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## **‘The Truth Is...’ –Lesbian Narratives of Gender**

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### **Abstract:**

In recent years, the habitual dualisms of Western thought have come under attack in a number of academic disciplines. This paper adds to these discussions by focusing on the permeable boundaries between ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ in the construction of gendered auto/biographies. The analysis of the stories of a number of gay-identified women, collected for social research purposes, highlights the dynamic relationship between socio-cultural narratives of lives, telling the story of one’s life and living that life. The common theme that runs through these women’s accounts is an awareness of the ‘fictional’ nature of many stories around gender, including their own, while acknowledging the impact these can have on their lived experiences because of the ‘truth effects’ (Malson, 2000, p.156) they create. The stories demonstrate that apparent non-fiction can include a great deal of fiction and can thus be theorised as initial attempts at transcending the logic of simple binary oppositions.

**Keywords:** Narrative; Identity; Auto/biography; Fiction; Non-fiction; Gender



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I thought lesbians *were* fiction.  
(Gingerbeer, anon.)

This whole theory of there is no truth is also just a theory because we all live with truths. We believe in things and because we believe in things they become true to us.  
(Katie)

## Introduction

This paper is based on a study that examines the ways in which a variety of gay-identified women relate to, oppose and/or reconstitute the most current socio-cultural narratives of femininity in the West. How do they construct their own genders in a time of ‘new gender regimes’ (Walby:2002) when there is (supposedly) no more clear ‘other’ (in the form of ‘heterosexual femininity’) to identify themselves against? It is a narrative study that takes the women’s stories and the complex interplay of connections between narrative and identity as its object of investigation. One of the key themes that emerged during the research points to the permeable boundaries between ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ in the construction of gendered auto/biographies.

The main purpose of this paper is to add to current debates in the field of narrative research and contribute to studies which focus on the ‘performative’ (Butler:1990), ‘staged’ (Goffman:1959), ‘discursive’ (Foucault:1985) and ‘storied’ (Plummer:2001) nature of identity in general and gender in particular. One aspect of these discussions is the recognition that long accepted dualisms between ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ in storied constructions of gender identities need to be challenged. In *Gender Trouble*, for instance, Butler’s argument is that ‘gender performativity is both not optional and not natural’ (Chinn, 1997, p.300) but ‘a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the *appearance of a substance*, of a natural sort of being’ (Butler, 1990, p.43). And in *Concepts of the Self*, Anthony Elliott underlines that ‘[a]s directors of our own self-narratives, we draw upon psychic frames of memory and desire, as well as wider cultural and social resources, in fashioning the self’ (2001, p.2). From this it soon becomes clear that presenting or talking about our gendered selves is not unproblematic –while these stories are not simply ‘true’ accounts of our gendered experiences (because they are placed within and influenced by specific cultural contexts), they

are not ‘merely’ fictions’ (Bradbury and Day Sclater; 2000, p.198) either, because they influence our lives in meaningful ways. While recognising this, however, Bradbury et al. argue that ‘we [still] lack a language in which to articulate, if not the limitations of [this] duality, then the means to transcend it’ (p.193).

While the relationship between narrative and identity has been hotly contested in many recent narrative studies in the social sciences (see Andrews et al.:2000; Frosh:1999 for examples) this paper concentrates on the accounts of several women who make sense of their gender identities in relation to current cultural narratives of femininity and lesbianism and the stories they tell about themselves. These accounts highlight the women’s *awareness* of the (partly) ‘fictional’ nature of many ‘stories’ around gender, including their own, while acknowledging the impact these can have on their *lived experiences* because of the ‘truth effects’ (Malson, 2000, p.156) they create. While some of these accounts are about resisting gendered fictions, others make conscious use of some form of creative license to achieve desired ‘truth effects’. On a theoretical level these latter stories or ‘auto/biomythographies’, a term I shall explain later, could be seen as initial attempts at transcending simple dualistic thinking.

