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**(In)visibly Unsafe:**

**Passing under the Radar and the Limits of Queer Space**

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*This article examines how a relationship between an FtM transperson and a lesbian femme shapes and affects their interactions within LGBT and queer spaces. This inquiry centers on the implications for the femme, not only since this position has been neglected by literature, but also as it is based on my personal experience. The use of auto-ethnography serves to address this theoretical gap while avoiding universalism and essentialism, by situating this examination in a particular location within a specific context. Focusing on the contemporary queer community in Tel Aviv, Israel, along with its continuing strong connections to American queer experience and thought, I attend to the type of performances that are embedded into the evasive yet rigid structure of 'queer' to determine whether performativity is used to stabilize some locations by destabilizing others, thereby producing a space safe only for some. Furthermore, femme experience, predominantly my own, is utilized to suggest viewing the femme position as a form of exile, to be redeemed by the reconceptualization of orientation within the queer frame, as well as by the re-contextualization of identity within intersectional borders.*

**Introduction**

*In a way, my body now extends less easily into space. I hesitate, as I notice what is in front of me. The hesitation does not 'stop' there but has redirected my bodily relation to the world, and has even given the world a new shape. (Ahmed 2006, p. 102)*

*I'm not sure if any identity exists without its counterpart. (Sheiner 1997, p. 132)*

A few years ago my ex and I went to see the Hebrew version of the lesbian play 'Last Summer at Bluefish Cove', produced by the local gay theater company 'Tahel' and hosted in the Tel Aviv LGBT community center. After more than a decade of lectures detailing the lack of representation of lesbian characters in the theater, cinema and literature, being represented in my own language brought tears to my eyes. Throughout the show I felt a deep de-familiarization by not having to simultaneously translate all situations, plot and characters to things I knew from my life, since what was being portrayed was not that different from my life. I was moved not only as a lesbian, but also as a very feminine woman who does not obey the anorectic decree of womanhood since the role of the most desirable woman, the one they were all fantasizing about, was played by a vivacious woman with a body very similar to my own. I felt represented at the most intimate level—that my body, my desires and my thoughts are relevant, exciting and sexy, and even important enough to be presented in a play. But whenever I got too emotional and squeezed my partner's hand, I could almost hear the women behind us, sneer and whisper: 'who are those *straighties* who came to see a *lesbian* play?'

Repeatedly, throughout my life, I have been afraid I might be disappearing.<sup>i</sup> As a light-skinned Moroccan Mizrahi<sup>ii</sup> woman and a high femme lesbian, I realized that parts of my life had moved forward without me, owing solely to my looks. My fair skin and intense femininity have made me re-appear straight and Ashkenazi-White, and thereby perform against my will a double passing. Like many other femme tales, this could be read as the story of *A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Hollibaugh 2000), fighting to spot a space tangible enough to include her oxymoronic location. However, within the confines of Israeli society, that girl still has a long way to go. While American femmes, from a wide range of classes, races and ethnicities, have been inspiringly reclaiming their identities and experiences since the 1980s, consolidating a firm and even fierce response to their misreading and misrepresentation, Israeli femmes' main concern to this day remains emerging out of invisibility. This is true not only in regards to the Israeli general public, but also in regards to the local LGBT and queer communities. While some lesbians giggle when they hear there are still femmes, most have never heard the word, and for some of those identified as feminists it's a genuine struggle to overlook our nails and heels or to fight the urge to lend us their copy of *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf 1991). Have Israeli femmes ever had a safe enough space to be considered feminist, lesbian or queer—all the while keeping their chosen genders intact?

I never imagined it could get much worse. As someone who usually dates butch people, who at times pass as men, it took me a while to note any change in the way I was being perceived. At first, my partner didn't fully pass and thus got a lot of the same reactions my exes used to get. Respectively, I settled in my usual position in a relationship—grateful for that fraction of insinuated queer visibility I get based on my proximity to a gender outlaw. That shred of recognition has granted me with a temporary pass to the 'secured spaces', reserved for those who

'looked the part' and thereby do not only enter freely, but also get a plus one. However, after only two years, and unmistakably after five, his physical appearance changed enough so he didn't 'confuse' anyone. And from the moment he started passing as a guy, I automatically started passing as straight, and we both found ourselves standing on foreign borders.

In my previous work (and as discussed throughout this paragraph), I examined by what means the exclusion of femininity from various feminist, lesbian, and queer domains affected femmes (Mishali 2014a). As I showed, whereas in the past femmes, butches and transpeople were viewed in lesbian-feminist spaces as suspicious positions derived from either false consciousness or betrayal, within current queer discourse the positions of the butch and the transgender have been reclaimed and re-conceptualized as viable and legitimate positions, redefining in turn the boundaries of queer space. Yet, even after more than three decades of femme (mostly autobiographical) reclaiming of femmeness, femininity is valued queer, both in theory and in practice, only when performed by men or males, and so, the femme position, if inhibited by a female, uncovers 'gender trouble' still shared by feminist, lesbian and queer spaces. As I pointed out, neither lesbian-separatism nor queer thought managed to produce either conceptual or actual safe spaces to account for various lesbian narratives. While lesbian feminism proposed to replace compulsory femininity with a unified form of androgyny detached from the 'female role', queer efforts worked to subvert gender tyranny with a unified form of gender resistance—namely gender crossing. While there is no doubt that both allowed many women to overcome their forced socializations and claim their stake in different forms of gender ambiguity and female masculinity, at the same time they banned or at least disregarded femininity as a valid option, leaving many women outside of what was considered 'political'. Even though both 'camps' identified 'the personal' as a valuable ground for the articulation of the political, they similarly centered limited experiences that illustrated their convictions most clearly, and thereby reaffirmed narrow identity based constructions of experience resulting in the omission and indeed marginalization of some.

Arguably, queer thought criticizes the binary structure of 'coming out', refuting naive expectations to 'arrive' 'home', contending it does not necessarily 'get better' (Butler 1991; Sedgwick 1990). However, does it allow us to just 'stay in', or similarly pressures us to perform our right to the elusive yet fixed structure of 'queer'? Is performativity being used to mold queer spaces all the while announcing queer ideals? And if so, how can it endanger subjects who exceed this premise? How safe is it for a femme who is in a relationship with an FtM transperson to keep using 'lesbian' to present herself within LGBT or queer spaces? And how safe could it be for her partner or their relationship?

To address these questions, while avoiding the mechanism by which gender or sexual essentialism sustain the myth of universal or shared identity, I will utilize my own personal experience in the Israeli queer

community, as a member and an activist since 2003. Since my goal is to 'spatialize and historicize the creation and recreation of identity' (Nelson 1999, p. 348), I will explore specific intersections between a Mizrahi femme with a trans partner and the Israeli LGBT and queer spaces (primarily in Tel Aviv) during the last decade or so.

The use of auto-ethnography, as a way of 'theorizing how situated, knowing subjects do identity' (Nelson 1999, p. 351), is directed at highlighting and analyzing the reciprocal relations between identity and community, performance and space, subjectivity and dependence. I do not view my history as a form of truth or any kind of proof of my thesis, but rather as my current understanding of an intricate location in a particular time and space, which could be useful to other considerations of related or comparable locations and intersections. This account reflects the ways by which I dealt with my shifting locations, assuming that '[s]ubjects can be constituted through hegemonic discourses of gender, race and sexuality while remaining reflexive of, and (potentially) intervene in, that process' (Nelson, 1999, p. 341). Similarly to the butch-femme auto-ethnography offered by Sara Crawley and Rebecca Willman, I consider my 'interventions' within these multilayered social routes to be 'constituted pragmatically among constrained discursive relations' (2017, p. 158), located between the voluntary and dictated, manifesting my creative negotiation with the demands and opportunities I came across throughout my life. Following their proposal to use their own auto ethnographies as sexual embodiment projects—a theory which manifests how subjects produced by discursive power, are also leading everyday agentic life, I suggest viewing my journey not as constituted by free active choices, but 'articulated via sense-making practices in situations—productions of reality in a thoroughly discursively constraining world' (Crawley & Willman 2017, p. 159). Particularizing these alleged interferences or involvements within this specific location in space, will allow me to clarify existing problems within queer spaces and discourses, as well as to propose a potential ground for new forms of resistance that re-center solidarity, inclusivity and diversity, by avoiding a unified model of theory, identity, and experience.

