

## Reading as Act of Queer Love: The Role of Intimacy in the “Readerly” Contract

By Lee Ronald<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The following paper has been revised from my 2001 MA thesis, which asked ‘Is it possible to define a strategy for reading queer?’ This includes an investigation of how the traditionally stable categories of reader/text/author may be redefined by queer strategies that instead force instability and flux. In the three years that have elapsed since first conceiving of this piece, I argue that the potential of queer reading is still one that has not been adequately explored. As I acknowledge, ‘whilst the queer does flag the fluctuating nature of sexual identity... it may also be used to unpack broader patterns of knowledge’ including those that give structure and meaning to our readerly imaginations.

This paper concentrates especially on the ability of the queer to skew our hegemonic definitions of intimacy, moving from the dualistic self/other into the additive space conjured by queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick and foregrounded by earlier feminist positions, such as the ‘placental economy’ of Rouch and Irigaray. Broadly speaking, what do such revised notions of intimacy do to the concept of ‘reading’ and how do they reconfigure the relationship ‘between things’ that reading involves? Key to my argument is the acknowledgement that ‘reading queer’ involves a radical rethinking of our ability to relate, and here I spend some time imagining what this revision may involve when figured through the lens of a queer liaison. It concludes by suggesting further starting points for investigation such as the positions of Lyotard and Butler, as well as indicating the queer readerly provocation which I suggest is apparent in Doane’s ‘lesbian post modern’.

*Key Words:* queer theory, reading, intimacy

### One

...what seems least settled is any predetermined idea about what makes the queerness of a queer reading... The model of such reading is hardly the state of complacent adequacy that Jonathan Culler calls ‘literary competence’ but a much more speculative, superstitious, and methodologically adventurous state where recognitions, pleasures and discoveries seep in only from the most stretched and ragged edges of one’s competence. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Novel Gazing*, p.2/3

The following is fundamentally an investigation of possibilities; those inherent in identity and reading at a particular post-modern moment. It echoes the sentiments of Susan Suleiman regarding ‘hermeneutic reading’ existing as “a kind of criticism whose chief focus of inquiry is the nature and possibilities of reading and interpretation” (Suleiman 1980, p.38). It develops this by articulating the nature of the possibilities that surface obliquely for us now, ideas that are lying in potentia, gnawing at the edges of what has been cast as legitimate experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Ronald was born in 1965 in London. She gained a first class degree in English Studies and the History of Art at Oxford Brookes University in 2000, followed by an MA in Gender Studies from the University of Leeds. She is currently engaged in researching a PhD thesis at the Centre for Women’s Studies, University of York. Her research is focused on sensuality and she is planning to organise a conference on the realm of the sensual for late 2004.

Reading is a complex activity contingent upon many factors, something that has the potential to be analysed in many ways: as activity or process, as interpretation or understanding (my reading of this is .....), as something shaping experience (for example, the gynocriticism of second wave feminism), as a universalised, readerly abstraction, (the universal male) or as that which echoes the interior experience of the person reading the text (reading as process of identification). As has been argued:

There is ... still no general agreement on what is meant by reading and literacy... The basic debate has been between those who hold that reading means essentially the 'mechanics' of reading, that is, the ability to decode written words into spoken words; and those who maintain that reading essentially involves understanding (Stubbs 1980, p.4-5).

Jeremy Hawthorn, (1987) in *Unlocking the Text*, asserts an even wider application of the term including a focus on experiences within reading such as 'response', 'explication', 'scholarship', 'interpretation', 'analysis', 'appreciation' and 'discussion' (Hawthorn 1987, p.28). Such a diverse focus has been essential in understanding how wide a terrain the term 'reading' covers, and in subsequently assessing its relevance in forming and maintaining ideological control. By that, I mean in understanding and acknowledging the role played by reading beyond the text, informing the process of identity construction. Awareness of the diversity of reading has also been useful in marking our conceptual thinking, each issue provoking us to further expand the powerful notion of what constitutes not just 'reading' but increasingly, what constitutes a 'reader'. My interests lie in considering how the queer, something fluid and mobile, (re)informs the relationship existing between reader and text. I argue that the conventional understanding of the tension between reader and text is based upon a particular definition of subject/object, and thus already primed expectations as to what a relationship between may mean/become. In rethinking the way this exchange may operate in terms of a queer encounter, I propose that such investigation should award us with newly imagined spaces for considering not just reading but also difference.

