she couldn’t think of another moment to speak about. Most of the interviews were organised via mobile phone text messaging, this proved to be a fast and effective mode of communication and also offered some interesting data to the collection. The interviews were held at locations of mutual convenience but in the main when and where it suited the participants best. These included their homes, my home, mutual friends’ houses, and a park. It was my intention to conduct the interviews every four months from April 2003 but due to many factors[^3] this did not work out. The first four interviews were completed by November 2004 and interview number five was completed in March 2005. It had been my initial intention to allow adequate time in between each interview to encourage participants to write in journals or diaries (none did this), read the transcripts as they became available, and reflect upon the interviews and speak to me if they needed about any concerns. I followed up each interview with a telephone call three or four days later just to see how they were feeling. Some participants sent me mobile telephone text messages[^4] after the interviews or reading the transcripts, or randomly when they felt like it.

[^3]: This included: quite a few break ups, house moving, cancellations, illness, work and time commitments
[^4]: I wrote down a number of mobile phone text messages sent to me by the participants because they invariably related to the preceding interview or the transcripts. I had permission to record these messages.
The first interview was based around their experiences of *The Gay Games* held in Sydney in 2002. I chose this first critical moment in our collective lives for a number of reasons. Firstly, the team was our link together and was situated very strongly within sexual identity experiences and discourse (both our own and through the media). This was an event we had all shared together and it marked a critical moment in time for each of us in terms of allocating resources (money and time), community involvement, place (our home town), performance (sporting and ‘lesbian/queer’), and ‘queer’ fun (parties and the like). This interview situated a ‘right now’ moment we all had in common and served as a point from which to retrospectively begin to think about other events or moments from their past that they might wish to share in future interviews. At the time I suspected this event had had a significant impact on most of the women involved in it, and I found this true for all of the participants. Secondly, as the first interview this topic was also safe and so laid the foundation for the possibility of an open and trustworthy series of interviews to follow. The focus of this interview was on the ‘lived experience’ of *The Gay Games* and what they believed they got out of the experience (if anything at all). In this interview preliminary questions were asked in order to introduce the interview process and were concerned with practical aspects of being involved in the soccer team such as: how they became involved, their roles, the activities engaged in and reasons for playing. The third reason was because it provided a starting point for the retrospective back tracking I next wanted the participants to do. That is, it made it easier to begin subsequent interviews by posing the question: ‘If we could consider this event as one possible critical moment related to your sexual identity, then reflecting on your past what would you consider others to have been?’

An important part of interview one was gathering very vivid descriptions of the experience of *The Gay Games*, and their emotional responses to the experience, individual events (for example the Opening and Closing ceremonies and various parties), and playing soccer. These questions began in similar ways: ‘If I can take you back to the Games now, I’m going to ask you to go through a few of the highs and lows, and a few of the things that happened. What for you was the highlight?’ For four participants the highlight was the Opening Ceremony. The follow up question was: ‘Can you walk me through that? Try to remember everything about it and explain it in as much detail as you can. What did you
experience? What did you see, hear, do, be?’ In this way I attempted to draw upon phenomenological methods of inquiry in order to gain an understanding of how the phenomenon (The Gay Games or the Opening Ceremony) was sensuously experienced by the participants. In this respect the participants were asked to describe both the geographical place of the moment and their own place within it. In this way place was used as both a self and geographical reflection.

For the next three interviews the participants had free choice and were asked to identify three critical moments, turning points or epiphanies (discussed in a moment) during their lives in which they were, or became acutely aware of their sexual identity as not heterosexual. This did not seem to be a difficult task and the participants engaged with the concept and the individual identity accounts became the basis of each of the three interviews that followed.

The final interview was held in small groups with the intention of allowing participants to interact with each other and discuss their involvement in the project in a broad sense, and also for me to bring to the interview some preliminary interpretations to prompt discussions. My original intention was to interview all participants together but this didn’t eventuate due to time and work commitments. The final interviews went for around one hour and were conducted in one small group (Tabitha, Maree, and Scout), and individually for Nell and Jacqui as it became increasingly difficult to organise a convenient meeting for the three of us. This interview focussed on their reasons for being involved in the research and what they believed they brought to it, left in it, and took away. Other relevant issues were discussed as they arose.

---

55 I wanted this interview to be more like a casual chat. Eventually the interview shifted from being driven by questions from me and single answers from them to a more open conversation between us all. This happened when I started to draw out particular points that each person had said in previous interviews or some of my interpretations from the data into questions around being ‘lesbian’ and the need to affirm it. This proved very provocative to them.
Transcribing

All of the interviews, except one, were transcribed by another person employed for this purpose. One of the first interviews was poorly recorded so I transcribed it myself. Each participant was given a copy of their transcribed interview to review for accuracy and meaning, and to elaborate on if they desired. No participant at any point chose to ‘modify’ the transcript, though they all expressed at some stage a discomfort about what they had read. I think this was more around what they interpreted it as saying about them rather than what they actually said. In total I ended up with twenty two interviews of variable length (average length was one hour thirty minutes) - over thirty three hours of spoken words.

At this point I will note that the transcriber herself made many of my first analytical decisions based on the way in which she ‘heard’, ‘read’ and interpreted the strings of conversation. She decided how the transcript flowed, sentence structure, where it was punctuated, what was said and how it was said; and whilst we spoke regularly about the nature of the data and the context of the research she was the first hand to re-story the story. Ultimately there can be no transcription accuracy. In the discussions below I wish to problematise the assumptions of the authentic power and authority of transcripts, and explain how I dealt with this issue.

There remains potential for the charge to be levelled that my non-transcribing of the interviews placed me at some distance from the research and disadvantaged the analysis of data in some way. I disagree with this. I wanted to focus upon what was said rather than how it was said. This meant I had a choice about whether to meticulously transcribe and re-play interviews, or to take a more relaxed approach. I chose not to transcribe and not to re-play the tapes over and again, instead I went to the tapes when transcription errors appeared due to poor sound, mumbling, unfamiliar words and the like (indicated on transcripts by XXXXX). I did not adopt a realist ontological position (Poland, 2003) about the ‘specialness’ or ‘truthfulness’ of the participants’ words. Instead I acknowledged and tried to work with the problems associated with converting spoken data to written text through the transcription process. Following the advice of Poland (2003), Kvale (1996) and
Silverman (2000) I was compelled to question the unproblematic, authentic and authoritative status of the transcript by viewing them, and what they ‘said’ and represented with a healthy distrust. This also remains faithful to the concept of ‘queering’.

I also used other data in the form of personal artefacts or documents to support the interview conversations, and thus attempted to lessen the problematics of both the interview and transcription. I also collected relevant media material around the *Gay Games* in order to place the event, and the participants and their words, within it. This material was analysed discursively for meaning and compared and contrasted with the interview data. After each interview and in between, I also kept a fieldwork journal. In this I wrote notes about how I felt, what I saw and sensed, and importantly what stuck out for me, or surprised me during the interviews. I read this material alongside each interview and some is used within this thesis.

When I re-read the material I was amazed at how it was possible to be transported back to the interview moments. This was aided by very quick return of the transcripts after the interview and also my own post-interview notes and comments. I seemed to know when we started and stopped the tape to regroup, or refocus, and also what the interruptions were. I sensed and recalled the moments when facial expressions changed, when a woman felt excited and enthused, when she cried or moved uncomfortably, when she spoke slowly or quickly, or when she had nothing more to say, and we both fell silent. The tears, intakes of breath, discomfort, displeasure, confusion, joy and desire all echoed in my head and through their spoken words that had become written text. This occurred as a result of reading and then re-reading (over again) the transcripts in their entirety. I could do this easily because in some respect I was a part of the interviewees’ experience, I had shared them on some level; I too had felt their words.
Research design

In this research I have drawn upon the method *traditionally* known as the life history interview. This method is commonly used in biography and ethnography and from these disciplines I have borrowed conceptual and practical ideas in order to shape my own interview style and method. I have drawn multiply from these fields and developed a ‘queered’ approach to the conducting of the interviews and analysis of the participants’ stories. In the coming pages I explain what I have borrowed, why I have borrowed it, and how I have re-moulded a deliberate interview method for these participants.

I start this section by firstly situating the methods of this research within the qualitative research tradition of biography. This is followed by an explanation of why I favour the life story approach to interviewing over the life history approach, and what this approach entails. I then move into a discussion of the critical moment or epiphany. The main aim of this section is to detail out the methods I used in this research and to further clarify the process of ‘queering’ the interview.

Situating the methods

Denzin (1989) describes biography as the studied and deliberate use and collection of personal-life documents, or ‘documents of life’ (borrowed from Plummer, 1983: 13), such as stories, accounts, autobiographies, interviews, biographies, videos and films, photographs, oral histories, official records, diaries, journals, letters, or postcards which might describe turning-point moments in individuals’ lives, or some significant experience worthy of investigation. It involves gathering pieces of ‘evidence’ of a life or an experience and putting it together to make some sort of a picture of that life/experience. On a general level biography has the potential to provide insight into the nature and meaning of lives that

---

56 In the literature the following terms have been used interchangeably to describe or give a name to the biographic and ethnographic approach known predominantly as the life history method: oral history, life story, document of life, case history or personal history (Minichiello et al., 1990).

57 Later I borrow aspects of this term to describe the other main method that I used in this research. I use the term *artefacts of life* because it hints more at story than history, fiction than fact. They signify momentos from an experience and moment in time.
is hitherto unseen; it also attempts to analyse a specific life or lives for some designated reason (Erben, 1998). Of particular interest to this research is the notion that this type of research also allows me to reconstruct the past with reference to how the participants understand, experience and draw meaning from the present (Scott, 1998). In these ways the biographical frame has guided my choices of methods along both general and specific lines of inquiry.

The subject matter of a biography is the life experiences of a person or persons, and a variety of research methods can be used to ‘write’ a life story. A central assumption in historical biographical writing has been “that a life can be captured and represented in a text” (Denzin, 1989: 9). This, of course is not a very poststructural or queer view particularly as most told lives are social texts that are essentially fictional stories, and the idea that an experience can be captured is at once and already problematic. This notion also assumes the existence of a coherent subject who can provide a reliable and truthful ‘window’ into their worlds, and in some way a picture of what it is like to be them. Jacques Derrida (1978) reminds that we can never have a clear window into another person’s life simply because the pane is always clouded and scratched by language, signs, and the processes ofsignification. The written and spoken language presented to, and drawn upon by subjects as a tool for conveying an experience, and presumably meaning, is always in a state of flux and inherently unstable and is itself loaded down with other signs and symbols associated with power and discourses. So by this thinking biographical methodologies have allowed me to ‘grab a hold of’ (but not capture) significant moments in peoples’ lives. I could also problematise the idea that experiences and identities, language, stories and story telling are insoluble and can stand alone, when they are in fact very porous, and in need of constant support. Contemporary biographical approaches take this messiness up by contesting, deconstructing and continually examining the interplay and influence of language, discourse and others, as well as the social, political, cultural and environmental factors that make our experiences tellable and make us seem to be ‘real’ (at least to ourselves).
Within this research the basic question has not been around what truths and untruths exist through the spoken words of the participants and my subsequent re-telling, or the portraits of selves and identities created, but rather the central question has been: How do these particular women live and give meaning to their lives and present these meanings in spoken, written and documented forms over time and place?

*Life story vs life history*

In this research the life story approach involved developing a specific set of questions which enabled the participant to construct a story of past experiences. This is of course co-constructed with the researcher because they have guided the process. To take a life story approach involves the researcher and participant considering the kinds of life experiences to be spoken about and referred to, questions asked, as well as the interview techniques employed. Below I briefly explain the method of life storying (as distinct from the life history method) as a methodological approach to interviewing, this is followed by an explanation of what the life story interviewing looked like in this research.

There are some subtle differences between life history and life story approaches. Citing work by researcher Michael Angrosino (1989), Peacock and Holland (1993) provide some useful distinctions between the life history method and the life story method. These authors describe Angrosino’s life history method as a record of the entire span of a life, and his life story as made up of the highlights or focuses on a few key events, moments in time or relationships (perhaps epiphanies). Peacock and Holland (1993) prefer the life story method as it moves away from the assumption that the narrative is ‘true’, as in a ‘history of a life’. Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1990: 148) explain this more clearly when they suggest a life history is an “account of life based on interviews and conversations”, whilst a life story is “a person’s story of his or her life, or a part thereof”. Bruner (1984) also makes a distinction between the story we tell about our life (the life story), and the life story located within its historical, cultural and political context (the life history) (cited in Biott et al., 2001; Denzin, 1989).
So where does that leave this research? I have adopted more of a life story approach because I asked the participants to tell stories of their lives by explaining and situating a series of single, critical or important events from their past (an epiphany). The life story method was chosen in order to foster their story telling process and to highlight the fact this was their own re-storying of various aspects of their lives, and how they had experienced them and now recall them. I did not ask them to re-count their entire life, nor did I ask them to tell it chronologically (the theme and order of interviews 2-4 was their choosing). The stories were random, specific and individual accounts that should not be considered out of their social, cultural, historical and political context. They were viewed as the storying of one person’s experience in only one aspect of their lives, namely their sexual identity. These were partial snapshots of lives, not an entire history of lives. I also prefer the use of the word story over history for poststructural, feminist, and queer reasons, that is this approach is more sensitive to my theoretical influences.

Life story interviewing

Life story interviewing, and its oft associated ‘confessional’ methods, are everywhere in contemporary life. David Silverman (1997: 248) suggests we appear outwardly to live in an ‘interview society’ founded on the premise of human interest and humanism, and one “in which interviews seem central to making sense of our lives”. He lists three co-requisites for the emergence of this type of society. Firstly, the emergence of the idea of an essential self as an object of narration; secondly, the existence of a confessional space; and thirdly, the technology of mass media. He explains open-ended interviews proffered as ‘real’, ‘truth’, ‘authentic’ and ‘telling it like it is’ invite caution, especially when viewed within the broader social, political and cultural contexts of people’s lives. As such, Silverman suggests I remain cautious to claims of authenticity through the interview process.

The life story interview method is a particular style of interview which often uses unstructured or semi-structured interview formats and questioning techniques designed to provide the story teller with the opportunity to tell their own stories in their own ways.

92
including: introspection, subject-researcher relationship, and the interpretative process (Atkinson, 1998; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Plummer, 1983). In this style of interviewing the participants were encouraged “to reflect upon the past and to look again at their own life experiences in an introspective and subjective fashion” (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 192). This style of interviewing facilitated the “reconstruction and interpretation of subjectively meaningful features and critical episodes in an individual’s life” (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 186), and had the potential to bring us closer “than many other methods to an intimate understanding of people and their social worlds” (Hermanowicz, 2002: 480).

Atkinson (1998) advises that minimising the structure of a life story interview makes it more likely the story will be re-told in the way, form and style of the story teller’s choosing. In this research this provided the opportunity for an in-depth approach to storying as well as interviewing.

In each interview I developed a series of loose questions I wished to pose in order to explore the larger questions of the study (Minichieollo et al., 1990). I didn’t want to frame the questions so they muted feelings or hid raw expressions. I wanted deep responses and an open space that did not sanitise the conversations, but rather encouraged, promoted and elicited stories that had private and personal reflective thought and emotion attached. There was structure to this process and also to the process by which the interviews were pulled together and sequenced. The conversations to ensue were “based upon mutual understandings, trust and rapport, and some shared perceptions” (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 193). Being a close friend appeared to facilitate this process.

The specific critical moments the participants chose have come together to provide a sequential montage of a series of dramatic, life changing events. In this way life story interviewing has allowed me to ask probing questions about experiences that required the participants to review their lives, and in the process opened up “an opportunity for self-evaluation, [and] reflection on the variable progress of their lives” (Godfrey & Richardson 2004: 146). When these women described their experiences particular types of narrative devices appeared. Following Godfrey and Richardson’s (2004) advice I identified four such devices. Firstly, like most stories, there was the teleological thrust, that is, events follow on
one after the other in a rational and coherent manner. Another motif to appear in this research was the adversity, or ‘my life has been a struggle’ story. This is a common narrative of ‘lesbians’ and ‘gay’ men, especially around storying ‘coming out’. In this narrative a difficult event or experience is explained as having been successfully negotiated, though sometimes at a cost, and these were often quite emotionally re-told. Despite the sometimes distressing nature of the stories, most of them were also tinged with a touch of nostalgia; this could be considered a third narrative device. Pride at having negotiated difficult events and to end up being ‘OK’ or even ‘normal’ added an almost heroic tinge to their narratives (see also Norquay, 1999). This sense of success through nostalgia has an important function in the participants’ recollection of their experiences from the past in light of their present understandings and subject positions.

In this research it has been essential to keep the stories of reminiscence and nostalgia at the foreground as the critical moments were historically, temporally, geographically and sensuously situated (for example Tabitha’s flashback nostalgic story and image of Huck Finn elicited a very powerful emotional response that transcripted words cannot capture). Godfrey and Richardson (2004: 146) suggest that, “nostalgia is an inevitable by-product of a sense of loss, something that is marked in any oral histories”. This leads onto their contention, and mine, that loss is another recurring motif in life stories. These authors further remark, “whatever the case, life narratives seldom run their course without mention of death, distress, and mourning” (Godfrey & Richardson 2004: 146). And this research is no exception with events of significant pain and difficulty resulting in both overt and covert losses being re-told. The concepts of loss, mourning and melancholia are dealt with in greater detail in Chapter Six.

The life story interview runs the risk of individuation, and this is a constant criticism of this approach. In the main this is because it relies upon humanist notions of the individual, that is, the existence of a “sovereign subject who possesses knowledge which, if skilfully solicited, can be uncovered by the interviewer” (Sykes, 2001: 14). Close data analysis also adds to this claim with a high priority and emphasis given to transcripts of words that espouse the reality stories of lives, experiences and events. In Sykes’ (2001: 14) mind this
serves “to valorize the ‘reality’ of personal experience and the transparency of oral accounts”. Therefore the assumption that life stories do and can and do these things when viewed with either a poststructural or queer lens brings into question the subject, the method itself, and any claims to ‘truth’ and or facticity. In short it is not possible to get an accurate portrayal of lived experience, or any type of genuine representation of that experience (Biott et al., 2001; Charmaz, 2000; Denzin, 1989, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Godfrey & Richardson, 2004; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Miller & Glassner, 1997; Richardson, 1994, 2000; Riessman, 2003; Tierney, 1998, 2000). In this research eliciting life stories has been a process for gathering words whilst poststructural and queer theory have offered a method for interrogating those words and their situated historical and discursive meanings.

The critical moment or epiphany

At a briefing meeting for all participants I asked each of them to choose three events, moments, or times in their life when they became aware of their sexual identity as not being heterosexual or that they believed may have been turning points, cross roads or critical moments in their sexual identity formation. Each of these moments then formed the basis of interviews two, three and four.

The identification of individual ‘critical moments’ or epiphanies (Denzin, 1989), life turning points (Riessman, 2003) or defining moments (Scott, 1998) provided the participants with a relatively free rein to express their placed, temporal and historical stories of sexual identity formation. Chronological order was not important, they could choose anything and start anywhere, it just had to be from their past, and significant to them. Two women chose to go ‘back to the beginning’ and childhood, two went back to school, and the other started with an adult experience. They each chose, as one moment, what I will loosely and initially call a calamitous or revelatory moment (a ‘coming out’, ‘crush’ or
‘first kiss’ moment), the other moments chosen varied58. I got a sense from their interviews that these choices were guided by their own search for reasons, confirmations, explanations and meanings for what they had experienced, who they were, what they were, and importantly, how they were.

Denzin (1989) and Riessman (2003) regard the examination of stories of significant turning point moments in time as useful ways by which to explore how identities can shift over time. Riessman (2003: 341) sees these events as “moments when the narrator signifies a radical shift in the expected course of a life”. She suggests that, “such turning points fundamentally change the meaning of past experiences and consequently individuals’ identities” (Riessman, 2003: 342). Denzin (1989: 71) is very enthusiastic about the interactional nature of epiphanies and suggests that they “leave marks on people’s lives”. “In them”, he writes, “personal character is manifested”, and whilst they are often moments of crisis and their effects may be positive or negative, they have the potential to alter “the fundamental meaning and structure in a person’s life”, because they tell a person what has happened to them in the past (Denzin, 1989: 71). He continues explaining that,

some are ritualised, as in status-passage; others are even routinized, as when a man daily batters and beats his wife. Still others are totally emergent and unstructured, and the person enters them with few if any prior understandings of what is going to happen. The meanings of these experiences are always given retrospectively, as they are relived and reexperienced in the stories persons tell about what has happened to them. (Denzin, 1989: 71)

I chose to have the participants draw on critical moments for a number of reasons. Mainly because I agree with both Denzin and Riessman and suspected that tracking sexual identity over time would enrich the data collected by placing the moment and the person within it, thus contextualising the experience. It also provided an opportunity for the participants to bring in, draw upon and share tangible pieces of ‘evidence’ that either marked, ran alongside of, expressed, confirmed, re-told, explained, supported, questioned, confounded,

58 Other moments included: overseas travel, childhood sexual abuse, an experience of a place or in place (three), sex, break-up. It should be noted that often we did not stay on the ‘topic’ and many moments merged or were extended upon during the interview.
confused, re-affirmed, or re-lived each moment for them. I found this approach appealing because it required the participants to make a choice about something that had happened, and they regarded as important enough to return to in order to explain their ‘selves’. The event, moment or experiences they chose had held some fascination or significance for them and so has been storied in many ways in the past, and for many reasons. This storying may have represented an attempt to find or reinforce meaning or understanding, to solve a puzzle or mystery, to provide an answer, or simply to reinforce what was already known or unknown about the experience. Whatever the motivation for returning to the epiphanal moments in the past, in this research this return elicited the types of descriptive and emotive responses I was seeking. The choice of moments by the participants was also linked to their understandings of their own sexual identity. This exposed the processes by which they constituted their ‘selves’ and their emotional investments in this process.

The concept that a single event can change one’s life irrevocably is both compelling and troublesome. In the main, the use of the notion of an epiphany seemed to allow the participants the freedom to decide whether something momentus did actually change their lives, but it also permitted, indeed encouraged them to tell their story as though it had changed their life and their selves or identities in some way. Their desire to give me something useful, to tell a good story, is relevant here. However, I remain uncertain of the participants’ precise motivations in telling their stories.

The moments each woman chose to share were very significant to them, and in later chapters I show this. It seemed of little consequence whether the moment signified some sort of major event, which touched every fabric of the life; a cumulative or representative event, which signified eruptions or reactions to experiences which have been going on for a long period of time; a minor epiphany, which symbolically represented a major, problematic event in a relationship or life; or an episode whose meanings are given in the reliving of the experience (Denzin, 1989: 71). I did not ask them how they came to choose their moments, the important issue for me was that the certain events were big enough to warrant their own re-examination, re-interpretation, and re-telling.
The epiphany provided us all with an event to explore and share in detail. It opened up a space for the participants to ‘tell their story’ as they saw it. I am unsure as to whether other less ‘dramatic’ requests might have elicited such candid and colourful stories for me to work with.

*Artefacts of life*

Many researchers employ different methods in order to ‘validate’ findings. The main research assumption associated with this is that there are fixed points or objects that can be joined together or triangulated to provide greater meaning and validity to data, and hence the research. Rather than triangulate, Laurel Richardson (2000a) suggests researchers *crystallize*, because “there are far more than ‘three sides’ from which to approach the world” (p. 934), and, “what we see depends upon our angle of repose” (p. 935). Richardson proposes the crystal as a central image for ‘validating’ postmodern mixed genre texts in order to avoid fixed, rigid, two-dimensional objects and ‘subjects’. She believes the crystal, with its: continual growth and change; different colours, patterns, angles, shapes and substance; ability to distort and refract light; and transmutations and multidimensionalities, provides a “deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 2000a: 935), and “paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know” (Richardson, 1994: 522). The incorporation of more tangible methods like journal writing, poetry, collage making, photography, art work, and the like from the disciplines or art, anthropology, performance, history, and dance seems to have become common place in qualitative research as part of both the data collection and writing stages59. It was because of these methods and the ways in which they can potentially deepen data collection, plus my desire to facilitate a sensual60 re-telling of their experiences that I asked the participants

---


60 Sense, sensing and sensuousness are taken up as lens for reading and ‘viewing’ this thesis in intuitive and intellectual ways, as well as in affective ways. In this research I asked the participants to recall their
to bring or create artefacts of life\textsuperscript{61} from the critical moments they chose to share. We then based the discussions on these tangible and emotionally relevant items.

The exploration of the participants’ notions of sense, sensing and making sense were explored via the types of open-ended questions asked, and by requesting them to provide ‘artefacts of life’ from that time, event or experience from which to begin discussions. In our everyday lives we use many ways to communicate and ‘speak’ to others and about ourselves and so different methods were able to illuminate difference - in people, in stories, in experience. I suggested the participants bring to their interviews documents or other artefacts they believed related to the moment they were wishing to share in that particular session, and in order to support and encourage their story. Each woman at various stages in the interview process brought some small artefact and/or document to share and refer to. Two of the participants prepared what they called an ‘identity collage’ in order to discuss some aspect of their life. Many of these artefacts were copied and with the participants consent have been included elsewhere in this thesis.

The artefacts the participants brought to the interviews often became the centre of the conversation and could be drawn upon to elicit responses or to initiate specific questions, as well as offering a safe place to which to retreat or return if necessary. For example in the following comment Tabitha is referring to a photograph of herself as a five year old (see experiences in descriptive and emotive ways. I wanted them to be able to describe their moments in relation to various aspects of place and sexuality, and to be able to engage in a process of making sense of these moments. Recall that in Chapter Two I expressed a concern that queer theory failed to take account of the material and sensate experiences of the participants’ lives, and so I proposed a ‘queer’ approach that accommodated the sensual data gathered. This approach has involved two things, firstly developing multiple meanings of sense, and secondly ‘queering’ aspects of phenomenology. In order to do this I turned to literature which spoke about the ways in which lived experience involves sense and sensing as well as sense making and making sense. I was initially drawn to a book called \textit{Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place} by Paul Rodaway (1994) to gather some clarity to my use of the term sense. Rodaway sees sense having an important duality, a metaphorical (and paradoxical) dimension that I wish to borrow. He describes sense in two ways. Firstly as making sense, developing meaning, order or understanding, and secondly as sensation, feelings or emotions, and of the senses (touch, sight, hearing, taste, smell, balance, kinaesthesis). Rodaway argues that both making sense (thinking) and sensing (feeling) offer a source of information and of understanding. Adopting aspects of both positions has enabled a close consideration of the links and associations between the two views.

\textsuperscript{61} Items included: photographs, diary and journal entries, poems, cards, collages, music, and books.
Chapter Six for the image, also see the poems *Boy* and *Be Different*\(^{62}\), and used it as a stimulus for a process of sense making about her sense of being different.

Tabitha: I have a terrible memory of my life, of significant events, a lot of it I don't remember. This is my only piece of evidence for my own peace of mind, to some extent it gives me peace of mind because once I started looking back at my sexuality and all that stuff, one of the key things is that I guess I was looking for proof which is kind of not very politically correct but I was looking for proof to say why am I like this, why am I different. Why, that's where I was coming from when I had such a significant moment or reaction to this picture.

This retrospective approach also seemed to fit with my intentions to have the women re-tell their stories as vividly, emotionally and sensuously as possible. I wanted to hear descriptions about the emotions, the colour, the sounds, the people, and the place where all they were telling had occurred. Asking sensuous questions in order to elicit sensuous responses also indulged my interests in phenomenological methodology. I used phenomenology to design the interview questions in the hope of creating a descriptive and sensuous life story interview and sensuously told life story. Human experiences are lived in as far as they are felt, internal, have affect and effects, and potential to change us. Lived experiences can stand alone because they have inherent personal meaning requiring no need for the person to examine surrounding discourses or to make meaning by drawing inferences\(^{63}\). I asked questions that were based on readings of phenomenology and phenomenological techniques, particularly the work of existential phenomenologists (for example Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964). Following the instructions of Moustakas (1994) and Giorgi (1985) I developed and used phenomenologically inspired questions, and these questions in turn elicited very specific types of responses. When I drew theoretically or methodologically upon phenomenology in this research I did so simply to ask ‘how was that experience for you?’ It was a sense of the experience that I sought, not its essence. I was interested in the descriptive, felt and partial explanations of the experience and the

---

\(^{62}\) I quote excerpts from these two poems throughout the thesis, each appears in its entirety in Appendix D.

\(^{63}\) But I also acknowledge this to be a ‘queer’ problematic because not examining and questioning the normative discourses that we each use to make sense of ourselves does little to challenge said discourses. Thus the same identities are constituted with little to no change to the prioritising of some ‘identities’ (and people) over ‘others’.
processes of sense making made evident from these visceral encounters. This kind of deployment of phenomenology also opened the research to other ways of thinking, being, and doing. In short I consider this to be troubling or ‘queering’ aspects of phenomenology in order to meet the specific analytical needs of this research. The following question and response exemplifies my ‘queer’ phenomenological intentions.

**Question:** Can you talk me through that; try to remember everything about it. What sort of physical feelings did you get? What things did you notice happening in your body?

**My body was just buzzing**
*the sound and noise, the noise was huge.*

**My hands were sweating**
*they were cold*

*my hands were cold.*

**I remember they were sweating.**

By asking for embodied descriptions of their experiences I was able to ground the participants’ responses within their own bodily materiality. Attached to this kind of sensate response is the notion that a particular (‘queer’) event and place can remain on Nell’s body (these feelings of *The Gay Games* came back when she re-told this story). According to Plummer (1983: 53) this type of questioning makes “the person’s subjective definition of a situation and the objective constraints which impinge upon them” obvious to readers, and as a result “one cannot fail to be aware that the individuals have bodies which bring them pain and that they live in groups which sometimes coerce and frustrate and sometimes give them joy”. Using concrete objects to initiate, prompt and stimulate the discussion of concrete experiences “permits one to see the reconciliation of these supposed interminable opposites and dualisms”, and seated within these documents and life stories is an individual engaged in the act of problem-solving (Plummer, 1983: 55).

---

64 In this thesis I use poetic forms of representation to display and present the participants words. In Chapter Four I explain in detail my choices with regards to this style of representation. This small section is an excerpt from a longer poem titled *The Gay Games Opening Ceremony*. At times, over the coming pages I introduce small sections of the poems in order to support a point and/or display the ways in which I shall be weaving the poems into the discussion. On occasions, throughout the thesis, I also use direct transcript text. This is done because not all of the interview data was re-presented as poetry, and at times the direct quotes are more poignant and useful. The two styles should be complimentary and supportive.
The enduring quality of objects aid memory and the recall of experiences, but “the meaning often remains tacit and implicit. A smell or taste … may awake strong feelings, but it is notoriously difficult to describe a taste or a feel or to pin down the emotions evoked” (Hodder, 2000: 707). As such material evidence can provide insight into the components of a lived experience, and they may get us closer to the experience, but often these experiences are not easily articulated (Hodder, 2000). Hodder maintains people both experience, and ‘read’ meaning from materials, and can inscribe new meanings through these readings. As a researcher collecting different materials I recognised I must remain wary of the materials used and the feelings elicited, as well as the ways in which the materials were used to re-tell a story, because these are always stories about internal senses of (an) experience.

‘Queering’ the life story interview

With the above in mind, plus the previous discussions about the five ways for re-framing ‘queer’ methodologies suggested at the start of this chapter, I now build upon and work with some of the ideas which have emerged from the work of Kong et al. (2002) in order to explain how I have fashioned a ‘queer’ interview method for the participants in this research. In short I now discuss how I have queered the life story interview as part of the process of ‘queering’ the methodology.

In the past research was done ‘on’ homosexuals, gay men or lesbians. It may or may not have been done by homosexuals, gay men or lesbians (though it usually was) but in the main it adhered to the styles of thinking and researching of the time. By way of a simple table Kong et al. (2002) trace the development of the interview as an important method for investigating the experiences of gay men and lesbians over time. Their table tends to mirror historical shifts in qualitative research in general from traditional or positivist thinking through to modernist and then post modernist approaches. The table reflects both shifts in theorising and everyday life from the late 1800s through to today. Whilst it offers a useful attempt to queerly place the interview method I am unsure as to whether this constitutes a
distinctly ‘queer’ shift or whether it could simply be seen as the inevitable result of postmodernism. The table is useful because it displays the temporal and historical emergence of the interview as a method for having conversations with all kinds of ‘queer’ people and asking all kinds of ‘queer’ questions. Rather than assuming that semi-structured in-depth interviewing is simply part of some postmodern theoretical evolutionary chain of events I would like to suggest that interviewing methods have changed historically in response to the distinct needs, interests and subjectivities of all researchers and participants.

In addition to hinting at a ‘queered’ approach to methodology, much of the research examined for this thesis can be read as suggesting that whilst a strong critical identity based theory behind one’s research choices is a distinct way of thinking about framing methodology, it does not result in the choice or development of distinctively queer methods, rather it brings certain ways of thinking, seeing and doing. Kong et al. (2002) suggest in this sense, ‘queering’ involves problematising, deconstructing, reflecting upon and questioning the three interrelated aspects of the interview process namely: the interviewee (including recruiting LGBTQQI participants and their historical situatedness and subjectivities); the interview (for example the popularity of the unstructured and semi-structured interview); and the interviewer (own subjectivities and positionalities). Adopting or developing a ‘queer(ed)’ methodology determines the ways in which the interview is conducted, how the questions are prepared, the types of questions asked, in some cases the types of responses received, and certainly the types of people chosen, as well as the theoretical interests and imperatives of the interviewer. It also significantly affects analysis and issues of representation.

For Kong and his colleagues four ‘new’ procedural issues have emerged in interviewing over time and they posit these issues as a method of ‘queering’ the interview. However, before doing so they remark, “of course these problems are not peculiar to the interviewing of homosexuals. The latter highlight them in different ways in relation to distinct subjectivities” (Kong et al., 2002: 245). This is a key point in my argument, that is, queer theory and methodologies offer researchers the opportunity to tease out and problematise a range of distinct subjectivities (including their own and not distinct to issues of sexuality),
and that a distinctly queer methodology does not exist. These authors consider the following four procedural considerations for researchers when conducting interviews. I ‘queered’ the interviews mindful of this advice.

Firstly, subjective representation is concerned with participant subjectivities, othering, voice and misrepresentation. The authors insist that interviewers must be overtly aware of othering and simultaneously investigate who is excluded by continually asking, “who and what is being heard through the interview … who are these ‘homosexuals’ … how do they come to find their voice, and what indeed is that voice … who can speak, who and what is being heard … who can speak for the other, from what position, and on what basis?” (Kong et al., 2002: 244). These are specific questions to ask of ‘queer’ participants and their ‘queer’ places.

Legitimation is their second procedural issue. This relates to the concepts of validity, legitimacy and reliability of the interview, composing research texts, and the faithfulness of words and data. In this consideration the interview itself should be seen as a potentially illegitimate and certainly problematic form of knowledge because of the subjectivity involved in composing results into a research text. Through this concept the interview and its historical orthodoxy and primacy become the object of critique. Elsewhere in this thesis I express concerns about ‘truth’, meaning, stories and story telling, these concerns can be scrutinised by adopting a ‘queered’ approach to interviewing that seeks to devalorise the interview process itself by deconstructing it as a form of discursive practice (Kong et al., 2002; Richardson, 1992a).

Reflexivity is a procedural issue for all researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). An appreciation for reflexivity involves careful consideration of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and centres on,

the problem of locating the connectedness between the (gay?) interviewer and (gay? bisexual? lesbian? queer?) interviewee. This alerts us to the questions of whether researchers should be part of the communities they study … emotional response … erotic involvement. (Kong et al., 2002: 245)
In the context of the interviews in this research, a space and place was co-constructed as a result of ‘queer(ed)’ methodologies and sensualising the questions. Our close relationship was significant in all aspects of the research. In the space created the participants were able to guide the process and engage at surprisingly deep and intimate levels as they blurred, crossed and challenged the boundaries between interviewee and interviewer.

As their final point, Kong et al. (2002) introduce issues concerning politics, morality and ethics. They maintain that because research involves human dimensions there must be consideration for what has been done to homosexuals in research in the past and what it means to now ‘queer’ research and work with ‘queer’ participants, as ‘queer’ researchers (that is unpacking our own erotic and sexual researcher subjectivities). They state, “we need to take account of the distinct possibility that, within the research process itself, interviews are moral and political interventions through and through, and we need to represent our findings as such” (Kong et al., 2002: 245). In this research I use poetry as a form of representation which I believe exposes the interview trope as moral and/or political.

In addition to the ideas expressed above the interviews (and research) were ‘queered’ in one more important way – nurturing sensuousness. Throughout this research I have remained committed to sensuousness, and the affective and descriptive emotionality of the experiences and the spoken words. When I developed the interview questions I drew upon a naïve but eager personal interest in phenomenology. These questions were deliberately designed to prompt the participants to respond and talk in emotive, sensual, and descriptive ways. The responses also lent themselves to phenomenological analysis in so far as phenomenology is interested in making meaning and sense of lived experiences, but not as a re-writing of the experience from my perspective (as is usually the case in phenomenological analysis). I consider this to be ‘queering’ because I have drawn upon the aspects of phenomenology I have found most useful and compelling, despite its sometimes malalignment with queer theorising.
Data analysis

Kvale (1996) suggest that the analysis and interpretation of data provides in some ways a continuation of the story that has been told. It also provides the opportunity for me to join the story for the specific purpose of research. In bringing my story to the story a certain type of knowledge is added, but in a ‘queer’ tradition this certain knowledge needs to be exceeded (Trinh, 1991) and ‘messed-up’.

Coding

Charmaz (2003: 320) describes coding as a process which requires the researcher to capture what she sees “in the data in categories that simultaneously describe and dissect the data … coding is a form of shorthand that distils events and meanings without losing their essential properties”. The first question I asked of the data was ‘what is going on here?’ This question initially enabled me to begin a simple process of scanning the interview data for themes and ideas. Later, when I continued to ask, it allowed me to draw on theory to discuss what was happening within the data and around the meanings or sense participants were making of their experiences. As I gathered an array of data from multiple sources a rich tapestry started to appear.

I undertook a two stage coding process that seems standard in qualitative research. The first stage involved a process of initial or open coding and this occurred when I identified “potential themes by pulling together real examples from the text” (Ryan & Bernhard, 2000: 783). This may or may not involve in vivo coding, a process in which categories and terms are identified from the words used by the participants’ themselves, ‘real’ examples (Ryan & Bernhard, 2000). The first reading of the interview data familiarised me with the tone, feelings and content of the interview, and allowed me to re-visit the interview. During the second reading I began to loosely identify re-current themes and emerging discourses from both the participants’ actual words and recurring concepts (Charmaz, 2000, 2003). I did this by using a variety of coloured highlighters, pens, pencils and tags. In this research I chose not to use qualitative research computer programmes because of the small number of
participants and large number of total interviews. This meant I had to remain very close to the interview data and could read between the lines as well as gather surface themes. I also did not want to be limited by surface coding of themes and then simply have to code again by hand.

In the second stage a more focussed and selective coding occurred which involved the identification of “the most frequently appearing initial codes to sort, synthesize, and conceptualise large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2003: 320). Charmaz (2003) explains this type of coding as more abstract and general, but at the same time analytically incisive. Coding in this stage allowed me to begin to make some analytical decisions about the data as I started to discover the participants’ broad views of their world. In this way I had begun to selectively code the data (Charmaz, 2000) and in so doing determined the ways in which I planned to analyse and integrate subsequent themes and discourses. At this stage (and later) I also used small Post-it notes on the interview transcripts to write memos to myself about: themes and codes, possible literature, follow up questions, future research ideas, and questions of the data or participant.

As the coding categories emerged through the collection of more data I then started to link them to theory by comparing and contrasting when, why and under what conditions these themes occurred in the text. After I had all of the interview data I went back to the transcripts and I then began to code it for deeper themes using discourse analysis (Grbich, 2003). Interview data was re-coded across each participants collection of four interviews, and then for a fourth time data was re-visited with similarly themed interviews being re-coded between participants, thus allowing for possible comparing and contrasting (for example The Gay Games interviews were compared across all participants).

This stage by stage process was very useful because the interviews and transcribed material were often spaced out and this gave me time to closely read each piece, go to the literature, and then reflect upon it before moving to the next one. The codes cut across multiple interviews and so represented recurrent themes in the data. Later this made deeper re-coding in line with emerging theoretical concepts much easier. For example a simple theme
like ‘place’ or ‘belonging’ was picked up across all transcripts, but later readings of discourses around ‘gender’ or ‘melancholia’ demanded a deeper understanding and familiarity with the material, and with theoretical perspectives as provided by the literature. In this way I was in a position to interact with the data and be responsive to it. I also became very familiar with the participants, their tone, their emotions and importantly their views of their own ‘realities’. In the early stages I posed questions of the data but also developed additional questions to place in subsequent interviews. The consistent re-visiting, re-coding and re-living of the data provided me with a strong comparative base from which to analyse, organise and then later write, about what I thought could be ‘going on’.

An essential and important aspect of analysing the data was returning to it after going back to the literature, particularly theory. In this way I was continually asking theoretical questions of the data as well as gathering theoretical tools from the literature to take to the next readings. Charmaz (2000) calls this theoretical sampling, and whilst I did not know what I was doing at the time it proved to be an extremely useful method for getting inside the data and asking informed questions of it, and also for keeping both the data and the theory open. Given the time between each set of interviews and between participants I was able to theoretically sample in many ways. I was able to: take theoretically informed readings of one interview into the next interview or series of interviews; refine and develop codes and categories from a number of differently informed and guided angles; categorise and code on different levels (that is the surface themes, and deeper discourses); formulate specific questions from interview to interview, or code to code; and, identify contexts and content that was relevant.

During the research, and particularly after interviews, I also wrote my own responses to the material in my fieldwork journal. At this time I tried to summarise the content and feel of the interview, and recorded significant ideas that emerged. I also recorded my emotional and visceral response to the participants’ stories, and their degree of comfort and general demeanour.
Poststructural discourse analysis and deconstruction

In terms of analysis, poststructuralists will often use either the Derridean process of deconstruction to analyse the ways in which language, and particular types of discourses are drawn upon in order to create meaning, or a Foucauldian perspective which focuses on analysing and deconstructing the regulatory power produced through and by institutional structures and practices which in turn shape and reproduce bodies and subjectivities in particular ways (Foucault, 1972; Grbich, 2003; Guba & Holstein, 2000; Silverman, 2000). The processes of deconstruction are similar and involve revealing the cultural status of discourse, and therefore its changeability, by laying “bare the binary oppositions which structure texts” (Weedon, 1999: 23) and practices of power which discipline and regulate. Carol Grbich (2003: 156) suggests that this is done in three common ways: “placing texts against each other in order to trouble them … interrupting texts in an attempt to prevent them closing, avoiding other interpretations; and creating another structure to allow a freer play of language”.

In poststructural (and queer) analysis the primacy and instability of language, and hence knowledge (and power) becomes a site for investigating both subjectivity and socio-cultural practices (Phillips, 2001; Weedon, 1999). Language is neither a stable nor closed system with signs that have clear meaning, rather it has endless possibilities in terms of meaning, and deep insidious structures and signifiers serve to manipulate and control individuals and institutions for the purpose of power (Grbich, 2003). In this way existing discourses are seen as structured in ways that are limiting in terms of how we think, read, write, and act. In a sense we are immersed in the language and discourses available to us and are therefore often unable to see the power-laden nature of discourses, and the ways in which they limit our understanding. Grbich (2003: 156) explains that, “a process of naturalisation has taken place, which has smoothed over the discourses making them appear to be transparent and ‘truthful’”. For Grbich (2003: 156), this discursive manipulation can be revealed when privileged discourses and texts have left traces of their existence which can be unravelled and exposed in order “to allow formerly hidden aspects to emerge”. The objective of poststructural analysis becomes the seeking out of traces and unravelling of them as a
method of breaking down existing discourses and by virtue of this, categories of power and knowledge. This in turn fosters alternative discourses which have the potential to widen the scope of our imaginations (Popke, 2003).

Below I describe how I have deconstructed the interviews and artefacts. In this description I borrow some guidelines (and add some ideas) for deconstructing texts from Grbich (2003), who has in turn adapted her ideas from the work of Rosenau (1992). According to these two authors deconstruction involves three processes.

Firstly, it requires a search for threads that disrupt the text. This entails reading the text sceptically and critically, taking the position of both rejecting and accepting nothing, and focusing only on the texts structure, content and omissions. This may involve: allowing the arguments within the text to challenge each other and placing them against each other; looking for links to other texts; identifying and disentangling simple and complex generalisations, binaries, hierarchies, ideas, contradictions and inconsistencies (allow the text to be messy, this is how they see the world); and/or looking for alternative readings by reading against the grain. A second deconstruction process involves closely examining the margins and identifying who is speaking, from what positions, and who is silenced or marginalised. This may also include determining what information may be concealed.

The third part of the process of deconstruction is the writing up. Grbich (2003) suggests that whilst writing up a deconstructive analysis the researcher should try to: allow as many interpretations as possible; use the language of the text and stay close to it; avoid absolute statements; and cultivate ambivalence, ambiguity and contradictions. An important aspect of this is to not foreclose on the data and keep in mind that the text created is not finite. I was careful not to over analyse the data I had been presented with. I refer particularly to my intention to view the data simultaneously as meaningful and meaningless, as both a simple piece of material and a material abstraction of an experience, as well as important signifiers of culturally and socially constructed identity discourses. This is important because it kept
the multiple tensions\textsuperscript{65} in the data and its analysis alive and at the surface for consideration, questioning and ‘queering’.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter charted the development of, and provided an explanation for, the fundamental methodological processes, methods, research design, and procedures of this research. It focussed on explaining the reasons behind my choices of methodology and method in light of a diverse selection of research that dealt with the lives, stories or experiences of ‘others’. Extending and challenging this literature, and its findings helped me to continue to ‘craft’ a robust, malleable and transportable concept of ‘queer’ and ‘queering’. I found that a distinctively ‘queer’ methodology does not exist because there are many ways of conducting research on/with ‘queers’, and because ‘queers’ are not all the same (neither are the ‘queers’ who research them). What emerged as paramount when researching ‘queer(s)’ was the importance of moulding a theoretically informed, but flexible and responsive methodology capable of catering for the subtle nuances of ‘queer’ lives and yet still provide a space for their stories and experiences to be critically analysed. I maintain that by asking what queer theory could do for this research I have moulded an approach that most suits the specific needs of the participants, and my own interests, ideas and investments.

\textsuperscript{65} By this I mean the multiple binaries inherent in this research: fact/fiction, truth/reality, queer/non-queer, heterosexual/homosexual and the like.
CHAPTER FOUR:
REPRESENTATIONAL COMPLEXITIES

Being gay is so me. I was born to be gay and once I decided okay … that's it, just do it, and see. I was just born to do it, know what I mean?^{66}

(Excerpt Who Am I? Scout)

INTRODUCTION

This chapter bridges the gap between my methodological concerns and theoretical tensions. In a methodological sense it explains my choices around particular forms of representation, in a theoretical sense it exposes and begins to analyse the data given the complexities associated with research and forms of representation. In the main the chapter presents arguments about the complexities of representing gendered and sexed identities in the interview process and writing from the point of view of both the participants and the researcher.

The chapter deals with two issues related to representation. Firstly, I further consider the ways in which my close friendship with the participants influenced the interview process. As an extension of the discussions in Chapter Three around research relationships and subjectivities, and in light of my own observations of the ways in which the interview processes played out, my focus here is on exploring the ways in which the interviews ‘became’^{67} a form of confession and/or therapy.

^{66} Throughout this thesis I place the poems derived from the participants’ words in bold text to differentiate their words from the main text. I do this even when citing small excerpts.
^{67} Searching for the ‘right’ word here is difficult. I observed that the interviews were used and constructed as confessional and/or therapeutic-like, but that they also developed and emerged in these ways. The subtle difference is that one was probably there from the start, whereas the other occurred as a result of the process and the participants’ involvement, interest and commitment to it. I suggest that each participant took up a
As my second task, I explain the ways in which I have chosen to represent the data or ‘write it up’, with specific focus upon justifying my use of poetic forms of representation. I have chosen a variety of ways in which to re-pose the data that are in the main based upon what and how the data spoke to me, the emotionality of the interview, my theoretical choices, and my desire to free up the writing process by experimenting with different genres. Early in this research it became apparent that I needed to strike a balance between theoretically informed specific analytical styles, such as those advocated by poststructural analysis, and what Laurel Richardson (2000a) terms creative analytic practice. On creative and poetic styles of representation in addition to Richardson I have also been inspired and influenced by the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989, 1991, 1992) and Andrew Sparkes (1995, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). It should not be surprising that I have chosen a variety of representational styles because of my ongoing commitment to mixing up, problematising, and ‘queering’ this research. In this thesis I have sought to create a multiple crossing of experiences and stories over time through the interviews, storytelling, poetry, prose, images, reflections, and journal entries. In a spirit of ‘queerness’ I wish to unsettle traditional academic modes of representation, what many researchers call realist tales (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Denzin, 1997; Glesne, 1997; Sparkes, 2002a, 2002b) and in so doing reject notions of realism in favour of critiquing the illusion of reality through poetic representation of interview data. This chapter seeks to explain my choices around poetic forms of representation from both a methodological and theoretical perspective.

Related to these points, in this chapter I begin to theorise the data in light of the complexities of the research process and representational issues. Throughout the chapter I have inserted pieces of interview text, mainly in the form of poetry, as it is the key representational mode I have chosen, but also in order to justify and demonstrate my analytic choices. My aim is to begin to display how making sense of both experience and data is a complex task. This ‘messy’ analytical starting point offers a fluid undertone which keeps subjective articulations of experience and identity in a state of flux, complicity and

---

particular approach to the interviews in line with either or both of these views of interviewing. I also suggest their ‘position’ was based upon ‘knowing’ me.
irresolvability. It is my aim to maintain this tension throughout the following pages and chapters to come.

**METHODOLOGICAL COMPLEXITIES**

From the outset of this research I was placed in a conundrum. I had some key questions I wanted to explore with some specific people in mind that could help me, but I also felt a shadow hanging over us all as I considered how our relationships might effect what they said and did, and what I heard and wrote. One of the methodological and theoretical issues to emerge from this research has been my intimate involvement with the participants and close relationships with them. On the one hand our relationship enabled a deep level of trust to ground initial conversations and for some highly personal and descriptive data to emerge. On the other hand it also complicated the research process, especially in terms of my choices around the use of data (and what that ‘says’ about them and me). My own reflections upon the effect of our relationship on the research process, and upon the participants further complicated this. I have been especially conscious of how I have chosen to theorise about the participants’ words because of my insider status and investments in the research. A key concern centred on representational choices and the effect of these choices on the participants, that is, when they read what I have written what will they see, think, feel, hear and say?

As the research progressed my researcher and friend position took on new meaning. I was a member of the research and friendship group. I was floating within an insider/outsider binary but I could not be both insider and outsider - when I was outside looking in the view was different to when I have ever been inside looking out. During the interview process I became a reflexive insider “negotiating roles and subjectivities, looking out” (Coffey, 1999:

---

68 I have found it difficult at times to separate out whether my discomforts were around being a friend or about my personal and professional investments in the research. They are no doubt inextricably related. Either way I regularly reflected upon the nature and importance of existing relationships as well as on the reasons why I was doing this research. For this insight and conversations around conducting research ‘on’ known participants I am thankful to Julie Mooney-Somers.
57). But this was confusing at times and hard to maintain because as Trinh (1991: 74) suggests,

the moment the insider steps from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside … She refuses to reduce herself to an Other, and her reflections to a mere outsider’s objective reasoning or insider’s subjective feeling … She knows she is different but at the same time being Him.

In this way I struggled with my sameness and my difference, my desires to research and be researched, to represent and be represented. And I struggled a lot with power - ‘being Him’ - and so continually questioned my complicity in subjection.

Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider. (Trinh, 1991: 74)

The research transformed the way I looked at and heard the world, and simultaneously encouraged me to question my own place in it. I found our ‘off the record’ relationships deepening, becoming more intimate, more quickly. One of the participants was a very close friend of mine for a number of years. She chose one of her interview critical moments as her schoolgirl crush on me. This was something we had never spoken about. We theorised together about her words, her experiences, her place; my words, my experiences, my place, and importantly where that located us both now. Another woman was a distant friend for many years, her disclosures about abuse, depression, and sense of loss created a place to build a new friendship.

I can’t explain how my feelings for Scout have changed since we started doing these interviews. She trusts me so much with her words that are so painful and yet they flow on and on. Sometimes it seems like a therapy session and I wonder about how I deal with that in research terms but also about how it must be to be her, and what I now do with this intimate side of her life, her hidden identity that I feel only I know about. This explains the person that I have known her to be. I didn’t know her … now I know so many things about her, she so little about me in return. Is this exploitive? I feel somehow closer, like some stronger bond has been forged. I sense
it every time I see her out socially. We seek each other out with unspoken understandings and through mundane conversation. Why is she giving me this? Is it for me as researcher or friend? Or is she doing it for herself? (Journal entry 11th July, 2004)

Through numerous readings across multiple disciplines I developed a strong multi-layered attachment to the research participants, and the other participant observers in this research (that is, other people who knew about or asked questions about this research including the participants’ partners and our other friends). At times I sensed discomfort from the participants with my social presence (I was told this at one of the interviews), at other times I sensed I was being specifically sought out to explain the ‘meaning’ of being ‘lesbian’. There were factors about me and about the research that gave many people ownership of this research and personal investment in it. There were many people invested in what I was doing and hence what I eventually had to say. This sense of the generalisability of sexual identity experiences, and search for explanations or reasons why, is typified in the following casual social interaction, (Friend encounter #1, March 2005).