### **How Political can the Personal Be? Lesbian Feminism and other American Legacies**

[W]e need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. (Scott 1991, p. 779)

Joan Scott's argument can elucidate why lesbians in the seventies, in order to be accepted to the lesbian-feminist movement, were compelled to replace their diverse narratives with a unified, pseudo-personal narrative that mirrored the movement's ideology. Although the seventies' feminist movement in the U.S. was transformed from a movement that excluded lesbianism to a lesbian-feminist movement, the broadening of the 'feminist' to include the 'lesbian' in effect

represented a reduction of the 'sexual' to the 'political' as well as the erasure of sexual life experiences and their replacement with a theoretical political identity. This new identity dictated rigid gender and sexual precepts regarding not only the appropriate gender (not feminine) and the appropriate object of desire (not men) but also the nature of sexuality (no power relations), without considering who can actually implement such decrees (Mishali 2014a).

As a counterweight to the prevailing lesbian stigma, the production of 'lesbian-feminist' life stories aimed at redefining lesbian identity in terms of political identification and solidarity with women, striving to prove that identity cannot be reduced to sexual attraction or gender appearance. The 'shared' experience established a lesbian-feminist hierarchy that classified practices based on their exemption from power relations. Within this framework '[s]exuality and its politically 'pure' manifestations became a form of political action as well as a mode of resistance' (Roof 1998, p. 28).

The idealization of lesbianism actually ignored the axiom *The Personal is Political*<sup>iii</sup> insofar as its assumption that 'lesbianism, especially when practiced by feminists is a superior form of sex' (Rubin 1981, p. 215), implying that certain forms of gender and sex can indeed exist outside of social power relations. The motto *Feminism is the Theory; Lesbianism is the Practice* (Radicalesbians 1992) captures the movement's use of experience to convert feminism from a theory into a practice, while converting the personal into the political. The adaptation of various narratives to fit into one homogenous collective narrative, aimed at confirming the appropriate identity and history, necessitated the silencing of experience that did not cohere with the movement's agenda. This led to a 'misleadingly clean cut between personal experience and old, but still powerful social practices [...]' (Dimen 1984, p. 141).<sup>iv</sup>

The lesbian-feminist movement did not acknowledge earlier lesbian communities, presenting them instead as anachronistic, and expecting them to adjust to the new lesbian model. Despite the fact that butch-femme communities had paved the way for the formation of lesbian genders and lesbian visibility, they were excluded from the revised lesbian narrative mainly because they exposed the lack of consensus regarding what lesbian identity is and how it relates to politics (Nestle 1987; Rubin 1981). Lesbian-feminism's universal formation of experience confirmed a favorable lesbian identity, which redeemed lesbianism from cultural eradication at the expense of a multitude of lesbian experiences that were erased from the communal narrative to avoid threatening its unity.

Scott's statement—that it is not subjects who produce experience, but experience which produces subjects—could potentially explain the stakes of lesbian feminism, not only for American butches and femmes throughout the seventies and eighties, but also for an Israeli femme a few decades later. My journey began in 2003 as I came across a small

butch-femme scene that took place mostly in private houses and public parks. Most of us learned about butch-femme from reading *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg 1993), and lesbian magazines like *On/Off Our Backs*. Although for a year we also ran a weekly social group, this sub-community, which mostly relied on sporadic gatherings and random information, could not offer any sustainable ground to explore butch and femme and eventually dissolved around 2007. These identities, that felt ours but had a long history before us, were lost in the local sphere which lacked any long-lasting meeting places or accessible knowledges. Therefore, many of us began exploring American queer culture, mainly by reading oral histories and autobiographical accounts of butches and femmes.<sup>v</sup> For me, this exploration forced a further examination of lesbian feminism, since its impact on this sub-culture, soon enough, became unmistakable. I came across an extensive theoretical, fictional and personal literature, uncovering a long history of dismissal by many who, like me, were judged primitive, downright sexist or just unaware, merely for choosing to dress or have sex on the borders of gender. These accounts of exclusion, have not only echoed my, previously unspoken, experience within feminist and lesbian spaces, but have also exposed a crucial part of my chosen sexual history, the past journey of some of the categories I chose to take on, along with their potential future prices to be paid.

This corpus shaped not only my personal and activist paths, but also the academic one, since I ended up writing my PhD about American butch-femme identities and communities. As I was completing my thesis, my advisor conducted an informal survey, asking a circle of colleagues and friends what 'butch' and 'femme' meant. The majority knew what a butch was and offered that 'femme' was a woman in a foreign language. This constant disregard, to what I considered to be the best way to reconcile different parts of myself, made me decide to import this knowledge to the local sphere. However, the mediation of ideas cannot only consider gaps created by time and space. It needs to also attend to the ways by which subconscious global mechanisms of stereotypization and stigma socialize us to reject and hate, even before we can name the object of our condemnation. Lyndall MacCowan (1992, p. 301) attributes her own failed attempts to create a new discussion about butch-femme in her gender studies classes to prejudice, and elucidates that '[o]nly when I took the focus completely away from them, making myself into both subject and object by talking about what it meant for me to identify as a femme, did any kind of dialogue become possible'. While I do not enjoy the same freedoms when teaching academic courses, and therefore save my own story for my work in the community, using personal localized accounts, such as MacCowan's, Nestle's and others, did allow me to do more than position 'femme' in a distant geographical, theoretical or historical space; it has allowed me to constitute it as a legitimate and meaningful option. Moreover, using the personal—others' and especially my own—enabled me to relocate femme in the Israeli space, as a lived sustainable position.

Such American queer legacies did not shape my narrative alone. Local feminist, lesbian, gay and queer fights have been informed and affected by American organizations and movements, such as Lesbian Feminism, The Lesbian Avengers, Act Up and Queer Nation. This influence was particularly apparent in the activity and views of the radical group 'Black Laundry', formed in 2001 to unite lesbians, gay men, and trans people to fight against the Israeli occupation and for social justice (Ziv 2010).<sup>vi</sup> This group marks a distinct transformation in the local activist arena from mainstream gay struggles against discrimination and for gay rights to radical queer struggles against pink-washing the Israeli occupation and for the recognition that all oppressions—national, racial or sexual—are interconnected and therefore, must be addressed together. Since I only joined the queer community in 2003, I was mainly involved in the activity of 'Black Laundry's successors, such as 'Cinema Paradildo', 'Queeruption' and mostly in Tel Aviv drag scene.<sup>vii</sup> Moreover, the relevance of American queer thought to the examination of Israeli queer space is particularly noteworthy due to its impact on local developments: Both the first organization of Israeli queer conference ('Other Sex') in 2001, as well as the first publication of Hebrew queer anthology in 2003 ('Beyond Sexuality') were initiated by scholars who were educated in American institutions and worked to import queer scholarship to Israeli disciplines, thereby helping in institutionalizing the queer field locally. Nevertheless, the effect of this process has not been limited to the academic field, but has also contributed to the shaping of the community and its subsequent identities and sub-groups. For instance, the 'Other Sex' conference has been functioning for the past 17 years as an annual gathering space for academics, activists, and members of the LGBT and queer communities, thereby creating a multilayered queer Israeli discourse.<sup>viii</sup>

My personal involvement in these procedures has been substantial. For the past 12 years I have been using my own experience to mediate American pro-sex feminism, post-colonial and queer thought, butch-femme culture, and femme identity to academics and non-academics via lectures and workshops within LGBT and queer venues: I have been a regular lecturer in the 'Other Sex' conference since 2005, and a member of its organizing committee since 2012; I co-initiated the translation of Joan Nestle's selected works into Hebrew and wrote the book's afterword in 2008, as well as co-organized her participation in a panel dedicated to her work in 2009; That year I also founded and led a femme support group at the Tel Aviv LGBT Center; wrote the gender identity chapter for the local adaptation of *Our Bodies Ourselves* in 2011 (incorporating interviews with local queer and trans people to explain American identity categories to Israeli youth); And published five articles and essays in Hebrew between 2009 and 2016, which centered on this American scholarship—either commenting on this corpus or examining its possible contributions to the understanding of Israeli women, Mizrahis and queers.

