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Review

The lesbian complaint: On kinship, genre and being public

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Abstract
This article discusses lesbian relationships dissolutions and the stories about them. Applying a narrative approach, the critical reading of breakup stories which are conceptualized as dramas by their participants seeks to problematize the distinction between private and public, respectable and scandalous, normative and deviant, and constructive and destructive in order to discuss queer publics and some longings that are attached to them. While the contingency between the institution of family and the politics of belonging in lesbian and gay lives has been intensively scrutinized and criticized by scholars and activists alike, questions regarding the forms of publics and belonging that emerge as a result of kinship failure are yet to be explored. Building on in-depth interviews and inspired by critical intervention into questions of counterpublics, I ask how intimate stories of relational dramas are narrated in an era of compulsory happiness.

Keywords
Genre, narrative, performativity, politics of belonging, public cultures, queer kinship, separation

Introduction

In one of the scenes in François Ozon's film, *Photo de Famille* (1988), the protagonist shoots his family and then arranges the bodies on the sofa, posing for a family portrait or a family shot. The fatal shooting can be read dually as both the destruction of the family and its preservation and conventional presentation to the public (Kooijman, 2005). This

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problematization of the distinction between private and public, respectable and scandalous, normative and deviant, and constructive and destructive will serve me as an analytical vantage point in reading lesbian relationships' dissolution, the public sphere and some longings that are attached to it. Similar to the fatal shooting, the dissolution of lesbian relationships both 'kills' the relationship while presenting it to the public through constant social surveillance and questioning regarding one's relational status (Lahad, 2012). Suggesting that, similar to other intimate experiences, relational status is a central component of one's life story, the article charts the social scripts and cultural conventions for narrating it (Linde, 1993; Plummer, 1995). In what follows, I argue that queer dissolution stories are shaped by popular scripts of family dysfunctionality and relational drama, which render it legible. Furthermore, I argue that they turn the scandal into a common and aesthetically familiar experience (Kooijman, 2005), and thus, they subvert common and homonormative notions of recognition, of being public, and of belonging.

Concerned with intimacy as a public mode of identification and inspired by Lauren Berlant's (2008) *Female Complaint*, this article focuses on the power of collective experience to establish a public and shared language and explores how intimate narratives shape both public spaces and conventions of belonging. Berlant's 'complaint' theorizes minoritarian authorship of women, where particular lives are readable as exemplary of a kind of life, emphasizing non-dominant, historically subordinated voices as a genre of telling and belonging. This theorization of public space suggests that people are attached to each other by a sense of a common emotional world that is available to those marked by a history of being harmfully treated in a generic way and that this commonality shapes and generates an intimate public (Berlant, 2008). Through this public, claims Berlant, one might feel attached to strangers and might cultivate fantasies of belonging and an aspirational site of recognition. The 'lesbian complaint' continues this discussion by focusing on intimate narratives and by investigating the contingency of queer kinship, the public sphere and politics of belonging.

Research on relationship dissolution tends to focus on reasons for the failure of lesbian (and, generally speaking, gay) couples to endure within relationships, pointing to hostile social fabric, discrimination and the lack of institutional recognition and support (Beals et al., 2002; Kurdek, 2005; Riggle et al., 2006). This scholarly debate perceives breakups as an anomaly to be accounted for and, indeed, to be explained. Thus, it adopts narrow neoliberal values of inclusion through access to family rights and adherence to heteronormative kinship, whose most prominent value is endurance, which forms the 'ideology of authenticity', linking authenticity not only to biology but also to duration (Schneider, 1984; Weston, 1995). Such heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, family, ethical conduct and hope (Halberstam, 2011: 89). Hence, by perceiving relationship dissolution as an inevitable and unwelcome outcome of homophobia, the neoliberal sexual politics reflected in the effort to explain relationship dissolution among LGBT redefines gay equality as access to the institutions of domestic privacy that enable inclusion of particular gay and lesbian subjects (Duggan, 2002). Finally, this approach constructs homophobia and abjection of LGBT relationality as external injuries inflicted on gays, preventing them from belonging and enduring. The 'lesbian complaint', however, suggests that structures of belonging are more complex and less polarized, that injury might constitute communities and that (negative) affect is

an organizing structure of minoritarian belonging (Berlant, 2008; Eng, 2010; Kuntsman, 2009).