A focus in my study will be provided by Tracy Chevalier's (1999) text *Girl With A Pearl Earring*, the factionalised tale of Griet, maid to the enigmatic seventeenth century Dutch painter, Jan Vermeer. Ostensibly most easily conforming to a feminist reading that emphasises the pathos and ostracism of Griet's situation, one shaped by issues of gender and class, I have chosen to develop it into a space within which also to explore queer reading possibilities. Using Chevalier's text creatively to experiment with the possibilities for queering a text, I hope to confront some of the queer ways of relating to and within the text whilst also using it to understand my own (problematic) position as queer reader.

Throughout, I intend my argument to reflect my interest in not merely the content of reader oriented and identity debates, but in the structures through which such debate is formed and defined. For example, when I began this work, I was aware that some reader-oriented theorists stressed the importance of the imagination in a reader/text encounter, for example the critic Denis Donoghue (1998, p.15-17). However, I cannot but argue that such approaches posit difficulties in that whilst advancing reading as pleasurable, leading to liberation and freedom, reading (and the liberation and freedom it helps construct) can only exist within already operating bodies of knowledge. Criticism that heavy-handedly stresses the positive force of the imagination in the reading encounter seems unable to accept that "the imagination" does not spring fully formed from some inherent, unsullied state of grace but is directed and shaped by cultural and societal forces. For example, aesthetic readings of the imagination are surely shaped

by the culturally and historical expectations for what we may be and therefore what we may transcend. In order to imagine ourselves as other through the interface of a text we are dependent upon constructs and limits that define what other is. We do not enter the reader/text encounter unencumbered by ideology. Therefore, it is crucial not merely to gauge content or the technicalities of language and its effect, but also attend to the structures that give such effects their import. This may be especially pertinent in terms of queering texts for as Sedgwick (1997) engagingly argues “interestingly, it’s also the repeated turn away from the deontological project of ‘ought’ that seems to characterise the unmistakable, though often tacit, ethical gravity and specificity of this [queer] work” (Sedgwick 1997, p.2.). That is, the way queer reading strategies appear to swerve away from “existing accounts of how “one” *should* read, and how one *does*... how people *should feel*, to the much harder ones of how they do and of how feelings change” (Sedgwick 1997, p.2). Implicit in such analysis is the idea that we are coerced to read and process information in a particular way that serves dominant ideologies and that queer strategies for reading instead open us up to new frameworks for understanding those ideologies.

Certainly, it is the challenge that the queer offers to the structural status quo that provokes my current thinking about reading, replicating Weinberg’s (1996) assertion that the charge of queer theory is increasingly to investigate the mechanisms by which a society claims to know gender and sexuality (Weinberg 1996). It has also been proposed that the “queer dislodges essentialist understandings of sexuality that propose a unified model of subjectivity based on biology. More than this, queer implies a sexuality or sexualities that confuse the old distinctions, male/female, gay/lesbian, and even gay/straight” (Belsey and Moore 1997, p.12). Developing this statement, the theoretical terrain for an unfolding of the queer is one that may potentially dislocate our current understandings of social and ideological mores as well as those overtly implicated in the ‘sexual’, given that all systems are interdependent. Given the subtle possibilities offered by the term ‘queer’, I assert that how we practically apply it is vital. It is not enough to see the queer as merely a euphemism for lesbian and gay studies or as a vehicle for simplistically hunting down homosexual episodes in a text, overt or otherwise. Queer theory, as I understand it, is not only about the birth of a manifold sex/gender system but rather is informed by an elegant revisioning of outmoded epistemological frameworks. Therefore, whilst the queer does flag the fluctuating nature of sexual identity as its defining *leit motif*, it may also be used to unpack broader based patterns of knowledge, including those that inform our reading life. As Rosemary Hennessy (2000) has so cogently expressed, ‘I would argue for a re-narration of queer critique as inquiry into the systems of exploitation and regimes of state and cultural power through which sexualities are produced’ (Hennessy 2000, p.113).

