

**Round table: *Identity and the Construction of Agency*
in *Contemporary Representations of Sexualities and Gender Identities*¹**

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1. Lesbian Identity and Agency in Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (María Isabel Romero Ruiz, UMA)

After post-structuralism and post-modernism, identity has become one of the key issues of feminism and lesbian theory with the aim to defy essentialist and hetero-normative notions of women's sexuality. As far as lesbian theory is concerned, it revolves around three fundamental issues: identity, sexuality and community. What is true for feminists in general is also true for lesbians: we move towards a lesbian theory through reflecting on personal lived experience (Gonda 1998: 113). However, there is a need for "a historical understanding of women's same-sex sexual behaviour concentrating on the origins of an individual and group identity" (Vicinus 1992: 468).

Three issues concerning the lesbian feminist agenda can be found in *Fingersmith*: the re-writing of the past to hear the voices of stigmatised groups; the debate of the writing and consumption of lesbian pornography; and the creation of a lesbian identity through the power of agency. Waters sees history as a cultural issue, and in an interview in 2007, Waters stated that the fascination with the Victorian period has to do with its relevance to the present, as Neo-Victorian novels deal with issues like gender, sexuality and class which were prominent in Victorian debates and are current in our societies of today. Waters believes that "culture and society are provisional, temporary things", and history is a process in which nothing is fixed and everything changes from one period to another (in Dennis 2008: 45-48). In the case of *Fingersmith*, Waters tries to compose hidden histories using the sensation genre, in which women had an outstanding part.

In this novel, we can find a critique of the objectification of the Victorian female body in pornographic books. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, pornography was available to the working classes and was seen as an inspiration for social revolution. By the middle of the 19th century, the price of the books was very high, the volumes of erotica were published privately and they circulated among upper-class families who had the education and the money to be able to afford them. It was also a male-dominated trade. In this context, Sarah Waters's objective is to show the possibility of women writing and consuming their own porn.

Waters is clearly opting for an open representation of lesbian desire, something that you could not certainly find in literary productions of the nineteenth century (Palmer 2008: 78). The language she uses is also transgressive and uncommon for Victorian times. Nonetheless, it is towards the end of the novel that the process of identity construction is completed and female agency through personal experience and feelings is exerted. Maud annihilates a male tradition of writing lesbian porn by destroying her uncle's library and using his literary space as her own. Maud will make of Sue a literate woman breaking social barriers and will show her how to get involved in a voluntary sexual relationship between partners. When Sue wants to know what

Maud's writing is about, she asks, "What does it say?" and Maud answers "It is filled with all the words for how I want you" (Waters 2002: 547).

2. Beyond Feminism(s): Gender Identity across Cultures (Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego, UMA)

Contemporary women of colour reject the construction of a feminist theory based solely on gender and defend that the identity for women of colour comes out of a multiple consciousness, one located at the juncture of contests over the meanings of racism, colonialism, sexualities, and class. All elements are crucial for delineating the relation of women of colour to language and the language that they use to represent their experiences in Literature. This theoretical approach points out that any feminist theory that accounts for the politics of colour in women's lives, should necessarily be able to examine, acknowledge, and overcome "the limitations imposed by assumptions of internal identity (homogeneity) and the repression of internal differences (heterogeneity) in racial and gendered readings of works by black women writers" (Henderson 1989: 117).

This writing/speaking from a plural consciousness requires understanding of multiple and often opposing ideas and knowledge(s) and also negotiating among them. As Anzaldúa states, "a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war" (1987: 78-80). Then, binary thinking is understood in the conceptual inclusive context of intersection and interdependence. Thus, feminist theory needs to be engaged in exploring the "total consciousness of women". These reasons have led many women of colour to adopt the term 'womanist' in an effort of overcome the limitations of terminology since feminism places a priority on women, nationalism or race consciousness places a priority on race. Both Alice Walker and African scholar Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi define womanism as consciousness that incorporates racial, cultural, sexual, national, gender, economic and political considerations. Contemporary cultural critics face the increasing publication of culturally diverse her(stories) indicating a recognition of plural realities and experiences as well as a diversification of inherited Eurocentric canons. Feminist scholarship has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history. This is a process which functions not just as a corrective to the gaps, erasure and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history, but which emphasizes the idea that the very practice of remembering and re-writing leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity.

Within this context, I would like to point out some crucial elements of the relations among writing, memory, consciousness, and political resistance:

- the creation of communal womanist political consciousness through the practice of storytelling.
- the re-definition of the very possibilities of political consciousness and action through the act of writing.

The decoding of these subversive narratives is one of the most significant challenges for contemporary scholarship. As Barbara Christian reminds us, storytelling and its role in literature offer, "the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge", rather than simply conceiving history and philosophy as the "split between the abstract and the emotional" which characterizes western thought (1994: 351-2).

Third world women and fourth world women together with women of colour's literary representations, their stories, their use of language, their identity and voice form an intricate mosaic which calls for open spaces. They have been engaged in deconstructing the images, identities, presumptions and methodology of hegemonic discourses –not only androcentric world views– but those of white feminism as well, validating and articulating the formerly submerged discourses of women, affirming a rich history of resistance embedded in their varied and rich cultural identities.

3. Identity and the Construction of Agency in Contemporary Representations of Sexualities and Gender Identities (Beatriz Domínguez García, UHU)

Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) is a reworking of the Ovidian myth of Iphis and Ianthe (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, IX) which modifies and adjusts this myth –to give a voice to all the parties involved in the plot– favouring the metamorphosis of the world around this new Iphis-Robin “in an effort to achieve [her] own particular purposes (e. g. political, didactic, structural, thematic, aesthetic)” (Doloughan 2010: 242).

Robin has power and agency herself and her entry into the sisters' close society works for Imogen in a sense it does not work for Anthea. By accepting not only her sister's love relationship but Robin's inconformism to society, Imogen breaks free of the “cultural determinations” which have categorized her throughout her life. Her new acquired sense of power and agency is clearly stated in her acceptance of her sister's choice both in the personal and in the political. As a matter of fact, Smith's revision of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe does not only work in its traditional plot. For it is Anthea the one who is finally transformed and who emerges from her conforming self to become the new Anthea she wished for. Iphis's and her mother's plea to the gods is heard in Anthea's own old plea (Smith 2007: 141). Iphis and Ianthe are also reunited in their natural forms now the myth has been “put in new bottles”. Yet their union, for which the metamorphosis is unnecessary, has transformed the world around them. Their “actively-chosen” identities help Imogen to make sense of her experiences and work to transform her own perception of herself and the world with the active choosing of a definite interpretation of reality. In all, if this retelling clarifies something, it seems it is stressing the necessity of fighting against cultural colonization by the hegemonic cultural paradigm which proposes categorization and definitions in terms of self and others.

Notes

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