The neoliberal turn in gay life is reflected in gay narratives – out with tragic love and loneliness, in with lighter versions of gay life (Love, 2007a). It is emphasized in the turn to happiness and the proliferating scholarship on the science and economics of happiness, which is combined with the popularity of therapeutic cultures, marking happiness as a way of measuring progress and success (Ahmed, 2010).[1] Not surprisingly, one of the primary happiness indicators in this new science is marriage, which is considered to predict happiness: a finding that is also a recommendation, and a science that is also performative, and which redescribes what is already evaluated as being good, as good (Ahmed, 2010: 6–7). Gay normalization demands that gays and lesbians not only have to be like everybody else (i.e. get married, raise children, be consumers, etc.) but they also have to look and feel good doing it (Love, 2007a). For gays, argues Heather Love (2007a), the pressure to appear happy is even greater because homosexuality is traditionally closely associated with disappointment and depression, on one hand, and with 'choice', as in 'choosing whom to be with', on the other. Given this climate of emotional conformism, it makes sense to ask whether gays and lesbians still have the right to be unhappy (Love, 2007a: 54) and how exactly one may belong once life/stories do not adhere to neoliberal convictions of family bliss.

This contingency between the institution of family and belonging in LGBT lives has been intensively scrutinized and criticized by scholars and activists alike. Yet, questions regarding the forms of publics and belonging that emerge as a result of relational failures, rather than success, are yet to be explored. Building on 23 relationship dissolution narratives, retrieved through in-depth and open-ended interviews with Jewish-Israeli lesbians, this article engages with empirical data through critical and queer lenses in order to discuss the implications of failure for belonging.[2] The next section portrays the sociocultural context in which the stories are constructed and narrated, namely, the Israeli familist discourse and homonormative LGBT politics. The subsequent sections, Lesbian Drama, Queer Publics and Side-Affect, engage with analytical reading of the dissolution narratives and conclude with a theoretical discussion titled 'The Complaint'.

Nation and belonging

In Israel, kinship is belonging: Israeli Familism, namely, the centrality of the normative family in private and public life, continues to be produced and reproduced daily as the foundation of the social order and as a national asset (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002; Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner, 2013). Families in Israel are more stable than in most industrialized countries and tend to remain in close contact with their extended kin (Lavee and Katz, 2003; Rom and Benjamin, 2011). While innovations to family structure were introduced also in Israel, familism remains the identifying mark of Israeli society. In this context, the woman is constructed first in terms of wife and mother: her primary obligations are to give birth to children and to care for her home and family members, implying a gendered division of roles and authority (Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner, 2013: viii). Divorce is perceived as a failure or unwelcome deviation

that requires therapeutic intervention. Hence, despite the frailty of the postmodern family and its dependence on its members' willingness to stay together, the family in Israel is a central constituent of the ideological and institutional mechanism of the state (Berkovitch and Manor, 2016; Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002; Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner, 2013).[3] Furthermore, in Israeli society, constant social surveillance and questioning regarding one's relational status are legitimate and acceptable (Lahad, 2012: 181). Penetrative inquiries or expressed wishes for speedy recovery from singlehood are part of the discursive mechanism of Familism and its regulatory power, emphasized in everyday interactions. The pressure to address, in public, one's own relational status is intense to such a degree that it turns coupledom into a *collective* and *public* concern (Lahad, 2012).

It is not surprising then that Israeli LGBT institutional politics features The Family as the category and route for belonging. It identifies civil rights with access to heteronormative family rights and constitutes claims for equal citizenship based on assimilation into the heteronormative model of family as a naturalized variation of a fixed minority, arrayed around a state-endorsed heterosexual primacy and prestige (Gross, 2015).[4] This means that, in addition to shooting the family, lesbian separation also shoots any possibility of access to 'exceptional belonging' (Puar, 2007), namely, institutionalized heteronormative modes of queerness that are regarded as exceptional components of the nation, and through which LGBT gain limited access to partial civil rights and liberal tolerance, and are invited into nationalism. In this cultural context, being able to provide a coherent story of one's relational position is a mundane necessity, a daily labor of confessing and updating, emphasizing the contingency between kinship, the public sphere and belonging. The following analytical sections explore lesbian relational intimacy and breakups as a public mode of identification (Berlant, 1998: 283) and the identities and subjectivities they produce.