In answering the key question *Is it possible to define a strategy for reading queer?* we may also ask why we should want to. What knowledge is to be gained in adopting a queer methodology for the process of reading? I hope to suggest that reconceptualising the interaction between reader and text is likely to involve us in a realignment of the possibilities of self/other that stretch beyond the text. At the same time, through seeing and understanding aslant or queerly, it may actually become possible to *undermine* the current frameworks that order our thinking. However, this is certainly no simple process, for given the nature of the queer, strategies/identifications/readings produced by/in this space cannot exist, or be assessed, in the same way as in the non-queer realm. The arena that produces possibilities and expectations, that order our assumptions for (what) playfulness (is), for (what) creativity (is) become changed.

I believe that whilst we may be offered a variety of queer starting positions, the activity of ‘queering’ is particularly productive; that is, ‘queering’ the encounter between reader and text. Using theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Emma Wilson to re-imagine what relationships have the potential to become I hope to reconceptualise the potential inherent

in queer strategies for imagining self/other, reader/text and thus the practice of being and reading itself.

## Two

We must reinvent love.

(Maud Mannoni, *La Language de la Hainamour*, p.25)

Although it may be useful to debate the notion of a queer reader and the problems inherent in this identification, I wish to instead to concentrate upon the possibility of using ‘queering’ itself as an active strategy for rethinking and reordering readerly possibility; here, it becomes an activity that allows us to rethink binary frames of reference. I propose that this strategy manifests mainly through the reader/text encounter where re-imagining this encounter is one method of moving beyond an oppositional either/or stance. Through the activity of ‘queering’, the reader/text encounter could be reinvented, made strange and its conventional framework undermined. By this I mean by concentrating upon reconfiguration of the oppositional stance, reader/text, re-imagining it as a different sort of relationship, one less competitive and tense, instead more inclusive and mutual. Here, a queer charge may also be detected in an awareness of how confidently we label what an *encounter between* may involve. Such a concentration upon the relationship (or rather the relationship potential) of reader/text, and its openness to being ‘queered’ also operates to foreground the nature of desire in all textual liaisons. Simultaneously, rethinking relationships “between” may also lead us to emphasise the position and possibility of the “other”. Perhaps it is this queer approach that may most effectively be mined for a new readerly discourse regarding difference?

It is apparent that ‘reading queer’ is a strategy dependent upon rethinking our ability to enter into a *different sort of readerly contract*. The queer reader in conventional terms simply cannot exist; instead we need to replace the traditional, foundationalist reader and text with a different vision of what a reader may be/come, offer and what a text may be/come offer. An adequate queer reading may be constructed from a hybridisation of such revised approaches. However, my interest lies in developing the strategy of ‘queering’ and the way it reconfigures the crucial *liaison* between reader and text. For example, queerly revisioning the boundaries that make reader/text a special relationship may be useful to consider. The French Studies theorist Judith Still (2001) engagingly talks of the reader existing in a romantic liaison with the text, envisioning this in the term ‘poetic nuptials’: she further defines this position as a redetermination or widening of spaces that determine giving/sharing and conversely determine constriction (Still 2001).

Certainly, I am compelled to consider not the reader or the text operating as the pivotal interface in reading, but the queerness of the *encounter between* reader/text. Indeed, Tony Bennett (1987) labels the encounter between reader and text as the ‘reading formation’, adventurously citing it as a “reciprocal process by which readers and texts are mutually produced and mutually productive... (restoring) a dialectical agency to the reading process” (Dimock 1991, p.639). In accessing and assessing the enigmatic structure of reading and the queer readerly space created by the liaison between reader and text, I suggest it may be useful to consider it in terms of permeable boundaries and borders. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) talks of borderlands that are psychological, sexual and spiritual, and of the borderland itself as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 1987, p.3). Although she does not explicitly engage with the borderlands that exist in the traditional encounter between the reader and the text, I suggest that her ideas may be creatively

applied to understand the possibilities existent in creating new readerly relationships. In her plea for flexibility she suggests we switch from:

habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterised by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes (Anzaldua 1987, p.79).

