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'Outside/In? Notes on sexuality, ethnicity and the dialectics of identification'

Anne-Marie Fortier

What could appear more different than the performance of a camp barber shop quartet by Italian/Canadian gay men in Montreal's annual gay pride week (*Divers-Cité*), on the one hand, and on the other, the annual procession and bazaar of the Montreal Italian church of Our Lady of Pompeii? Many friends were disconcerted when I revealed how I spent my summer of 1998 moving between Italian church processions and tracking the activities of the *Gruppo Italiano Gay e Lesbico di Montreal*. I myself was not sure as to why I insisted on seeing the religious events while at the same time, my research interests were shifting towards gay and lesbian Italian-Montrealers. To be sure, our puzzlement was connected to the association of one space with sexuality, and the other with ethnicity. While we could acknowledge that both spaces had something to do with both ethnicity and sexuality, it seemed as if they sat uncomfortably alongside each other. But as I cycled between the *centre-sud* gay village and the *centre-nord* Little Italy (and its church), it seemed to me that the very edges of these two worlds met at the intersection of sexuality and ethnicity. Without claiming that ethnicity and sexuality always have everything to do with each other, one of the aims of this article is to explore how they relate to each other in the lives of gays and lesbians of Italian migrant background.

It is worth noting from the outset that this essay is part of a research project that is at its very preliminary stages. The project comes out of an earlier study on the formation of an Italian émigré culture in London, where I examine different forms of representation of the Italian presence in Britain: written narratives (namely monographs), political discourses, and the daily-life of two London based church-cum-social clubs (Fortier forthcoming). In the latter, I



was particularly interested in the relationship between the construction of the identity of places and the formation of Italian belongings. Developing a corporeal approach to group identity formation, I scrutinised the simultaneous gendering and ethnicising of spaces and bodies (individual and collective) (Fortier 1999). Within this double process, I argued, the prioritisation of irreducibly gendered subjects acts as a display of unchangeable cultural continuity. As Judith Butler writes, "[g]ender is a project which has cultural survival as its end." (1990: 139). The simultaneity of gender and ethnicity, then, is not to be read as a system of equivalence. As Vikki Bell points out, thinking gender in terms of cultural survival resists the temptation to "regard gender and ethnicity as operating as aspects of subjectivities that can be analysed according to the same cultural and psychic processes." (1999: 5)

This earlier study is informed by recent feminist redefinitions of the subject which are premised on a new form of corporeal materialism where the body is understood as a site of inscription and performance of identity; "a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological" (Braidotti 1994: 5; Grosz 1994; Butler 1990, 1993; Probyn 1996; Grosz and Probyn 1995; Gatens 1996). The concern for the body constitutes an important critique of the Cartesian mind/body split, but tends to conflate all forms of differentiation (sexing, gendering, racialising the body) into a system of equivalence. Consider for example the following statement: "Within modern societies, gender and sexuality, along with race and ethnicity, are the most apparent points of convergence for practices of normalisation, discipline and power." (Probyn 1997: 25; my translation). Statements such as this one line up systems of difference onto a level playing field, while the use of visual metaphors ("the most obvious") reinstate the centrality of what is visible in definitions of how systems of power operate. In short, the emphasis on the body is at risk of privileging the visible (what is written on the body) as a key site of construction of difference. Which is not to say that the empiricism of the visual field does not operate in our daily lives and have a direct effect on how we negotiate regimes of power. In what follows, I contemplate the limits of the visual field by, first, examining narratives of gays and lesbians of Italian émigré background who describe their experience of difference as a problem which emerges between one identity and another (the ethnic and the homosexual). Second, I turn to attempts to reconcile these 'two worlds', such as the creation of organisations like the *Gruppo Italo Gay e Lesbico di Montreal*. This strategy entails acts of 'coming out' as Italian within the gay and lesbian 'community' that complicate the "empiricism attributed to the visual field" (Fraser 1999: 111) in defining racial identities as well as sexual identities. Indeed, what does coming out as Italian reveal about the limits of the visibility of ethnicity and the invisibility of sexuality?