[Hug hello then] “So have you worked out why we are like this yet?”
[Taken aback] “I’m sorry?”
[Talking quickly, very concerned face] “Well I just heard about your research and that it was about being gay, and about how it happens and what it means. Like is it genetic or something?”
[Thinking how to approach this investment but explain the research] “That’s not quite what it’s about. It is in a way but mostly I won’t be saying that this is why lesbians are the way they are, because I can’t I’m only talking to a few people.”
[Not that satisfied with response] “Yes but don’t they say the same thing? Won’t you explain why? It would be good to tell others the truth, like if its genetic and all.”
[Careful] “I’m only talking to a few people about their own experiences of identity and place. They are also their own stories, so they change too. They are all different and not everyone’s truth. Truth is a problem.”
[Looking at me with hopeful eyes] “But there must be a reason that it happens.”
[Half smile] “Maybe we can talk about it later.”

69 By this I mean the way in which a lesbian identity can be collectively owned and have meaning to others who identify in or with this group. It is when a series of single stories, through popular discourses, come to represent the collective story, narrative, and/or experience of the group. An example of this is the ‘coming out’ story, and friend encounter #1.

70 I include the emotional responses here in [brackets] as a way in which to highlight the feelings attached to this research and to indicate the comfort many people had with what I was doing.
This person wanted an explanation for her sexuality from me based on the experiences and words of others, as if others had the same experiences or could speak on behalf of her or because she couldn’t. I remember her face vividly, it was pleading, almost desperately, to know why she was the way she was, that is, not heterosexual.

By claiming to represent the ‘voices’\textsuperscript{71} of the women I interviewed (and seemingly the voices of our friends) I have also been representing my own (silenced) ‘voice’. A ‘voice’, that through this process has become a bit louder and less vulnerable. When looking at the women in this research I saw myself. I had my own issues of discomfort over self-disclosure outside the research to others who asked about it. When explaining my research to some people\textsuperscript{72} I often became uncomfortable and found myself covering or protecting my sexuality simply because that is what I had always done. Issues such as these around whether to tell or not to tell, and the personal and professional consequences of doing so abound for ‘queer’, ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘bisexual’ researchers (see specifically various chapters in Lewin & Leap, 1996, and Kulick & Willson, 1995) (see also King, 1999; McLean, 2001; Tierney, 1997; Valentine, 1998; Warren & Fassett, 2002).

In this research I desired to have my own inconsistencies and vulnerabilities complicit in the re-production and re-presentation of the stories of others, and hence in the reproduction of discourses associated with identity. In this way, and in line with queer theoretical thinking, I did not wish to hide behind the participants in a cloak of neutrality, nor did I want to let them stand alone carrying the burden of representation (Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000), my research intentions are explicit. Richardson (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 2000a, 2001), Sparkes (1995, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2002a,

\textsuperscript{71} ‘Voice’ is a sticky term. I do not mean their exact words as they can only ever appear as they have been played with, for example in the process of speaking, recording, transcription, analysis and interpretation. A close term would be ‘the individual stories’, but ‘voice’ adds an aspect of now being able to speak after being silenced. I use ‘voice’ to represent speaking up and being heard, as opposed to silence. It therefore also has an advocacy role as in feminist thinking.

\textsuperscript{72} For example my grandfather who remarked, “what would you want to study something like that? Doesn’t seem very important.” Or to people I didn’t know who weren’t queer or researchers. I worried about what people would think of me. “When are people going to stop apologising for being lesbian?” was a comment I received at a small colloquium in which I shared my early research ideas and discomfort at being labelled ‘lesbian’ through this research.
2002b, 2003), Fine et al. (2000), Denzin (1989, 1997, 2000, 2003), and many others\(^\text{73}\) encouraged me to write through, about and within my (embodied, gendered, sexual) subjectivities, engaged in a process of self-modification and turning back in on myself (Minichiello et al., 1990), thus narrating a form of researcher self-reflexivity primarily as a concern for representation (Fine et al., 2000), and which was also a reflection of my personal, political and ideological investments and responsibilities.

**Interview complexities: shifting between methodological and theoretical concerns**

Interviews are complex conversations. What is said or heard can shift from moment to moment depending upon the space created, the questions posed, and a plethora of interpersonal and emotional variables. My participants and I knew things about each other that in ‘regular’ research situations researchers and participants do not. The ways in which we approached the research was based upon what and who we knew, and our individual and collective investments in the research.

The interviews involved individual and shared explaining, sensualising, describing, empathising, and understanding which allowed each participant to re-visit their experiences of sexual identity in quite embodied ways, and to take me with them, albeit it as a relatively quiet participant observer. This was my intention. They went back … they felt … they described. The result was a very colourful series of individual reflections but also, upon rumination, a deeply emotional collective description of ‘being’ *not* heterosexual. The piece of transcript data below from Nell exemplifies depth and emotionality but also tremendous trust. In this segment she was crying as she read from her travel journal (hence putting these words in “inverted commas”) about the moment she realised how much she loved women.

> Nell: "I'm cracking up as I write this; the man next to me is almost laughing at me but he has no idea why I'm laughing. Knowing you laugh and someone laughs at

\(^{73}\) See for example: Califia, 2005; Ellis and Berger, 2003; Ellis and Bochner, 1992, 1996; Ellis and Flaherty, 1992; Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul, 1997; Faulkner, 2005a, 2005b; Newton, 1996; Queen, 2005; Rinehart, 1998; Tillmann-Healy, 1996.
you but they are just laughing because you are laughing. I feel amazing, we have not long taken off from Sydney and I feel so full of emotions. I cried and I smiled whilst leaving and then I felt like jumping up and down but in my belt I can't. I was staring at the air hostess across from me and their beauty has taken my breath away. As I was sitting here staring and smiling at them I started to feel hot. They are so touching, attractive, delicate, sensual and smooth, I got all horny staring at them. If only they knew I was a lesbian but they don't and sometimes I think that's great. I wanted to touch her skin, her red lips. She had these amazing red lips. That's what I remember the most. Her name must be Koori, JAL Airlines. Her lipstick is so perfect, man I feel hot. So I was burning up busting to get out of my seat but the fasten seatbelt sign was on. I had to go to the bathroom and touch myself. It felt so fucking good. Here I am flying away with the world at my feet to discover everything. I'm still smiling so hard and my hand is in pain from writing so fast. If only this plane was full of lesbians what a feast. I remember walking out of the bathroom and my seat was here and I remember just smiling and just this feeling. I remember looking at the plane; there were five seats in the middle and three seats on this massive plane. And I remember thinking if this plane was only women how nice would it be, you know, that was my feeling like it's amazing. I love women, I'm so happy to know that I'm going to discover much going on this adventure. Bye Sydney I love you all, time to stop, no room, I will ask for a drink. Mama Mia.”

The participants responded to the methods used by filling the transcripts with pages of vivid, emotional and colourful accounts (as above). Many were almost one complete stream of speaking - like a soliloquy punctuated only by tears, laughs or questions re-directing the response or encouraging more details. Whilst the material collected was descriptively rich and vivid upon closer analysis a distinct pattern emerged which made the data somewhat predictable and repetitive. The women in this research consistently spoke about, described and made sense of their experiences, their places, and their identities in essentialist ways. As I lay the transcripts on the table a prominent theme surfaced – these women believed in core identities and that affirming their ‘lesbian’ identity was a personal, public and political necessity for survival. Driven by their needs, interests and investments they narrated experiences of moments in time and place in ways that re-inscribed heteronormativity and re-constituted the notion of an authentic or ‘real’ lesbian identity that needed to be affirmed in order to be normalised.

Excerpt from *Who Am I* (Nell)

So I don’t believe that for me it’s a choice. I just think I am a
lesbian and that I was born like it. Why would I be feeling like that if I wasn’t?

And again …

Excerpt from *Who Am I* (Tabitha)

You start at ground level, the core which is, you’re female there’s sexuality there’s gender and then there’s identity.

I guess I would put it in three buckets, they move around. My gut is saying maybe it is the sex as your core sexual interactions, roles. I don’t know I get confused at that point.

I get confused too but the confusion and messiness of our views of our ‘selves’ is one of the joys of being human, and of using queer theory. We are not predictable, neat, stable or stationary. We are contradictory (we talk about both ‘buckets’ and ‘cores’ of identity), ‘messy’, on the move, confusing, and confused (I was born a lesbian, ‘why would I be feeling like that if I wasn’t?’). These wonderful inconsistencies are at the heart of this thesis and with regards to this chapter crucially relate to issues of representation. Later I explain how poetry has provided a ‘queer’ way of representing the data and the ‘messy’ contradictions inherent with living out complex lives. It is my intention to explain more fully how poetry enabled a number of different perspectives to emerge and guide analysis in subsequent chapters.

‘Knowing’ and ‘known’ participants

The interview process itself was very interesting because in many ways they didn’t seem to be conventional interviews, but nor were they conventional conversations between
friends. The meetings were situated somewhere between friendly conversations and semi-structured interviews, as such they had the usual interviewer-interviewee dynamic in that they gave detailed responses when I asked directed questions but they also had a degree of participant direction, control and ownership (which sometimes frustrated me as I wanted to pursue a different line than they did). I had a list of loose questions but sometimes I didn’t ‘control’ what was asked or explored, often the participants directed the discussion and determined what would be said and where we would proceed next. This is more similar to a regular social conversation, but quite removed from traditional interviews. I am inclined to think perhaps this approach resulted in deeper data as the participants’ themselves explained, described and moved the interview in and around themselves and their experiences, rather than it being about me directing them. But at the same time I was very concerned I knew so much about them and they knew very little about me. How would this impact on our ‘outside’ friendships? Did we really know each other better or had I just used them?

Most of the interviews went well beyond the allotted time and included much more than was asked. On most occasions the interview continued after the tape recorder had been turned off and I was surprised to see little difference in the animation or enthusiasm to speak ‘off the record’. Whilst I had expected a change I noticed I was the one who became more involved by stepping back as researcher to stepping forward as friend. I wondered did this bother, upset, or confuse them, or make them change in the ways in which they spoke or the things they decided to tell? Did turning on/off the tape recorder and turning Karen on/off shift anything in the processes? It doesn’t appear as though much changed for them.

Another important factor to emerge was that as an interviewer I was permitted to ask questions I may not have ordinarily asked as a friend. This in turn seemed to entice the participants to provide responses they may not have given to me in an everyday social situation. In addition to re-negotiating friendship and interview boundaries we each tiptoed

---

74 From my experience regular social conversations between friends are relatively equal in terms of talk time, questioning, and listening. An interview is not designed like this it is directed and one-sided, I ask briefly, they answer at length. During the interviews I sensed the participants slipped me out of the friend category and into the interviewer category more easily than I myself slipped in and out.
along thin personal boundaries. On a couple of occasions the participants became aware (usually by re-reading their transcripts) of what and how much they had said, and were concerned about what they had ‘given away’. The mobile phone text message below from Scout exemplifies this.

```
Hey sorry taken soo long to get bac..had a read [of interview texts] god I sound like a tosser.can’t stand it..
```

28-Oct-2004 16:54:27

Scout also spoke on one occasion about being nervous seeing me socially after an interview because she thought I would be judging her or think she’s ‘psycho’. On that occasion she did not want to talk to me or make eye contact, and yet at our next interview the chain of disclosure continued and the boundaries were re-negotiated. In hindsight I probably should have raised these issues as they arose with the participants so we could work through them together.

After each interview I reflected upon the words of the participants by reflecting upon my experience of the interview as well as my own experiences of what they had spoken about. During, and after the interviews, I felt what they had described in their stories, not simply because I was there, rather because I had intimate knowledge about what they were talking about. I watched, listened and felt each significant moment emerge and unfold before each of us knowing I had seen, heard, and felt them all before. I reflected upon how each woman had regularly, and in an ongoing manner negotiated her sexual identity based upon a lifetime of making sense of these experiences using limited and limiting discourses from their childhood, usually forced on them from their parents. Discourses that today give little comfort in terms of shedding any more ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ onto what happened to them at various moments in time over their lives. The ways in which they re-experienced and re-told their critical moments was based upon my knowing, understanding, and feeling what they had felt. In some situations I had even been there with them in the past, and was there again, now, during the interview.
I maintained regular and ongoing contact with each of the participants and this raised some inherent difficulties around anonymity and privacy. I myself encountered privacy, confidentiality and subjectivity issues and took methods to remain both professional and approachable as per University of Wollongong ethics procedures. In casual conversations at times I felt as though I was developing into a spokesperson for ‘lesbian’ identity, and whilst the participants did not press me for information, outsiders often did. I was known and knowing to many, and so too was what I was doing. I recall an incident at a friends’ funeral (of a participants’ partners mother) in which a partner of another participant asked me what I was doing afterwards. I said I was going down to Wollongong.

“What for?”
“To meet with my supervisors?”
“Are you studying?”
“Yes”
“What are you doing?”
“I’m doing a study that looks at experiences of place and sexual identity
[enter her partner and participant, silent]
“That sounds interesting, who are your participants?”
“Um it’s with some people from my Gay Games soccer team.”
“Oh, really, who?”
“Well, I can’t actually say, I’m not allowed …”
[cut in from participant and partner] “Oh I’m in it and some other people and actually most of them are here …” [looking around the room]
[cut in me] “And we shouldn’t talk about who in a place like this because they may not like us to.”
“Oh that doesn’t matter … (to partner) bet you can’t guess who else?”
[Exit me, shaking head]

(Friend encounter #2, November, 2004)

I felt concern about being known more strongly when I considered the anonymity of the participants themselves. Whilst I explained to them perhaps others may recognise their stories, words and comments, I don’t think they realised how likely this could be until they read the transcripts. I wondered how they would feel and respond to this; perhaps they would withdraw, maybe ask that certain quotes or comments not be used. I was worried about how I represented them and how others (including the other participants and their friends) might ‘see’ or ‘read’ them.
I became very familiar with the stories of each of the participants because they were often repeated from interview to interview. I had also heard a number of them before, socially. On some occasions in social settings I found it difficult to recall whether the story I had in my head about a participant was one they had told me in confidence in an interview or one I had heard them or others relay to me in some other setting. I usually remained quiet, concerned I might overstep some patient/doctor privilege by speaking about what I ‘wasn’t supposed to know’ instead of what ‘everyone knew’ about the person. When did I pretend I had heard a story for the first time or for the fourth time? What about if they said or did something socially that contradicted what was said or done in the interview? Would they want to speak to me about interview data in social settings? How should I proceed in each case?

A consideration of the multiple dynamics created by the interview space and process helped me to deal with these issues. Very early in the interview process I had a sense we had created a confessional-like space, one in which they came to be heard, I sat and listened, and in some strange way a process of absolution was being discursively inscribed on and around us. Likewise I was suspicious that the interviews were also acting as a form of therapy for the participants. In order to ‘test’ these ideas in interview number five I asked each woman what they believe they got from the interview process, and each one described it as a form of therapy. In a moment I discuss this aspect by examining the therapeutic-like effect the participants reported from the interviews, but before this I firstly turn to the work of Foucault to further explain my sense that the interviews acted as a form of confession.

Confessional effect

In the second paragraph of The History of Sexuality, Foucault (1978) describes a kind of freedom of seventeenth century sexuality reminiscent of The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, The Gay Games and numerous other celebratory events in the ‘queer’ Sydney community. The following quote signifies both a return to basics and celebration, but also a problematic in terms of outward displays and expressions of sexuality in contemporary
times. With respect to this research it also highlights the link between experiences of and within place and sexuality.

It was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions, when anatomies were shown and intermingled at will, and knowing children hung about amid the laughter of adults: it was a period when bodies “made a display of themselves.” (Foucault, 1978: 3)

In his critique of the discursive powers of sex Foucault (1978: 9) poses a primary question about the association between sex and sin when he quizzically asks, “why sex was associated with sin for such a long time”, and why we have burdened “ourselves today with so much guilt for having once made sex a sin?” Foucault describes us as a society of confessing animals, and one only need to turn to popular culture to see examples of this (for example, in the proliferation and popularity of confession-like television programmes like Jerry Springer, and reality TV like Big Brother). He identifies the confessional as a method of regulating sex by creating both the imperative to speak of one’s sexual sins and a space for absolution of one’s associated guilt and shame. A surface reading of this displays the possibility for the emergence of a sense of guilt and shame around one’s sexuality simply by virtue of its association to sex, deviance, difference and bodies - and certain bodies - that is, the repressive and silent enforcement and policing of compulsory heterosexuality. An additional stretching of the link between sexuality and sin sees guilt and shame emerging from sex and sin, and as a result the act of confession (that Foucault clearly associates with sex) as freedom from guilt, sin and then sex. It is here that I draw a link between the work of Foucault on sex and my own work on sexuality. This link between sex-sin-guilt-shame helps to explain the emergence of recurrent themes in the data around shame and guilt (being ‘wrong’ or ‘different’), and the desire to confess one’s private and ‘dirty’ sexual secrets or sins. In the context of the present work I consider the interviews to be confessional in nature with respect to what Foucault (1978: 20) describes as, “the nearly infinite task of telling” secrets to another who can bear witness.
Michael Peters (2000) provides a useful explanation of the components and purposes of this ‘task of telling’ when he describes confession in terms of acknowledging, disclosure, guilt, identification, and importantly, language.

The Latin word confessio means something like ‘acknowledging’. Confession is both a declaration and disclosure, an acknowledgment or admission of a crime, fault or weakness. The acknowledgment is, in part, an act to make oneself known, to disclose one’s identity which focuses on the form of a discourse of private feelings or opinions. In its religious form, confession involves the acknowledgment of one’s sins orally as a duty, with repentance and desire of absolution. In the literary sense, ‘confession is the deliberate, self-conscious attempt of an individual to identify himself, to explain his nature to the audience who represents the kind of community he needs to exist in and confirm him’ (Doody, 1980: 185). As such it is both a communicative and an expressive act. Confession is a narrative in which we create ourselves; in which we create our own narrative, reworking the past, but we must do it in public. It seems that when the subject is creating itself through writing, culturally it feels compelled to tell the truth about itself. (Peters, 2000: 359)

Hence confessing is tightly aligned to subjectivity and subjectification. Commenting similarly, Nicholas Rose (1990: 240) posits “the truthful rendering into speech of who one is, to one’s parents, one’s teachers, one’s doctor, one’s lover, and oneself, is installed at the heart of contemporary procedures of individualization”. He continues,

in confessing, one is subjectified by another, for one confesses in the actual or imagined presence of a figure who prescribes the form of the confession, the words and rituals through which it should be made, who appreciates, judges, consoles or understands. But in confessing, one also constitutes oneself. In the act of speaking, through the obligation to produce words that are true to an inner reality, through the self-examination that precedes and accompanies speech, one becomes a subject for oneself. Confession, then, is the diagram of a certain form of subjectification that binds us to others at the very moment we affirm our identity. (Rose, 1990: 240)

Foucault’s equation of sex-sin-guilt-confession surfaced within both the data and the interview process. This equation thematically dominated the words of each participant in terms of a sense of being or feeling ‘wrong’ or ‘different’, and as a desire to affirm coherence. I have read this as guilt or shame at being ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ and not ‘heterosexual’ (or normatively gendered) and use the following excerpt from Wrong (Scout) to illustrate this point.
Every-one … (like) ev-ery sin-gle person, “Wrong Wrong Wrong”

In my head it became like [Well what’s wrong with you] [I don’t know what’s fucking wrong] [Well why don’t you just know] (Oh my god)

Unsure of what was wrong, all Scout knew was that she was ‘wrong’ (sex-sin-guilt-shame).

The women appeared to use the interview as a space that involved a kind of transformation of the self (May & Bohman, 1997), but which also offered a way in which to show they ‘cared for’ themselves. In this sense telling was ‘confessing’ because it was a way for them to “‘escape from the restrictions of the unitary self,’ a self that is unconflicted but which, for that reason, has few resources for liberating itself from a narrow set of strong, identity-oriented evaluations” (Taylor, 1989: 462-463, quoted in May & Bohman, 1997: 150), and discourses. The telling became not always and simply a telling to a forgiving other, but also a telling of and to “oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex” (Foucault, 1978: 20). In this way ones every desire is transformed into discourse time and time again, and the “power mechanisms that functioned in such a way that discourse on sex … became essential” (Foucault, 1978: 23). Hence one confesses and thus reproduces the repressive discourses of pleasure and desire circulated for the purposes of control. This could explain the participants’ investments in the research, and may also relate to their compulsions to affirm an essential and coherent ‘lesbian’ identity. It may also help us to shift the view on Tabitha’s anger with her mother by appreciating her ongoing attachments to, and investments in, her own ‘difference’ and her need to confess it (to me and now on paper to many) as a form of affirmation (of difference and self). In Chapters Five and Six I explore this concept further.
Excerpt from *Be Different* (Tabitha)

**For a large part of my childhood (I didn't really know or understand)**

I remember significantly

my mother saying to me often

"Be different, can you just be different"

"Oh why can't you just put some make up on, put a nice dress on"

"Just be different"

What she's asking me to be different to who I am.

The way I interpret that is I'm different from a very young age

that's what made me feel different.

The interview space itself also had elements of the confessional as described above, especially with regards to the ways in which the participants spoke about their embodied experiences which signified they were engaged in both a sense or meaning making process as well as one of secret telling, bearing witness and absolution.

It also played out in regards to the ways in which I was relatively silent during the interviews. An important aspect here is appreciating that the effect of confessing on the confessor is largely dependent upon the reactions of the witness to what has been told. The reaction of another is important because it shows how the secret has been taken up. In the religious sense confessing is *always* an absolution and hence affirmation, but in the interview setting this can vary based upon the interviewer’s responses. The reaction of the silent ‘other’ becomes important in this case not so much in terms of absolution but more so in terms of recognition and ‘validation’, and thus a therapeutic-like effect emerges. I was acutely aware I was not the one who was continually asked to re-construct ‘truths’ about experiences – I sat and listened.

---

75 I quote excerpts from these this poem throughout the thesis but have not analysed it specifically. A complete version of *Be Different* appears in Appendix D.

76 For insights into methods of distinguishing confessional and therapeutic effects I am grateful to a conversation with Dr. Jo Milne-Home (APA).
In an interesting application and critique of Foucauldian descriptions of the confessional power/knowledge structures at the heart of the deployment of sexuality, Laura Hengenhold (1994: 88) suggests that the various discourses at play around rape and the rape trial “clearly contribute to the ‘hysterization’ of women by cultivating complainants’ confessions in order to demonstrate their supposed lack of self-knowledge”, and therefore create elements of doubt around the ‘truth’. Despite situating her critique of rape using Foucault, she points out that the rape confession is nothing like the masculinised confessional described by Foucault in that “it is the female victim, not the accused rapist, who is forced to confess her sexual experience and to explore sexual motives publicly in excruciating detail” (Hengenhold, 1994: 92). Who becomes the accused and who the accuser? Where is the absolution? In the courtroom certain words and acts are counted as reasonable or truthful and others are not. This could be said to represent an imbalance of power/knowledge, and Foucault articulates the power of agency at play here when he remarks, “the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing” (Foucault, 1978: 62). Thus my silence, like those in the courtroom, or of a priest, powerfully constitutes me as one who could absolve sins, or as in the above example, accept a woman’s story as ‘fact’ – or not.

I would also like to take another tack now by asking whether or not it is possible to view the participants’ confessions as a method of escape from, rejection or even subversion of, the normalising restrictions of a heavily conflicted self? Is it possible that these women, who have felt, acted and articulated both against themselves and their ‘kind’, have gained strength and agency via their engagement with the interview process? In this case, like the confessional, all that was required of me was a simple nod, smile or comment. This is a stand and position Tabitha found very difficult to accept but nonetheless pushed through to a deeper understanding of her own subjectivities.

Tabitha: I think after our session, that’s the first time I had a profound awareness of how much I had to suppress myself over the years and since then I’ve just been like, I went through this really full on stage of just going “oh my god I am internally homophobic I actually hate who I am, you know I’m not comfortable about being a
lesbian” and I went through this really deep kind of period where I was pretty down on myself and really questioning myself for a couple of months.

In this text Tabitha’s confession of internal homophobia is not seeking absolution but rather marks a kind of understanding of the limits of her own subjectivity. With this utterance she moves onward to ‘deal’ with her conflicts of self by recognising her self hatred and working with what remains of it. This process serves as an injunction to the repressive discourses of sex and sexuality by acknowledging and accepting her shame and guilt, mourning it, and moving forward. In this sense the confession acts in therapeutic ways. In Chapter Six I describe this concept in detail with regards to loss, mourning and melancholia.

**Therapeutic effect**

Denzin (1999: 568) reminds us that “writing is not an innocent practice”, and as such, emotive conversations and interviews have the potential to create a “sense of emotional verisimilitude for reader and writer, producing experiences of catharsis, self-renewal, and self-discovery” for the speaker, the writer, and the reader. One reading of relevant research from psychology would suggest that the participants’ depth of commitment and engagement could be viewed as a process of therapy (see for example, Coyle, 1996; Hollway, 1989; Walkerdine, 1990, 1997) or to have a ‘therapeutic-like’ effect. Perhaps the participants saw this as a once in a lifetime opportunity to speak and be heard, tell secrets, but also to help others, as well as themselves. The participants wanted to talk and this was because of who they were as much as who I was, that is someone with whom they could relate, confide and share experiences; someone who posed thoughtful questions which helped them to make sense of what they felt; listened heartily; was one of ‘them’; but

---

77 I do not intend to drift off into distinctions between various forms of therapy, firstly because I am not a therapist, and secondly because it is not required here. The point I wish to make is that the interviews were affective, they elicited and produced emotional responses that appeared similar to the effects of attending therapy. In this sense, I suggest that being able to speak and expose secrets to another about what they had experienced was a form of recognition of these experiences and hence acted as a kind of ‘validation’ of their lives (and sexuality). They were provided a space in which to reflect and speak, and in the process this became the kind of “self affirming experience that any therapist would like to see” (personal correspondence, Milne-Home, 2005). Hence my use of the term ‘therapeutic-like’ in order to signal that the interviews were somewhat ‘like therapy’.
also someone who could shed some light on who and how they were; in a way to facilitate an understanding of their own sexuality. By asking for, listening to, and honouring their stories an affective bond was created.

Most researchers would acknowledge that telling a life story is not intended to be therapeutic, in fact many researchers would probably call such research biased, self-indulgent, and subjective. But it is also realistic to accept that when someone tells a story the person is involved in some sort of personal recollecting, understanding, clarifying, questioning, and sense making that may have not been possible before the interview. The open and frank dialogue, trust and excitement to emerge from the interviews in this research suggests that the opportunity to speak about oneself continuously for an extended period of time is a rare, compelling and exciting concession that has an almost cathartic and self-affirming effect. Gergen and Gergen (2000) maintain that one of the important features of the life story approach is the emergence of some kind of internal dialogue that subjects have with themselves. Atkinson (1998) further suggests it is the conversation between interviewee and interviewer which is the key to the ‘therapeutic-like’ effect of the life story interview. For Atkinson (1998: 12) “the very process of telling our story clearly, directly, and honestly can be like therapy”, importantly, and especially in the context of this research, he adds that this depends “on what our circumstances were to begin with”. Thus my sense of a ‘therapeutic-like’ affect, and their expressions of it, was based upon our starting relationship, and the contextual setting created.

I have little doubt that the participants in this research thought the interview process was ‘therapeutic-like’. The following participant quotes indicate how I have read a ‘therapeutic-like’ effect in this research. The issue of their feelings about the interviews was dealt with specifically in interview number five and the quotes below typify the overall responses to the question: ‘I’d just like to get a response from each one of you about what you thought about [the interview] process and your involvement in it?’

Tabitha: I found the process a very open process and very therapeutic and an opportunity to explore your own life; probably one I don’t allow enough time for
outside of this. So it was a good opportunity to just really delve into that particular aspect of your life again.

Nell: Yeah, I definitely think this whole involvement for me has definitely made me feel positive about myself and how far I’ve come and where I am today like I feel it is like it has reaffirmed who I am and now I feel proud of who I’ve become despite some hard times, you have worked through them because you have lived them again.

Maree: I didn’t find it so much therapeutic even though it was … but what I found really good was that it was making me think of where I’d come from and what might have created my sexuality or maybe enabled me to be sort of comfortable with it or just the whole, since coming out and where I’ve lived and who I’ve hung out with, like looking back and thinking why those sort of things happened and where I’m at today also.

The interviews allowed the participants to openly and honestly explore and understand their own experiences, struggles, issues, dilemmas, patterns, ideas, feelings, responses, actions, thoughts, problems, and ‘truths’ from the past. I also listened to and honoured their stories. Through a process of storying and re-storying in a safe space, and in front of another, they could bring their stories into the present for critical self reflection and analysis. In this way the past shed meaning on the present and future, and the stories were re-configured, thus creating the possibility for the development of new, imaginative, liberating and/or subversive narratives and discourses. Something seemed to happen to each participant. Even the reserved Jacqui thought the interviews had changed the ways others saw her as well as how she acted socially.

Jacqui: Even people have said to me like on Sunday, you seem a bit more, you are different, you are more relaxed or whatever and I am, I don’t know what it is … I think I’m more at ease with myself and maybe that is just a part of growing up as well but I think the actual interviews, it brings things, it makes you think about things that you might just brush aside or forget about, you know, like your childhood, like I guess your questions and asking what specific things about being gay do you remember … I’m a bit more okay at being me, like I’d say to you I “don’t have anything to offer”, but now I’m a bit more relaxed at saying this is me and if it is not good enough then so be it, know what I mean, this is who I am.

In terms of analysis, Atkinson (1998: 13) says it is important for the researcher to “examine the text for possible insights and new understanding”. Some of these insights could also be
considered ‘therapy-like’. For example on the occasion when Tabitha disclosed she felt she was internally homophobic, and was mortified. Yet in the comment following she seemed to come to some new understanding of herself.

Tabitha: I just reached a level of comfort with it where I understand how powerful it is for me to actually understand that side of me now. Then I started to look at my mother and understand that as well. That’s what I tend to do, I tend to kind of just really push it in my own behaviour initially, verbalise it with friends over a beer or test the waters around myself and sort of chat about it with my good mates and say “I realised this about myself, what do you think, etc. etc” and you know just try it on out there in the world and just think that’s my way of dealing with things. And I think that’s kind of what I did and now I just have a level of comfort to go “yeah this is a big part of me” and “yeah I’m a lesbian”.

Finding these new insights or understandings allows serious consideration of the degree to which recalling early life events, reflecting on them, and then re-telling them may help to “clarify those issues or added a greater sense of integrity to the teller’s life” (Atkinson, 1998: 13). Tabitha made sense of her personal revelation (confession), and upon deeper reflection went on to suggest that her own understanding of herself (therapeutic-like effect) will help her to understand others, and to empathise with them by deferring judgement on them.

Tabitha: “I’m not gonna judge you for it, it’s absolutely okay”, so then I’m able to help other people with the awareness that I now have of it and to share that kind of insight.

**Writing complexities: not just an issue of representational style**

The mixing of different modes of writing; the mutual challenge of theoretical and poetical, discursive and “non-discursive” languages; the strategic use of stereotyped expressions in exposing stereotypical thinking; all these attempts at introducing a break into the fixed norms of the Master’s confident prevailing discourses are easily misread, dismissed or obscured in the name of “good writing,” of “theory,” or of “scholarly work.” (Trinh, 1992: 138)

The quote above resonates with me because it opens a space in which to speak about my friends’ constant emotional, psychic and embodied struggles as women and as lesbians, and...
about my own tensions as an academic. It also offers a warning to be acutely aware of the power of words to re-inscribe oppressive discourses. In my writing I have taken on a degree of social responsibility to expose what I consider to be oppressive discourses and practices and in so doing merge life, research, theory, and writing with subjectivities, passions and complexities. This is unsafe terrain, but Trinh (1992) reminds me there is no safe place from which to simultaneously explore complex subjectivities and problematise the subject, and then to write about this. The work of Trinh displays how contemporary ways of theorising about subjectivities, power and language can be carried out through poetical language, photography and film “ as long as poetical language is not equated with a mere aestheticizing tool nor practiced as a place to consolidate a ‘subjective’ self” (Trinh, 1992: 121-122). It is with this caveat that I begin an explanation of poetic forms of representation.

‘Touching us where we live’

In the spirit of affectionate irreverence toward qualitative research, I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. (Richardson, 2000a: 923)

The work of Laurel Richardson changed the path of this research and instilled me with poetic passion. I was buoyed by her confidence in words to create ways of telling, listening and knowing that can be considered valid and reliable in research terms but more importantly engage readers and writers in embodied and visceral ways. Richardson gave me licence to explore the ways in which I am both researcher and human, and how I entered into the lives of the participants and gave meanings to their experiences alongside, with and through consideration of my own. I was drawn to the open, rebellious and seditious nature of her work, it provided me with a ‘queer’ context in which to write and be written into my work. Queer theory called upon me to continually question my methods and roles and to not be confined by traditional ways of researching or thinking, in a way to use my imagination. Richardson (2000a: 924) permits and promotes a ‘queer(ed)’ style of writing, but like Trinh, warns, “writing as method does not take writing for granted, but offers multiple ways to learn to do it”. For Richardson (2000a: 923) writing is “ a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis”. So to write differently evoked difference
and this stimulated different kinds of knowing, thinking, reading, understanding, and meaning, as well as different analysis, interpretation and representation. For example an attempt at writing differently raised some alternative questions regarding gender, sexuality, identity or the body. An example appears below where both Scout and Tabitha reclaim a ‘boy’ gender. Here I show my use of poetic styles and methods of transcription to tease out and trim down our discussion but to also highlight the more subtle conversations they were having with themselves. Thus by striping the sentences bare a conversation emerges about the performative nature of gender. In this sense, following Corinne Glesne (1997) poetic representation offers a possible ‘third’ or even fourth voice that is neither researcher nor participant, but is rather “some combination of the two that mirrors the ‘true’ conversation” (Faulkner, 2005b: 8).

Excerpt from *Fly Boy* (Scout)

```
All the girls (and there were heaps of girls)
I was always friends with lots of girls (I never had a lot of male friends)
    I never wore dresses
    I was just accepted (Yeah)

I was like their little boy.
They would treat me as if I was their little boy.
```

Excerpt from *Huck Finn* (Tabitha)

```
People just laugh.
I wanted to dress like a boy.
That’s how I feel most comfortable,
    most natural,
    most self-expressed.

I was just being me.
(wearing boy’s clothes and feeling good about it)
```

Poetry has always touched me where I live – my body (Richardson, 1992a). It has resonated, given meaning, and re-created lived experiences in and on my body. Thus for me (and others) poetry is an embodied activity that “touches both the cognitive and the sensory in the speaker and the listener”, and invites us to “vicariously experience the self-reflexive
and transformational process of self-creation” (Richardson, 1992a: 26). Like many before me I have been inspired by Richardson’s creative representation of interview data through her now famous poem, *Louisa May’s story of her life* (Richardson, 1992a). In many ways I feel an affinity with Richardson. Like her I have interviewed, read and theorised, and now sit down to make sense of what I have experienced and what it is that I am struggling to know. I have been dissatisfied with the ability of positivist representational styles of prose in academic writing to: convey the subtleties of language provided through speech; present aesthetic and affective readings of words and experience; represent the ambiguities of human experience, ‘truth’ and ‘reality’; expose the inconsistent fractures of subjectivity; and to take on theory as a mode of constructing and representing research data.

As a result of these frustrations a number of qualitative researchers are choosing to represent their research findings as narrative poems or stories. These poetic representations may be works of fiction, non-fiction or blended fiction/non-fiction. None claim to tell a ‘true’ or ‘real’ story, but all issue a challenge to traditional academic writing by writing reflexively from within, with emotion and in unashamedly embodied ways. Richardson and others78 offer poetry as an alternative and additional form of data analysis and writing, a choice available amongst many which will not be suitable to all forms of data or for all researchers. I used poetic representation as more than an act of defiance. It also offered an evocative and emotional mode of social experimentation, and an intimate conversation with the complexities of relationships, language, ways of knowing, ways of being, meaning and embodied subjectivities. It provided a process for developing deeper understandings and connections with the participants and their words; as such it has the potential to mobilise social action (Ellis & Bochner, 1996), and to be deployed as a form of political action. As a method of analytical inquiry it offered a great deal to the data collected in this research. In the following paragraphs I outline a rationale for choosing this genre and the benefits it brought to this research, the researcher and the reader.

---

DEALING WITH THE COMPLEXITIES

I wished to retell a series of emotive ‘lived experiences’ (and the complications associated with suggesting this) that signalled some kind of sense and meaning making process that was accessible and available to a variety of readers, and elicited responses in those readers. I collected research data which appeared, as for Austin (1996) and Gilgun (2004), to be so compelling that standard representational formats did not seem to fit or offer an opportunity to share the sensual nature of the data collected. Piirto (2002: 441) describes poetry as a natural, dynamic ancient art form that came before writing, and which possesses powers to transform others because the poem is able to,

convey a sense of empathy for the lives of the people being spoken about; it also humanizes both the subject of the poem and the speaker of the poem … provides a sense of particularity, a sense that what is being represented is real … has ‘productive ambiguity’ … more of a chance for multiple perspectives. Perhaps the poem provides the reader with new ways of seeing.

The participants in this research told some amazing and heartfelt stories that lyrically provided some sense of what it was like to be that person, and to be ambiguously human. I turned to poetry because I desired to be able to re-enliven these stories and show “another person how it is to feel something” (Richardson, 1994: 9), either foreign or familiar. Poetry also helped me to express the ‘feel’ of the interview experience, including its interactional nature, tensions and linguistic qualities. I looked for phrases, words or concepts that ‘captured’ (as closely as I could) the participants’ perspective or personality. The following excerpt from Wrong (Scout) displays the ‘productive ambiguity’ of poetry as well as providing an insight into Scout’s painful sense of her self and her sexuality.

I felt wrong
I felt wrong
I felt like I was trapped.

I can see what it is that I was feeling -
    It’s all about drowning,
    The subtle pain;
    Scratching and drowning.

(as I said)
(you know)
(you know)
Crying and confusion.
And just being wrong.

It’s all about desire,
This gut ache all the time;
Hurt and desire.
Sick and fear
And a lot of wrong.

It’s all of those things, all of them together, all the time.
I just wanted to scream out.  
(and what else)

Like Richardson and Trinh, Piirto (2002) is also necessarily wary of flippant and thoughtless use of poetry because there is still a great deal of tension around all alternative forms of representation, and writing poetry does not make one a poet. Reed-Danahay (2002) remarks that the line between effective writing and narcissism remains very thin, but suggests that perhaps all reflexive writing is a form of narcissism. Whilst poet-researchers such as Piirto (2002) suggest the usefulness of poetic representation is debated and controversial, the crux of the issue appears to be about expanding the choice of narrative strategies and resources available for analysis and representation, not about whether poetry is a valuable form of research or academic endeavour. It’s important to also note that often the aim of poetic transcription or re-presentation of data is not necessarily always to ‘make’ poetry (Glesne, 1997).

**Poetic representation**

Poetic representation provided a way in which to expose the prose trope in the construction of certain types of Western historically situated knowledge and to both highlight and contest the constructedness of all writing (Austin, 1996; Richardson, 1990, 1992a, 1996a, 2000a; Sparkes et al., 2003), and the position of the author (Trinh, 1989, 1992). All writing is artfully constructed and I use poetry in this thesis as both a form of representation, and resistance. I was as much a part of the participants’ experiences as they were because I had shared many of them, and so could relate to them intimately. In relations to this poetry provided emotional authenticity *because* I was a part of the joy and confusions of the
experiences, and the re-tellings. On a reflexive personal and academic level this process: offered a way in which to include my self and my experiences in the research; made my vulnerabilities as a researcher and writer surface; gave me licence to explore my researcher and writer self; and, provided an opportunity to make this work understandable and accessible, emotional, open, honest, caring, close, and sensitive.

More specifically related to conducting research, working poetically helped me to sort out how I was feeling about the interview data, it therefore made me more responsive and reflexive towards the data. Reading data in different ways allows researchers to see and feel the world in different ways, from a different angle or dimension, and to come to ‘know’ the data in different, more complex ways (Faulkner, 2005b; Glesne, 1997; Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 1990, 2000a). This forced me to think critically about the role of theory and personal ideologies in research and social interaction, whilst allowing me to keep my humanist self quietly in check alongside my analytical and theoretical self. As a form of analysis poetic representation required me to reflect deeply on the data, the experiences, the language and discourses drawn upon, the usefulness and stability of the interview process, the use of theory, and styles of representation. And this reflection opened up new analytical and representational directions. It offered a means to convey my concerns with ‘truth’, meaning making, research, theory, representation and subjectivity by providing tentative and partial realities that could be read and re-read over time, and re-contextualised and carried over, forward and through other spaces simply because poetry is ambiguous, timeless and transferable (Sparkes et al., 2003). Poetry allowed for different interpretations and styles of representation, it kept alive my desire to not foreclose on the data. Sparkes et al. (2003: 170) remind us that realist tales tend to draw the reader to the same conclusions as the author, whereas poetic representations invite “readers to make their own conclusions and are not filtered towards a researcher-dominated ending”. This process is supportive of my deployments of queer theory and ‘queering’ in this research because the poems are deliberately designed to “stimulate and encourage multiple interpretations by evoking a range of responses in readers who may be differently positioned towards the text” (Sparkes et al., 2003: 170), and in this way open up the research process to contestation and questioning. For example, in one interview Maree was unsure about the differences
between her core self and her sexuality, work self, daughter self and the like. The text below is a skeleton of her confused words edited and set out in a way which plays with this confusion by keeping her contradictions obvious and with no resolution necessary because as writer and reader we know these issues are confusing, and not neat and tidy.

Excerpt from *Who Am I* (Maree)

I’m just as proud to be a dyke.
A lot of the time I just think I’m me and that’s who I am. It’s hard for me to explain what that is, where I see it going, how I feel about it
At the end of the day that’s just me, like I know the core of me who I am it’s just me. I’m just me.
I think I was born gay. A lot of it is environmental and opportunity so I don’t think you can say you are born gay and that’s it.
I’ve gained the ability to be happy and just to be myself not feel like something is missing and not knowing what it was.

Poetry also indulged my interests in aspects of ethnography and phenomenology that emphasise describing vivid and emotive lived life-world experiences and glimpsing the essence of these experiences. It also provided a method through which to re-create and re-live the lived moment or epiphany. Humans experience the world and speak about it in relation to their bodies, in this sense we could be said to experience the world in embodied ways (Richardson, 1992a; Sparkes et al., 2003; Sparkes, 2002a). Poetry provided me with an embodied means by which to express this and share the participants’, my own, and the readers’ embodied subjectivities (including our feelings, emotions, vulnerabilities, concerns, and senses). Various portraits emerged of the participants which displayed their complexities, subjectivities, vulnerabilities, passions, and contradictions. This offered a highly personal glimpse, and a different method of framing the participants’ experiences, feelings and emotions. It provided a way for an often silenced and marginalised ‘voice’ to
be heard, and in that act opened a space in which to challenge oppressive discourses and present a different angle, and type of knowledge regarding what it is like to ‘be’ different (lesbian). This opening up and personal glimpse into ‘being a lesbian’ is exemplified in the interview series by each participant’s choice to speak about her first encounter\textsuperscript{79} with another woman in intensely emotional ways. Nell’s section of the group poem, \textit{First Touch} displays this sensual moment.

\texttt{I can remember everything:}
\texttt{beds being made up}
\texttt{people crashing}
\texttt{a bed made up for me and her}
\texttt{I remember lying down. I didn’t know this woman (laughs)}
\texttt{I remember lying on my back.}
\texttt{Leaning on her side with her elbows, one of her hands came and}
\texttt{touched me on the stomach.}
\texttt{Just a little bit.}

\texttt{My whole stomach back flipped, curdling}
\texttt{tumbling like a dryer, going round and round.}
\texttt{I was frozen loving it.}
\texttt{My whole body was just spinning}
\texttt{ spinning}
\texttt{and}
\texttt{spinning.}

\texttt{We kissed}
\texttt{It was the first time I’d ever kissed a woman,}
\texttt{so soft and tender and warm.}
\texttt{I’ll never ever forget that first kiss and that first touch (laughs)}

\textsuperscript{79} It is not my intention to valorise lesbian desire over any other kind of desire (that is most people would probably speak about their first sexual encounter in embodied and emotive ways). My intention with this excerpt is to illustrate how poetry can further eroticise an already sensual event and create a picture of the moment in which it occurred and the moment it was re-told (in the interview) in the readers eyes, thus taking them back to their own special first erotic, sensual or sexual encounters. It is also significant to note that this original moment took place in my own house, and I have been able to further sensualise the event because I was present - on both occasions - plus have also experienced this moment for myself. In this sense poetry has stripped back an everyday moment to its emotional and charged core, our own bodies.
Poetry requires the reader/listener to engage in a conversation on cognitive and emotional levels and to respond in an ongoing process of self-reflexivity, as they are drawn into the processes of understanding, analysis and interpretation (Sparkes et al., 2003). In this thesis the reader/listener is invited to co-construct the story, to feel and empathise, and to make their own sense of the experiences, people and processes, nothing is simply ‘given’. In this way the reader/listener is invited to rupture relationships, challenge discourses, methods and processes (Sparkes et al., 2003; Swan, 1999). We had common stories … perhaps the reader/listener does as well. Like Sparkes and his colleagues I wondered where a reader or listener could fit into this document, and how this person would bring their own experiences, ideologies and meanings to the data. I feel poetic representation has provided a means of involving (engage, inspire, move, entertain, stimulate) the always implicated and present reader/listener in research and writing in a way I could never quite do in traditional academic writing.

That said, in generating the poems for this thesis it was not my intention to put myself forward as a ‘poet’. My choices were far more pragmatic than that and whilst my work may move towards poetry I do not consider it to be poetry, because after all the poems are merely the participants’ words somewhat ‘moulded’ or perhaps simply ‘fashioned’ on a literary notion of poetry. I argue that the subtle distinction between poetry and poetic forms of representation, and between research poetry and literary poetry permits some liberties in this respect. As such I do not feel so tightly bound by the usual rules and regulations that define one as a poet or one’s work as poetry. I have not been concerned about whether the poems were ‘good’ or ‘bad’ rather that they were effective in there personal aesthetic. Upon reflection re-producing the transcripts as poetry presented few complications mainly because I wanted to do it and it was how the data appeared to me. Thus reaching some ‘standard’ or worrying about whether I was doing the poems ‘correctly’ – or well – wa notr worrying for me. I did not initially concern myself with issues of ‘quality’ or evaluative criteria, and instead (perhaps naively) simply set out to share what I saw as already present in the data. For this reason I wish to keep a necessary tension on the concept of what makes for ‘quality’ research poetry in order to not constrain either the concept or the ‘poems’ to come.
However, what has to be remembered is that as a research method the process of writing or using poetic forms of representation necessarily raises questions about ‘quality’ and criteria for judging the work. For example does one have to produce ‘good’ poetry in order to achieve one’s research aims and purposes or would ‘bad’ poetry suffice? Related to this is the need to reflect upon the problems associated with judging poetic forms of representation, for example what is an appropriate criteria by which to judge research poetry? These questions are especially important to think about given my arguments against the suitability of traditional methods and criteria often used in qualitative research in the context of this research.

*A question of ‘quality’*

On the issue of ‘quality’ I have found the work of Jane Piirto\(^8\) (2002) to be quite instructive. Piirto (2002) begins her argument by suggesting that individuals within academic fields (for example education) and domains (for example educational research) should strive to push the boundaries of the domain in order to transform the field. She makes an important distinction between poetry for qualitative research and poetry for literary writing. She then goes on to carefully consider the ‘arts-based’ tensions at the heart of producing poems if one has not studied poetry, or as in my case, is not a ‘poet’. In short she explores issues of writer ‘qualifications’ and writing ‘quality’ concluding that attempting to synthesise one’s work across domains is “an exciting possibility” (Piirto, 2002: 444). The gist of her argument is that perhaps the criteria for one need not necessarily be the same as for the other.

In her paper Piirto (2002) critiques three of her own poems in order to identify some of the pragmatic and aesthetic possibilities, qualities and criteria that excite her about poetic forms of representation. She seems harder on herself than others, believing none to be ‘good’

---

\(^8\) Interestingly Piirto (2002) has two criteria for ‘permitting’ education students to undertake arts-based research (such as poetry). Firstly students might have an undergraduate minor in the domain. Secondly they may have had peer-reviews, conducted shows or exhibits, or created products despite no formal study in the domain. I have neither of these so discuss these issues from an ‘unqualified’ position.
poems, describing each in turn as ‘inferior’, ‘not quite good enough’ and ‘hubristic’. Cleverly though, during her critique she lists numerous practical and aesthetic elements of her work as research (set against literary poetic quality), thus generating a suitable starting list for judging the ‘quality’ of poetic forms of representation in qualitative research.

Faulkner (2005b: 5) adopts a similar argument when she offers “one story in an attempt to improve and expand the impact of poetic representation” and from a diverse array of poet researchers generates a list of scientific, artistic and poetic criteria with which to ‘judge’ poetic forms of representation in research. Faulkner (2005b) offers the following table, I suggest as a useful starting method for judging the poems in this thesis and elsewhere.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific</th>
<th>Artistic</th>
<th>Poetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depth</td>
<td>Compression of data</td>
<td>Artistic concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Understanding of craft</td>
<td>Embodied experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>Discovery/surprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of human</td>
<td>Moral truth</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>Emotional verisimilitude</td>
<td>Narrative truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td>Evocation</td>
<td>Transformative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Sublime</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulation of craft/method</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Poetic Criteria (Faulkner, 2005b: 24)

When considering the kinds of criteria best suited for judging poetic representations I found it very important to firstly reflect upon the reasons that I chose this method and also upon the research purposes, aims and desired outcomes. In this sense it was my aims (and inclinations) that in some way provided a loose set of starting criteria that evolved from a very specific set of procedural instructions for making the poems (see *The ‘production’ process* below). I surmised that if I followed the advice of others in forming the poems and also used my own intuition that the ‘quality’ of the poems would be suitable for my research purposes and thus would provide an opportunity for quality theorising. Thus my

---

81 I wonder if at this point it is useful for me to confess that I believe my poems to be ‘good enough’ or at least effective?
choices were purposively informed and strategically based upon the feel of the data, the interview experiences, my comforts and challenges, theory, the outcomes I wished to achieve, the research questions, and the specific guiding experiences of ‘researcher poets’.

The ‘production’ process

Poems were created from the interview transcripts as a part of the data analysis procedure (Ely et al., 1997; Faulkner, 2005a, 2005b; Freeman, 2001; Glesne, 1997; Hill, 2005; Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 1992a, 1992b, 1997a, 1997b, 2000a; Santoro et al., 2001; Sparkes, 2002b; Swan, 1999). Developing the poems was an iterative process (Poindexter, 2002) requiring extensive reading and re-reading of interview transcripts (Faulkner, 2005b; Glesne, 1997; Hill, 2005; Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 1992a) and posing of a series of questions about the data with regards to the dominant story being told, recurring themes, and the internal poetics of the data (Faulkner, 2005b; Santoro et al., 2001). Coding and sorting occurred in the same way as other qualitative data for the identification of emergent themes from the interview transcripts (Faulkner, 2005b; Glesne, 1997; Hill, 2005; Poindexter, 2002; Santoro et al., 2001) (see Chapter Three).

The development of themes was based upon my desire to create and share various portraits of the participants and connect and familiarise the reader with them (Glesne, 1997; Hill, 2005). The themes also: addressed the research questions; related to the overall themes and discourses emerging in the data; were stimulated by a specific emotional response from the participant or myself with regards to their words (Piirto, 2002; Travisano, 1998); had aesthetic appeal (Poindexter, 2002); and explored data in a different way in order to catch the nuances and poetics of language (Glesne, 1997).

Two types of poems were generated from the data. Firstly, I created poems using a single participant’s words under a particular theme (for example Wrong). Secondly, I thematically grouped quotes from more than one participant under one theme (for example Who Am I?). This was done by organising the data as follows.
• Each participant’s individual interview\textsuperscript{82} data was analysed thematically (that is each interview for each participant was coded). Each participant’s coded interview data were cut and pasted into one document under the same themes (Document 1). This involved copying phrases, sentences, comments and paragraphs that seemed to highlight certain perspectives, themes, emotions, experiences or personalities.

• A single participant’s thematically organised data (Document 1) was then developed into poems OR each participant’s Document 1 was merged to generate a collection of whole group thematically organised data (Document 2). The decisions about what to cut and arrange thematically was based mainly upon frequency of recurring themes, for example the poem \textit{Who Am I} represents each participants’ comments about essential identities, whereas \textit{Wrong} represents one participant’s recollection of ‘coming out’.