I have already posited 'queer reading' as something that may be able not just to help us rethink the reader/text but also rethink binaries such as self/object. Similarly, Anzaldua cites her overtly queer aim as breaking down the subject-object duality that keeps us a prisoner (Anzaldua 1987, p.80). Dissolving this reductive binary, keeping from duplicating territory/identity labels and instead maintaining the encounter between reader and text in a state of flux is surely the aim for all strategies of queer reading.

It may be argued that the central pivot in terms of reading belongs to the unconscious and that we are never fully in control of what we read and how we interpret what we read. Indeed, (and here, I am in agreement with a Butlerian concept of performative reading) I do not believe we may take up a position at will, but surely a rearrangement of the borders that define the relational stance between reader and text may influence the performances we feel coerced to give? In this model we are not doomed to repeat the same acts indefinitely but are allowed leverage to access new patterns of behaviour. Certainly, Anzaldua's vision may widen our scope for imagining the queer import of reader/text if we accept the malleability of the parameters that have previously governed this interaction. That is, acknowledging that the reader/text encounter is one which has been constructed within a specific framework for categorising and stabilising 'reality'. Surely, a productive queer reading must be the one that questions all stable definitions of reading (including a determined reader/text encounter) as well as the identity of the reader and/or text?

The complex act of repositioning ourselves within a queer reading encounter may be furthered by the queer relational theories articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Her autobiographical text *A Dialogue on Love* deals with her own queerly formulated relationships both with self and others. Here, her main focus is on an additive form of thinking, likened to the logic that something/someone can be *both* one thing and another rather than being *either* one thing or another (Sedgwick 1999, p.109 and p.125). We may use this activity of cutting across oppositional categories to play with the idea that the text and reader do not need to inhabit binary poles but may instead be positioned in an understanding, existing within a liaison that queerly interacts, weaves between and within each other in the reading encounter, meshing, merging and creating new spaces for understanding the parameters of self/other. Thus we may eventually move beyond the notion of a reader/text 'borderland' to a space whose parameters are pulsing and morphic. Sarah Cooper (2000) writes provocatively of the method of 'reading with' as a queer reading strategy and one I perceive as particularly enabling if we are to imagine new ways of determining textual relationships (Cooper 2000, p.74). She also makes a plea for a different sort of readerly connection, arguing "to the extent that queer theory forms queer readers, this influence, as it is written into one's identity and stance, means that one is always reading with an other (rather than as or like an other)" (2000, p.74). But as well as reading *with* (as advanced by Cooper), we may also be able to read *across*, that is, across categories of difference. For example, by taking up particular non-oppositional stances, for example, "with, within, across, beside", we would automatically be destabilising conventional categories of relational difference, whilst also queerly agitating our own preferred sexual or gender identity.

My suggestion is that revisioning reader/text intimacy is an important queer strategy in that it provocatively troubles our traditional framework for thinking. This includes thinking about sexuality, gender, identity, self/other and about difference. However, the very plurality of the queer is demanding for it requests that we think not only about the way readerly space is constructed in terms of sexuality and gender, but also about how this coercively limits, regulates and produces societal boundaries. A readerly example of this, for example, being the way textual silences conspire to colonise marginal viewpoints.