Some propose to view the denunciation of butch-femme by lesbian feminism as an understandable response to normative efforts to mold

lesbian desire according to the straight alignment, which originated in sexology. Sara Ahmed's solution is to redirect lesbian feminist critique, previously aimed at butch and femme bodies, towards mainstream readings of lesbians as forced imitations of the heterosexual couple. This way, she suggests, we could refute 'the assumption that butch-femme is necessary for lesbian desire' (Ahmed 2006, p. 98) as well as acknowledge the lived, and undeniably valuable, contribution of butches and femmes to the mapping of lesbian possibilities. However true, lesbian feminist writers did not offer any renditions of butch-femme culture so far, and therefore left us with a lesbian category—mostly void of experience and only masquerading as personal.

I believe that the conceptual legacy left by lesbian-feminism shows how politics organizes and interprets certain aspects of experience while evading others, and how positioning experience as prior to identity serves the construction of a universal identity and history while obscuring the ideological function of experience. Feminist or lesbian experience can never confirm the necessity of a particular politics, reflective of universal interests and accessible to every woman, because women's experiences are inevitably various, complex, and discrepant. Although Scott (1991, p. 785) grants that '[t]he unifying aspect of experience excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience', thereby offering important tools for the identification of erased narratives, she does not present us with tangible methods for restoring those experiences. Therefore, my aim is to carry Scott's project further by accounting for the personal's capability to undermine constructed dichotomies between the political and the personal, oppression and resistance, subjectivity and dependence, while not only rehabilitating suppressed narratives but also consolidating some space for unexpected narratives to come.

Personal experience can and has been used to confine subjects to fixed and predetermined categories, resulting in the construction of binary paradigms, misrepresentation, and exclusion. However, the personal can also call into question universal identities, by revealing their dependence on particular contexts, reminding us not to work toward 'defining' identities but toward 'defending' excluded positions in all their multiplicity (Feinberg 1996, p. ix). In what follows, I use my own personal experience with the lesbian category and its successors to suggest that any analysis of experience must account not only for the proximity of normative constructions of experience to the 'true' and 'natural', but also for the possible damages involved in disavowing experience as a productive site for the conceptualization of identity.

### **Looking the Part: Lesbian Category and its Rightful Performers**

Since I was sixteen, being a lesbian is what I've been. So what's the anxiety, the discomfort? (Butler 1991, p. 18)

Like Butler, I too figured out I am a lesbian as early as sixteen, and ever since felt the need to *make an effort* to be considered as such, all the



while wondering '[h]ow is it that I can both 'be' one, and yet endeavor to be one at the same time?' (Butler 1991). I started using 'lesbian' to describe myself after telling another girl from school that I love volunteering at self-defense classes, although whenever the instructor is on top of me and I am supposed to push her away I blush and freeze, and she replied casually 'it sounds normal to me, but I am a lesbian'. That word resonated something vague in me that as a child to a conservative Moroccan family I only heard before in late-night scary movies. It made me feel sane, but didn't keep me from feeling like an outsider looking in, the same way I felt before when being around straight girls. For six years I went out with women, but always continued to feel like an imposter, the same way I felt previously around straight girls.

Naming oneself as a lesbian is thus an effect of being a lesbian (in a certain way), which itself produces the effect of being a lesbian (in another way). (Ahmed 2006, p. 93)

As Ahmed clarifies, naming myself did not only give voice to a silenced misread past, but also committed me to a predestined future. Unlike Butler, I have never felt qualified to be a lesbian, and knew that since I don't look like one, my pass into lesbian spaces could be easily revoked. Even when I realized this identity is performance based and shaved my head at seventeen, I still only got those 'nice try' half-smiles. A long period of trying to be a convincing dyke ended with a breakup from the one girl I thought was going to make me feel like I fit somewhere. Her leaving me for men, alongside my mother's sense of betrayal and lesbians' constant suspicion of my 'realness', led me, at 22, to try for the first (and only) time to be with a man. The parting from lesbian life was at least for a year a separation from life altogether, at the end of which I knew I would never want to be straight again, and attempted to find the lesbian crowd I remembered. Most of the women I knew were replaced by others and the small collection of underground women-only events and spaces I left behind turned into a big, organized and vibrant lesbian scene in which I was once again the newbie who had to prove that she belonged. I remember trying to find a loophole that would allow me to enter the club, something that would verify I was indeed one of them, but soon enough I gave up trying and found my place in a small sub-community in which I could finally stop translating my lesbianism to hands-in-the-pockets and loose t-shirts and just be the Mizrahi high femme I am, and even feel desired for it. Since this was the first time I felt somewhat safe in my own skin, I was eager to create safe spaces for others like me, and therefore dedicated much of my academic work and social activism in the following decade to stirring up a local discourse about butch-femme, pro-sex feminism and queer sensibilities. By regularly organizing talks, panels, workshops, groups and parties, I aimed to turn abstractions, such as consensual gendering, gender crossing, role play, submission and domination, to livable and even safe possibilities.

It almost worked for a few years. The 'community' was an evasive hybrid created amidst house and street gatherings, feminist and anti-

occupation demonstrations, improvised parties that never found a permanent home, panels and groups we organized by ourselves for ourselves, steady visits to the only lesbian bar which survived for more than a decade ('The Minerva'), and annual attendance to both the pride parade (in deferent blocks but with the same people) and to the only queer conference there was ('Other Sex').<sup>ix</sup> But in a capitalist reality of constant national and sexual occupations, this community, if ever existed, was always somewhat imagined. Perhaps that is why I felt the need to remind myself and others that I am a lesbian, at the same time knowing that any attempt to establish, circulate and confirm my lesbianism is bound to fail. And this compelled necessity has little to do with the fact that every identity is reproduced indefinitely rather than constituted once and for all, and more to do with the fact that every time I repeated a lesbian performance, waiting for that affirmative-flirtatious-in solidarity glance or nod, I was paralyzed by the option of succeeding and therefore, being forced to confess that I have a boyfriend, and not because I am a closeted married woman (although considering the home I grew up in it could have been the case), but because there was another closet I have yet to come out of, but nothing is waiting for me on its other side, not even a language. If a lesbian coming out story is primarily based on a binary metaphor in which one is moving from danger (namely men) to safety (namely women)—how could a femme with a trans partner ever come out? What aspects of herself will become silenced when she will allegedly say everything she has to say about herself? Is there a way for her to present a clear, homogenous identity which will be understood immediately in each and every time and space?