• The interview questions were removed (Glesne, 1997; Hill, 2005: Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 1992a; Santoro et al., 2001; Swan, 1999) so as not to distract, direct or lead the text that remained. In this way the poems were “no longer interviews” (Santoro et al., 2001: 196).

I then sat with Documents 1 and 2 reflecting upon the ‘essence’ and feel of the words (Ely et al., 1997; Glesne, 1997) remembering my own responses and feelings about the data and the interviews as well as trying to hear and see the participants speak their words and interact in the interview. Like Poindexter (2002: 708) I searched for “unambiguous phrases, strong statements, eloquent expressions, wording that appealed to me, and portions of narrative that I felt strongly captured the person I had met and interviewed”. This method relied heavily upon personal gut feelings and literary hunches based upon emotional and aesthetic criteria (Glesne, 1997; Hill, 2005; Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 1992a, 1993; Sparkes, 1995, 2002b; Swan, 1999). Poindexter (2002) maintains that her poems express

\textsuperscript{82} I used transcript data from interview one, two, three and four because this material focussed on the individual critical moments and was organised around the key questions of the research particularly related to emotive and lived experiences of sexual identity and subjectivity. Data from interview five was not analysed poetically because this interview predominantly focussed on the motivations for, and outcomes of, involvement in the research.
her own emotional connection with the material and the people and developing poems in
this way resulted in a deeper empathy and resonance with her participants’ experiences.

Document 1 and 2 were developed into poems by arranging the participants’ phrases into
stanzas that seemed to best represent the themes and the narrative flow and ‘meanings’
associated with the conversation (Glesne, 1997; Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 1992a;
Santoro et al., 2001). This resulted in a poem of their actual words because “the poems
seemed to be embedded in the stories” (Poindexter, 2002: 708). Larger paragraphs were
edited down into smoother, sharper, briefer and more meaningful lines or comments by
removing conjunctions, some repetitions, and thematically irrelevant phrases or sentences.
Portions of interview data were repeatedly re-transcribed, utterances were divided into idea
units, lines, and stanzas with careful attention given to the participants’ sequence, pace,
tone, and phrasing (Poindexter, 2002). This was all part of a filtering process aimed at word
reduction (Glesne, 1997), and economy of words (Piirto, 2002; Poindexter, 2002) but also
involved developing or highlighting the already present poetic form of the data such as
intonation, syntax, repetitions, cadence, speed, alliteration, assonance, pauses, rhymes, off
rhymes, diction, tone and meter (Faulkner, 2005b; Piirto, 2002; Richardson, 1992a; Santoro
et al., 2001; Sparkes, 2002b; Sparkes et al., 2003). This resulted in short and powerfully
emotive statements that were permitted to stand alone as a form of valid analytical
interpretation and writing (Sparkes et al., 2003). The resulting poems became a
representational form of the participants’ experiences presented “in a coherent, abridged
form, acknowledging their expressions and words … render[ing] stories into a core
narrative, spotlighting ambiguity and highlighting the simplicity and power of the
respondents’ worlds and words” (Poindexter, 2002: 709), and importantly also my own
words (Richardson, 1992a, 1993).

The poems are each participant’s exact words and in the main they appear in the
chronological order in which they were spoken. On no occasion did I change tense or
grammar or put words ‘in their mouths’ (Glesne, 1997; Poindexter, 2002; Richardson,
1992a; Santoro et al., 2001; Sparkes et al., 2003), as I wanted the complications of language
and their constructions of themselves, and meanings through language to remain on the surface of the work.

I played minimally with individual poems by moving lines around which tended to go well together or create a logical sequence (Poindexter, 2002). For example when a participant spoke about a topic, then went on to another, then back to the original topic, I cut together related material, and then edited. Cross interview themes were also merged into single thematic documents. I sought to retain and highlight both the emotional and linguistic aspects of their dialogues and to accurately represent the words of participants by including: the side comments to myself and themselves; tears, anger, frustration, laughs; moments of lack of understanding, confusion, or playfulness; and, volume, changes in pitch or the way in which words were said. Like others before me, I have done this through the use of various literary devices such as italics, bold type, changes in font, indenting, line breaks, pauses, bracketing, spaces between lines and stanzas, repeated words, and directly quoted words or sentences.

The format and shape of the poems in this thesis is not arbitrary, it is based upon what the participants said and how they said it, and the ways in which their original words took poetic form. The ways in which we speak is already poetic (Glesne, 1997; Poindexter, 2002; Richardson, 1992a, 1993, 1997b; Sparkes, 1995, 2002b; Tedlock, 1983) so the point at which to italicise, drop a line, space out words or start and finish a phrase was intuitively felt through the data, and having been present and interacting at the interview. This was also enabled by my own embodied, personal ‘feelings’ of the events they spoke about. In short I had direct empathy with them because I had felt what they had felt. The ways in which I knew these women, the things I had felt with them, and the ways in which I was invested in this research strongly influenced how the poems were formed.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined two representational complexities of relevance to this thesis. Firstly, I discussed how my close relationship with the participants played out in the interview
process as a form of confession and as therapeutic-like in nature. This examination was linked to exploring the motivations and words of the participants with a specific focus upon the often complex and ambiguous ways in which they chose to describe, explain and represent themselves during the interviews. How I dealt with the wonderfully complex ways in which the participants described their lives and experiences relates to the second representational imperative of this chapter, namely how I managed to ‘capture’ the complexities of lives and research, whilst continuing to deploy queer theory, but at the same time avoid writing in realist ways. With regards to this I explained in detail my attraction to poetic forms of representation as a way in which to display the subtleties I had picked up in page after page of interview data. By including a number of pieces of interview text ‘moulded’ to poetry I provided both an example and justification for my use of poetic forms of representation in this thesis. I also provided a detailed description of the process by which the poems were formed.
CHAPTER FIVE:
‘QUEER’ SUBJECTIVITIES AND PASSIONATE ATTACHMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In a broad sense this chapter is about identities and the myriad of ways in which we explain, construct, give meaning to, are invested in, and are attached to normative notions of identity. In a more specific sense, it is committed to exposing the difficulties, pleasures, contradiction, and ongoing ‘work’ associated with maintaining (articulating, ‘enacting’, ‘doing’) an identity. In short, the chapter is about the benefits, costs and risks associated with passionate attachments to a coherent ‘lesbian’ identity, and to the normative discourses which tend to essentialise that identity. By association it is also about the difficulties of queerly theorising consistent affirmations of essentialism and coherence – herein lies the theoretical challenge of this chapter (indeed thesis).

Over the past two years I have wondered why identity matters so much, especially when definitions and experiences of it vary so markedly. I pondered about why it is so important to dismantle identity, when to maintain and affirm one seems such a fundamentally normative thing to do. I battled to understand the different ways in which the participants did and said things, how they contradicted themselves, and the various resources they deployed in order to construct an essential notion of ‘lesbian’ identity. This chapter epitomises my constant struggles to deal with data that didn’t always do or say queer things. For example, from the data I noticed that the participants seemed to be constructing a notion that ‘lesbian’ identity was both essential (‘natural’, born, essence, ideal) and coherent (consistent, whole, logical, credible). These articulations were clearly at odds with the underlying premise of queer theory. That is, identities are not fixed, stable or coherent,
nor are they ‘natural’ or essential, but rather they are a highly contingent cultural fiction or fantasy with no authenticity (Butler, 1999a; Jagose, 1996).

I am drawn by the idea that in their attempts to affirm a particular kind of coherent ‘lesbian’ identity (whatever that may be) in order to explain ‘who they are’, the participants in this research articulate the political issues at the heart of queer theorising, namely: What is identity? What is subjectivity? Are these things ‘real’ or ‘made’? What are the problems associated with, on the one hand affirming coherence and normativity, and on the other incoherence and non-normativity? In order to theorise the themes, ideas and concepts emerging from the data I have divided the analysis into two sections.

In the first section, Affirming Coherent ‘Selves’, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which the participants attempt to affirm a particular kind of coherent ‘lesbian’ identity as ‘natural’ (later I argue in order to appear ‘normal’). I do this by asking the following questions of the data: How are the participants constructing or constituting themselves? What are they saying and doing? What kinds of things do essentialising discourses do for them? Where do these ideas come from? What normative ideas of ‘lesbian’ identities do the participants construct (or not)? In order to deal with these questions I turned to literature that spoke about a debate between essentialism and constructivism. As I was not content to frame the analysis within this debate I sought out theorists who critiqued identity categories for political purposes but at the same time didn’t seem to have too much of a problem with their strategic use – especially as desiring ‘coherence’ seems to be a profoundly ‘normative’ thing to do. The work of key feminist theorists, Diana Fuss (1989, 1991), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), and Judith Butler (1999a) provided a suitable backdrop for discussions of identity (in particular coherent and essential identities) and guide the analysis of five poems titled, Who Am I?83 I read their work as offering a position that can both re-problematise articulations of coherence at the same time as de-constructing these very articulations. This task involved viewing identity categories as always difficult but

83 One for each participant. These poems have come from each woman’s story of either her ‘coming out’, ‘first lesbian love’ or sense of being not heterosexual. The main theme running through the poems is the notion this is ‘who I am’ and how I was naturally meant to be (that is, as Scout explains, ‘I was born to be gay’). The title adds a twist to this by posing the question ‘who am I?’
sometimes productive in that their constitution and articulation does just that – produces something. Associated with this is the ways in which coherence is described in relation to identity and subjectivity. Also of relevance in this section is the ways in which each of the participants deployed psychological discourses (each has had therapy) to ‘know’ themselves and thus be able to construct and affirm their ‘selves’ as coherent. This is done very deliberately, strategically and emotionally not just as a way in which to make sense of their desires within limiting normative language, but also for safety, comfort, belonging, and as a matter of living and surviving in a world where incoherence is both pathologised and problematised.

In the second section, *A Matter of Survival*, I ask: Why do the participants feel the need to affirm a coherent identity? What are the risks in being other than the way they describe themselves? What stands to be ‘lost’ if coherence is not articulated, ‘enacted’ or maintained? What’s the problem with affirming coherence? What is at stake when attachments to identity are always viewed as problematic? In this section I argue that the participants are passionately attached to the notion of an essential and coherent ‘lesbian’ identity, and the idea of living a ‘normal’ life. Further, I contend that what is at stake is losing this sense of coherence, and it follows the normative aspects associated with having a coherent sense of self. In this section I use the work of Michael Warner (2003) to bring the data into sharp relief against his compelling argument for troubling all things ‘normal’. As an extension of my own interests in making bodies matter, I draw upon the more recent work of Butler (2004a, 2004b) to consider the risks involved with losing a sense of coherence, and to ruminate the idea that the only ‘normal’ thing about life is that it is precariously grievable, and that sometimes simply to breathe, live, and care is all that really matters. In this analysis I place sexual politics somewhat aside as I endeavour to problematise *The Trouble with Normal* (2003) through the ideas of Fuss, Sedgwick and Butler which encourage me to think in different ways about coherence, and to consider articulations of authenticity, ‘naturalness’, and even ‘normalcy’ simply as everyday ‘matters of survival’.
I am interested in Warner’s work because on the one hand the interview texts need troubling, and cause troubles, but on the other hand their analysis is far more complex than just saying or doing this. By juxtaposing the data against Warner’s ideas I embark upon a discussion of ‘normal’, ‘natural’, ‘authentic’ and coherent identities which insists upon posing a counter argument, ‘what’s the trouble with normal?’ as a viable mode of inquiry. In this discussion I maintain that the data consistently challenged the ideas of Warner (and other queer theorists), and that an ‘against the queer grain’ reading provided a more nuanced platform from which to appreciate and re-articulate the complexities associated with living in a normatively constructed world.

This is not an attempt to refute Warner, to the contrary I find his thesis empowering and compelling. It is precisely this compulsion and my interest in his work that encourages me to think in different ways about coherent identities and about the concept of ‘normal’. By refusing to deconstruct the troubles with the participants’ conceptions of ‘normal’ I maintain that I am keeping the data open to reworking, and the attached identities consistently in motion. In short, I challenge queer theory to make an account of the various subjectivities of the participants as a way in which to describe and explain how they live their lives. By exploring who and how they are and experience themselves these women have articulated one of the most fundamental questions that we each pose about ourselves, that is ‘who am I?’ Whilst their words and deeds may well be troublesome to some or provide no ‘answer’ to this question, they are prophetic and inspirational to others, and this view, whether normal or not is equally as important in constructing their sense of self as productive humans whose lives matter very much.

Hence my arguments in this chapter are focussed towards thinking differently about coherence by considering the ways in which the participants deploy it productively. It is not my intention to pit coherence against incoherence, identity against non-identity, nature against nurture, normal against abnormal, Butler against Warner, or to reify any of these concepts. Rather, I propose a critical stance which allows me to think about coherence as a
strategy to help us live and survive, and which enables us to be and act in the world, because over and above all else I have been dealing with people’s lives.

**AFFIRMING COHERENT ‘SELVES’**

Before proceeding with the analysis of the *Who Am I?* poems I will briefly clarify the ways in which I am deploying notions of identity and subjectivity in relation to coherency. In short what I mean by ‘coherent’ and ‘essential’ selves in the context of discussions about identity and subjectivity.

Perhaps from the outset it is important to acknowledge that we have all been brought up to think of most aspects of identity in essentialist ways (Vance, 1998), and to think like this is a profoundly normative thing to do (Butler, 1999b, 2004; Jackson, S., 1999a, 1999b). As a consequence, popularly, identity is generally explained within the frameworks of either essentialism or constructivism (Seidman, 1996a). With an essentialist lens identity is viewed as the particular ‘things’, traits, beliefs, allegiances or attributes beneath the surface of the body and deep inside us that make us ‘us’, you ‘you’ and me ‘me’, and so in some way (in the short or long term) provide a sense of a “consistent personality and mode of social being” (Hall, 2004: 3).

Alternatively, identities can be explained as historically, culturally, socially and/or discursively constructed (Epstein, 1996, 1998; McIntosh, 1996; Plummer, 1996; Weeks, 1996), “involving social meanings, norms, institutions, and conflicts” (Seidman, 2004: 250) that are not ‘natural’ or fixed, and thus emerge as “a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency” (Weeks, 1986: 26, quoted in Seidman, 2004: 250). This idea of negotiation

---

84 I am not suggesting this to be a strategy of intentionality, I’m simply reacting to the data and am interested in exploring how the strategy is deployed.

85 There are many theories situated under the rubrics of both essentialism and constructivism thus making each term somewhat open to interpretation and resistant to conclusive definition. It is not within the scope of this thesis to identify and then analyse each of these theories. That said it is useful for me to explain the broad ways in which essentialist and constructivist notions of identity are articulated by the participants and to what effect. Each of these theoretical positions and the spaces between them invite critique and deconstruction. A useful overview of the essential/constructivist debate can be found in Seidman (1996a), Epstein (1998), and Fuss (1989).
and struggle is exemplified within the *Who Am I?* poems where the participants explain how they have tenuously ‘discovered’ their sexuality and felt compelled to affirm a ‘genuine’ ‘lesbian’ identity, but are simultaneously confused about where that identity came from or what exactly that identity is or means. This suggests that identity is less a matter of ‘things’ making up our core or our essence, and more a matter of how hard we work to construct the idea of a coherent identity.

Viewed from either framework it seems having an identity is important. Discourses of psychology, popular culture, and socialisation teach us that to have a stable identity is valuable in Western society, mainly because to have an unstable one is problematised and pathologised. What is very noticeable throughout the data, and specifically in the words of Tabitha, Scout and Maree is the ways in which the women articulate and draw upon psychological or therapeutic discourses in order to construct a sense of coherence. I believe they do this for two reasons. Firstly, I suggest they draw on these discourses in order to validate and understand themselves, and who and how they are. Psychological discourses, and in particular, therapy has provided each woman with a very powerful resource for both understanding and affirming their sexual identity. It is no surprise that this identity is an essential one given the imperative of psychological discourses to affirm coherence. The desire here may well be to construct, ‘know’ and see themselves as ‘normal’. Secondly, I suggest psychological discourses provide a way for others to view and understand them. They are a resource for family and friends to use in order to make sense of the kind of life their daughter, friend or lover has lived or lives. The desire here may well be for others to construct, ‘know’ or see the participant as ‘normal’, and so at times, like them.

In contrast to the notion of identity, Butler (1999a) and Foucault (1978) prefer to examine the discourses attached to the various places (subject positions) from which we speak, act, behave and operate – our subjectivities. Both theorists suggest that there is nothing inside us that is instinctively or naturally ‘real’ or ‘authentic’, but rather it is language (and discourses) which make us *think* we need to be this or that identity, and to be it in certain ways. For example, Butler (1999a) asserts that we get our idea of an authentic sex (like female) and gender (like femininity) from language, discourse and social practices. We
don’t have some innate understanding of what it involves to be female or feminine, but we do work very hard to construct a coherent self along ‘authentic’ lines. This highlights the investments that many people have in constructing stable coherent identities, and for Butler this offers a position from which to destabilise heterosexual normativity. Butler (1995b) argues that to be a subject is not to be a being endowed with will, freedom and intentionality, or to be one who is situated within a set of social practices. Subjectivity is dependent upon the effects of our situatedness. So we should not speak about the subject or identity, rather we should speak in terms of the plurality of subject positions, each of which is a function of discourse. Thought of in this way, the subject is neither a free or active agent, nor ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’, rather the subject is crafted in different forms and given meaning over time, this includes the ‘queer’ subject and the subject of queer discourses (Foucault, 1978).

**Identities matter: Fuss, Sedgwick and Butler**

The contribution of Fuss to the identity ‘debate’ in 1989 and 1991 was significant because she built upon discussions at the time which described sex as having historical and social bases (see Seidman, 1996a, 1996b, 2004). By convincingly arguing that heterosexuality and homosexuality are unstable mutually exclusive categories that rely on each other for coherence, Fuss (1989, 1991) implores theorists to closely examine, critique and deconstruct the ways in which people, identities, and desires are divided as either heterosexuality or homosexuality (Seidman, 2004). By attempting to neatly classify individuals as one or the other, Fuss (1989, 1991) illustrates a social hierarchy based on inequality in which one identity is preferable over another. Further, even if one identity is admitted to the ‘inside’ yet another will become a constitutive ‘outside’. By taking a view that the issue is about the social order not identities per se, Fuss (1989, 1991) argues for the critical deconstruction of the systems and practices that compel us to affirm an identity as opposed to a politic of affirmation. In relation to this thesis, by acknowledging that the politics of identity are fraught with difficulty but not foreclosing on the possibility that affirmations of identity can be productive, I suggest that Fuss’s (1989, 1991) questions of epistemology (‘how do we know?’) have colourfully multiplied and mobilised the plethora
of identities now representative of ‘queer’. Simultaneously she encourages systemic
discursive deconstruction and nurtures a sense that “sexual identity may be less a function
of knowledge than performance, or, in Foucauldian terms, less a matter of final discovery
than perpetual reinvention” (Fuss, 1991: 6-7).

In The Epistemology of the Closet, Sedgwick (1990) asks us to think about why and how it
is that we have come to think of ourselves as having sexual identities (Seidman, 2004). In
this text she was particularly interested in how the act of ‘coming out of the closet’
generates specific categories of knowledge, definitions, and modes of arginalizin that
affected the entire social order. This, argues Sedgwick (1990) means exposing the ways in
which the heterosexual/homosexual binary structures core modes of thinking, culture and
identity (Seidman, 2004). I am interested in Sedgwick’s work because, like Fuss’s it takes
the heat off identities as such, by encouraging a critique of the social order (discourses,
practices and institutions). In my mind this implies not so much the subversion,
deconstruction or disavowal of identities, as the intense critique and deconstruction of the
discourses which set up the binary heterosexual/homosexual so prominently and
unproblematically.

By offering a radical critique of the politics of gendered identity Butler (1999a) is able to
suggest that identity is performative. Gender, she argues is a fiction, an artificial and
unnatural construction that gathers its status from repeated performances. The main thrust
of Butler’s analysis appears to be that gender exists at the level of discourse, and it is this
aspect of queer theory that complicates the data collected in this research. This
complication arises because to view discourse as monolithic can often presume that
experiences of social and spatial isolation, discrimination, ‘coming out’, vilification, acts of
surveillance, and other ‘queer’ issues that matter only exist at the level of discourse. Whilst
this may well be true in terms of some views of queer theorising, these things were very
tangible and ‘real’ aspects of the participants’ lives.

Butler (1993, 1999a) maintains that the way to politicise identity is to perform it in ways
that challenge expectations. Hence, for Butler (1997a), agency comes from knowing about
our own subjection and investments in it. Drawing on Butler (1995a), Stern (2000: 113) suggests that what appears, through the processes “of reiteration by which subjects are continuously constituted”, is a space “in which the constituting forces are open to being reworked”. So whilst we should not, and do not need to presuppose a prior subject, what we should do is interrogate the ways in which we are made subjects and with what consequences, and only then can we begin to re-work the script, even as we participate in it (Butler, 1995a). So Butler doesn’t seem to be entirely against identity categories, as she acknowledges that Western concepts of identity are cultural re-productions (that are performative and discursive) that can potentially be more than just categories of oppression – identity can also be a powerful tool against oppression, and power.

On this idea, Butler argues that in many ways the subject requires an identity (and an investment in that identity) forged out of “a radical and constitutive relation to alterity”. Whilst this appears limiting, for Butler (1999b: xiv) the ‘taking up’ of an identity at least offers “the point of departure for politics”. By arguing that identity is not fixed or continuous, but is rather under constant construction, Butler (1999b) speaks of a subject who is in a state of becoming, constantly outside and beyond itself, never able to “return to a former self” (p. xv), and who “is always recognizing itself through identity” (Carlson, 2001: 308). Confessing that she lives in hope that “a coalition of sexual minorities will transcend the simple categories of identity” and refuse, counter and dissipate “the violence imposed by bodily norms”, Butler (1999a: xxvi) states that whilst identity categories can become the instrument of power one seeks to oppose this is “no reason not to use, and be used, by identity”. Instead what could be seen to surface from a variety of forms of investments in identities is the continually re-written and visual story of collective struggle where the possibility “for a livable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins” is an impure form of power that produces potentially disruptive forms of agency as a result of this very possibility (Butler, 1999a: xxvi).

Following Fuss, Sedgwick and Butler it could thus be argued that deconstructing an identity or identity category is not the same as disavowing one, and likewise affirming one need not always be viewed as politically problematic. Deconstruction simply implies an
approach to identity which is askew, one that poses serious questions of the very words and discourses upon which we so meticulously build our identities in terms of normative notions of coherence. In short, identity does matter but what is at issue is the ways in which it does, and for whom.

**Natural born lesbian: constructing a coherent ‘lesbian’ identity**

The series of *Who Am I?* poems were formed from the participants’ interview texts in which I noticed a tendency for them to speak about their ‘selves’ as either essential or coherent. Three interesting concepts emerged from these poems. Firstly, the poems created a sense of a ‘lesbian’ identity that was both *essential* (having an essence or being ‘natural’ or ideal) and *coherent* (being whole, logical, consistent and credible). Their collective stories constructed a set of ideas of what and how a ‘lesbian’ is or should be and do, or what they had discovered of themselves or become. The second, and most profound aspect of this picture was the notion that one was *born* into this ‘lesbian’ identity, and came to understand, realise or discover this ‘fact’ through a series of often unpleasant events and interactions. A third interesting observation was the way in which the essential and ‘natural’ ‘lesbian’ often became a fall back position, a concept the women consistently re-turned to. I argue this return to be a process of making sense of their ‘selves’ as coherent. This process of constant return, turning back in, and associated reiteration (for example the constant repetition of ‘born’, ‘natural’ and ‘who I am’) is displayed throughout the following poems by the first indented column where I have dropped lines and aligned all of the words that they used to create an essentialised image of themselves. Thus I display how the constantly re-turning self comes to recognise itself through identity (Butler, 1999b; Carlson, 2001).

In addition to highlighting the perceived nature of a ‘lesbian’ identity, the *Who Am I?* poems also illustrate how the women in this research view identities as playful and something that can be played with. Their emotional investments in constructing, articulating, and affirming a coherent identity is an important part of this process; this also
requires constant theorising. I follow each poem with a brief analysis based on the observations described above.

Who Am I? (Tabitha)

“This is
who I am what’s wrong with it. I don’t understand.”

At the
core it’s the difference between
man and
woman, it’s a construct we’ve created.

You start at ground level, the
core which is, you’re
female there’s
sexuality there’s
gender and then there’s
identity.

I guess I would put it in three buckets, they move around.

My gut is saying maybe it is the sex as your
core sexual interactions, roles.

I don’t know I get confused at that point.

Things have affected how I am,
who I am today.

Awareness is the key, I think now that I can understand.

I feel very comfortable with
who I am. When I say that
who I am can be any number of things.

I like to play roles acting like a
boy was first
nature for me.

I wanted to dress like a
boy I felt the most comfortable, most
natural acting like a
boy.

It’s like it’s what I’ve been from the day I was
born. It’s kind of like I don’t have a choice this is just
who I am the
core of me is just this
tomboy
boyish kid who at her most selfish best is in a pair of boardies.

Self-awareness and being able to articulate
who I am where I come from, why I am
who I am to really get to the
core of
who I am with real brutal honesty has left me with a whole lot of insecurities about who I am.
“Fuck you I am who I am” is based on me living out who I am with these insecurities.

This text was generated from prompts and questions which emerged from Tabitha’s discussions of an image of herself as a child (as Huck Finn to be specific) she brought to the interview (see Chapter Six for image). There are several interesting ideas to be derived from Tabitha’s text. Firstly, I am interested in the ways in which she theorises about identity. She starts off with a vague attempt to ‘define’ identity as ‘buckets’ that move around but appears unable to satisfactorily ‘explain’ her self through this analogy. When she states ‘awareness is the key’ she draws upon psychological discourses which encourage us to ‘know’ and understand ourselves in order to be ‘comfortable’ with all of our ‘buckets’. This resonates with Foucault’s (1978) description of identity as a discourse about which we talk about ourselves. It is communicated to others by what we do and say, not as some fixed thing inside. ‘Crafting’ an identity then becomes a process of constructing a sense of oneself as coherent and ‘real’ (whether or not this is viewed as ‘true’ seems irrelevant) via practices, beliefs, and social interactions – in some ways coming to ‘know oneself’. The ways in which we ‘craft’ our ‘selves’ is based upon our investments and desires to be and be seen by others as a particular kind of person (for example as a ‘woman’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘normal’). Who Tabitha (and indeed each of the women) thinks she is then becomes ‘any number of things’, which in the main hinged around playing out her various identities using the discourses for ‘crafting’ available. Of great importance to her is playing the ‘boy’, and recognising (through understanding and awareness) the importance of re-turning to, and playing with her identities rather than always defining her self by them.

A second interesting aspect to emerge from this text is her description of this boy as ‘first nature’ to her. Her use of the words ‘nature’, ‘born’, ‘tomboy’, ‘boyish’, and ten uses of the sentence ‘who I am’, conveys not buckets or play, but rather very strongly the idea of what I interpret to be a core, authentic self. Ironically this core self is male (this may also help to
explain her previous assertion that ‘maybe it is your sex as your core’). It seems that through the use of psychological discourses which link masculinity to certain inherent attributes or traits, Tabitha is able to reinforce the notion of a ‘core’ self, and has developed a sense of her self as innately ‘male’ (or ‘masculine’). Whilst this ‘knowledge’ produces insecurities it is the awareness of this, and consequential play with it that offered her a coherent sense of self (within the context of normative society). In other words, she uses psychological discourses strategically to articulate who she is, where she comes from, and importantly ‘why I am who I am’. To be at her ‘core’ male is OK, but only if she plays with it, and can describe, explain, and make sense of it – but not be it.

The third interesting aspect of this text is the tremendous amount of emotion Tabitha expresses and displays around her identities, and making sense of herself. In short, theorising herself as coherent (‘natural’) is very important to her – she is invested in being able to ‘define’ her self normatively. When this emotion is added to her theorising using normative discourses her play becomes her insecurities. In the final lines we observe the inherent difficulties of incoherence – insecurity. Whilst awareness may well be the key for Tabitha, she continually reconciles her sense of a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ self against normative discourses which disavow and disallow that particular self. In the last lines she seems to almost plead with herself to defy normative discourses, ‘fuck you I am who I am’ is said as much to herself as to others. For Tabitha, trying to get to her ‘core’ or to create a coherent identity from the image has been, not surprisingly, elusive, and left her with insecurities (which could be read as no certainties) – this is me, and I just have to live with it.

Who Am I? (Scout)

I don’t get stressed about things that other people do
I get stressed about being just me.

Being
  gay is so me. I was
  born to be
  gay and once I decided okay … that’s it, just do it, and see.
I was just
  born to do it, know what I mean?
It seemed so natural to me. I felt so totally calm it feels like I’ve been here before, it just felt like I had.

I knew exactly how it would feel and smell.

“Oh my god, here I am” of course I struggled.

Definitely, there is a core, an essential you.

There’s a little child, You, the person that knows all that stuff from back there; then you have the person that I talked about before; then you have the adult person.

So there’s like three of me I guess.

Being an adult I feel more like I did when I was little.

That little girl got lost, squashed … there were so many more things that she still wanted to express.

It’s just occurred to me that I’ve never actually just been me with somebody, there’s only been bits of me never been all of me. I feel more whole now than I ever have.

Going to therapy started to change that.

That was one of the questions to the therapist

“Is that why I’m gay?” She said no. I said “but how do you know?”

“Because it happens to people who aren’t gay as well.”

But I think … I don’t know if it’s true,

but I think … it has something to do with me wanting to be a boy. I think that’s why I wanted to be a boy.

I was a different person, anyone with me now only knows me as me as they see me now.

I just reinvent myself each time so there’s no stuff from before, no baggage.

So in that way it’s been like I’ve just opened another door

“You know what, this is who I am”

Yeah I’ve found me that’s the thing, I feel more like me than I ever have.
Scout starts by explaining how she has struggled to ‘just be me’. She then goes on to affirm a ‘natural’ self as a way in which to make sense of her struggles. She suggests identities are stressful, they are in bits and pieces (‘three of me’), and that she felt she didn’t fit in simply because it was so difficult just ‘being’ her. In other words maintaining a non-normative identity is hard work. Like Tabitha she strongly asserted she was ‘born’ gay (‘being gay is so me. I was born to be gay’) as a way in which to explain her ‘natural’ desire for women. She explains her ‘knowing’ as ‘natural’ because of her deeply visceral responses to same sex desire; she knew how it would smell and feel before she had even experienced it. Scout’s words highlight how regulatory discourses are insufficient for explaining same-sex desire. Following a line of thinking from Elizabeth Grosz (1995) her lack of words to explain or describe her desire for another woman may also provide a powerfully subversive corporeal effect. Grosz argues it is quite reasonable to not know or understand one’s ‘lesbian’ self simply because there is insufficient language available for us to do so. She explains that it is the very inarticulatedness, indeterminancy, and non-representability of lesbian sexualities which “attests to the fundamental plasiticity of women’s desire” (Grosz, 1995: 227). She suggests there is an inherent openness and malleability of ‘lesbianism’ to many forms and types of practices and pleasures; this she explains speaks to “the more or less infinite possibilities of becoming” (Grosz, 1995: 227). Thus, as I later suggest, for some women to affirm a ‘lesbian’ identity is, from the start a subversive act because of the instability of that identity category.

Interestingly, like Tabitha, Scout explains her same sex desire in terms of gender; she had dreamed of being a boy and wanted to be a boy, and perhaps this could offer her an explanation for her sexuality. In Chapter Six she explains her childhood abuse in terms of gender (if she was a boy maybe it would not have happened). This reiterates the imperative to explain one’s non-normative self in order not to be pathologised, and displays the limitations of language to effectively do so.

By explaining, ‘I’ve never actually just been me with somebody’, but that she now feels ‘more whole than I ever have’, Scout’s words display how she draws upon psychological
discourse (therapy) in order to affirm a sense of coherence. These discourses helped her from being stressed about, and struggling to be herself, and ‘going to therapy started that’ process. For me, there is also another interesting aspect to her assertions. Scout starts out with the notion that being gay was ‘natural’, but the subtlety of this claim lies in her suggestion she was ‘born to be gay’, not necessarily born gay. In this sense Scout differentiates between being and doing. I suggest this separation, along with her overt discussion of ‘lesbian’ sexual pleasure, dreams of a boyhood, and understandings of the ways in which she necessarily re-turns to and reinvents herself (with no baggage and despite the discourses of psychology), speaks to ‘queer’ conceptions of ‘lesbian’ identities as fractured, fluid and unstable. So the desire for coherence occurs alongside an ongoing process of playing with, and making one’s self. I argue that this is ‘queer’ as it does not assume a pre-discursive self, and the self ‘made’ is never complete, and only ever becoming … something else. It exemplifies Grosz’s (1995) request to experiment with, and feel ‘lesbian’ pleasure rather than always theorising, analysing, explaining and reflecting upon it in terms of ‘lesbian’ identities. For Grosz (and Scout) this requires refusing to “link sexual pleasure with the struggle for freedom … [or] to validate sexuality in terms of a greater cause or higher purpose” or in terms of an identity category. Instead Grosz (1995: 228) favours committing to,

a desire to enjoy, to experience, to make pleasure for its own sake, for where it takes us, for how it changes and makes us, to see it as one but not the only trajectory in the lives of sexed bodies.

*Who Am I?* (Jacqui)

It feels

natural for me to look at a women and go “wow” whether I was born like this I don’t know, I don’t know why.

I think I was just born this way, it’s the way I was built,

I just feel that way about women, it’s just who I am I think.

I thought I was on my own

“We knew you were gay”

“How did you know I was
"You were a pretty girl and you didn’t go out with boys or anything."

"That doesn’t mean anything" … or well it didn’t to me. I did feel like a bit of an outcast, didn’t feel a part of it, on my own, a bit of a recluse, a bit of a loner. I struggle with my own self-confidence and belief in myself. When I did come out my mum took me to a psychiatrist.

I am gay and happy, I just struggle with me as a person.

“This is who I am you know, I’m gay.”

I’m never embarrassed to say I’m gay or anything like that, it’s just my honesty I want people to know this is who I am because I am proud of it, it’s not something that I’m ashamed of.

Jacqui’s school friends reminded her of both her sameness and difference and in so doing explained to her her desire for women as a teenager. Jacqui lacked a language to make sense of her desire, but her friends did not. Through their words she was able to better understand why she had struggled with her self confidence and beliefs in herself, and why she felt an outcast, a recluse, and a loner. She says the idea that she didn’t know what was going on serves to reinforce her belief she must have been born gay – it was the way she was ‘built’. When she realised these things she also learnt what was at stake by not adopting a heteronormative subjectivity, ‘when I did come out my mum took me to a psychiatrist’. This reinforces the costs of not taking up normative subject positions, and thus highlights the importance of ‘knowing’ one self in particular ways (for example

---

86 Foucault (1984a, 1984b) explains that one of the important technologies of the self is self-knowledge, or ‘knowing the self’. He argued that an important aspect of this has historically involved determining the ‘truth’ about the self, “because only in knowing this truth can we work on ourselves to achieve perfectibility” (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000). An important thing to remember is that we can never really ‘know’ the truth about ourselves, because this is a fictive concept tied up in regulatory discourses from which we can never escape (Butler, 1999a). It could perhaps also be argued, following Butler (1997a, 1999a) that we are somewhat ambivalent to the concept of ‘knowing’ ourselves. This ambivalence is apparent in the idea that taking care of the self requires ‘knowing’ the self and knowledge of the self, as well as,
through therapy). As a result of that experience she describes her same sex desires by asserting coherence but also as something she has come to accept and feel proud and happy about (perhaps through therapy) – ‘I am gay and happy … it’s not something that I’m ashamed of’. Jacqui uses psychological discourses to try to validate what she had ‘become’, and in order to maintain a belief and confidence in herself. Whilst happy to be gay, she also speaks of her ongoing struggle to construct a coherent notion of her self as a person, ‘I just struggle with me as a person’. This could be read as a refusal to cohere, in that she does seem to separate being a ‘person’ from being ‘gay’.

Affirming a self identity, and happiness with that, is a process of creating social, political, and personal locatedness. If an identity is socially constructed then it also goes that it is located in the social, and that one’s locatedness is contingent upon describing oneself in relation to society and to others rather than a process of discovering one’s essence. As Jacqui found, social contexts change and so too do the identities constituted within them as a way in which to describe one’s location over time and place. Thus affirming coherence, for most people, is a profoundly normative thing to do (Rust, 1993). Most people experience their sexuality as stable and essential, and as such, changes in sexual identities appear to be processes of self discovery which involve accepting one’s ‘essential’ sexuality (Rust, 1993). This helps to explain why the participants are so invested in affirming both a coherent and essential identity in order to be seen as “individuals who are creating their own identities” and charting their own ‘futures’ (Rust, 1993: 70). However, rather than being free and malleable, these ‘futures’ (and identities) are charted against heteronormative discourses which filter certain types of identities, behaviours and desires which do or don’t ‘fit’ against the norm.

This also raises interesting questions about the notion of an essentialised homonormative identity, especially when few or no homonormative identities are available to make sense of one’s self (as was the case for Jacqui). I suggest that the ways in which Jacqui separates knowledge of a number of rules or acceptable conduct or of principles that are both truths and prescriptions. To take care of the self is to equip oneself with these truths: this is where ethics is linked to the game of truth (Foucault, 1996: 435-436).
being ‘gay’ from being a ‘person’, and Scout’s use of more normative discourses to place and re-invent herself, highlight that what it means to be ‘gay’ is more than just an issue of same-sex desire. This is important because it speaks to ideas of fractured, relational and dynamic shifts in our senses of self over time and place, thus defying the necessity to categorise either ‘lesbian’ or ‘queer’.

Who Am I? (Nell)

It wasn’t questioning myself because I knew myself. What I did question at the time was how is it in a relationship with a woman?

I didn’t question my sexuality.

My family didn’t understand the context, they were still coming to terms with me being gay it was laughable, a bit of a joke.

Like I haven’t even chosen to be who I am I am it. Haven’t made a choice, that’s what I’m made of, that’s who I am.

For me I’m who I am, choosing that lifestyle is who I’m supposed to be where I feel totally me.

For me there’s no doubt about it. I was born the way that I am.

Choice is almost taken away, choice is taken away from me because I am who I am.

I had no control over my feelings for women when I was growing up, it’s just what happened, there’s nothing that could change it, there’s no reason that it made me, that I’m like I am.

So I don’t believe that for me it’s a choice. I just think I am a lesbian and that I was born like it. Why would I be feeling like that if I wasn’t?

This is just how I was. It was my make up, in my genes, how I’m made up to be.

Either you just accept that or cover it up and pretend it’s not there you have that choice.
It’s just me, it definitely was me.
My parents would say “is it because I had affairs on your mother and we divorced?”
There’s no reason.
This is me and that’s that.
I want to live this life.
I don’t want to be married to some man, ugh, have to pretend, have to live that lifestyle.
I would be totally pretending, I wouldn’t be totally happy with myself.
The choice wasn’t there for me because this is how I am.
I am myself definitely.

Nell did not question her sexuality (it was so innate) but she did question her family, and the regulatory power it represented and implemented. In her descriptions in more than one interview she pleaded through tears for them to understand and accept her. This plea displays the ways in which we are constituted within power relations, and compelled to conform to normative ideals. By saying she had no choice, or control of her same sex desire, Nell could refuse the normative constraints and explanations imposed upon her. If there was no question, no choice, and no control then her sexuality was not her ‘fault’, it was no-one’s fault, it just was, and ‘I am it’. She constantly reiterated that there was no reason, other than genetics, that she is a lesbian, stating simply that ‘this is me and that’s that’. In this statement there is no compromise, no backing down, only defiance, but this also shows her investments in her own subjection via her strong stance against a heteronormative identity. She refused to pretend to be anything other than what she ‘knew’ her self to be – a ‘lesbian’.

I draw on Warner (2003) here to explain her desire to assert ‘no choice’ as a method of making her existence and desires justifiable and therefore legitimate. I suggest that for Nell, this offers a powerful stance that disrupted normative power in that it was an occasion where an identity category was strategically deployed as a tool of resistance – resisting sexual shame. Nell makes an active identification in order to ‘craft’ her identity by
describing her sexuality as ‘no choice’. Her mother once blamed me for her daughter’s homosexuality, and yet through her determined refusal to be ‘constructed’ as not lesbian (see Coming home in Chapter Six) Nell deflected the power of her mother’s interpellation and denied her words the power to harm or shame. In some way I see her sitting powerfully somewhere in between and beyond any identity debate, denying that anyone can realistically choose their desires. She sits in a ‘queer’ comfort zone that on the one hand is dependent upon changing historical conditions that moralise all desire, but at the same time makes “room for new freedom, new experiences, new pleasures, new identities, new bodies” (Warner, 2003: 12). By arguing that “pleasures once imaginable only with disgust, if at all, become the material out of which individuals and groups elaborate themselves”, Warner (2003: 12) elucidates the importance of doing something political with sexual shame. I suggest Nell’s reiterations and ongoing stance against normative discourses is an example of resisting sexual shame. Her coherent and essential ‘lesbian’ identity has opened new possibilities to both herself and those around her because she is actively re-working both hetero- and homo- normative scripts.

In the Who Am I? poem, Nell continually states she had no choice in her desire for women – she was born ‘gay’. I wonder what would have happened if there had been a question, a choice or a degree of control? In this sense her question, ‘why would I be feeling like that if I wasn’t?’ is important because it highlights that’s she was concerned about, and knows what is at stake if she did not have a coherent position from which to speak. If she wasn’t born this way how else did she come to be like this? How could she explain it to herself and others? Using the heteronormative resources available Nell displayed that she had no other way in which to make sense of her desires. Via this brief aside question, and slight waver in her voice I saw and felt what was at stake for her if she did not take this strong stance … rejection, expulsion, and isolation. Taking up a coherent and essential identity as ‘natural’, was for Nell, like the others, a matter of survival.

Who Am I? (Maree)

Everything I am and everything about me just made me who I am.
Who I am now is different, even just the way I look, my hair, my piercings, people look at me and eighty percent probably think I am a lesbian.

I guess I do wear it on my sleeve it’s not only who I am. I don’t push it down people’s throat.

It was just a natural thing that this barrier went up.

I was butch big, had a lot of attitude, very defensive.

A lot of the time I just think I’m me and that’s who I am. It’s hard for me to explain what that is, where I see it going, how I feel about it.

At the end of the day that’s just me, like I know the core of me who I am. It’s just me. I’m just me.

I live a very gay lesbian lifestyle.

My sexuality is probably a bigger part of my life than I realise.

It is a big part of who I am. I am happy with who I am and comfortable.

I’m just as proud to be a dyke.

I think I was born gay. A lot of it is environmental and opportunity so I don’t think you can say you are born gay and that’s it.

I’ve gained the ability to be happy and just to be myself not feel like something is missing and not knowing what it was. I think … I mean … I can’t imagine if I was heterosexual.

I don’t know whether that’s right or wrong but that’s just how I feel. Just to be able to be myself and be comfortable with that.

I’m just me. How good is it to be able to just be you, you know.
There are three interesting ideas to come from Maree’s rather circular discussion of her identities. Firstly, identity is contradictory in that it is inherently difficult to define and explain and most of us are resistant to do so. Yet its definition and explanation is impossibly limited by normative discourses which expect us, indeed compel us, to make an account of ourselves. For Maree, on the one hand it makes no sense to say it is ‘natural’ but on the other it is just as hard to say it is learned or constructed. Neither option explains well enough why most people aren’t homosexual, or the reasons why some people feel strongly that they are. This discussion is far more complex than that, and I suggest that intuitively each participant knows this. There is no excuse or reason why Maree is different (not heterosexual). Her confusion, upset and resistance surfaces simply because words are not available to explain same sex desire in any way other than through limiting heteronormative discourses (Grosz, 1995). This relates to the second concept to come from this text, namely that an essential identity is a neat, comfortable and safe fall back position. It is this position (not identity) – the ‘natural born lesbian’ – that provides each of the women in this research with the possibility for happiness, safety, comfort, and pride.

For Maree being ‘lesbian’ and being like other ‘lesbians’ also involved some particular kinds of corporeal performances (wearing her sexuality on her sleeve; challenging people, being ‘agro’, defensive and butch; her hair, piercings, and big ‘dyke’ body). In this sense she used her body to define/describe her identity as coherent. This is the third concept to come from the poem. Her comfort appears to come from accepting her own body and as a consequence her sexuality. But after three pages of conversation testing her hypotheses about identity Maree reinstates her sexuality as a huge part of her sense of self which affects many aspects of her life.

Maree: Yes it’s a big thing [sexuality] because we all want to be particular people and mainly we want to be ourselves. But when you have a think about it sexuality is a part of that … just thinking about it now our sexuality must have a huge part in it, after I’ve just said it’s a minor part because I don’t know whether I’d have the piercings I have, the hairdos I have, the tattoos I have or live in the environment I live in if I wasn’t gay.
So the choices Maree has made signify she is invested in both having and continuously validating what she believes to be a normative ‘lesbian’ identity, which is, on reflection, a big part of her and who she is, and what she wants to be. So much so she believes her change of heart about the importance of her sexuality now signifies the emergence of a ‘queer’ identity.

Maree: I said it’s not that important and it’s obviously very important (laughing). Can I change my answer? I’m queerer than I thought. I’m a Virgo.

In identifying as ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ and ‘dyke’ (on Participant Information sheet) and ‘queer’ (here), Maree displayed her ambivalent and uncertain investments in identity categories as such. Caught out both building an identity and dissolving one, she took up another subject position, Virgo, which comically exposed the fictive and performative nature of gender and sexuality. This rejection and reclamation of negative labels through ‘reverse discourse’ (Foucault, 1978) is an important strategy of resistance against heteronormativity for Maree, and also Tabitha.

Butler (1991: 14) states she “would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign [lesbian] signifies”. This means that she would like the word ‘lesbian’ to remain floating undefined and undefinable. I believe I have provided compelling evidence that the participants in this research also share the same desire. Whilst they have appeared to create a distinct sense of what a ‘lesbian’ is or does the constant contradictions and confusion when read alongside the long list of possible ‘lesbian’ identities, categories or desires they themselves describe, speaks to the indeterminacy of the term ‘lesbian’. Thus, like ‘queer’, ‘lesbian’ resists containment and definition because to say one is a ‘lesbian’ does not necessarily and always assert an identity with a stable content (Butler, 1991, 1999a). Following Butler (1999a), Esterberg (1996) argues that in this sense the ways in which ‘lesbians’ assert a presence in the world, and present themselves to others is performative. Like Esterberg I argue this performative effect to signify a kind of gender and sexual playfulness that may or may not be deliberate or conscious. What is most salient here is that the constant re-turn and ‘play’ is taken very seriously by each of the participants. To me,
this displays that they care very much about their ‘selves’, others, their identities and their communities. The poems above add further weight to these ideas and continue to support my assertion that affirmations of coherence perform some kinds of particularly ‘queer’ work for the participants, even if all it does is simply provide a place from which to speak.

**Collective identities: ‘I’ at the junction of who ‘we’ are**

In his explanation of subjectivity, Mansfield (2000) posits the ‘I’ at the junction between human emotion and philosophical abstraction thereby suggesting the ‘I’ to be an effect of both lived experience and ‘discernible meaning’. In this research the participants appear to live their lives, and craft their bodies and identities with significant others from their ‘communities’ or ‘families’. In the process they develop meanings about self and ‘other’, and hence what it is and means to ‘identify’ as ‘other’ – in their case, as ‘lesbian’. In this sense stating their individual ‘I’ or ‘me’ or collective ‘us’ or ‘we’ is extremely important in affirming their sense of ‘selves’ because their ‘I’ is always normatively problematised. Mansfield (2000: 3) explains that because subjectivity can be viewed as both a general and abstract principle based upon resistance to separation into distinct selves, it encourages us to imagine,

> or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience.

Thus, for Mansfield (2000) subjectivity is very much about sociality, identification, attachment, relations, being ‘placed’, and a deep investment in this ‘placement’. This attachment is linked strongly to context, including place, but is also linked to others and their ‘places’ (subject positions), and the discourses they draw upon. It is also attached to the historical and cultural ideas, beliefs, and ideologies which circulate around us all as discourses. This may help to explain the participants’ investments in self, others, community, and place as both a form of resistance as well as subjection. Mansfield (2000: 3) further explains that the subject is never isolated or separate but instead operates at the intersection of shared truths and principles and that “one is always subject to or of”
something” (italics in original). The junction of these things also becomes a place of tension where it may be impossible, inappropriate or problematic to maintain a particular subject position because someone or something (person, practice or institution) is positioning the subject otherwise (for instance Scout’s and Nell’s parents as shown later in the poems *Coming Home*, and *Wrong*). In this case subjectivity is seen as a site of ongoing struggle and tension.

The women in this research conceive identities as collective (local, global, and liminal). When people appear to have the same traits or attributes they are said to share a ‘common’ identity, for example a Jewish, Australian, female or ‘lesbian’ identity. In the main this is a historical and discursive set of assumptions about what, who and how this or that collective identity is constructed, lives or behaves. Clare Farquhar (2000: 221) contends that the terms ‘us’ and ‘we’ are often used inclusively in lesbians’ discussions as a method of including “all female non-heterosexuals within a common identity”. She argues this results in the erasure of ‘lesbian’ diversity and difference in order to organise, mobilise and resist collectively “in opposition to hegemonic heterosexuality, and as a form of resistance to the policing of non-conformity” (Farquhar, 2000: 221). Like Farquhar, I found the women tended to rally behind what they were not via stances against heterosexuality (‘I am me’ and that’s not heterosexual), and non-conformist and assimilatory discourses (‘I am me’ and that’s not perverse or abnormal).

Additionally, Farquhar (2000) found a theme of ‘and we’re not all the same’ which seeped through in the words of the participants when we consider the stories collectively. For example Maree’s notion of identity is strongly situated in a collective (and normative) concept of what ‘a butch lesbian’ is, and this view is strongly embedded in her choices of lesbian signifiers, embodiment, and desire, and hence how she constitutes her sexual identity. Maree is invested in being seen as a ‘lesbian’ (on her sleeve, her body, in queer places or at queer events). In her comments Maree attaches herself to the normative signifiers of collective ‘lesbian’ identity and in so doing reinforces both her difference and sameness. Taking up the label ‘dyke’ or ‘butch’ suits Maree’s political and embodied purposes as a ‘lesbian’, this is also the case for Tabitha with regards to her investments in
notions of ‘lesbian’ communities and politics (see Chapter Seven). But this view does little to challenge normative conceptions of lesbian desire as arginalizin. In contrast Scout, Nell and Jacqui refuse to engage with or use the terms ‘lesbian’, ‘dyke’, ‘butch’ or ‘queer’ and prefer instead the term ‘gay’87. This served “to perpetuate gendered notions of lesbian identity … rather than to undermine or erase binary notions of gender” (Farquhar, 2000: 226). That is, these three women consider ‘gay’ to be a gender neutral term because they consider the others to be arginalizin (though it could also be argued that Tabitha’s and Maree’s gender play could also suggest a binary between masculine and feminine). So whilst these women stand in angry defiance to heterosexuality and heteronormativity their words also implicate them as complicit in the re-constitution of hegemonic notions of both gender and sexuality. In this sense each of the above poems can be drawn on as metaphors for contemporary discussions around identity politics, ‘lesbians’, desire, and queer theory, and present the participants as subjects involved and invested in a process of ambiguous, complex and confusing becoming that is ruptured by momentary lapses in coherence. Additionally, this is a process they themselves perceive as problematically ‘natural’ – most of the time.

In this section I have argued that the affirmation of somewhat coherent ‘lesbian’ identities by the participants seemed to have a powerful effect in terms of agency and could be seen as an affirmation of ‘queerness’ primarily as a matter of survival, and not always as a stable sexual identity. I suggest that this kind of view of essentialising discourses of coherence and identity can be considered as ‘queer’ in that it does particular kinds of ‘queer’ work for the participants permitting them to take up multiple subject positions, not identities, and to engage in multiple kinds of resistance. This also highlights the need to view issues of gender and sexuality simultaneously and signals a rupturing of the always problematic view of coherence. The affirmation of a ‘boy’ gender does particular kinds of work for Tabitha and Scout because it reveals that a ‘boy’ gender has not been foreclosed to them, but rather their claims that this is possible represent a fracturing of normative views of gender. One

87 This data appears on a preliminary consent form when I asked each participant to indicate how they would usually ‘identify’ themselves.
could also argue that the adoption and insistence on a ‘tomboy’ identity is an act of both gender and sexual resistance (similar to Butler’s case for drag).

Nell is strongly invested in the idea that she had no choice in her sexual preference; it was a ‘natural’ and inevitable event which unfolded. She thus firmly constitutes herself as ‘not the same’ as others, and her words echo a deep investment in the idea that ‘lesbian’ can explain her feelings and emotions, because she needed to be able to explain these things to her family (in order to be ‘accepted’ and viewed normatively by them). There is a strong discourse of assimilation in Nell’s words which is juxtaposed by some of the ‘queer’ acts and activities that she engages in (see the Little Devil image in Chapter Seven). In Chapter Seven we see how Maree and Jacqui seem to be invested in the relationship between their ‘selves’ and ‘queer’ place(s). In this sense the transience and movement of place constituted their sexual identities, and presented a site for affirming both their sameness and their difference, but also for disrupting normative views of place.

