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The sexed facets of ordinary signs

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Whither linguistic landscapes?

The sexed facets of ordinary signs

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Abstract

The main argument of this article is that Linguistic Landscape (LL) scholarship has largely ignored – erased even – gender and sexuality, two important axes of power along which public spaces are structured, understood, negotiated and contested. In order to partly redress this academic oversight, this article investigates a small data set of banal sexed signs, mundane semiotic aggregates, which, precisely because of their fleeting and unassuming character, can easily be ignored, but nonetheless "(in)form our understandings and experiences of [gender,] sexuality and subjectivity" (Sullivan 2003: 190). In doing so, the article also argues for the importance of incorporating queer theory into the analytical apparatus of Linguistic Landscape research, because it provides us with a valuable theoretical lens through which to unveil the operations of power in relation to gender and sexuality (and other social categories) in public space.

Key words: gender; linguistic landscapes; place; queer theory; sexuality; space

1. Opening the scene

Originally employed in an article by Landry and Bourhis (1997), the expression "linguistic landscape" [1] has not only gained currency as a key theoretical notion in the study of the sociology of language; it has also established itself as a strand of academic inquiry in its own right, complete with multiple journal articles, edited collections and monographs, an annual conference and, in the near future, its own journal. That being said, the notion of "linguistic landscape" is somewhat of a "floating signifier" (Hall 1997). Different scholars assign different meanings to it, resulting in a wide variety of methodologies (see Shohamy and Gorter 2009; Jaworski and Thurlow 2010).

A diachronic glance at the development of this academic field reveals that some earlier studies followed large-scale, quantitative approaches. For example, some investigations explored how many times different languages occur separately or together in urban environment "public texts"[2] (Sebba 2010) such as street names, shop signs or advertising billboards in underground stations (see in particular Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Backhaus 2007; Lanza and Woldemariam 2009 for a rare example

of a rural linguistic landscape). These numerical tokens are interpreted as indicators of larger ideological and political language processes. As such, the relatively strong presence of English and the absence of Arabic in Jewish areas of Israeli cities is understood to be the concomitant manifestation of globalization and Israeli nationalism (Shohamy 2006). In many ways, this early work was radical because it drew our attention to public signage, rather than policy documents, as the tool through which language policies are not just implemented, but are also contested and resisted.

Recently, however, research on public signage has taken a more qualitative turn. Relying on smaller data sets, studies have highlighted the importance of transcending the purely linguistic element of public texts so as to also grasp their multimodal and multi-semiotic nature. This has resulted in a focus on the dynamic interplay of language, visual elements and other semiotic means in public signage (see e.g. Stroud and Mpendukana 2009; Pennycook 2010). Moreover, Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) have urged us to engage more seriously with the "material" conditions underpinning sign production as well as the enabling and constraining aspects of the spaces in which these material and semiotic objects are located (see also Blommaert and Huang 2010). This qualitative turn has also entailed a shift of attention from static items to mobile artefacts such as advertisements on public transport or even T-shirts (see in particular Reh 2004; Coupland 2010; Sebba 2010).

Finally, most current work also takes an ethnographic sensitivity to public spaces, one that is not limited to critical analyses of texts *per se*. Instead, the emphasis is on understanding the human-sign interface, thus exploring the different and very complex ways in which individuals perceive and engage with public signage in their everyday lives (see Blommaert 2012; Leeman and Modan 2009; Malinowski 2009; Todd Garvin 2010; Trumper-Hecht 2010; Stroud and Jegels 2013).

Whether taking quantitative or qualitative approaches, this body of research has largely ignored – erased even – the gendered and sexualised nature of public space (see however Goffman [1977], an important precursor to theorizing the gendering of public spaces; see Leap [2005]; Stroud and Mpendukana [2009]; Piller [2010] for notable exceptions; see also Jones [2009] and King [2012] for important contributions to the study of gender, sexuality and place in virtual environments). Related to this, what should also be flagged up is the *absence of feminist[3] epistemologies* from the Linguistic Landscape field as a whole (see Piller [2010] for an exception). This neglect is particularly remarkable considering that the related field of cultural

geography has produced a burgeoning feminist literature on space/place, gender and sexuality over the last thirty years (e.g., Massey 1994; Bell and Valentine 1995; Oswin 2008; Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Tucker 2009).

Why is this the case? A most obvious answer can be found in the disciplinary origin of Linguistic Landscape as a radical offshoot of research on language attitudes (Landry and Bourhis 1997) and language policy (Shohamy 2006), two strands of sociolinguistic inquiry which have traditionally been less concerned with gender and sexuality than with other forms of social categorization such as ethnic and national identity (see however Bengoechea's [2011] work for a notable exception). Read from a language policy viewpoint, it is rather unsurprising that scholars analysing the built environment have focused nearly exclusively on the multilingual aspect of signage, a semiotics that is often quite straightforwardly tied to ethnic tensions in the nation-state but does not lend itself equally easily to reflections on gender and sexuality. Such oversight, however, is not innocent, as it has inadvertently contributed to shaping the directions of Linguistic Landscape inquiry, thus failing to account for some important facets in which public spaces are structured, understood, negotiated and contested.