For this paper, I have selected a small number of the stories collected for my thesis to highlight some of the most interesting ways in which the women I interviewed narrated their understanding of the porous boundaries between ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ in gendered constructions of the self. First of all, however, I would like to give a brief overview of the very different accounts that have emerged during the research to highlight the complexity of the issue. Rather than aiming for a ‘true’ expression of their gendered selves, some women’s main concern is with (re-)appropriating or finding ways out of existing ‘narrative expectations’. Others use these ‘fictions’ or overemphasise certain aspects of their identities (or ‘nuclear episodes’ of their lives) to create desired ‘truth effects’. The often temporary and relational nature of our gendered selves becomes apparent. As the ‘restorying’ continues, gender has to be understood as always already partly ‘fictional’. Our identities are multi-layered and constructed in interaction with other human agents even as we are often expected, as moral human beings, to present a ‘unitary self’. This self that many receive as our ‘true self’ can never be anything but partial, and hence ‘fictional’. Some of the stories demonstrate how it is possible to create the sense of a ‘unitary, stable self’ that is nonetheless ever changing. Others highlight why and how positive narratives,

even if ‘fictional’, can become the foundation for real-life experiences, while warning against any meta-narratives, however positive, that make it impossible to have alternative stories heard.

### **Gender presentation as ‘truth effect’ –Amy’s story**

Amy is keen to convey a strong sense of self. Even so, unlike many women, she does not see existing gender stereotypes as a threat. On the contrary, she uses these to her advantage.

*I don’t really subscribe to the idea that there is masculine and feminine behaviour. I think these ideas are constructed and all the rest of it [...] I’ve never given much thought to my gender identity. I mean I am a woman, I was a girl, and I don’t challenge that in any way... I think I would probably find being read as a boy or getting funny looks in the ladies’ loos a lot more difficult if I didn’t have a clear idea that I am a woman and that I am a lesbian and that’s for me who I am. I have a strong sense of who I am. So it doesn’t bother me at all. It is not something I take very seriously.*

This is an example of a successful story of self-realisation. Amy’s strong sense of self is not threatened by the way other people read her. While she acknowledges that gender may be problematic for people who do not have a clear idea of who they are, and she is aware of the way Western narratives of gender are constructed, it is not something that is on the forefront of her mind. If anything, being read incorrectly ‘is [as she says] quite entertaining’ to her. If Amy’s story ended here, it would seem that current gender ‘myths’ do not have an impact on her sense of self at all. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that she does not occupy a clear position in the ‘truth/fiction’ dilemma discussed in this chapter:

*I am me, but I know that I am a lesbian and readable as a lesbian and I make a conscious effort to be readable as a lesbian. [...] I mean being read is about being able to tap into certain networks and.... to make friends with people that you know you are gonna get on with, that sort of thing.*

Amy knows how to use the ‘truth effects’ gender stereotypes create to her advantage. Her sense of agency is not lost (see highlights), even as existing lesbian gender narratives affect her lived experiences in a very real way. On the contrary, she uses them as a means to have access to spaces in which it is easier for her to express her sexuality more positively and to ‘be her’ in a

more meaningful way. As she says, she has ‘always made a point throughout [her] life of not exposing [herself] to places or experiences where [her] sexuality would be a negative issue’. Being able to be read as a lesbian and being able to read others as such, even if this visibility relies on stereotypes or so called gender fictions, influences Amy’s sense of self-realisation and her real life (ontological) experiences positively. Mary Evans (2005, p.44) talks in this context about the need to re-conceptualise our stories about our lives ‘in terms of accounts of negotiation, rather than definitive stories’ and that only ‘then, perhaps, clearer understandings of individuals might emerge.’ In other words, our stories and performances of our gender are never created in a vacuum, but in relation to other individuals, whole communities and cultural scripts.

### **Gender as temporary and relational –Jenna’s story**

There are vast amounts of literary and academic texts on mother-daughter relationships and young women’s struggle to find a voice which is independent from their mother’s (Friday:1977; Kincaid:1985; Steedman:1986). In this paper, I would like to add to this literature by focusing on Jenna’s account about her search for agency when she first came out. Her relationship with her own mother and how it affected the way she expressed her gender identity is particularly interesting. Her mother is also gay-identified and raised her in an inner city queer community. Like many young women’s stories, Jenna’s evolves around the need to differentiate herself from her mother. Coming out within a queer community in which gender and sexual politics converge, made this quest for a sense of self even more important.

