

**Abstract** In recent writings on post-industrial economies the idea of the commodification of sexuality is highly visible. Yet many of these analyses tend to overlook the important debates in sexuality studies which have questioned both essentialist and utopic readings of the commodification aesthetic. In this article, I draw on some of these insights to think through the commodification of sexuality at work, especially in regard to the 'lesbian' at work. In particular I ask if post-industrial service work may be currently constitutive of a 'lesbian postmodern'. In so doing I suggest that the commodification aesthetic may be read as involving the *making* of sexual subjects at work. But I also consider the ways in which the terms of recognition of the 'lesbian' at work may deny claims towards particular forms of workplace capital through a definition of performances of sexuality at work in terms of categories of immanence. I suggest this raises problems for arguments which suggest workplace justice in regard to sexuality may be best achieved through a politics of recognition, since the terms of recognition or visibility at work may themselves not be neutral.

**Keywords** aesthetics, commodification, the lesbian postmodern, recognition, sexuality, work

Lisa Adkins

*Australian National University*

## Mobile Desire: Aesthetics, Sexuality and the 'Lesbian' at Work

### Introduction: the commodification of desire

A recurring implicit and sometimes explicit theme in histories and analyses of the contemporary organization of sexuality is the idea of a commodification of desire (see, for example, Altman, 1996; D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988; Doan, 1994; Griggers, 1997; Singer, 1993; Weeks, 1991). This theme is, for example, often a central feature in histories and analyses of the organization of heterosexuality. In recent accounts (see, for example, Hawkes, 1996; Segal, 1994) it is characteristically suggested that

from the mid-twentieth century onwards a commodification of heterosexual desire was put in place. This commodification is typically understood to be evidenced in the marketing of consumer goods through sexual codes; the development of a range of consumer products focusing explicitly on the sexual; the emergence of a public sex industry, including the pornography industry; and a proliferation of expert knowledges concerning sex popularized through sex therapy, sex manuals, and advice-giving sex experts. Such forms of commodification of heterosexual desire are often interpreted (see, for example, Hawkes, 1996; Jackson and Scott, 1997; Weeks 1992) as significant in the making of a number of distinctive features of contemporary heterosexuality, including a liberalization of heterosexuality (involving an uncoupling of heterosexual sex from marriage and reproduction); a shift in the definition of heterosex from sex as danger to sex as pleasure; an aestheticization and stylization of heterosexuality; and a move away from the idea of heterosexual desire as fixed, stable and immutable via the emergence of a heterosexuality defined in terms of flexibility, adaptability and choice.

But the commodification of heterosexual desire has also been linked to a number of distinctive features of contemporary culture more generally. Thus, the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private; the development of new modes of accumulation and regulation; and the making of consumer culture, including the making of new forms of subjectivity and identity figured in terms of the pleasures of consumption, have all been connected to this new ordering of heterosexuality (see, for example, D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988; Hawkes, 1996; Juffer, 1998; Katz, 1995). Hawkes (1996), for example, has suggested that the commodification, commercialization and promotion of heterosexual desire has been a vital component in the establishment and dynamics of a consumption-based mode of flexible accumulation, where images are commodities and their consumption constitutive of self-identity.

While the idea of the commodification of heterosexual desire is often central to analyses of the ordering of contemporary heterosexuality and to histories of heterosexuality, so too has it been understood to be key to histories of homosexuality. Altman (1982), for example, linked the commodification of desire to the making of homosexual visibility. Indeed he suggested that such visibility 'was only possible under modern consumer capitalism, which for all its injustices has created the conditions for greater freedom and diversity than are present in any other society yet known' (Altman, 1982: 104; see also D'Emilio, 1983). Although the commodification of desire has been widely taken up in analyses of heterosexuality and homosexuality, this idea has been deployed more recently in analyses of lesbian desire and the contemporary organization of lesbianism. Specifically, the idea of a commodification of desire has been taken up in regard

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to the ways in which consumer culture now concerns a range of desires, including lesbian desire. Thus, the targeting of lesbians and gay men as specific consumer groups (Clark, 1991; Smith, 1997); a proliferation of the signs of the lesbian body in everyday popular culture (Griggers, 1997); as well as a proliferation of images seeming to address particularly lesbian pleasures (see, for example, Allen, 1997; Gibbs, 1994; Lewis and Rolley, 1997), have all been understood to attest to a recent commodification and aestheticization of sexual diversity. Esterberg (1996) describes this moment in regard to lesbian identities in the following terms:

In recent years, a very different face is being put on popular depictions of lesbianism – more ‘feminine,’ less political . . . this new ‘chic’ lesbian is shown trading her support group for a shopping bag. She is no longer out to change the world – only her wardrobe. (Esterberg, 1996: 275).