As the title suggests, this article is programmatic in nature in that it is built on the assumption that gender and sexuality *should* be brought onto the map of Linguistic Landscape research to a larger degree than has been done thus far. This academic imperative is particularly pressing if we agree that a linguistic landscape is a "public space that reflects social processes of articulation of power" (Lefebvre 1970). As a vast body of feminist scholarship has illustrated (see Cameron and Kulick [2003] and Bucholtz and Hall [2004] for overviews), sex – both in the sense of male-female difference and as a synonym of erotic and reproductive practices – is not simply a "natural" aspect of one's life, but is a deeply social construct as well as a crucial "vector of oppression" (Rubin 1984) in both private and public settings.

In highlighting the need to pay more concerted attention to gender and sexuality in public space, I also argue for the importance of employing a particular type of feminist approach – a queer[4] theoretical lens – through which to read "public texts" (Sebba 2010). As will become clearer in the following sections, queer theory provides us with an important analytical toolkit to unpack the operations of power in relation to gender and sexuality (and other social categories) without falling into too easy conflations between "processes" (a man's/woman's desire for another man/woman), on the one hand, and "identities" ("gay"/"lesbian"/"heterosexual"), on the other.

More specifically, queer theory will be employed in this article in order to deconstruct a small sample of what I call *banal sexed signs*. This is a term which brings together Baker's (2008) notion of "sexed texts" with Billig's (1995) conceptualization of "banal nationalism". "Sexed texts" is a useful notion which captures the textual manifestations of the intersection between gender and sexuality. Unlike Baker (2008), however, I employ "sign" rather than "text" in order to strategically capitalize on the semantic ambiguity of this term. In a broader sense, the word "sign" surpasses the purely linguistic to encompass the complex social semiotic guises in which gender and sexuality can be encoded. At the same time, "sign" also carries a narrower, more material meaning of "an inscribed surface displayed in a public space to convey a message" (Backhaus 2007: 4–5). As will be shown in the examples below, it is this semiotic/material relationship that is crucial for understanding the gendered and sexualized nature of linguistic landscapes.

Banal nationalism captures one of the most elusive forms of ideology, namely the subtle daily reminders of national belonging that go undetected such as a "flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (Billig 1995: 8). By the same token, *banal sexed signs* are those mundane semiotic aggregates, which, precisely because of their fleeting and unassuming character, can easily be ignored, but nonetheless "(in)form our understandings and experiences of [gender,] sexuality and subjectivity" (Sullivan 2003: 190; see also Thurlow and Jaworski [2011] for a similar appropriation of Billig's term, albeit in a discussion of globalization).

I have been intentionally selective in choosing a small, fairly motley assemblage of "signs" which I have encountered in recent travels (2010-2012). In justifying the choice of this dataset, I do not stake any claims of representativeness or generalizability. Rather, in line with Pennycook's (2012) rationale underpinning the usage of personal data in the study of language and mobility, my own experiences vis-à-vis certain textual artifacts should serve as "an incitement to reflect" (Pennycook 2012: 35), a stimulus to "to think otherwise" (Pennycook 2012: 34; Hoy 2004), or, as I would suggest, to *think queerly* (Fryer 2012; see also Livia and Hall [1997]; Motschenbacher [2011]; Nelson [2012]), thus bringing the potential to open up new avenues of Linguistic Landscape investigation.

This methodological tactic is underpinned by the belief shared by ethnographers and other qualitative researchers that "descriptions and explanations […] involve selective viewing and interpreting that are based on one particular way of seeing the

world" (Haglund, 2005: 30). As such, "researchers cannot be neutral, objective or detached from the knowledge they are generating" (Haglund 2005: 30). Recognising the partiality of knowledge, however, is by no means tantamount to overlooking the importance of academic rigour – an exercise that, according to poststructuralism, ethnography and other strands of qualitative inquiry, requires the researcher to be self-reflective, "rather than to employ amnesia and poor arithmetic whilst claiming academic neutrality" (Heugh 2003: 39).

It is in this self-reflective spirit that I want to first provide a sketch of my own ideological trajectory, followed by an outline of the queer theoretical and political assumptions that inform the analysis of three very diverse examples of banal sexed texts: a newsstand at Dulles Airport in the US, two T-shirts in a shop window in Stockholm, Sweden, and a coffee-shop in Johannesburg, South Africa.

2. The "I" on the scene

Mobility, homosexuality and queer thinking are perhaps the most apt key words to describe my adult life trajectory. As an Italian national who, after leaving my country of birth at the age of twenty-five, has resided in five other sociopolitical contexts and visited many others, I have constantly experienced a strong sense of being "out of place" (Said 1999; Pennycook 2012). This is a form of bodily and intellectual restlessness, which not only manifests itself as a "sense of never quite feeling at home, never quite knowing what those long-term insiders are talking about" (Pennycook 2012: 29); it also takes the form of a more radical project of enduringly going against the grain (Stroud 2001) and breaking the rules of the game (Bourdieu 1992), thus "constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others" (Said 1994: 4). As Pennycook (2012) points out, it is the constant encounter with the "Other" that fuels the desire to always question givens and opens up the "possibility of thinking otherwise, of seeing other possibilities" (Pennycook 2012: 47) than one's own.

More specifically relevant to this article, I have taken as a given since childhood that my erotic and emotional desires and fantasies are directed towards men, rather than women. Therefore, my post-pubertal, open self-identification as a *gay man* was a fairly uncontroversial statement of the obvious. Whereas my openly gay identity made me sensitive and subject to homophobic comments and innuendos, I was less aware of – and at times even contributed to – the (re)production of gender inequalities and sexist behavior.