Divided lives

By my own decision, I live 'bi-coastally'. In some ways, this means I get the best of both worlds: the east coast and the west coast. But believe me, in other ways, it's not easy! There's a lot that I lose too. For example, instead of feeling like one integrated person, I often feel torn in half. It feels like I'm Italian in New York, and a lesbian in California... I feel constantly divided. I think my dilemma is one faced by many gay and lesbian people, whose *unpopular* sexual orientation means they end up needing a certain of distance from their families. I think this semi-estrangement is especially painful for those of us raised in close knit, ethnic families. (Capone 1996: 36; italics original)

This constitutes an exemplary narrative of the autobiographical essays by Italian/American gays and lesbians collected in a book entitled *Fuori* (which means 'out' in Italian; Tamburri 1996). Running through Giovanna (Janet) Capone's text is the sense of discomfort that arises when she attempts to reconcile her sexuality with her ethnicity, a project that comes across as doomed to failure.

There is indeed a widespread tendency to separate ethnic and gay spaces and lives, a separation that is sustained, as Dana Takagi writes, "with our folk knowledge about the family-centeredness and supra-homophobic beliefs of ethnic communities." (1996: 247) The unfeasible reconciliation is largely connected to the spatial metaphors which, much like languages of immigration, suggest that the meeting of the 'two cultures' would entail moving from one into another. For Capone, the impossibility of reconciling her lesbianism with her



italianness is located in what she identifies as her Italian family ethos. For another contributor, Teresa Carilli, growing up Sicilian/American and lesbian is summed up in one word: 'strangled'. And the strangulation originates within her dysfunctional family. I am not questioning the deep pains, scars and traumas that result from troubled and violent family lives; but what strikes me is that most contributors to this collection seek to make sense of their divided lives by tracing the origins of the discomfort that arises from the difference between being gay and Italian/American, *within* their family. For them, the family is the principle site where ethnicity is crystallised; it is the first ethnic network. The very relocation of ethnicity *within* the family suggests that family relations, structures and ethos are explainable by ethnicity, and vice versa. Family as teleological: the point of departure and the end point, fatalistically inscribing, and inscribed within, the Italian *modus vivendi*. In addition, not only are ethnic culture and family life mutually reducible to one another, they are also interchangeable: that is, the ethnic 'community' is represented as a family, as when Capone writes of her "Italian American family in New York, which is my ethnic base, the family into which I was born" (1996: 37).

For Giovanna (Janet) Capone, being an Italian in New York is about being with her family. Ethnicity and family sum each other up in a familiar narrative that a number of feminists have long since alerted us to. Indeed, the family trope becomes a key site through which ethnicity is essentialised and eternalised through the naturalisation of gendered differences (Brah 1992; Juteau 1983; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; McClintock 1995; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Yuval-Davis 1992). What remains under theorised, however, is the connection between sexuality and ethnicity: indeed, the feminist critiques of ethnicity, race and nation have widely subsumed sexuality under gender. In other words, the gendering of ethnicity amounts to the same thing as its heterosexualisation.

The subsumption of sexuality may be related to its understanding as something that develops over time, rather than identities such as race and gender, which appear to be given (Fraser 1999: 109). In most narratives found in *Fuori*, the state of ethnic certainty is unquestionable, almost self-explanatory: the typical story traces the process of *becoming gay* in contrast to *being Italian*. Yet as I read the texts, the well-known question asked by Maxine Hong Kingston came to my mind, in the following re-phrased version:

[Italian émigrés], when you try to understand what things in you are [Italian], how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one's family... from what is [Italian]? What is [Italian] tradition and what is the movies? (1975: 56)

Indeed, whose invention is the intensely heterosexual Italian family trope? Two other contributions to *Fuori* begin to unpack this construction by writing on their families as not fitting in with such established representations. Philip Gambone writes:

As a gay man, I feel fortunate to have grown up in a family where "macho" values were not predominant. The first-generation men in my family were gentle and kind, men who seem not to have been overly preoccupied with proving their masculinity. My uncles, most of them born in Italy, were chefs, florists, carnation growers, tailors. In their own way, they must have enjoyed beautiful thing as much as their female counterparts did. They were not vicious or cruel or insensitive. My paternal grandfather, "Pop", was a retired railroad worker who enjoyed nothing so much as to putter in his garden, make wine, and enjoy a good cigar. (1996: 72)

Mary Cappello, for her part, wonders if

those who helped shape my identity and who emigrated from Italy faced an even more virulent strain of patriarchy in the United States, and if, in fact, their leaving had something to do with being outside the purview of the original patriarchal context as well... What I could never fail to notice about the men and women in my Italian/American family...was [how] the men failed miserably and with varying degrees of unhappiness in conforming to the mask of white, middle-class masculinity, and the women wielded word, story, their own bodies, in ways that could never pass for demure. By Anglo-American standards, to put it crudely, the male members of my family were soft and the females were hard. Mightn't the fraternal demolition parties that Hollywood cinema has invented for Italian/American subjectivity be indicative of



precisely the fear that those dark, curly-haired, music-loving, flower-tending Italian/Americans are queer? (1997: 96)

Indeed, aren't the anxieties over a possible queer consequence that may be produced by flower-tending men or exuberant women constantly deflected by the repeated instantiation of Italian masculinity through representations of patriarchal authority and machismo alongside the good-cook Italian mamma, utterly devoted to her children and particularly to her sons; the Madonna-like figure of sacrifice and devotion that has commonly represented 'white ethnic' women in US (di Leonardo 1994: 177)?

Cappello's statement gestures towards an attempt to 'queer' Italian culture in a way that moves beyond the oppositional duality between homosexuality and ethnicity. Indeed, Cappello queries the very constructed nature of Italianità by relocating it within the broader social and historical American context. Both Cappello and Gambone produce an account of their experiences as a lesbian and a gay man living in Italian/American families that undermines the self-enclosure of the ethnicity model, on the grounds of ideas of femininity and masculinity deployed within the discourse of heterosexuality.

Cappello's essay stands in contrasts to the others in the collection because it refuses to follow the usual route whereby the deed of queering ethnicity may be done simply by adding gays and lesbians to the history of ethnic minorities, which is what Mary Jo Bona implies in her introduction to *Fuori*. She states that the gayness of the writers "influences, showcases, modifies, and reinvents Italian/American identity" (1996: 4). This suggests that adding homosexuality into the ethnic pot will invariably alter the cultural identity. Such add-on models operate from the assumption that all forms of differences are created equally and do little to question the certainty of these 'identities'. In contrast, Mary Cappello presents a complex fabric of queerness that exceeds sexuality, and of Italianità that exceeds ethnicity; a portrait where ethnicity and sexuality are difficult to discern.

'sexuality' and 'ethnicity' are neither stable terms nor sites whose contours can be apparently traced. 'Sexuality' and 'ethnicity' can have both everything and nothing to do with one another, just as they might only be truly mutually articulated through other discursive conditions like religious practice and class. (1996: 91).

As I show in my own analysis of religious practices of Italians in London, Catholicism, in Italian émigré culture, is a crucial site for the creation of Italian terrains of belonging where sexuality and ethnicity are imbricated in performative acts of collective re-membering (Fortier 1999). Displays of religious practice, in this sense, does not express Italian cultural difference, it rather performs it. And this performance combines discursive injunctions of ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

In an insightful move, Capello chooses to speak her lesbian Italianness through the typically Catholic mode of 'self-revelation', the confessional, precisely because ethnicity and sexuality are not representable in a 'once and for all' fashion. Cappello deliberately reinstates this particular narrative as a specifically Catholic one, through which particular forms of gendered ethnicity may be articulated.