I suggest the participants have used affirmations of coherence as a necessary, important, and ongoing re-iteration of a sense of self which signifies a dynamic and shifting process of re-constitution and validation. It is how they have come to make sense of and explain their sexual identity to themselves and others, over time and place. These affirmations are also related to safety, feeling safe, community, others, and belonging. There is no doubt that the speaker and stories have changed temporally and spatially, and so I further argue that their affirmations continue to expose the performative nature of gender and sexuality thus allowing them to re-turn, to play, and to go on becoming a subject on their own terms, and in their own ways. Via affirmations like ‘I am me’ or ‘this is how I am’ the participants verbalise a process of careful, and often conscious ‘re-crafting’, ‘re-making’, and re-constituting of their identities over time and through places. I describe these constituted identities as ‘queer’ in that they are simultaneously ‘natural’, constructed, and neither. This talk about ‘crafting’, ‘knowing’, speaking, and reinventing their ‘selves’ from ‘mixed up buckets’ of identity ‘bits’ highlights the fragility of identities and increases the potential for individual and collective agency and resistance at various sites from within normative practices and discourses. In the main this is possible because of the confusion created
around their affirmations not in spite of them. This suggestion attempts to gently displace the often negative essentialised and valorised view of affirmations of coherence as problematic, and to re-position affirmation as a self enhancing form of self knowledge which signifies that these women’s sexual identities are very important, far from stable or fixed, and are affirmed as a matter of everyday survival.

A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

In poststructural and queer camps, attachments to essential identities are usually read as problematic, but in the context of our conversations, and their everyday words and deeds, these attachments appeared to be useful to the participants in personal, social, and political ways. In this section I argue that these particular ‘ways’ are deeply important and ‘real’ aspects of self that are tied up in the participants’ passionate attachments to coherence, and the associated need and desire to simply survive and live in the kind of world where coherent identities are valued, indeed often valorised (for example through pop culture, media, psychology), and where incoherent ones are problematised and pathologised. I illuminate this contention in three ways. Firstly, I analyse a poem, Wrong, using Butler’s (1997a) explanation of passionate attachments to describe what is at stake if coherence is neither desired nor constituted. Secondly, I follow this with a critique of The Trouble With Normal (Warner, 2003) by re-visiting the normalising concepts inherent in each of the poems in this chapter.

Thirdly, throughout this section I maintain that in trying to live well and develop a sense of a (queer) ‘way of life’ (Halberstam, 2005) – as they have done throughout their lives – the participants in this research display a profoundly affective commitment to themselves and others as agents who are capable not just of refusal, disruption, resistance, or grief, but who also enact compassion, vulnerability, hope, and love as the very antecedents of the “possibilities for a livable life” (Butler, 1999a: xxvi). From this third position I argue that agency need not be constrained by the unconscious or forces of oppression if it is viewed as tightly bound to, and complicit in, everyday social structures, practices, and situations.
which affectively manifest as meaningful ‘ways of life’ or as methods of caring for oneself (and others) (Butler, 2004a). These everyday things, whether ‘performed’ individually or collectively are felt and embodied, and have the potential to undo gender and sexuality in their simplistic normality.

**Passionate attachments**

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997a) reconfirms and then builds upon the following key points from her previous work. Firstly, the achievement of a coherent heterosexual identity involves giving something up (in this case the primary homosexual love object) that has been prohibited. Secondly, these prohibitions and repressions constitute identities (Butler, 1993, 1997a, 1999a). Thirdly, gender is a *process* of the ego not an innate, pre-given or natural disposition (Butler, 1999a), and as such masculinity and femininity are *accomplishments* “which emerge in tandem with the *achievement* of heterosexuality” (Butler, 1997a: 135, my emphasis). Fourthly, heterosexual identity and gender identity have melancholic structures (or are one of its effects) because melancholia is “the unfinished process of grieving, [that] is central to the formation of the identifications that form the ego” (Butler, 1997a: 132). As a consequence all identities are melancholic because they are based upon the foreclosure of homosexual desire and attachment (Butler, 1993, 1997a, 1999a). In Chapter Six I extend this discussion into considerations of melancholic subjectivity, but what interests me in this section is the participants’ passionate attachments to a coherent ‘lesbian’ identity, and consequential consideration of what stands to be lost (prohibited or repudiated) if coherence is not articulated or maintained. I later argue that these attachments are formed as a matter of survival.

Butler (1997a: 8) uses psychoanalysis to explain how a child’s initial passionate attachments and libidinal investments are to its “earliest objects of love – parents, guardians, siblings”. The child is dependent upon these attachments for survival as the child cannot look after itself, and this signifies for Butler that our first early, primary attachments to others are based upon power structures of domination and submission. Butler (1997a: 8) argues that whilst the child doesn’t know precisely to what it is attached, it does know that
it must persist in these attachments that are “formed in dependency”. Once formed this primary dependency creates the conditions of the “formation and regulation of the subjects and becomes the means of their subjection” (Butler, 1997a: 7). Subordination (by power relations) thus emerges as the condition or possibility of becoming a subject, and further that the subject knowingly plays out these attachments in its “desire to survive, ‘to be’” (Butler, 1997a: 7). In this way the Butlerian subject is paradoxically passionately attached to its own subordination. I quote Butler (1997a: 1-3) at length in order to explain this.

As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, that what “one” is, one’s very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another … “Subjection” signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject. Whether by interpellation, in Althusser’s sense, or by discursive productivity, in Foucault’s, the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power … The form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning on oneself.

Through this quote we learn that subjects are attached to the very powers that subordinate them via interpellatory or discursive processes. In this sense power acts on the Butlerian subject in at least two ways,

first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject’s “own” acting. As a subject of power (where “of” connotes both “belonging to” and “wielding”), the subject eclipses the condition of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power. The conditions not only make possible the subject but enter into the subject’s formation. (Butler, 1997a: 14, italics in original)

The following poem captures Butler’s paradoxical process of subjection because it displays the ways in which subjects are simultaneously ‘a subject of power’.

180
Wrong (Scout)

I would have these full on conversations in my head
and all I kept thinking was,

I felt wrong
I felt wrong
I felt like I was trapped.
I can see what it is that I was feeling -
   It’s all about drowning,
   The subtle pain;
   Scratching and drowning,
   Crying and confusion.
   And just being wrong.
   It’s all about desire,
   This gut ache all the time;
   Hurt and desire.
   Sick and fear
   And a lot of wrong.
   It’s all of those things, all of them together, all the time.
I just wanted to scream out. (and what else)
Everyone was saying
   “Wrong, Wrong, Wrong”
Even people that didn’t know what was going on, they were saying
   I was wrong. (you know)
Like my friends at school [Oh my god even they’re saying it’s wrong]
They said
   “What’s going on with you, you need to talk to us?”
   “You’ve changed, there’s something wrong with you!”
   “We don’t like how you’ve changed, we want the old Scout back!”
   “What’s going on with you, why don’t you talk to us any more?”
   “What’s wrong with you, what’s wrong with you?”
   “You know you’ve really changed and we don’t like it!” (and they didn’t even know)
Every-one … (like)
ev-ery
   sin-gle
   person
   “Wrong Wrong Wrong” [Well what’s wrong with you]
In my head it became like
And just crazy talk,
just crazy talk,
kooky sort of crazy stuff.
And then when I did it I thought

“How can this be wrong?”
“This is so not wrong, this is right!”
It was like the most natural thing in the world.

I don’t know what is but thank god there’s something in me that has the ability to just go

“How can this be wrong?”
“Do you know what, fuck em all …”
I don’t care if I have nobody
and I did
I lost everybody
Even now
I see myself kissing this woman and I’m like,

[Why is this so wrong?]
[Why is something that feels so good … why do people see it, perceive it as wrong?]
[Why does it feel so right for me?]
[What’s the big fuss?]
(you know)

In the poem we see Scout relentlessly engaged in a process of guiltily twisting and turning back on her self in order to embrace the law and the wrongness of being ‘lesbian’. Thus Scout (as the Butlerian subject) is constituted through processes of subordination, submission and repudiation, “becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (Butler, 1997a: 2), and “since there can be no social identity without subjection … the subject is passionately attached to the law or the authority that subjects it” (Salih, 2002: 119). In other words, through her attachments to power the citation ‘wrong’ subordinated her at the same time as providing the possibilities of her resistance. Butler explains that this paradox emerges because the relationship between the subject and power is an ambivalent one, in which “the subject emerges both as the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency” (Butler, 1997a:}
14-15, italics in original). In other words, the subject does not ‘have’ power rather it emerges from power and depends upon power in order to ‘exist’.

This poem captures Scout relentlessly turning in on her self in order to ‘know’ her self (she is compelled to do so by her father and friends). This is interesting because it signifies the importance of ‘knowing’ one self as ‘other’ within a heterosexual discourse. Ironically there was no way for Scout to ‘know’ herself other than as ‘wrong’. So this poem exhibits a process by which Scout has come to ‘know’ her self through regulations, rules, and discourses to be the ‘wrong’ other – that is ‘lesbian’. The resource through which she has made sense of this is therapy, where her very vivid feelings of drowning, pain, scratching, confusion, hurt, sickness, fear and wrongness about desire (‘it’s all about desire’) could now be defined as ‘depression’. Here being ‘at risk’ of a diagnosis of ‘depression’ perhaps represents one of the costs of incoherence, as does believing what the therapist tells her. If Scout could not make sense of her self or ‘know’ her self in normative ways, how could she be viewed as anything other than ‘wrong’ (wrong being the pathologised ‘other’)?

In the world in which we live incoherence is problematised and hence it becomes very important to ‘know’ our selves and to ritually recite or reiterate a coherent sense of self. I believe this is why the ‘coming out’ narrative featured so strongly in this data – basically re-telling these stories reaffirmed the participants’ coherence. They understand themselves through these storylines. Therefore the stories become a part of their subjectivity, and a way in which to live out this moment and the next. The ‘things’ at stake or standing to be lost are numerous. From their stories I have gleaned the following: pathologisation; social isolation; negotiating social exclusion; not being ‘normal’; being ‘abnormal’; being ‘queer’ and all that is associated with negotiating a stigmatised identity; discrimination; fear, anxiety; threat of harm or injury; hatred; unequal status or rights; loss of privilege (e.g. marriage, health, insurance); repression and oppression; sense of illegitimacy; lacking a sense of importance; lack of validity; ostracism; death; losing one’s place; dehumanisation; unintelligibility; failure; incoherence; discontinuity; worthlessness; ungrievability; powerlessness; unidentifiability; indeterminancy; un-representability. From the data, and my own experiences, these are fairly standard losses faced by those “trying to live or who
live on the sexual margins” (Butler, 1999a: xxvi). For Scout these also equated with losing people (‘I lost everybody I lost everyone’), and popular culture would have us believe that without others we are not viable subjects – perhaps even, we are nothing, or more precisely we are nothing that matters.

In the poem her head is full of ‘crazy talk … kooky sort of crazy talk’, and we come face to face with the internal psychic struggle to make sense of our selves when we have limited resources to do so. When this is added to the overwhelming list of what stands to be lost from not ‘knowing’ our selves then the risks of incoherence are indescribable. By falling back on an essentialist view in order to take ‘care of her self’ (‘it was the most natural thing in the world’), Scout creates her own ‘reality’ and language for her desires through actions – kissing a woman and knowing it to be ‘right’. The dialogue throughout provides a précis of her processes of turning in to find answers to questions that cannot be verbalised, whilst simultaneously exposing small openings that transcend a politic of affirmation by insisting upon talking about new ways of ‘being’.

In this paradigm, agency comes from being both subordinated and produced by power, and wielding power in unexpected, but potentially subversive ways (Salih, 2002). This is an important concept in terms of reading agency in this research because it suggests that the participants are not merely the effects of power, but rather that agency comes from their ambivalent and paradoxical relationships to power and the temporal modalities in which they simultaneously depend upon power, and wield it in unexpected ways. So despite the losses of ‘everything’ and ‘everyone’ experienced by Scout, in the final lines she is still

88 Whilst Foucault (1984a, 1984b) reads the ancient Greco-Roman instruction ‘take care of yourself’ as ‘know yourself’ (which could be construed as establishing who one is, that is as some ‘real’ entity), he also provides a detailed textual analysis which posits such ‘knowing’ more as aesthetic, communal, and nurturing. By arguing that the extent to which one can ever know oneself is more fruitfully viewed as an art form that involves developing a ‘caring’ relationship with self and others rather than as a revelation of ‘I know who I am’, Foucault provides me with a theoretical resource that seems to be better able to illuminate some of the more problematic (in terms of queer theory) articulations of the participants in this research. Thus the goal of caring for self appears to be more about ethically and morally living well and completely, and this in turn has benefits for the community as well as the self. Linking the self to others and community in this way binds matters of the self to ethics, aesthetics, knowledge, survival, and political action, I construe the participants’ strong individual attachments to identity, place and community as an example of this form of ‘knowing the self’ and this analysis describes the processes by which the participants ‘craft’ and reinvent themselves for themselves not as themselves.
kissing and desiring girls, and with her eyes closed she punctures the discourses of the interpellation ‘Are you, are you disgusting? Are you, are you that?’ (excerpt from the poem *I Don’t Get It*, Chapter Six) with a sensuous exhalation, and equally as powerful citation, ‘this is so not wrong, this is right!’ Her final comment from *Wrong*, ‘[What’s the big fuss about?]’, and from *I Don’t Get It*, ‘Would you prefer I was a straight murderer or a gay lover?’ question the authenticity and veracity of the regimes which have incited her to conform all of her life, and thus she begins to re-work the script even as she passionately participates in it.

In this research it appears as though the participants are passionately attached to many things. In the main, they appear to be attached to, and invested in a broad notion of some kind of a naturalised ‘lesbian’ identity. In order to present the sense of coherence of some kind of authentic identity (that is if I am not like everyone else, who am I like?) the participants formed various attachments and describe distinct investments in these attachments. In the data this appears variously as attachments to difference, community, place, belonging, being born ‘gay’ (‘this is just who I am’), ‘boyhood’, ‘queerness’, identity, and an investment in normative practices and assimilation. This suggests they are drawing upon discourses which help them to both *be* and *do* something. It also highlights the constant work that needs to be done in order to create and maintain a coherent sense of self. This appears in Tabitha’s attachments to her difference, and her community, but she troubles these ideas with a ‘queer’ attachment to her ‘boy’ gender. Likewise Scout highlights another paradox when she states her attraction to women was ‘wrong’ but also ‘natural’; and also that her sexual attraction to women is deeply tied up in her desire to ‘be a boy’.

I consider coming to terms with one’s difference, persisting in it, and insisting on it to be some kind of ‘queer’ authenticity. It serves as an act of disordered defiance and self reclamation that is productive in the sense that it produces effects, but also because it re-produces alternative scripts, thus exposing the lies, norms and laws of the ‘heterosexual matrix’. For example in the excerpt below when Tabitha’s mother attempts to hail a normatively gendered child (believing that one exists) with the call ‘oh why can’t you just
put some make up on, put a nice dress on’, Tabitha persists in wearing what she wants … ‘jeans, t-shirts, sneakers, board shorts’, and saying ‘this is who I am, what’s wrong with it, I don’t understand?’ because ‘knowing’ her self in this way (feminine) did not make sense. Her lack of understanding and refusals expose the lie that girls must wear dresses.

Excerpt from Be Different (Tabitha)

“Where’s my daughter, I thought I had a little girl”
For a large part of my childhood (I didn’t really know or understand) but I remember significantly
my mother saying to me often
“Be different, can you just be different”
I would come downstairs ready to go out somewhere
dressed in what I want to wear … jeans, t-shirt, sneakers, board shorts, kind of stuff …
She would say
“Oh why can’t you just put some make up on, put a nice dress on”
and then …
“Just be different”

What she’s asking me to be is different to who I am.
The way I interpret that is I’m different from a very young age
that’s what made me feel different.

In this poem Tabitha ironically constitutes herself as different, which I read as a reclamation of power rather than as a sublimation to the call, because telling me this, in this way is more a story of resistance than of discovery. She knew she was different, she felt it, saw it, and enacted it, and in Chapter Six we learn she even has the ‘proof’ to show this (the image of herself as Huck Finn). She had no way of ‘knowing’ her self in any other way except as ‘boy’, ‘tomboy’, ‘Huck Finn’ or just ‘different’. Tabitha’s (and her mother’s) constant uttering of the metaphor ‘be different’ illuminates how confusing it was to do this – different to what, to whom, how? Through her actions and rejections she challenged the tenets of the ‘heterosexual matrix’. Her resistance and agency comes from ‘knowing’ some secret and special aspect of herself that she believed to be so central to her existence – she
was a ‘boy’, and she needed to take special care of her boy self in order to oppose the powers that attempted to normatively regulate her and her body.

On another tangent I also suggest that this ‘sense of coherence’ and passionate attachment to coherence parodies normative gender and sexual practices, thus challenging the laws that attempt to regulate those who appear to “fail to conform to the gendered norms of intelligibility” (Butler, 1999a: 23). In this sense the coherence of a ‘lesbian’ identity exposes the incoherence and discontinuity of a heterosexual identity and the power networks which insist upon it. A statement like ‘this is just who I am’, whilst essentialising in one sense, is also expansive and confronting in another (for example it perpetually poses ‘who am I?’). These words deny the presence of either a pre-discursive heterosexual or homosexual subject, presenting only the viability of a ‘queer’ subject who cannot and does not fit, and is invested in not fitting, as well as fitting. It is the obvious confusion of both constituting and resisting coherence which illustrates the ridiculousness of any claims to stability, fixity or essentialism. When viewed as a powerful affirmation from within a limited and limiting ‘heterosexual matrix’ this statement shows resistance by troubling restrictive discourses and norms. I also suggest this affirms some kind of ‘queerness’ as a complicated, ambiguous, often confusing, and ‘abnormal’ state.

**Troubling The Trouble with Normal**

When a given sexual norm has such deep layers of sediment, or blankets enough territory to seem universal, the effort of wriggling out from under it can seem enormous. The burden becomes even heavier when one must first overcome shame, or break with the tacit force of a sexual morality that other people take to be obvious. (Warner, 2003: 6)

I entered this thesis with a certain ambiguity towards ‘queer(s)’ and ‘normal(s)’. After I read the *Trouble With Normal* (2003) I began to wonder about norms and where they come from and what they do. Certainly I agree with Warner that sexual norms are sedimented, universal, and shameful, but I also wonder about the everyday ways in which the participants in this research have overcome, broken from, and challenged their sexual
shame or wriggled out from under the blanket. The poems above provide some hints of this, and despite agreeing with Warner that ‘normal’ is at times trouble, I cannot discount the visceral and practical effects of not investing in ‘normal’ on some level, for example investing in constituting a sense of coherence and being proud, not shameful about that. So what I am most interested in here is not troubling the data with queer theory or Warner’s ideas, but rather troubling Warner’s ideas with the data. I suggest this provides a welcome rupture in queer theorising by placing the people at the centre rather than the politics. That is, it’s OK to say that ‘normal’ is troublesome but not at the exclusion of those who only know ‘normal’ as a way in which to live their lives.

*What is ‘normal’?*

By using common statistical applications of the term ‘norm’ and ‘normal’, Warner (2003) provides a convincing argument that normal is an impossibility, and there is no such thing as normal or no reason to be normal, simply because normal means to be within a common statistical range – and in reality we all deviate from the norm in some way. Normal is a fiction. With regards to sex he argues on the one hand, sex is considered normal behaviour, and, on the other, quite an abnormal act (in terms of cultural meanings, messiness, lack of rhythm, and variations). Realistically few people probably want their sex to be considered normal anyway – most want it to be ‘special’, ‘different’, ‘individual’. Drawing upon health discourse Warner (2003: 57) concludes that current use of the term normal is as “right, proper, healthy”, straight. For example what one’s blood pressure or body temperature should be, which is “what most people are … is what most people should be” (Warner, 2003: 57). Following this into sexuality the logic is “what most people do or desire is … what people should do and desire” (Warner, 2003: 57). Of course this concept is flawed as biological norms are often expressions of social norms, and variations from the norm are not necessarily pathological, they can also become new norms (Warner, 2003). Given this, Warner (2003: 58) then asks, “how did we ever accept a world in which we are told to have a certain sexuality just because it is the average of a larger population?” A worthwhile question, and as we have seen in the data the answer is simple – being other than
heterosexual is pathologised and problematised, and so there is a lot at stake in being either incoherent, or \textit{not} ‘normal’.

Warner presents a compelling discussion of the normativity of ‘normal’, one I don’t think many would disagree with. That the lesbian and gay movement has fractured along normative fault lines is not unusual given the ways in which ‘lesbians’ and ‘gays’ appear to have been popularly normalised (or normalise themselves). The key thing that causes trouble for Warner is his observation that in taking up (hetero)normalisation (and assimilation) the fractures have become ravines which function to divide so-called respectable ‘gays’, ‘lesbians’ and ‘queers’ from unrespectable ones, and into which those who continue to defy ‘normal’ slip. In this sense, argues Warner (2003: 49) the trouble comes when the normalisation of the gay and lesbian movements (in an attempt to overcome sexual shame) differentiates and disavows sex and sexuality, and in so doing reproduces stigma and “the hierarchy of shame”. Ultimately Warner (2003: 74) pleads, not for doing away with ‘normal’ altogether, but for the embracing of queer culture and sex “in all its apparent indignity, together with a frank challenge to the damaging hierarchies of respectability [and] the politics of sexual shame”. But what does this mean exactly or even in ‘reality’, especially in the contexts of sexual minorities, or in the ways the participants live their lives?

\textit{What’s the trouble with ‘normal’?}

Nearly everyone, it seems, wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being like the rest of us. Put in these terms, there doesn’t seem to be a choice at all. (Warner, 2003: 53)

Warner (1993: xxvi-xxvii) has argued that, “‘Queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal … not just the normal behaviour of the social but the \textit{idea} of normal behaviour”. From Warner, and in light of the data, I wondered what exactly is ‘normal’ behaviour, and suggest that this question is probably as slippery as asking ‘who am I’, or even “what do queers want?” (Warner, 1993: vii). In Chapter Two I made a case against posing such indeterminate questions and instead asked what queer theory could \textit{do} with the
obscure and contradictory responses to questions such as these. Determining what queer theory can do is the most salient and practical task of this chapter, and attached to it is troubling Warner’s idea of normal (behaviour and identities) with data that was heavily invested in many normal things.

At no time in the interview process did any participant say she thought herself to be ‘normal’, nor did she articulate a desire to be ‘normal’. I actually don’t think they want to be ‘normal’ at all, they just seem to desire normative ‘things’ (at times). The subtle and passionate ways in which the participants described their lives, the things they had experienced, and the things they had lost all point to an investment in normative concepts and processes of normalisation. And this comes as no surprise to me, how else could they constitute themselves given the discursive resources and taken-for-granted norms available to them?

Excerpt *Wrong* (Scout)

*Even now*

I see myself kissing this woman and I’m like, [Why is this so wrong?] [Why is something that feels so good … why do people see it, perceive it as wrong?] [Why does it feel so right for me?] [What’s the big fuss?] *(you know)*

Excerpt *Who Am I?* (Tabitha)

“This is who I am what’s wrong with it. I don’t understand.”

Excerpt from *Who Am I?* (Maree)

*I don’t know whether that’s right or wrong but that’s just how I feel.*

---

89 I use the term ‘things’ to signal a dual understanding of ‘normal’. Firstly that generating a list of ‘normal’ attributes is impossible, and secondly that most of the time many of us aren’t quite sure what we want anyway.
In the three excerpts above Scout, Tabitha and Maree try to make sense of themselves by using normative notions of ‘selves’ but they couldn’t do it. Unable to find words, and unhappy with the ones they had (for example ‘wrong’ and ‘different’ provide no sense to them – ‘I don’t’ understand ‘why is this so wrong?’) to describe their same sex desire they each reject the language that positions them as unviable subjects and by asserting ‘this is just who I am’, and who I am is not ‘wrong’ it is right, they seek coherence yes, but don’t appear to want to be ‘normal’. By posing these questions of discourse and then rejecting them as insufficient they are challenging normative concepts not subscribing to them.

I was angry after I read The Trouble With Normal. At times I have felt as though Warner would have me fucking a gay man in a bathhouse rather than cooking dinner and watching L Word with my girl friend (if I had one or if I desired to watch it). Why do I have to be so exceptional in order to trouble ‘normal’? Maybe this is precisely the trouble with ‘normal’ – many ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘queer’ men and women don’t fuck politically, but many think and act politically. Who am I to pass judgment upon the ways in which a handful of women, my friends, live their lives? Despite what I read about the perils of being ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘bi’, ‘queer’ – and the pathologisation of non-normative desire – the lives these women have led are profoundly normative, and ‘normal’ is equally as perilous as the above categories. An incredible diversity and strength made up their productive and happy lives. Perhaps they are simply ignorant to the ‘call’ of some aspects of queer theorising, maybe they choose not to hear it? But maybe … perhaps … they are quite content with the ways in which they live their lives, and they don’t require this prescribed lens through which to scrutinise their every act, utterance or desire. Because, as I have realised, it grows tedious and tiresome to analyse every act, utterance and desire of another, and in the process make sexual identity a big deal. Maybe it isn’t always such a big deal (Grosz, 1995). Maybe their desire for assimilation and affirmation was based upon their sense that “sexuality is not about politics but about pleasure and happiness”? (Savin-Williams, 2005: 209). Returning to Warner I wonder if his ‘trouble with normal’ is that it is ordinary, regular, boring, insignificant, even banal? That it’s not exceptional and not queer? That the ‘trouble’ is that some queers want it? So the trouble is not apathy or desire for normativity, the trouble is
‘us’. Why else after years of theorising, activating, protesting and living queery do queers (like Warner) still view normal as ‘normal’? Shouldn’t something have changed? Today an answer to his sixteen year old question ‘what do queers want?’ (Warner, 1993: vii) is still ‘we don’t know’, but some queers do want ‘ordinariness’ and ‘normalness’ – and that spells trouble. My ‘trouble’ arises when I wonder why, as a queer theorist I have to regard ‘normal’ with suspicion, especially when it represents a fundamental, though banal desire? Why do we have to be exceptional to make a point, be listened to, or have laws changed? If we must still continue to blame ‘normal’ for everything why can’t it be a strategic concept through which to challenge Warner’s ‘politics of shame’? What would happen, and to whom, if we stopped making a big deal about ‘normal’?

I don’t see big trouble with normal in the data because I don’t believe that queer can be so easily aligned against normal. This is an important point to argue because living as ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ is not as simple as either normalising oneself or being consumed by normative notions of modern society, such as capitalism, marriage, consumer culture or watching L Word. After all there is more to identity than the gender of those we desire or fuck, and yet I do acknowledge the anxiety of identity wherever I turn. I have shown this discussion to be far more complex than that. The view that queer is opposed to normal is not quite subtle enough to deal with data which regularly refused to align with abnormality. Ironically in setting up queer in opposition to normal it becomes what it is normatively suggested to be – ‘abnormal’. So whilst Warner is breaking away he is also reinstating a binary, and queer as a politic of affirmation, that is, it is important to affirm that one is not ‘normal’ in order to be or do ‘queer’. The data provoked different kinds of questions about theorising and living not queer, but ‘lesbian’ identities, where ‘lesbian’ was constituted as a ‘normal’ category. There were new questions which required new ways of thinking that were ambivalent and ambiguous, but also clear and affirming. I have needed to think about the data in more complicated ways and to be able to open up identity categories in ways

---

90 In this context naming one’s identity is important because none of the women (except for Maree after the interview stage) identified with the term ‘queer’. Two were repulsed by the word ‘lesbian’, all five favoured the word ‘gay’. So clearly it’s not so much the category is important as the behaviours, acts, desires, and ways of living which delineate and define that category from another (heterosexuality). This thesis deals with individuals for whom having an identity is not a fiction, nor is it part of a political organisation or movement - it just is.
which were more appreciative of the complexities of peoples’ lives. In this sense it has been important to note that ‘lesbian’ identities are not unambiguous, nor are they all the same, and so they are equally as implicated as other identities in the ongoing and irresolvable contradictions of identity. And this is a reason to deploy identities and not throw them out with a wave of a queer wand – abracadabra don’t be ‘normal’.

In a way the series of *Who Am I?* poems simply draw attention to the (im)possibility of re-interpretation and re-presentation of ‘lesbian’ authenticity and hence ‘normal’. In Chapter Seven we learn that the participants enjoy parodying their ‘lesbian’ identities when they attend a queer dance party, on Sydney Harbour, called *Azure*. Past performances have included: Solid Gold dancers, ABBA, Women’s Pro Tennis Tour, ToolGirls, and Dykes on Spikes (golfers). This year’s theme was Michelle’s Clitisserie. In 1999 ‘the group’ also appeared in *The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras* as the *Lemon Avengers* and in 2005 as *Hooters on Scooters*. The following image seems to capture the parody and humour of different forms (‘queer’ representations) of ‘lesbian’ identities rather than their authenticity, and deliberately not its ‘normativity’.

![Image 5.1: Hooters on Scooters (Mardi Gras, 2005)](image-url)
If we look at ‘normal’ as doing then it means we can get on and off the ‘normal’ track, thus exposing ‘normal’ as thin, fragile, straight. If we can all do normal so well then it doesn’t seem so important to be it. I know a number of queer theorists who do quite normal things like walk their dogs, go to work, snuggle their partner on the couch, and often stay at home. These things, in my eyes, don’t make them any more ‘normal’ or any less ‘queer’ – it’s just what they do. So what do ‘queers’ do? Why do they/we have to be so extra-ordinary or exceptional in order to be political or subversive? Can’t they do it in the everydayness of their so-called usual or regular (dare I say, normal) lives? Can’t small acts of ‘queer’ normalcy (like wearing giant ‘hooters’ in a parade) be productively subversive? Why do queers have to be queers 24/7? Doesn’t this boil down to the strategic use of acts, deeds, moments, behaviours and practices that regardless of whether ‘normal’ or not, actually do something to challenge the status quo? In short, can’t one be a ‘normal’, everyday ‘queer’? I argue yes, because everyday ‘queers’ do everyday ‘queer’ things, in their homes, streets and workplaces which confront ‘normal’. I maintain that the following comments from the participants (from the poems) about themselves defy normative discourses with a steadfast emotional refusal to be anything other than how they are, and that will always be not ‘normal’.

Tabitha: Fuck you I am who I am
Scout: Do you know what, fuck ‘em all …this is who I am
Jacqui: I just feel that way about women, it’s just who I am
Nell: This is me and that’s that
Maree: I’m just me

In troubling The Trouble With Normal with the data I have found Warner’s idea of sexual shame to be quite instructive. But unlike Warner I do not believe that it is so straightforward to state that queers feel sexual shame because they are not ‘normal’. I think this sense of shame is much deeper than that and comes from more sinister and psychic mechanisms and feelings. In Chapter Six I engage with the concept of melancholia as a way in which to deal with data that spoke of unexplainable loss and interjections to mourning. In light of Warner’s words, reflecting upon the data presented here which has stressed the
importance of constructing a coherent and essential sense of self, and thinking about the
data to come regarding loss and mourning, I suggest that any sexual shame the participants
have in relation to their sexual identity is less a matter of normativity or being ‘normal’,
and more an issue of value. Within normative Western society the lives of many people
who live on the margin are not viewed as important, valuable or worthwhile. In short,
following Butler (1993) some lives appear to matter more than others. The data presented
throughout this thesis reiterates this point, over and over.

The discourses of normalcy that provide power and respect to one group of people are
simultaneously deployed to defile, devalue, and de-materialise ‘others’. This places a desire
to be something closer to ‘normal’ as a way in which to be accorded dignity, respect,
importance and value. Neither my friends nor I feel that we are accorded these basic
‘rights’, in fact these things are often repeatedly and infinitely lost to us. Whilst I
acknowledge and agree with Warner’s excellent argument against seeking ‘rights’ or
equality through marriage, I can neither understand nor ignore the kind of hatred that drives
such a move (for example to change a Commonwealth law to make me unlawful). I cannot
understand how my body (not it’s sexual acts but what it disrupts or troubles) causes such
offence to people who don’t know me. In our struggle to simply survive, normal everyday
things are lost to us. We will never be ‘normal” because our sexual shame comes from a
deply visceral and perpetual sense of hatred that is seen everywhere in the faces of others,
and manifests through ‘laws’, ‘practices’, violence, and institutionalised and state
sanctioned homophobia. I suggest it is these very ‘real’ senses or feelings of displacement
and not belonging that drive any compulsion to move closer to the norm. This move could
be seen as a way in which to derive comfort and safety in a world where for a body to be or
do anything other than ‘normal’ is not just problematised or pathologised, it is materially
vaporised – our lives do not exist, so we do not exist. To live continuously in this way, and
with a sense that one does not matter, is not important, or can never be considered in any

---

91 For example recent changes to Commonwealth laws in Australia that now clearly define marriage as only
between a man and woman in order to refuse to acknowledge same-sex marriages from countries where such
an ‘act’ is recognised through law, or to extend adoption choices to same-sex couples.
way valuable, is to live a life that is worthless, unacknowledged, invisible, unintelligible, and empty.

Understood in this way seeking coherence becomes an almost obligatory aspect of living a ‘normal’ life. This shifts the central discussion to one of finding and creating love, and living well with respect, dignity, consequence, and pride rather than about overcoming sexual shame by trying to be ‘normal’. Only with these things, argues Butler (1993, 2004a) comes a sense of one’s self and one’s body as both grievable and livable, and this, I suggest, is a completely ‘normal’ desire.

‘The possibilities for a livable life’

But there is a normative aspiration here, and it has to do with the ability to live and breathe and move and would no doubt belong somewhere in what is called a philosophy of freedom. The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity. (Butler, 2004b: 219)

So what things connote a general92 ‘philosophy of freedom’ and provide the possibility for a ‘livable life’? There is little doubt that queer theory does. In this thesis queer theory provides an important resource for unpacking the social constructedness of identity and conceptions of ‘normalcy’, but in relation to the women in the research, it tends to show little concern for their ‘real’ life experience on the sexual margin. In many ways queer theory denies the ‘realities’ of their identities, thus further arginalizing those for who having an essential identity is a central aspect of their lives and sense of self. By closely considering the complexities of ‘queer’ I offer the coherent identity as a legitimate way to construct and live a livable life.

The participants have used their identities and bodies for ‘queer’ purposes including to contest gendered and heterosexed space, practices, and discourses. These identities can

92 I am taking a liberty here with Butler’s generalisations about ‘freedom’ and ‘humanity’ by extending her broad concepts to issues of sexuality. I do this in order to argue that the lives of those on the sexual margins do matter.
never truly be separated from the ‘mainstream’ or from ‘normal’, but what emerged from the data were consistent attempts to do so. By arguing that investments in norms paradoxically both threaten and guarantee social survival, Butler (2004b) offers a productive way in which to re-view the data presented in this chapter and to anticipate the data to come. This requires viewing normativity in two ways. Firstly, and in line with Warner (2003), Butler (2004b: 206) views normativity as,

the aims and aspirations that guide us, the precepts by which we are compelled to act or speak to one another, the commonly held presuppositions by which we are all oriented, and which give directions to our actions.

Secondly Butler (2004b: 206) argues that normativity refers to the processes of normalisation and the ways in which certain ideas, ideals and norms,

hold sway over embodied life, provide coercive criteria for normal “men” and “women”. And in this second sense we see norms are what govern “intelligible” life, “real” men and “real” women. And that when we defy these norms, it is unclear whether we are still living, or ought to be, whether our lives are valuable, or can be made to be, whether our genders are real, or ever regarded as such.

In this sense we could view the participants’ desire for coherence as a way in which to appear to adhere to the norms of normativity. Where, in the first instance, it is important to be seen as having things in common with, and aspiring to the same things as ‘others’ simply as the thing to do. Butler doesn’t seem to have as much a problem with this as Warner. In the second instance, norms serve to designate in advance what a livable existence should be. In this case to claim or desire coherence as a subject (either individually or collectively) who is not normatively afforded such a privilege challenges norms which foreclose livability to some bodies. For to desire to live in such a way, or to insist that such a life is livable is to continually call into question “what it means to be human”, and to perpetually reinterpret “the basic conditions and needs of humans” within their historical and cultural circumstances (Butler, 2004b: 222). In this regard I see the participants’ attempts to validate and affirm who they as attempts to differentially define ‘human’ and in so doing to re-define their own basic entitlements to a valuable, ‘real’ and
livable life. I suggest that such a process of resignification should not be viewed as craving to be ‘normal’ because the basic condition of life is not biological but is more accurately to establish the minimum conditions, and hence possibilities for a livable human life (Butler, 2004b).

Following Butler (2004b: 219) I propose that the participants’ inclinations to cohere to normative senses of gendered or sexed ‘selves’ do not always signal their conforming to “the regulatory or normalising functions of power”, but instead it is the norms, and their attachments to them which can “form the basis of their ethical and political claims”. Butler (2004b: 206) suggests that,

we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose.

In other words, we need norms because they also serve to powerfully bind⁹³ ‘us’. Norms bind individuals and communities often in the face of, and in spite of, the violent and restrictive powers which seek to fracture and restrict human bonds. This is not an argument about creating identity categories to do this. It is an argument about defiance, social justice and opposing the terms that subject ‘us’⁹⁴. In this way, and following Habermas, Butler (2004b) argues that norms provide the basis for the possibility not just of community, but for coming to appreciate and understand what it is that humans have in common. For example claiming that one is born ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ affirms the reality and authenticity of that identity and what is shared in common. Each woman at some stage asserted that she had been born ‘lesbian’, and additionally that the discovery of this natural ‘fact’ has been a difficult process involving negotiating the often negative and repressive attitudes of parents, friends, family, psychiatrists, strangers, and society. As such it was important to affirm in order to validate oneself and one’s ‘choices’ to, and for others (and self) – to be seen to

⁹³ Recall that this relates to Butler’s (1997a) discussion of the processes of subjection where one is both a subject to and of power, but also wields power in unexpected and potentially subversive ways. Perhaps seeking coherence or normative ways of living could be viewed as this paradox?
⁹⁴ Perhaps this is also what Warner wants.
have something in common, but also in order to make their identities ‘real’, intelligible, and livable. It is apparent that the participants are active in their assertions, affirmations, validations and reclamations of particular ‘lesbian’ subject positions as not heterosexual, perverse, ‘other’ or abnormal, and this serves as an important form of sexual agency via caring for, and having pride in self. Validation was very important to each participant, and the act of affirming a coherent ‘lesbian’ identity not only served to validate their lives (bodies, desires, ‘selves’, friends and choices), but their very existence. After everything ‘normal’ is or isn’t has been said, done and gone, what remains are my friends and their honest attempts at living without shame and with dignity, and pride. Affirming their lesbianism was a vital and everyday part of this as they attempt to live their life as a valid human.
CHAPTER SIX:
WORKING WITH WHAT REMAINS

*Puff the Magic Dragon* (Scout)

I don’t know what it is …
As young as five years old …

… I can remember …

Mrs. Jeffreys,
the kindergarten teacher
playing Puff the Magic Dragon
on the guitar.

I’d be up the front
sitting as straight as I could possibly sit
in love with her
singing Puff the Magic Dragon.

… I remember it …

I was five.

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Five I explored how Judith Butler’s theories of the subject can help to understand the connections between subjection and the operations of power. This required close examination of the relationship between the “process of becoming subordinated by power” and “the process of becoming a subject” (Butler, 1997a: 2). The analysis in Chapter Five drew upon two of Butler’s theories of subjection from *The Psychic Life of Power*, namely passionate attachments and foreclosed attachments. In the present chapter I pursue a closely related, and the second of Butler’s theories of subjection, ‘melancholic subjectivity’, as a theoretical starting point for analysing a selection of data which spoke of sometimes traumatic experiences of loss, grief, and mourning. This chapter embarks upon consideration of Butler’s (1997a: 29) call to recognise,

that the subject produced as continuous, visible, and located is nevertheless haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation.
It is my contention that whilst melancholia appears to have a haunted history of lack and non-assimilation that it also marks a place from which to begin to work with what remains of loss, rather than to limit. The brief poem above signals the tensions attached to this vista of melancholia in that the memories, feelings, and magic associated with acknowledging one’s same-sex desire appears to simultaneously mark, and rupture the limits of melancholic subjectivity.

In this chapter I use Butler’s ideas on melancholia in two ways, the first is political, the second theoretical. Firstly, by placing loss at the point of origin of the subject, psychic life is implicated as a constitutive element of melancholic subjectivity and hence melancholic agency. For Butler (1997a) this is also a political placement as it provides an “account of the formation of identity in power” (Campbell, 2001: 47). Secondly, I use Butler’s work as a theoretical building block from which to further expand her views of melancholic subjectivity in ways that are better able to deal with the social materiality of lesbian lives. I do this by engaging with theoretical concepts from an edited text, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003). The editors, and other researchers⁹⁵ in *Loss* position melancholia as presence, positive, and affirming, rather than as absence, lacking, and negating. Butler’s (2004a) more recent work on mourning also contributes to this rethinking, as does Ann Cvetkovich’s (2003a) affective trauma⁹⁶ research. My intention with these directions is to elucidate a process of reconfiguring melancholia as productive, political, and agentic from what remains of loss and grief. According to the above theorists many things can be said to remain from melancholia, most significantly, mourning remains (Butler, 2004a; Eng & Kazanjian, 2003); and, emotions, feelings, and memories also remain (Cvetkovich, 2003a, 2003b). Exploring the remains of strong memories and

⁹⁵ See particularly chapters by Eng and Kazanjian, Lloyd, Min, Moten, Morris, and Nichanian.
⁹⁶ I was drawn to Cvetkovich’s (2003a: 3) personal path to trauma, interests in traumatic events that occur every day to everyone, commitment to depathologising experiences of trauma and loss, and her description of trauma “as a name for experiences of socially situated political violence”. This thesis is not a study of trauma but I acknowledge that the participants sometimes describe their experiences as traumatic (distressing, shocking, frightening, injurious, wounding, or having long lasting effects).
attachments to loss raised some interesting questions in this research about the so-called ‘haunting limits’ of subjectification.

Freud told us things get lost all the time – places, ideals, bodies – but we each probably already know this. One of the most enduring qualities of loss is that we do know it, have felt it, and can remember it; we are therefore always attached to it, as we have all been undone by loss and grief at one time or another. It follows that we are also always attached to others through loss. In this sense a passionate attachment to lost love objects is both a social and political act because it signals a passionate attachment to others and ourselves (Butler, 1997a; Eng, 2000; Macheray, 2004). In Precarious Life, Butler (2004a: 30) puts forward mourning as a resource for liberating the subject because it offers “a point of departure for a new understanding of the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia [which] can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others”. Only then, claims Butler, can we hope to see the vulnerability in the face of another as our own and hence engage in a process which both evaluates and opposes “the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and thus certain human lives are more grievable than others” (Butler, 2004a: 30). Following Butler (1997a), Pierre Macheray (2004: 17) argues that in order for this kind of critical agency to transpire from melancholia, “subjects must first be liberated from themselves” and their attachment “to what, in them, is lost”. This chapter is about being undone by everyday experiences of loss, working with what remains, and melancholically ‘liberating’ the subject.

From the ruins of lost places, ideals and bodies ‘new’ places, ideals and bodies are invariably materialised. These ‘new’ things are founded upon the very impossibility of an avowed loss, and are “thus fundamentally determined by a past that continues to inform it” (Butler, 2003: 468). So whilst we may wish to avoid repeating many aspects of history, of our pasts, we cannot wipe loss from our skin – we will always bear its trace and its sensations – and herein lies the political agency of melancholic subjection. This chapter productively considers these traces of loss (the words, experiences, and acts) by actively seeking out memories, moments, and possibilities of ‘melancholic agency’. As a result I have analysed the data in the ways my theoretical inspirations compelled me – searching
for the ‘new’ seeds, ‘new’ questions, ‘new’ directions, and ‘new’ stories that arose from the sometimes dark depths of loss. I deliberately dealt with the participants’ words in ways which opened their experiences to theoretical scrutiny but that also created an occasion for acknowledging and taking back power from within limiting discourses (as suggested by Foucault, 1978; and Butler, 1997a, 1999a). In short, I scanned the data for melancholic agency. I maintain this was not an act of valorisation, it was a strategic choice, and the data I teased out suited my theoretical purposes and arguments.

The first part of this chapter is dominated by theorising as I draw upon the work of Freud (1987a, 1987b), Butler (1997a, 2004a), Cvetkovich (2003a), and Eng and Kazanjian (2003) to carefully mould a resource that can generate ‘new’ discourses, ‘new’ directions, and ‘new’ places with what remains of modern experiences of loss and trauma, particularly as they relate to sexuality and the women in this research. The latter part of the chapter analyses the data in light of this ‘new’ potentiality for melancholia.

THEORIZING MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA

When I started to read about loss, grief, trauma, mourning and melancholia, I started to think about the type of world I lived in and began to use melancholia as a philosophical metaphor by which to examine my own life and times, as well as the data. During this time it occurred to me that the literature, data, poems, and news I was daily consuming spoke consistently and openly of recent histories of trauma and loss that created a space filled with lost and ungrievable bodies, minds, lands, love, ideals, and hope. Loss surfaced as a key feature of living in a postmodern world, and before me festered a collective “malady of grief” (Kristeva, 1989: 221). Cvetkovich (2003a: 17) suggests that the affective experience of trauma “characterizes the lived experience of capitalism”. She thus argues trauma and modernity to be “mutually constitutive categories” (Cvetkovich, 2003a: 17). One line from
Scout (1992) seemed to fuse losses of the past and present, and articulated some kind of constitutive postmodern ‘malady of grief’.

My tears form an ocean, which I am drowning in.

Simultaneously emerging from the data was a cloudy silhouette of this ‘lost’ world. My own, and the participants’ experiences of twenty first century injury and loss necessitated viewing melancholia as something much more than pathological grief. This observation gestures towards the fundamental questions in this chapter. What was it that Scout reports drowning in? How does melancholia leave its mark upon the subject? Indeed, could melancholia be seen to mark the limits of human subjectivity?

**A line is drawn: Mourning and Melancholia**

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud (1987a) explains mourning as a healthy, normal and finite response to loss which involves working through the loss over time by grieving and then successfully accepting the loss. In simple terms, mourning is the experience of lack, something is lost and gone forever, and we just have to live with it, work through it, accept it, and get over it. Macheray (2004: 15) explains this as the effort taken to adapt “oneself to something fundamentally lacking, which in reality is to adapt oneself to its absence, to the fact that it is lacking”. Melancholia by contrast, is conceived as a pathological, indeterminate, and abnormal response to loss. There is loss of self-regard in melancholic grief. Whilst many of the characteristics of normal mourning appear the same as those of melancholia, according to Freud the melancholic persists with his or her narcissistic attachment to the lost object by turning back in (introjection) on him/herself and so cannot get over (accept and adapt) the loss, and instead forms an identification with the lost loved-object and engages in an “indefinitely continued and repeated mourning” (Macheray, 2004: 15).

---

97 Scout gave me copies of numerous poems of her own written during her teenage years. This is a line from one of them.
In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1987b) seems to get himself in a bind when he realises that the identification he initially described in relation to melancholia is also a crucial aspect of mourning and so suggests that melancholia is not pathological, and further that all ego formation has a melancholic structure (Butler, 1999a; Eng, 2000; Muñoz, 1997; Salih, 2002). In other words “he makes room for the notion that melancholic identification may be a prerequisite for letting the object go” (Butler, 1997a: 134, italics in original). In Freud’s new account of melancholia the mourning process is crippled by intense hostility towards the lost object and so full relinquishment is hampered (Butler, 1999a; Fortier, 2003; Salih, 2002). This results in an “ambivalent incorporation of the lost object as a strategy for keeping one’s argument with it going” (Fortier, 2003: 134), resulting in a diverse range of inwardly self-deprecating symptoms such that the giving up of the object “becomes possible only on the condition of a melancholic internalisation or … a melancholic incorporation” (Butler, 1997a: 134, italics in original). In Freud’s new formulation the ego is viewed as the effect of melancholia and occurs when the melancholic turns inward (Eng, 2000). Once this has happened only then can the proper work of mourning occur. Butler (1999a: 79) summarises this shift nicely explaining that,

> the identification with lost loves characteristic of melancholia becomes the precondition for the work of mourning. The two processes, originally conceived as oppositional, are now understood as integrally related aspects of the grieving process.

This is a very important distinction because it means that melancholia precedes the ego and far from pathological it should be regarded as a normatively constituted psychic mechanism which engenders subjectivity itself (Eng, 2000). Importantly this “opens up space for accounts of pain as psychic, not just physical” (Cvetkovich, 2003a: 2-3). This is the central notion in Butler’s twisting of melancholia.

Following Cvetkovich (2003a, 2003b), Fortier (2003), and Butler (2004a), I also contend that reconfiguring melancholia must take into account the affective nature of lived experiences, and that careful consideration of this is crucial to rethinking melancholic subjectivity and the potential for political militancy, activism and agency which springs
from such a position. This involves considering how a range of everyday feelings and emotions like anger, rage, guilt, shame, love, and violence manifest as a broad range of ambivalent human responses and are not simply based upon an individual’s psychic deficiencies or Freudian ‘dispositions’ (Butler, 2004a; Cvetkovich, 2003a, 2003b).

The Butler twist

The key point where Butler departs from Freud is with regards to prohibition and incorporation. Following a Freudian logic, the same-sex parent is the lost love-object with which the child forms an identification through introjection resulting in melancholia. But for Butler this melancholic identification with the same-sex parent is incorporated not introjected, that is, it is preserved on the surface of the body. Butler (1999a: 87) writes, “incorporation literalizes the loss on or in the body and so appears as the facticity of the body, the means by which the body comes to bear “sex” as its literal truth” (italics in original). Thus the effects of the prohibitions are not just psychic attacks on the ego, they are also embodied and encrypted onto the body’s surface (Butler, 1999a). In the following quote Butler suggests that the melancholic heterosexual embodies his or her forbidden same-sex desire as a hyper gendered identity (that is hyper masculinity or femininity). She argues that “disavowed male homosexuality culminates in a heightened or consolidated masculinity, one which maintains the feminine as the unthinkable and unnameable” (Butler, 1999a: 89). By way of an explanation and drawing upon Lacan, she proposes the following.

If feminine and masculine dispositions are the result of the effective internalisation of that taboo [against homosexuality], and if the melancholic answer to the loss of the same-sexed object is to incorporate and indeed, to become that object through the construction of the ego ideal, then gender identity appears primarily to be the internalisation of a prohibition that proves to be formative of identity. (Butler, 1999a: 81)

---

98 Introjection is “the process whereby objects from the outside world are taken into and preserved in the ego” (Salih, 2002: 53). For Freud identification takes place through introjection but for Butler identifications are incorporated (Butler, 1999a; Salih, 2002).

99 See Butler (1999a) pp 86-87, and (1997a) pp 134-136 for an explanation of incorporation. Salih (2002: 54) defines incorporation as “the process whereby objects are preserved on the surface of the body”.

206
Further,

… this identity is constructed and maintained by the consistent application of this taboo, not only in the stylisation of the body in compliance with discrete categories of sex, but in the production and “disposition” of sexual desire … [Consequently] dispositions are not the primary sexual facts of the psyche, but produced effects of a law imposed by culture and by the complicitous and transvaluating acts of the ego ideal. (Butler, 1999a: 81)

In this entire quote Butler provides a compelling explanation for the ongoing ‘drive’, attachments and investments of the subject to the constitution and maintenance of particular types of gendered and sexed essential identities. This highlights the ongoing instability of identities and supports both Butler’s and Freud’s contention that all identities are based upon melancholic foreclosures.

It is now clear how important Butler’s formulations are for those interested in identities and politics, as well as for anyone who has ever simply wondered how they have come to be who and how they are. Butler offers a hopeful explanation which evaporates the shame and guilt of loss formerly associated with lack (for example not ‘being’ woman, straight or white). In just a few pages she critically challenges the notion of a natural order of either gender or sex by describing the normalisation of gender and sexual identities “as a form of insidious trauma” (Cvetkovich, 2003a: 46).

Melancholic agency

In a practical extension of her ideas of gender melancholia from Gender Trouble, in Bodies That Matter Butler (1993) rethinks and extends the notion of ‘gender-as-drug’. In this text Butler (1993: 235) explores the embodied nature of gender by suggesting performances of gender allegorise a loss that cannot be grieved, and drag has the potential to expose this loss because it further “allegorizes some set of melancholic incorporative fantasies that stabilize gender”. By exposing and allegorising the “mundane psychic and performative practices” involved in the ‘normal’ constitution of heterosexual gender, drag also allegorises “heterosexual melancholy, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the
refusal to grieve the masculine as the possibility of love” (Butler, 1993: 235, italics in original), thus revealing “the allegorical nature of all sexual identities” (Salih, 2002: 96). These ideas expose the trope of heterosexuality by using melancholia to critique gender normativity.