At this point, I wish to further queer the reader/text encounter through the framework of 'love', a timely focus that was visited by Luce Irigaray in *I Love To You* (1996). Echoing ideas about reading as posited by Brooks (1993), Radway (1984) and Cooper (2000), I suggest that the reader/text encounter, and the space produced in this liaison, emerges primarily from, and within, restrictions of desire. Following on from such ideas, I argue that it may be particularly fruitful and interesting to use nascent queer theorisation about intimacy and intimate liaison to provoke us into further stretching/re-imagining and rethinking boundaries that coerce us to particular forms of readerly desire and love. Consequently, a focus upon the boundaries that limit and formulate practices of intimacy and a recognition of the textual contribution in creating a framework within which we love, and how we act out love, is central to such restructuring. This returns us to Sedgwick's (1997) assumption that queer reading is that which departs from 'shoulds' and 'oughts' into a wider field for articulating our experience of feeling and relating. Whilst I am concentrating upon the intensity of love as producing a specific, destabilising effect, I acknowledge the ability of other forms of liaison and desire in producing a queer readerly response. Indeed, in a remarkable and elegant essay that comments upon the effect of textural codes in creating a queer readerly space, Renu Bora (1997) cleverly quotes Elizabeth Freeman, who provocatively states that "For me, having a 'crush' is about texture, like crushed velvet or crushed foil. My surface gets all uneven, my underneath shows through, things shine up suddenly. It's like 'being' crushed material, but also like wearing it, alternately slithery and itchy" (Bora 1997, p.94). An acknowledgement of the actual suppleness of desiring boundaries, boundaries that we have been inveigled into believing are static and set, is of course paramount to all re-narration of queer thrills. For example, romantic liaisons are fundamentally conceived of in terms of a tension 'between two' and simplistically the reader/text relationship may also be exposed as a dualistic encounter. However, by relying upon the queer theorisation that expands our notion of self and other, for example in Sedgwick's (1999) identificational terms, we may encounter a more subtle and amorphous space where 'between' may expand across readers and across texts. In this example, the readerly encounter exists not merely as the space where reader (singular) and text (singular) converse. Rather, a queer strategy of reading would instead be reliant upon, and celebratory of, the shifting ingredients (historical, cultural et al) that determine both reader and text as multifaceted, intertextual and plural.

For this piece, I will use the term *love* to describe an intensity of emotion enjoyed by what we understand as 'the heart' and most accessible to Westerners through the relationship between what/who we perceive as self and what/who we perceive as other. When discussing structures that limit our seeing and perceiving of what love may be, of the boundaries that govern the potential of love, it is crucial to acknowledge that such boundaries exist in an unnatural state, reliant upon us perceiving "reality, society and self" in a particularly reduced and ego-dependent way. To illuminate this – love as constriction, love occurring within a finite set of parameters - it may be useful to acknowledge the non-Western viewpoint where what is stressed is the *boundlessness* of love and the infinite capacity of the mind and heart which are one.

My own understanding of Tracey Chevalier's novel *Girl With A Pearl Earring* is, to some extent, dependent upon my acceptance of those limits that confine me to acting out a

particular reader/text engagement. I am formally coerced by means of constitutive silences and narrative insistence, by the subtle rendition of gender and its relationship to (hetero)sexuality, to a readerly performance that will situate itself neatly and harmoniously within the framework offered. On first reading, *Girl With A Pearl Earring* is not a radical book, but perhaps in subsequent reading encounters, that is precisely the reason for its usefulness and profundity. That is, it is able to lay bare the hegemonic patterns of our reading behaviour, provoking us to a new and queer understanding of the reading encounter itself. This may be especially true in understanding the way our reading of gender and sexuality is shaped by that encounter, how our readerly desires and expectations are met or undermined by the signification of the text. But, what of love in the encounter between Griet and myself, between the textual artefact labelled *Girl With A Pearl Earring* and my own identity as something similarly (culturally and historically) constituted? Prosaically, what's love got to do with it?