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Subsequently, however, encounters with a few politically radical activists in Sweden, together with a concomitant reading of feminist and queer theorists Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, opened up for me a completely new understanding of the ways in which gender and sexuality are deeply intertwined and performed in daily life. Through work informed by queer theory, I began to recognize that homosexual men can be complicit in the reproduction of the patriarchal order; it is also through queer theory that I started to see the distinction between sexual *processes* and *practices*, on the one hand, and sexual *identities*, on the other. In other words, I began to appreciate that a man's desire for and sexual activities with another man do *not necessarily make him gay*. This is because the conflation between processes and practices (desiring and/or having sex with a person of the same gender) and identity (calling oneself gay) is not as naturally self-evident as I had previously assumed, but is the historical debris of a particular sexual worldview which originated with the "birth of the homosexual" in 19th century Western thought (Foucault 1976).

Because of the strong impact that queer theory has had on the ways in which I currently perceive representations, objects and bodies – including my own body in space – I will now move on to present an overview of this heuristic framework.

3. Thinking queerly

Originally employed as a synonym of homosexual or as a homophobic slur, the term "queer" underwent a three-fold process of re-signification, re-appropriation and politicization in the United States during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period characterized by dissatisfaction on the part of many American non-heterosexuals with the kind of identity politics that had underpinned the "gay liberation" movement. The main critique raised from a queer standpoint was that gay liberation in the United States was an exclusionary political movement characterized by a racialized (=white), gendered (=male), and social class (=middle-class) bias which ultimately policed and excluded other forms of non-heterosexual identification. However, dissatisfaction with the sexual identity politics that underpinned gay liberation was only *one* component in the emergence and success of the word "queer". The other component was the HIV/AIDS outbreak, which not only galvanized non-heterosexuals in an unprecedented way but also helped them to start questioning the homo/hetero dichotomy (Jagose 1996).

It is in this historical landscape of political and social activism that "queer" was incorporated into the realm of academia and was joined to the more "respectable" word "theory" (Kulick 2005). Like any other theoretical framework developed in so-called "post-" or "late-" conditions (i.e. post-structuralism, post-modernism, late-modernity, etc.), queer theory is not a consistent, coherent, and all-encompassing conceptual apparatus. In other words, there is no such a thing as a queer theory in the singular. Rather, queer theory consists of many, very different, and at times apparently incoherent approaches. As Halperin puts it, "[q]ueer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence" (Halperin 1995: 61–62). But if all we have is a name, then we might ask ourselves: what is it that makes a specific academic inquiry queer? What kind of "added value" does a queer lens offer that other approaches don't?

Sullivan suggests that "it may be more productive to think of queer as a verb (a set of actions), rather than as a noun (an identity, or even a nameable positionality formed in and through the practice of particular actions)" (2003: 50; see also Livia and Hall [1997]). As such, queer can be thought of as a verb that problematizes "*normative* consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality – and that, consequently, is critical of all those versions of identity, community and politics that are believed to evolve 'naturally' from such consolidations" (Jagose 1996: 99; emphasis added). Underpinning the sceptical view of gender/sexual identity which is a key feature of queer approaches are the assumptions that (1) gender and sexuality have been "casually entangled in knots that must be undone" (Butler 1998: 225–226), and (2) "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (Butler 1991: 13–14).

Several remarks can be made on the basis of Jagose's and Butler's statements. Firstly, despite acknowledging that sex, gender and sexuality are separate categories, queer theory highlights that these constructs have been socially entwined in such a way that they have developed a "unique relationship" (Sauntson 2008: 274) with each other. Hence, a queer stance tries to draw attention not only to how biological sex (the dichotomy between males and females on the basis of organs of reproduction) is mapped onto gender (the opposition between men and women, masculinity and femininity) and how these dyads are in turn the foundations on which heterosexuality

rests (cf. Butler 1999 [1990]: 194). Rather, it also seeks to highlight how some of the ties between sex, gender and sexuality are socially (re)produced as "normal" and "desirable" (typically, the attraction between two allegedly opposite and complementary sexes/genders that underpins heterosexuality) whilst others are devalued as "deviant" and "unwanted" (usually, same-sex desire).

Secondly, queer theorists emphasize that an understanding of the social construction of normality versus deviance cannot be limited to unearthing the social conditions that enable and uphold *heteronormativity* (cf. Motschenbacher 2011), that is, "those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary" (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 55). Instead, it is more productive to think of queer as a more antagonistic form of dissent, which "rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (M. Warner 1993: xxvi). According to such a view, a queer perspective should also shed light on the ways in which certain forms of same-sex desire can *themselves* become normalized and legitimized over time (for example, monogamous, committed homosexual relationships) whilst others are (re)cast into the domain of abjection (cf. Bourdieu 1998) (for example, S/M and uncommitted, multi-partnered relationships).

Finally, because of their sceptical stance towards *all* versions of identity, queer approaches are *not* co-extensive with LGBTIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, asexual) studies, although there are of course synergies and intersections between the two. Scholarship influenced by queer theory is likely to be as concerned with casting a critical gaze on heterosexuality as it is with scrutinizing homosexuality and examining the complex intersections between the two (cf. Cameron and Kulick 2003: 149). Most crucially, thinking queerly is ultimately about "cruising utopias" (Munoz 2009), longing for a world beyond identity categories, something which might never happen but is nonetheless worth striving for because it "propels us onward" (Munoz 2009: 1).