Queer theory explains that no one can stay 'out' at all times, since the closet keeps rebuilding itself around the gay subject as a result of the assumption that everyone is straight until proven otherwise (Sedgwick 1990). However, does queer space challenge these binary poles? Which performances get you 'in' queer space and which ones push you out? Is performativity being used to mold queer space, and if so, by what means does one become included 'in' queer and 'out' of heteronormativity?

You can call our story a cross-gender love story, not simply because it originated years earlier in a different gender, but because it incorporated most of his transition, giving me the chance to love much more than one gender. However, does it make our relationship 'queer'? What guarantees the person who is going through the change via the contours of a relationship, and not of the body, a pass to stay within the confines of queer?

According to Butler (1990), more than we use identity-categories they use us, and at the moment we name ourselves we commit to something we cannot limit or control. Paraphrasing Butler, one might say that while we use identity categories to keep ourselves safe by stating our boundaries, these categories have the power to make us unsafe by pushing us outside of others' boundaries. As a lesbian who fell in love

with a trans guy, what right do I have to continue using 'lesbian' to present myself? And if I will continue to do so, how will it implicate me or him? Will it necessarily turn me into a transphobe—someone who forces butches and trans men to 'man' the same gender continuum? Won't I be immediately accused of loving him exactly for what he is working to get rid of, what he hates about himself? But hasn't loving always meant loving the wounds and scars, the geography of insecurities, the topography of not fitting in, the history of self-hate? Should we name all of this 'femininity'? When I continue to say I am a lesbian, am I necessarily positing everyone I have ever loved on the same scale starting with 'failed femininity' and concluding with 'successful masculinity'? As a lesbian who is in a relationship with a trans guy, how can I explain my position without disavowing his? Is the only way to protect his name to give up mine, like my straight sisters have been doing throughout history?

### **The Promise and Premise of Queer Visibility**

I do not always recognize us, femmes, even though I see us every day. (Davis 1997, p. 169)

Feeling safe within queer space has never been an easy task as a femme. Throughout 2007 I was a part of a queer drag ensemble which performed every other Friday-night in the only lesbian bar there was in Tel Aviv back then. Although I was one out of three FtF performers we rarely performed together since most of the members agreed that 'more than one femme a night can't really pass as political'. Often after the show someone would come to me and say 'Wow, a really powerful and moving piece, but how can this be 'drag' if you look exactly the same on stage and in real life?' Since for many of us performers, drag was a part of a private journey in which we figured out our desired gender locations, frequently enough there came a point when there wasn't a distinct difference between our appearance on and off stage. However, only some of us were asked to explain. The performers' usage of 'FtM' and 'MtF' to describe the different drag acts intended to express their understanding of the stage as a safe space to experiment with the idea of transitioning, some of whom actually ended up making a change and even keeping their stage name. Nevertheless, this lingo also served to distinguish the 'actual' drag shows (those performed by female drag kings and male drag queens) from other forms of drag (those that do not display a clear reversal between sex and gender). As femmeness was not viewed as a possible queer gender, one consciously acquired and brazenly maintained, FtF performances passed as queer only next to FtM ones, and were therefore read as no more than a cute sidekick of the 'real' thing. It was then when I first realized femininity and femmeness were presumed to be more of the same.

Does queer space account for this particular negotiation, or offer those who maintain it any practical tools to deal with the 'straitening devices' or the perceptions they impose? In 2009 I established a femme support group in Tel Aviv's Gay Center, which offered the first space for femmes

to share their differences and similarities while redeeming their idiosyncratic stories from a long history of dismissal and shame. However, consolidating this space as safe took a long time, since its material boundaries confronted us with those who did not welcome us or acknowledged our struggle, but rather viewed femmeness as silly or redundant. Our encounter with the outside stirred mostly harassments, confused looks and amused reactions, not only in the public, clearly 'unsafe', space, but also in the gay, supposedly 'safe' space. They all echoed the same question—what is femme and why does it matter? leaving us wondering if it could ever be intelligible enough to live. This might explain why most of the group members did not identify as femmes for most of its duration, and only did so after almost a year of shared experience, which offered the first foundation to charge this otherwise meaningless concept as familiar and localized, yet sufficiently heterogenic and flexible for ongoing molding and remolding.

Consequently, if invisibility is unsafe, should we aspire to readability? During the same year my partner and I, along with two other friends, went to support the west Jerusalem's pride parade, one of the most controversial and dangerous parades in Israel. We decided to stay in the city afterwards for a queer bash, and around midnight left the party and started walking towards our friend's car. The streets were still packed with amused teenagers sitting around waiting for 'the queers' to pass by, shouting stuff like: 'go home, the parade is over'. When we realized one of us, a non-passing transwoman, was getting too much attention, we tried to walk faster, but before we knew it, we were surrounded by a group of young men. The first one to get hit was my boyfriend<sup>x</sup> at the time, a trans guy who may pass as gay, and I, who jumped to defend his body, thinking my femininity makes me immune to beatings, was second. It obviously started as a transphobic attack, but continued as what—a homophobic one? lesbophobic? misogynistic? Who was I when I was hurt?

At that moment un-safety defined each and every one of us as queer, and queer was established either by looks or alliance. All other categories we carefully chose to protect our fragile locations became equally irrelevant, as our bodies fused into a united and unified front of perversion. Within that hostile space, we were all the same, queer by force of bad timing and off location, each of us acknowledged as someone who actively deviates from the norm to follow something (or someone) beyond the boundaries of 'safe'.

So, does every form of femininity bound to become readable only by means of oppression? Though queer theory unquestionably seeks to account for multiple forms of visibility, it repeatedly centers those that manifest a clear transgression: It has the habit of emphasizing trans lives that can be used as an allegory for gender mutability (Prosser 2006), as well as privileging hyper-visible styles of female masculinity to demonstrate how theoretical abstractions are embodied in the flesh (Cvetkovich 1998). As Bidy Martin (1996, p. 74) elucidates: '[q]ueer theory and politics necessarily celebrate transgression in the form of

visible difference from norms that are then exposed to be norms, not natures or inevitabilities'. In other words, the concept of gender fluidity does not randomly derive from varied butch and transgendered experience, but selectively stem from fixating on coherently visible forms used to produce new, yet not less restrictive, gender standards. These confine both lesbians and trans people to a liminal space between genders, ignoring those who wish to inhabit a stable location.<sup>xi</sup> Although this binary construction of both transgenderism and femininity do not do justice to the full range of actual transgender and feminine embodied formations, it does not treat them even-handedly: whereas transgenderism signifies an aspired pole to attain, femininity represents no more than a fixation to be overcome.

Queer theory glorifies Butler's performativity model, which proposes to rethink gender not as the natural reflection of a preceding origin, but as the prior social construction. This construction is responsible for stipulating our becoming subjects with our 'consent' to produce ourselves daily as men and women by imitating contextual masculinity and femininity (in accordance with maleness and femaleness respectively), which, in turn, retroactively recreates the illusion of the predetermined along with alleged casual relation between sex and gender. While this shift from the 'internal' and 'fixed' to the 'external' and 'constituted' has allowed many to reappear as desired, leaving their previously compulsory assigned locations behind, it has forced others, whose chosen positions do not visibly contradict their former ones, to disappear, ignoring Butler's (1998, p. 226) warning to 'resist the dialectical oppositions that underwrite the prevailing modes [...] that orchestrate who will become visible, and how'. Scott's (1991, p. 778) claim, that conceiving the evidence of experience through 'a metaphor of visibility' preserves rather than subverts predominant ideologies, and can be useful to explain by what means queer theory's appropriation of particular experience indeed formulates a *metaphor of visibility* that functions as proof of the gender crossing model. Exalting the experience of those who manifest a readable inversion does not only exclude those who cannot live this metaphoric ideal, but also put all others under surveillance, lest they perform their genders too seamlessly.