Butler hypothesises that the unacknowledgability of homosexual attachments within the heterosexual matrix forecloses homosexual desire from the start and makes such attachments ungrievable. What results is not a refusal to grieve but a form of grief that is pre-empted because of the absence of a cultural setting (conventions and discourses) “for avowing the loss of homosexual desire”, and for Butler (1993: 236) “it is this absence that produces a culture of heterosexual melancholy”. Following on from this Butler (1993: 236) uses Hegel’s idea of negation of negation (loss of a loss) to explain the double disavowal or “never-never” that occurs.

The straight man becomes (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he “never” loved and “never” grieved; the straight woman becomes the woman she “never” loved and “never” grieved. It is in this sense, then, that what is most apparently performed as gender is the sign and the symptom of a pervasive disavowal.

For Butler this is a more psychic and insidious affair because of the deeply instituted and inscribed prohibitive cultural and discursive foreclosures of homosexual attachment, she thus uses the term ‘foreclosed’ “to suggest that this is a preemptive loss, a mourning for unlived possibilities” (Butler, 1997a: 139), and “not just prohibited but foreclosed – in the sense of unthinkable” (Bell, 1999: 170). In relation to racial melancholia, Butler suggests that the sheer numbers of reported murders of black men has a numbing effect that provides the black community with “a kind of grief that is limitless and without end” (Bell, 1999: 171). Similarly, via the example of deaths from AIDS Butler argues that we live in a culture that presents neither a space nor a language to mourn deaths which have already and always been foreclosed, and this is buried along with the love and life associated with them. This presents mourners (particularly queer or raced ones) with uncertainties, shame and guilt with regards to loss: is it true love, true loss, a grievable relationship, a grievable loss, and
thus a life worthy of having been lived; or is it an unthinkable, illegitimate, ungrievable, and unreal loss, love and life? (Bell, 1999; Butler, 1997a).

Whilst these formulations are quite grim, they can be drawn on to determine where and how to rupture the status of heterosexuality, and herein lies the political project of Butler’s arguments to this point. In the quote below Butler explains how heterosexuality can be ruptured by the repudiation of homosexuality because this ‘act’ exposes this unacceptable abjection (homosexuality) as the very source of heterosexuality. She explains, “renunciation requires the very homosexuality it condemns”, not as its external object, but as its most treasured source of sustenance. The act of renouncing homosexuality thus paradoxically strengthens homosexuality, but it strengthens homosexuality precisely as the power of renunciation. (Butler, 1997a: 143, italics in original)

Butler (1997a) also pushes us further by asking us to consider the ways in which gender identities can be exposed as complicit in the re-production of heterosexuality and similarly repudiated, opened up, and ‘panicked’. In this consideration Butler takes us back to the imitative concept of performativity explained in Gender Trouble (1999a) and the allegorical project of drag in both Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter (1993). Without going into an extensive conversation about these terms the short version of Butler’s arguments is as follows.

Consider that gender is acquired at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments; the girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs the barred object as a part of the ego, indeed as a melancholic identification. Thus the identification contains within it both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the ungrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis. If one is a girl to the extent that one does not want a girl, then wanting a girl will bring being a girl into question; within this matrix, homosexual desire thus panics gender. (Butler, 1997a: 136)

By drawing on Freud, Butler (1997a) explains how desiring a member of the same sex as an adult panics gender because gender is founded upon a prohibitive desire (taboo against homosexuality) that pervades cultural life with everyday forms of gender anxiety. These
formulations lead to another of Butler’s more famous contentions, “the ‘truest’ lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman, and the ‘truest’ gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man” (Butler, 1993: 235, 1997a: 146-47). This relates to her previous notion of the ‘never-never’ and the assertion that hyper-masculinity and femininity are symptomatic of disavowed homosexual desire. For Butler the political task then becomes finding creatively subversive ways in which to trouble or panic gender and as a result throw heterosexuality into a spin.

In the final chapter of The Psychic Life of Power, Butler (1997a) goes back to Freud in order to continue her political account of subjectivity. In this chapter Butler teases out the psychic and social costs of critiquing and deconstructing the relationship between power and normative heterosexual and gender identities in terms of melancholia. By continuing to support Freud’s assertion that in melancholia the ego turns back in on itself, Butler manufactures a theory which implicates melancholia in the production of both “an internal world as well as a topographical set of fictions that structures the psyche” (Butler, 1997a: 171). What emerges from Butler’s exposure of this spatial trope, and subsequent discussions, is the notion that because melancholia constitutes the ego, the psyche is a topography formed by power, an effect of the “effect of the regulatory, disciplinary, and normative operations of power” (Campbell, 2001: 39). Butler (1997a) argues that because melancholia exceeds the power structures which constitute it and the subject, it can be seen as initiating psychic life and it therefore “presents the possibility for subversion and agency” (Salih, 2002: 134).

Following Homi Bhabha’s idea that melancholia is not passive but is rather “a form of revolt that takes place through repetition and metonymy” (Butler, 1997a: 190), Butler argues that if the traces of loss are acknowledged then melancholia could be reconfigured as an occasion for affirmation and subversion (Salih, 2002) as it contests the ideality of authority by incorporating it (Butler, 1997a). For Butler, “the ‘critical agency’ of the melancholic is at once a social and psychic instrument” and the new incorporations become potential “sites of rearticulation, conditions for a ‘working through’ and, potentially, a ‘throwing off’”. (Butler, 1997a: 191). Drawing on Derrida, Butler (1997a) proffers that this
‘throwing off’ entails recognising one’s constitutive melancholic identities by accepting one’s ‘otherness’, indeed one’s very survival depends upon it as a process “of avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one’s own emergence” (p. 195), and “what melancholia shows is that only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all” (pp. 195-196).

In the final analysis Butler explains that the potential for melancholic agency lies in the melancholic incorporation of power and its subsequent deadening or inability to act unilaterally upon the subject. By offering a critique of the formation of identity in power, Butler affirms the political potential of melancholia when she intimates that agency lies in rejecting one’s ontological status and giving up any claims to coherence by “embracing, rather than repudiating, sexed and gendered ‘alterity’” (Salih, 2002: 133). Further, this requires acknowledging that “to persist in one’s being means to be given over from the start to social terms that are never fully one’s own” (Butler, 1997a: 197). This is a significant point in the context of this work because it begins to speak to a re-working of melancholia as a productive political and social presence which can disrupt repressive discourses via a shift to mourning, which, it seems, is what remains of melancholia.

**Butler in mourning**

I am interested in Butler’s recent shifts away from melancholia and towards mourning in both *Precarious Life* (2004a) and *Undoing Gender* (2004b), and the imperatives and implications of such a move. I believe these shifts signal a point in Butler’s work where melancholia becomes a workable, productive and usable resource rather than a lost and inassimilable remainder. Butler’s shift suggests to me that whilst not the same, the two terms could in fact be thought of as constitutive. Further, we are ‘marked’, not limited, by loss, and by wearing it on our bodies we are refusing to forget loss, to give it up, or to have it foreclosed. This creates a space for the creation of ‘new’ bodies, places, and ideals.

---

100 Following Freud the other can be an object, place or ideal. Also note the new language emerging here in Butler’s work - recognising, accepting, avowing, inaugurate, absorbing, and later acknowledging – characteristics generally ascribed to mourning not melancholia, and concepts which hint at melancholic consciousness.
Butler, like Freud eighty years before her, returned to her previous formulations of melancholia, especially with regards to consciousness. Explaining tentatively that, “mourning involves knowing what one has lost (and melancholia originally meant, to a certain extent, not knowing)” (Butler, 2004a: 22, my emphasis), Butler seems to lose her enthusiasm for melancholia as an explanation of various forms of psychic, ideal, bodily, and spatial loss. She replaces her enthusiasm for melancholia with a passionate discussion of mourning and the possibilities of re-configuring loss – and its associated affective experiences (shame, anger, guilt, despair, fear) – politically not violently. Whilst I am very supportive of this I do wonder about Butler’s motives. Why replace melancholia now with mourning? Is it perhaps to recognise, avow, inaugurate, absorb, acknowledge, accept and work with what remains of a nation riddled with loss, shame, guilt, vulnerability, fear and dread, one unable to comprehend what exactly has been lost and forced to respond with violent melancholic venom at a faceless enemy?

The work of Butler, and others\textsuperscript{101} breathes humanness into contemporary experiences of extreme, unimaginable and disavowed trauma and loss, bringing with it political agency through what remains of melancholia – feelings, memories, emotions, and mourning. Butler brings us back to earth with confronting ‘right now’ questions which challenge our concepts of humanity. In these texts she begs us to ask and answer: “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? What makes for a grievable life?” (Butler, 2004a: 20; Butler, 2004b: 17-18, italics in original). In a stark shift from her previous ideas of melancholic politics of performativity and drag, with these ‘new’ questions Butler (and also Cvetkovich) challenges us “to grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics” (Butler, 2004a: 30). Butler pleads for us to be disoriented by grief, to look beyond personal loss, and to develop an identification with suffering itself. By insisting that we understand and confront the very conditions of our own subjection, and additionally identify with the suffering of others, she marks each of us as the only person who can answer: “Who have I

\textsuperscript{101} See for example Cheng, 2000; Crimp, 2003; Cvetkovich, 2003a, 2003b; Eng & Han, 2003; Eng & Kazanjian, 2003; Lloyd, 2003; Min, 2003; Moten, 2003; Morris, 2003; Nichanian, 2003.
become? What is left of me? What is it in the Other that I have lost?” (Butler, 2004a: 30), and thus she continues to extend and challenge the limits of melancholic subjection.

In the *Afterword* of *Loss* Butler (2003) humbly closes the text with the idea that catastrophe leaves a permanent mark and so is not representable against a historical backdrop that offers little sense or meaning to experiences of indescribable suffering and loss. Loss, she argues, marks us for life, but that mark does not foreclose the possibility of charting a ‘new’ future precisely because it is always present, insuperable, and irrecoverable (Butler, 2003). In conclusion she states,

> It [loss] becomes the condition by which life is risked, by which the questions of whether one can move, and with whom, and in what way are framed and incited by the irreversibility of loss itself. (Butler, 2003: 472)

**WHAT REMAINS?**

In my work the ideas for a ‘new’ discourse of melancholia have grown from historical accounts of loss, and the work of Freud (1987a, 1987b) and Butler (1997a, 2003, 2004a). My own ideas have gained currency and direction from these views and also from a most remarkable edited book simply titled, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003). I would briefly like to describe what remains for me after reading this text and thus elucidate the underlying theoretical imperative of this chapter.

In an attempt to re-configure and politicise pathological discourses of mourning, Eng and Kazanjian (2003: 1) deploy a rethinking of Benjamin’s idea of ‘historical materialism’ as “a creative process, animating history for future significations as well as alternate empathies”. In doing so they position *Loss* from the counterintuitive perspective of presence rather than absence, working with ‘what remains’ rather than what is lost, lacking or no longer remains. Their project attempts to disrupt the restrictive enclosure of melancholia as negative and negated, and to re-position it as “productive rather than pathological, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 2). In the *Introduction*, Eng and Kazanjian drift back to Freudian
formulations of mourning and melancholia in order to describe a ‘different’ way of
framing, seeing and deploying melancholia, and in so doing expose its agentic possibilities.
I contend that they offer a ‘queer’ re-working of Freudian melancholia by suggesting that
working with what remains resists perpetuating pathologising accounts of melancholia, and
therefore I argue, (homo)sexuality. They explain that a deeper understanding of
melancholia, as implied by Freud would,

no longer insist on its pathological nature … We suggest that a better understanding
of melancholic attachments to loss might depathologize those attachments, making
visible not only their social bases but also their creative, unpredictable, political
aspects … In this regard, we find in Freud’s conception of melancholia’s persistent
struggle with its lost objects not simply a “grasping” and “holding” on to a fixed
notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains.
(Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 3-4)

Eng and Kazanjians’ refusal to separate out mourning from melancholia, or to position
melancholia as lacking creates a space for traumatic memories of past losses to become
productive resources of the present and future from which ‘new’ objects, places, and ideals
emerge. They argue that whilst “mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to
rest”,

melancholia’s continued and open relation to the past allows us to gain new
perspectives on and new understanding of lost objects … In this sense, melancholia
raises the question of what makes a world of new objects, places, and ideals
possible. (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 4)

On this point, and in conversation with Eng and Kazanjian, Butler (2003: 467) agrees,
suggesting that,

somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no
memory can retrieve it; a fractured horizon looms in which to make one’s way as a
spectral agency, one for whom a full “recovery” is impossible, one for whom the
irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency.

---

102 This refusal to separate is also implicit in the work of Crimp, 2003; Cvetkovich, 2003a, 2003b; Min, 2003;
This infers that there are persistent (though often indescribable and unrepresentable) traces of loss, either the space left by it or the space where it wasn’t that materialise the loss of a loss (Butler, 1993; Macheray, 2004). This vantage point provides a strong, positive and productive discourse because it offers a new “way to think about loss as constituting social, political, and aesthetic relations” (Butler, 2003: 467), and melancholia emerges as productively agentic.

From Freud’s (1987a) doubts we learn that the work of mourning is probably not possible without melancholia, and with Butler’s contribution we realise that melancholia is the very precondition for both the work of mourning and the ego (Butler, 1997a). Taking this idea further, Eng and Kazanjian (2003: 4) insightfully proffer that,

> it is precisely the ego’s melancholic attachments to loss that might be said to produce not only psychic life and subjectivity but also the domain of remains. That is, melancholia creates a realm of traces open to signification, a hermeneutic domain of what remains of loss.

Butler (2003: 468) adds that what remains, is a form of,

> melancholic agency who cannot know its history as the past, cannot capture its history through chronology, and does not know who it is except as the survival, the persistence of a certain unavowability that haunts the present.

In relation to ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘queer’ experiences of melancholia, wearing the ‘mark’ of histories of loss (violence, hatred, discrimination) provides a social and communal political rallying point, because “loss becomes the condition and necessity for a certain type of community” (Butler, 2003: 468) – one held together by common memories, feelings or senses of loss. What this opens is a kind of productive melancholic recuperation of loss that refuses to let go of the past and instead creatively animates it in the present for the future via acts of everyday mourning. This is a mourning for losses that keeps on feeling and remembering and so will always remain present in its absence. It is the kind of mourning that is necessarily endless because it anticipates both the insuperability and unimaginability of loss, and hence the endless necessity to feel, remember, and mourn.
‘New’ questions, representations, and alternative meanings

The primary goal of *Loss* is to rethink “modern and postmodern understandings of loss as a general and abstract, even metaphysical, condition of being” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 5) by insisting that “loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it” (p. 2). To this end the anthology includes essays which examine collective and individual experiences of twentieth century traumas such as war, genocide, slavery, AIDS, exile, migration, reunification, globalisation, revolution, culture, colonisation, and the loss of loss itself. By engaging with the countless struggles and memories of the past these essays position melancholia as engaged in an ongoing, active, unfixed, and dynamic process which is constitutive of the past, offering not fixity and closure but an animated form of politics. If loss is read in these ways then it follows that discourses of loss can be challenged, shifted and re-configured in ways which ‘deal’ with contemporary experiences of both ‘queer’ loss and ‘queer’ subjectivity. Rather than only seeing the catastrophic losses of bodies, spaces, and ideals of the twentieth century, Eng and Kazanjian, and the other writers in *Loss* also see the “psychic and material practices of loss and its remains”, and these remains, for them, are productive for both history and politics, because “avowals of and attachments to loss can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 5).

This call for ‘new’ questions and alternative meanings is also echoed by Cvetkovich (2003a), who by innervating experiences of trauma, loss and mourning with an affective everydayness is able to cleave open multiple sites (and discourses) to cultural and political resistance and re-writing. In doing so Cvetkovich offers memories, feelings and emotions as workable remains. Following Butler (1997a, 2003) this involves insisting upon a politic which melancholically incorporates power and so frees the ego and psyche to pursue agency, and following Benjamin this involves bearing “witness to the present” and keeping the “past steadfastly alive for the political work of the present” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 5). The impetus of *Loss* then becomes opening up the present by re-considering the past, and
reorienting both towards an unknown future. This necessitates placing “less emphasis on what is lost” and instead identifying and investigating,

the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of how loss is apprehended and history is named – how that apprehension and naming produce the phenomenon of “what remains.”

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, mourning remains. (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 6)

So instead of speaking of melancholia as a turning in on oneself about lost objects I propose the data to follow be read with a turning out of oneself onto what remains – feelings, memories, emotions, and mourning.

**Bodily, ideal and spatial remains**

Theorists such as Eng and Kazanjian (2003) and their colleagues, Cvetkovich (2003a), and Butler (1997a, 2003, 2004a) opened a door to me for an alternative re-reading and re-configuring of melancholia in terms of presence (psychic, physical and affective), and considering melancholic agency in terms of what remains of loss. It is my intention to contribute to this rethinking and reconfiguring of melancholia and in so doing to build upon the wonderful re-opening of loss, trauma, and mourning provided by these theorists in light of the participants’ passionate attachments to loss. This line of thinking drifts towards Butler’s (1997a) call for critical contemplation of the processes of subjection because it turns the lens back in and folds the words, feelings and memories back on themselves. This alternative view forms the basis of the theoretical analysis to follow.

The following analysis is structured using the section headings provided by Eng and Kazanjian (2003). The transcripts and poetry are therefore theorised and analysed in terms of Bodily remains, Ideal remains and Spatial remains of melancholia. Under each heading, in turn, I provide a brief description of the ‘remain’ from the work of Eng and

---

103 The sections are based upon the kinds of loss suggested by Freud, but for a more detailed explanation of how and why these headings emerged see Eng and Kazanjian (2003: pp. 7-23).
Kazanjian (2003) mainly via an extended quote. I then follow this with a poem or other texts from the research that I believe to be illustrative of a certain kind of remain from loss, and hence publicises the possibility of melancholic agency.

**BODILY REMAINS**

By recalling the ancient art of interpreting the volatile materiality of the body, the persistent notion of black bile focuses our attention on the ways bodies inhabit and are, in turn, inhabited by social constraint … we must consider how the productive constraints of melancholia materialize bodies … We suggest that this classical trace of melancholia’s corporeal origins calls attention to the twentieth century’s vigorous, often catastrophic, embodiments of loss. (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 8)

*The Black Oil (Scout)*

I don't have it any more so to try and remember how it feels ...
There's a lot of different things.
One of them was like this oil
It's like you have a car oil that is like going through your veins
    You can feel it
It like washes over your eyes
    You can feel it under your skin.
That's part of it … um …

The other thing is like you're drowning.
    Like you sort of feel it wash over your eyes
You can taste it almost
    It's in your body.

The above lines may well appear to be the words of Kristeva or perhaps even Benjamin on melancholia. These lines are from a participant in this research. In an interview, with these words she vividly and sensuously described the black oil in her body running through her veins, over her eyes, drowning her. The words also reveal a very specific resource that she has to make sense of this experience - therapy. This is not the only time Scout speaks of either black oil or drowning, later in the poem *The Easy Way*, Scout equates the oil with depression, thus giving the black bile meaning because it materialised her body in very

104 I am not a therapist, nor is this thesis based within psychology or psychotherapy. I am not claiming that depression is melancholia or that melancholia is depression, though after two casual conversations with psychotherapists I am led to believe that there are sharp similarities. I use depression as Scout’s word, and her
particular ways (‘It’s in your body’). Thus signalling infinite human variability and the melancholic body’s relevance in philosophy and politics, as well as everyday experiences of trauma (in her case sexual abuse) and loss. This materialisation doesn’t simply involve asking how bodies hear and see loss but also asking:

how specific sociohistorical losses see and hear bodies. How are embodied losses registered as historical events – at what costs and for what purposes? How is it that some bodies emerge, appear and materialize while others remain ghostly, disappear, or fade? What political possibilities do such embodied losses enable or disable? (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 8)

These questions revitalise Butler’s (1997a; 2004a) concerns about what counts as loss and what counts as a grievable life because they “attend to the ways abject and unlivable bodies do not simply lose intelligibility but also continue to be haunted by creative possibilities” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 8). In this section, Bodily remains, I “take up losses of [materially gendered] bodies whose meanings emerge from interpretations of their persistent and volatile material remains” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 9).

* * * * *

By analysing a photograph and two poems which signify a sense of embodied gender unnaturalness and difference, I consider the ways in which Tabitha is able to imagine, articulate, and materialise a differently gendered body from what remains of her sadness at losing her ‘boyhood’ hero Huck Finn. I further contemplate how she has consciously incorporated and mourned this figure with specific attention to the (im)possibilities of mourning an embodied gender which is from the start foreclosed. The fourth text analysis in this section is of a poem titled, Fly Boy which was formed from the words of Scout. Through this poem I extend my consideration of conscious embodied loss when I theorise Scout’s ‘girl’ gendered body as abject because it was the body responsible for her childhood abuse. I am interested in the ways in which Scout’s imaginary childhood ‘boy’ meaning making of the oil that swept through her body using the resource of therapy. I draw an intriguing discursive parallel with the ancient humoral concept of black bile.

---

219
body could have prevented or protected her from the abuse perpetrated on her ‘girl’ body. The memories invoked of her small girl body are tinged with melancholic loss but there is a necessary presence of mourning in what remains that helps her to make sense of her same-sex desire and to reconcile her abjection.

By reflecting upon the ways in which Tabitha and Scout are able to cite and materialise a ‘boy’ body I specifically examine Butler’s (1997a) contention that the potential for melancholic agency lies in the melancholic incorporation of power and its subsequent deadening or inability to act unilaterally upon the subject. I explore the idea that an imaginable loss is a conscious loss by carefully teasing out the idea that a ‘boy’ is both imagined and imaginable to these women because they believe they have actually been it (a boy) in both their minds and bodies at particular places and times, and even continue to be that boy (often at time of their choosing and with specific intent, for example, to disrupt a space or views of colleagues). In this way their stories have a parodic effect because the women have deliberately maintained and nurtured this boy all through their lives thus leaning on the normative discourses that did not permit them to be a boy in the first place.

It is precisely this imagination that makes it ‘real’ and so the loss of it is also real and conscious. That is, I contend, Tabitha’s and Scout’s gender melancholia is imaginable to them and therefore conscious, and this is displayed in the tender ways in which they return to the remains. For me it follows to ask, could not a conscious knowing and acknowledgment of such an intense and incomprehensible loss provide the place from which agency is enacted? In this way gender melancholia - imagining being the boy - not only vindicates who and how they are but also creates a phantasmically non-conforming body that remains in the spaces of their memories and on their adult bodies, all the while parodically shattering an ideal that failed to regulate their bodies in ‘normal’ ways.

This signifies a point from which to rupture the very notions and discourses that have subjected them as ‘wrong’ or ‘different’, and foreclosed being a boy. This also involves exploring the other boy who emerges when the ‘real’ boy is lost, the tomboy. I argue that acknowledging and recognising one’s gendered and sexed ‘difference’ (as suggested by
Butler) can involve the further choice of either accepting, deferring or denying it. In this sense the images and words have a citational and agentic effect because for them to say ‘I was a boy’ or ‘I am a boy’ materialises the boy they never were (recall that the idea of the never-never is part of Butler’s theorising around melancholia). Tabitha and Scout both express sadness and regret at the apparent loss of their boy because it is not ‘normal’ for them to say, think or imagine such a thing, and yet they cling to the idea as a way in which to make sense of themselves, and their sexuality and gender. In short, whilst they are free to mourn this boy they have refused to give him up, but instead incorporate and nurture the image or ideal that remains.

These against the grain readings guide my ‘working with what remains’ of ghostly, hazy, magical, non-conforming and melancholic bodies and the political possibilities presented by such bodies. A view from this angle invites searching for what remains of the bodies, the feelings, and the memories when they are returned to and mourned. Through the words of Tabitha and Scout I consider the gendered embodiment of mourning from the traces of what remains of their stories and their sometimes magically materialised bodies.

**Tabitha**

Karen: Okay tell me all about what you’ve got here [referring to an image Tabitha brought to interview]

Tabitha: This is my only piece of evidence for my own peace of mind, to some extent it gives me peace of mind because once I started looking back at my sexuality and all that stuff, one of the key things is that I guess I was looking for proof which is kind of not very politically correct but I was looking for proof to say why am I like this, why am I different … This picture is a picture of me and I guess I'm about four … and I'm dressed in, and this is significant …
From the age of four (Tabitha)

From the age of four
I was old enough to make choices about what I wanted to wear.
I wanted to dress like a boy
that's how
I felt the most comfortable and the most natural.
From the age of four
I was just being me without any influences of society.
I didn't know anything else being me was wearing boy's clothes and feeling good about it.
From the age of four
I was told that I was different
It wasn't until I was told that that it had an effect on me just being told that you are different all the time.
And that's my struggle (it has always been)
being told that
I'm different.
I look at this photograph
this is when I never knew what different was
I was just being me.

Image 6.1: Huck Finn (Tabitha)
Huck Finn (Tabitha)

I have a terrible memory of my life, (of significant events)
a lot I don't remember.
This is my only piece of evidence (it gives me peace of mind)
I was looking for proof (which is kind of not very politically correct)

But I was looking for proof to say Why am I like this?
    Why am I different?
I had a significant moment or reaction to this picture.
This picture is a picture of me. (I guess I'm about four)
It's taken on the driveway of my family home
where I was raised for my entire life, we never moved.
The person standing next to me is my oldest friend,
she lived across the road.
The way I'm standing is hilarious
    ... and this is significant ...
Holding what looks like (if I were a boy)
    my penis or grabbing my nuts.
But I don't have any ... (That's just what I do, I still do that now)
I'm dressed in ...
    ... and this is significant ...
My mother has obviously put me in the mode shorts and the halter neck top.
I have gone nuts; want to wear
    a tie
    my beanie
    a little bag with a stick on it, like Huckleberry Finn (I used to love Huck Finn; to walk in the bush with my little Huck Finn rucksack)

I wanted to
    ... wear boys clothes (like a boy) I hated wearing girls clothes!
    ... play boy sports (like a boy) I hated girl sports!
    ... feel comfortable in pants (like a boy) I don't wear dresses or skirts!
People just laugh.
I wanted to dress like a boy.
That's how I feel most comfortable, most natural,
most self-expressed.
I was just being me.
(Wearing boy's clothes and feeling good about it but starting to feel confused and frustrated)

What I really feel is confused
    about wanting to wear boys clothes
    and being told to wear girls clothes.
Before proceeding I must say that I have found it very difficult to delineate between the concept of bodily remains and ideal remains with regards to the kind of data collected from Tabitha and Scout. It is clear to me that the following discussions highlight the connections between gender and heterosexuality as embodied ideals. So whilst I have separated out bodily and ideal remains into separate sections I do not suggest that what follows is not about ideals, nor that what follows that is not about bodies.

Despite her ‘terrible memory’ Tabitha felt compelled to find ‘proof’ of her sexed ‘self’ through an image of her gendered self. She explained that she offered the photograph as evidence or proof (to herself and me) of her authentic ‘core self’, and as a way in which to explain herself today because the image signifies how she was ‘naturally’ meant to be. She explained that ‘it is the essence of who I am. Not the same, not different, just me … he’s my brand’ (private correspondence, 17th March, 2006). This proof finding process was a significant and essential part of her sense of being ‘different’, and the image carries a burden of ‘proof’. That is, throughout her life she has felt the need to prove her naturalness, authenticity, embodiment, gender, sexuality, desirability, and grievability. Her need for proof signifies the (im)possible choices about whether to accept or renounce her non-normative body and its implicated ‘different’ identities, and associated shame and guilt. It also signals the ongoing troubles associated with maintaining any identity.

‘Acting like a boy was first nature for me’

Tabitha’s image and poems seem to infer that had ‘society’ (and her mother) not tried to change her she may well have stayed an innocent, ‘natural’, pure, authentic, unproblematic, neutral, ‘boy’. It seems that from four onwards she sensed she was being moulded into a

---

105 The age of four is significant here because before age four her mother dressed her and so may have considered this body as gender neutral to a point, and it wasn’t until it continued to behave in inappropriately gendered ways that it became a problematic body, one which needed regimenting and regulating. Today, Tabitha retains her Huck Finn body and still sees it as problematic because of how others ‘read’ it, how it changes spaces, and how it still continues to not conform. This highlights her attachments to a ‘lesbian’ identity which now makes her body meaningful.
particular kind of normatively gendered subject against her will, and against the materiality of her body. Her ‘natural’ will or desire being to dress herself, move and be like a boy.

Tabitha: I think acting like a boy was first nature for me. It’s like it’s what I’ve been from the day I was born. It’s kind of like I don’t have a choice this is just who I am.

I am interested in how Tabitha used the image to evoke feelings of nostalgic sadness that repeatedly constituted a sense of bodily loss. For Min (2003) this is representative of a subtle artistic allusion of being stuck between the past and the present by representations that give life, reactivate, and animate lives and experiences. Tabitha’s image posed such allusions, and her search for ‘proof’ was finely balanced between fact and fiction, space and time, boy and girl, image and imagination, sameness and difference.

The Huck Finn image plays an ongoing and peculiarly significant role in Tabitha’s adult sense of self, understandings of herself and her investments in her ‘differences’, and hence in her attachments to a ‘lesbian’ identity and affirmations of coherence. He metaphorically represents her ‘boyhood’, the clothes further signify the boy, and without a doubt in her mind Tabitha headed off into the bush, in love with Huck or at least the embodied image he represented (boyness, freedom, adventure, masculinity, ‘naturalness’). She has made him essential to her assertion that her body represents a certain type of non-conforming gendered self because the image proves,

that without any influence of society and society expectations of what a little girl should be … I was just being me because I didn't know anything else and me was wearing boy's clothes and feeling good about it.

The image represents a material body - her little ‘boy’ body - that has been lost since the age of four and still haunts her embodied adulthood. It is significant to her because it clarifies or justifies the way she is (and was) ‘naturally’ and inevitably - right down to how she now still comically holds herself by the ‘nuts’. She perceives her posture, gestures and acts as gendered boy, not at all like a girl because she simply hated anything to do with being ‘girled’. Tabitha’s refusal to be girled represents a stand against gender conformity.
To further prove her point she even stands up to her mother (who arguably represents social regulatory power), and re-dresses herself. This defiance is another significant act for her.

At the end of this interview Tabitha renounced the Huck Finn image because instead of proving, ‘it's just the way I am and it's okay’, after our conversations around it, the image made her intensely self reflective and sad.

**It makes me sad having had this discussion it just points out for me that it's kind of sad what happened.**

(Excerpt from *Be Different*)

This comment heralded for me a kind of return to the lost image and a shift to mourning the boyhood remains. The comment and how she spoke to me quietly about Huck, lovingly holding the image, suggests she is mourning\(^\text{106}\), and the agency in this lies in the idea that her mourning consistently returns her to the remains, and re-animates the photograph (and the boy). Through mourning she accepted she was different and that her non-conforming body was what created her sense of difference. The photograph materialises and signifies her difference, marks it out, but in a nostalgic rather than melancholic sense (‘I was just being me’). She recently explained to me that she regularly returns to this image as a kind of ‘reference point’ or check in point to her ‘core self’. Rather than intense sadness or a sense of loss, the image aids her adult sense of self. Tabitha believes that as she moves closer to greater understanding and self acceptance that she is moving closer to Huck Finn (private correspondence, 17\(^\text{th}\) March, 2006).

Tabitha can mourn her lost boy because she has experienced him and materialised him through her words and the image. He is not just imagined. What remains is a narrative that sensuously and emotively participates in a kind of melancholic deferral or resistance to closure (Luciano, 2003). In this sense deferral simply means being once barred from mourning, but upon return now engaged with it. Nichanian (2003) suggests this experience resonates with Holocaust and Genocide ‘survivors’, and I now suggest also with lesbians in

\(^{106}\) I’m unsure here of whether she is mourning her lost boy, or her lost girl.
relation to gender melancholia. The value of this lies in the affect of leaving the image and words open to re-interpretation and re-signification because it represents a kind of mourning that is not possible, unreal, or in a Butlerian sense foreclosed. Min (2003) maintains that deferring and or denying loss is productive in that it re-situates melancholia metaphorically as becoming. She develops this view by suggesting that the desire to want or have, the refusal to let go, or remaining attached to lost objects requires reflection, fluidity, turning, and ‘acting out’ (for example in the case of gender melancholia Butler associates with drag).

The photograph of Tabitha as Huck Finn represents a paradox because it offers a confronting dialectic between reality and unreality, grievability and ungrievability, naturalness and unnaturalness, image and imagination, gender and sex, mourning and melancholia. It also provides a parody of a parody because it is able to illuminate the tenuousness of the so-called facticities of naturalised sex and gender. By returning to it, looking at it, and talking about it she denied the possibility of foreclosure precisely because that is what prompted the opening in the first place (Moten, 2003). Tabitha refused or deferred this foreclosure by continually returning to the image despite its unreproducibility and unreality (Moten, 2003). Drawing on Nichanian (2003) I describe this as refusing the impossibility of imagining loss, and what this refusal shows is that perhaps the limits of the imagination may well mark the limits of mourning, and hence melancholic subjectivity.

**Becoming Huck Finn**

If we view ‘be different’ as a citation intended to shame107, then it becomes apparent that to reject or otherwise deny that citation contains a rebellion against normative concepts of

---

107 Tomkins (1963/1995) (cited in Probyn, 2004) argues that we each have a series of paired ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ affects which are innate and include shame-humiliation, anger-rage, contempt-disgust, distress-anguish, surprise-startlement, enjoyment-joy, and interest-excitement. Tomkins considers affect to be more than mere emotional responses or feelings, and suggests they are, instead, experienced on and in the body to such a degree that we cannot think about the body outside of them (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995). Does this ring a melancholic bell? For Tomkins then, affects allow us to “recognise the differences between the inside and the outside of the body”, and they seem to have a memory because they also produce “bodily knowledge” (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995: 22). When an emotion like shame is viewed as an affect it takes on a uniquely
gender. Butler (1993) suggests that this can be achieved if we rethink gender performativity in terms of the normative citations which produce viable subjects. She explains,

To the extent that the naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates a process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a “girl,” however, who is compelled to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. (Butler, 1993: 232)

Tabitha was ritually cited as a ‘girl’ but could never become the viable girl her mother desired simply because such a girl or her femininity do not exist. It was, in essence, a citational impossibility, an unobtainable object, and in a Butlerian sense, a bluff (thus exposing gender as performative and heterosexuality as allegorical). Her subsequent investments in being different could therefore be viewed as subversive because she refused to ‘cite’ herself as a viable subject (she could be neither girl or boy, feminine or masculine).

Year after year Tabitha silently but actively defied (and invested in – the subject in/of power) her mother’s citation to ‘be different’ by refusing to give up her lost boy and thus refusing to incorporate the shame associated with such mourning. In the process she has refused to conform to social expectations of gender and even sex (as seen by her considerations of transgenderism) and also sexuality. By not foreclosing on her imaginative boy hero, and even today still using him to strengthen her denials of normative gendered ways of being and doing, I argue that Tabitha defers gender melancholia and inscribes it as a part of her becoming. This requires thinking about what remains, and therefore what can be reclaimed from shame. In developing this idea I refer to Min’s (2003: 233) use of Agamben’s imagining of “melancholia as a metaphor of becoming”. Eng and Kazanjian

melancholic nature. It also assumes that like melancholia, we are all capable of experiences of shame, either shaming or being shamed. In theoretical terms this also extends the critique of the supposed integrity and ‘naturalness’ of the body. In practical terms it means that many ‘queers’ wear both their melancholia and shame on their bodies, and also that it is the intention of shameful citations (or injurious speech) to inflict more shame and melancholia onto the non-conforming body in an attempt to regulate or adjust it. I suggest this situates shame and melancholia as mutually constitutive. I am hence very interested in how shame contributes to melancholic subjectivity.

108 I say defer because at times she still feels shame associated with her non-conforming body, but she also reworks it in ways which gather strength and offer points of resistance, subversion and agency simply because she continues to repudiate the so-called realities of gender and sex.
(2003: 13) similarly suggest that Agamben’s “melancholia materializes the ghostly remains of an unrealised or idealized potential – the unreal image of an unobtainable object that never was and hence never was lost”.

Perhaps what Tabitha reclaims from the ruins of shame are unrealised and idealised memories and feelings not so much of being Huck Finn, but of becoming Huck Finn – ‘an object that never was and hence was never lost’. That is, becoming her ‘self’ and crafting her ‘self’ over time from the remains of gender shame.

I’m not like them

Tabitha knows she upsets and unsettles gender stereotypes and places by simply having her body and being in place, for instance when she says, ‘I'll walk into a room (I've made a conscious effort not to conform in the way that I dress)’. Ironically by stating she deliberately goes against social expectations she is also reinforcing her investments in being different (despite the fact that she hated being hailed to be different she now exploits it). I read this as agentic because her sense of difference also provides a sense of power, a melancholic re-incorporation of power if you like. The following excerpt from Be Different reinforces this view.

It's about my appearance and my sexuality.
The way I look and how I dress.
Like a boy.
When I stand in a room full of my corporate colleagues,
    they're all pissed,
acting like absolute idiots I'm
different to them.
I can feel my mind thinking that,
    when I'm talking to them,
when I'm having photos taken with them,
I'm conscious of being
different to them.

So a re-reading of the above, in line with Butler's (1993) idea of parody, sees Tabitha derive pleasure in dressing differently, and behaving differently to others at work, and thus
emerged as a figure in drag; a disruptive force that confronts place (in this case her workplace), gender (I’m like a boy, but not like these boys, and I’m like a girl but not like these girls), and sexuality (I’m not going home with any of these drunk idiots) by virtue of the performative nature of her ‘queer’ body.

Recalling the work of Min (2003), and Eng and Kazanjian (2003) I hence claim that the idealised remains of Huck Finn provide Tabitha with a space for re-imagining her difference by materialising the unobtainable. In this sense Tabitha uses ‘queer’ strategies to disrupt her workplace and thus exposes the incoherence of normative gender, sex and sexuality by “converting the abjection and exclusion of non-sanctioned sexed and gendered identities into political agency” (Salih, 2002: 91). She does this by noting emphatically to herself (in the last lines) that she is not the same as the people around her, that she is different to them but not ‘abnormal’. By renouncing the negative citation of difference she thus exposes their sameness, and both their attempts and failings at being normatively gendered and sexed bodies themselves. Her difference ruptures the power of normative discourses and shifts the so-called gender ‘problem’ onto them. They are the ones trying to be the same, to be the impossible boy or girl that is cited through normative gendered discourses.

In the reclamation of her difference Tabitha reveals her colleagues’ own constant struggles to maintain and regulate a sexed and gendered order, and highlights her refusal to do so. She looks at them problematically (reversing the gaze she often gets), and scrutinises all of the sexed and gendered ways in which they are cited to be ‘normal’, be like each other, and not be ‘different’. Her embodied presence lays bare the processes by which a normative gender is rendered unachievable for everyone and this is made all the more apparent when her colleagues are pissed. Today, for her, the risks of exposure as a gender fraud (that is, people will discover she isn’t Huck Finn) is consciously and strategically weighed up against the overwhelmingly grounded and ‘real’ sense of belonging, freedom and acceptance that she feels as Huck Finn in her ‘gay community’, and amongst her friends, but also against the impossibility of a natural order of gender for both her and her work colleagues.
Returning to the remains: imagining and mourning the boy

I would like to return to the image of Tabitha and pose the question, what makes her sad? Her upbringing? What her mother said? Losing Huck? Is she sad that the world changed her into a girl? Is she sad that the image no longer gives her ‘proof’ of her naturalness or authenticity? Now, when she looks at the image does it remind her that she can never be a boy, never was the boy, and so could never-never have lost him?

Regardless of which question we lean towards what she has experienced and experiences now is certainly without a doubt, sad at times. She has lost a deep connection to her boy self that back then, as now, sustained and made her. Made in the sense that in her imagination and through this image she actually was, once (and maybe still is), Huck Finn. I contend that her acknowledgement of the fiction of the image serves as a starting point for conceptualising her melancholic becoming from what remains of the image.

The image is representative of a past so pure and believable that it was experienced as ‘real’. Her ‘boy’ emerged from a melancholic repudiation of gender that could be read as a kind of cathartic identification in that to imagine is to identify with, and to hence identify oneself (Nichanian, 2003). So what remains from this is the notion that this image provides much more than proof. It provides a critical rupture in her sense of loss of her boyhood simply by suggesting that to be a boy might have happened, could happen or even did happen … in her imagination. This repudiation, and its repeated exposure (through the image) could therefore be considered an act of disrobing gendered ideals; and for Tabitha gender melancholia emerged as a resource for working with the imaginable remains of the past.

In the interview after the one containing the text presented here, Tabitha reported reflecting upon what she had said, how it made her feel, and what it meant to her. She explained it in terms of internal homophobia. I’d like to discuss this comment quickly by going back to Butler’s idea that in order for agency to come from melancholia we have to do two things.
Firstly, we have to identify with the ‘face’ and suffering of (an)other by repudiating ourselves as somehow different, ‘better’, more precarious and hence more grievable than the other (Butler, 2004a). Secondly, she insists that we each come to acknowledge, understand and confront the very conditions of our own subjection by marking, probing and mourning the boundaries of it (Butler, 1997a). So it seems that perhaps Tabitha went away and began to question the limits of her self-construction (Luciano, 2003), coming back with,

Tabitha: I think after our session, that’s the first time I had a profound awareness of how much I had to suppress myself over the years … I went through this really full on stage of just going “oh my god I am internally homophobic I actually hate who I am, you know I’m not comfortable about being a lesbian” and I went through this really deep kind of period where I was pretty down on myself and really questioning myself for a couple of months.

Now the question emerges, does Tabitha’s ‘discovery’ of her gender melancholia (in her own terms as internal homophobia) now signal a kind of mourning because she recognises and accepts it? Well maybe, yes. Perhaps she hurts more now knowing what she knows, and she is mourning what remains - the feelings and memories, as well as her shame of her shame? Theorising melancholia as/through internal homophobia allowed her to use a term that she was familiar with. This enabled her to see and explain her own gender melancholia as internal homophobia in herself, against herself, in others, and against others. She was able to explain that she had indeed lost something. And even though she may never know exactly what she lost in Huck, she accepts her loss, and is empowered by it.

Tabitha: Yeah and then I just reached a level of comfort with it where I understand how powerful it is for me to actually understand that side of me now. Then I started to look at my mother and understand that as well.

During the course of the interviews Tabitha began to reconfigure her loss, and in the process to redefine the limits of her own subjection. She found comfort in the process of acknowledging her self-loathing (melancholia) and worked with what remains.
Tabitha: … and now I just have a level of comfort to go “yeah this is a big part of me” and “yeah I’m a lesbian”.
Karen: So a big part of you was realising that you were a lesbian or a big part of you was realising this fear around acknowledging that.
Tabitha: Yes both, but I think I’ve done more work on the latter, the fear around acknowledging it than that I am a lesbian.

In this sense Tabitha’s grief has both undone and re-constituted her sense of self. Free to now grieve the ungrievable (Huck), Tabitha reclaimed her embodied difference and vulnerability (and investments in it) in an act of defiance. This is an important political act says Butler (2004a), because whilst we are each entitled to claim autonomy over our own bodies such claims need to be made politically not individually, and in spite of our desires to reconstitute our ‘self’ as if it always existed.

Scout

_Fly Boy_ (Scout)

All the girls (and there were heaps of girls)
I was … always friends with lots of girls (I never had a lot of male friends)
      … never wore dresses
      … just accepted (Yeah)
      … like their little boy.
They would treat me as if I was their little boy.
We played mum's and dad's
they would make me the man;
   “You have to kiss when you come home”
I'm like    "But they're not kissing you"
   "No only you do"
I don't know how many girls tried to teach me how to kiss
They had a lot more knowledge,
they were always very willing.
So in some sort of way in kid's land, (maybe)
   kids sense stuff, (maybe they could see all of that)
   subconsciously, (maybe we all could)
   I don't know.
It was weird
   I'd always say to god or whoever (and that was the thing)
   if I could be a boy
   if you could just make me a boy
   then it would be okay to be with women.
I so desperately wanted to be a boy.
   I would pray every night.
   I just kept praying if you
      could make me a boy. If you
         can't do that …
         can you make me fly?
   Just some little things.       (the only two things I want ever)
To wake up every morning and be
totally
   disappointed
completely,
   utterly
shattered

Laying in my bed                (I'm eleven)
   … dreaming …             (having full on sexual fantasies)
   … dreaming …           (at the age of nine or ten)
      … chicks …
      … women …
      … kissing me all over …
      … watching …
      … music, actors …
         … I was a guy, a man, a boy …
      … to be Rod Stewart …
         … so I could get all the girls …
      … all these chicks in my bed …
         … kissing me all over …

It's like a boy's wet dream,
   … almost …
   … but I was a girl.

In my own head
   I was a boy,
      they were kissing me,
   I was a man.       (I couldn't quite understand how)
                  (I wondered what the hell it meant)
                  (Maybe that’s why I wanted to be a boy?)

From the age of three something changed in my head
If I was a boy?

   Maybe?
   Maybe?
   “Do you know what,
      maybe,
         maybe,
      if I was a boy …
      I wouldn’t have been sexually abused”
Scout’s play life with friends functioned to provide her with a place and opportunity to play the boy, but it was not of her choosing. It was the other girls who made her ‘their little boy’ she simply complied with their wishes and indulged their need to practice kissing. What Scout never doubted was their affection, love and attention, but what she did doubt, or was ambivalent about was her non-conforming girl body which made their genuine love impossible. Scout said she knew what she was doing wasn’t quite ‘right’, but because they had control, made her the man, and told her what to do, then she could readily comply. It was them not her, who were willing. They knew she wasn’t a boy, and even subconsciously (‘kid’s sense stuff’) knew she was not straight either. They encouraged her to kiss them, and so to live out her fantasies (and potentially there’s as well) in ‘kid’s land’ as well as dream land.

Scout makes sense of this event by relegating it to the realm of the unconscious, unthinkable (and perhaps ungrievable). It is interesting that both Scout and Tabitha chose to tell a story of gender non-conformity from their childhood, and then proceeded, in the interview space, to make sense of the experiences in terms of fanciful childhood concepts (dreams, Huck Finn, Rod Stewart, flying), like their bodies, thoughts and desires were somehow not ‘real’. The males chosen to be their ‘model’ represented significantly hegemonic versions of masculinity. So the man they dreamed they were was a ‘real’ man, in contrast to their not so real ‘woman’ or girl (not a ‘good enough’ girl and not a ‘good enough’ boy). This again brings to the fore the effect of discourse on gender formation, the fragile nature of identities, and the implications of not conforming. In their stories they still seem to equate the idea of being a boy or being with girls as not quite right, not ‘normal’, for Tabitha ‘different’ and for Scout simply ‘wrong’. In this way, even today, they appear to carry an unexplainable burden of guilt, shame, and confusion which exemplifies the citational power of the threat of shameful expulsion and exclusion. They remain haunted in adult life by what they were told iteratively and continuously to be ‘normal’ gender and sexual behaviour.

\[109\] I am not suggesting that these hauntings are always negative or problematic, they are quite simply, productive.
When she was young Scout could not make sense of her attraction to girls (and later the experience of ‘being’ lesbian), because she thought about it in terms of gender, that is, she is not a boy so these things are not allowed – they were simply ‘wrong’\textsuperscript{110}. In some way Scout carried a burden of guilt associated with her erotic attraction to women that she cannot either explain or accept (except perhaps at the end of the poem where she draws upon her experiences in therapy). For her, the very idea that a girl could love another girl is as fantastic as being able to fly. In this sense she has an idea(l) of what is ‘real’ and possible, but also what is ‘unreal’ and improbable, but still imaginable. Her fantastic dream and (im)possible request to ‘god or whoever’ suggests she knew that being a boy or being turned into a boy was highly unlikely - about as unlikely as being able to fly - but still she imagined the possibility of both (‘night after night’) all the while justifying her attraction to women to herself as an equally as fanciful concept. It is interesting that her dream life became the place where such things were not only possible but enabled. In her dreams she was a boy, a man, Rod Stewart, and women kissed her all over, leaving her guilt free to explore the dreamy reality of a ‘boy’s wet dream’.

Scout: … I just so wanted to be Rod Stewart … like I wanted to be that guy singing on stage so I could get all the girls. I couldn't quite understand how.

Scout’s confusion about what was happening to her, as well as her non-conforming gendered body, and erotic dreams about women were negotiated within a very limited set of discourses (and childhood understandings) which positioned her as an unviable subject. She yearned to be Rod Stewart but it never happened. And this was what she could never understand.

\textsuperscript{110} Some of this poem and other interview text hints at homosexual melancholia associated with being a ‘lesbian’ (and what that means, and doesn’t mean and entails). Scout doesn’t explain this in terms of a lost heterosexuality (that is not being straight or having straight things, having lost certain signifiers of heterosexuality), but rather in terms of her lost boy. In this way I argue that gender precedes and is complicit in the formation of sexual subjectivity. I also suggest this indicates a primary loss of gender identification and associated melancholia before a loss of heterosexual identification. I contend that for Scout and Tabitha mourning the boy serves as a metaphor for mourning all of their losses and differences, as well as a process of acknowledging their losses and therefore of melancholic agency.
Scout was not like the other girls, and whilst she may well have been their ‘play thing’, she made deliberate choices and used them to make sense of what was happening in her waking life, but also to hide away from it. Throughout the whole poem we see Scout continuing to try to make sense to her adult and child selves, and to provide me with details about exactly why she wanted to be a boy. In the final lines she tells me very tentatively that maybe (maybe), the reason she so dreamed and desired to have a boy’s body was not for the erotic and uncomplicated touch of women she associated with masculinity, and hence heterosexuality, but because with her girl body she was sexually abused, and,

“Do you know what,
maybe,
maybe,
if I was a boy …
I wouldn’t have been sexually abused”

In the poem Scout implies that if she was a boy then perhaps her feelings for women would not only be acceptable, but also, maybe, the things that happened to her would not have occurred. Instead of mourning the boy she thought she was she mourns the boy she wanted to be. The boy who could protect her and help her to understand a whole lot of things about how she was, and what had happened to her as a child.

Being a boy or being able to fly was a way for Scout to escape the unwanted touch of another. She wanted to, no needed to hide her girl body so that it was not violated, not rendered the object of another’s perverse desire. A desire that is still for her incomprehensible (even after therapy) and still terribly embodied (recall Black Oil). She does not remember who took her little girl away, only that she was irretrievably lost and silenced.

Scout: I think that person, that little girl got lost and squashed and I think there were so many more things that she still wanted to express.

In this regard Scout’s gender melancholia could be seen as based upon a loss of something ideal like childhood innocence (she recalls hardly remembering a thing about her life
between age 3 and 16). It could also be prompted by the loss (stealing, silencing) of her little girl, or the violation of her ‘girl’ body. Maybe it represents the guilt or shame attached to the pleasure of kissing girls or the loss of the pleasure or enjoyment of it? Perhaps it also marks the loss of a boy who could have ‘saved’ her, or at least prevented the abuse from occurring – maybe? Viewed in any way her loss was traumatic and immense, and it remains upon her, and inside her.\footnote{At this point I just wish to implicate gender melancholia in the formation of her gendered and sexed subjectivities. I want to avoid foreclosing on her words by pathologising her or making readings of her that I am unqualified to make.}

\textit{A boy who could fly}

Could it be that the acknowledgement or acceptance of what one is not is a key ‘symptomatic’ of melancholia? Or that what both Tabitha and Scout are grieving is the absence of their boy, not the boy himself? In this way perhaps melancholia could be viewed as mourning the absence of the lost love object (rather than the object itself), or the idea of the loss, the loss of the loss, the never-never (Macheray, 2004). This introduces a spatial aspect to melancholia where what remains of what was never there becomes more important than who or what was lost. These musings lead me to assert that perhaps the effects of melancholia, or some forms of melancholia have degrees of consciousness. That is, melancholia has effects on the subject that they may not perceive, and these effects have degrees of consciousness. In short, maybe Scout and Tabitha were conscious of their melancholic subjectivity in that they knew who they had lost in terms of object, place or ideal (Huck Finn, Rod Stewart, a normative concept of gender or heterosexuality), but not necessarily what they had lost in these things (a sense of self, the ‘boy’, innocence, safety, love, bodily melancholia). These things were consciously deferred, not lost, because they were never there to be lost. The idea that melancholia is unconscious is not lost altogether here, instead it provides a compelling argument for degrees of consciousness. By keeping consciousness open in this way I suggest that potentially the melancholic’s final mortal trap may be \textit{consciously} knowing or at least being able to imagine \textit{what} she has lost, what stands to be lost, or what is at stake as a result of the loss. There is something unsettling and
strangely powerful about thinking about melancholia in this way. I believe this presents a threatening sense of both despair and exuberance which can simultaneously reinforce deep sadness and re-instate strength from what remains. The mortal trap becomes a trap door … into a *Never-land*.