In fact, to retrieve or celebrate some myth of an essentialized Italian/American ethnicity might require the effacement of gay desire, and perhaps this is why I have made the choice to filter this set of reflections through a rhetorical mode — the confessional — rather than through some picture-perfect memory of a discernible Italian/American content as explanation of sexual choice. (1997: 91).

The reference to the confessional is also a gesture towards Judith Butler's statement about sexuality as calling forth the mode of disclosure (Cappello 1996: 91). Indeed, sexuality, and more specifically homosexuality, requires an act of revelation for it to be 'shown' and, consequently, 'known'. Yet the precepts of confession are complex, especially when it comes to their political ramifications. Cappello, following Butler, wants to resist the fixing of a lesbian identity that may result from naming it, while she acknowledges that "to write and speak as a lesbian... sometimes functions as a politically efficacious phantasm" (Butler in *ibid.*) Hence in her confession, Cappello maintains the ambivalence about what being a lesbian



Italian/American means, and opens up the question about the privileging of certain signifiers over others, in definitions of sexual and ethnic identities.

Breaking the silences of in/visibility

The writers of the essays published in *Fuori* all express, each in their own way, a desire to retain some form of Italianness, however reconstructed. Surfacing from these essays is a sense of uncomfortable connection to ethnicity, yet a desire to recreate it as a place of being *and* becoming: a necessary point of attachment that delineates cultural difference, yet one which involves a continuous reconstruction.

Part and parcel of achieving this, however, is a process of naming their Italian ethnicity. Outside of the purview of the Italian family, Italianness needs to be signalled out. "In graduate school", writes Theresa Carilli, "I came out as a Sicilian-American" (1996: 59). Coming out renders visible what is lived as invisibility, as erasure of difference and singularity. Giovanna (Janet) Capone states that within the lesbian/gay culture of California, she feels "like my Italianness is somewhat compromised and rendered invisible." (1996: 38) Toward the end of her essay, Giovanna reveals that she recently reverted to her Italian name as a way of clearly stating her Italian background. Janet was the name given her by her father. This act of outing her Italianness is thus also an act of resisting the Law of the Father that is so entrenched in definitions of Italianness. Her gesture is one of re-fixing her ethnicity, after her father had de-ethnicised his daughter as well as himself (he had changed his name from Vincenzo to James), most probably in an attempt to pass within American WASP culture. To be sure, the possibilities of passing are not equally accessible to all ethnic minorities, a point I discuss below. But the point that interests me here, is Giovanna's, and other's, return to ethnicity (what Herbert Gans (1979) has called symbolic ethnicity) as a key marker of difference.

Within such efforts to belong as queer and ethnics, ethnicity may operate as a comfort zone. When I first attempted to meet the members of the *Gruppo Italiano Gay e Lesbico di Montreal*, I had a telephone conversation with a lesbian member, M. She expressed some reservations about my joining the Gruppo on the grounds that I am not Italian. This was, roughly, the gist of our conversation:

M: We meet as Italians. Being gay in the Italian culture is very difficult, and we meet to be able to share and discuss those difficulties as Italians. An outsider would simply not know what it's like.

AM: I can appreciate that, but I also sense that there are experiences that we do share. For example, I was brought up as a Catholic, and find that much of what some Italian gay and lesbians say about the difficulties of being gay in an Italian family has to do with Catholicism. I can relate to that.