Quite predictably, queer theory has not been without its critics. Speaking from the "borderland" position of a "new *mestiza*", Anzaldua has pointed out that queer theory has not been as "inclusive" as it originally promised. Instead, it has been largely the precinct of white, middle-class, homosexual academics, something which has led to "mak[ing] abstractions about us colored queers", and "limit[ing] the ways

in which we think about queer" (Anzaldua 1991: 251). Whilst this bias certainly characterized earlier work, race has increasingly been brought into the queer analytical spotlight (Puar 2002; Sullivan 2003; Elder 2005; Oswin 2008; Fryer 2012). For example, in my own research on an online community for men who are looking for other men in South Africa (Milani, in press), I have illustrated that, nearly twenty years into democracy, race still seems to be a key element structuring same-sex desire in post-apartheid South Africa. What counts as "normal sex" has a clear racial layering in that it implies erotic practices between individuals of the same race. This in turn reproduces, rather than challenges, the deeply ingrained process of *intimate self-regulation* (Foucault 1988) which was forged through the apartheid ideology of racial segregation. If erotic desires are the ultimate litmus test through which to gauge the degree of social transformation in a democratic South Africa, the results of this study testify to an embodiment of the *status quo* rather than of social change. This is particularly surprising considering that the "average member" of this online community is a male in his late twenties, someone who has lived nearly his entire adult life *after* apartheid.

Another critical point has been voiced by supporters of liberal LGBTIA politics regarding queer theories' scepticism about identity categories. Queer theory, so the argument goes, is an elitist enterprise led by a bunch of privileged academics, who, having gained rights thanks to identity politics, can now comfortably turn their backs on it and downplay or even deny the importance of sexual identities for people in "real" life. From this, it follows that queer theory does not contribute to – or even threatens – the ongoing political emancipation of sexual minorities. The problem embedded in such an argument is that queer theorists do not deny that "homosexuals exist; just as there is no doubt that women 'really' exist, or that men do. If anything, these identity categories are only *too* real" (D. Warner 2004: 324; emphasis in original). Instead, queer theorists raise a cautionary warning against a too optimistic reliance on sexual identities as the catalyst for social change. And this is neither an indicator of snobbish political apathy nor a token of "post-rights" ingratitude. The point that queer theorists want to make is that politics based on sexual identities can, in the best of cases, lead only to a temporary re-calibration of power inequalities, but will ultimately leave the homo/heterosexual binary intact and unchallenged (Yep 2003: 47). In order to achieve the radical project of deep social transformation of the *status quo*, queer approaches promote a questioning of the seemingly "normal" and

widely accepted nature of the homo/heterosexual divide itself, therefore destabilizing the very truth of that normality.

4. Querying gender norm(ality)

The first example which I want to analyse is a newsstand that I encountered in February 2011 at Dulles Airport, outside Washington DC in the US. What I thought would be an hour long wait before boarding the plane turned out to be a much longer stopover spent wandering around the outlets, restaurants and coffee-shop in the airport's duty-free area, idly attracted by the colourful allure of consumerist displays, one of which is the newsstand represented in the pictures below.

Figure 1 Men on the newsstand

Figure 2 Women on the newsstand

Based on a media ethnography of spaces of consumption in London, Iqani (2012) describes the newsstand as "a multimodal space in which […] its riot of words, colours and images reference and merge into one another as they jostle in juxtaposition to catch the eye of the consumer" (2012: 75). This vivid sketch resonates well with my own perception of the newsstand in the rather unassuming retail space at Dulles Airport. At first glance, there wasn't anything unique which would make this newsstand different from the many other similar displays of news offerings and 'lifestyle' publications in supermarkets, airports, and other commercial outlets around the world. One could even go as far as to suggest that these magazines and their material layout are quintessential examples of banal sexed signs, which appear so "normal" that they could have been overlooked. Yet, as mentioned earlier,

from a queer theoretical standpoint, "normality" is no less exempt than "deviance" from critical deconstruction, in fact quite the contrary.

What seemed "normal" was the gendered division that marked the spatial organization of the magazines on the newsstand: periodicals dedicated to a primarily female audience were positioned on a large shelf on the long left-side wall of the shop. Perpendicular to this, magazines aimed at a male readership were located on a much narrower wall facing the shop entrance. Of course, such spatial distribution could be said to be a reflection of the gendered logic underpinning the economy of "lifestyle magazine" production: women buy Cosmo, men buy FHM. It could be added that this layout might have been dictated by the interplay between the respective amount of men's vs. women's magazines and the material (i.e. architectural) constraints of that specific retail space. Put simply, there are more women's lifestyle magazines than men's; hence the former need to be placed on the largest available wall.

Either way, what is important is the *semiotic effect* of this spatial arrangement. If read through the lens of Butler's (1999) theory of gender performativity, the newsstand at Dulles Airport is not reducible to a passive reflection of a pre-existing sociological division along gender lines. Rather, it is itself performatively bringing a particular gendered order into being. Two interrelated ideological processes are revealed in such a performative act: (1) the "interpellation" (Althusser 1971) of separate gendered readers/viewers into visual and material consumption; and (2) the activation of deep-seated normative beliefs about the roles of the two genders.