What remains for me in Scout’s text is a little boy who could fly. He could kiss and be kissed, dance, sing, play guitar, act, and pick up chicks. He made a time that was unimaginable and reprehensible, tangible and comprehensible. Whilst he did not protect Scout from others he could take her to safe places where girls could kiss girls, girls could be boys, and where they could all fly. Like Peter Pan the boy appeared to Scout in dreams and child play as a saviour, not lost but pulling her through the remains of her traumatic childhood life. This boy, who could not prevent the little girl from being abused, took pleasure in the dream world, and allowed desire for the undesirable to smoulder. A desire which was also nurtured and permitted, at times, in the ‘real’ world by attentive and understanding girl friends, who maybe knew what was going on (Scout’s abuse as well as her sexuality) but still treated her lovingly and unconditionally as ‘their’ little boy. They owned him/her, and s/he was very happy about that. What remains now, for both Tabitha and Scout, is the memory of a boy who never was and so never could be lost; an imaginable boy (and boyhood), for whom anything, even flying - and certainly kissing girls - was possible.

**Imagining and reclaiming loss**

The image, poems and texts presented exemplify the process by which Tabitha and Scout have tried to, and continue to try to, make sense of their non-conforming gendered bodies and the ideals of femininity and masculinity variously ascribed to them. They also expose the limited discourses that they both have ever drawn upon in order to understand their ambivalently embodied gender. Whilst both women seem ambivalent towards their gendered bodies they are at the same time, in some way, very attached to it, invested in it, and nostalgic about it. This, for me, becomes the point at which melancholia can be shifted because what is absent or lost may be relatively easy to chart but what remains requires
optimistic vigilance and a belief that experiences of loss need not always be negative or in some way lacking. Tabitha and Scout appear nostalgic about their experiences but are more keenly engaged with and invested in what remains of them, and their past.

Tabitha’s image introduced a nostalgic aspect to melancholic gender and when clarified with an iconic representation of boyhood, like Huck Finn, the image animated adventure, mystery, independence, and desire. Tabitha proudly displayed the image not to prove coherence but rather to materialise her boy body, to bring him back. Scout is kissed by chicks, and this materialises the rockstar. For Tabitha and Scout it seemed as though a certain kind of boyness was imaginable (if only in their imagination, in their bushland, and their dreams) because they had had it, had felt it, had lived it, had believed it. I suggest that Tabitha and Scout are able to mourn the loss of this boy and boyhood because he had been incorporated as a part of their sense of self. He is, therefore, very ‘real’, personally meaningful, achievable, thinkable, and so counts as grievable.

In this sense the image and texts represent a potentially subversive corporeal body, a body that confronts and questions the very discourses upon which normative understandings of gender and sexual identity are grounded. That is, both Tabitha’s and Scout’s bodies beg the questions ‘what is a boy?’ and ‘what is a girl?’ This body, as now conceived and constituted, sends a clear message that not only is there no answer to these questions but that there is also no question, and no guarantee of bodily (gender or sex) authenticity.

IDEAL REMAINS

In this section, Ideal remains, I am interested in the loss of ideal notions of gender (femininity and masculinity) and heterosexuality appearing in the words of the participants. The loss of these ideals appears to have affected the ways in which the participants have made sense of their ‘selves’, constructed their senses of self, experienced and explained their bodies, and looked at the world and others.
In working through the concept that we seem to attach our ‘selves’ to social and cultural ideals around gender and sexuality, I have been drawn to work around racial melancholia which focussed on the everyday ways in which melancholia underpins racial conflicts and struggles with specific reference to issues of assimilation and racialisation (Eng & Han, 2003). I draw a parallel between this work and the individual and collective experiences of queers as a ‘minority group’ stuck within the normative ideals of white, masculinist, nationalist, middle class heterosexuality. In this strategy I am not suggesting collapsing differences together, rather I deploy these ideas as a way in which to conceptualise dominant discourses.

In their discussion of racialisation, assimilation, and immigration Eng and Han (2003) describe a kind of productive racial melancholia that involves a militant and aggressive refusal to let go of the lost loved object. A refusal, they argue, which is “at the heart of melancholia’s productive political potentials” (Eng & Han, 2003: 365), and what Eng and Kazanjian (2003: 13) suggest offers “a politics of ideality”. In a lovely twist on Freud, which depathologises melancholia by positing the imperative of assimilation as a negotiation between mourning and melancholia, Eng and Han (2003) maintain that the melancholic’s absolute refusal to let go (at any cost) is precisely the pre-condition for (racial) agency and the exposure of social ‘untruths’. Thus,

it is the melancholic who helps us come face to face with this social truth. It is the melancholic who teaches us that ‘in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill.’ (Eng & Han, 2003: 365)

In the participants’ stories I wondered about the ways in which they denied or refused to conform to gendered and sexed norms and ideals, as well as how they tried (often unsuccessfully) to abide by, and reproduce these very rules. The ways in which the participants dealt with the ‘condition’ or ideal of heterosexuality, and, by implication gender, highlights the importance of re-thinking the communal nature of melancholia as a method of creating ‘new’ ideals.
**The Easy Way**
(first half Scout, second half Nell)

My father said to me once
he said …   "You've taken the easy way out"
I think I was twenty-one, we were driving over the Anzac Bridge.

I'm [thinking] …
"oh yeah, you've got it in one there dad, you're right on the ball with that" (laughs)
"what the fuck are you saying"
(not that I swore at him)
I just said …
"What?"

He apologised a couple of years later
he said …   "I apologise because I can see that this has not been easy"

I'm [thinking] …
"hello"
I said to him …
"Why would anyone choose it?"

"I know"
"I certainly wouldn't have.
This has been five or six years of hell for me, just trying to survive each day.
I've lost my family and friends, I've basically lost four years of my life"

Just gone, like in some sort of depression.
Just like the depression that I suffered anyway (that was another thing on top of it)

*   *   *

My mum said to me once,
she said …   "Being gay is a cop out, that’s a cop out"
I was totally thrown not knowing what to say.

[I thought] …
"How dare you say it’s a cop out? It's a fucking struggle.
To get to where you are.
To feel confident and comfortable with who you are.
It's not a cop out at all.
How easy is it to have fear of rejection, fear of ‘what am I going to say’, ‘can I hold hands with my girlfriend, can I do this’"
It’s not an easy way out by any means. You wouldn’t go through this … the heartache then to finally go … “it’s okay I can be this person”

This poem is quite interesting because it expresses both a desire for, and a concern with, sexual normativity and assimilation. On the one hand the dialogue between parent and daughter, the use of words like the ‘easy way’ and a ‘cop out’ offers homosexuality as choice pitted against heterosexuality, but as a poor or ‘wrong’ one involving struggles, heartache, and importantly, loss. On the other hand the dialogue and words could equally be viewed as powerful and subversive in that they expose heterosexuality as the ‘hard way’. Below I firstly deal with the so-called loss, heterosexuality, and then I discuss how a re-reading can trouble the ideal of heterosexuality itself.

Scout

In the poem Scout recalls the day when crossing the Anzac Bridge, Sydney her father told her that her lesbianism was a ‘poor’ choice, and ‘the easy way out’. My guess is he thought it an easy way to opt out of normative society and conforming to the ‘rules’ about being a girl (and girled) and importantly, being heterosexual. Through this comment he suggested that homosexuality was a choice, and also re-affirms that for him, it was the ‘wrong’ choice (recall Wrong in Chapter Five). He seemed compelled (by the law) to keep trying to turn his daughter back towards the ‘right’ choice (and as we learned through Wrong used many powerful coercive methods to do so). This was his way of upholding the law and of making sense of it (in some ways his apology is an acknowledgment this law and ideal makes no sense). At the time, by his way of thinking, giving into same sex desire was the easy way, thus positing the denial of same sex desire, and ‘being’ heterosexual as ‘hard’. I am intrigued by the irony of this, especially given Scout’s response that if she did have a choice in any of this she would not have chosen same sex desire.

In the poem I use italics and brackets as a way in which to separate out what Scout said she thought, and what she actually said to her father. Note she thought with rage and defiance (but with a nervous laugh). She then replied, neither in the terms of her thoughts or its
language (she should have sworn at him) but rather, weakly, and law abiding with, ‘what?’ Thus she was again compelled to abide by the law, to feel guilt and shame about her desire (he is her father after all and she is a subject to his law). Scout appeared to have fallen ‘victim’ to the power of past citations that her desire was ‘wrong’, and therefore she was ‘wrong’. The cycle of melancholic subjection is continually played out for her, well at least until years later when she interjects his confessed shame (‘I know’) with disbelief that he could even imagine that her life had been easy (‘hello’), and with the question ‘Why would anyone choose it? … I certainly wouldn’t have’. This is a crucial point, because in this act Scout was not being subversive or defiant against the law, rather, she was re-inscribing and abiding by it. If being like her (and experiencing what she had experienced) was a choice then it is definitely one she would not have made. For her, homosexuality had always been the ‘hard’ way. She was so conditioned to seeking out and valuing the practices and ideals of heterosexuality that anything other than it would be considered hard, aberrant, and ‘wrong’. This exposes the normative discourses she has drawn upon in order to explain her own shame and disgust at not measuring up to the heterosexual ideal. To her father she reinforced the costs of this supposed choice in terms of loss (lost friends, family, time and life), and in the process she melancholically re-constitutes an unwanted and ‘wrong’ self, that is, as not heterosexual. Heterosexuality and all its privileges were the lost ideal, not the objects like friends, family or time.

Nell

With a very similar comment (‘cop out’) Nell’s mother places her in front of the ideal laws of gender and sexuality. This time it is not the law of the family and social exclusion but is, rather a citation of the law that says her desire for women is inappropriate and unsanctioned because it was a choice and a poor (indeed cowardly) one; a genuine ‘cop out’, a weakness of character. Nell was thrown by the power of this comment and unable to stand up to her mother and speak. She could only relay to me what she thought (in italics), suggesting she fell mute in front of the law. She thought to say many things about comfort, fear, struggles, and rejection but could not utter them. Instead at the end, somewhat disappointed in herself she says to me (not her mother).
It’s not an easy way out by any means. You wouldn’t go through this … the heartache then to finally go … “it’s okay I can be this person”

With this comment I wonder can I provide the understanding and forgiveness for her inability to speak in front of her mother? Probably not. Will she ever be able to speak of these things to her mother? No, she refuses to re-visit this time with her mother. Instead, like Scout, she restates that her loss of heterosexual status is significant because not having it has been a struggle and to have chosen it willingly was to invite only heartache, hell and depression.

Maybe it is useful here to recall Freud’s idea that perhaps the person does not know exactly what has been lost only that something is missing - it has left a big hole or pain or depression or heartache. This doesn’t signify an absence but rather provides a workable space to mourn. In these texts Scout and Nell appear to not be so much sad, as angry about their losses, but do they know what they have lost in their expressions of anger and rage? Do they need to know? Their losses hinge around loss of heterosexual status and privilege, a loss they have both denied. It’s not that they are upset about losing the individual trappings of heterosexuality, like marriage or babies (though this is apparent in some comments), but perhaps they mourn the idea or ideals representative of, and signifying heterosexuality. The ideals everyone (they thought) must want, desire and have in order to be considered ‘a member of this family’, a member of society.

So to frame their ‘deviance’ and difference as a choice serves to continually subject that choice (and that identity) to the regulatory powers of the very laws that proscribe homosexuality. Standing in front of their parents again and again they have both been made subjects to these normative laws, and again and again they have failed to validate their so-called choices in terms other than those that have simultaneously hailed them, and foreclosed their same-sex desire. In short, they use the same discourses as their parents to make sense of their lives and loves, and in the process seek a coherency that can never emerge because it is interpellated in such limiting ways. This re-confirms rather than
fractures the normative boundaries of melancholic subjection (Butler, 1997a). Butler (1997a: 28) argues this is a primary drive associated with our desire for ‘social existence’. She explains,

The subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced, but that repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm “in the right way,” one becomes subject to further sanctions, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened. (Butler, 1997a: 28-29)

In other words, the subject is held in a double bind of power. Compelled to re-cite the norms of its production ‘in the right way’, but always teetering on the edge of failing to reproduce a viable subject. The stories of Scout and Nell reveal this paradox and its inherent risks. The language chosen by both parents exposes the processes of melancholic subjection. I suggest this also allegorises heterosexual melancholia in that the women in this research would vehemently deny being melancholic about losing heterosexuality because they believe it was never there to be lost in the first place (the never-never). To these women the ideal of heterosexuality was unattainable and remains irresolvable, “at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal” (Eng & Han, 2003: 345).

**The ‘hard way’**

In the poem *The Easy Way* what emerged from the remains was that despite their unconvincing responses to the law, and investments in heterosexist ideals and discourses, both Scout and Nell have done something very important and subversive here. They have exposed the fragility and difficulty of keeping up the normative gender and heterosexual front. To say homosexuality is the ‘easy way’ or a ‘cop out’ ironically positions heterosexuality as the ‘hard way’, thus exposing the difficulties of maintaining the coherence of all identities. It is heterosexuality that is a difficult ‘choice’ and, we come to view heterosexual identity as unstable, ambiguous, risky, and a hard way to be. It is hard to keep up heterosexual appearances, acts and discourses, but whilst it is hard to be heterosexual for Scout and Nell there was a way out – homosexuality (but this is ‘hard’ for them).
Eng and Han (2003) describe this compulsion or desire to fit in (or assimilate) as a process of negotiation between mourning and melancholia (which co-exist for the ethnic, and I now argue, sexual subject). Further, the conflicts played out in this allows “us to understand the negotiation of [racial] melancholia as conflict rather than damage” (Eng & Han, 2003: 363, italics in original). These authors argue that this renders (racial) melancholia a productive category from which minority subjectivities can be viewed as a fluid and negotiated conflict focussed on everyday survival, rather than as “permanently damaged – forever injured and incapable of ever being ‘whole’” (Eng & Han, 2003: 363, italics in original). In relation to the data presented here I argue a similar stance with regards to homosexual melancholia. In the processes of dealing with their lives Scout and Nell have faced intense conflicts whilst negotiating their identities and places. Their apparent anger and sadness should not be viewed as pathological (abnormal, ‘wrong’, ‘hard’, ‘easy’ or a ‘cop out’) but rather as an integral part of their everyday existence and a means of survival (Butler, 1997a; Muñoz, 1999, cited in Eng & Han, 2003). In this sense struggle and conflict become productive and agentic.

By choosing the so called, ‘easy way’, both Scout and Nell reinforce their sense of self because they have taken on the normative ideals of heterosexuality. In a way their belief in some kind of an ideal of a coherent identity and refusal to let go of it, though not so queerly acceptable, helped them through citation after citation to be ashamed and embarrassed about their desires (and ‘choices’). The heterosexual ideal was never lost to them, simply because they never had it or desired it. Their consistent assertions of “I am me” not only deflected the normative gaze but also empowered them to continue to affirm themselves as ‘different’ and ‘wrong’, that is, as not heterosexual. This gave them subversive potential because they themselves, and their parents, expose both heterosexuality and homosexuality, as the ‘hard way’. 
In Aristotle’s and Ficino’s account of melancholia there is a valorisation of a special truth of genius and imaginative creativity in melancholia as less a wretched state “of despair and disease than as an imaginative form generated by subjective apprehension of and attachments to loss” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 17). In this way skill in science, mathematics, geometry, art, time and space came to mark the melancholic subject rather than despair, with a crucial emergent aspect being “a new aptitude for spatial thought” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 17).

Exploring spatial remains requires investigating how, when and why we occupy, experience and think about space as we do. This involves considering “the intersection of subjectivity and space, questioning the politics and aesthetics of territorialisation”, and asking whether it may be possible to “read in spatial apprehensions of loss as well as apprehensions of lost spaces a resistance to or disruption of the Cartesian mastery of self and other?” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003: 20).

Below I provide interview text and poetry which speak to everyday experiences in place(s), spatial melancholia, and the attached social surveillance. I argue that various gazes, acts and discourses function to shame and exclude those who do not belong in particular spaces or places. The spatial thinking here involves investigating what remains from loss of ‘place’ or loss of some kind of ‘sense of place’, and the associated sense of (not) belonging and fitting into a society that spatially regulates, shames, and constrains certain types of bodies and desires in certain places. I explore the risks associated with (n)either meeting the gaze nor turning away from it. I contend that these gazes, acts and discourses are deliberate

For a good historical account of melancholia see Schiesari (1992) and Tambling (2004).

By this I mean: the ambivalent and disquieting look that ‘queers’ get when they are out of place or in non-queer places/spaces; how queers are read and constituted in and by spaces and places; and the discourses (words, practices and acts) that permit and encourage the indifferent, but regulated form of surveillance which is complicit in the gaze/look.

This section also begins to anticipate Chapter Seven by considering how the careful maintenance, monitoring and reproduction of places and spaces as heterosexed, raced and gendered serves to reproduce a spatial sense of shame on those who don’t belong or don’t fit.
forms of normative social monitoring designed to keep ‘us’ on the margins not only of the space or place but also of society (including the boundaries of acceptable and normative bodies, gender and sexuality). This posits society as a place where some bodies don’t fit and where everyday shame “spectacularly shows itself in its essential vulnerability – its everyday dependence” (Probyn, 2004: 329). This also relates to Cvetkovich’s (2003a) assertion that shame manifests both affectively and spatially. My argument in the following is predicated on the idea that those who are perceived as, or perceive themselves as non-conforming lose a ‘sense of place’ within the social milieu and this precipitates a form of spatial melancholia.

Coming Home
(first Scout, second half, Nell)

All I know is that I wanted to talk to you about how painful it was me coming out.

Year Ten was when I thought I was gay.
I think I was seventeen when I was outing
Somebody called my parents and told them.
My parents totally flipped out, my father lost total control of his being for about three years (he doesn't remember)
Every single day he asked me if I was gay or not.
I was struggling (as you can imagine)
Trying to come to terms with it on my own. (because it's something that I didn't really want to be)

I was just trying to get through it.
I don't think anyone saw that struggle …… They just saw me.
I wasn't even out (but at least I was trying)
I'd come home and go straight into my room

"Why are you in your room so much?"

Sometimes my stuff would be smashed, my art work.
I’d make up stories, then he would follow me, I’d get caught.
Mum says now that she was there for me (she was quite supportive)
I don't remember how it started but he hit me and pushed me to the ground.
Mum was screaming, hysterical (which I guess was her way of trying to make him stop)

her way of sticking up for me.
I was on the phone
She just walked in
screaming,
hung up on me.
I lost it
walked through the house,
smashed a hole through a door.

“If you walk out that door don't come back”.

I thought,
I can't stay here
I can't stay here,
I can't go back. (I can only go forward)
I remember that quite clearly
I don't see that as supportive.

* * *

I remember
driving,
leaving the party,
the moment that I was first with a woman.

I took off
excited,
a little bit nervous,
but I thought …

[you can tell your mum anything, you know, you just can]
… we had the best relationship.

So I went up there, mum was cooking dinner.
“Mum I have to tell you something”
“Yeah go on, go on”
“Well I think I’m attracted to a woman”
She just stopped, and looked at me.
“What?”
“Yeah I think I’m attracted to a woman”

[you can tell your mum anything, you know … you just can]

She put down the saucepan.
“If you are a lesbian you can consider yourself no longer a part of this family”
… that was her answer.

At the time I just kind of broke down I didn’t know how to respond.
I thought …
I’ll break it to mum first because I knew she would understand

[you can tell your mum anything … you know … you just can]
She packed her bag and put it at the front door.

“If you are a lesbian you can consider yourself no longer a part of the family”

[but you’re my mum … I should be able to tell you anything … you know]

* * *

In this poem I suggest ‘coming home’ to metaphorically represent ‘coming out’. It hints at the sense of belonging that many people, though not all\(^\text{115}\), report when they ‘come out’, in spite of their experiences ‘at home’. From a geographical perspective coming home may also mean joining new friends, and creating new places, communities and lifestyles, as well as the sense that one has found one’s place, one’s self, or one’s home.

In the poem *Coming Home*, Scout and Nell describe what happens when home is a place that is taken away as the result of non-normative behaviour, inclinations or desires. For both women what was once experienced as, or at least expected to be, a place of unconditional support, love or refuge, disintegrated into one of violence, hostility and rejection upon the revelation of same-sex desire. The poem sketches a view of homes as places where the regimes of normative ‘truth’ are stringently upheld, and where to defy them risks expulsion into an inhospitable outside – ‘If you walk out that door don’t come back’. Thus the door closes on the person who does not abide by the rules of the home (which maintains, reflects and upholds the rules of society).

In both sections of the poem the ‘lesbian’ subject was constituted as an aberrant and repulsive subject who had no place in a ‘normal’ family and so could also not fit into society. Scout and Nell were presented with an ‘us’ or ‘them’ decision, where going home with ‘them’ (the ‘lesbians’) meant losing all of the trappings of normatively gendered and sexed society (with ‘us’), and hence becoming forever destined to lurk on the margins of all places.

\(^{115}\) Some people experience ‘coming out’ as very isolating and placeless.
Scout

The thing closest to Scout, her artwork, was destroyed in her home; she was followed and hounded by questions about her desire, compelled to make an account of herself. She tried to both hide and conform, but in the end her desire betrayed her in a telephone conversation, and she was uncovered. By losing her place at home Scout was forced to live day-to-day relying on the generosity of friends and her partner at the time. Like a transient fringe dweller, she slept at train stations on occasion because she refused to buy into the monitoring and regulating of her behaviour and desire in her home. Every day was a struggle just to get through (see *The Easy Way*). Worst of all no one saw her struggle to understand her sexuality with the minimal resources she had. All they saw was her defiance and disobedience, her deviance and her wrongness (recall *Wrong*). Hailed as abject, and rendered placeless, Scout continuously refused the violence and shame attached to the constant badgering and tracking of her parents by exposing the hypocrisy of sexual conformity as far from supportive. She left home because she couldn’t go backwards, and could only ‘go forwards’ towards (an)other home, towards placelessness.

Scout chose to leave the family place rather than stay and be reminded daily of her aberrance. She stood up to the gaze, confronted her shame, and decided to become thing that most worried her parents and unsettled their normative views, she became the thing that she had been hailed as and not to be – she ‘became’ a lesbian. Whilst deciding to be with women held pain she still turned away from the gaze that had isolated and followed her, trapped her, and abused her. This sentiment is felt strongly in the lines of the poem *Wrong*, where Scout, eyes closed kissing a woman discovers that this is right, that she has now come home.

*And then when I did it I thought*

“How can this be wrong?”

“This is so not wrong, this is right!”
When Nell first kissed a woman she was so thrilled she wanted to share it with one of her closest friends, her mother. Driving home with nervous excitement she never doubted that her mother would listen to her because ‘you can tell your mum anything’.

In the poem one cannot fail to feel the emotional effect of Nell’s confession of same-sex attraction. It appears as precisely as I recall hearing it, punctuated with emotion, pauses, tears and facial expressions that expressed the joy and excitement of ‘coming home’ (acknowledging desire for a woman), and coming home (to home and family). It also makes the silence associated with the laying aside of everyday tasks resulting from her dual home coming, deafening. When this is followed by the immense citation of shame and disgust in the comment, ‘If you are a lesbian you can consider yourself no longer a part of the family’, it is difficult not to take a deep breath for oneself.

Nell recites her mothers’ phrase perfectly, twice in this text, and then in exactly the same way during other interviews, such was the affect associated with this citation - ‘it was just a really horrible horrible experience’, she explained. Nell did not seem to know the person who had issued the statement, or what the statement required her to do, it came as a completely unexpected shock. In this statement from her mother, Nell was forced to make a choice between continued inclusion in her family and home, and by association adherence to normative practices and rules (that is, no same-sex desire), or face expulsion and exclusion from her family and home, and by association be excluded from ‘normal’ society. It is easy to imagine how standing accused and shamed in front of her mother she could not speak. And how, after having been hailed by her mother drawing upon normative heterosexist discourse, she stood mute, held equally as tightly in limiting discourses which turned mother against child. She had been made to feel so very ashamed of what she had said and thought, and whom she had desired. She even felt foolish for imagining she could tell her mum anything.
Nell: And you know what’s hard too, at the time because you are so confused and because you don’t even know how to respond, that’s what’s so hard … I just didn’t know how to deal with it at the time. I didn’t have enough grounding perhaps myself and enough support and enough knowledge to be able to stand there and debate with someone, just say “hang on a minute”.

Nell was unsure about her sexuality and what her desires meant, she was trying to share this with her mother. But when the saucepan was lowered, something happened to shift their relationship, something like disgust and abjection interjected to make the space between them thick and excruciatingly silent. The two stood toe to toe, now strangers stricken in language, a language Nell had thought would help her mother to understand, a language wielded in disgust by her mother. In speaking about the ‘catastrophic mourning’ associated with the Armenian Genocide of the late 1890s, Marc Nichanian (2003) describes something close to the space I see created between Nell and her mother, and the sick sense of disgust and hatred many ‘queers’ experience daily. Nichanian (2003: 115) remarks that through human speech “everything can be understood, pardoned, accepted, even loved”, but that there is something lurking beyond all forms of speech, “beyond every power to integrate, beyond all human apprehension”. He continues,

This thing is not death, it is not murder or burned houses, it is not even extermination. It is the will to exterminate. What disintegrates people … is therefore not extermination as such … what disintegrates is not the death in tens of thousands or in millions. No, it is the will to annihilate, because it cannot be integrated into any psychological, rational, or psychical explanation whatever … What disintegrates is the interdiction of mourning. (Nichanian, 2003: 115-116, italics in original)

I’m not suggesting Nell’s story to be comparable to the incomprehensible systematic extermination of millions of Armenians. Rather, something resonated affectively for me with Nichanian’s comment. I was perturbed by his suggestion that it is not the speech or acts of humans but instead their ‘will’ to exterminate or annihilate one another that is so totally incomprehensible, unnameable, beyond representation. This ‘will’ does nothing other than announce the interdiction of mourning by raising annihilation above life. Foreclosed in this way and sense of humanity is denied, and collective mourning is limitless because it becomes so obvious, though incomprehensible, that some bodies have
come to matter more than others. These ideas also reverberate through the work of Butler (2004a, 2004b) on violence, detention, and anti-Semitism; Crimp (1989, 2003) about AIDS activism, militancy and moralism; Eng and Han (2003), Eng (1999, 2000), and Cheng (2003) on racial melancholia; Cvetkovich (2003a) on trauma; and here, within this thesis, and through the words and experiences of the participants - and myself. How and why did Nell’s mother come to hate her so much in the time it took to lower a saucepan? What forces construct a ‘will’ to annihilate another as if they did not exist or do not deserve to exist? What is there to say standing in front of a law which abjects, denounces, rejects, and subjects one to the will of another? What Nell feared most was her family looking at her with disgust and rejecting her, and as if following some sinister script that is precisely what she got.

Nell: The biggest, the thing I was most afraid of was rejection and I got that.
K: Why would they reject you?
N:… because I was different and dirty … a woman being with a woman just being ugh to them; just being dirty and wrong.
N: It didn’t feel dirty and wrong to me because I was curious about it … I felt that my mum would look at me with disgust which she did and her words were “if you are a lesbian you can consider yourself no longer a part of this family”. And they will never ever go away, because she was just disgusted.

Reflecting upon how she remained voiceless because she was young, confused and stuck, Nell could not speak to her mother, and later to her father and sisters about her feelings and sexuality. With each thus bound to the will of another what is highlighted is how both parent and daughter were trapped within powerful regulatory discourses.

When faced with the threat of familial and social expulsion Nell went out on her own, firstly into a share house with friends and then onto a wonderful year long adventure ‘to find herself’ overseas. She felt she had lost her self, she had lost her very soul.

116 Reflecting upon my own life experiences, yes sometimes I have felt someone look at me as if they might ‘annihilate’ me. Everyday I am discriminated against in the form of laws about health, marriage, rights, parenting, education, and politics. Some days I wonder how it is that an unknown face can hate me so much when they know nothing about me, have never spoken to me, and have never seen my face, or lived my life.
Nell: I lost myself it was like I lost the girl that was just this free happy girl who loved life and I lost that.

Nell had incorporated a deep sense of loss of place, self, love, and freedom, and her overseas trip was her search for her place, and a sense of her place. In her second interview she brought journals, books, photographs and CDs in order to facilitate the sharing of what she had lost and what she had found (her ‘self’). For some time Nell believed that the homophobia, disgust, and abjection others felt for her was simply about an ignorance that could “be overcome with time, education, and ‘progress’” (Crimp, 2003: 201) (as seen in her attachment to assimilation and regular comments about ‘educating’ others). Crimp (2003), like Nichanian delves into the depths of the psyche for some kind of explanation about why deaths from AIDS do not matter and are not grievable, and also how a comment or gaze can strike such indescribable fear in a lesbian’s body. Crimp (2003: 201) argues that this is not about time or education but rather about “the abjection of homosexuality … is a deep-seated psychic mechanism central to the construction of normative subjectivity and thus of social cohesion”. I see this in the interaction between mother and daughter, and many of us feel this in our everyday lives. Ultimately what is required is not standing mute, turning back on ourselves, assimilation, re-education or normalising, but rather there exists an urgent political imperative to understand “how and why we are denied our humanity within and through those very forces” (Crimp, 2003: 201). In the context of Nell’s comments this means gathering her everyday feelings and remains of melancholic subjectivity (shame, disgust, fear, anger, guilt) and taking them forward as a mechanism by which to ‘find’ herself, and reconstruct her identities, and communities in front of the faces that sought to annihilate her.

Whilst overseas Nell deliberately bombarded her parents with stories of her blooming desire for women. Letters, cards and photographs of her (their abject daughter) in ‘queer’ places, with ‘queer’ people, doing ‘queer’ things all created a ‘lesbian archive of feelings’ (Cvetkovich, 2003a) which effectively interrupted their citations. In this way she refused to be monitored by the social gaze and instead decided to assault it with a ‘queer’ form of spatial subversion.
Nell: I definitely pushed the boundaries and I knew I was pushing the boundaries but at the time I thought I've got nothing to lose and it felt good pushing the boundaries because I had no physical pressure around me or nothing else around me, no relationship issues, work issues, family issues, I just had myself. And I only had myself just to focus on and share my experience and I wanted to push those boundaries. I know even when I wrote and I said that I'd kissed some girls or you know, I said it … But I thought, yeah, what could possibly go wrong if I didn't say these things like, so I've got nothing to lose.

Nell consistently showed in her words that she was “dissatisfied with the assumptions that minority subjectivities are permanently damaged – forever injured and incapable of ever being ‘whole’ (Eng & Han, 2003: 363, italics in original). By searching for her ‘self’, recreating her ‘self’, and preserving her loved or lost objects, she “displays the ego’s melancholic yet militant refusal” to let go of or ‘get over’ her same-sex desire (Eng & Han, 2003: 365). The boundaries she was pushing were the normative one’s that had held herself and her parents. Political agency emerged from her defiant refusals, and her ‘lesbian archive’ worked to rupture discourses and shift her parents’ views. Following Eng and Han (2003: 365) I believe, that for ‘queers’ such refusals and acts may mark “the very precondition for survival, the beginning of a strategy for living and for living on”.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter commenced with Butler’s (1997a: 29) call for “a critical analysis of subjection” and set about drawing upon her most recent works to establish a social, political and theoretical climate in which to consider the ways in which melancholia “marks the limits of subjectivation”. Using Butler’s notion of gender melancholia I argued that passionate attachments to loss are implicated in melancholic subjectivity. Further, by melding the work of Eng and Kazanjian (2003), their colleagues, and Cvetkovich (2003a) with Butler’s (1997a; 2003; 2004a), I was able to cultivate a resource that enabled me to speak about melancholia, and analyse the data from a position of psychic and affective presence, rather than one of absence, negation and loss. By refusing to separate out mourning and melancholia I have nurtured a space which enabled traumatic memories of
loss to become productive resources of the present and future. From these resources ‘new’ objects, ideals, and places could emerge. The text message below highlights this blending of past, present and future.

Did u read article in daily tel? About mums passing on xtra gene to males which may relate to them being gay. They said in the article that people think u r gay due to how u r raised! I so disagree and it shits me wen people say that. I was put on this earth gay! How i don’t no. My biological makeup is gay. I’m thankful i no this, feel content in my own being, dont fight it, but love being who I am…gay. X

Nell, 5-Nov-2004 11:15:50

In this mobile phone text message Nell seems angrily engaged in a process of affirming sexual coherency. She appears sad, worried and frightened by the ways in which language constitutes her, and at the same time doesn’t understand her. She is also unknowingly constituting her ‘self’ as abject. Nell’s frustrations are with discourse. Discourses regularly drawn upon by others in order to speak, write, and cite psychic injury. The most incomprehensible aspect for Nell is the injurious ‘will’ of an(other) who does not know her, does not see her face. The intensity of the sense of rage and hatred she feels daily cannot be underexplained as mere mourning or pathologised as melancholic. In the main we may well be deeply hurt and melancholic about *being* homosexual (or not being heterosexual), but not because we regret or feel shame about what we do or are, but rather because we are not seen to exist materially or to matter within broader social discourses and practices. Neither our losses nor our bodies are grievable – and we feel this.

If, following Butler, agency comes from acknowledging one’s own investments in power and subjection it should ensue that we probably need to know about and become conscious of our losses in order to disrupt injurious discourses of gender and sexuality. I maintain the women in this research are very aware of what they have lost – we are each reminded about it everyday of our lives. We have mourned, and continue to mourn in a way that refuses to submit to the laws of others, history and discourse, and I have argued that this refusal (or deferral or denial) constitutes a form of melancholic agency. The women in this research deliberately remain attached to their memories, feelings, identities, and selves as a way in which to remain attached to themselves and to others. This provides a place for collective
sadness and anger, joy and compassion, hope and love - the necessary ingredients for action.

Neither the participants nor myself may ever know or understand the things in our lives we have lost, or for that matter the things we have found. We had a conversation together about memories of a number of critical and influential emotional events that marked a few moments in time and place when they perceived themselves in certain ways. Together we created an archive of our lives, and as discursive as it may seem it was also quite ‘real’. That these ways invariably ended up as constructing their experiences of same sex attraction as negative, difficult and lacking is no real surprise. This simply reflects how these women were constituted, and constituted themselves within normative and limiting discourses which position homosexuality as negative and lacking. In spite of their senses and expressions of oppression, sadness, shame, and loss together we negotiated a space from which to share our experiences. Our refusal to detach from our memories and emotions reinforces the necessity to remain attached to the past in order to keep processes of making sense alive, ongoing, and present. Butler (2003) explains that this involves viewing melancholia as presence, as a sensually in motion mode of becoming, and not as paralysed, static or gone. She remarks that whilst the past is irrecoverable it is not past, it is instead a,

resource for the future and the future is the redemption of the past; loss must be marked and it cannot be represented; loss fractures representation itself and loss precipitates its own modes of expression. (Butler, 2003: 467)

Our losses, in this sense mark the past, present and future with boundless possibilities of bodily, ideal, and spatial re-creation.
CHAPTER SEVEN:
HOW DO ‘SELVES’ AND PLACES MAKE EACH OTHER?

Tabitha: So moving from the heterosexual world into the homosexual world, you know when I took that attraction for Catherine and moved it into a physical space … what that did was that gave me a blank canvas I think to start again on a lot of levels and to explore … all of a sudden I absolutely felt like I had come to the right place, knocked on the right door, found a home, had all those senses of where have I been, I should have been doing this all along, kind of thing, absolutely, which is why I’ve never been back (laughs). So it was just like okay wow what does this mean to me, what does this mean to me on a deep sexual level?

Maree: Ever since I've been out and about as a gay woman I've lived around King Street and that's where I call my home, basically.

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One I explained how I wished to explore the area in-between queer theory and human and feminist geography, as a result, in Chapter Two I teased out the kind of ‘queer’ work I wanted queer theory to do in this thesis. Following the lead of Butler (1997a), in Chapter Five I explored how passionate attachments to a coherent ‘lesbian’ identity reflected the participants’ dual involvement in processes of subjection, that is, as both a product and instrument of power. The notions of ‘ordinariness’ and ‘survival’ resonated strongly with the participants’ stories and experiences, and as I argued then, allowed them to do and say particular kinds of things, some ‘queer’ but most relatively ‘normal’. Chapter Six delved deeper into their passionate attachments in terms of melancholia, that inassimilable remainder of loss, that Butler (1997a) suggests marks the limits of subjection. In previous chapters I have been concerned with the participants’ attachments to more idealised (and theoretical) notions like essential identities, normative discourses, and loss. In this chapter I am interested in the participants’ material, embodied, and visceral
descriptions of their attachments to place(s) and the effect of these attachments on the relationship between people and places. In this chapter I do not consider what is at stake or what stands to be lost from passionate attachments, rather I simply deal with the dynamic relationships between the participants’, each other, and their place(s). Hence the chapter focuses on examining the tangible ‘realities’ of the mutually constitutive nature of sexual ‘selves’ and place(s) by exploring the ways in which sexual identities are constituted in and through places and spaces, and how places and spaces get constituted through people’s actions in and on them. In short, it explores what the places were, meant and became at the time the participants engaged with them. This does not involve a search for lost objects, because what remains is more tangibly important to the participants. In this way this final analytical chapter builds upon and extends the discussions of ‘spatial melancholia’ in Chapter Six. It does this in two ways.

Firstly, the notion of passionate attachments to place(s) has permitted an examination of the material experiences and interactions between people and place(s) by encouraging me to assume that there is both a relationship and an attachment. In a sense this is more about why and how the attachments are formed, and the meanings derived from such attachments and relationships. In this chapter I do not consider what has been or stands to be lost, rather I am more interested in what is present, and what at times was viscerally ‘real’, but at other times a ‘ghostly’ illusion. Secondly, this chapter is not about loss of place or self in either a bodily, ideal or spatial sense, rather it is about the residual affect of interactions with, in and through place (including the memories, sensual feelings, and ‘hauntings’ that remain on and within both bodies and places). This affective angle allowed me to examine the reciprocal and dynamic nature of this process of mutual constitution. The opening epigraphs display these subtle differences. Each text reflects a deep attachment to place and places (in bold text), and associated notions of belonging, community, safety, comfort, family, and fitting (being at ‘home’). These comments not only reveal that places are experienced sensuously but also that they are experienced in relation to identity, more specifically, sexual identity (in italicised text). They indicate that to have a sense of one’s place is to have a sense of one’s sexuality, and hence a sense of (one)self.
In the coming pages I identify the ways in which the participants and their places constitute one another, and to what effect. This exploration is based around an investigation of subjectivity in terms of ‘sense of place’. I argue that an understanding of the sensate experiences of ‘queer’ bodies and identities in and through place(s) has potential to challenge the normative production of gendered and sexed space. This is explored metaphorically in terms of sense (including feeling, ‘hauntings’, imagining, sensing, making sense, and sense making) and place (including geographical aspects such as places, events, streets, home and work; embodied aspects such as one’s body as place, placed, misplaced, displaced; and belonging or fitting aspects such as sense of place, home, community, family, and finding one’s place). In order to deal with these observations (which emerged from the data), I drew on theoretical tools to map the participants’ more material experiences of subjection. My main theoretical resource was Nigel Thrift’s notion that places and people constitute each other materially, psychically, and emotionally, developed through his work with non-representational ‘theory’. I deploy this resource in order to address the primary question of this thesis, ‘how do the participants constitute their sexual identity in relation to place?’ Throughout this chapter I argue that the decentered notion of agency, which founds non-representational ‘theory’ provides an entry point into the data for ‘queer’ theorising that considers this question and precipitates a range of re-imagined spatial responses and possibilities.

---

117 I am referring here, and throughout this chapter, to both hetero- and homo- normative space.

118 I am not suggesting ‘experience’ to be some thing that can be dug up, uncovered and recorded. It lacks such transparency, though it is in many senses real, simple and unassailable to those who feel it (O’Driscoll, 1996). O’Driscoll (1996) draws upon the work of Fuss (1989) who herself quotes Althusser, explaining that “lived experience is not a given, given by a pure ‘reality,’ but the spontaneous ‘lived experience’ of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real” (O’Driscoll, 1996: 31). O’Driscoll (1996: 31) suggests, as do I, that using the term ‘experience’ doesn’t mean seeing the subject in essentialist ways, as some kind of already existing consciousness but rather it marks the processes “through which that subject is constituted”.

119 Non-representational theories says Thrift (1996: 7), are “concerned with thought-in-action, with presentation rather than representation”. Further it is the kind of theorising that is very modest and “which is intent on seeking relational rather than representational understandings … [It] is a practical kind of theory … because non representational ‘theory’ is the theory of practices … Theory becomes a practical means of going on rather than something concerned with enabling us to see, contemplatively, the supposedly true nature of what something is” (Thrift, 1999: 304, italics in original).

120 Thrift (1999: 297) puts ‘theory’ in scare quotes because “one of the purposes of non-representational theory is precisely to undo what we think of as theory”. 262
PLACES AS ‘PASSINGS THAT HAUNT US’

The participants often described their experiences of place(s) in quite nostalgic and emotive ways. It was as if they had been forever marked by a place or an experience in place, and remained in some way still haunted by the memories of the event, the time, and place. The intensity of these stories prompted me to seek out a theoretical framework which permitted a critical analysis of the ways in which the participants interacted with their places whilst still being able to ‘capture’ the ethereal and embodied nature of their utterances and memories. This search brought me firstly to Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Knopp, 2004; Murdoch, 1997a, 1997b; Whatmore, 1997) and then finally to non-representational ‘theory’ (Thrift, 1996, 1999). These theories have offered me a ‘queer’ lens through which to explain the haunting and sensual memories of the participants in place as well as appreciating the ways in which they haunt places. By this I mean examining the in-between space, the space where objective and subjective experiences of place and body scratch, meld and meet. This, I believe is a more accurate approximation of the participants’ lives as it places equal emphasis on object(ive) and subject(ive) experiences within a complex and dynamic network of relations like the ‘queerscape’. In doing this I re-imagine the ‘queerscape’ as a site of “rich and varied [queer] spectral gathering[s]” (Thrift, 1999: 316, italics in original). Over the following pages I explore the multitude of ways in which ‘selves’ and places are precariously and transitorily ‘in the making’, being mutually and intimately ‘crafted’, constituted, haunting each other, and ‘given meaning’.

---

122 Gordon Brent Ingram, an architect, offers the term ‘mapping the queerscape’ as a way in which to explore queer geographies, sexualities, bodies, consumption, and life. Ingram et al. (1997) speak particularly passionately about the need to ‘map the queerscape’ in terms of marginalisations, such as gender, race, language, culture, age, disability, class and queerness. They argue that the ‘queerscape’ could be viewed in terms of the objective (such as geographical maps, places, neighbourhoods, venues and events) and the subjective (notions and feelings in our head like community, belonging, coming out/coming home, identity, sense of place, sense of self, sense of sexuality). I am tentative about the binary objective/subjective but it does invite re-imagining in light of the work of Thrift, for example this may involve viewing all space as a ‘queerscape’. 

263
**Actor Network Theory (ANT)**

Briefly, ANT emerged from within science as a philosophical and sociological approach through which to explore the power dynamics of the complex relationships between nature and society, humans and non-humans (Murdoch, 1997b). Murdoch (1997a), frustrated with having to make choices between ‘unsavoury binary terms’ instead advocates avoiding the choice altogether by carefully searching for a negotiated space between oppositional terms via an investigation of links rather than distinctions. The critical aspect to this is the decoupling of the binary human/agency and the consequent de-centred approach to agency achieved by considering humans and non-humans as symmetrically linked in complex networks of relations. In this framework agency comes from a variety of human and non-human ‘actants’ who mobilise, negotiate, constitute, and are constituted by each other and the network in which they interact (Whatmore, 1999). The de-centering of agency is achieved via a refusal to separate out binary terms discretely. In some sense this allows place and its ‘non-human’ elements to come alive with power and imagination, and to indeed be able to ‘craft’ identities and bodies, and in turn to be crafted by identities and bodies (as shown later in the poem *Ode to Kinselas*). In many ways then, it is possible to read ANT as a very ‘queer’ approach.

**Non-representational ‘theory’**

Thrift (1999) expresses a concern for the ways in which ANT suggests that humans and non-humans should be more or less considered symmetrical and equal. In his view this approach shows a reluctance “to ascribe different competences to different aspects of a network” and thus it fails “to see the importance of place” (Thrift, 1999: 313). He states that Actor Network theorists,

often fail to see the importance of place: their vision of a radically symmetrical world of networks, consisting of different aspects like humans, animals and things, and mobiles like writing, print, paper and money constantly combining and recombining is an important corrective to simple humanisms and to simple notions of connectedness, but it also means that actor network theory cannot speak of
certain things ... actor network theorists often fail to see the importance of place because they are reluctant to ascribe different competences to different aspects of a network or to understand the role of common ground in how networks echo back and forth, often unwittingly. (Thrift, 1999: 313)

Thrift (1999: 307) views ANT’s depiction of “a world of overlapping networks all struggling to make themselves felt by making connections between all manner of things human and non-human”, as problematic because, as he argues, “connections have to be made, they do not just happen”. Thrift argues that connections within networks are relational, and following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), he proposes writing of a world of assemblages in constant deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation; this also includes (drawing on Probyn, 1996) remetaphorising “debates on identity and belonging” (Thrift, 1999: 307). To Thrift (1999: 313) the ways in which things are mixed in ANT “seem prosaic, and therefore misses much of their haunting quality especially as this relates to place, that sensuous mixture of object and experience that lies at the edge of semantic availability”. Things like the goose pimples, nerves, tears, and smiles that featured strongly during the interviews and poem about The Gay Games.

As a result of these criticisms of ANT, Thrift (1999: 310) presents less a formal non-representational ‘theory’ and more a ‘humble’ approach to human spatio-social relations which draws on ANT’s de-centred notion of agency to carefully consider the ways in which humans experience places as “‘passings’ that ‘haunt’ ‘us’” (italics in original). He develops this idea in three ways. Firstly, he states that place is dynamic and as such takes shape only in passing (passing through; practices are passed on but not in pre-ordained ways; place is incomplete). Secondly, place is more than a context or setting that we haunt or haunts us. Practices open up spaces, they are disclosive, and things about and in places haunt us (and we them). Thirdly, experiences in and of place involve particular kinds of human competences that are felt, sensed and embodied, and “it follows that ‘the materiality of place lives, is inscribed in our bodies’ (Game, 1995: 202)” (Thrift, 1999: 314). In short, we feel and sense place. Thrift describes three human competences as further hauntings which creep us closer to this elusive idea. They are emotion, memory and language. Emotions, Thrift (1999) suggests, place us in the world, they provide passion, feelings, moods, and
vital attunements to situations. The words of the participants seep with emotion and situational sensuality. Memories register experiences and senses of those experiences. We live with the constant reminders and remains of place(s); they leave their traces on us, and us on them; and such memories can be rekindled. In non-representational theory language is performative, “a virtual structure achieved through use, not a potential structure actualized by its use” (Thrift, 1999: 317). It is also extra-discursive, and so poses limits on what is sayable, describable and knowable, not because it shouldn’t be said, described or known, but simply because it cannot be described. In this sense “we know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, quoted in Thrift, 1999: 316), and some things we simply cannot describe, make sense of or come to understand. For example how Maree can see her family on/as King Street, how Tabitha created a global community in a sporting venue, how Kinselas could give Jacqui her life, or how an experience from two years ago can still make Nell feel all dizzy, shivery and tingly.

Thrift (1999: 316-317) explains that what is resurrected through these ‘hauntings’ is an ecology of place that “is a rich and varied spectral gathering”,

[a] tense gathering which both value and multiple anomaly, receptivity and imaginative capacity: ghosts, apparitions and monsters; magic, haunting and dreams; rites, rituals and raves. And it is this new style of describing becoming … which is allowing a different and more open sense of place to make its way into the open.

The idea that we are haunted by experiences in and of place(s) is appealing because it begins to explain our attachments to, feelings about, and memories of certain places at

---

123 For example the highly charged, emotional and sensate descriptions of The Gay Games appeared to 'viscerally' take the participants back to the place and the event, Nell - 'I'm all shivery, I've got a tingly feeling, it's a really good feeling’.

124 King Street, Newtown is considered to be a gentrified shopping and dining suburb in Sydney that is very popular amongst lesbians for shopping, being seen, dining, and living. Close to the University of Sydney it attracts a mixed (queer) crowd of Indigenous Australians, students, punks, Goths, diners, executives, lesbians and gay men – all with their dogs. It is a significant place for Maree, where she lives, works and plays.

125 Kinselas is now a mixed bar/night club in Taylor Square, Oxford Street that is of significance to the days when Jacqui was coming out in the late 1990s. At this venue she attended a lesbian night called ‘On the other side’. One of the queerest things about Kinselas is that in the 1920s it was funeral parlour run by the Kinsela family (Faro, with Witherspoon, 2000).
certain times. It represents “the power of things to dwell with us and their power to haunt us (and we them)” (Thrift, 1999: 312). It provides an ethereal and ‘queer’ explanation for why we often return to a place simply because of ‘it’, and the senses, feelings, desires, and attachments that remain inside or upon us and/or others, and that also reside within the place (or event). This concept helps me to appreciate the affect the Gay Games (and other places like Azure, The Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, Kinselas, King Street) had on the participants, and the ongoing legacy of their investments and involvements in ‘queer’ places and events.

Places as ‘rich and varied spectral gathering(s)’ implies attachment to the ‘real’, imagined, ‘truthful’, fantastic, social, material, and ‘queer’ aspects of our everyday place(s) and lives. This suggests that human bodies, identities, and places are magically constituted and constitutive, involved in a vast array of shifting, ongoing and unpredictable processes, practices, and discourses, some of which require tremendous effort to develop, uphold or maintain (for example femininity or heterosexuality). It sheds new light on understandings of a ‘sense of place’ as a process of relational opening out and folding, of meaning making, movement, and magic. It thus illuminates how ‘selves’ and places come to matter(ialise) (to feel, remember and speak) in ‘queer’ ways. When viewed as spectral entities there emerges a refusal to hierarchise, and instead posits a vision that permits a number of readings of the multiple processes of unpredictable and ‘messy’ becoming(s) and making(s) at play between the experiences of identities, bodies, and places.

By way of an example Knopp (2004: 125) describes ‘coming out’ as a compelling, “highly contingent and contextualized process involving all manner of human and non-human forces”, rather than “as an autonomous achievement of that individual coming to an epiphany and then ‘choosing’ to act” (though he says, the latter does occur). Knopp (2004: 131) convincingly argues that the de-centred notion of agency in non-representational theory can help queer theorists and geographers to think about queer identities and places “as fluid and ‘under construction’ sets of spatial practices”, and to simultaneously construe these practices as,
generated in and through networks and relationships, and as involving all manner of human and non-human ‘actants’. Importantly, they dispense pleasure, security, and empowerment along with (always partial) knowledge and understanding.

**Sensing space: pleasure, security, power**

The participants consistently spoke about the ways in which places and their connections to and in places gave them pleasure, safety, comfort, and/or empowerment. It is interesting to note that generally the participants were not able to explain exactly what it was or where their *sense* of these things came from, it was just there (sensed, felt, remembered and imagined). The following quotes and poem display how places and humans are engaged in fluid spatial practices that form strong emotive and visceral connections between people (and their identities) and places that are often difficult to explain or comprehend. They also highlight how our knowledges and understandings of these things are only ever situational, temporal and partial.

Scout: I think that's why I loved soccer so much it was just this little place that I could just be me and be safe and that's all it was for a while I think, for a long while, to be safe. It was definitely in 1988 and 1989 and 1990, it was all of that. I mean for me it was all those three, four years coming out … And for me that was all I knew and that's all I had … It was my family.

Maree (excerpt from *My Space, Place, Family*)

*I just feel a lot of comfort, I’m comfortable.*

*It’s a sense. Yeah that’s what I get, that’s it, that’s what it’s about.*

*I get a sense of belonging a sense of being loved.*

*That's where I call my home … basically.*

Tabitha: … the emotional connection that I feel for the gay community will far and above outweigh any other connection in my life … this sense of family and security that we all feel when we are all together like that.

Nell: I think it was just different because you just knew that everyone was there for a purpose really. So just coming together, you know gay community, safe and friendly and it was just so powerful, although it was all connected with sport it had
so much other powerful connections to it, like it was just you and yourself and your mates all around you … you could be yourself totally and everybody could.

Friend encounter #3: The energy and emotions experienced during the MG [Mardi Gras] festival are amazing … It’s empowering to be involved. What a great 3 weeks it is – it’s almost a let down/come down when it’s all over! Enjoy it while it lasts.

Friend encounter #4: February is the best month of the year in Sydney. So many places, spaces & events to celebrate being gay. Each year brings “us” one step closer to having every other month of the year as a time to be open & free.

In these quotes we learn that places and people form powerful sensate connections that impact upon notions of self, identity and community. Scout attached sadness and intense loneliness to the years of her ‘coming out’ (see Wrong and Coming home in Chapter Five) and yet found solace and contentment in her safe little place, soccer, which became her family. Maree spoke of feeling safe, comfortable and belonging on King Street. She couldn’t quite put her finger on exactly what or why this is but she senses things from the place and the people who inhabit it that make King Street a part of her family, and herself a part of the King Street family. For both Tabitha and Nell The Gay Games was an extremely powerful event and the dynamics created by the people and the place made them feel safe, secure, and connected to others. The final two comments speak to the intense spatio-temporal experience of The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in February 2004, and to the hope that the residual effect of this time seeps into the other months of the year.