Queer theory has criticized the closet along with its sexual paradigms and challenged the construction of lesbianism or homosexuality as a contradiction of heterosexuality, thereby allowing for a consideration of butch-femme sexuality (to name one example) as a queer option. However, I propose that with respect to gender, queer theory replicated the very same dichotomies that are intrinsic to the closet. By constructing queer gender as dependent upon coming out of femininity (for cisgender women) and coming out of masculinity (for cisgender men), it has effectively preserved the expunging of the femme and of other options that cannot be explained solely by the reversal of categories. Even as it worked to undercut the framing of identity in terms of an imminent essence, queer theory's casting of gender

performance in terms of an oppositional relation to inner sex ultimately perpetuated the determinist model of the closet.

Nelson (1999, p. 351) suggests that the problem with Butler's performativity approach is that it 'assumes an already abstracted, time and placeless subject', and therefore does not leave room 'to theorize the historical and geographical embeddedness of human subjects who 'perform' a wide variety of identities in relation to various spaces over their life course' (Nelson 1999). While I do not see eye to eye with Nelson on this, and consider Butler's work to permit the contextualization of particular everyday gender productions, I do believe that performativity's reliance on visible gender reversal reinstates the biological as an origin from which one must deviate in order to appear as queer. Moreover, centering this strategy as ultimately queer neglects possible implications for those who resist the norms by other, less visible, means. I understand Nelson's concern that Butler's rejection of the autonomous fully conscious subject will void disobedience of intention; however, claiming there is no subject prior to discourse does not mean that the subject's relation to discourse does not produce intent. Conversely, I suspect Butler urges us to reconsider intention not as the extension of an inner predestined essence to be expressed, but the product of particular interactions of the subject with different discursive processes, social practices, institutions and other subjects. Unfortunately, queer scholarship is yet to articulate how to make subversive intentions visible, or in a broader sense, challenge visibility as the primary ground for the construction of queer space.

There is no doubt that while queer visibility in the public sphere has negative repercussions for many, queer invisibility provides others with some protection whether they seek it or not. Nonetheless, identifying queer invisibility with 'safety' obscures the ways by which visibility and invisibility are contextually constructed, leaving their intricate relations to 'safety' and 'un-safety' to be redefined within each space. In other words, assuming that invisibility equals privilege runs the risk of ignoring many forms of un-safety; among others, the dangers shared by all (feminine) women in a misogynistic world. Moreover, the reproduction of femme invisibility within feminist, lesbian and queer domains assigns feminism/lesbianism primarily to androgynous, masculine or hybrid genders, thereby making those spaces 'less safe' for other possible performances.

While we must object to the formation of a collective experience, we at the same time have to recognize and address the mechanism that regulates 'what counts as experience and who gets to make that determination' (Scott 1991, p. 790). In this respect, insisting on femme experience as a useful site for the destabilization of the mandatory correlation between gender (masculine/feminine) and sexuality (lesbian/heterosexual respectively), aims to challenge what counts as 'disobedient experience'—be it feminist, lesbian, queer or otherwise subversive. Furthermore, the inclusion of femme within these frameworks stands to address not only her exclusion from theoretical,

historical, and communal arenas, but also the femme's potential to contest the rigid separation between these interconnected conceptual and material spaces. Hopefully, a theorization of rebellious personal experiences, that additionally resists their merging into a unified identity-based narrative, could allow us to bridge the segregation not only between allegedly detached camps, but also between different parts of ourselves.

### **Taking it Personally: Performing Out of Context**

You might search for others who share your points of deviation, or you might simply arrive in spaces (clubs, bars, houses, streets, rooms) where welcome shadows fall and linger, indicating that others too have arrived. (Ahmed 2006, p. 105)

Queer theory criticizes the false promise of 'coming out', explaining that while it tempts us to free ourselves from previous limitations and hardships, derived from forced immobile gender and sexual categories along with the realities they enforce, it actually exposes us to new set of dangers—namely, similarly constraining identity structures, inseparable from homophobic premise (Butler 1991; Sedgwick 1990). But what can we say about a coming out which frames the person next to us? Which entangles the articulation of one identity with the erasure of another? Which stabilizes one (sexual) by destabilizing another (gender)? Even though, as queers we are aware of the ways by which coming out stipulates our chosen identities with the acceptance of attached norms, most of us still expect others around us to identify by using one label to uncover 'who they are'. But is there always an appropriate name to uphold?

As a girl who has a boyfriend, where is this need to keep a connection to my lesbian self coming from? Why am I so afraid to be viewed as someone who betrayed herself or her community? Perhaps, not to identify as lesbian means turning my back on my past and denying my debt to the lesbian-feminist mothers without whom I would probably already be a mother and wife. One of the alternatives I recently considered was to start identifying more vaguely as 'queer' so as my deviation to straightness won't be singularly explained by the person I am with. But aren't the boundaries of this non-identity likewise strict? Provided that queerness is defined primarily by gender crossing, who will agree to view me as queer as long as I stay so unbelievably feminine and do not even bother to suggest a more 'modern' version of femininity that is visibly distinguished from the 'old', 'traditional', and necessarily oppressive one? And even more so, could I not be lost in any identity that presumes that my gender is irrelevant to the understanding of my sexuality? How much meaning could my identification as queer have in Israel, where it is first and foremost a product of academic discourse? And finally, could this identity better protect my partner's identity or explain the nature of our relationship? Would 'queer' indeed threaten the normalcy or naturalness of his masculinity any less?

When we attended big LGBT events we were often asked if we were straight. My partner used to say: 'No, I am trans and she is femme'. However, does his response indeed prove that we were not straight? And if so, at what cost? His answer was frequently followed by 'Oh, so you are lesbians', pushing me to wonder—was there a way for me to keep on being a lesbian without dragging him along, thereby confirming the transphobic assumption that every trans guy is basically a woman? At other times, someone from my past would bump into us in the street holding hands and whisper into my ear: 'Oh, so eventually we lost you as well', making me feel once again like a traitor. Even close friends were struggling to understand why we cared so deeply what other people thought of us, and mostly advised us: 'not to take it personally', refusing to acknowledge that 'the depersonalizing of justice can make injuries disappear, and the dictum 'don't take it personally' fails because it allows the harmful action to be justified through the concealment of its effects, which are effects on somebody' (Ahmed 2004, p. 198).

If the construction of queer space in fact relies on the axiom 'the personal is political' then the removal of the emotional cannot be understood as a neutral act of practicality aimed at political progress. As Hartal, David and Pascar (2014) indicate, the conflicting understandings of 'safe space' expose it to be an impossible structure based on a contradictory set of feelings, expectations and demands. Queer circles are indeed known for offering a safe space to discuss the personal, ask questions, experiment and even make mistakes free of judgment. However, all of those could easily contradict other 'queer needs', such as to be safely recognized in our chosen genders or sexualities.

We did quite a lot to find ourselves a safe space. After thirty, many of our friends started having babies or sank into serious relationships, but we continued to religiously attend every queer event, feeling safe only through the eyes of our friends who carried with their smiles and hugs our lost histories. Although my partner did not identify as a man, it was obvious to us that in the public space nuances were luxuries and we were better off letting people think what they thought rather than promoting prejudices. Queer spaces were not always easier. Even when our particular locations were recognized, we were not freed from misunderstandings: My partner's use of feminine pronouns to talk about his past confused some, while threatening others who made other choices. His heightened sense of style made us also pass as a gay guy and his hag, and while he preferred it to other misreadings, I found it equally unsettling since, here too, I was viewed as straight.