This shift is not lost on Hawkes, who comments, ‘First in movies, then music, in historical dramas and soap operas, and finally fashion and advertising, “the love affair with lesbianism” . . . has been flourishing’ (Hawkes, 1996: 142). Indeed she suggests that in the 1990s erotic choice has become another consumer freedom. But Hawkes understands this commodification and aestheticization of sexual diversity as diluting the radical and subversive elements of non-heterosexual sexualities. For example, she suggests that the recent celebration and popularization of lesbian chic by mainstream sexual culture, involving an appropriation and stylization of lesbian sexuality, has rewritten radical sex as a commodity and defused its potential. Indeed, she argues the pervasiveness of notions of style and choice in the promotion of sexual diversity may have little to do with a radical rewriting of sexual desires. Style and image, Hawkes suggests, allude to the possibilities of a radical sexual diversity, but do not promote it. For Hawkes, in what she calls the ‘gender bending’ climate of the 1990s, an ‘underlying script of assimilation’ (1996: 143) is therefore understood to prevail, an assimilation which is operating on the terms of mainstream sexual culture.

## A lesbian postmodern?

While some commentators agree with Hawkes (see, for example, Esterberg, 1996) regarding her concerns with the commodification of sexual diversity, especially in regard to the assimilationist and de-politicizing aspects of this process, nevertheless other writers have stressed that this commodification may offer more of a challenge to mainstream sexual culture than this kind of analysis suggests. In her analysis of the organization of lesbian sex, for example, Creith (1996) discusses a lesbian ‘sexual revolution’ which she suggests took place from the 1980s onwards. At the

heart of the revolution, she argues, was a struggle over the meaning of lesbian identity, a struggle which shifted the meaning of lesbianism away from issues of politics to issues of sex. For Creith this shift is understood to be linked to the commodification and stylization of lesbian desire. She documents, for example, the development of the lesbian sex industry and the popularization of lesbian sex therapy and sex manuals which she suggests have been key in moving the definition of lesbianism towards issues of sex, style and aesthetics. But Creith also suggests this kind of stylization has opened up a new form of politics around sexuality, and in particular new ways of critiquing and destabilising the hetero/homo binary. She looks, for example, at the re-emergence from the late 1980s onwards of a highly stylized butch/femme – or as she terms it neo butch/femme – which Creith suggests challenges the gender binaries of heterosexuality since ‘such performances demonstrate the ease with which gender identities can be constructed, no longer on the map of genital geography – showing that all gender is a performance, a masquerade’ (Creith, 1996: 138). For Creith the commodification and stylization of lesbian desire concerns therefore not so much a heterosexualization of lesbian sexuality or the end of politics in regard to lesbianism and sexuality more generally, but the emergence of a new aestheticized postmodern ‘lesbian’ and a new stylized politics in regard to sexuality.

This emphasis on the political possibilities of the commodification and stylization of lesbian desire is also stressed by Lamos (1994), who argues the commodification aesthetic in relation to lesbian desire has involved a blurring of the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality. But she also warns that the stylization of lesbian desire may not be entirely unproblematic. Butch/femme styles, for example, may run the risk of becoming naturalized by being reduced to heterosexual norms or by being adopted as the psychological inner truth of a person. Hence Lamos suggests postmodern butch/femme may turn out to be ‘just another essentialist identity, postmodern culture another gay ghetto, and postmodern lesbianism itself another moment in the history of sexuality rather than a challenge to it’ (Lamos, 1994: 94, see also Clark, 1991).

Hennessy’s (1995) historical analysis of the commodification aesthetic in regard to sexual identities suggests that Lamos may well be correct to warn that the stylization of sexual desires and identities concerns a particular moment in the history of sexuality rather than a challenge to it. Through a consideration of issues of class in relation to the stylization of lesbian, gay and queer desires, Hennessy points to certain limits of a politics focusing on the commodification aesthetic in regard to sexuality. Specifically, she suggests that like commodity capitalism in general, analyses which point to the political possibilities of the commodity aesthetic in regard to sexuality fetishize sexual identities.<sup>1</sup> In particular, they make

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invisible the socio-historical conditions that make such stylized identities possible, including an increasing separation of the spheres of production and consumption, and global divisions of wealth and labour. Moreover, in making the specific socio-historical conditions of commodity capitalism invisible, Hennessy suggests such analyses tend not to recognize that the subversive and deconstructive possibilities of the commodification aesthetic are limited by the ways in which a stylized consumer-orientated sexual identity is only available to the new urban middle classes of industrialized economies.<sup>2</sup> Thus Hennessy contends such a politics speaks only to the urban professional classes, and makes invisible non middle-class lesbians, gays and queers.