To begin with, the most obvious semiotic device through which interpellation operates is the "demand gazes" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996) of the myriad of faces on the magazine covers. Inspired by Foucault (1980, 1988), Iqani (2012: Ch. 7) observes that front pages are not just a display of an ideal to be voyeuristically contemplated, but are also a powerful activator of an inner moral imperative: "thou shalt be like that" (cf. Berger 1972). Magazine covers therefore work as "paper mirrors" which "metaphorically reflect ideal selves to the viewer and provide the raw material for a reconstruction of self in the image of the face on the cover" (Iqani 2012: 155). As such, they are perhaps the most potent manifestation of the stealthy operations of modern power – not a loud, external, coercive reprimand, but an insidious internal whisper of self-monitoring and regulation (see in particular Iqani [2012: Ch. 7]; see also Thurlow and Jaworski [2006] for a discussion of how business

travel spaces are gendered, privilege is "normalized" and frequent flyer programmes market aspirational identities).

Quite predictably, the women on these covers are young-looking, beautiful, slim and mostly white (see also Machin and van Leeuwen's [2007] extensive research on *Cosmopolitan*).[5] By the same token, their male counterparts are also young and only slightly less pale, but they are larger, rugged and muscular.[6] This is an expected pattern of bodily representation. It confirms and reproduces the racially short-sighted, ageist (nearly gerontophobic) and fat-obsessed character of contemporary consumer culture (Coupland, 2009; Gill 2009); it also re-enacts an ideology present cross-culturally which views the two genders as complementary opposites: women are petite and need security; men are strong and need to protect (see Goffman [1976] for a ground-breaking analysis of the visual enactments of such gender stereotypes).

The activation and (re)production of a deep-rooted ideology of gender difference is further sustained by the position of so-called special interest magazines. Note in particular how *Popular Mechanics*, *Popular Science* and *Scientific American* are placed directly under *Men's Journal*, whereas *Bon Appetit*, *Fine Gardening* and *Furniture* are situated near *Woman's Health.* Such a choice is neither random nor innocuous because it subtly re-enacts a well-spread cliché in "Western" contexts that "hard" science and technical abilities are (and should remain) the prerogative of men whereas more "soft" skills such as cooking, gardening and interior design (should) belong to the female jurisdiction.

Overall, the psychedelic ensemble of gazes, poses, faces and bodies on the magazines' front pages at Dulles airport produced a silent cacophony of incitements: "look at me", "be like me", and "buy me". Most notably, these interpellations did not "hail" me *qua* passenger alone, but as a specifically gendered one. (Hetero)sexuality was not absent from this vortex of "synthetic" (Fairclough 2001) calls. On the one hand, it could be said that the heterosexual norm was momentarily disrupted by the direct gaze of the half-naked body-builder of *Men's Health* or the scantily dressed model of *Bazaar* who, from their paper podia, dispense captivating looks to *everyone* irrespective of the gender and sexual identification of the viewer. Put differently, no matter what the target audience of a magazine might be, the "economic (and perhaps almost ideological) exploitation of eroticisation" (Foucault 1980: 57) on its front page astutely capitalizes on both the homosexual and heterosexual "pornographic imagination" (Iqani 2012: 120) of the potential viewers. On the other hand, the

heteronormative order was securely restored as soon as I, bored by the long wait, thumbed through the patently heterosexual content of the advice columns in those very magazines that had offered me a queer hope of ambiguous desire.

5. Heteronormativity and its (dis)orientations

That gender and sexuality are subtly intertwined with each other emerged partly from the concluding section of analysis of the newsstand at Dulles airport. Leaving aside for a moment the erotic ambiguity of the gazes on front pages, media scholars have convincingly demonstrated that lifestyle magazines are deeply heteronormative in that they are built on and reproduce the belief that the world is exclusively and inevitably heterosexual (Gill 2009; Benwell 2002). However, heteronormativity is an insidious ideology that not only imbues the glossy, perhaps far-removed, pages of lifestyle magazines, but also pervades nearly every domain of daily life (Kitzinger 2005), including a shop window in a European capital.

The photograph below was taken in October 2011 outside a small retail store in one of the most crowded streets in central Stockholm, Sweden. For contextual purposes, it should be added that this shop is located on the main pedestrian thoroughfare that connects the commercial areas surrounding the Stockholm subway hub of *T-Centralen* with the tourist-crowded island of the Old Town (*Gamla Stan*). Similar to the case of the newsstand above, one could contend that there is nothing unusual in displaying two T-shirts with affective statements for Swedes on a shop window in the streets of Stockholm. It could be argued that this is but another local manifestation – imitation even – of a more global trend, which originated with the now historic 'I love NY' logo created to promote tourism in the Big Apple in the late 1970s.

Figure 3 Heteronormative?

The seemingly "banal" aspect of these sexed signs lies in the fact that the larger, loose-fitting, "men's cut" T-shirt carries a love declaration for women; conversely, the smaller, more tight-fitting, "women's cut" garment openly reveals affection for men. As queer theorists have reiterated, "a performance of heterosexuality must always be in some sense a performance of gender, because heterosexuality requires gender differentiation" (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 72). What is important to highlight is how gender difference is encoded in the materiality of the T-shirt (its shape), which in turn is embodied in the very name of the cut. This gender opposition is reinforced typographically through the different sizes of the typeface, which stand as a mimetic normative reminder that men are bigger than women.

In this context, it is also relevant to note the different graphic fill effects of the two hearts: plain red vs. the Swedish flag. With regard to the former, the red heart on the women's cut T-shirt is perhaps unsurprising in view of the well-spread stereotype in Western societies that women are the ultimate repository of emotions. Similarly, the symbol of the Swedish flag on the men's cut T-shirt is no less unexpected considering the deep masculinist character of any nationalist project (Yuval-Davis 1997; Nagel 1998). This nationalist semiosis, however, takes a less serious twist when the T-shirt is worn by its most plausible buyer – a tourist – something which can be inferred by the linguistic choice of English. In this case, the Swedish heart could be read as a symbol of a paradoxical act of national identification. After all, the tourist is not performatively turned into a Swede by the very act of wearing the T-shirt. Instead, the heart can be read as a multimodal manifestation of the fetish for an "authentic" souvenir (see Bucholtz [2003]; Coupland [2003]; Jaworski [2007] for discussions of the problematization of authenticity in sociolinguistic research).