M: That's a point. But the *Gruppo* is reserved to Italians because it allows us to speak in our own language; not necessarily the Italian language as such, but as Italians. *It's a question of mentality*. We meet as Italians, not as gays and lesbians. This is what makes us different from Quebeckers [sic] (emphasis is M's)

According to M, ethnicity constitutes an important site of solidarity for the Italians who meet under the auspices of the *Gruppo*. M's declaration testifies to the enduring appeal of ethnicity as a signifier of cultural coherence (Cohen 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992) that stabilises the presumed fluid and indeterminate gay/lesbian 'identity'. Ethnicity becomes a position from which to speak of oneself as different, unique. Theresa Carilli explains that she came out as Sicilian-American because she understood that

there is something unique about my relationship to the world because of my ethnicity. I finally understand [sic] that I approach the world with a set of Sicilian rules and values. I continue to explore and write about how my ethnicity has shaped my understanding of American life. (Carilli 1996: 59)

In contrast to Mary Cappello's view about the fluidity of ethnicity and sexuality, these statements are firmly grounded in an ethnicity conceived as an undeniable terrain of belonging that is shaped through entangled narratives of origin and genealogy. But beyond unearthing the organising principles of ethnic absolutism, I am interested in the implications of



these gestures of identification and demarcation for our understanding of ethnicity and difference. However 'given' it may seem, ethnicity is the site of difference that the *Gruppo* seeks to mark, to render visible. The very insistence of a distinct Italianness, the repeated acts through which it is signified and displayed (the banners in the gay pride parade; the separate stall on Pride day; the creation of the Gruppo; the listing of its meetings within gay and lesbian 'events', in Montreal's entertainment weekly; M's own emphatic assertion that "it's a question of mentality") questions the uncontested state of ethnic definition. What does this reveal, then, about the indisputability of ethnicity in connection with the centrality of the visual in definitions of ethnic (and sexual) difference?

We can begin to unpack the self-narratives sampled above in the context of shifts of meanings that have occurred within the notion of ethnicity itself, in the last forty years. While 'race' has gradually been resignified in terms of culture rather than skin colour within the new cultural racism, the conflation of ethnicity with 'race' (namely in Britain) has privileged what Gayatri Spivak calls "chromatism, the visible difference in skin colour" (1986: 235; see also Ahmed 1998). This has fostered different categorisations such as 'invisible immigrants' to speak of Italian, Spanish and Portuguese immigrants in Britain (MacDonald and MacDonald 1972); the revival of 'white ethnics' in the United States, and its appropriation by Italian (and other migrant European) intellectuals (see for example Alba 1990); or 'visible minorities' used in the Canadian official multicultural jargon, to distinguish 'cultural minorities' (sic) of colour from 'cultural minorities' of European descent (other, that is, than of French or English 'stock' [sic]).

Unlike the US and Britain, Canadian multiculturalism has from the outset been constructed around diversity within Europeanness, and has only latterly developed to 'include' 'other' minorities as constituting an important constituency in the Canadian historical, political and social fabric. The creation of organisations such as the Gruppo within the gay scene is recent (1996), yet it is legitimated by the established multiculturalist discourse, which cleared the space for the recent proliferation of ethnic-based gay and lesbian organisations and events in Montreal. Such quests for visibility and vocality within a predominantly white male gay 'culture' challenges different aspects of the assumed homogeneity of the gay and lesbian scene — dubbed 'dairy scene' by Man C (1998), a gay black Montrealer.

In the days leading up to the 1998 Pride festivities in Montreal, a front page headline in one of the Montreal dailies read *Les autres gais* ('The other gays'), that is, gays and lesbians of 'other' ethnic background than French Canadian: the journalist, Brian Myles, listed a number of organisations for gays and lesbians belonging to cultural communities "all alongside each other: "Italian, South-Asian, Arab or Latin-American." The article is a typical rendition of multiculturalism as an endorsement and a creation of cultural *diversity* where cultural difference is not only contained (Bhabha 1990: 207-208), but where different regimes of cultural difference are collapsed into the fold of 'otherness', and rendered homologous. The