In Luce Irigaray's (1990) analysis of gender differentiation, *Je, Tu, Nous* the author draws upon the work of biologist Helene Rouch in advancing a theory dependent upon the singularity that exists between mother and child *in utero* (Irigaray 1987, p.37-44). Here, Irigaray explores the idea of a fusion between one and another (or rather one and one) operating not in terms of competition or colonisation, but in terms of something "strangely organised and respectful of the life of both" (Irigaray, 1987, p.38). This relationship between mother and child, mediated by the placenta, is presented, by Irigaray, in terms of 'the placental economy' and is a clever and intriguing way of accessing loving relationships in terms far removed from any combative, oppositional Symbolic. Instead, we are given the opportunity to think differently about what the relationship 'between' may be, witnessing a form of love that cannot be understood parasitically, but is instead presented in balance, in harmony without recourse to differential combat. I have already suggested that the reader/text exchange is often presented as something competitive, oppositional and thus oppressive. Indeed, whilst J. Hillis Miller's (1977) essay *The Critic as Host* may force some "brilliant and labyrinthine" investigations into critical reading habits, (Lodge and Wood 2000, p.254), it also offers a formulation of reading that is dependent upon the actual imagery of parasitism (Hillis Miller 1977, p.255-262). Further, I argue that an understanding of reading or readerliness as a 'dual to the death' that results in Barthes (2000) "death of the author" (Barthes 2000, p.146-152) or in some colonisation of the text, may only be possible through the use of a framework for thinking that is uselessly violent and thus ultimately unproductive.

Interestingly, given my interest in rethinking the reading encounter in terms of queer desire, Rouch (in dialogue with Irigaray) goes on to defend her thesis against the traditional Western framework of Freudian psychoanalysis. She argues that "it justifies the imaginary fusion between a child and its mother by the undeveloped state of the child at birth and by its absolute need of the other, its mother" (Irigaray 1987, p.42). She develops this thinking by reiterating the common view that this fusion simply has to be broken in order to render the child as a subject; that is entering into subjectivity through the Symbolic, and a subsequent engagement with language. Her argument leads us to rethink psychoanalytical understanding of the subject and of desire by causing us to be aware of the parameters by which both are judged. This is precisely what I suggest must also be done in terms of the reader/text encounter and the way our understanding of the reading relationship is formed. Instead, Irigaray and Rouch encourage us to think about a notion of self and other that exists before language and "does not necessarily accord with those forms our cultural imaginary relays: loss of paradise, traumatising expulsion or exclusion" (Irigaray, 1987, p.42). Her emphasis is on re-imagining possibilities for what we may become, something I wish to develop by newly conceiving possibilities for what we may read/experience in terms of readerly intimacy. Julia Kristeva (1987) also attempts to

understand the way 'love' manifests itself in Freudian psychoanalysis, in her essay *Freud and Love: Treatment and Its Discontents* (Kristeva 1987, p.21-56). I suggest that a consideration of psychoanalytical terms such as "idealisation, desire and narcissism" are relevant in repositioning the queer borderland that exists in the text/reader encounter. Such reconsideration is likely to cause us to access the text differently, to understand our motivations and longings aslant. Of course, the most important (and radical) issue here is using a view such as Irigaray's 'placental economy' to reorder our expectations for the possibilities that may exist in a dialogic relationship when our sense of desiring self is re-imagined. However, it may also be used to answer earlier questions concerning the relationship of the queer (reader) to language and to consider the ethical implications of reading.

I am not suggesting we use the model of Irigaray/Rouch as a template where the text or readerly encounter will become the mediating placenta, but rather that we use such ideas to provoke strange and clever queer strategies for reimagining readerly engagement. If our challenge was to rethink the reading encounter in terms of liaison, then using a theory that queerly reconfigures that encounter through the desire of our first love-bond, our first romance (and one before our acquisition of language in the fatherly Symbolic) seems pertinent.