*The thing is my mum always looked like a dyke. [...] When I first came out... I was very conscious of kind of like getting rid of a lot of like...[...] I guess in my late teens I was very femme. [...] I guess it was some kind of rebellion against where I came from.*

Rather than looking for her ‘true’ gender identity, Jenna’s main concern was to find a way to express her gender in a way that was different to her mother. Living within a queer community allowed her to do so by adopting a femme identity, because unlike many other young gay women I interviewed, she did not need to be visibly gay to be recognised/accepted as such and to gain access to a safe space where she could explore her sexuality. In fact, identifying as

femme helped her to gain access to a world she had thus far felt excluded from –the heteronormative world many of her friends belonged to. As Plummer suggests, '[i]t is not just what one *is*, but the whole panoply of responses from defining self and others who help shape the life cycle and the shifting sense of who one becomes'(p.194). This idea of the self as 'shifting' becomes apparent in Jenna's account. The femme identity she adopted through the coming out process was only *temporary*. In fact, her gender identity has shifted several times over her life course. As she says, she does 'not feel [she] need[s] to hold on to [just] one identity'. Jenna's story thus adds yet another angle to the topic here discussed. It is a good example of the idea that at any given time gender identity is only temporary and hence always already partly fictional. As Kenyon and Randall suggest, 'restorying continually goes on within us' (Plummer, 2001, p.187). It becomes clear that we need to attempt to 'transcend the habitual dualisms of Western thought' (Bradbury and Day Sclater, 2000, p.198) –while we may experience certain expressions of our gender as 'true' at any given moment, these same expressions may soon become unsatisfactory and thus 'fictional' to us. Indeed, depending on her changing needs as an individual to secure a sense of self-realisation (in relation to her mother, the queer community she lives in but also in relation to heteronormativity), Jenna's expressions of gender shift to create 'truth effects' which allow her this kind of agency.

### **The importance of positive stories –Alice's account**

Alice, who has lived a non-heteronormative lifestyle for over 20 years, recognises the need for new stories. While *she* has always resisted living her life according to the very few socio-cultural 'scripts' available to lesbians, she recognises the effects these have had on a lot of gay women's life choices and experiences. For her, therefore, it is important to pass on her own 'counter-stories' about her life.

*I like telling positive stories because things are very challenging for a lot of lesbians and I think that's horrible. The importance of my story is to say it does not have to be like that. We need positive stories. Then other people can see that these myths aren't true anymore.*

By talking about her own, very positive (counter-normative) experiences Alice intends to influence other women's 'imagined possibilities' (Evans, 2005, p.44) and hence potentially affect some of their life choices (their 'truths'). Her story and others like hers will help unravel the mythic nature of many cultural narratives of lesbian lives and make new, more positive collective life-stories possible. In this context, however, it will be important to raise a note of caution. While cultural and personal narratives undeniably contribute to shaping individuals' lived experiences in a myriad of ways, it would be careless to ignore the impact social and material realities can and do have on people's life choices. As Bradbury and Day Sclater (Andrews et al., 2000, p.197) warn, 'telling a good story does not, in fact, make everything ok'. In other words, material realities can get in the way even as positive cultural scripts come into existence.

#### **The problem of 'narrative fictions' and the need for alternative stories –Katie's account**

While positive collective life-stories have been crucial for the emotional and sometimes physical survival of individuals of minority groups, Katie's account highlights the dangers of turning *any* version of lesbian life into a 'meta-truth'. Far from being unproblematic, even positive stories need to remain open to negotiation:

*I had very idealistic ideals about lesbian relationships... there were aspects in my first relationship where, if she had been a man, I would have been more alert to some of the kind of power and control she tried to exert in the relationship. I don't think I would have let a man treat me in the same way.... So I think that it can be very damaging for lesbians in relationships to believe that there aren't gonna be any of these issues. They might not be fixed, they might not be attached to gender, because you're both the same gender, but it still exists anyway, you know...*