Lesbian drama

> And everything was so very dramatic, the way we like it. (Tamara)
>
> She told me that she's a lesbian, and that she has a girlfriend, and that she separated from her girlfriend during that year; all the usual telenovelas.[5] (Hadassah)

The telenovela is a Latin American melodrama that became popular in Israel during the 1990s. Alluding to a common practice and aesthetic convention ('all the usual'), my interview partners used 'telenovela' and, more often, 'drama' to point to an organizing principle and aesthetic convention of lesbian relationships. A telenovela emphasizes polarized moral forces, expressed in personal and familial terms, while extending beyond the biological family into all areas of social (and public) life (Gledhill, 1992 in Lopez, 1995: 260). This use of 'drama' and melodramatic excess emphasizes the ways in which collective yet individual experiences of pain are understood and reproduced through mass media popular culture (Berlant, 2008: 13). Indeed, my interview partners used lesbian separation and lesbian drama interchangeably as an idiom or a term that does not need further elaboration. Phrased as a grammatical construct state, 'lesbian separation' implies a causal and metonymic relation between that which is lesbian and that which is

dramatic and therefore doomed to fail, as emphasized by Tamara's generalizing statement: 'the way *we* like it' (my emphasis). Yet, 'drama' is used also to emphasize a state of affairs that is anything but clear, progressive, or linear:

> Correct me if I'm wrong, [but] according to your experience, [aren't] lesbians those who separate, [and then] after two hours get back together, and separate, and get back together again, and date someone else and after two years, are back again; that's the mess that's going on. (Alona)

Indeed, lesbian separation appears to be one of the most enduring experiences in lesbian lives. It is a form of relationality that is neither coupledom nor its expiration and seems to have the power to include other relationships within its scope, involving former and current lovers, in an ongoing 'saga', in the words of one of the narrators. While still coded as a separation in an effort to illustrate a transformation or a crossing, lesbian separation is performed as yet another genre of intimacy by incorporating a set of guidelines that determine questions of accountability, boundaries and ethics of shared spaces and care, on the hand, and by enacting a series of dramas, involving communities, families and friends, on the other. It is the attachment of 'drama', to the 'we' and the 'usual' in the stories that consolidate and validate its regularity, emphasizing the metonymic and metaphoric quality of drama and its pervasiveness in lesbian lives.

What seems to be interesting about lesbian separation is that whereas the narrators experienced heteronormative coupledom, that is, the imitation of normative protocols of intimacy, through different mechanisms of exclusion, rejection, abjection, compartmentalization and ambivalent tolerance enacted by their communities and families, it is the failures and public scandals associated with separation that were publicly staged and could not be easily dismissed. This trend, in which failure rather than success forces the public to recognize queer relationality, is evident also on the institutional level. For example, even when same-sex marriages were not recognized in the United States, same-sex couples who dissolved their relationships ended up undergoing divorce proceedings in court if questions of custody and property needed to be resolved, so forcing the courts to recognize them de facto and post factum as any married couple (Buchanan, 2006).[6] Similarly, in the United Kingdom, The Civil Partnership Act (2004), which preceded the recognition of same-sex marriages (2013), also includes a dissolution order, for which state responsibility is similar to a divorce decree (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 2004: 128). In Israel, where LGBT marriages cannot be legally performed, courts are nevertheless asked to attend to LGBT relationship dissolutions in relation to child custody or shared property (Hadar, 2001, 2007).