Tourists aside, the two T-shirts are a material/semiotic micro-cosmos of a broader gender order in which men and women are seen as opposite but complementary extremes of a dyad. This, in turn, is a form of social differentiation which, according to radical feminism, is the pre-requite for heterosexuality to preserve its normative and incontestable status (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 46). From this perspective, then, one could conclude that the arrangement in the shop window was a material/semiotic materialization of a clearly heteronormative ideology: men desire women, and women desire men.

The following discussion, however, presents two problems inherent in this interpretation. Firstly, it focuses exclusively on the domain of representation, thus failing to account for actual consumer behaviour, a set of practices which do not necessarily reproduce and might even contest the gendered and sexual norm encoded in the T-shirts. Secondly, it relies exclusively on one particular bodily *orientation* (Ahmed 2006). In saying this, I draw upon a basic phenomenological insight that the ways in which our consciousness is directed towards material objects cannot be divorced from the positions which our bodies inhabit in space. As Merleau-Ponty has pointed out, the body is not "merely an object in the world, […] it is our point of view in the world" (1964: 5). And, because of its intrinsic bounded-ness, the body brings with it a specific "horizon" (Ihde 1990), a limit that "gives objects their contours and even allows such objects to be reached. […] The bodily horizon shows the "line" that bodies can reach toward, what is reachable, by also marking what they cannot reach" (Ahmed 2006: 552).

In this specific case, I was attracted to the T-shirts and not, say, the ice-cream freezer, because their text tickled my queer theoretical interest in issues of gender and sexuality. However, my perception of the T-shirts was constrained by my bodily position *outside* the store. Not only did my body determine what I was oriented to, but the shop window also acted as a horizon which "marks the edge of what can be reached by the body" (Ahmed 2006: 552). It was only once I entered the shop and started browsing through the actual stock *inside* the store that I was *dis*oriented by a very different scenario; "men's cut" versions of "I love Swedish boys" and tight-fitting T-shirts featuring "I love Swedish girls" were also hanging on the stand, albeit not markedly visibly. To use Doty's (1993) term, this discovery brought about a "moment of queerness", one of those instants that "destabilise[s] heteronormativity,

and the meanings and identities it engenders, by bringing to light all that is disavowed by, and yet integral to, heteronormative logic" (Sullivan 2003: 191).

Figure 4 Non-heteronormative?

It could be argued that the non-heteronormative T-shirts found inside the shop were material tokens of consumerist recognition of a lesbian or gay identity. As has been pointed out earlier, however, queer theory warns us against confusing "sexual identity" with "sexual desires". What's noteworthy about the T-shirts under investigation is the *absence* of overt sexual identity labels ("gay", "lesbian", "heterosexual") which would fix their referents into stable subject positions. Instead, these T-shirts invoked a more dynamic affective *process*, articulated through a multimodal combination of a linguistic and a visual element: the pronoun "I" and the visual icon of the verb "to love". Instability is fuelled here by the many concomitant, different referents that the pronoun "I" may take, coupled with the semantic ambiguity inherent in a love declaration. To overtly state one's desire or affection for someone of the same gender does not necessarily rule out attraction to someone of the other gender, and vice versa.

In sum, shifting the "horizons" of perception allowed for a more complex interpretation of the T-shirts. Phenomenologically, what had started as a critical orientation to a fixed heteronormative order ended in a pleasantly queer sense of disorientation.

6. Utopian dreams, identity falls

In line with current developments in research on the semiotics of public space (see in particular Stroud and Jegels, this volume), I would argue that a queer investigation of public signage cannot be limited to a critical multimodal analysis of objects in public space such as the newsstand at Dulles Airport, nor should it limit itself to unearthing a researcher's own experiential understanding of particular material objects like the T-shirts in Stockholm. Instead, it should also entail a sensitivity to the experiences of those people who have created, pass through or live in those spaces, and thus make sense of them on a daily basis. Such an approach is particularly apt to unearth grassroots understandings of the relationships between space, politics, identity and desire with regard to gender and sexuality.

To this end, I now move on to an examination of a coffee-shop which opened two years ago in the main commercial street in Melville, a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa where I live. In a local travel writer's words, "a bit rough on the edges, [...] Melville lays claim to some of Jozi's most enthralling places" (Gardner 2010: 51). Consisting of three major commercial thoroughfares (Main Road, 7th Street and 4th Avenue), this suburb can be described as an historical "urban village" where second-hand shops and niche establishments trading design, furniture and clothing jostle with restaurants, coffee-shops and late-night bars.