Katie's story thus addresses the issue of inequality in same-sex relationships. Only over time did she realise that her ideals regarding her relationship with a woman did not match her own experience thereof. Kate Millett's (1976/2000) *Sita* is a good example of the issues at stake here. In her auto/biography, she focuses on her plight after leaving her husband for a relationship she had idealised. While Millett was trapped by her own politics (Millett, 1968/2000), Katie's idealisation of her relationship with a woman 20 years on is also partly influenced by feminist

writings of the 1970s that called for women-only spaces and romanticised female relationships. Whereas Alice's example above thus highlights the need for new, more empowering accounts to counteract the restrictive effects a multitude of myths around the lesbian identity have (had) on many gay women's lives, Katie's story points to the downside of (meta-)stories around identity politics. Here again a discussion of *Sita*, which is a powerful rendition of jealousy, obsessive, fading love and emotional blackmail, is useful. While reactions to it have ranged from 'so powerful that it hooks the reader from the start' (Briscoe, [n.k.]) to calling it a 'self-pitying drone', what interests me here is that proponents of lesbian identity politics criticised it for expressing a version of lesbian experience which is *not* 'uplifting'. Whereas the 1990s shift away from political definitions of lesbianism has opened up a space for multiple and fluid identities (Soenser Breen, 2002) which allows for a greater variety of both positive and negative accounts of lesbianism, a number of the stories collected for this thesis still echo concerns about how to talk about lesbian relationships/genders without putting 'the lesbian community' (which can be experienced as very real and necessary, but also as fictive and non-existent) on the line. Positive accounts are seen as crucial for both self-acceptance and being acceptable to a wider public. Several of the women I talked to expressed a fear of being seen as deviant. Katie's story, however, is a good example of the effects this fear to publicly address more negative issues around lesbian relationships/genders can have on real-life experiences. As she says, 'we believe in things and because we believe in them they become true to us'. While narratives of lesbian relationships as egalitarian can have a positive effect on the way individual women understand their own relationships, which may influence these relationships and end up making them more egalitarian (the story becomes their truth), Katie's account reminds us of the dangers of any meta-narratives, no matter how positive they may be. They can make us blind to 'real' situations, or worse, make it impossible for us to tell stories of abuse (or have them heard).

### **Identities as complex and multi-layered -Louisa's story**

Louisa describes herself as 'a sort of half Muslim, half Christian of a working class origin, Black' gay woman. As her account unfolds, it becomes clear that the way she expresses her gender and her sexuality gives her the opportunity to counter hegemonic accounts of the Muslim



woman, the Black woman, the gay woman and Western femininity more generally. On a lot of levels, hers is the most obvious account of a clear recognition of the complex interplay of various race, gender, class and religious positions in understandings of the self. What is most interesting about her story in this context is that in order to make other people understand the full complexity of her gender, she feels she has to overemphasise certain aspects of her identity to create a ‘truth effect’ which most closely resembles how she identifies:

*My dad’s Muslim and my mum’s Christian. My dad’s never had much influence on my life, neither has Islam. Still... any time people ask me I always say I am Muslim as well, because I am... although I am not religious at all. But I think Islam obviously has these negative connotations at the moment. So in a sense I always say it because people don’t expect it. I can’t be because I’m gay and am in drag from time to time and don’t wear a headscarf. And I’m like ‘why can’t I be Muslim? Because I eat bacon sandwiches or what?’ ...When I was born I was taken to a Mosque as opposed to a Church.[...] To me to be able to stand up and say I’m from African and Caribbean descent and I’m gay is important.*

It becomes obvious that Louisa is anxious to convey a sense of the complexity of her identity. She is fighting stereotypes on several levels. In that sense, hers is a story of reclaiming agency. It is possible for her to reconcile different aspects of her identity which most current narratives of race, gender, religion and sexuality would not allow her to. She is thus very clear about the fictitious nature of these narratives. Interestingly, in order to resist these and to tell a new, more accurate story (or to construct a gendered self that feels more ‘real’ to her), she uses some creative license in her account. She is very aware of what is expected of Muslim women, and although she is not religious, it is important to her to fight the ‘myths’ about Muslim femininity. Her way of doing so is by announcing she is half Muslim when it is least expected –in queer contexts, where she often presents herself in drag. Although this is important to her on a political level, to fight the ‘negative connotations’ Islam is currently faced with, it is also important to her on a more personal, emotional level. It is ‘establishing a marker, saying that [she is] from mixed parentage and that [she] can be a bit of everything’, something society often does not allow individuals like her to be. Indeed, Sylvia Plath’s protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, Esther, is a good example of someone who fails under this pressure. Unlike Louisa, Esther is at the conclusion of *The Bell Jar* ‘a person who has agreed to play a social role’ (Evans, 2005, p.3), to live within the constraints of the gendered ‘fictions’ available to her.