In talking to heterosexual friends who have also read *Girl With A Pearl Earring* I am struck by how emphatically they read it as onlookers witnessing a love story. Their wish was for Griet to capture Vermeer; in terms of 'relationship', the relationship was the one existing between Vermeer and Griet. I would suggest that given the overt positioning cues in the text, for example, the way Vermeer is constantly alluded to, is enigmatised as 'him' in an attempt to coerce the viewer into viewing the artist as a mystery to be solved, inducing at least a wistfulness and more a longing, that is the way that Chevalier wants the text to be read; that is from a position of heterosexuality and conventional gender identification. However, a queerly imagined perspective may instead read outside the categories of gender to produce a reading that is more concerned about reading 'with' Griet, understanding her longing, refusing judgement and acknowledging the way readerly positions are formed. However, admittedly, in my battle with lesbian and queer readerly positions I wanted Griet to escape, to escape from Vermeer and from Pieter. In terms of 'relationship' for me the love affair was not between Vermeer and Griet but between Griet and myself. This is not to place sole emphasis upon the reader in creating readerly space but to acknowledge the importance of relationship and intimacy in reimagining the reader/text encounter as something different to that which we have been coerced into believing. Although my lesbian stance could be construed as operating *against* a queer reading, I suggest it could in fact be used to acknowledge the panoply of reading relationships *in potentia*, awakening us to possibilities of other divergent and queer responses. In terms of the relationship between a lesbian position and a queer position, I am also suggesting that far from acting out an encounter based on hostility, they may actually be able to productively inform the other. Indeed, Doan (1994) writes winningly for the emergence of the "lesbian post-modern" in her book of the same name, promoting this position as something funded by insights both lesbian and queer. Despite admitting that 'there is no innocent way to wear the category' of lesbian, Robyn Wiegman also posits it as a "seductive, subjectively necessary... disturbingly territorial and regulatory regime" (Wiegman 1994, p.16). Echoing my own ideas about the fluidity and evolution of queer practices of reading, she then comments that "the lesbian post-modern marks a different type of encounter... it seems to me that the lesbian post-modern slips and shifts Monique Wittig's decidedly modernist proclamation: not just that the lesbian is 'not a woman' but the lesbian is not – cannot continue to be 'the lesbian' either" (Wiegman 1994, p.16). This is the sort of subtle lesbianism I am envisaging in any engagement between queer and lesbian forms of reading practices. I consequently believe that both strategies of thinking may offer methods of further

understanding self and other, society and text, relationships between and the possibilities for love and intimacy.

### Three

the call for new orientations, new objectives and especially new vocabularies is still admittedly a seductive one  
(Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, p.7)

Wolfgang Iser (1980) has commented on the difficulty of describing the space opened up by the activity of reading by asserting that “the two partners in the communication process, namely, the text and the reader, are far easier to analyse than is the event that takes place between them” (Iser 1980, p.107). The difficulty of this task cannot be overestimated. However, it seems that the event between the two, the exchange, does have to be broached in order to reach further understandings of queer strategies of reading. That is, by foregrounding the dynamism and flux of the reading encounter, be it through an understanding of reading as ‘performative’ or through a desire to ‘queer’ the encounter between reader and text, we seem most ably equipped to undertake a queer readerly (r)evolution. This is of course not to offer such possibilities as the only queer options. It has to be stressed that whilst there exist queer strategies for re-imagining readerly limits/exchanges, queer readings themselves can be only momentarily glimpsed. They are not (meant) to be fixed. As an example, the collection of essays assembled in Sedgwick’s (1997) anthology of queer readings in fiction, *Novel Gazing*, are legitimately ‘queer’ yet overwhelmingly exist as accounts of dissident sexuality within texts. They do not examine any queer recasting of the relationship between reader/text but are still able to function as examples of ‘queer readings’.

My overarching question for this piece has been *Is it possible to define a strategy for reading queer?* with my own predilection being for the activity of ‘queering’. Here, the covertly pliable encounter between reader and text offers a stimulating and creative space in which queer activity make take amorphous shape, assume some transitive form. I advance the idea that reading queer brings something new to the process of reading by provoking us to reconsider the factor of identity inherent in the traditional term ‘reader’ and to propel us into an assessment of factors governing intimacy. However, I also wonder if reading hasn’t always relied upon some sort of destabilisation, some sort of shapeshifting, formless, fluidity. Perhaps there is something fundamentally queer about the strange, eclectic nature of reading itself, something that is made particularly transparent in the activity of reading queer?