So what were our options? To go out to gay events in which he would get a lot of attention, while I would spend the night smiling to excited exclamations of 'love the shoes!?' Or going to women's only events that would probably let us in because they know me, while leaving him to play the role of the dubious man invading female space? And what if for once, we would have actually entered a party exactly when a song we love was playing and I would have manage to convince him to



dance, and for just one moment we would have forgotten where we were and sank into our bodies—wouldn't this be abruptly interrupted by a gaze reminding us that once again we pass as 'that creepy straight couple who came to make out in a lesbian party'?

We also tried our luck in the transgendered community, and for a short while we almost felt like we belonged. However, soon enough our differences came back to haunt us. If to be in a butch-femme relationship automatically placed me as the opposite of the ultimate lesbian-butch—being with a transperson inescapably turned me to a cisgender: someone who feels contented in their given gender. Since 'cisgender', like 'queer', does not distinguish between men and women, it can steer clear of questions like: do all forms of gender-passing necessarily grant privileges? What kind spares you the gender trouble and what kind exposes you to troubles? Did feminine appearance ever not limit one's safety? Are there women who constantly and without reservations feel comfortable in their gender, despite the ongoing *discomfort* it entails? Is there a woman ignorant of how painful and dangerous it is to be defined based on sex organs? In a misogynistic rape culture could there be *ciswomen*? Furthermore, isn't the automatic definition of femme as cisgender based on physical determinism alone? And couldn't the dichotomy cis/trans be used to erase gender variance, while promoting transphobic notions that view gender as eternal? Could gender-based oppression serve as a ground for cooperation rather than segregation?

The central pride-parade in 2011, subsidized by the Tel Aviv municipality, was led by a campaign in which celebrities and key members of the community posted photos of themselves under the slogan: 'It's worthwhile to be Proud'.<sup>xii</sup> The campaign attempted to fight homophobic stereotypes by offering a positive representation of successful LGBT figures, while overlooking their privileged locations based on class, nationality, ethnicity, geography and so on. A queer group I was a part of initiated an alternative campaign and parade that aimed to make the less photogenic sides of the community visible. As a part of this campaign I posted a picture of myself with a text along the lines of: 'In a society that hates any racial or national difference, and any expression of feminine sexuality is viewed as an invitation for sexual harassment—how much is a Mizrahi lesbian femme worth?' My partner also participated by posting a picture of himself alongside the caption: 'It's worthwhile to be a transman if you are willing to respond to 'bro' and 'hey man', erase your history and forget you know what it's like to be a woman'. I shared this on my Facebook wall and added above: 'Thank you trans men for continuing to be our sisters'.<sup>xiii</sup> While many transpeople and queers identified with the sentiment or were moved by it, one transman commented angrily that this was a transphobic remark. I tried to explain I had no intention to apply this to every transman, but actually to thank my partner and other trans friends for their feminist activism (most of whom do not identify as 'men', in order to resist the gender hierarchy), and also admitted I never thought of 'sisterhood' as essentially female or feminine, but to no avail. From that moment on the discussion shifted to focus on different questions

of belonging, inclusion and exclusion, resulting in a big split between lesbian, queer and transpeople who up until that moment were working together to create a space for themselves.

Is there a space among contemporary activist and communal spaces in Israel to acknowledge and address more than one marginality at a time? Don't they all include and exclude based on bodily traits? What kind of space can be produced between the poles: academia-activism, men-women, straight-gay, heteronormative-queer, transgender-cisgender, Mizrahi-Ashkenazi, Arab-Jewish? And should there be a middle ground? Who is fighting for the safety of an unemployed Ashkenazi trans man who does not pass as male? A Mizrahi ciswoman who works on the street? A Palestinian academic femme? Is there a safe enough space to acknowledge that various oppressions intersect, even within every identity? Is it similarly 'unsafe' to be invaded by Israeli occupation, Ashkenazi hegemony, or rape-culture and to be hurt by marginalized individuals who are making themselves accountable? The struggle for safe space can make it easier to forget that different oppressions co-exist and harder to remember that in the fight over 'who is the most oppressed', we all lose each other.

In 2013 I attended the Homonationalism and Pinkwashing Conference at the City University of New York. I was surprised to realize how many queer activists, continuingly working against Israeli occupation, were ignorant of the existence of other minorities in Israel. Instead of addressing the ways by which nationalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia work together to secure the Israeli hegemony, the conference centered on an Israeli-Palestinian dichotomy, not too different from the one used in the Zionist discourse, thereby forcing all of us arriving from Israel into one of either poles: Israeli or Palestinian, Arab or Jewish, majority or minority. This sharpened the well-constructed binary poles, as well as reproduced the continuous erasure of Mizrahis—Arab Jewish Israelis. Criticizing Israeli pinkwashing, without particularizing its primary beneficiaries, obscures the selective nature of Israeli privilege reserved for homonormative, white-Ashkenazi, middle-class, able-bodied cismen, while blurring other shades of 'washed' oppressions. While we could have been united by our shared queer stakes in activism and social change, including the urgency to create safer spaces, soon enough we were divided to opposite sides on the premise one can either be the oppressor or the oppressed.

As Hartal, David and Pascar (2014) clarify, constructing a unified, closed and homogenous space based on identity, be it physical or emotional, does not promise safety. They propose instead to consolidate a space based on a dialogical ongoing consent, one which entails shared interpretations of reality and history. While I agree we need to attend to the particularities of each community, I am afraid that the segregation of queer space replicates previous forms of separatism that in the name of keeping some safe forced many to choose between different parts of themselves, or otherwise wander about without a

home. When searching for a space for myself, what identity should I fight to keep safe: the lesbian? the feminist? the queer? the femme? the Mizrahi? the academic?

However hopeful, Michel Foucault's (1978, p. 95) statement: 'where there is power, there is resistance' can also serve as a reminder that any form of disobedience is at the same time a product of the power it is set to challenge. The double and unstable nature of both power and resistance can explain why 'safe space' shaped in the face of social oppression is eventually utilized to divert struggles, to divide and conquer, to promote essentialism disguised as authenticity, to turn agendas against themselves, to replace institutions with individuals and to reduce political complexity to the rhetorical question 'Who is against whom?'. If we are to understand power not in terms of restricting or forbidding but in terms of producing relations, what kind of relations are being produced in the name of safe space?

### **Feeling Safe in a Small Space: Contextualizing the Borderlands**

The moment we arrived to see the apartment, after months of unsuccessful hunts, we spotted the rainbow flag hanging from the window and took it as a sign that this was our new home. A short while after we settled in, we got a call from our landlord demanding that we take down 'the homos rag' from her building straight away. We knew she felt comfortable saying that to us since she thought we are 'a normal couple', and assumed the flag was left hanging by mistake, a coincidental heirloom from the gay couple who lived there before us. I wanted to yell at her that I have no intention of removing the flag, and that I know that the only reason she made nice with the wealthy white-Ashkenazi gay guys who used to live here was she liked the fact they redecorated her apartment at their expense, but I kept quiet. After ending the call still shocked and disappointed in myself for not answering back, it suddenly dawned on me—what exactly would I have said? That I am keeping the flag because I am a lesbian and my boyfriend is a trans person? What would she understand by that, and could we have stayed after she would have realized we were not who she thought we were, and didn't even have two huge incomes to compensate for it?

We were never blind to the privileges we received whenever we passed as straight, but every time a plumber or a technician ignored my questions and asked to talk to my husband, I had trouble breathing and I was not sure this was in fact the life I chose for myself.

If we do not have a unique definition, a definition that stands on its own rather than in relationship to, are we like the tree in the forest: if no butch is around to see or hear the raging of our desire, does it still exist? (Davis 1997, p. 166)

If everyone assumes that we are another married couple, does it matter that we aren't? What is more important: What people think of me or

what I think of myself? The way I look or the person I am attracted to (and the way he/she looks)? The kind of sex we have? The way we perceive our relationship and each other? Can we survive as a couple over time without a community, and who could be our role models? How can I long for an acknowledgement I have never gotten or miss a sense of belonging I have yet to experience?