Against the backdrop of this urban landscape, the opening of another recreational business might sound fairly trivial. Since its inception, however, *Love & Revolution* has had an overt social and political purpose, which is summarized nicely on the homepage of its website:

> EXTRACT 1
> Love and Revolution is a space where change happens. It is a space where like minded and not so like minded people come to share, to argue, to agree, to debate, to eat while debating, to read, to open up their minds but most importantly, to respect.
> (www.loveandrevolution.co.za)

This description is strongly reminiscent of Habermas' (1969) characterization of the political role played by 18th century salons, coffee-shops and voluntary organizations in fostering the rational-critical debate that is a pre-requisite for modern democracy to

develop. Obviously, such a political drive is also encoded in the "revolutionary" designation of this shop's name. What is meant by "revolution", however, became clear to me only once I interviewed Ishtar, one of the business's founders, a 26 year-old, self-identified "female-bodied", South African Indian lesbian, who declared that revolution is a "day-to day thing", and went on to elaborate as follows:

> EXTRACT 2
>
> I needed to get away from this whole Struggle mentality, the fact that if you are not struggling, that if your life isn't miserable, you are not fighting hard enough. And I'm like, that's bullshit, like, why can't I love my job and work in civil society and have a personal life and not be an alcoholic?
>
> […]
>
> So I decided to take a two year break, and opened *Love and Revolution* and trying and do activism on a smaller scale*,* create a space where people feel safe in and talk about their things, and create a network where people can help each other out, and have each other's backs, and have a safe space where people can come to and, like, share [giggles], just share, just talk, because sometimes that's what people need, *they just need to talk*.

Drawing on her personal experience as an activist within NGOs against gender violence, Ishtar raises one of the many dilemmas experienced in politically active, young, post-apartheid South Africa, namely the clash between (1) the survival of an old frame of reference (i.e. the "Struggle", the fight for democracy) in defining what counts as a meaningful political act; and (2) a new socio-political context where the priorities of political engagement have shifted markedly, and where young people are increasingly buying – quite literally – into a depoliticized system of consumerist aspiration (Stroud and Mpendukana 2009). Without falling into political apathy, Ishtar nonetheless rejects the "Struggle" grand-narrative of political activism (see also Dlamini 20010) and instead proposes a more *localized* type of social intervention through a consumerist channel, one which relies less on confrontation than on respectful "conviviality" (Gilroy 2004; Williams and Stroud, ms) as a springboard for political action. Or, as Ishtar herself would say, "there cannot be revolution without love, and love itself can be an act of revolution".

Read together, the website description and Ishtar's narrative reveal an interesting intersection of consumerism, affect and rationality, of feeling and debating in the politicization of a public space. In this sense, the creation of *Love & Revolution* is an empirical testimony to Williams and Stroud's more theoretical reflections on the ways in which material/semiotic spaces may "create conditions of local neighborhood engagement and new emotional geographies of place for a revitalized 'politics of civility'" (Williams and Stroud ms), or it is at least an attempt at such.

However, rational and affective debate is regulated by a particular discursive regime within the premises of *Love & Revolution*, as emerged quite clearly when I first entered this space and was met by a large sign facing the entrance (see image below).

Figure 5 Inside Love & Revolution

Evidently, this is a warning sign that polices this specific space, cautioning against any discursive manifestations of *–isms* (ageism, sexism, etc.). The message encoded in the sign is that everyone, irrespective of their self-identification and views – those "like minded and not so like minded people" – is welcome in this space provided that they watch what they say. Yet, Foucault (1976) and Butler (1997) have observed that any act of prohibition, whether it comes from oppressive centres or from liberal or libertarian margins, is bound to create an impasse, for it generates those very categories that it seeks to repress (see also Milani and Jonsson [2011] for an empirical

example in a school context). What is particularly remarkable is how gender and sexuality are *not* overtly invoked in the representation of *Love & Revolution* on the home page; nor are they mobilized on the windows of this coffee-shop through iconic visual references to the feminist movement or the LGBTIA community. In other words, *from the outside*, *Love & Revolution* could qualify as another "banal sexed sign" which can easily go unnoticed. But gender and sexuality are indeed brought into being inside the coffee-shop through the warnings "no sexists" and "no homophobes".

The gridlock created by trying to make identity categories less salient as a defining factor of a particular space, on the one hand, and yet falling back onto them, on the other, emerged even more strongly in the interview with Ishtar after I asked her whether she thought of *Love & Revolution* in terms of a "gay and lesbian" space.

> EXTRACT 3
>
> People assume that it is a gay and lesbian place purely because it was run by two lesbians but, I don't know. I shy away from that definition purely because if you look at things that are defined as gay and lesbian spaces, if you look at first Friday, the lesbian party, that happens once a month, I would not want to be associated with them. They are [giggle], there's a horrible music, a whole bunch of only white lesbians that hang out at a big bar and/or try and fuck each other [giggle].
>
> […]
>
> I try and stay away from using one thing to base my identity on, so I don't really introduce myself going: hi I'm Ishtar, I'm lesbian. I like many things, I listen to different types of music, I read, I, like, there are so many other things that define me that it annoys me when I go into these, like, what I call gay and lesbian spaces, and that is how… you are identified basically on who you are fucking, who you are gonna fuck, and that is the core of your identity, and I'm like, I am so many more things than that.

Clearly, Ishtar does not dismiss the category of "lesbian" altogether. Rather, through a de-essentializing discursive move, she highlights how the Self is not reducible to a single axis of categorization ("lesbian"), but instead consists of multiple co-existing layerings. Notably, Ishtar emphasizes *practices* – encoded linguistically through the verbs "like", "listen to", "read" – as fundamental for expressing her sense of self. Yet

20

at the same time, she rejects facile equations between one's sexual activities and one's identity. This, in turn, is the basis on which she questions the process through which people commonly transfer her choice of sexual identification onto *Love & Revolution*. Taken together, these discursive moves allow Ishtar to *downplay* the relevance of sexual practices and identities as the only defining factor of herself and the space that she has created.