While Hennessy raises issues around the limits of a politics of sexuality defined in terms of the commodification aesthetic, in a different register, Griggers (1997) has argued the commodification of desires and the mainstreaming of lesbian bodies in the public sphere presents a double-bind which is characteristic of lesbianism in postmodernity. Considering, for example, the merger between the sex industry and plastic technologies, the mass production of phallic body prostheses, and the appropriation of the phallus/penis by lesbians, Griggers suggests 'lesbians have turned technoculture's semiotic regime of simulation and the political economy of consumer culture back against the naturalization of masculinist hegemony' (Griggers, 1997: 47). But while this situation provides possibilities for self-reinvention and self-empowerment, Griggers stresses it also involves an appropriation of lesbian identities – as well as their labour, leisure and purchasing power – into the commodity logic. Indeed, in the context of such moves, Griggers suggests that lesbian bodies are best understood as disorganized bodies of transformation, that is, in the public culture of postmodernity lesbians are subjects in the making 'whose body as signs and bodies as sign are up for reappropriation and revision' (1997: 49).

Thus there can be no claims to essential desires, pleasures and identities which exist in a 'mythic moment prior to commodity production' (Wiegman, 1994: 5; see also Allen, 1997), nor can 'we' rely on a utopic theorization where the figure of the 'lesbian' is placed outside of commodification and read as essentially transgressive or subversive of commodity capitalism (Griggers, 1997; Jagose, 1994). Rather, the issue to be explored is the way in which desires, pleasures, bodies, sexualities and identities are figured and constituted through commodification aesthetics. Questions regarding the breakdown of sexual categories, the blurring of the hetero/homo binary, the undoing of public/private distinctions as well as questions concerning possible naturalizations of stylized desires and identities and issues of exclusion from such positions – that is, questions regarding the politics of sexuality in commodification culture – must therefore also be addressed in this frame.

Clearly, much is at issue in the debates on the commodification of lesbian desire, from questions around what a 'lesbian' is, to issues connected to the proliferation of the signs of lesbian identity. To attempt to address some of these issues I want to turn to the context of contemporary workplaces, and in particular to service workplaces. I do so as current analyses of the figuring of post-industrial work suggest that service workplaces may be a key site of the commodification of desire and thus perhaps an important ground on which to pose questions concerning the commodification aesthetic in relation to sexuality.<sup>3</sup> I want to ask, for example, if service work may be constitutive of a 'lesbian postmodern' (Doan, 1994), that is, of a stylized and aestheticized 'lesbian' sexuality at work where, for example, stylized performances of butch/femme, masculinity and femininity are read in non-essentialist ways, blur the hetero/homo binary and de-naturalize heterosexuality. I also want to ask, following Hennessy, if there are certain exclusions from such stylized identities at work. To ask such questions I draw on recent analyses of post-industrial economies generally and of service work in particular. I also offer analysis of secondary data concerning issues of workplace style and sexuality, and in particular draw on a description of an experience of recent workplace restructuring (Savage, 1997) and interview data concerning workplace experiences from an oral history project on lesbian lives in Britain (Ainley, 1995). These data highlight the significance of style as a signifier of lesbian aesthetics at work, but, as I will make clear, also raise important issues around the politics of identity. In bringing this material together I hope to illustrate some of the problems which flow when desires, pleasures, sexualities and identities are read in terms of nostalgia or utopics. Moreover, I hope to illustrate, as Griggers has suggested more generally for post-industrial economies, that in terms of service workplaces lesbians may be best understood as subjects in the making. To begin I turn first to the issue of the stylization or aestheticization of work.

## **Service work and the commodification of desire**

A number of writers on the contemporary economy have stressed an intensifying aestheticization or culturalization of economic life, whereby the aesthetic components of labour are taking on increasing significance in comparison with its more technical aspects (see, for example, Bauman, 1998; Lash and Urry, 1994). Thus a new sovereignty of appearance, style and image is understood to be at play at work, where stylized workplace performances have emerged as key resources and increasingly secure workplace rewards. This new sovereignty of appearance, style and image is widely understood to be particularly at issue in service work, where a spatial and temporal proximity of producers and consumers arranges work in a way which not only puts an emphasis on stylized presentations of self