At this point, a number of possibilities for further investigation present themselves, including an exploration of contemporary queer readerliness in the realms not just of queer theory and/or deconstruction but within the post-modern arena of identity. Certainly, it may be fruitful to approach queerly configured approaches to storytelling alongside Lyotard’s theory of postmodernism; that is, something “chiefly characterised by a general incredulity toward metanarratives, large-scale stories that claimed total explanatory power” (Donoghue 1998, p.22). Here, it would be interesting to explore how the queer re-imagines narrative and the space given to individual identity within a text. Ideas such as those proposed by Lyotard appear to have a superficial allegiance to the queer, yet it may be beneficial to avoid making assumptions about the depth of such an alliance before exploring the cast of their individual colours and nuances. Another possibility for further exploration could be in contrasting the philosophies espoused by a queer theorist such as Judith Butler and a more conservative reader-response critic. All such explorations would augment the current paucity of work on queer and reading.

At the same time, whilst building on understandings and re-imaginings from our approach to queer readerly strategies we must expand our thinking to include other differently configured readerly spaces and their possible impact on the structures through which representation is monitored and difference established. I would conclude from my own research and thinking that this is crucial.

The most obvious (common?) way of approaching the queer is by situating it within frameworks of gender that are bipolar, heteronormative and, arguably, masculine. However, to deepen our understanding of the queer I believe that a focus on sexual and gender dissidence in the role given to lesbian women could be beneficial. I was alerted to the importance of lesbian thinking in the realms of queer reading by several arguments including Mary McIntosh's (1993) feminist comment that:

queer theory, being *deconstructionist*, has much in common with the more radical forms of social constructionism represented in the male gay tradition. Indeed queer theory may be said to be a development of that tradition, which has simply laid claim to a more all-encompassing status (McIntosh 1993, p.47).

However, whilst acknowledging the problems surrounding feminism (especially lesbian feminism) and queer theory, not least due to the non-gender specificity of the queer, I remain convinced that a productive *engagement* between them is possible. I am not suggesting that an 'agreement' or 'truce' between such positions can be reached, (or is even desirable...) but that each has much to offer the other in presenting diverse opportunities for reformulating societal structures and formations surrounding identity, representation, relationships and formative processes such as reading. Certainly, 'queer reading' (in all its guises) is something that can be developed much further. As well as an investigation into 'difference' through an oscillation between a queer and lesbian practice of reading, it would be fruitful to comment upon queer(ing) spaces for textual production and textual dissemination.

It may also be pertinent to pay attention to the role of the imagination in queer thinking and reading. Lastly, a major issue in this work remains in determining the freedom of the reader in terms of the queer. Does a queer position allow us to somehow override the normative effects of a text?

I conclude my exploration by again exhorting the importance of love in re-imagining ourselves as queer adventurers and queer readers. A considered revision of how the queer re-sites our traditional, Western notion of intimacy (especially the notion of love) and how this reconsideration may interact with wider, boundless relating to identity remains a fecund ground for further reader-oriented experimentation. At the same time, I argue that the lesbian post-modern may also offer startlingly productive relational possibilities, ones that we may be able to apply to the arena of the textual encounter:

In looking at the interlocking of two parts – fingers and velvet, toes and sand – there is not, as psychoanalysis suggests, a predesignated erotogenic zone, a site always ready and able to function as erotic. Rather, the coming together of two surfaces imbues both of them with eros of libido... for their own sake and not for the benefit of the unity or organism as a whole... their value is always provisional and temporary, ephemeral and fleeting (Grosz, 1994, p.80).

Returning to the earlier emphases of Jonathan Weinberg in articulating an elegant and subtle queer aesthetic, I now argue that queer reading may be most productively re-imagined through a

revised and politically charged framework for understanding self and other. This framework is likely to be radically informed by notions posited by the post-modern lesbian. Therefore, for me, queer strategies of reading do not mean the death of the reader or the death of the text, but rather, the imaginative and creative re-education of ourselves in terms of how we may relate, both to the text and ultimately to the wider arena of selves and identities beyond the academy.

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