Of course, it is a truism that discursive moves of self-presentation always entail more or less overt acts of positioning of the "Other" (Davies and Harré 1990). In the case of the narrative above, descriptions of one's space come with a strategic positioning of the "Other" space. Having refused a sexual identity label as a defining factor of *Love & Revolution*, Ishtar proceeds to offer her view on what she considers "gay and lesbian" spaces, one in which sexual identity is overlaid with race and sexual promiscuity. What is particularly interesting is how Ishtar relies on an "intersectional" move through which a sexual identity category triggers a racial category in the description of space. In this way, homosexual spaces become essentially synonymous with whiteness.

To conclude, *Love & Revolution* promised in many ways to be a "queer space" which aimed at creating localized forms of political engagement by fostering a respectful, "convivial" debate and trying to transcend reductionist homo/hetero oppositions. Such an undertaking was indeed satisfied through the many events organized there, including a "Sex Toy Workshop" which gathered a sexually and gender diverse audience. Queerness manifested also in the general atmosphere of radical "open-mindedness" which I experienced during my afternoon visits in search of an "alternative" space in an otherwise conventional strip of suburban "restaurants and […] late-night bars, each trying to emulate the other" (Gardner 2010: 51).

As Duggan points out, queer enterprises "carry with them the promise of new meanings, new ways of thinking and acting politically – a promise sometimes realized, sometimes not" (1992: 149). It is this sense of insecurity that makes them queer. The examples above illustrate that treading around identity binaries is a slippery journey fraught with inevitable falls; it is a utopian dream which can be striven for, but realized only in short-lived moments, and thus can never be fully accomplished (see also Milani 2012). Moreover, and this is perhaps the most uncertain part of the story, *Love & Revolution* was recently sold, and the new owners relocated it into the premises of a Yoga Studio at the lower end of the same street. It is

unclear whether this space will uphold its political potential or whether radical (sexual) politics will be domesticated in the interests of the economy of a burgeoning New Age sensibility. This uncertainty, however, is after all the very spirit of what counts as "queer".

7. Instead of closing the scene

Whether with the help of a queer theoretical lens or any other feminist approach (see Mullany and Mills 2012), the main argument of this article is that gender and sexuality should be paid serious attention by Linguistic Landscape scholars, not least because of the political loading of these social categories. If Linguistic Landscape research is true to its radical roots of developing innovative approaches to language-political issues and aims to continue contributing to the understanding of the ways in which language is imbricated in the (re)production of power in public settings, I find it difficult to see how this radical enterprise can be realized without looking at the banal sexed signs which surround us.

I am reluctant to bring this article to a close by indicating precisely the directions in which the study of banal sexed signs should head. This hesitation is intentional because "uncertainty" is what has cropped up repeatedly in many queer theoretical writings (Butler 1993; Jagose 1996; O'Rourke 2011) – a form of insecurity, I should add, that is not viewed as negative, but rather as the *sine qua non* for queer theory to uphold its radical potential and not be domesticated. That being said, one glaring candidate of analysis was touched upon in this article but deserves more serious investigation, namely the *body*, its historicity and materiality in space. Perhaps a semiotics of bodyscapes (see e.g. Peck and Stroud, ms) is precisely what lies on the horizon of Linguistic Landscape research, allowing us to interrogate the fuzzy boundaries between "private" and "public" (cf. Gal 2002).

Notes

[1] An aspect of the controversy lies in the usage of the adjective "linguistic" instead of "semiotic". Whereas the former might convey a narrower perspective on language as "spoken and written" codes of communication, the latter includes other forms of meaning making such as visual. "Linguistic" is employed in this article in a very broad sense, encompassing all forms of meaning-making. Although this terminological choice is debatable, it is justified by the fact that "Linguistic Landscape" (LL) is the most institutionalized designation for the study of the semiosis in public space. As will become clear throughout the article, this choice has less to do with "majority usage" or with a desire to "fit in" than with an attempt to "queer", that is, to question, unsettle and partly re-signify an established disciplinary field.

[2] The public/private divide is itself contentious. Taking a feminist perspective, Gal has cogently argued that "'public' and 'private' are not particular places, domains, spheres of activity, or even types of interaction. […] practices. Public and private are co-constitutive cultural categories […], and equally importantly, indexical signs that are always relative" (2002: 80). As such the distinction between these two categories is fuzzy and unstable. What will emerge in the paper is not only that "public" spaces only acquire meaning through "private", "affective" stances, but also that the meaning of what is (visible from the) "outside" (say, a shop sign or a T-shirt in a shop window) depends on what is "inside" (a retail space).

[3] I espouse a broad definition of feminism in linguistic research as a critical standpoint which openly aims to unpack gender and sexuality "with respect to regimes of power and speakers' agency in relation to these" (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 486).

[4] There is no agreement among scholars about the relationship between "queer" and "feminist" thinking. Some are adamant in highlighting the divisions between the two (e.g. queer theorists are in favour of prostitution and sadomasochist (S/M) sex whereas feminists aren't). Cognizant of the differences, others prefer instead to emphasize the (radical) feminist heritage of queer theory (see Cameron and Kulick 2003 and Bucholtz and Hall 2004 for detailed discussions).

[5] Of the thirty-five (partly) visible female models in pictures 1 and 2, thirty-one are white, and only four are black.

[6] Of the eleven visible male models in pictures 1 and 2, seven are white, three black and one Latino.

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