It is important to note that while the separation stories underscore failure and transgression, they also haunt 'success' stories, reproducing longings for assimilation and public recognition through endurance, emphasizing a normative and non-normative kinship mix (Butler, 2002). This concurrent existence of success and failure and the longing for public recognition it entails are articulated in the narratives through scenes of normative coupledom, witnessed, recognized and affirmed by a wider audience. Public recognition is thus used in a prescriptive way and as a measure against the pervasiveness of

separations in lesbian lives, as described by one of my interview partners on the occasion of her wedding, performed outside Israel:

> And I really felt, all of a sudden, the power of this whole thing called wedding, it was very [...] strong, it was very nice, I really liked wearing my ring and we really became a kind of an institution among our friends [...] [I mean] something you can count on, that will operate in a certain way, a kind of a project. [...] When we decided to have an open relationship [...] a friend told me: 'I'm not sure if it's a good idea. I really love [your relationship], I really love this thing, it is very important to me that it should continue to be like that'. [...] This hope [that relationships endure] is very important to people, because it is very, very despairing to start a relationship each time and then separate and start a relationship and separate, it's exhausting. [...]. I think it's also related to the [lesbian] community. [Our marriage] provide[d] some security. We also had a really nice home, and we created [...] a place that is pleasant and fun to come to and you build things together, and it has a future, and it has something positive [...]. And we were investing in what might be defined as taking care of the house, and it was (actually) taking care of the relationship, of cooking and inviting people to our home, and supporting one another. (Shachar)

The family is a project, a brand and a site of blessing for others who come within its powers, rendering publicness on lesbian relationality. This public is activated through domesticated intimacy that is expected to endure; a project that provides the larger community with a model for belonging and a cure for the despair embedded in separations. By their witnessing, the congregated audience validates the union as worthy of being witnessed. This is a recurring performative act as the audience keeps coming back for more. Their many returns to the beautiful and cozy apartment of the married lesbians resemble an act of pilgrimage. 'I really like this thing, and it is very important for me that it continues in the same manner', asserts a friend, who was informed that the exemplary couple has gone polyamoric. The successful lesbian relationship becomes a 'thing', fetishized and open to public scrutiny; a 'project', already appropriated by others who participate in maintaining its 'projectness', emphasizing the regulatory power embedded in normalization and integration of difference and diversity rather than through exclusion, prohibition and discrimination (Engel, 2011: 73–74). Such discourses underscore a peculiar kind of movement where the desire for the public is realized by actually shrinking the public sphere and redefining gay equality as access to the institutions of domestic privacy (Duggan, 2002). Yet, even in the context of domestic bliss, separation haunts the collective consciousness, a side-effect and *affect* that are both suspended and coexist. Halberstam (2011) proposes to look at such instances as a suspension of a coercion to choose between heteronormative prosperity or (social) death – a suspension that does not speak the language of linear agential power and instead articulates itself through the existence and potentiality of failure in queer life (p. 129). Concurrent with a representation of family bliss, an intimately disappointed intimate public emerges, whose members are already experienced in power, intimacy, desire and fantasies of transcending and flourishing (Berlant, 2008).

It seems that the pervasiveness and persistence of lesbian separation in lesbian lives cannot be divorced from relational endurance and success. In the narratives, separation evinces a folkloristic-like dimension articulating it as a feature of coupledom *and* of

lesbianism, making separation a metonym for lesbian identity or for lesbian relationality and making them indistinguishable:

> In the future, when we're fed up with each other, and we're bored, and we can't separate because we're lesbians. (Anat)

> I can say that we were in a relationship for a full year and then we were in separation for another full year. (Orit)

When I asked my interview partners about when a separation begins and ends, one of them answered, 'My separations start the minute I meet them'. Other narrators defined the unending quality of lesbian separation as 'classic', used the expression 'more or less separated' or described separation as the 'first chapter of the saga', all in order to emphasize that lesbian separation is by no means a polarized, linear or expiring event. Hence, while relationships do end, separations appear to linger. It is an undetermined position, a potentiality that awakens or is revisited, and might spread to include others within its scope.

Although occasionally celebrated in the form of 'chosen families' of ex-lovers who became friends, this amalgamation of separation with relationality is not always embraced as a queer victory over heteronormative protocols of time and family. There is a tendency to joke about lesbians' breakup processes, including suggestions that these tend to be quite long, drawn out, and at times, may last longer than the relationship itself (Weinstock, 2004). We do not know empirically whether lesbian couples take any more or less time breaking up than other types of couples, yet the transition phase from lovers to ex-lovers does not tend to occur in a clearly delineated time frame or sequence, and for some it might never reach closure. Nonetheless, the long duration of the lesbian breakup process reflects a common lesbian relational story (Weinstock, 2004: 208).