After my conversation with M., I returned to Dana Takagi's essay where she examines the links between the invisibility of sexuality and the visibility of racialised ethnicity in relation to the construction of Asian/Americanity. For Takagi, the difference between gay/lesbian and 'race-based ethnic identities' crucially revolves around their in/visibility. In a familiar narrative, she suggests that the invisibility of sexuality is connected to a certain degree of voluntarism that she views as absent from racial identities. One can choose to pass as heterosexual, but one cannot choose to pass as white if she is black or Asian. In short, running through her essay is a tendency to pit the assumed visibility of ethnicity against the invisibility of sexuality, writing of the former as fixed and inescapable, and of the latter as fluid and multiple (sexualities rather than sexuality; 1996: 245). For Takagi, the invisibility of homosexuality "means that silence and its corollary space, the closet, are more ephemeral, appear less fixed as boundaries of social identities, less likely to be taken-for-granted than markers of race" (1996: 249). The invisibility of homosexuality means that its counterpart, heterosexuality, is also invisible. Because it is not seen on the body, sexuality is invisible, hence fluid (although the compulsoriness of heterosexuality assumes us all to be so until proven otherwise, that is, until *we display* our homosexuality).

Theoretically speaking, homosexual identity does not enjoy the same privileged stability as racial identity. The borders that separate gay from straight, and, 'in' from



'out', are so fluid that in the final moment, we can only be sure that sexual identities are as Diana Fuss notes, "in Foucauldian terms, less a matter of final discovery than a matter of perpetual invention." (Takagi 1996: 249)

It follows that race-based ethnicity would not be 'a matter of perpetual invention', but, rather, an uncontested fact. Her own rendition does not challenge the theoretical assumptions she sets out to interrogate.

Takagi seems to suggest that the invisibility of (homo)sexuality is something to be longed for, in contrast to inescapable visibility of 'race'. For Takagi, racialised ethnicity is that which is 'of colour', thus reinstating whiteness as the universal, invisible, unmarked ethnicity against which otherness is marked. "[E]veryone is white unless they look black" (Fraser 1999: 113). To be sure, the visibility of 'race' does not operate equally for all ethnic minorities. For gays and lesbians who also identify as members of ethnic minorities (in Canada, the US or the UK), the double invisibility implies a negotiation of the very choices of identification; that is negotiating what is going to be 'outed', in both sense of 'putting out' and 'bringing out' (Fuss 1991: 4). But this negotiation takes place at the crossroads of relations of power that are not equal. 'Coming out' as Italian within the gay/lesbian 'community' is not the same as 'coming out' as African/Canadian, South East Asian/Canadian, or Native/Canadian. The latter constitute acts of resistance and contestation against racisms, while the former challenges assumptions about the cultural homogeneity of the lesbian and gay community. A challenge that may be read, albeit with caution, as disturbing accepted assumptions about hegemonic whiteness.

On the one hand, coming out as Italian results from the very privileges that Richard Dyer identifies as embedded within the invisibility of whiteness (1988; 1997). The newspaper article cited above opens as follows:

Hammit Shinhat is gay. He is completely open about it with his family, friends and work colleagues. His dark brown eyes and his perpetually tanned skin reveal that he is of another *ethnie*. Hammit Shinhat is of Indian origin. (*Le Devoir*, 1-2 August 1998; my translation)

The location of Hammit Shinhat's otherness onto his skin reinstates the marking of whiteness through difference. Shinhat is of another "ethnie" (in French, *ethnie* has etymological links with race), thus supporting the view that being Quebecker means being white. Within this discourse, Italians are less "other" than those with "perpetually tanned skin": an interesting metaphor when read against Sara Ahmed's account of the tanned skin and the black skin as being coded differently. The tanned body is a desirable body, a beautiful body, one which signals the care of the self, in contrast to the black, stained body (Ahmed 1998). The opening sentences constitutes a typical orientalist practice of othering that serves to enforce the homogeneity and coherence of the white subject.