The theme of feeling ‘at home’ or part of a ‘family’ when accepted sexually in place is very strong in the above quotes, the poem below, and throughout the interviews of each participant. The strength of connections between people and places (whether ‘real’ or not) serves as a place from which to disrupt views of spaces and places as normatively gendered, heterosexed or homosexed. These women changed and were changed by ‘queer’ experiences in and of place - they also seemed to change place(s). This dynamic relationship is exemplified in the image and poem to follow.
Ode to Kinselas (Jacqui)

Okay … it’s only one side of being gay
but it’s Kinselas.
Kinselas was like
“oh my god this is great, this is being gay”.
It’s going out, celebrating,
the feeling, the music, the people.

It was all so new to me.
I loved the music
that’s where I’ve made friendships
that have lasted.
Friendships that have stood the test of time
that helped me recognise who I am.
You could just be yourself.
So that’s a really big thing for me.
This was somewhere that I wanted to be
I didn’t want the night to end, didn’t
want the night to end at all.
Kinselas was the meeting place for me,
just stepping out.
What it meant to me …
It just gave me my life basically.
There I felt part of it.
It was great to go there, everyone included
me, it just blew my mind.
I can’t explain it
just the sense of belonging, and proud.
Proud to be a part of it,
to feel like I could say that I was a part of it.


Jacqui explained that Kinselas basically gave her her life. The venue carried many of the signs of a ‘gay lifestyle’ that as a young woman on the ‘scene’ Jacqui was either unaware of or unsure of. She recalls the sensual and heady experiences of lights, music, celebration, bodies, drugs, women, and hands in the air, that gave her an idea of what it was ‘really’ like to be gay - ‘great!’ Each aspect of the person, place and event was on the move; brushing against one another leaving traces of memories, smells, tastes, sounds, and materiality on the surfaces and deep inside. Each was in motion, to-ing and fro-ing, coming
and going, passing by. Jacqui felt welcomed and included by all of the human and non-
human aspects that made up Kinselas, including its morbid past.

Jacqui felt she was a part of the place, and the experiences that occurred in it, and this gave
her an unexplainable, but mind blowing sense of belonging and pride. Jacqui, feeling
somewhat displaced at first moved through Kinselas, found her place, her self, and her
sexuality, whilst becoming a part of what makes that particular place what it is. The notion
of movement and placeslessness is not unfamiliar to the women in this research and they
each speak consistently of some kind of action, search or quest involving movement across
space and time: moving out of home, to the city, to a different suburb or job; travelling to
‘find themselves’ or ‘find their place’; walking out, stepping out, ‘coming out’; drifting
through places and ‘feeling in/out of place’; going out, dressing up, and ‘coming home’.
Jacqui’s experiences, and her relationships with people and the place allowed her to be
herself, and to recognise who she was. In this sense ‘queer’ identities are spatially
fractured, exploratory, adventurous, creative, negotiated, contradictory, and constituted by
relationships with and between the variety of places they come into contact with over time
(Knopp & Brown, 2003).

Jacqui, her friends, other onlookers and partyers all still haunt Kinselas. She said she left
a legacy at Kinselas (melded into the place and now ‘haunting’ it); she was, and still is
‘proud to be a part of it, to feel like I could say that I was a part of it’. Kinselas, the place,
has been many things to many people, both what it is, and its effects have been produced
through people’s actions on it and in it. In this sense this place is always more than it is or
has ever been.

Spectral gatherings

The following series of quotes from Tabitha speak of a place where spectres gathered, but
also where multiple and conflicting discourses intersected.

126 Apparently the cellar (embalming room) of Kinselas is haunted now.
Tabitha: It [Gay Games] was like going to the Mardi Gras but it was on a global scale; it was on a global scale, it was like this is the whole world, the gay community is here now … the events brought together so many people for different reasons … everyone was there because we all had a unifying identity that we all carry and we all relate to each other on the same level, you know and it was just amazing.

… everybody is your family and that's how we all feel, this sense of family and security that we all feel when we are all together like that. To feel that and to have iconic people like kd lang who have put their life on the line like we all have in our own way, um, to be able to be open and honest as a human being in her chosen field of expertise. To go "hey how are you doing" … It's like "this is my buddy and we know all each other" … And then whatever that guy's name is who did that speech [Michael Kirby]

These comments present some of the inherent paradoxes associated with ‘queer’ identities, ‘queer’ places, and ‘queer’ place-making. What exactly has Tabitha described here? An image, memory, fantasy, place, an ideal?

Tabitha conjured up a fantastic, elaborate and sensuous picture of a global ‘queer’ community with open doors, open hearts, and open arms. At this event, in this place (Aussie Stadium, Sydney) Tabitha imagined (or was it ‘real’?) a united ‘queer’ collective congregating as one community headed by elders such as kd lang and Justice Michael Kirby127 (who have themselves faced injustices and survived). The emotional connections and the familial bonds she formed on this night with the place and the people were so strong and so embodied for her that they ‘far and above outweigh any other connection in (her) life’. For Tabitha the stadium was something like a huge ‘queer’ living room in which she could reach out and touch ‘queer’ icons, stand alongside members of her ‘queer’ family, and make quite un-queer statements like, ‘everybody is your family and that's how we all feel, this sense of family and security that we all feel when we are all together like

127 In the months preceding The Gay Games Justice Kirby was accused, under parliamentary privilege of using a Commonwealth car to cruise young male prostitutes. The story was fabricated and a begrudging apology was issued. The incident had a significant impact on his reputation and so the passion, hurt, emotion and strength of his speech was evident to all who knew the story. I recall a tense hush across the stadium, people crying as he spoke, and a standing ovation. The participants still speak about this speech, event and place, and thus appear to still be haunted by the words said in that place, at that time.
that’. Tabitha is passionate about her big (‘normal’) ‘queer’ family, and in numerous interviews she reinforced her attachment to imagined or liminal individual and collective identities and communities.

On various occasions and in a multitude of places the women in this research appeared to have played with the edges of normative space. In this sense Tabitha’s vision does this, but it also reinforces normative notions. This represents a paradox - what exactly is normative space, and how do these women adapt to it or change it? How does it change or adapt to them? They variously report at times feeling ‘out of place’, ‘not fitting’, ‘at home’, as having a ‘sense of place’, and whilst admittedly these have occurred mainly within the context of ‘queer’ places and spaces they have also occurred within heteronormative spaces and places as well (for example at Aussie Stadium, in a workplace or public space). These are the times I have found most interesting, as well as the occasions when they have occupied queer space in somewhat ‘queerer’ ways (for example during The Gay Games or at dance parties like Azure harbour party or The Mardi Gras party). By positing a sense of boundary-less insides and outsides, and in-betweens in the places they occupy (whether these be actual or imagined) the women in this research have negotiated their ‘sense of place’ in ways which fray the edges of both hetero- and homo- normative space. Their stories of gender and sexual identities are filled with contradiction and paradox which points to the difficulties involved in keeping up and maintaining (let alone ‘finding’) one’s identity and one’s place(s). But far from foreclosing on the stories or suggesting their ambiguity to be problematic, I instead contend that this permits a celebration of the paradoxical messiness of ‘queer’ spatial relations, and signifies a new way of ‘describing becoming’ (Thrift, 1999). In short their stories and comments support Knopp’s (2004) contention that ‘queer’ identities and places are fluid sets of spatial practices that can only ever be viewed as ‘under construction’.

Phantasmagoria: ghosts on the hillside

Representations of queerness in space appeared ‘real’ to the women in this research (whether they were or not). This is exemplified by the ‘queer’ ways in which the
participants challenged normative views whilst simultaneously constituting particular kinds of ‘queer’ identities by dressing up and ‘performing’ at the Azure harbour party. The images (appearing over the page) from this event typify the ‘queerness’ associated with the participants’ performances of identity in and through queer events and queer places. I maintain these images present a phantasmagoria, a series of strange dreamlike images that materialise a place where experiences, understandings and perceptions border on unreality (iBook G4, Tools Menu Dictionary, accessed 5/2/06). I am particularly drawn to the use and power of ‘camp’ humour, parody, drag, pregnancy, masculinity, femininity, sport and sexuality to act as ‘queer’ performatives. Thrift’s (1996, 1999) ideas allow me to view these performatives as ‘queer’ because they are based upon no original version of either gender or sexuality (Butler, 1999a). They are serious performances which are ritualised, based upon magic and ghosts, and have a very subversive outcome (despite the fact they are occurring in supposedly already ‘queer’ events). My argument here is based upon the irony that these displays (‘performances’) are deliberately scripted to disrupt normative views of gender, sexuality, ‘lesbians’, ‘queers’, and place. This is verified via the reactions of other people in attendance at the event, for whom the arrival of a coach full of non-gender or sexually specified Toolgirls, tennis players or golfers signals the beginning of a show or act at the event for them.

Nell: … I remember walking through with my girlfriend and people were saying to us “are you part of the show” and I was going “yeah we are part of the show”. So the spotlight was on us and I think that is a really fun thing and it’s good too.

The ‘group’ was viewed as ‘queer’ by queers, thus the parody disrupts homonormative space. What becomes important in the consideration of the interactional, synergistic and representational nature of places and people is that the claims to authenticity and ‘realness’ do have the potential to contest and disrupt both space and place in political and personal ways. Duncan (1996) and Valentine (1995, 1996) both suggest that lesbian and gay practices (like those of Nell and her friends at Azure) have great potential to denaturalise the gendered and sexualised nature of public spaces. In this sense ‘queer’ disruption is evoked in queer places. Duncan (1996) maintains that the very nature of ‘queer’ contests and confronts the production of public space for both homosexuals and heterosexuals and
this is exemplified in Nell’s comments below, the devilish spectre she leaves haunting and
dancing on the hill (discussed in a moment), and the ‘queer’ performativity associated with
‘dressing up’, parodying and performing with her friends for, not simply at, these events.

Nell: We have definitely been involved with lots of other gay events particularly
party gay events where it has been awesome to get out there and express yourself
and dressing up has been a huge part of it. We always seem to be the same people,
the significant people … We don’t do anything by halves, we get in there and we go
“hey if we are going to a sunset party we are going to make an impact” … I was
Mary Jo Fernandes and I remember walking around for a couple of weeks prior
saying “yeah I’m Mary Jo Fernandes” … I was getting excited about the whole fact
of dressing up but also dressing up with twenty other people … because being
around a bunch of people that all look the same as you and you go to party is quite
significant … you are in the spotlight; people see you and in comes this group of
people and it feels pretty, that same buzzy warm feeling, it feels extra high and extra
exciting because you’ve made a little effort to make an impact on this party …
you’ve dressed up … got together with the gang … had drinks prior … caught a bus
together … purposely rocked up an hour late to feel like you’ll make a difference
and we did make a difference … it was just hilarious, like we were known as this
tennis tour that was there. And the year prior we had all dressed up as ABBA and so
at the party we were the ABBA group and you can pass people and they’ll go “oh
wow, you are part of that group” or whatever …

This quote seems to draw together most of my arguments in this chapter and also takes on
Duncan’s (1996) and Valentine’s (1996) call for subversively ‘queer’ acts of resistance. In
essence these are acts that seek to ‘queer the space’ (any space) by confronting and
opposing the normalising gazes and boundaries which seek to silence and eject different
bodies (including homonormative gazes). Duncan (1996: 138) argues that if such acts are
explicit and readable “then contests around sexuality would become more visible to the
straight population”. There seems little doubt that the participants’ intentions are both
explicit and readable. Duncan (1996: 138) further suggests such naturalising tactics have
the potential to work on the ‘queer’ population as well by “pointing to the fluidity of
identity and helping to transgress clear-cut heterosexual/homosexual dichotomies”. This is
apparent in Nell’s description of her ‘team’s’ attendance at the Azure parties. Nell and her
friends have created a routine of dressing up, meeting, travelling, and performing together.
In short, deliberately taking on roles which parody the performative nature of gender,
sexuality, ‘queer’, and them selves. Others in attendance at the event believe the group are
‘performers’ for their own spectacle, whilst people on the street stare open mouthed as we walk to our coach ‘costumed up’, and drive through the streets of Sydney. The costume and ‘performance’ attracts attention and makes a difference to the event and the place. It confuses all who view it, and with a wave of her racquet, and a Mary Jo smile, Nell exposes the ultimate comedy of it all when ‘yeah we are part of the show’ hails a disruptive ‘queer’ figure that everyone believes is ‘real’. This ‘performance’ leaves all unsure of the boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, ‘queer’ and ‘non-queer’, because the boundaries between heteronormative and homonormative space have been blurred.

In here interview Nell maintained that when we dance and jump around at the annual Azure party we were actually creating an inclusive ‘queer’ space simply because we were contained there (in a usually heterosexed space) with other ‘queer’ people. So for her, just being there, stopping, and doing what we do contests normative ideas of space.

Nell: … when we go to a harbour party, we're there, if you look on the hill there's all these gay men and women jumping around and dancing and we're in this spot and we stop in this spot, you know.

The previous photograph re-creates the image of Nell’s words and also shows the paradoxes of space (inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion), and how stopping on the hill and yelling to each other, ‘look where we are’, blurs the boundaries of normative space by creating a sense of disembodied spirit. This place changes constantly based upon the human and non-human forces that occupy it. Turning ‘queer’ for one Sunday in February is part of the process of ‘becoming’ for this place.

Massey (1994) describes places as temporally unique, local and global, unfixed, contested, multiple and ‘timeless’. This, I suggest, can be thought of in much the same way as when Butler and others describe identities. The Azure party occurs once a year so whilst it is unique the memories (including the idea of ‘taking over’ heterosexed space) live on within the bodies of the participants. Massey’s idea that place is relational and temporal, as well as stretched beyond ‘real’ borders, creates a notion of places as paradoxical (both global and local, timed and timeless), and speaks to Thrift’s (1999) metaphor of the spectral (‘queer’) gathering. In this image it becomes possible for ‘queers’ to haunt Mrs. Macquarie’s Chair because the outside folds in and the inside seeps out thus creating a reproduction of ‘queer’ place(s) and identities which are contingent, diffuse, and magical. This allows the boundaries between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, fixed and fluid, to be porous and vulnerable to contestation permitting a view that like identities, place and space are continually being made and re-made, engaged in a process of uncertain and unpredictable becoming (Massey, 1999). The image of the Azure party visualises (and materialises) the paradox created when a heteronormative space like Sydney harbour is ‘queered’, and it highlights the transient nature of this event and the people who create it. Knopp and Brown (2003: 421) argue that because ‘queer’ acts of resistance (however big or small, subversive or assimilatory) happen everywhere this exposes the spatially disjointed “and discontinuous nature of power.”

Despite what Nell says the stories she has told in this thesis are not the usual one’s told to researchers looking into ‘lesbian’ lives. In the main the literature suggests gay men and lesbians inhabit spaces and places differently, further they use, experience, define and create them in different ways (Almgren 1994; Bouthillette, 1997; Califia, 1997; Podmore,
2001; Ridge et al., 1997; Valentine, 1995, 1996; Valentine & Skelton, 2003). It is important to note here the paucity of research conducted around lesbian spaces, places and communities, and the token commentary often ascribed to lesbian lives and experience. Grant (1997: 117) supports this claim, remarking that “the treatment of lesbians in geography has been more often one marked by absences … [and] lack of the lesbian mark on the city”. This comment is supported by both male and female researchers in the field with a number of feminist researchers arguing that when compared to gay men, lesbians face considerably more restrictions simply because they are women (see for example Bouthilette, 1997; Probyn, 1995; Valentine, 1996), often appearing ‘invisible’ on the queer landscape because “lesbian geographies appear to be more dispersed, hidden and ‘private’” (Podmore, 2001: 333). Early work by Castells (1983), Lauria and Knopp (1985) and Knopp (1990) (all variously cited in Bell & Valentine, 1995a; Duncan, 1996; Ingram et al., 1997) tends to support these findings, though did not directly examine discretely the lives and lived experiences of lesbians. The data collected for this research suggests that ‘lesbians’ (or the lesbians I know) do make, occupy, ‘haunt’, and leave their mark upon ‘real’ and imagined places in some pretty ‘queer’ ways. Similarly places make, occupy, ‘haunt’, and leave their mark on ‘lesbians’ in some equally as ‘queer’ ways, as indicated by Nell’s lingering presence at Mrs. Macquarie’s chair.

**Devilish ‘hauntings’**

In preparation for one of her interviews Nell prepared a collage128 of her world titled My Mardi-Gras My Life (see Image 7.8 over the page) and used it to rekindle the emotions, spirit and spectres of her three significant places and events, The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade and party, and Fair Day. In the quote below she explained how wonderful it was to be given the space to think about her life and to relive the events of ‘her world’. She chose language, symbols and places to display her emotional memories of her events, people and places.

---

128 This collage was her choice. I gave no instructions except to suggest if they would like to bring along stimulus material or artefacts of the time/moment to any of the interviews then they could. Nell engaged with this process and across each interview brought books, CDs, photographs, travel diaries, and her collage My Mardi-Gras My Life. Maree made a similar collage titled My space place world.
Nell: I actually find it really nice being able to relive it again and it makes me feel good to go "wow look what you've done" … since our last visit, I was just thinking about my life. So I'll call that "My Mardi Gras and My life" and I just thought about all words that came to mind and I just wrote them down in two women symbols and places like Sydney and the Opera House and lots of people at the Opera House, like entering that community space, you know, with all of us there.

During this interview Nell cried as she relived the moments she had managed to capture on paper and through words. She felt, remembered and spoke about how her transitory occupation of a place had made her feel, and still makes her feel today. Haunted by emotion in such a way she remarked half to herself, ‘wow look what you’ve done’ thus appearing to affirm her own identity with and through others (‘community space’), and place (Sydney, Opera House, events, places). This ‘wow’ was so strong she equated her Mardi Gras with her life, displaying how place and a sense of self are mutually constitutive.

Massey and Jess (1995) argue that because places are infused with meaning and feelings, a ‘sense of place’ can develop from every life experience and pervade every aspect of our lives. A ‘sense of place’ forms part of the participants’ understandings of ‘truth’, ‘reality’ and causality, and as such a consideration of the spatial has ontological and epistemic importance to them, even if only partial and fractured. Put simply, experiences of and in place(s), and discourses of place and space, provide them with a picture of the world as a place in which their everyday conceptions of self and reality are made sense of in terms of their relationships with the world, and with others. Understanding how we experience the spatial (and how it experiences us) provides an opening for understanding how we live our lives, and significant places and events play a big part in the way of life of the participants.

Nell’s collage highlighted her three favourite events and places.

Nell: … big significant things … my favourite days … the parade and then the party, which was unreal. And I just had comments about the party, diversity, *Queer as Folk*, because that TV show is unreal. And then I saw these and I thought that's so how I feel at the Mardi Gras party.
By ‘these’ Nell means images, words, costumes, bodies, events, and places. She also included ‘queer’ popular culture to support and affirm her world. The overall image presented is clearly spatial, social, mystical, and ‘unreal’ (in both senses of the word). Etched within the two women’s symbols are dozens of words which add further meaning to her world and her experiences in it. Nell went on to explain her choice of ‘the devil’ as a key figure in her collage, and as a metaphorical representation of herself, ‘crafted’ for, at, and by these places. A sense of these places as spectral gatherings that haunt us cannot go unnoticed in the following explanation and image.

Karen: Can you describe that little devil?

Nell: There's a devil here with big boots on and devil horns and pitchfork and just undies on, no top and an arm band and that just feels like me, like that kind of rebellion feeling that you can just prance around and go to Mardi Gras and be around women; I don't know, just parade, parade in a costume that you want to parade your body in. Know what I mean, can't walk down the street like that.

Karen: Okay, is that like a dress up for you, is that what you really want to do?

Nell: I do like it, it's like an erotic kind of adventure.

Image 7.9: Little Devil (Nell)
Nell saw herself as this devil. She has a sense of her place and her places because she is able to feel, recall, speak about, and act in eroticised and free ways in the very specific and ‘queer’ places that make up her world. By choosing an imaginary (but sexy, sensual and naughty) figure to personify herself, Nell materialised a ‘queer’ entity that appeared in this ‘queer’ place and time. She can’t do this everyday but to parade her body, topless, around other women has a powerful and rebellious affect that typifies Nell at her deepest notion of self (‘that just feels like me’). Nell’s devil is but one of the ‘passings’ of place that haunt us, and whilst it only ‘comes out’ once a year, she (and others) see (and imagine) the spectre of her devil dancing topless on that hill every day of the year – and that makes her (and others) feel very good.

At first glance the idea that we can interact with, attach to and ‘find’ (our) places in geographical, social, cultural, political, emotional and sensual ways seems equally as flawed as declaring ‘this is just who I am’. That said there is much to be gained from considering these ideas in ‘queer’ ways by positing ‘sense of place’ as the effect of a multitude of spatial interactions, practices and processes that encompass many things and change constantly over time. In this way it is productive to consider ‘sense of place’ as “a fundamental condition of human existence” which is never truly complete, and is instead always “fluid and ephemeral, always contingent and always in the process of becoming” (Knopp, 2004: 129). Streets, events and places are not just the sites of everyday interactions, and for living and working, they also provide a stage for our stories, our beliefs and values, our ‘sense of self’ and belonging, our ‘sense of place’ and our ‘sense of sexuality’. Following Knopp such a view seems to resonate more closely with the lived experiences of ‘queer’ bodies and places.

‘Sense of place’

In the past human and feminist geographers have sought to understand how people experience, perceive and consume both transitory and everyday places, and in the process give meaning to experiences of, in and through place. When experiences and meanings to do with place (including the social and political relations in which place is embedded)
become a central part of who we are in the world then place and identity can be said to be mutually constitutive. In this explication ‘sense of place’ can only be understood within the context of an individual’s life, including their experiences, ‘passings’, and movements through places, and their evolving subjectivities, as well as their effect and affect on broader non-human forces (for example economics, discourse, socio-economic status, media, technology, disease, nature, suburbs, streets, venues, events as suggested by ANT).

Lived connections bind people together in groups and communities, and most “critically people do not simply locate themselves, they define themselves through a sense of place” (Crang, 1998: 102, my emphasis). This is evident in the poem Ode to Kinselas, and Nell’s view (and later Maree’s) that her places created and defined her life and sexuality. In this sense I argue that sexual identity and place are mutually constitutive. I have shown how place and sexual selves could be seen to be stretched out somewhere between the ‘known’ and ‘unknown’, requiring attachment to both the ‘real’ and the ‘abstract’. Knopp (2004: 126) suggests such an imaginary is less concerned “with order, finitude and certitude than on incompleteness, fragility, and tenuous, fluid relationships”, and that this world is not a collection of “transcendent ‘truths’ … but rather as an elusive and ephemeral flurry of activity marked by constantly changing topological relationships”. It seems that making sense of the world and our experiences could be seen as a practical task (a matter of survival at times) rather than a search for facticity, ‘truth’ (Thrift, 1999), self or identity. The data discussed thus far in this chapter (and to come) seems to support the practical (deliberate, material, embodied, ‘real’) nature of making sense of our lives and selves. Developing a sense of oneself therefore seems to be more about materialising, feeling, sensing, and living than theorising one’s identities.

In the following analysis I specifically recall the participants’ sensual and spatial experiences through a queer place, King Street, and a queer event, The 2002 Sydney Gay Games. I view ‘sense of place’ in ghostly ways and in terms of geographical ‘passings’, ‘spectral gatherings’, and uncertain subjectivities that are ‘in the making’. This allowed me to explore the ways in which ‘selves’ and places appeared to be magically and continuously constituting each other. At the same time I considered what it means to say such things.
‘Sense of place’ materialised as a theoretical resource situated somewhere between the empirical, ‘real’ and actual lived experiences of ‘selves’ and places, and the liminal, imaginary, theoretical and discursive ways in which ‘selves’ and places interact, communicate, and melt into one another. Such an approach invites an exploration of the data in ways that neither disavowed nor valorised the experiences, the places, or the identities, but instead nurtured ontological and phantasmic uncertainty as a process of ‘queering’. To do this I drew upon the participants’ spoken words from interview transcripts, poems, and artefacts from the event to create a picture of what it was like to ‘live’, ‘haunt’, and ‘pass’ through places and events, and what it felt like to be haunted by them. Thrift’s (1999) theorising has clearly been instructive in this process.

King Street

My Space, Place, Family (Maree)

I want to talk about my sense of place,
how I feel my sexuality influences that or creates that.
I feel my whole lifestyle, what I do, is influenced by my sexuality …
Where I work, live, play
Where I feel comfortable as well.
Before I came out I didn’t really fit, have the opportunity to explore my sexuality,
I was stuck in a very heterosexual place.
Newtown
changed everything in my life.
I've always lived around this area
I've lived around King Street.
I walk through it on the way to work or on the way home.
Most weekends I'm up there, it's safe, it's a safe place.
I get that safety here.
I don’t feel different; not standing out; people aren’t challenged;
no-one turns a head to anything on King Street … no-one at all.
I’m a majority.
I have fun.
I'm amongst my family and friends, it's just like a little family;
nowhere feels as comfortable as there … nowhere at all.
I just feel a lot of comfort, I’m comfortable.
It’s a sense. Yeah that’s what I get, that’s it, that’s what it’s about.
I get
a sense of belonging
A strong theme to emerge from the data has been the idea that ‘queer’ places are important to ‘lesbian’ identity because they offer safety, ‘comfort’ and protection, as well as a sense of belonging to a distinct ‘queer’ community or sub culture. It is important to note that the idea of a ‘queer community’ was both real and imagined for the participants (sensed and experienced) but that it was often compared to and housed within and beside the ‘normal’ and ‘regular’ heterosexual community. To feel ‘in place’ somewhere, must be interpreted in comparison to feeling ‘out of place’ elsewhere. The participants consistently presented an ambiguous explanation of this when, on one hand, they spoke about the need for ‘queer’ places to provide them with a space to ‘be themselves’, ‘express themselves’, and be ‘the majority’ and in so doing affirm their differences and sexual identity through places. Whilst on the other hand they asserted that homosexuality is as ‘normal’ as heterosexuality, and is a part of the ‘normal’ (heterosexual) community/space. In this sense their ideas of fitting in and belonging could be read as fitting into and belonging to heteronormative society, space and communities, and not being ‘different’, ‘standing out’ or challenging others. This pits articulations and ‘acts’ of essentialised identities and places against expressions of ‘queerness’ and the importance of disrupting normative space by shifting the gaze (like dressing as Mary Jo Fernandez). This often placed Maree in a quandary and she spoke about finding it difficult to resolve how she perceived herself in and out of both ‘queer’ and heteronormative spaces. For Maree ‘queer’ places were perceived as safe and comforting because ‘no-one turns a head to anything … no-one at all’ and thereby sexual difference is neither interpellated nor signified, thus is unproblematised (unlike her experiences in heterosexualised spaces). But of one thing she was quite sure, her places were ‘real’, she diffused¹²⁹ with King Street, and it (in all its human and non-human forms) diffused right along with her. King Street spatially and temporally constituted her, and she it.

¹²⁹ By this I mean a melting, melding, rubbing off, and seeping effect. The concept is borrowed from Knopp and Brown (2003) who likewise suggest that something like a seeping effect occurs between identities and places.
Maree: I choose to live in certain areas, I choose to go out in certain areas but more so within myself a sense of place. For me it’s not the physical sense, it’s more of a sense of safety, a sense of being comfortable and sort of just a sense of, you know, like place to me isn’t a house or a building it’s just a place in the world almost … and my sexuality influences my sense of place at the moment.

There is great potential to use the movement and diffusion of bodies and places to challenge gendered and sexed discourses. By playing with the Sartrean notion of being-in-the-world, Mendieta (2001) reminds that to always see gendered or heterosexed space and place as vacuous and stifling is to forget what it means to have a body in the world, and this ignores the many opportunities for agency which spring from differentially spatialised bodies. Maree’s emotions and sense of (her) place typify this. Mendieta (2001: 211) continues,

...to be in the midst of the world, however, is not something ethereal, abstract, or without material consequences. To be the object of someone else’s look is to be a body which is seen. The look of the other makes us blush and we are thus corporealized. To be in the world is to have a body. To take a place in the world, is to live out our bodies in that distended space that has become our place; of course, insofar as we assume it.

This idea resonates strongly with Nell’s previous comment about the ways in which we make an event, how it makes her feel, and how ‘other communities are looking in’ and in the process being changed. Mendieta (2001) further suggests that this continual corporealisation is also spatial and temporal, and in the end the body is always being outdone and surpassing itself. So to be in the world is to never truly be in the world but rather to be moving and oscillating in a process of becoming. Maree’s body, which is both placed and placing, spatialised and spatialising, is lived rather than encountered, just as the world is lived rather than discovered as already constituted (Mendieta, 2001). With her body Maree can, and does return ‘the gaze’ in ways indicative of agency and which disrupt normative space. Therefore her body and identity, as well as King Street are things “continuously being surpassed” (Mendieta, 2001: 211) in response to each other and the changes they effect on others.
Of one thing each participant was quite certain - ‘queer’ places, venues and events gave them a sense of belonging that made them feel attached and connected to a network or a community. It may not be important whether this is read as attached to a heterosexual community (though certainly they always are) but what was apparent is that these women have a multiple notion of ‘sense of place’ in terms of sensing and feeling their ‘queer’ place(s) as well as developing a sense of themselves and their sexuality in relation to their ‘queer’ places. In the opening six lines of the previous poem, Maree asserts this. She then went on to explain how that her sexuality (as one aspect of her ‘self’) has influenced her movements through, and attachments to place, and has hence contributed to her ‘sense of place’ (and sense of self and sense of sexuality).

Here Engwicht (1999: 14) helps to explain Maree’s ‘senses’ when he suggests that streets and ‘home territory’ (I interpret as any place that makes you feel ‘at home’) provide a strong ‘sense of place’, “and a sense of place can be very important in developing our identity as people. A sense of place is a feeling or affinity with the physical environment”. That physical environment can be a street, a tense sexual moment, a venue, an event, a hillside, or a bedroom. This is not just about the physical things present, it also includes the emotions, memories, stories, and affections that take us back to pleasures, desires, places, ourselves, and our bodies. These things, when we sense, see and feel them have the ability to reconfirm and transform ‘selves’ and places. This is what places like King Street, Kinselas, Azure, and The Gay Games do for the participants, even after the events have long gone. Stories of place provide location and an embodied sense of where we should be, thus re-ma(r)king our own subjective spatial and bodily boundaries. Stories in and of themselves help us to understand our own ambiguities and difference, and the broader implications of places and events because the story in itself makes ‘reality’ for us and in so doing evokes “a strong and immediate ‘sense of place’” (Bird, 2002: 526).

There is little doubt that for Maree (Tabitha, Jacqui and Nell) a sense of community, belonging and fitting in is a significant factor in understandings of self and the constitution of sexual identity through a ‘sense of place’. Maree is still in regular contact with King Street (its pavements, traffic, buildings, signs, cafes and shops), and its ‘queer’ spatial
signifiers (flags, stickers, magazines, dogs, bill posters, advertising, economy). Its human inhabitants accept her, notice her, but don’t stare; and she has a strong emotional sense of these reciprocal looks and feelings, and this unspoken reciprocity means a lot to her ‘sense of sexuality’. In the last lines Maree alludes to the notion that her body, sexual identity, and her places are performatively enmeshed in a dynamic, but fun, processes of mutual constitution and re-production. She loves King Street, it loves her – it is where she found her sexual place, and basically her ‘home’. These sentiments also confirm that neither King Street, *Kinselas or Azure* would exist as they do without Maree, Jacqui, and Nell ‘haunting’ their pavements, dance-floors, and hillsides.

*The 2002 Sydney Gay Games*

Exploring the sensual dimensions of the participants’ experiences invites consideration of the ways in which stories or memories can express the feel, taste, sound, and sight of lived experiences. The following poem¹³⁰ (and accompanying images appearing after it) is a blended version of each participants description of their main highlight from *The Gay Games*, the Opening Ceremony. The data collected in this particular interview (number one) spoke to me in a multitude of ways that resonated with my various readings and the theoretical resources deployed in this chapter. I was able to reflect upon both the data and the experience from a unique insider position. We shared this experience together. We were all able to speak about the experience(s) of the event from a personal and collective angle. This also relates to Richardson’s (2000a, 2001) notion of the power of the collective story to re-write a cultural script in ways that have the potential to both resist and alter normative ideologies and practices. In short, the interview data collected from the five *Gay Games* interviews plus my own experience spoke to me as one (collectively), and also alluded strongly to ideas around realism, diffusion, haunting memories, spectral gatherings, and the visceral and emotive nature of embodied ‘queer’ spatial experiences.

¹³⁰ I also provide an array of images over the page to be viewed alongside the poem as a way of visually resurrecting the bodies, place and event.
Something rather sinister also emerged from the ‘experience’, and from the participants’ and my own reactions to the powerfully deployed discursive citations and ‘hailings’ invariably attached to such a visible global challenge to heteronormativity. It seems reasonable to suggest, that in a historical and cultural sense, *The Gay Games* have emerged as the most significant overt sensual statement of ‘gay’ solidarity against heterosexism and homophobia on the planet (Sykes, 2001). There is little doubt (as the poem below displays) that there are some distinctly powerful spin-offs for those participating such an event. But, I also noticed at the Sydney *Gay Games* (and other local ‘queer’ events[^132]) a series of inclusions and exclusions along spatial, economic, bodily, and cultural lines. Sykes (2001: 220) is not surprised by this suggesting that these “new exclusions and conflicts” are the inevitable outcome of “hard-fought political struggles” waged by a growing and progressive social movement that has, itself, become “ambitious, conservative”, and perhaps even, narcissistic. By examining the protests against commercialisation and corporatisation at *Gay Games* Amsterdam in 1998 in terms of narcissism, Sykes (2001), I suggest, goes some way to explain what some gay men and lesbians (for example Tabitha) describe as ‘internal homophobia’. So perhaps what Tabitha felt as a powerful collective identity, safety and sense of sameness, and what I felt, at times as discomfort, privilege and exclusion during *The Gay Games* 2002 was in fact a narcissistic articulation of our own psychic conflicts between individual selves, and our desire to belong to groups and communities? This conflict, explains Sykes (2001: 210) “arises between a narcissist wish for sameness and the threat to narcissism created by differences” (italics in original). This may also offer an explanation for the revoking of Montreal’s rights to host *The Gay Games* in 2006 in that in both of these examples money emerges as difference (Sykes, 2001), and hence the basis for inclusion/exclusion between members of the ‘group’, and hence as the basis for a narcissistic response. Sykes (2001)

[^131]: I use the term ‘gay’ here deliberately because of the title of the event, it’s historical roots, the event’s continued ‘buying’ into, exploitation of and reliance upon ‘gay’ consumerism, tourism and dollars; and the events growing commercialisation and reliance on corporate sponsorship. These shifts, I argue stand in opposition to *The Gay Games* principles of Acceptance, Diversity, Inclusiveness and Tolerance, simply because the event, structured spatially and corporately in the way it is, including and excluding the people it does cannot genuinely speak to these principles.

further suggests that this may manifest as homophobia. Towards the end of this chapter I provide a further example of this by looking at a speech, quote and image presented at *The Gay Games* in 2002.

In the interview I posed the question: ‘*What about the Gay Games experience itself? Were there any highlights in there for you? Can you talk me through that? Try to remember everything about it*’, and this was the response …

**Gay Games Opening Ceremony**

The highlight without a doubt was the opening ceremony  
without an absolute doubt  
it was absolutely fantastic.

I've got a photo of us walking to the stadium  
You can see the excitement on everyone's face  
Wearing our  
uniforms together for the first time … the preparation.  
We're just so so excited … the anticipation … this is gonna be something big!  
Walking  
just so excited (*it was just like the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games*).

So we got there (*like we were so excited*) but had hours and hours  
I felt freezing cold  
everyone was really excited.  
It was like waiting for something to happen.  
You can see all these people from around the world  
international people everywhere  
people dressed up (*this is the first time you actually get to see with your own eyes what the hell this is about*)  
There's all the colours  
the orange of the Netherlands, they take up a whole bay!  
I remember seeing all that  
all the noise  
the music  
people were just pumped  
it was just so exciting.  
A really open environment  
We were just sharing a really unique experience.

Everyone starts going in
you can see it happening.
The loudspeakers …
"What's happening in the big stadium?"
(there people in there? Or mum, dad and their dog, a couple of people with a picnic hamper … that's it)
We get down
were walking (I love to have a drag queen organising everyone else, it was hilarious, I'll never forget that)
Australia goes in last.
We were
... the very last group
... standing on the edge
... about to go in
... waiting in the tunnel
There were whistles and people banging drums
The noise was just so loud, we were just like "oh my god" (yells).
Surrounding us were people bashing against the aluminium tunnel
The noise was huge.
We were just screaming
all just looking at each other screaming.
I remember feeling this buzzing feeling go through me (I'm feeling it now)
Your jaw goes funny
it’s an amazing feeling
a real vibration,
that’s what it is
it’s a vibration
it goes all the way from my groin area up to my jaw.
My body was just buzzing
the sound and noise, the noise was huge.
My hands were sweating
they were cold
my hands were cold.
I remember they were sweating.

Finally we go in and just run
Looking around, it was like my head was turning slowly
just in shock
amazement about the thousands of people that were in that stadium
seeing the streamers swish from side to side
the roar of the people
things popping off, fire crackers.
You can
... see the light
... hear the noise
... see, like the stadium is full "oh my god" (yells)
I remember seeing
smoke or dust through the whole stadium
seeing pink and white streamers going everywhere, thinking "oh my god"
I felt the most natural high I've ever had in my whole life.
It's indescribable.
The field was the best feeling
the grass was so green and it was so soft (I remember that feeling).
The air was crisp
it was cool
the stadium was just awesome.
It was packed.
We were just going mad
running
screaming
hysterical
it was just awesome.
Everybody ran forward.
We all just ran forward.
I just ran
wherever my legs took me
just running.
I remember running forward
then backwards
side to side
Yelling, and looking at someone, and screaming.
Yeah that was a good feeling
an awesome feeling.
It was just absolutely exhilarating
seeing that crowd was amazing
like pride and elation, and absolute exhilaration all at once,
"no I don't want this moment to be over yet, this is too good".
(I'm all shivery, I've got a tingly feeling, it's a really good feeling).
They couldn't get us off the field we were so excited.
We weren't gonna let anything stop us having a good time
It just went too quick.
I wanted to stay on the field longer (laughs).

Everything sort of goes by in a flash.
It was amazing
like being a superstar
I felt like Cathy Freeman or something at the Olympics.
To be in that stadium
with all those people
knowing my parents were there
running out last, in our shirt.
It was probably one of the best nights of my life
It was amazing.
It was a night which I don't think could ever be captured again
It was amazing.
It was our night
one night is forever
that was our night.

Each of the participants was clearly affected by the sensory and spatial experiences of *The Gay Games* Opening Ceremony. This particular event left a lasting mark upon each woman, one that each easily and readily returned to in order to re-tell (and hence re-live) that moment in time. The poem reverberates with excitement and sheer joy at being able (permitted) to express their sexuality in such a way, in such a place, at such an event.

Like Nell, this poem makes my palms sweat. It floats me back to that cold, cold night and so, so exciting event; to the people (my friends, strangers), costumes, noise, colours, smells, sights, and feelings. The Opening Ceremony of the 2002 Sydney *Gay Games* was, and still is, a gathering place for and of ‘queer’ spirit(s). I drift back there now (as the women in this research did) and re-experience the ghostly memories of time and place. Being a part of, sensing, and experiencing this kind of community gathering requires believing in ghostly and Utopian concepts like shared communality, unity, cohesion, equality, and assumptions of solidarity and collectivity (Ridge et al., 1997). People from various places around the world merged into and through the event, and the event appeared to merge with them in a process of ‘queer’ diffusion, leaving in the participants a legacy - a sense of pride and belonging at having simply been a part.

In some sense the experience was surreal and séance-like. Their words conjured up and materialised a colourful and magical global community of ‘queers’ previously unimaginable in this place.³³ As the participants ran across the green, damp grass a grandstand full of spectators they did not believe could possibly be there (just for them), rose in front of them. The poem highlights the multitude of ways in which places and people are sensed, materialised and imagined in social, emotional, and embodied ways. It

---

³³ Rugby League, Rugby Union, and football are typically played at Aussie Stadium, with cricket and Australian Rules Football played next door. This stadium is a monument of sporting hegemony, and we ‘queered’ it.

292
also exposes the participants’ investments in this event as a definitive mode of political self affirmation to friends, families, strangers, the world, anyone who would watch or listen, but especially to those who have, in the past denied, discriminated, silenced, or injured ‘us’ (individually and collectively). Hence the importance to Tabitha of standing upon the ‘hallowed turf’ of the Sydney Cricket Ground.

This time and place was very special to Scout, Maree, Jacqui, Tabitha and Nell as it reflected the expression of a sexual self impossible in their everyday lives. And after years of difficulty, discrimination, loss, marginalisation, injury, and silence this was their night and their chance to speak up, be acknowledged, sexually self affirmed, and heard. In a way, it was kind of what they thought they deserved.

**It was our night**

one night is forever

that was our night.

I also wonder, following Sykes (2001), whether this can be viewed as narcissistic, and hence as an example of one of the ‘new exclusions’ she argues gives rise to resurgent and ongoing forms of (internal) homophobia. The participants were ‘believers’, and this was clearly an occasion for righteous self parading, self belief, and self love. But they were also ‘hailed’ into the gathering by some very powerful discourses, some of which focussed on our own profoundly narrow images of ‘queer’ identities, politics and places; others which sensually tempted and cajoled us to meld with each other and the event in order to create ‘a global queer team’ and sense of sameness; and still others which now leave a hollow ache about the ‘reality’ of the event and it’s ability to account for the material ways in which difference is experienced by ‘queers’ worldwide, and especially by those who did not, could not, or were not invited to this gathering.

*Politics of place*

This event, like many ‘queer gatherings’, was also political, and this was exemplified in the speech titled *A Moment in Time* by High Court Judge, and International Human Rights
advocate, Justice Michael Kirby (see Appendix E). His speech begs a closer deconstruction than the one I attempt here, but I wish to briefly tease out its effect as a spatial interpellation of collective identity, and form of narcissistic desire.

Maree: … the speech by the high court judge, Michael Kirby was absolutely amazing. I have a printout of it on my office wall at work.

Each participant referred to the speech of Justice Kirby as a significant aspect that reinforced their sense of being a part of something global and eerily bigger than themselves. The speech appealed to their sense of spatial imagination and reinforced their intense embodied experiences of sameness (all the ‘international people everywhere’, ‘people dressed up’, ‘all the colours’, ‘the orange of the Netherlands’). Kirby’s use of ‘global’ discourse, name dropping, and war metaphors throughout were deliberate, and Kirby (because of who he was, what he did, and what he had experienced in the past and more recently) ‘hailed’ us by appealing to our imaginary notions of spatial and spectral collectivity and commonality of identity. He called to us, and wanted us to be and do something. The power of this collective identity, he said, could change the world through acts and utterances reflecting ‘an alternative vision for humanity’. Not only were we drawn in but we were also being called to arms, asked to unite against a common foe, ‘inequity’ (not heteronormativity, I wondered?). Were we all the same? What imaginary bonds held us together? Gender? Sexuality? Oppression? Injustice? Excitement? Desire? Could ‘we’ really save the whole of humanity? Should we?

In this moment in time (and all its spatial relationships) we were party-goers who had been powerfully interpellated to look inside and re-invent ourselves as one, thus re-constituted, rather ambitiously, as a community of would-be activists and advocates of ‘justice’ for all humanity. I wondered did this represent a queer attempt to shatter the boundaries of the unitary or coherent identity, or was it simply an appeal to a very specific congregation of imaginary collective identities (that is, those who can afford to be there and who ‘turned’) to use their privilege to speak on behalf of others? What would be the cost of disloyalty to the ‘cause’, in turning away from the ‘group’? Or the cost of being different within one’s
collective difference? Would my doubts signal me as a traitor intent upon spoiling the
illusion of ‘sameness’ so carefully constructed at the centre of Kirby’s global call to arms? I
left with these questions, and have somewhat reconciled them through deeper
understandings of psychic attachments to sameness, and fears of difference. In other words
I have come to consider at least some kind of answer to Stephen’s (Hall, 1990) question to
her image through Narcissus’s response, also at a mirror.

Alas! I am myself the boy I see. I know it: my own reflection does not deceive me. I
am on fire with love for my own self. (Ovid, 1995: 92, quoted in Sykes, 2001: 209)

I left with questions, whereas Tabitha - after being ‘hailed’ by Kirby’s final plea “for the
sake of the planet and of humanity … by our lives let us be an example of respect for
human rights. Not just for gays. For everyone” – saw her face in the mirror, turned, and
obeyed both the law and the collective.

Tabitha: Michael Kirby, who was just so moving and so wonderful, you know, like
minded people coming together for the same cause and just an incredible sense of
security and you feel safe and secure and like there's no question of acceptance;
there's no question of being different; all those things just go out the door and it's
just everyone is there together. And they are rare moments in your life for us and I
think when we get them we just revel in them, you know. When you are with your
family, when you are in your workplace, when you are doing anything other than
gay community things, you are different and you are aware of it in your
subconscious and at times you are consciously aware of it. But in this environment
all that goes out the door and for me I feel it so much and that sense, you know,
when you're together, um.

In that moment in time I was feeling quite burdened by the weight of humanity described
by Kirby. But for many people, including Tabitha - a strong advocate for ‘lesbian’ (‘gay’
and ‘queer’) community identity, with a particular interest in the ways places and events
impact upon sexual identity - the call was heady. In each of her interviews she valorised the
notion of both ‘real’ and imagined communities of sexual dissidence, and a unified ‘gay’
identity. Doing so was very important to her sense of self and attachments to others and her
community. This was most apparent in the language she used to resurrect the experience of

295
The Gay Games. She revitalised this event in three ways, thus drawing upon the discourses circulated by Kirby.

Firstly, she conjured up the notion of unified and common local and global ‘queer’ communities in which individuals could think and act in the same ways. She did this by comparing The Gay Games with The Olympic Games and via the following comments which reinforce the notion that imagined local and global ‘queer’ communities provide not only security, belonging, sameness, and ‘family’, but also a powerful sense of the existence of a ‘queer’ locale, nation, globe, and identity.

Tabitha: … it was like … Mardi Gras but it was on a global scale; it was on a global scale, it was like this is the whole world, the gay community is here now.

Tabitha: … you are with your gay community in one place in the common cause.

Tabitha: … you know everyone was there because we all had a unifying identity that we all carry and we all relate to each other on the same level.

Secondly, by drawing upon a fairly typical Australian sporting discourse she materialised a kind of ‘queer’ nationalism and pride through place by using terms like home, backyard, ‘hallowed turf’, ‘we’, and ‘us’. Backhandedly this also reinforced a somewhat exclusionary sense of commonality of place, experience, and identity (and who could and could not ‘fit’).

Tabitha: … you got to meet people and it was just amazing having gay people come from all over the world and be in your backyard.

Tabitha: … [the Opening Ceremony] did us proud.

Tabitha: … [the Opening Ceremony] brought that connection back because it was a new cause and a new purpose and we had the whole world, the whole gay community, like the global community … we all came together in our homes and it was our chance to show them how we partied.

Thirdly, she focussed in on her own close community as a micro version of the global concept, a group within a group if you like. The overall effect of this was a desperately
passionate attachment to Kirby’s ambitious vision of communal identity, and a growing sense of togetherness and love. Dare I suggest love of self? Where self is both individual and group.

Tabitha: I was drawn to a community and the whole opportunity for me to be part of a community was wonderful and one that I can relate to … So when I found the gay community it was just so comforting and so great. And I really get off on the whole community thing, you know when I’m out and about or we’re all out having a great time together and you know it’s just like I’m so happy to be here; you know I love this community that we’re in …

Thus for Tabitha, *The Gay Games* experience marked an important place and event, and thus played a crucial role in her ongoing processes of sexual identity constitution. All of the things she loved most about ‘her community’ had merged in this one moment and place to give her a sense of who she was. This created a desperately happy moment for her (‘I’m so happy to be here’) where strangers became friends; friends were clung to passionately; and together ‘in the common cause’ with our ‘unifying identity’ we could relate, connect, and feel a deep sense of community, safety and belonging, rather than a sense of fear, shame, and expulsion because of our differences (from normative society). From this place we could then, as a team (remembering this was sporting event) advocate for all humanity.

Whether this is true or not, or narcissistically problematic or even homophobic is not the main point I’m trying to make here. Rather, what I have tried to highlight is the ways in which both hetero- and homo- normative discourses function to simultaneously coagulate and alienate individuals and ‘communities’. In a way I imagined we were all somehow bewitched. Materially and discursively enchanted by our own reflections, but at the same time attached to, and invested in the seduction. The sensual materially and emotionally affirming legacies of this event are powerfully apparent in the previous poem. I suggest that the within and between group intolerance circulating beneath Kirby’s speech is just as obvious, and thus brings to the surface the seductive discourses drawn upon by the participants (and Kirby) in order to make sense of both their experiences of this event, and of the bigger picture in their everyday lives. I propose that providing insights into the effects of psychic investments in sometimes ‘fantastic’ and narcissistic experiences of a
stable and common sexual identity exposes these discourses, and sets a platform for disrupting them.

Another interesting interpellatory political message (in addition to the Kirby speech and the ‘themes’\textsuperscript{134}) came from Gay Games co-chair, Bev Lange. Lange explicitly linked identity and place via an image (see Image 7.10 over the page) and text proclaiming ‘queer’ solidarity through place. The text reads,

\begin{quote}
The Gay Games are for everyone, so wherever you are from … regardless of whatever your identity or name you go by, there is a place for you here. (Sydney Star Observer, \textit{fg}, 2002: 8-9)
\end{quote}

It brought rapturous applause from the ‘pumped up’ audience. We had all been hailed, identified and placed; some had turned, and found a home - together. I suggest that this quote and image provides a further example of how powerful discourses of assimilation and commonality were deliberately deployed at this event to develop a sense of sameness at the expense of difference. This fervent seduction\textsuperscript{135} was maintained throughout the Opening Ceremony via iconic and parodic performances by a barefoot kd lang, Bob Down\textsuperscript{136}, and Kath and Kim\textsuperscript{137}, and a spectacular light, music, and fireworks display (to match The Olympic Games).

\textit{The Gay Games} was imagined, conceived, promoted, and experienced as a gathering place for all manner of colourful and loud apparitions. It was a melting pot of nationalities, localities, identities, and politics. Many left invigorated and empowered by ‘new’ sensory global and spatial identifications after having ‘a night which I don't think could ever be

\textsuperscript{134} The Gay Games themes were Acceptance, Diversity, Inclusiveness and Tolerance.

\textsuperscript{135} It is important to note that most of the participants in this event appeared to be willing seductees. This also relates to Butler’s (1997a) notions of power in psychic life.

\textsuperscript{136} Gay comedian/singer in Australia.

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Kath and Kim} is a comedy television show in Australia that parodies colloquial Australianisms. The name of the soccer team the participants were involved in, \textit{Look at Me Kimmie, Look and Me} (or \textit{The Kimmies}) is based directly on this show, where the comment ‘Look at me Kimmie, look at me’ is regularly uttered by Kath (mother) to Kim (her daughter).
captured again’. The night and the place was, and still is, ours; but some, like me, are still wondering how a global identity can change the world.

CONCLUSION

The data presented in this chapter spoke consistently of strong attachments to place(s) and events and displayed the various ways in which the participants occupied and claimed ‘queer’ spaces in paradoxical ways. This chapter examined two key elements related to this claim. Firstly, I explored the affect of ‘queer’ places on the participants, and the affect of ‘queer’ participants on places. Here I was concerned with how the participants felt, sensed, and experienced place. Secondly, I discussed the kinds of meaning derived from these visceral and emotive experiences, and how they contributed to the ways in which the participants constructed and made sense of themselves. My aim with both of these lines of argument was to explore the questions, do identities get constituted in and through places and spaces, and do places and spaces get constituted through people’s actions in and on them?

These questions were explored via a compelling alternative theory in non-representational ‘theory’ (Thrift, 1996, 1999). This theory helped me to better understand the embodied and sensate nature of the data and the more ‘real’ aspects of the participants’ lives. The data throughout this thesis has oscillated between affirming a coherent ‘lesbian’ identity, and denying one exists, but a constant throughout has been the participants’ insistence that they sense, feel, and experience themselves and their lives in material ways. Also evident throughout has been the notion that these embodied experiences were very important in terms of developing a sense of one’s place, and for constructing one’s sexual identity. The contradictory nature of the participants’ stories speaks further to the notion of paradox, and to the complex connections between ‘real’ and imagined people, places, communities and events. Thrift’s (1999) more ‘spiritual’ outlook infused place and other non-human elements with agency and helped me to examine the ways in which the participants and their places ‘haunt’, ‘make’, and diffuse with each other. The idea that places return to us as
‘passings that haunt us’ resonated strongly with the data especially in relation to ‘queer’ performances at ‘queer’ events.