When it comes to separation, the traits of endurance and permanence become unwelcome. The desire for permanence collapses and is replaced by the desire for a separation in the most common, normative and linear sense. Hence, where never-ending separation is articulated as insane or 'lesbian', a final and complete ending is considered 'normal', desirable and a success, echoing hegemonic scripts of maturation (Halberstam, 2005). And while lesbian separation might not adhere to neoliberal convictions of management of life and the conventional logic of temporality, it is publicly scrutinized and evaluated, and thus offers a productive site for exploring the convergence and transformation of that which is 'lesbian' with that which is 'public'.

Queer publics

'You're not a lover till you blab about it', asserts Michael Warner (2000: 103),[7] arguing that the couple form is sentimentalized by public statements and the act of witnessing. One may also add that 'you're not an ex-lover till you blab about it'. Indeed, the nonlinear and culturally unintelligible lesbian separation provides endless opportunities to confess one's failures to either properly keep to the relationship or to end it. As I have elaborated earlier in the Israeli context, people are urged to tell their intimate life

narratives and to account for their relational status. The requirement for a relational 'résumé' emphasizes the pervasiveness of separations, as one is bound to tell and re-tell one's relational position or history, such as in the example of giving a relational account of oneself when dating:

> When you start dating someone new, usually, you [are expected to] tell what was before, but not at [a detailed] level. Surely not at this level. More like in a sentence or two. [...] This dynamic in first dates is very silly. [Because] you don't really know if it's going somewhere, or if it's just [another case of] 'let's get to bed already'. (Sivan)

> I [was expected to] present a 'résumé' to a [recent] date. [And then] you talk very briefly [...] bringing forth general outlines, noncommittal details, not really discussing the pain, not really discussing things, not discussing the shit, no. (Dalit)

As Ken Plummer argues, intimate narratives, especially sexually intimate narratives, construct a moral self. They establish an intimate or sexual citizenship, which bears a concern regarding the public sphere and traditional citizenship (Plummer, 1995: 151). Intimate narratives underline the contingency between private life narratives and public modes of telling since many intimate experiences have their fictions appropriated into daily storytelling (Plummer, 1995: 38). The dominant sexual storyline for LGBT would be the coming-out narrative, which is structured according to a progress storyline of homecoming, success and happiness (Plummer, 1995: 83). It is considered a desirable, if not the exclusive, LGBT apparatus for penetrating the public and negotiating belonging and is evident also in the work of a not-for-profit LGBT education and information center in Israel named Hoshen. Hoshen's main educational strategy is 'The Personal Story', a workshop facilitated by two LGBT individuals who share their life and coming-out stories, structured into a 20-minute narrative. The workshop aims to create 'a stereotype-free environment' by structuring a story that 'helps the audience relate' as well as 'sympathize with the difficulties and hardships LGBT had to face', ultimately constructing 'a positive LGBT role-model'.[8] Hoshen narratives converge two themes: on one hand, self-realization and individualism, and on the other hand, the progress storyline, which elaborates on the hardship of coming out, the prices paid, the satisfaction in self-realization and the reconciliation with homophobic family members (Kupper and Kaplan, 2010: 168). As one of the volunteers claims, presenting himself as a parent of two children turns him into 'normative' (unlike presenting himself as a person who has sex with multiple partners) and emphasizes the rules for producing normalcy in personal stories that are presented in public (Kupper and Kaplan, 2010: 166–167). These convictions and the unintelligibility of separation to normative belonging echo also in the stories told by interview partners who also volunteer in Hoshen:

> I never elaborate on [the separation] part [...] this is not the story I tell in Hoshen [...] I don't think I've ever talked about it. (Hadassah)

> [Ever since] I started volunteering in Hoshen [...] I've met plenty of lesbians and homosexuals, and I hear plenty of stories. That's what you do there, after all; tell a story [...] for 20 minutes, which is a rather short space of time [...]. So you construct the story and decide what you include in it, and after you've told it enough times, all of a sudden, it's very easy to think that

> this is your story [...] and you need, actively, to disassemble it and see what else happened there. [...] So we iron ourselves for the sake of our cause. (Anat)

'Ironing' oneself points to the common belief in the existence of specific scripts. It facilitates penetrating the public sphere and may extract the desired empathy, tolerance and recognition toward sexual deviants, associating progress, happiness and fulfillment with being public. This might imply that homosexuality continues to be understood as a damaged and stigmatized subjectivity that requires happy representations and success stories as a response to a history of injuries (Love, 2007b). As Butler (2001) argues, recognition is not always based on knowledge but on the apprehension of its limits (p. 28). The equation, put simply, is as follows: LGBT progress narratives are the measure for addressing inequality and homophobia by transforming a negative experience into a positive identity and thus creating a culturally coherent version of the deviant subject (Preser, 2011). But what if negativity haunts you?