Within this discourse, Italians move through the colour codings, in and out of the tanned body as the seasons succeed each other. Their "olive skin" is not "perpetually tanned", hence they are "white, like us". If their Italianness is a "matter of perpetual invention", it proceeds from the secure position of the power of whiteness, that is, its 'normality'. Moreover, Italians in Canada, and more specifically in Quebec, have acquired the emblematic status of the 'good ethnic', as opposed to the 'bad' immigrant, within a discourse that tends to associate ethnicity with a kind of indigenism as a result of its relation with more recent migrations to Canada. In other words, by virtue of their historical presence, Italians may dissociate themselves from more recently arrived immigrants and acquire a special status that rests on particular claims to the land and to the shaping of the Canadian national history (see Fortier 1998). Within this social and historical context, the unmarked site of whiteness supports, rather than it destabilises, the marking of sexuality.

On the other hand, the coming out of Italian gays and lesbians testifies to the necessity of narratives in 'revealing' what cannot be 'seen' — narratives of blood, shared histories, shared ways of life. As Mariam Fraser suggests (drawing on an essay by Vikki Bell) "the disclosure of ethnicity requires — rather like the disclosure of sexuality is assumed to require — narratives that 'tell' what the body will not necessarily 'show' (1999: 112-113). In short, although speaking from within the system of white privilege, it is not only as whites that members of the



Gruppo are coming out (nor are their acts merely performing whiteness). In this respect, identities are not reducible to the matter (the body, the skin) on which, and in which, they are seen to be inscribed: the outing of Italian Montrealers pushes against the limits of the fetishism of skin/body (Ahmed 1998; Fraser 1999) and reveals the uncertainty of ethnic identity and ethnic culture.

What could appear more different?

The question I raise at the beginning of this essay is a rhetorical device that I use in order to foreground the centrality of the visual in establishing difference: "what could *appear* more different...?" Yet the emphasis of the visual in defining ethnic and sexual difference is brought to question if we view identity as performative, that is, as not reducible to what is displayed on the body. In Judith Butler's words, the performativity of identity means that identities are constructed by the "very 'expressions' that are said to be [their] results." (1990: 45).

In this respect, Butler's insistence on repetition as producing effects of materialisation of the body is important to bear in mind when exploring the ways in which appeals to difference operate through speech acts that derive their power by virtue of their citationality, that is "through the invocation of convention" (Butler 1993: 225). Statements such as "my name is Giovanna", or "you are not Italian" seem to suggest that there is such a thing as being Italian, and its "reality" and are unquestionable. These statements invoke a set of conventions that, ironically, the very ethnic spaces that appear as un-inhabitable by gays and lesbians (such as ethnic churches) actively perform and construct through rituals, inaugurations, remembrances, and so on.

These statements also reveal the extent to which ethnic identity is primarily a narrative; one which relies on history, origins, genealogy, and geography. By this I seek to question assumptions that ethnicity and race are defined by skin colour. In short, ethnicity is it not always only about 'race'. This appears particularly clear to me as I constantly shuttle between Quebec and England, two parts of the world where ethnicity works so differently, both in the political realm and in theoretical discourses. My own understanding of ethnicity straddles British, Canadian and American 'traditions': simply put, ethnicity, as I use it, is a 'point of suture' that may be conceived as predominantly racialised (as in the UK) or predominantly culturalised (as in Canada/Quebec and the US), though it always includes both processes, the articulation of which is locally and historically specific. The outing of Italians within the gay and lesbian community implies a process of revealing and displaying ethnic difference that is founded on what cannot be seen; on narratives of identity. Narratives which, to be sure, operate through regimes of difference that sustain assumptions about the universality and coherence of whiteness, yet which also serve to disrupt this coherence.

Which brings us back to the question of visibility and its limits when assumed as an end point in identifying sexual and racial/ethnic difference. By seeking to move away from the visual, I sought to contribute to a further understanding of the complex intertwinement between the marking and the unmarking of differences. For it seems to me that the ambivalence of visibility, outsiderhood, the unmarked, acquires a special significance when examined in connection to the experience of 'queer ethnics'.

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