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for workers, but which also means that such presentations or performances are part of the product, or part of what is sold. Moreover, and in terms of my concerns here, this arrangement of service labour has been understood to involve a commodification aesthetic in regard to sexuality at work (see, for example, Adkins, 1995). So, for example, discussing her recent study of professional service workers McDowell has suggested 'an increasing proportion of jobs in contemporary Britain involve the marketing of personal attributes, including sexuality, as part of the product' (McDowell, 1995: 76). Thus she argues that in contemporary service work 'selling oneself – one's body, sexuality and gender performance is part of the job' (1995: 93). Similarly, discussing his research on fast-food restaurants and tourist labour, Crang emphasizes the role of tourism employees, not simply as producers of a product but 'as part of that very product, producing themselves as part of their jobs' (Crang, 1997: 152). This co-production, he suggests, can be seen in a number of ways. He points, for example, to the way what he terms 'the ascribed characteristics of employees' – in which he includes gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age and class – are part of 'the role-playing process' of service work (ibid.).

What is clear from this very brief discussion of how the commodification of sexuality is currently understood to be at issue in the arrangement of service labour, is that there is sometimes a tendency to read sexuality as pre-existing the commodification aesthetic – in this case as pre-existing service work. So although at one point Crang suggests identities are not just brought to work by employees but forged through it, he goes on to argue that 'employees with different ascribed identities may have radically different experiences of what is apparently the same job' (Crang, 1997: 152). But Crang does not ask if these '*different* ascribed identities' or 'ascribed characteristics' of employees are made in and through the commodity aesthetic of service work, he simply assumes they pre-exist work, and moreover produce different workplace experiences. Although it is not clear from his discussion what these 'different' ascribed identities or characteristics might be, or exactly how work is experienced differently for those with these (unspecified) ascribed identities and characteristics, in a discussion of problems for workers performing service labour, especially problems associated with having their 'selves' figured as part of the product, he nevertheless suggests performative work may be experienced more positively. In particular:

workers may be able to isolate their paid performances within the realms of the false, distancing themselves from their roles, and playing with them as well as at them. Or they may deconstruct these categories of real and false: individually by enjoying the opportunity to play out multiple personae, seeing none as more false or real than any other . . . by taking the opportunities for cultural invention through performances. (Crang, 1997: 153)

For me this understanding of service work is of interest on two counts. First, the stylization and aestheticization of work is here understood not to concern essential or fixed identities. Rather, it is understood to deconstruct essentializing categories such as 'true' and 'false' in that the opportunities for cultural invention provided by the aestheticization of work disavow the idea of a true, real essential self which exists in a mythical place outside of the formal realm of work. Second, the idea of individuals playing out multiple personae suggests that the aestheticization of work allows mobility and flexibility in regard to workplace performances. Given that the performance of service labour has been suggested to involve sexuality, this reading of service labour implies that the commodification aesthetic may well be productive of the kinds of boundary breakdowns, category and binary blurring which Lamos describes in her thesis on the lesbian postmodern. But there is a clear contradiction at play here. On the one hand it seems that service workers are able to deconstruct true/false dichotomies, seize the opportunity for cultural invention through performances, and enjoy the playing out of multiple personae. And on the other, there are workers with 'different ascribed identities' and 'ascribed characteristics' who, it would seem by their very definition, are unable to play out multiple personae, be inventive in terms of their cultural performances at work and deconstruct true/false dichotomies in relation to their workplace 'selves'.

This kind of contradiction is also evident in McDowell's recent analysis of the findings from her study of professional financial service sector workers. She talks, for example, of gay men in service work having to 'conceal their sexual preferences while at work' (McDowell, 1997: 179). This she suggests is a result of a workplace culture in which emphases on individual competitiveness, the sexual objectification of women and particular forms of homosocial relationships between male colleagues and clients position gay men as the 'Other' at work. Indeed, McDowell points to the ways in which 'male respondents, both straight and gay, talked about the camouflage or masquerades they adopted in the workplace to conform to accepted versions of masculinity' (1997: 179). McDowell also discusses how women found themselves in a similar position in regard to femininity. Thus one of the respondents in her study said "Men have a real problem with women who are unfeminine. If you hide your femininity entirely you get called a lesbian – they don't handle it very well" (1997: 154). Indeed, McDowell points to the way women respondents generally 'spoke . . . [of how] a particular feminine performance at work masked their being, what they termed the "real me"' (1997: 202).