Audre Lorde's auto/biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is one of the most powerful literary examples of accounts which demonstrate the 'tension between telling a story faithful to one's own experience, and writing against the mythic structures or foundational 'truths' of dominant social groups' (Soenser Breen, 2002). As the term 'auto/biomythography' suggests, (having to) draw(ing) a clear line between fiction and non-fiction in accounts of the self can be damaging to that self. This becomes especially important if that self is placed in a political and socio-cultural climate which has specific expectations of certain identities. By allowing her Muslim identity to take prevalence, even though she admits that Islam has never much influenced her, Louisa modifies an aspect of her identity to benefit both her own subjectivity, and that of others in a similar situation. She resists dominant cultural narratives of race, gender and religion with an autobiographical account that 'transforms a personal issue into a public one' (Riessman, 2000, [n.p.]). As Portelli suggests, '[w]e may even know that some statements are factually wrong: and yet "such 'wrong' statements [may] still [be] psychologically 'true' and... this truth may be equally important as factually reliable accounts"' (Plummer, pp.238-239).

As we have just seen, Louisa is not afraid to tell stories against the grain, (even if they are factually not entirely accurate) not only to convey a better sense of the complexity of her own identity, but also to contribute to 'imagined possibilities' around Muslim femininity and gender more generally. At the same time, however, she acknowledges that from time to time it is 'easier to just fall into the categories' people want you to fall into rather than 'trying to deal with the politics of how to fit in'. While she is thus highly aware of the contradictory ways in which her 'multiple selves' are stereotyped and consciously tries to convey a sense of the heterogeneous nature of her gendered identity, she is first and foremost looking for a good life. When asked whether it is ever important to her to fit in she says:

*I think that I like to be on the inside but with the ability to step outside, just because it's what I'm interested in. [...] I don't necessarily want to be in a category that's different from the rest of society. [...] I argue a lot with people about a lot of things to do with gender and sexuality [but] I like my life to be easy. I have different groups of people that I hang out with and I will adapt my ways of thinking to deal with each set of people that I'm with. [...] I will change how I am depending on who I'm with just because it's*

*easier. [...] It is quite easy to adapt. Because you have to. [...] It's always like my mindset will change [...] it changes into probably 4 or 5 different cycles of different levels about what sort of gender you'd fit into.*

Doing a degree in sociology and hanging around a London queer scene has helped Louisa develop her interest in and understanding of gender as constructed. Despite her fascination with the performative nature of gender, however, she does not want to be different by all means. While her desire to assert her Muslim heritage is important to her on a more publicly moral level (given the current images of Islam and Muslim femininity) as well as on a personal level (to stress the complexity of her identity), she prefers not to be permanently confrontational when it comes to issues around gender and sexuality. Given the many layers of her identity, however, asserting her 'sameness' only becomes possible by tapping into various social networks that allow her to explore each one of her 'many selves' separately. While these are analysed in more detail elsewhere (Jung, 2006), what is important here is that Louisa's story is a great example of the idea that our identities are multi-layered and constructed in interaction with other human agents, even though we are often expected as moral human beings to present our identity as a 'unitary self'. That these 'coherent selves' can never be anything but fictional seems to become clear here. Interestingly, however, being able to present a holistic sense of ourselves is still often key to be seen as believable as a person. Louisa has learnt to adapt 'just because it's easier' as she says. Even so, she never loses her agency. On the contrary, she seems to move with relative ease between these various situated contexts. Within each, she consciously taps into aspects of her identity that are expected and acceptable to avoid unnecessary confrontation. While all of them may be more or less 'true' expressions of her gender identity, they are always just partial and therefore inaccurate. Stories like Louisa's will hopefully help engender 'knowledge that disrupts old certainties and allows us to glimpse something of the complexities of human lives, selves and endeavours' (Andrews, Day Selater, squire and Tamboukou, 2003, [n.k]). Her account should make us aware of the multitude of ways in which we foreground as well as hide aspects of our identities for self-protection.