A big part of my gender is shame. Because I am too feminine but never appropriately dressed; Because my body is too visible but never by the audience I crave; Because I want too much but the way I want or look or act is not considered to be sufficiently feminist, lesbian or queer. Since a part of me will forever be the Moroccan girl from a periphery town, I desperately need a space away from shame, which has shaped my everyday life since I was a child to a work-weary, angry mother who spoke broken Hebrew with a heavy accent and cut my hair short to save time and money, dressing me in clothes that came from an unknown second/third hand, stained with our class.

I remember when I first figured it doesn't have to be that way. It was almost a decade ago, outside of a local queer space. We walked into a queer party in Boston just as a glamorous group of women on stage were telling a captivated audience about 'The Femme Show' which was just arriving to town. Looking at the crowd looking at them, made me understand that within local queer borders, I have never expected admiration or even appreciation, just inclusion. Realizing the crucial role femmes have played in most central queer scenes in the States, or how many performances and events, in New York City alone, are dedicated to celebrating the femme identity stirred similar reactions. One time, the miracle even included us. It was when we entered a well-known lesbian-queer bar in San Francisco (Lexington), and for the first and only time in our lives, we were instantly read as trans and femme. It of course immediately turned SF to our favorite place to visit, but when we returned there two years later, hoping to recreate the magic, we were told slowly and politely that we were probably in the wrong place.

Queer theory should deconstruct not only the reciprocal relations between power and resistance (Foucault 1978), but also the relations of each to space. One useful prism to account for the ways by which different locations juxtapose is intersectionality. This premise recognizes that every form of oppression necessarily interrelates to other forms of discrimination, inequality, and injustice that compose together the oppressive social system (Anderson & Collins 2007; Crenshaw 2001; Jones 2003). Respectively, no social identity is constructed independently, but is rather shaped and reshaped reciprocally to other components of experience. While queer contemporary investments in intersectionality are increasing, some works could be said to precede this trend.<sup>xiv</sup> Situated on ethnic, racial, geographic and sexual crossroads, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) has proposed considering the borderlands as a model for intermediate queer space that subverts rigid boundaries and allows for ambivalence,

overlaps and constant transformation. By positing herself and her narrative on the borderlands, she has forced us to rethink the obligation to inhabit one identity at a time, uncovering that both the self and space cannot be easily divided to separate territories. By refusing to 'choose sides' and identify as either black or white, gay or straight, feminine or masculine, she embodies and materializes the notion that different identities, even those constructed as binary, coexist; an idea which could and did serve as a ground for intersectional thought.<sup>xv</sup>

Not only academia has taken up intersectionality as a critical frame and political stand point for more than a decade; some work has been done within communities to link this vision to actuality in order to restructure space, and specifically to make it safer. One possible translation of intersectionality to everyday life, particularly in the States, could be the rising number of what we can view as 'intersectional groups'—different forums intended for multilayered positions such as: queer fat femmes, queers for economic justice, black trans lives, and so on. I believe these sub-groups do propose some solace from universal identity politics, and can even provide actual solutions to problems raised in front of segregated space. However, such spaces are usually possible within big central cities, and are not necessarily feasible in a small space like Tel Aviv, the Israeli gay haven/ghetto (depends who you ask), which offers mainly mainstream groups intended predominantly for gay men. Although within recent years efforts have been made to account for queer possibilities, or at least more of the LGBT letters, within a community struggling to have one group for each 'identity' (at times the only one in the country), it's hard to imagine a Mizrahi femme group or even a Mizrahi trans group.<sup>xvi</sup> Local virtual space does demonstrate the need for such groups, some of which already exist in the form of a Facebook group or a mailing list. However, without intersectional premise, these groups, materialized or not, may well deepen the rift between different parts in the community, as well as between different local minorities. So how could we construct or even envision intersectional ground? Such (middle)ground should foresee how to juxtapose different fights, while allowing all of us to acknowledge our differences, along with our dependence on others who do not have to be identical to us in order to share our pain, battle and space.

### **Queering the Orient(ation): Love beyond the Borders**

Some of us are accepted in the community because we are academics or activists and despite our femininity or otherwise flawed 'choices'. My kind of femmeness is additionally forgiven based on an indirect respect for the partner's successfully queer performance. Although I have been identified as a femme who is attracted to queer masculinities for years, imagining the reactions I would get if I suddenly fall for an even slightly feminine lesbian weakens my confidence. Presuming that if we both 'couldn't resist our compulsory gendering' we would inevitably be considered as normative girls looking for the easiest way to assimilate, would I ever risk my only link to queer visibility? And if so, would my life indeed become easier next to someone 'similar'—when there won't be

anyone to open the door for the delivery boy, walk me home at night, or speak on my behalf during a physical, and while sounding rational and calm? And finally, are there others like me, who suppress different parts of themselves to better fit queer space?

The queer mapping of sexual orientation is yet to account for the ways by which 'straight readings are 'directed' at lesbians in ways that affect how they inhabit space or how space impresses upon [their] bodies' (Ahmed 2006, p. 95). By using her own narrative, situated in a particular neighborhood, Ahmed illustrates how her sexual orientation dissolves into space when asked to categorize her partner as either sister or husband. Yet, does queer space necessarily guarantee better readings? Queer theory clarifies that sexual orientation cannot be reduced to the binary hetero-homo object-choice as it actually covers a much wider range of possible partners, together with the number, age and roles of participants (Sedgwick 1990). While this view indeed broadens the scope of object-choices to be named queer, it does not offer any practical ways to identify or signify queer sexual orientations outside the normative prisms of sexual object or gender deviation. Although it rejects the reduction of sexuality to sexual orientation, and insists on identifying other variables such as self-identification, acts and preferences, queer communities still expect their members to perform their take on 'the queering of sexuality' by engaging with others within queer space. Apart from sex parties (in which sexual acts are being performed) or communal debates (in which identities are being proclaimed and defined), the only spatial way to present queer sexuality is by arriving to queer space looking queer or accompanied by someone looking queer. In other words, the performativity and subsequent readability of identity—at least when not marked as visibly queer—is dependent upon our relation to others.

Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view. (Ahmed 2006, p. 107)

As Ahmed, I also believe that 'it is not that the 'object' causes desire, but that in desiring certain objects *other things follow*' (Ahmed 2006, p. 100, emphasis added). For me this might have meant that by desiring butch women I gradually became safe enough to explore my intricate relations to masculinity and even to men. Queer space offered a protected environment not only to analyze my difficulties in previous relationships with women, but also to acknowledge that there has always been a gap I ignored—between knowing I am not straight and not knowing what it exactly meant. Ahmed suggests that 'sexual object choice is sticky: other things stick when we orientate ourselves towards objects, especially if such orientations do not follow the family or social line' (Ahmed 2006, p. 101). Applying this to my story might say that my attraction to lesbians has led me to realize my pull towards butch women which later on stirred me towards other queer masculinities, including butch and trans masculine people, who some identify as men

and some do not. This should not be used to verify an essential continuum between butch and trans people, as this continuum describes my specific sexual journey, and even if applicable to others, it is only intended to demonstrate how desiring different people 'affects what we can do, where we can go, how we are perceived' (Ahmed 2006, p. 101).