But McDowell also discusses the ways in which service labour may be transgressive of normative heterosexuality. In particular, she suggests that such transgressive possibilities lie in the way service labour, with its

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emphasis on self-conscious stylized performances, opens up a space for fluid gender performances in the workplace which challenge the masculine/feminine binary. Thus McDowell looks at the ways some of the women in her study, especially older women, self-consciously performed parodies or masquerades of femininity at work, and at how such women strategically adapted their performances of femininity to subvert masculinist norms. For example, one of McDowell's respondents talked of how "you can influence things by being more female or less female" (McDowell, 1997: 198). Such performances are understood by McDowell to show not only how gender may be becoming fluid in service workplaces, but also – and following Butler (1990) – to parody and subvert the regulatory norms of gender at work. In addition, McDowell discusses the ways in which fluidity in regard to performances of gender is also at issue in regard to men workers. Specifically, the younger men in her study were 'aware of the interactive nature of service work – the inseparability of their bodily performance from the product being sold' (McDowell, 1997: 186). Thus rather than a fixed, internal attribute, younger men workers, like their older women colleagues, understood gender at work as a self-conscious performance, a sign to be made up, deployed and exchanged.

In this account of service work the stylized performances of some workers are therefore understood to be transgressive in that they reveal that gender and sexuality cannot be understood to be caused by, originate from, or be attributed to coherent subjects who possess an essential sexuality, gender or sex. Rather, such performances reveal the idea of coherent subjects in regard to the commodification aesthetic at work to be a cultural fiction. And in this sense it would seem that the commodification aesthetic might well be linked to a queering of sexuality in service workplaces. But there are also professional service workers who, in terms of the commodification aesthetic, are disempowered 'Others'. Such 'Others' include gay men (McDowell, 1997: 179), 'women . . . [and] men from different class, ethnic and educational backgrounds' (1997: 203). In a similar fashion to Crang's tourist workers with 'ascribed characteristics' and 'different ascribed identities', it would seem that by definition such 'Others' are unable to be mobile in regard to performances of sexuality and gender, since processes of 'Othering' define workers in terms of particular and fixed genders and sexualities. Nor does it seem that the aestheticization of work affords these workers possibilities for cultural invention and the opportunity to deconstruct the categories of 'true' and 'false' in regard to workplace 'selves' as they are understood to 'conceal', 'camouflage', 'mask' and 'hide' their 'real' selves and to experience their 'selves' as fixed, stable and coherent.

McDowell suggests the experiences of such 'Others' in professional service work is linked to the operation and dominance of a hegemonic

masculinity which she characterizes as ‘revolving around a variant of an embodied, manly, heterosexualized class-based masculinity’ (McDowell, 1997: 203). In particular, it is this masculinity which is understood to ‘disempower a range of “Others”’ (ibid.). However McDowell understands hegemonic masculinity to be part of an ‘old’ regime of sexuality and gender at work, a regime which is currently being challenged by the ‘new’ and – as McDowell sees it – ‘progressive’ move towards the arrangement of service work as a performance, with its possibilities of parody and subversion in regard to normative heterosexuality and gender. The different and disempowered experiences of workplace ‘Others’ are therefore understood to be connected to an old oppressive regime, while the experiences of those performing parodies and subversion in regard to sexuality and gender are understood as progressive and indeed as potentially ‘liberatory’ (McDowell, 1997: 207). In short, a postmodern sexuality involving mobile and fluid subjects is understood to be undermining a modernist sexuality in which sexuality is figured as the ‘truth’ of a person. In what follows, however, I question this periodization of workplace sexuality. I do so through a consideration not so much of workers who are mobile subjects in regard to the commodification aesthetic of service labour, but through a consideration of those who in Crang’s terms are workers with ‘different ascribed identities’ or ‘ascribed characteristics’, and in McDowell’s terms are workers positioned as ‘Others’. Thus I consider the experiences of workers who in terms of Crang’s and McDowell’s analyses would be considered not to have mobility in regard to stylized performances of sexuality and gender at work.

### **The ‘lesbian skirt’, ‘being paid to be a lesbian’ and ‘lesbian hair’ at work**

To do so I turn first to a workplace scene which forms part of a larger description of an experience of workplace restructuring where a new emphasis is being placed on employee dress, style and appearance. This is described by a woman librarian (Savage, 1997) who is a self-identified lesbian and who is ‘out’ at work. The scene is described in the following terms: ‘The other day I wore a skirt to work. I thought I was power dressing. Maggie looked up from her desk and yelled: “hey everyone, she’s in drag”’ (Savage, 1997: 85). There are obviously a number of interpretations which could be made of this workplace event. Here I offer just two. The wearing of a skirt to work by a self-identified and ‘out’ lesbian could be understood as involving, as Creith might suggest, a postmodern lesbian performance, which disrupts and confuses a normative association of female femininity with heterosexuality at work by subverting the connections