In responding to the thesis questions my main argument has been that the participants and their places ‘make’ one another, and in the process develop a ‘sense of place’, that being a sense of their own place and their places, as well as a ‘sense of self’. Sometimes the participants reported ‘feeling at home’, ‘safe’, or a sense of ‘comfort’ when they occupied spaces, at other times they felt displaced and ill at ease. In the main their more positive senses of place occurred in ‘queer’ or homosexed places and spaces or at ‘queer’ events where a sense of some kind of community, support or safety contributed to a sense of belonging and acceptance, or of at least being a part of something special, big or even global. Whether ‘real’ or imagined these things were felt. It was these feelings and senses which led me to argue in this chapter that places (and particularly ‘queer’ ones) are very important to the participants’ sense of self, and their sense of sexual identity. It also became apparent to me that places are not static, they also breathe with life and come alive with the events and people that transitorily, though often regularly, inhabit them. By folding in and out of each other we haunt places as much as they haunt us. Thus I argued place(s) and ‘selves’ to be sensed and experienced as dynamic ‘hauntings’ that are full of life, in the making, resistant to standing still, and mutually constitutive.
CHAPTER EIGHT:
BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I set out to explore the ways in which five ‘lesbian’ identified women theorise, constitute, feel, understand, experience, make sense of, and live their sexual identities in relation to each other, others, community, normative discourses and place. It began by situating identities, bodies, meaning, language, experience, sensing, memory, and place in paradox, and set out to nurture the inherent contradictions, complexities and ‘messiness’ attached to these terms and the ways in which we live our lives. And here, at the end, it resists closing off the data, the concepts or the experiences by continuing to nurture this paradoxical tone.

In this thesis I have carefully examined and considered the complex ways in which the participants spoke about their bodies, meanings, experiences, and memories in relation to sexual identity and place. More specifically I have presented data and theorised about ‘lesbian’ identity and the many ways in which a particular group of lesbians came to understand themselves as viable sexual subjects in relation to each other, others, community, normative discourses, and place. Examining processes of subjection in this way highlighted the more subtle but complex ways in which our experiences and understandings of sexual identity matter to our ‘sense of self’ and ‘sense of place’.

A key focus has been to explore Butler’s (1993) concept that bodies ‘matter’ by posing questions like, ‘why does difference matter?’ and ‘why do some bodies matter more than others?’ For the participants this also became a fundamental question, ‘who am I?’ For me, a key task was examining the participants’ passionate attachments to this concept and the kind of work it (that is a notion of ‘lesbian’ identity and the attachments) did for them. This
direction of inquiry was initially motivated by my own experiences with issues of ‘matter’ around sexuality, identity, embodiment, loss, and place, and a developing ‘sense of (my) place’. As a result, later theoretical and analytical directions were strongly influenced by poststructural theoretical resources, and queer theory in particular, and empirical choices were influenced by ‘feminist geography’. These interdisciplinary choices both challenged and helped me to deal with the ‘material’ complexities presented in the data by developing a critical analysis of subjection (as called for by Butler, 1997a). By ‘crafting’ a series of robust, malleable, flexible and critically responsive theoretical and methodological resource that were able to continually ‘trouble’ and push the boundaries of both queer theory and ‘feminist geography’. This, in turn, offered alternative ways to think about issues of coherence, difference, loss, place, and the many other things that mattered to the participants.

In this final chapter I wish to re-evoke the concept of ‘matter’ as a way in which to bring back the major findings of this thesis, and in so doing make visible the key themes and experiences of the participants, experiences often rendered invisible or immaterial in the past. Under the heading, What Matters? I discuss the main themes to emerge from this research, and this then provides a way in which to consider ‘how and why this research matters?’ and to whom? Over the following pages I argue four things ‘matter’ to this research and the participants, and should therefore ‘matter’ to others, namely: doing matters, coherence matters, loss matters, and place matters.

WHAT MATTERS?

In The Psychic Life of Power, Butler (1997a) flags regulatory power, melancholia, and place as factors that both constitute, and mark the limits of subjectification. So for Butler, subjection matters. In the analytical chapters of this thesis (Chapters Five through Seven) I addressed each one of these ‘factors’ in turn, and now briefly return to the conclusions of each in order to tease out what matters and then discuss why this matters, and to whom.
**Doing Matters**

In Chapter Two I explained how Butler’s ideas about queer theory could be deployed as a critical resource through which to do some ‘queer’ work with the data collected. Her ideas were drawn on to maintain and cultivate the tensions of this research and the complexities attached to stories about the ways in which we live our lives. Her notion that power is both promoted and opposed troubles binary categories and implies that subjects are paradoxically invested in their own subjection (Butler, 1997a). The data presented throughout this thesis reinforces this contention but also extends it in subtle ways.

By offering a critique of the subject in this way Butler exposes the power differentials and inconsistencies of claims that sex and gender identities are given, ‘real’, authentic, and ‘natural’. However, as I argued in Chapter Six it is not always entirely necessary to do away with the idea of a ‘lesbian’ identity as that category can be subversive and did particular kinds of work for the participants in this research. Constructing a coherent ‘sense of self’ mattered a great deal to the participants. In terms of future research this is an important observation in that if desiring coherence is viewed as a profoundly normative thing to do, then it should not be assumed that all LGBTQQI identifying people, who do desire coherence, are politically impotent. Here I argue for coherence to be viewed as a normative desire that may or may not have political imperatives behind it, but that can be deployed in both political and subversive ways. By drawing upon data which consistently spoke about the importance of a coherent ‘sense of self’ I extended Butler’s view of queer theory and troubled the idea that coherency equates with ‘normal’ and that desiring coherence is problematic for queer theorists and politics. Thus I opened the data to a greater variety of productively ‘queer’ re-readings whilst simultaneously opening up queer theory to ongoing critique. In this sense it was not so much what queer theory is but rather what it could do as an analytical resource to help me deal with the themes arising in the data. Hence what mattered most in this research was doing queer as opposed to being queer, and below I justify how my ideas around ‘queering’ this research in theoretical and methodological ways has broader implications.
'Queering': what can queer theory ‘do'?

In Chapters Two and Three I explained how I desired to nurture a responsive and malleable methodological and theoretical resource that could help me to suitably deal with the particular needs of the participants and their stories. Quite simply I was interested in what queer theory could bring to data that most of the time wasn’t stereotypically queer. By firstly going to the data and then developing and deploying a concept of ‘queering’ as a process of *doing* that is about both identities and ‘acts’, I was able to nurture ‘queer’ as a fluid category (or term, concept, ideal) and process (including research) that disrupts the comfort that all categories and processes give us. ‘Queer’ also emerged as a contextually meaningful moment of resistance and rupture (however small, however ‘queer’). In this way the methods and theory were continually modified, stretched and challenged in response to the data, rather than theory dictating how the data was ‘read’. In the later analytical chapters this approach made it possible to theorise in different ways about the things that mattered most to the participants, thus ‘queering’ resisted foreclosing on the data and instead opened it up to alternative readings.

This matters for three reasons. Firstly, it shows that sometimes lives and stories are not straightforward; they are confusing, complex, and often ambiguous. This is especially the case for those whose lives are disrupted or complicated by normative views of the ways in which we *should* live, and most poignantly, who we should love. Secondly, this approach weaves queer theory into the data as opposed to valorising it by laying it on top or beside data. This made queer theory a transportable and malleable resource which illuminated material stories of difference and their associated ‘poisonous’ discourses without valorising an identity. In short, as I have argued, despite some perspectives in queer theory, identity does matter, mainly in terms of what we do with it. My approach required ‘queer’ to reorient towards people, and the social spheres and environments in which they live and operate (Green, 2002; Plummer, 1998; Weston, 1998). In this way ‘queer’ and ‘queering’ became an acceptable and usable resource for the women in this research in their everyday lives.
Thirdly, bringing queer theory to ‘queer’ data disrupted the comfort of identity categories as it displayed the obscure, unpredictable, and sometimes indescribably painful ways in which we each come to matter to ourselves and each other. I suggest that in order to have the category ‘queer’ come to matter in research (and our everyday lives) it should be able to make an account of the multitudinous ways in which people experience difference, explain themselves, act, and identify. In so many ways the data collected in this thesis consistently messed with ‘usual’ and comfortable notions of queer and queer theory. I argue that my approach to queer theory via the notion of ‘queering’, embraces the ‘messiness’ of our lives by acknowledging the ‘real’ experiences of those who have been silenced without valorising the experiences or those who sense, feel or articulate them. I suggest that researchers need to reflexively collect and respond to their data in ways that keeps the ‘messiness’ of the lives and experiences of LGBTQI identifying people on the surface (especially their ‘normal’ and material notions of self), and that data should not be sacrificed in order to ‘make’ theory fit. I thus argue that ‘queering’ as proposed and deployed in this thesis makes a significant methodological contribution by provoking the ways in which research is conducted by, on or with LGBTQI identifying people.

My line of reasoning in these matters is not based on the idea that all LGBTQI people live their lives in ‘radical’ or ‘queer’ ways, rather it is based on the notion that ‘queerness’ offers alternative narratives of identity, bodies, and places which can, and do, rupture normative discourses and practices in unexpected ways. These arguments are made possible because discourses are multiple, unstable and discontinuous, and possibilities for change and disrupting normative ways of being and doing expose discourse as both the vehicle and means of resisting power (Foucault, 1978). It also speaks to Butler’s (1997a, 1999a) contention that subjects are not always constrained by or through discourse, and this reinforces the notion of ongoing paradox. I would argue that this method of deploying ‘queer’ is a point of contribution of this thesis to queer theorising.
‘Touching us where we live’

In this thesis I was interested in how the participants experienced, sensed, perceived and made sense of their ‘selves’ in the material context of their lives. My choices of the life story interview and artefacts of life were guided by this interest as well as my close relationships with the participants. The questions asked were specifically designed to elicit emotive and sensual data, and our friendship enhanced this process. As a result strong emotional themes emerged very quickly from the interview transcripts, and my intuitive response was to read it lyrically in the ways that I had originally heard it (and in some cases experienced it), as if I we were talking again. In doing so I came to see in the texts not pages of writing but small blocks of powerful stories, single lines of touching moments, sentences where meaning making was in process, a tear on a page; and I came to hear an intake of breath, a laugh, or a stifled gulp. From the outset the data was powerfully sensuous and it needed to stay that way in order for me to adequately share these stories with others in the ways I desired.

The use of poetic forms of representation provided a method of writing and representing the data that kept the life, sounds, and feelings of the participants’ words and experiences on the page for others to engage with. This added a sensuousness and intimacy to the data that I doubted could be captured by realist tales and large quotes of interview text. It also kept the contradictions and complexities of identity and life attached to the participants’ material bodies, moments, and lives on the surface because it trimmed down their stories to the ‘raw’ emotions of each person, place or experience. This, I argue accentuated how their bodily experiences came to matter both in their lives, and in the context of this research. By freeing up the writing process via the use of alternative modes of representation I was better able to deal with the complexities of the participants’ lives, as well as the complexities of research and writing.

Whilst I was inspired by a range of poetic work from a number of researchers (particularly Laurel Richardson), there was still a small gap in qualitative research using poetic forms of representation – little of what I was reading spoke about the experiences of LGBTQI
identifying people. So in addition to nurturing and amplifying the emotional and lyrical data collected, my choice of poetic forms of representation also presented an opportunity to contribute to, and extend this kind of representational style. This approach also indulged my own interests in poetry as well as my apprehensions around more ‘clinical’ qualitative approaches. Upon reflection the use of poetic forms of representation also provided a useful way in which to explore and textualise the experiences of the participants in relation to matters of coherence, loss and place. By forming poems from the transcripts these important themes became evident very early in the research process thus subsequent interviews and theorising was always focussed on what seemed to matter most in the words of the participants.

I did not take up the style of one or two researchers to create the poems, rather I read across a number of descriptions of processes and a number of poems, and formed my own method of developing the poems in this research. I believe my descriptions of this process provides a significant set of practical guidelines for future researchers, and thus contributes and extends this field. This also offers ‘queer’ researchers an alternative mode of re-presenting the stories of ‘queer’ participants in the ways that most strongly resonate with their experiences of difference. It encourages ‘queer’ researchers to overtly write themselves and their own ‘queer’ sexual subjectivities into their research as a method of confronting claims of self indulgence or bias. My approach to developing poems from interview text offers an extension of the developing field of poetic representation, and a method of ‘queering’ one’s research methodology.

**Coherence Matters**

In Chapter Five I provided a broad thematic analysis of a series of poems titled, *Who Am I?* in terms of theories of identity and in relation to discourses of regulatory power. These poems highlighted the participants’ propensity for speaking about, and affirming a particular kind of coherent, ‘lesbian’ self. This chapter troubled and extended the limits of

---

138 An exception to this was the work of Sandra Faulkner (2005b), and whilst I not dealing with issues of sexuality per se the work of Andrew Sparkes on masculinity offered useful guidance.
contemporary queer theorising by asking not so much what queer (theory) is, but rather stretching what queer (theory) could do (from Chapter Two). Through a critique of Warner’s (2003) *The Trouble With Normal*, I explicated a view of coherence that could better offer an account of the many ‘(ab)normal’ ways in which the participants constituted their ‘selves’ and lived their lives. I propose that it is crucial to think differently about the imperatives, meanings and discourses behind desires to cohere, because despite some queer theoretical claims that identity doesn’t matter, the data in this thesis strongly suggests that coherence does.

From the data it seemed as though lesbian subjectivity was more closely aligned to the notion of a unitary, ‘natural’, and authentic self than to ideas of a permanently fractured and multiple self (Butler, 1999a; Foucault, 1978). By drawing upon Butler’s (1993: 15) notion that, “the paradox of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms”, I maintain that it is more useful to think about this in terms of survival as opposed to normalisation. My reasoning here is that like power, we are tied to and invested in norms, but can re-work them in unexpected ways. If we take this view then the ways in which the participants created, maintained, monitored, and constituted their sexual identities is more a ‘project of self’ (Giddens, 1992) or ‘identity quest’ (Knopp, 2004). This signals a far from static view of self (as their words may have hinted at), but rather suggests a highly reflexive relationship with self, others, and place. Again this encourages an infinite array of endings to this thesis.

The women demonstrated, and I argued, that they were active subjects who were invested in normative discourses by regularly deploying ideas from therapy as a tools for constituting their authentic ‘lesbian’ identities and for making sense of their experiences and ‘selves’ (sometimes in spite of what these discourses ‘said’ about them, their experiences or their sexuality). However, of central importance to these findings was the way in which the notion of ‘lesbian’ identity was constructed reflexively and relationally as

---

139 Following Colwell (1994), this self is always a ‘relational self’, for example friends and attachments to communities and places (real or liminal) appeared to support changing ‘selves’.
fluid not passive, important not irrelevant, and then how this identity was played with. In this sense the women appeared to be active agents in the ‘making’ of their own sexual subjectivities, as shown by the emotional and passionate ways they spoke about their ‘selves’ and the humorous ways in which they parodied gender and sexuality. So whilst they took their identities very seriously, they also considered them to be playful and malleable resources for coping with living in a world where to not take one’s identity seriously is often problematised and pathologised.

To this end, I argue, the participants affirmed themselves in productively ‘queer’ ways as a matter of everyday survival, rather than as a process of normalisation. In short, to maintain one can be born ‘lesbian’ or that one desires to be ‘normal’ can be considered ‘queer’ (and subversive) because to say this does not always assume the existence of an original, ‘natural’, authentic or unitary subject. In this sense it is important for researchers to view both ‘queer’ and ‘normal’ as unstable categories within power, and as both offering potential sites of resistance. Each category offers moments where discourses based upon knowledge and power can be resisted, shifted, and reversed simply by the subjects’ strategic choices within the very discourses that are said to ‘dominate’ or ‘normalise’ them. Viewed in this way the political potential of the subject lies in their ability to firstly accept and acknowledge their own subjection (Butler, 1993, 1997a), and secondly to challenge or rupture ‘normalising’ discourses that through power shape human subjectivities into distinct categories such as ‘normal’ or ‘queer’. By viewing coherence as a primary drive for survival, these findings (and approaches to coherence) help researchers to better understand the passionate attachments and investments that LGBTQI identifying people have to the idea of a coherent identity, and/or a ‘normal’ way of life.

The findings of this research also help to further understandings of our senses of self, and particularly how a sense of one’s sexuality is attached to (and invested in) a quest for an authentic ‘lesbian’ identity via the search for coherence. These results support theoretical observations by theorists such as Butler and Foucault about the ways in which subjects are invested in their own subjection, and how subjectivities are formed within, and as a result of power relations and norms. These findings also build on this theorising by highlighting
and exploring many of the material complexities associated with sexual subjectivity not addressed by Butler, Foucault or queer theory. This hinged upon my refusal to be tied to ‘normal’ (queer) views of coherence. I maintain that this approach challenges and extends theoretical understandings about the many incomplete, complex and uncertain processes of becoming our ‘selves’. This also contributes to understandings of the mutually constitutive processes through which certain bodies come to matter more than others.

**Loss Matters**

Matters of loss featured strongly in the participants’ experiences and stories. In this sense, following Butler (1993, 1997a, 1999a), sexual identity and loss were found to be mutually constitutive, and formative of both gendered and sexed subjectivity. Via a number of poems and an image I argued that whilst melancholia may well mark the limits of subjectification (as per Butler, 1997a), in many ways it is an assimilable resource for coping with futures undoubtedly and consistently clouded with the emotional experiences of loss and trauma. I made this claim by engaging in both a critique and deployment of the work of Butler (1993, 1997a, 1999a), and by arguing the necessity to shift the ‘traditional’ view of melancholia as negated and somehow lacking. I suggest that this view of melancholia has much to contribute to understanding the ways in which LGBTQIQ identifying people incorporate experiences of bodily, ideal and spatial loss that they find traumatically indescribable or don’t even know they have experienced\(^{140}\). By following the ideas of Eng and Kazanjian (2003) and their colleagues, Cvetkovich (2003a), and Butler (2004a, 2004b), I stretched queer theory in order to mould a theoretical resource that was more responsive to the losses expressed in the data. This demanded an emphasis on working with what remained of the participants’ losses, namely the feeling, memories, emotions, and mourning.

Understanding melancholia in these ways has the potential to guide researchers to a deeper consideration of psychic and material experiences of loss. In the context of the lives of those for whom loss is arguably the very pre-condition of their subjectivity (for example

\(^{140}\) I think this relates strongly to Tabitha’s description of internal homophobia, and I suggest that this offers an interesting direction for future research.
LGBTQII identifying people) viewing melancholia as a productive and affirmative presence provides two new imperatives for researchers. Firstly, it necessitates acknowledging that loss is a material and embodied experience that is worn on the body, and further that one’s body may represent a kind of loss (for example in the way that it looks or refuses to conform, as was the case for Tabitha). Thus, following Butler (1993), incorporating this bodily loss by either accepting and acknowledging or deferring and refusing becomes a method of subversion and resistance. For example, by imagining that a boy body was possible and ‘real’, both Tabitha and Scout worked with all the magical memories and emotions of their childhood to mourn an ‘identity’ that had appeared to be foreclosed. Thus they were able to melancholically incorporate the deadening effect of power to act unilaterally upon them (Butler, 1997a). This is important because it encourages LGBTQII identifying people to simply do what they want to do as a form of resistance to heteronormative discourses.

Secondly, and closely related, is the importance of identifying small acts and moments when the normative ideals of gender and sexuality are disrupted. In Chapter Six I argued that imagining and ‘performing’ one’s body in ‘queer’ ways disrupts the view of homosexuality as pathological and problematic. This occurs when the normative idea that homosexuality is a choice insists that heterosexuality is also a choice, and in the case of Scout and Nell, a hard choice. By refusing to acknowledge they had lost anything or to take on their parents’ views, both Scout and Nell worked to rupture the ideal status of heterosexuality ascribed by their parents, and in the process engaged in a strategy for living and surviving (Eng & Han, 2003). This approach to melancholia may well be of use to those working in psychology or counselling.

**Place Matters**

In Chapter Seven I explored how experiences of and in place appeared to shape ‘lesbian’ subjectivity. The importance of ‘queer’ places, events, communities, and friendships was consistently cited by the participants as a method for affirming both one’s authenticity as a ‘lesbian’, and one’s difference to ‘heterosexuals’. From the research it became clear that
relationships with others are a primary way by which the participants came to ‘know’ and understand their sexual ‘selves’. The women in this research had distinctive relationships with each other, with me, with other friends and lovers, and with place(s). These relationships are marked by intense sensual feelings like excitement, euphoria, sweating palms, racing hearts, and other more liminal notions like senses of ‘belonging’, ‘safety’, ‘lesbian communities’, and ‘comfort’. These findings are supported by research in ‘feminist geography’, but by focussing on the ways in which places and ‘selves’ make each other I was able to critique the tendency of past research to valorise ‘queer’ identities, places and events.

By choosing a relatively ‘queer’ theory to analyse the data in non-representational ‘theory’ (Thrift, 1999), and searching for discursive meanings in the participants’ stories, I remained more concerned about the nature of the relationship between identity and place rather than the nature of the identities and places as such. In this way I took up Nast’s (2001) call for more theorised empirical research in the field of ‘feminist geography’ and achieved my own goal of playing in the gaps between queer theory, and ‘feminist geography’. By researching the lives of ‘lesbian’ identifying women I also extended this field of research and its tendency to omit the experiences of ‘lesbians’ in both homosexed and heterosexed place(s).

This chapter focussed upon a number of magical ‘queer’ experiences of the participants’ in ‘queer’ places, and explored the ways in which these ‘queer’ ‘selves’ and ‘places’ made each other. This led me to conclude that place and sexual identity are mutually constitutive. In short, ‘queer’ places and events are very important in the lives of ‘queer’ identifying people as ways in which to develop both a sense of self and sense of sexuality. I maintain that ‘sense of place’ offers a suitable metaphor through which to examine the discrete, magical, and lasting experiences of ‘queers’ in place, not as a method of valorising an identity or a place, but as a way in which to understand the significant role that places have in our notions of self, and to appreciate the ongoing need for places and events where ‘queers’ can feel free to express their sexual ‘selves’ as an act of resistance. This argument is based upon the notion that a sense of belonging and safety is an important part of who we
all are, and perhaps an absence of such places will severely effect how we feel about ourselves and our lives. Basically, place (and especially ‘queer’ places) matters to the women in this research, and anecdotally to most LGBTQI people. I thus argue ‘sense of place’ offers a critical platform from which to gauge the meanings of place and identity, and analyse the discourses at play in this mutually constitutive relationship. ‘Sense of place’ appears to be a useful concept for considering how queer theorising can inform empirical work in ‘feminist geography’, and vice versa. The concept brings both theoretical and material discussions of identity and subjectivity to the fore whilst at the same time highlighting the importance of considering the ways in which heteronormative discourses are implicated in the construction of identities and place(s). Importantly, it adds a sensual and emotional dimension to the lived experiences of sexual identity, and a kind of ‘comfort’ in sensing one’s place.

ENDING IN PARADOX

This thesis has demonstrated that humans are dynamic and agentic beings engaged in complex processes of speaking and acting that are not always constrained by the social, political, historical, cultural, and spatial contexts and discourses in which they are formed and invested. It examined a fundamental question of interest to many of us, namely, ‘who am I?’ Posed as such this thesis only has the ability to provide hazy ‘answers’ because most of us live and understand our ‘selves’ in hazy ways. Thus it is important that our lives and stories of our ‘selves’ remain ‘messily’ based upon our contradictions as humans. This notion aside, I do believe that small moments of ‘queer’ rupture can and do punctuate our relatively ‘normal’ lives in ways that we can not predict. The participants in this research have no idea how their stories have evolved here and what their collective stories can do. Like me they may also doubt the ‘quality’ of the re-presentations and depth of the theorising. They may even remain concerned about the criteria to be applied to their stories or the ways in which their lives will be spoken about and judged by others. All we each really ‘know’ at this point in time is that we have felt these events in our lives and they have shaped, and continue to shape our understandings of ‘who we are’. Tabitha reinforced this indefinite becoming in an email to me about the poems,
I felt as I read them, I felt the words were very touching and very real … It all sounds perfect, just how I remember it all happening. I’m so touched that you have made these beautiful poems out of our thoughts. And I am proud to have been a part of your work, thank you for the opportunity; it has helped me to know and accept me for who I am. xx

Tabitha (email correspondence, 2nd July, 2005)

To be able to in some way have ‘captured’ her experience and now share it with others has been a driving imperative for me, as it was for the participants. It shows our investments in our ‘selves’ and others. This thesis story has been, and continues to be, in a state of uncertain ‘becoming’, requiring constant revision and reflection on the ways in which the constitution of our sexual subjectivities are inextricably linked to our transient, felt and sensed meanings of desire, pleasure, others, community, place, and self. It is this place now that will continue to ‘re-make’ this story over and over again in ways none of us could have anticipated from the start, and importantly in ways that make our bodies, identities, experiences, and places come to matter for ‘others’ who live on the sexual margin.
REFERENCES


New York: Routledge.


Visions and Realist Images in Ethnographic Writing. *Journal of Contemporary 
Ethnography*, 25(1), 144-166.

& M. Willson (Eds.), *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological 

& S. Steinberg (Eds.), *Thinking Queer: Sexuality, Culture and Education* (pp. 15-32). 
New York: Peter Lang Pub.

Hawley (Ed.), *Post-colonial Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (pp. 207-238). 
Albany: State University of New York Press.

Moten, F. (2003). Black mo'nin'. In D. L. Eng & D. Kazanjian (Eds.), *Loss: The Politics of 
Mourning* (pp. 59-76). Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California 
Press.

& J. W. Scott (Eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (pp. 369-384). New York: 
Routledge.


York University Press.

of Space, Bodies and Gender*. London: Routledge.

Human Geography*, 21(3), 321-337.

for a Nondualistic and Symmetrical Perspective on Nature and Society. 

Confusions from Sleeping with the Natives. In E. Lewin & W. L. Leap (Eds.), *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists* (pp. 236-260). Urbana 
& Chicago: University of Illinois.

(Ed.), *Destabilising Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (pp. 156-169). London: 
Routledge.

Sociological Approach to Sexuality. In S. Seidman (Ed.), *Queer Theory/Sociology* 

Lesbian Community. In K. Plummer (Ed.), *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of 


334


Walters, S. D. (1996). From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (or, why can't a lesbian be more like a fag?). *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 21*(4), 830-869.


APPENDIX A:
Participant information and consent form

Participant Information Sheet

Background

This project forms the backbone of my PhD research at the University of Wollongong under the supervision of Associate Professor Janice Wright. This research intends to explore the ways in which lesbians interact with, and develop a sense of, ‘their places’. It further explores the notion that perhaps ‘their places’ can in turn interact back on them to create, develop, refine and reinforce a sense of self, sense of identity, sense of belonging and sense of community. Put simply, this project involves a broad investigation of the relationships between lesbian identity, sexuality, place and community. It’s about you, your past, your future and what you do. You have been chosen based on your affiliation with the Look at me Kimmy...Look at me women’s soccer team.

What are the benefits of the study?

Research suggests that there is a gap in the ‘mapping’ of lesbian lives in terms of notions, creations and senses of identity, place, sexuality and community. Possible audiences for this research include: postgraduate students, educators, academia and scholars (researching in gender, identity, sexuality, sexual politics in the fields of cultural and human geography, public health, urban planning, social policy, gender/queer and sexuality studies); professionals involved in education, locating and working with sexual minorities, urban planning and design, gentrification, social policy, political analysis and activism; place makers (e.g. council); mainstream queer media and queer organizations; retail owners; lesbian activists, lesbian communities, lesbians; and, the general public. It is suggested that such research may potentially influence the provision of specific educational, community, spatial, geographical, social, and public health products and services to meet the needs of lesbians. It will also allow your voice to be heard.

What will the study involve?

The study involves undertaking up to five (5) semi-structured interviews throughout the coming year that focus on describing, discussing and exploring your life experiences of identity, sexuality, place and community. We will also discuss the various senses, meanings
and feelings that you have derived from these experiences, and also from being a part of, and participating in events such as the **Gay Games** and **Mardi Gras**. It is anticipated that each interview will go no longer than 2 hours. They will be tape recorded, and held at a place and venue of your convenience.

I would also like you to keep a diary or journal of our meetings and any things that may come up over the coming year that relate to the topic. From time to time I may ask you to record, discuss or recall personal experiences and moments from your past and I would like you to try to record *everything* that you think and feel, and even sense about what has happened around and to you in terms of your sexuality, your sexual identity, your community and your place(s). I also encourage you to draw things, make things, write stuff, take photos or collect artefacts (e.g. newspaper articles, flyers, stickers). These can be *anything* that display what you think and how you are feeling, and might support your words in the journal and at interviews.

**Confidentiality**

Only I shall have access to the information that you provide and be able to link it to you. Your details and comments will be coded, recorded and reported upon in such a way that you will not be identified in the thesis. A typist will be used to transcribe the interview data, but will not be able to identify you. All comments, questions, writings and artefacts will be treated with absolute confidentiality and respect. Some of this material may be used in the final thesis and your consent to do so will also be required. You will be given a one week time period in which to comment upon transcribed interview material in order to evaluate and comment upon its accuracy. This material will then be kept securely for a period of no less than 5 years. Individuals will not be directly identified within the final thesis results or related material. Copies of the final paper will be submitted to the University of Wollongong for assessment for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, and sent to each participant if requested (a summary is also available to you).

It is my duty to inform you that aspects of this study may cause you some personal discomfort, distress or upset. Any perceived or actual harm or burden that you experience in the study will be immediately addressed via altering or modifying the research process (eg modifying questions, completing an alternative task), or referral to the appropriate services for guidance and/or counselling.

You are also reminded that participation is **voluntary** and that you are free to withdraw from the study at **any time** without adverse effects or suffering disadvantage as a result of that choice, and that I shall have the utmost respect for your decision to do so.

**Enquiries**

Please feel free to ask me, my supervisor or the Ethics Officer in the UOW Research Office any questions that you have concerning this study at anytime. I value your stories and want to tell them as accurately as possible. So please make contact if you have any concerns.
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I ______________________ have read the Participant Information sheet and understand the study as it is proposed.

I also realise the extent of my involvement in the study and what is required of me, and that I can ask questions at any time about my involvement in the study.

I also understand that all comments and material that I provide during the course of this study is confidential, and will be treated with the utmost respect, and not disclosed to others.

I have been informed that up to two other people may have access to the material that I provide during the transcribing, coding and data analysis phases but that my real name will not be used in any stage during the study from recruitment to publication. I understand that I will not be directly identified at any stage during the study to research assistants, other participants or the public.

I have been informed of any possible harms, emotional distress or burdens associated with my involvement in this study and agree to take on these risks and burdens.

In addition I understand that my involvement in this study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to leave the study at any stage, whenever I wish, without recourse or penalty.

I agree / do not agree (indicate one) that any or all of the information and materials that I provide during this research can be used by the researcher in this project, at conference presentations and in subsequent future research projects.

Signature: _________________________

Date: __________________
PARTICIPANT DETAILS: Confidential

Please complete this form as best as you can and return it to your interviewer. It is entirely confidential and will be accessed only by the chief investigator.

* NAME: _____________________________ (for chief researcher only)
* CONTACT DETAILS: __________________________________________________
* AGE: _________
* NATIONALITY: _______________________
* CULTURAL BACKGROUND: _______________________

* SEXUALITY OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION: _________________
* Choose some words that best describe you:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

* SUBURB/CITY where you live now: ____________________________
* Choose some words to describe how you feel about this place:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

* YEARS LIVING HERE: ___________________
* LIVING ARRANGEMENTS: circle below
  Rent / Mortgage / Own
  Alone / Partner / Others

* WHERE DID YOU GROW UP (city/town/suburb): _______________________
* Choose some words to describe how you feel about this place:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

* WORK SITUATION: ___________________
* HIGHEST EDUCATION COMPLETED: _______________

* WHAT ROLE DID YOU HAVE IN THE KIMMIES:
________________________________________________________________________

* Explain how you became involved in the Kimmies:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

* Choose a few words that best describe how you felt about being in the Kimmies:
________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX B:
Research project instructions

Dear Participant,

1. For our next meetings

This is a really important next step, what you do before our next meeting will shape our thesis and all our conversations to come.

What I would like you to do is create a timeline of critical moments or events in your life that you think have been important in the formation of who you are today. Ideally I would like them to be related to the development of your sexual identity, to your being and becoming a 'lesbian'. These don’t have to be happy or traumatic tales. They are whatever they are, and are based on your lived experiences of them. So try to be honest. Try to feel and sense the experience. Below I list some steps for you

- roughly draw up a timeline and record your 3 critical moments/events. Each meeting we will discuss one of them. Put them in some kind of order. In Interview #2 we will talk about event #1, interview #3 event #2, interview #4 event #3. So for now all you need is to roughly map out each on the timeline. We can start at your earliest or most recent experiences - it's up to you. Choose your first event to talk about.
- Find some time alone and close your eyes and try to take yourself back to this event/moment. Try to remember absolutely everything about it (especially how you felt & sensed the experience, what happened, who was there, where it was)
- Using any medium you like (eg words, poems, story, artwork, images, photos, images or whatever) maybe try to create a piece that defines, explains and describes this moment to and for you OR perhaps you have a significant item from that time or experience that may help you to explain things to me
- Spend some time unpacking this moment. Allow yourself to feel it
- Bring your piece or recollections of the moment to our next meeting. Be prepared to talk to it
- our first interview will focus on our time in the Gay Games, so think about that event and how you felt about it and how it made you feel

2. Over the coming months I would also like you to jot down, collect, produce or record (in any way you like, eg words, a diary, images, pictures, poems, stories, photos, artwork) any things that come to you as a result of

- talking with me
- the things you do associated with your sexual identity
- going places and meeting people (e.g., go to places and notice, then record, your responses, senses, feelings, thoughts about the place and also the people). Maybe draw maps of your places (home, work, out, from your childhood), people and experiences (what meanings do you get from these things?)
- feeling part of groups, teams, events, activities etc
- your self
- talk about fantasy and fact; real and imagined experiences. Maybe ask others how they are experiencing the same things that you are.

I want to collect as little and as much of a snapshot of your lives that I can, in order to kind of give readers an insiders view into you. You may remember things after we have spoken, or just want to tell me something else later that’s related. Just call or email me and get it out and let it out. Say what you like. Later, together we can negotiate what we can use in both our interviews and our thesis.

You can call me anytime to talk about stuff or if you are confused. Your contributions are very precious to me, and anything that you say may be potentially very exciting to include. So get it all down, however silly. Treat it kind of like a big (and a bit long) project to tell me how you feel, and how you experience yourself, your places, your people and your community.

PS You don’t have to be a creative genius or artistically correct. Whatever turns you on is good enough for me. This can also be in spoken words if you don’t want to make or bring anything (or can’t). But in that case can you keep a little journal or diary of your feelings and senses about this process. You may not think it very special but will all be very valuable in the end.
APPENDIX C:  
Interview questions/themes/directions

Interview #1

Introduction
- How do you feel about being involved in this project?
- Chat about material on demographic sheet (tell me a little something about yourself, where you live, why, what you do)

Becoming a Kimmie
- How did you come to be a ‘Kimmie’? How did you feel initially about this involvement?
- Have you been in other similar events? Or teams?
- Tell me about ‘the Team’ and your perceived role in it (flag attachments to the team or person eg new group member, old member, search for the common denominator eg a person?)
- Do you do, or have you ever done, other things with members of this team? Describe, explain, things and events and feelings involved. Why?
- What did you think about the team organisation? Gear? Training etc? What roles did you take? Why? How did that feel at the time?

The Gay Games Experience
- Do a guided visualisation back to the Gay Games. Tell me about your Gay Games experience
  - highlights, lowlights
  - the Event
  - the Opening/Closing Ceremonies
  - the parties (what, where, feelings, why)
  - playing (venues, games, results, gold medal)
  - the people, friends, family, partners, other teams (who came for you, effect of that)

The impact on you
- Describe your favourite moments (be graphic in terms of senses)
- How has it impacted on you, what has it left in you?
- Has this experience impacted on your ideas around your own sexual identity? The sexual identity of others.
- How do you think others experienced the event? How can you tell?
• Have you done any things with the Kimmies since the GG? Describe. How did being back with the team, or team members make you feel?

The future
• Do you intend to go to Montreal in 2006? Why?
• What do you think will be needed to attend this event? What roles will you take on?
• What do you hope to gain from that experience?

Practice timeline task with a guided meditation of going forward to Montreal. Take participants to the stadium Opening ceremony, the street parties in Montreal, Le Club Sandwich, Bar Magnolia, the Quebecoise women. See the event, feel the event. How do you feel?

Prompts:
• Sensory descriptions of the places, events, people
• Description of individual physiological responses at particular times, places

Interview #2, 3, 4 themes

The artefact: Tell me what you have brought along/created here and the process that you went through in its construction. How did you feel during this task? Explain. Compare to how you felt back then.

The moment: Talk me through this moment in your life describe it in as much detail as possible
• What happened?
• Who was there?
• How did you experience this event? What effect did it have on you then? Now? Why?
• How?
• What have you ‘taken’ from this moment? Describe.
• What did it take from you? Explain.
• Why did you choose this moment to tell me about?

The place
• Describe the scene/place
• What else happened in this place?
• What was the sense you had of this place? What did it mean to you?
• What effect did this place have on you?

The people
• Describe them
• Were these people always in this place? Anyone else?
• How did they treat you? Why?
• What effect did these people have on you?
Prompts:
• Sensory descriptions of the moment in terms of feelings, place, event, people, senses eg descriptions of individual physiological responses at particular times, places
• Descriptions, explanations of meanings/understandings related to sexual identity

Debrief
• Discuss feelings of the participant with the process and what we have discussed today.
• Are there any issues, problems or stresses arising from what we have talked about?
• Remind participants that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time
• Follow up phone call in a few days

Interview #5 ideas

The research
• How do you feel about the research and the research processes? Any comments?
• How would you describe it and your experiences of it?
• What has been important parts of this process for you?
• How has it affected you? What has it told you about yourself?
• What do you think you gave to this research? What are you taking away?

From the data
• Much of the data collected focused on identity, what do you think it is? What about your need to affirm it? What’s that about?
• How is sexuality linked to identity?
• What does it mean to you, has it meant to you, to be able to recognise and express your sexual identity?
APPENDIX D:
SUPPLEMENTARY POEMS

First touch (Jacqui, Scout, Nell, Maree, Tabitha)

Boring life
my first gay experience was when I was about twenty.

I had feelings for a teacher (you know) had a crush on her (you know)
For me
it was natural to
just look at this teacher
and go                       wow
get a bit of a               buzz
be really shy and reserved around her.

(What are these feelings is it just because you don't have sisters and you want to be close to a female, like my mother/daughter relationship wasn't very intimate at all)

A couple of girls at school
would be really affectionate.
I'd be so drawn in.
I wanted to be close to them (it's more I want to be close to them)
I crave affection (is it because I'm physically attracted to them?)
There was one girl (she was the most affectionate)
she would give me cuddles, love you, kiss me and all that sort of thing.
I was just so drawn to her.

Affection is very innocent.

(I didn't know what it all meant, didn't know what these feelings meant. Did it mean I'm gay? When I think back now did I even know what it meant to be gay, like, I didn't understand what gay was at that time)

My first girlfriend was a big part of finding out who I am (is this who I am?)
There were rumours about her being gay (a party girl, the rebel, she was just this rock star)
I had an attraction to her (but I didn’t even know what it was)

I …
thought "wow this girl is gay", whenever the word gay came up my ears would
prick up.
was so excited just to hear her name
had her on a pedestal.
got the feelings too, the butterflies around her (usual stuff you know)
observed her every move and her every word (even if I wasn't supposed to be listening)

Guns and Roses ‘November Rain’, ‘Sweet Child of Mine’ played all night.
We were outside talking (I didn't even smoke).

It was so out of the blue
(I'm grateful it did happen)

She just leaned over and kissed me …
Amazing, like fireworks.
Unreal.

My first kiss from another female
(you know it was like “wow”)

A bit scary at first (you know)
you're nervous type thing.

All we did was kiss,
that's all we did that night (but it was such a big thing for me)
I was so attracted to her
I thought she was gorgeous.

❤❤❤

It was more just being with a woman, it wasn't even
about the sexual act as such it just felt like …

I remember
I remember the date
I remember exactly where it was
I remember the whole thing
I remember there was a moment when

I stopped

I looked up and
tried to catch myself
I sort of looked at myself and thought
"You know what, this is who you are and
this is right"

And that's what it was like

❤❤❤
There was one girl,
we kept having a few eyes and stuff
her hand kept coming around my waist
she kept coming up behind me dancing.
It was late, people had gone.
I was drunk but knew where I was.

I can remember everything:
beds being made up
people crashing
a bed made up for me and her
I remember lying down.
I didn’t know her … this woman (laughs)
I remember lying on my back.
Leaning on her side with her elbows,
one of her hands came and
touched me on the stomach.

My whole stomach back flipped, curdling,
tumbling like a dryer, going round and round.
I was frozen loving it.

We kissed
It was the first time I’d ever kissed a woman,
so soft and tender and warm.

I’ll never ever forget that first kiss and that first touch (laughs)

So unafraid to let it happen.
I didn’t want to hold back or kind of suddenly stop and go “what am I doing”

I felt so comfortable,
I didn’t have to explain to anyone what I was doing.

❤ ❤ ❤

She was a lot older than me,
I was in year 6, eight years younger
I had her on a pedestal.

She was a farm girl, from a property out west, two sisters and a brother.
I was with boys
I dated her brother as a way of being closer to her.

She was just really nice
I used to do really silly things like her washing
I’d always run in a hurry to school just to catch up to her.

She was really sporty
I played a lot of sport
I think it was just admiration.

She was very good looking
I used to write her name in flowers outside her room
I was infatuated with her.

She was popular
I used to sleep in the same bed with her
I remember her smile

She had a horse
I used to help; run after her and do stupid things
I’d pick up all the horse manure; I used to do that for her.

She was my first memory of being attracted to a woman – emotionally.
I felt something for a girl deeper than just friendship
I remember feeling happiness, just really happy.

She provided me with something
I did think about kissing her
I didn’t kiss a girl until I was twenty-five.

She is just a part of the puzzle
I still think about her
I guess looking back now I realise what was there.

At the time I didn’t know that could be possible.

❤❤❤

In hindsight (only in hindsight)
it was an awakening.

No - I think I want to kiss her,
I think I want to touch her in the way that I do with my boyfriend.

I don’t know where the turning point was.
Meeting her is the only way I can describe it. 

*Maybe it was just time; easily influenced, ripe to explore it for the very first time.*

The minute that it came into my life

I jumped at it. I couldn’t resist it.

There was a subconscious connection that I couldn’t put my finger on, couldn’t describe

I was drawn to this person. Incredibly curious about who she was, what made her tick, she was different to other girls that I knew

I admired her

looked up to her

was really attracted to her

wanted to be like her

had lots and lots of feelings for her

basically fell in love with her.

I couldn’t possibly walk away from that … that moment
gave me a blank canvas
to start again, on lots of levels
to explore.

All of a sudden I *absolutely* felt like I had

come to the right place,

knocked on the right door,

found a home.

Where have I been?
I should have been doing this all along!

Which is why I’ve never been back

(laughs)

❤❤❤
Be Different (Tabitha)

My parents were *(and they loved this word)* “progressively broad” *(whatever you want to call it)* enough to say
   "Yeah, you can play with that truck; yeah, you can have that woodworking set, because you really love it; yeah, you can go and play soccer"
Allow me to do those things
to grow and develop in things that I was interested in
While still being incredibly confronted by the fact that their daughter was so different from all the other girls.
Not really knowing how to deal with it other than fighting against me to some extent.
So there was some freedom for me. But there was a struggle very early on because my mother was saying
   "Where's my daughter, I thought I had a little girl"
For a large part of my childhood *(I didn't really know or understand)*
but I remember
   significantly
  my mother saying to me *often*
     "Be different, can you just be different"
I would come downstairs ready to go out somewhere dressed in what I want to wear … jeans, t-shirt, sneakers, board shorts, kind of stuff … She would say
   "Oh why can't you just put some make up on, put a nice dress on"
and then …
   "Just be different"
What she's asking me to be is different to who I am.
The way I interpret that is I'm different from a very young age that's what made me feel different.

It was really frustrating for me
I was getting mixed messages
  Getting support, popularity, encouragement, pride from my parents and popularity at school through sport
They are very outwardly proud they just adored me *(on some level)*
On the one hand it's acceptance but on the other hand I'm getting this constant message…
   “It's not okay to be who you want to be”
   “It's not okay to be you, you have to change”

They always came from a place of unconditional support.
yet there is this whole undercurrent.
At home when I was just being me
I didn't get acceptance
I got backlash from mum and dad saying
"Can't you just be different"
They just wanted me to be like all the other girls,
play with dolls,
wear dresses, be normal.
But "this is who I am, what's wrong with it, I don't understand?"
Most of the time it was just like
I don't understand.
I don't know,
I don't understand.

Not good enough is how it made me feel.
Inferior, because I'm
different
I'm obviously not as good as everyone else

I just think I was so far out for her (she's even said it to me)
She had no point of reference, no way of understanding
She said to me,
she told her next door neighbour, her best friend, Aunty Pat (my role models, she's a Scorpio)
"I don't understand this child that I have, I don't know how to deal with her, she's
just … we clash"
"She's nothing that I expected"
That's the story that I have from my mother
about me.
So I just think I was so far out of the field for her and
it was a struggle.

I kept getting brought down,
every day I'd put clothes on
I'd go outside and
there would be a comment about me not being appropriate and (of course) my conclusion is
"Not good enough again"
Bang
down each time
not being what you want me to be.
I just don't know enough about my mum and
what was going on for her and
what her concept of homosexuality was.
It seems threatening sometimes
for parents to have their children
not conforming how other kids do
how other little boys and little girls do
sometimes it's because they have this idea about
what's normal.

So in some ways it's almost
"Be different, don't be you, i.e. don't be gay"
"Don't be like a boy"
I think she does love me now.
she struggled with me as a young person
I certainly think because of her own issues she wasn't able to express love for me.
And it affects me today in my relationships and my self-esteem
it affects me, it's my core
one defining thing about me it always
comes back to that … always.
I just have this in-built disbelief that anybody could love me

My brother thought I was weird (*he still does on a lot of levels*)
We are so so
different.
I remember playing footy on the front lawn with all the boys
he just thought he had this nutbag sister
who wants to play football
when all the other girls in the street are playing with their dolls.
I think I was an annoyance,
I think I frustrated him
He just thinks
I'm weird
I'm so
different
he just doesn't get it.
That's how they defined me,
their definition of me was that
I'm just
different
to other little girls and therefore I believe it intrinsically.
I still believe it.
They could accept some of it but ultimately
they couldn't accept their daughter
being homosexual.
It has become less significant as I get older
but I'm still incredibly aware of it.

Now it's my sexuality that defines me as being
different,
because that's the obvious thing. I sleep with girls.
I guess that's the primary one
There's always the underlying feeling for me
that's kind of been drummed into me from day one.
   It's with me all the time, it really is,
the sense of being different I got from a very young age, this is with me in my mind, when I'm relating to other people.

But it's not there when I'm with my gay friends.
I don't feel different to my gay friends or my lover
I don't have any of that, none of those issues are there so I can just a hundred percent be me without this constraint.
It's about my appearance and my sexuality.
      the way I look and how I dress.
      Like a boy.

When I stand in a room full of my corporate colleagues, they're all pissed, acting like absolute idiots I'm different to them.
I can feel my mind thinking that, when I'm talking to them, when I'm having photos taken with them, I'm conscious of being different to them.
More self-conscious of it thinking all the time "what are you thinking about me because I'm different"
I've only just started a new job so it's all present again You're new I'm conscious of being different.
I'll walk into a room (I've made a conscious effort not to conform in the way that I dress) so I wear what I feel comfortable wearing which is different to most of the females in the office.
If I'm feeling good, confident and in myself then I'm confident I'm fine not concerned about what other people are thinking. But if I'm feeling a bit down struggling with something emotional in my life not quite buzzing in myself; then I'll feel a lack of self-esteem about myself I'll start to feel like other people might be thinking about me "She looks like a boy" "She must be a dyke"
I just wish that I was brought up to feel like it was okay to be who I wanted to be it was no threat to them
it didn't matter
    that they just loved me anyway.
I just wish that I'd had that.

When my lover says to me
    "I love you"
I want to believe her and I want to have a relationship where I believe her.
Feeling like you are unworthy of love
    it gets in the way of having a fulfilling relationship.

You know what I really feel, is confused.
About wanting to wear boys clothes and being told to wear girls clothes.
Yeah that's what I think.
Having a lot of fun,
    being a kid,
    happy smiling,
but starting to feel confused and frustrated.

It makes me sad now,
    it used to make me happy
    it was my little thing that showed me that
    I'm me from the day I was born
all this stuff was just in me.
I didn't know anything about all the other social shit
I was just me.
And that used to make me happy
    it used to give me a sense of freedom it's like
    it's just the way I am.
It proves that it's
    just
    the way
    I am and
    it's okay.

It makes me sad having had this discussion
it just points out for me that it's kind of sad what happened.
Under different stars, at the beginning of a new millennium, in an old land and a young nation, we join together in the hope and conviction that the future will be kinder and more just than the past.

At a time when there is so much fear and danger, anger and destruction, these Games represent an alternative vision for humanity. Acceptance. Diversity. Inclusiveness. Participation. Tolerance and joy. Ours is the world of love, questing to find the common links that bind all people. We participate because, whatever our sexuality, we believe that the days of exclusion are numbered. In our future world, everyone can find their place, where their human rights and human dignity will be upheld.

This is a great time for Australia because we are a nation in the process of reinventing ourselves. We began our modern history by denying the existence of our indigenous peoples and their rights. We embraced White Australia. Women could play little part in public life: their place was in the kitchen. And as for gays, lesbians and other sexual minorities, they were an abomination. Lock them up. Throw away the key.

We have not corrected all these wrongs. But we are surely on the road to enlightenment. There will be no U-turns.

Little did my partner Johan and I think, 30 years ago, as we danced the night away at the Purple Onion, less than a mile away, that we would be at the opening of a Gay Games with the Queen’s representative and so many to bear witness to such a social revolution. True, we rubbed shoulders on the dancefloor with knights of the realm, such as Sir Robert Helpmann, and with future premiers, such as Don Dunstan. But if an angel had tapped us on our youthful shoulders and told us of such a change we would have said “impossible”. Well, nothing is impossible to the human spirit. Scientific truth ultimately prevails. So we unite together: men and women, indigenous and newcomers, black and white, Australians and visitors, religious and atheist, young and not so young, gay and straight.

It is put best by Corey Czok, an Australian basketballer in these Gay Games. “It’s good to be able to throw out the stereotypes,” he says. “We’re not all sissies, we don’t all look the same and we’re not all pretty!”

His last comment may be disputed. Real beauty lies in the fact that so many are united – not in the negatives of hate and exclusion, so common today, but in the positives of love and
inclusion.

The changes Australia has witnessed over 30 years would not have happened if it had not been for people of courage who rejected the ignorant denials about sexuality. Who taught that variations are a normal and universal aspect of the human species. That they are not going away. That they are no big deal. And that, between consenting adults, we all just have to get used to it and get on with life.

The people of courage certainly include Oscar Wilde. His suffering, his interpretation of it and the ordeal of many others have bought such changes for us. I would include Alfred Kinsey. In the midst of the McCarthyist era in the United States he, and those who followed, dared to investigate the real facts about human sexual diversity. In Australia, I would also include, as heroes, politicians of every major party, most of them heterosexual. Over 30 years, they have dismantled many of the unequal laws. But the first of them was Don Dunstan. He proved, once again, the astonishing fact that good things sometimes occur when the dancing stops.

I would also add Rodney Croome and Nick Toonen. They took Australia to the United Nations to get rid of the last criminal laws against gay men in Tasmania. Now the decision in their case stands for the whole world. I would include Neal Blewett, who led Australia’s first battles against AIDS. Robyn Archer, Kerryn Phelps, Ian Roberts and many, many others.

Yet this is not just an Australian story. In every land a previously frightened and oppressed minority is awakening from a long sleep to assert its human dignity. We should honour those who looked into themselves and spoke the truth. Now they are legion. It is the truth that makes us free.

I think of Tom Waddell, the inspired founder of the Gay Games. His last words in this life were: “This should be interesting.” What an understatement. Of Greg Louganis, twice Olympic gold medallist, who came out as gay and HIV-positive and said that it was the Gay Games that emboldened him to tell it as it was. Of Mark Bingham, a rowdy Rugby player. He would have been at the Sydney Gay Games. But he lost his life in one of the planes downed on 11 September 2001, struggling to save the lives of others. He was a real hero. Of Bertrand Delanoé, the openly gay mayor of Paris, stabbed by a homophobe whilst attending a celebration at city hall. He showed courage. His last instruction before he was taken to hospital was that the party should go on till sunrise. Indeed, I think of everyone who affirms the fundamental unity of all human beings. Who rejects ignorance, hatred and error. And who embraces love, which is the ultimate foundation of all human rights.

Let the word go out from Sydney and the Gay Games of 2002 that the movement for equality is unstoppable. Its message will eventually reach the four corners of the world. The Games will be another catalyst to help make that happen. Be sure that, in the end, inclusion will replace exclusion. For the sake of the planet and of humanity it must be so. And by our lives let us be an example of respect for human rights. Not just for gays. For everyone.