Given the homonormative climate of emotional conformism, it makes sense to ask whether gays and lesbians still have the right to be unhappy (Love, 2007b: 54). Indeed, my initial interest in the act of storytelling intensified and became more urgent in light of the narrators' difficulty in constructing separation stories: either the difficulty embedding them in their lives, and in their life stories, or the difficulty of constructing a linear succession of events and the omission of details as well as large pieces of their lives (Preser, 2016). This twofold failure – to keep to relationships in the normative sense and to construct a coherent story that enables the narrator to claim and negotiate group membership (Linde, 1993) according to the progress storyline – provides fertile ground to explore gestures and encounters that have no canon (Berlant, 1998: 286) and to ask what happens once negative affects go 'public'.

Side-affect

Modernity is cluttered with all kinds of sexual stories (Plummer, 1995). These stories may employ literary genres that constitute a recognizable pattern (Gergen and Gergen, 1997: 168; Plummer, 1995: 50). They unfold and provide meaning in ways that parallel the ways in which other stories unfold and provide meaning and are 'genred' according to cultural genres of storytelling in a tragic, comic or ironic tone (Brunner and Weisser, 1991: 136; Randall and McKim, 2004: 239, 249). Social scripts of narrating are inscribed on bodies and construct identities; they reflect a greed for comprehensibility that we might feel impelled to use as a way of organizing and interpreting events and actions (Marcus, 2002). Yet, a genre may also stand for an aesthetic structure of affective expectation (Berlant, 2008: 4). Curious about the scriptural nature of lesbian drama, here named a side-affect in order to elaborate on the haunting presence of negativity and stigmatization, I asked Inbar, one of my interview partners, who kept using the term 'lesbian separation':

Ruth: Do lesbians experience separations that aren't lesbian separations? Because you mentioned 'lesbian separation' a lot.
Inbar: No.
Ruth: So there's only lesbian separation?

Inbar: For lesbians? Yes.
Ruth: So, there aren't separations that are not 'lesbian?'
Inbar: Not that I've noticed.
Ruth: Can you define lesbian separation?
Inbar: Making scenes. Really, just making scenes. [...] They [lesbians] somehow return to puberty, and that which looks tolerable at 15 [looks ridiculous] at 30. [I mean] enough, lady, didn't you commit suicide when you were 15? Enough, it's pathetic already! [Lesbian separation is] suicidal threats, and self-destruction, and stalking your ex, and enough! Lesbian separation [is] one long separation that continues and continues and continues and continues.

If separation is a lesbian script, drama is a genre of feeling and belonging. As Lauren Berlant (1998: 286) asserts, minor intimacies bypass the couple, which have been forced to develop aesthetics of the extreme to push these spaces into being by way of small and grand gestures. Hence, drama is a form of public intimacy, repeated, detailed and structured around a shared expectation to provide certain kinds of affective intensities (Berlant, 2008: 4). These affective intensities shape queer counterpublics and constitute them as different or alternative; indeed, they are potentially regarded with a sense of indecorousness (Warner, 2002: 86). Participants in these publics are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse. Furthermore, they stand in contrast to those who do not belong to it and who are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene (Warner, 2002: 88). As Berlant and Warner (1998) maintain, such publics are dispersed through unrealizable definitions, such as community and identity, and they index virtual social worlds by cultural forms that range from a repertoire of styles and speech genres to referential meta-cultures. Transgressive by the virtue of manifesting themselves through ways other than official or privatized forms normally associated with sexuality, queer counterpublics emerge through intense and personal affect (Berlant and Warner, 1998).