between sex, gender and sexuality. But it could also be understood as involving a disruption to a normative lesbian librarian aesthetic. That is, for the librarian who rarely wears a skirt at work, this scene could also be understood to challenge a particular lesbian librarian look. Thus this scene could be interpreted as suggesting that a specific style of dress in this workplace figures this worker as a lesbian at work, a style which is understood by the co-worker to be disrupted by the 'lesbian skirt'. Indeed, the librarian goes on to describe the lesbian dress code in her particular workplace as 'power dressing with a touch of eccentricity, shoulder pads, boots, plenty of black . . . a leather jacket slung over a chair, a silver studded belt. And the ubiquitous leggings' (Savage, 1997: 85).

The figuring of the lesbian at work through this particular dress code seems also to be at issue in another workplace scene described by the librarian:

Last week we were all issued with the first edition of the . . . Corporate Wear catalogue . . . Inside, next to soft images of workmates that look more like Tokyo than Ultimo, various little homilies are printed. Beside a man wheeling a bicycle and a woman with a dog it says: 'They're comfortable and easy-wearing. I don't feel that I have to change as soon as I get home.' And next to a shot at Circular Quay, complete with stripy awnings and paper bags full of plump oranges, a besuited man and women are saying: 'It's great to be part of a team and still keep my individuality.' (Savage, 1997: 85-6)

On receiving the catalogue a colleague of the lesbian librarian ironically suggested to her "It'll never work. There's no leggings" (Savage, 1997: 86). Her colleague therefore implies there will be employee resistance to the take up of 'Corporate Wear' as this would threaten the visibility of lesbians in this specific workplace.

While the example of the librarian is suggestive of a lesbian aesthetic at work, an aesthetic which I have suggested is made visible by the case of the 'lesbian skirt', the following description of 'lesbian hair' by a nurse who is not 'out' at work, interviewed by Ainley (1995) as part of an oral history project on lesbian lives in Britain, shows that no easy identification or desire may flow from such aesthetics:

Dress is a major issue, it's a real problem. My hair makes a statement, but it isn't all spiky and wild. One of the women where I work is a lesbian, she has hair like that and I really don't like it. That to me says, 'I am a lesbian.' . . . *I guess it's just the way she chooses to wear her hair.* (Ainley, 1995: 138, my emphasis)

Although this clearly warns against a simple conflation of aesthetics, desires and identities, nevertheless this account of the significance of hairstyle at work in terms of sexuality also shows how particular aesthetics may figure 'the lesbian' at work. But it also suggests that there is nothing essential

about these aesthetics, since there is a clear recognition that a 'lesbian' hairstyle is a choice which 'makes a statement' about sexuality at work. This case therefore makes visible that 'lesbian hair' is not an effect of *being* a lesbian, that is an effect of pre-existing 'individual' and 'personal' 'attributes' or of 'different ascribed identities' or 'characteristics'. Rather, stylized performances themselves *make* the lesbian at work. The figuring of the lesbian at work through workplace performances is also made clear in a further interview carried out by Ainley (1995). Here a woman describes working as a professional in a lesbian and gay organization as being 'paid to be a lesbian' (Ainley, 1995: 135) at work. She goes on to describe how this:

was frightening because you really have to perform. The pressure's always there at work, but this was different because the world was a lot more casual around work then. *Being a professional lesbian you just felt very visible*. But you felt like you had to say the right things, and god help you if you did anything off. (Ainley, 1995: 135, my emphasis)

While this work situation may be read as somewhat unusual, nevertheless what it again illustrates is a materialization of a visible lesbian identity at work through what here seem to be quite rigidly defined workplace performances.

For the nurse interviewed by Ainley discussed earlier, the issue of lesbian visibility in regard to aesthetic performances was particularly at issue when she left nursing and took a new job:

I didn't realize it at the time, when I went into nursing, how much I would hide behind the uniform and how comfortable I felt in a traditional female role, where I could be totally hidden. Nevermind that I used to walk with a bit of a sway or anything like that, I was in a dress with a little cap perched on my head. It wasn't really until I left the health service for another job that I realised I did not know how to dress . . . Or I did not know how I wanted to look, but I might well be accused of being lesbian and that bothered me. (Ainley, 1995: 137)