### **The ‘unitary self’ –Rebecca’s story**

For Rebecca too, issues of self-presentation are tied in with issues of self-protection and hence on the forefront of her mind. She is familiar with existing popular narratives around lesbian genders and the ‘truth effects’ various ways of self-presentation can therefore create. While she is keen to experiment with various sartorial styles, it is important to her that the way she finally presents herself remains stable:

*It’s really weird, you know. But depending on the length of my hair I feel like I have to hold myself and dress very differently. When I have long hair, I like my surfer gear and my whole attitude is a bit boyish. As soon as my hair is short, and I mean really short, I feel like I have to girl it up a bit, otherwise I feel uncomfortable. I guess I am aware of what these different looks express to others. I don’t want to look too dykey nor too feminine.*

The different ways in which lesbian genders have been typecast and hence generally understood influence Rebecca’s choices of self-presentation. She is very aware that far from being neutral, her gender is constructed in interactions with others. She does not want to be seen as ‘too dykey nor too feminine’. We get a sense that it is important to her to express her gender in a way that does not comply with current stereotypes of femininity and of lesbianism, possibly because she feels that they do not fully express who she is. At the same time she likes to experiment with different styles. In order to be continuously read in a particular way, then, she consciously changes her behaviour to match her changing styles in a manner that does not influence the way other people relate to her. Rebecca’s account demonstrates the very subtle but complex ways in which it is possible to create the sense of a unitary, stable self, which is nonetheless ever changing.

### **Afterthought**

The stories discussed in this paper demonstrate that as individuals, we engage with gender in a multitude of ways and that apparent non-fiction can include a great deal of fiction. As Stanley points out, ‘telling apart fiction, biography and autobiography is no easy matter’ (1992, p.125).

Gay-identified women in particular, often have a heightened awareness of the artificiality of gender categories because they have long been positioned as ‘other’ in this model. This means that gender becomes a highly reflexive project for these women. While Katie’s concern with narratives that portray lesbian relationships as necessarily egalitarian shows how important it is to oppose meta-narratives (meta-fictions), as they can have a negative impact on women’s lives, many stories here discussed show that it is possible to engage with gendered fictions creatively, as long as they are recognised as such and ever changing. This uneasy distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ does therefore not necessarily have to be problematic. On the contrary, telling our lives through ‘auto/biomythographies’ can lead to changing attitudes about (lesbian) genders and help individuals live a good life.

As already indicated, it is important to point out that political and material conditions can have a great impact on the success of narratives that aim to ‘meaningfully transform lives, selves and cultures’ (Bradbury et al., p.197). Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of work that looks for aspects of our identities that lie beyond the stories we tell about ourselves (i.e. Craib:2000; Frosh:1999). The main aim of this paper, however, is to demonstrate that cultural and personal stories can, and in these women’s case do, have an impact on how we define ourselves and how we relate to others. Even if we understand the stories we tell about ourselves as ‘fictions’, the accounts above demonstrate that these ‘fictions’ influence our lived experiences in very real ways. That stories are not all ‘equally valid or invalid, truthful or deceptive’ should not deter us from ‘evaluating just what it is that is being constructed’ (Plummer, p.238) and how this determines who we become.

Finally, conceptualising these women’s stories as their ‘preferred identities’ (Riessman, 2000) opens up a space for debate about the researcher’s own position as storyteller. While my access to their lives is limited to the stories they tell me about this life, my research aims will also shape the way I use these women’s stories to tell my own. There is always necessarily a ‘performative element’ to telling a story. Rather than revealing these stories as inauthentic, however, this ‘performative element’ highlights that they are ‘situated, constantly re-negotiated and accomplished in social interaction’ (Riessman, 2000, p.6). Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology reminds us of this as early as the 1950s. As long as the research process is not obscured, conceptualising the researcher as storyteller seems to be useful.

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