Lesbian bonds can involve orientations that are about shared struggles, common grounds, and mutual aspirations, as bonds that are created through the lived experiences of being 'off line' and 'out of line'. (Ahmed 2006, p. 103)

Orientation is spatial by definition. It defines the direction by which we need or want to go. While the term has been generally appropriated by essentialist discourse in order to describe predetermined tendencies, it can be reclaimed to designate where we can or wish to go, as part of an ongoing quest aimed at finding a safe enough space to include different parts of ourselves or others we search for—yet to be named. Ahmed urges us to consider lesbian desire as 'a space for action, a way of extending differently into space through tending towards 'other women'' (Ahmed 2006, p. 102). This has helped me not only to redefine my own gender and sexual orientations as well as their limits, but also to recognize that our movement towards others needs to become more visible, even for those of us who allegedly do not depend on others to appear. I still identify as lesbian to state my political commitment to women, myself included; a commitment which enabled me to reconsider who I am and how I choose to live my life, despite familial obligations. In relation to others, through such identification I hope to include a shared particular feminist ground and, if mutually desired, a personal past and cultural history. If this movement towards others, or reorientation, could be rearticulated not in terms of forced dependence, but in terms of chosen connection, we would be able to start identifying the multiple ways by which we re-orientate each other within and towards space.

If there ever was a moment I didn't feel shame, it was when I was a part of a butch-femme split in time and space, where different locations intersected beyond sex and gender boundaries, united by a pseudo-nostalgic longing for something we never had, but was nevertheless ours. And isn't that the very definition of 'safe space'—a shared desire to believe in an imagined 'split in time and space', inclusive yet sheltered, that as queers we are expected to give up on or at least deconstruct? But without such space, could a trans-femme couple survive over time, separating their destiny from the mythic 'blues' of Jess and Theresa?<sup>xvii</sup> With no space to secure the understanding and downright existence of our fleeting locations and ever-changing bonds, how many queer stories can last? Should the butch-femme story be used only to eco a predestined ending or could it give voice to new beginnings, aimed at reconciling broken unions?

Lesbian desires move us sideways: one object might put another in reach, as we come into contact with different bodies and worlds. This

contact involves following rather different lines of connection, association, and even exchange, as lines that are often invisible to others. (Ahmed 2006, pp. 105-106)

The butch-femme tie could manifest one way to bridge the chasm between lesbian, trans and queer locations and spaces—based on respect to historical and current forms of intimacy and solidarity. This interconnectedness could encourage the consolidation of a space that would not force us to separate in order to share space with those visibly similar to us, but would allow more of us to stay together or find each other beyond 'identical' boundaries. Furthermore, precisely the femme, who has to rely on others for readability, could motivate a new ground for queer space, one which escapes the oppressive confines of individuality, which stands at the heart of identity politics. A position configured on a junction between identity and anti-identity, the personal and the political, the hyper-visible and the invisible, the safe and the unsafe, might inspire a new set of interpretations to existing understandings of 'feeling safe' within queer space.

*Every time we step out to the street we are playing a man and a woman but they see a boy and a whore and sometimes they ask us if you are my brother and we both think that if anything you are my sister. You stick a cigarette behind your ear to appear more intimidating but we are the only ones who are afraid. I wrap around your arm a pain that deepens between my breasts which bind themselves with a fabric shield and we cross the street where there is no room for crossing which is not black and white we cross a street and a ban to love without noticing where we are and how we look trying to overlook how much we are being looked at and you realize you can't look straight in the eyes of every man who penetrates my body with his eyes you know that your false threat will become his real one. To be us in the street is to be where they see me and don't see us, where you are worried that they could see you weren't always you but take comfort in the fact they see you as a child or a sissy and when you go out to buy cigarettes and are asked for your ID you laugh and don't think what they will do if they will see the small print because today you are passing and when you come to me on a very hot day, starting to undress in the stairwell thankful for the freedom of darkness I open my door to your shiny chest and you push it up and twist your mouth to a kiss and ask: How do I look? Like a transvestite? And I hug everything you can be and thank god for another day you arrived to me safe and sound.*

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Patricia Williams, who also passes as white due to her fair skin, inspired this thought. (See Williams 1991)

<sup>ii</sup> Mizrahi and Ashkenazi are categories of ethnicity that serve to classify the Jewish-Israeli population into two distinct groups. The term Mizrahi refers to Jews who immigrated to Israel mainly from Arab and Muslim countries, while the term Ashkenazi refers to Jews who immigrated to Israel from western European countries, as well as English speaking countries in the Americas. Like Black and White, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi are cultural categories that hold class and economic value, as well as both negative and positive symbolic meaning. These categories serve the Israeli-Ashkenazi hegemony in determining the social standing of Ashkenazis and Mizrahis, and in defining the hierarchy and power relations between them. For more about the meanings of Mizrahi particularly for women. (see Dahan-Kalev 2001; Motzafi-Haller 2001; Shohat 1992, 1999, 2003, 2006)

<sup>iii</sup> This approach, prevalent in the feminist discourse of the 1970s, was largely grounded in Kate Millet's ground-breaking conceptualization of sexual politics (1970). Millet's identification of the 'personal' with the 'sexual' stemmed from her premise that the hegemonic discourse on sexuality is essential to the construction of the heteronormativity that preserves patriarchy.

<sup>iv</sup> For more about the construction of the unified model of personal narrative in lesbian-feminism, see Stein 1999. For further critiques of lesbian-feminism as a homogenous politics, see the anthology *Pleasure and danger: exploring female sexuality* (Vance 1984).

<sup>v</sup> See for instance the anthologies: Camilleri & Rose 2002; Gibson & Meem 2002; Harris & Crocker 1997; Munt, 1998; Nestle 1992.

<sup>vi</sup> Earlier influences can be found in feminist and lesbian social and activist groups in Jerusalem that were active during the seventies and early eighties. (See Rachamimov 2015)

<sup>vii</sup> For more about the ways in which American queer ideas and movements shaped Israeli queer thought, activism and community see Gross 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> This conference recently produced an anthology which gathers selected papers from the last decade dealing with central local queer issues (among them my work on Mizrahi lesbians). The introduction of this anthology assisted me in describing the first steps of the consolidation of queer field in the Israeli academia. (See Gross, Ziv & Yosef 2016).

<sup>ix</sup> Between the years 2011-2012 there was another queer conference in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem titled: “Mind the Gap’: The Jerusalem Conference for Activism, Academia and the LGBTQ Community in Israel’.

<sup>x</sup> The use of ‘boifriend’ instead of ‘boyfriend’ aims to create a linguistic difference between a cisgender boyhood and a transgendered one. I chose to use it here to account for my ex’s choice at the time not to identify as a man but as a trans person.

<sup>xi</sup> For an exemplary critique of the ideal of queer fluidity, see Halberstam 1998a. For a further discussion of Martin’s work. (see Halberstam 1998b; Ziv 2015)

<sup>xii</sup> In Hebrew, the slang word for ‘worthwhile’ also means equal and has a similar ring to the word ‘gay’ thereby creating a catchy slogan along the lines of: ‘It’s OK to be Gay’.

<sup>xiii</sup> In Hebrew this, like most, is a gendered sentence in which I used only masculine.

<sup>xiv</sup> For more about the possible connections between intersectionality and queer thought, see (King & Cronin 2010; Muñoz 2010; Rooke 2009; Taylor 2010).

<sup>xv</sup> Other works that offer similar mapping of hybrid identities and multiple oppressions are: Appiah 1994; Jindal 2004; Moraga 2000.

<sup>xvi</sup> For an initial examination of the intersection Mizrahi-lesbian See: Gvion & Luzzatto 2004; Mishali 2012; Motzafi-Haller 2005. For an initial examination of the intersection Mizrahi-queer, see Yosef 2004; Mishali 2014b. This last reference includes some of the personal anecdotes mentioned in this article.

<sup>xvii</sup> Here I refer to the main characters in Feinberg’s novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993).

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