This example could be read as suggesting that for those with 'different ascribed identities', 'ascribed characteristics' or for 'Others' in relation to sexuality at work there is a 'concealment', 'camouflaging', 'masking' and 'hiding' of 'real' selves. But what seems perhaps to be more important here is not so much the issue of 'true' and 'false' selves, nor a transgression of this binary, but how the performance of workplace aesthetics may or may not locate this worker in terms of sexuality. Thus, while this former nurse identifies a particular hairstyle as figuring a lesbian subject at work, and believed that her nurses uniform did not figure her as such, her new job made her anxious as she did not want her stylized performances to fix her in terms of sexuality at work. Indeed, so strong was her recognition that

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stylized performances at work involved as she termed it 'labelling' (Ainley, 1995: 137) in terms of sexuality, that this worker described how she was not going to attend a work-related function 'because I don't know how to dress. I miss a lot of social occasions because of this. It is tied up with my sexuality, completely' (ibid.).

This example, along with the others I have drawn on here, illustrates not only that stylized performances may be constitutive of sexuality at work, but also that the issue of the positioning of lesbians as workers with 'different ascribed identities' or 'ascribed characteristics' or as workplace 'Others' who experience work 'differently', is an issue of workplace aesthetics. In particular, these examples suggest that what is at issue in regard to the figuring of the 'lesbian' at work is not so much the modernist idea that sexuality is the 'truth' of the person, but the more postmodern idea that stylized performances are constitutive of identity. Thought of like this, postmodern stylized performances of service work may be understood not as McDowell suggests as transgressing, subverting and challenging the binaries of sexuality and gender at work, especially the hetero/homo and the masculine/feminine binaries. For on my reading these stylized workplace performances do not seem to be 'progressive' in the sense of moving from a model of sexuality based on the 'truth' of our selves, to a fluid, mobile, multiple and moreover 'liberatory' sexuality at work. Rather, the cases of the 'lesbian skirt', 'lesbian hair' and the 'lesbian job' suggest that the commodification aesthetic in regard to sexuality at work needs to be read as *making* sexual subjects at work, subjects who neither pre-exist the commodification aesthetic or offer a new utopics in regard to sexuality. Thus it seems that while the categories of 'true' and 'false' cannot be invoked to understand performances of sexuality at work, neither can the tropes of old/new or oppression/liberation.

Yet my argument also suggests that at least in the case of service work the making of such sexual subjects does not concern a script of assimilation on the terms of mainstream sexual culture, or a simple heterosexualization of lesbian identities as Hawkes and others have argued in regard to the commodification of sexual diversity more broadly. Rather, the examples I have drawn on seem to suggest that the commodification aesthetic at work involves a clear recognition of diversity in regard to workplace performances. Indeed managers of workplace diversity are currently in the business of making visible, putting to work, recognizing and rewarding employee differences, including those of sexuality (see, for example, Powers and Ellis, 1995). In the United States, for example, the jeans manufacturer Levis aims to 'value a diverse workforce . . . at all levels of the organization . . . Differing points of view will be sought; diversity will be valued and honestly rewarded, not suppressed' (Hay, 1996). Workplace organizations are clearly then important sites of the writing of lesbian

bodies and identities, and therefore important sites of politics in regard to contemporary sexualities. Post-industrial workplaces where lesbians are 'going broadcast' (Griggers, 1997: 44) should therefore be understood neither to concern transgressive queer workplace cultures or the making of essentialist identity categories where 'lesbians' are understood to exist prior to their workplace performances.

## **Conclusions: aesthetics, sexuality and the politics of recognition**

So far in this article I have tried to illustrate how aesthetic performances may be key for the figuring of the 'lesbian' at work. However, one implication of this argument is that part of the issue of 'lesbians' experiencing work 'differently' may concern a kind of fixing of aesthetic styles in regard to sexuality at work. The case of the 'lesbian hair', for example, suggests that workers who perform aesthetics which concern signifiers of lesbian identity may be defined by such aesthetics in relation to sexuality. Thus, the worker who performs 'lesbian hair' is read as immanent in regard to sexuality at work. Specifically, her hairstyle is read by co-workers as saying 'I am a lesbian'. In other words this example suggests that some workers may get fixed in terms of sexuality at work in relation to the performance of particular aesthetic styles. In such cases other workplace performances of sexuality and gender at work may be denied, or perhaps more precisely, there may be an absence of recognition of such performances as such workers become immanently positioned at work in terms of specific cultural styles.