Inbar's incitement of lesbianism is attributed through her personal experiences and refracted through the general, so emphasizing the lesbian public as a site of recognition and reflection, of emotional contact and social dramas (Berlant, 2008). This convergence of the affective and the generic produces a common emotional world articulated here as 'lesbian', that is available to those who are marked by a history of being treated in a generic way and have survived by establishing an aesthetic and spiritual scene, producing vernaculars of belonging (Berlant, 1998: 10; Warner, 2002: 81). In the separation stories, excess is the genre of telling and generates stories narrated with heavy irony that demonstrate, in detail, the agonizing act of breaking up as well as the agonizing act of publicly narrating the reality of a relationship falling apart:

> I was insufferable. [...] I used to sit and eat my brain with a tea spoon: 'Did she call? She didn't call! [...] What was the tone [of her text message]? What is she doing now? Is she with someone else? Is she sleeping with anyone?' blah-blah-blah! My parents could not bear it anymore. Everybody hated me [...] But I'm constantly separating, I'm constantly talking about her, I constantly tell everybody, I'm constantly in separation. (Inbar)

> I think that when I say that I won't go into detail, it's because I could tell you this story now for three hundred pages, with most of the details. It means recounting every evening [we met], and the times she listened to me more and the times she listened to me less, and the times she hugged me with one arm and the times she hugged me with both arms; it's so lesbian. (Ofri)

Occupying public space in the generic emphasizes the performative act of separation storytelling as a public performance. Hailing lesbian drama as a mass media broadcasted genre (such as telenovela) does not temper the excess, but reframes it as a familiar and heavily consumed genre. Excess or drama form the meta-narrative of lesbian relationality and is produced as yet another lesbian regularity. Constituting it as a group identity enables its members to occupy public space in the generic, to mass as 'a-' and to become a multitude that makes a political deformation of public space (Baraitser, 2009). Here, the queer counterpublic is articulated by narratives that shape the conventions of belonging and provide confirmation, consolation and discipline through which particular lives are readable as exemplary of a kind of life (Berlant, 2008). It is an in-between space that is constituted by the concurrent stray from the local and failure to appear on the scene of the institutional, civic or ideological (Baraitser, 2009). Hence, Lisa Baraitser (2009) asserts, what is performed is that which spills out of the everyday experiences of managing intimacy in public, the uncontained aspects of human subjectivity in its affective dimension: 'the ways we are always already too much for each other; too much emotion, too much relationality' (p. 24).

The complaint

> [She] drove me home, we stopped, and couldn't stop kissing, just couldn't! I asked her: 'Are you coming up?' She said: 'No'. I said: 'Really?' She said: 'Yes'. So I said: 'OK, so we won't be typical lesbians, we won't exchange phone [numbers], we won't exchange surnames, [we] don't live in the same area, so we won't see each other, let's leave it as a really beautiful memory, a really good [memory], without tragedy'. (Inbar)

Antithetical to the 'typical' lesbian practice, 'without tragedy' underscores the dramatic potential of the scene: passionate kissing, difficulty to pull apart, a resolution not to realize the sexual tension and maintain anonymity to prevent future contact, which would inevitably lead to 'tragedy', emphasizing the scriptural and causal nature of the 'lesbian drama' as already inscribed on lesbian relationality. The 'lesbian complaint' has aimed to problematize the distinction between that which is considered conventional and public, as in the case of Hoshen's 'ironed' life stories, or the marriage ceremony and adoration of lesbian family bliss, on one hand, and that which is stigmatizing, negative and considered as belonging to the private on the other. The separation 'shoots' the lesbian family in the normative sense; it also 'shoots' access to belonging and exceptional citizenship. Yet, the drama and scandal of the never-ending separation blur the opposition between the public and the private and include private queerness in the public image of the family portrait (Kooijman, 2005: 85).

The 'lesbian complaint' is concerned with discourses of disappointment – disappointment with the world and disappointment with lesbianism. The intimate public created by

this complaint is based on the circulation of intimately disappointed intimate narratives and representations expressing commonalities and likenesses arising from shared histories and ongoing actions (Berlant, 2008). This belonging is claimed through the production of a generality among women or among lesbians in the case of this study, creating, to paraphrase Berlant, aesthetics of excess and a universalist icon of the lesbian who loves and suffers. Although this study is not about mass media culture and its consumption, it charts the narrative symptoms and rhetorical strategies for accounting for that which is recognized as failure. The lesbian complaint does not demonstrate, nor can it be read as a straightforward case of reproducing an essentialist identity and internalized homophobia. Rather, it emphasizes how belonging to an intimate public is a condition for feeling in general (Berlant, 2008: 13). The 'complaint' offers an intimate and messy bridge to a world of experiences and a history of queer failures that is removed from us by the ideology of (enduring) happiness (Halberstam, 2011: 104).

Similarly to other narratives of social trauma that affect and incite identity, separation stories dissociate from the traditional protocols of signification and are accompanied by an excruciating, affective intensity that eludes, while simultaneously demanding, symbolic inscription (Eng, 2010: 168). They suggest that unrepresentability is a material necessity, which requires making room for another kind of story, one that performs the realities of emotions, that includes humor, resistance and abjection and that expands the emotional archive (Cvetkovich, 2003: 23). Separation stories offer maps of desire that render the subject incoherent and that provide a better escape route than those that lead inexorably to recognition (Halberstam, 2011: 130). They also suggest that disappointment is not the opposite of fulfillment and that incitement does not contrast with belonging (Berlant, 2008; Kuntsman, 2009).

Indexing affect as the organizing structure of storytelling may enable affect to come to *supplement* the story as the way-it-really-was by providing another language for loss and damage (Eng, 2010: 170–172). As David Eng argues, affective predicaments allow the connection between affect (excess), genre (drama) and the act of storytelling to read the coexistence between restricted narratives, on the one hand, and excessive and detailed dramas with their lingering emotions on the other. Although not adhering to the homonormative logic of recognition, the separation narratives demand their own epistemological coordinates, not as a mode of recovery (Eng, 2010: 183–184), but through the construction of injurious speech acts and drama. This form of belonging is by no means an assimilative project, a project of institutionalizing the deviant relationality, forging acceptance or acquiring respectability. It does not neutralize identity, 'iron' it, or normalize the story as a means for recognition and tolerance. Rather, it is a reworking of negativity and failure, restoring the capacity to be public and producing queer belonging.

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Notes

1. For example, the first paragraph of the World Happiness Report 2016, which was put out by the United Nation (UN) states: 'Increasingly, happiness is considered to be the proper measure of social progress and the goal of public policy'. See http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/03/HR-V1_web.pdf
2. The interviews took place between April and November of 2008, in various locations throughout Israel and in different settings according to the wishes of the narrators. My interview partners were all Jewish citizens of Israel, aged 22–53 years. The majority lived in the center of Israel during the time of interview (i.e. in the Greater Tel-Aviv metropolitan area and the Sharon area). Only two resided in rural areas, one of them in a particularly secluded location in Israel's periphery.
3. The family is produced and reproduced through the centrality of heterosexual marriage according to Orthodox Jewish matrimonial law, by the enhancement of the birth rate (of Jewish women) as a strategic national objective of the Jewish state, by gender inequality in the job market and by welfare regulations, which create a correlation between divorce and poverty, especially in the case of families headed by women (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002). See also Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner, 2013. A current example of the entanglement of family, blood and nation is evident in the creation of the Biological Will™, by Irit Rosenblum and New Family, a family rights advocacy and litigation non-governmental organization (NGO) in Israel. The Biological Will documents individuals' desire for use or disposal of sperm, ova and embryos in the case of death, incapacitation or infertility. This initiative follows Rosenblum's proposal to establish a sperm bank for Israel Defense Forces soldiers (see http://www.newfamily.org.il/en/biological-wills/).
4. By focusing on 'soldiers and mothers', Israeli lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) struggles for equality have preserved, rather than challenged, the existing social order. Targeting institutions that lie at the center of the Zionist-nationalist ethos, such as the army and the family, activists have played along the homonormativity and homonationalism trajectories (see Gross, 2015: 9–10; Kadish, 2005: 234–235).
5. The telenovela is a Latin American soap opera that became popular in Israel during the 1990s.
6. With the exception of not necessarily being treated unequally in regard to tax, property and child custody laws.
7. Citing Robert Gluck.
8. See http://www.hoshen.org/index_en

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