Some writers (see, for example, Diawara, 1998; Martin, 1994) have recently suggested that mobility in regard to cultural styles is constitutive of cultural resources. Diawara, for example, has looked at the ways in which a mobile or transtextual relation to different styles of masculinity is associated with new forms of cultural capital. And elsewhere I have suggested that such mobility in regard to performances of gender at work is constitutive of workplace resources (Adkins, forthcoming). This may have some important implications for a reading of the 'lesbian postmodern' at work. For while it may well be the case that the commodification aesthetic in relation to sexuality at work means that there is increasing 'lesbian' recognition in the public domain of paid work, that is, of signifiers of difference in regard to sexuality, the material I have presented in this article suggests that such recognition may however fix 'the lesbian' at work in relation to particular styles. Claims towards workplace mobility, especially mobility in regard to performances of sexuality and gender, may therefore be difficult to achieve. This raises some important questions about the efficacy of a politics of recognition in regard to sexuality at work. Nancy Fraser (1997) has recently argued that the cultural recognition of sexual and other identities

lies at the heart of definitions of contemporary justice, indeed that in contemporary 'postsocialist' political life, the struggle for recognition 'is fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict in the late twentieth century' (Fraser, 1997: 11).<sup>4</sup> Yet if, as the material I have presented here suggests, recognition at work in regard to sexuality makes visible only certain kinds of performances, and moreover lesbian identities are defined in terms of categories of immanence which dispossesses workers of mobility in relation to cultural styles, then perhaps justice is better conceived as involving not a simple recognition of sexuality at work, but as involving a politicization of the performativity of economies (Adkins and Lury, 1999). By this I mean that instead of assuming that all workers are in the same position to make visible stylized workplace performances in regard to sexuality, and moreover that such styles will be recognized in the same ways, those concerned with the commodification aesthetic in regard to post-industrial economies may do better to recognize that in workplaces where there is a recognition of sexual diversity the *terms* of such visibility are crucial (see also Mason, 1997). While Hennessy has argued that analyses which foreground the commodity aesthetic in regard to sexuality often make invisible certain injustices, nevertheless my argument suggests that to ignore the commodity aesthetic would not only make invisible an important site of the writing of the lesbian in postmodern culture, but may also ignore injustices of visibility<sup>5</sup> in relation to sexuality.

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### Notes

1. Hennessy is particularly concerned with queer analyses of identity in this regard. Indeed she argues that queer theory and activism may be understood as participating in the aestheticization of everyday life since the fetishization of identity found in queer is complicit with the project of consumer lifestylization. Mariam Fraser (1999) however has warned of the dangers of collapsing queer and lifestylization, especially since while the latter is often understood as a self-transformative project, queer theory is often careful to avoid a notion of individual intentionality. Fraser goes on to argue, however, that because both queer and lifestylization are based around a theatre of identity, and both tend to be concentrated within the field of visibility 'an equivalence may be forced between them' (Fraser, 1999: 117).
2. See also Binnie (1995) who has looked at the relationships between political economy, sexuality and urban space, and in particular the politics of exclusion from urban spaces of queer consumerism and the limits to queer consumer power.

3. Although here I am interested in analyses of work which consider sexuality in regard to the commodification aesthetic at work, it is important to point out that not all analyses of sexuality at work take place within this frame. In an excellent study Dunne (1997), for example, adopts some of the more traditional tools of sociological analysis to show how sexuality crucially affects occupational choices. And in *Homo Economics* (Gluckman and Reed, 1997) the tools of economics and political economy are mobilized to consider sexuality in regard to work and economy.
4. While Nancy Fraser notes that the struggle for cultural recognition of sexual and other identities is fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict, nevertheless she argues that cultural recognition needs to be supplemented with socioeconomic redistribution if all forms of contemporary injustice are to be addressed. She proposes a strategy of deconstruction and socialism to redress current injustices. As my discussion throughout this article highlights however, 'cultural' injustices cannot be easily separated out from those of 'socio-economics', especially in post-industrial economies and workplaces where stylized workplace performances constitute workplace resources.
5. Such injustices of visibility have recently been highlighted by Mariam Fraser (1999) in a discussion of queer politics. In particular she suggests that the emphasis on the visible in queer politics excludes those who choose not to be made visible and who do not want to be recognized. My analysis suggests further that such a politics must also recognize that the terms of visibility in regard to sexuality may not be neutral.

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### Biographical Note

Lisa Adkins is Research Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Publications include *Gendered Work* (1995) and the co-edited volumes *Sexualizing the Social* (1996) and *Sex, Sensibility and the Gendered Body* (1996). Recent articles have been published in *Theory Culture and Society* and *Economy and Society*. She is currently writing a book on flexible identities at work in regard to sexuality and gender. *Address*: Sociology Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Coombs Building, Fellows Road, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia. [email: Lisa.Adkins@anu.edu.au]