Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation

Teresa de Lauretis

If it were not lesbian, this text would make no sense
—Nicole Brossard, L’Amér

There is a sense in which lesbian identity could be assumed, spoken, and articulated conceptually as political through feminism—and, current debates to wit, against feminism; in particular through and against the feminist critique of the Western discourse on love and sexuality, and therefore, to begin with, the rereading of psychoanalysis as a theory of sexuality and sexual difference. If the first feminist emphasis on sexual difference as gender (woman’s difference from man) has rightly come under attack for obscuring the effects of other differences in women’s psychosocial oppression, nevertheless that emphasis on sexual difference did open up a critical space—a conceptual, representational, and erotic space—in which women could address themselves to women. And in the very act of assuming and speaking from the position of subject, a woman could concurrently recognize women as subjects and as objects of female desire.

It is in such a space, hard-won and daily threatened by social disapprobation, censure, and denial, a space of contradiction requiring constant reaffirmation and painful renegotiation, that the very notion of sexual difference could then be put into question, and its limitations be assessed, both vis-à-vis the claims of other, not strictly sexual, differences, and with regard to sexuality itself. It thus appears that “sexual difference” is the term of a conceptual paradox corresponding to what is in effect a real contradiction in women’s lives: the term, at once, of a sexual difference (women are, or want, something different from men) and of a sexual indifference (women are, or want, the same as men). And it seems to me that the racist and class-biased practices legitimated in the notion of “separate but equal” reveal a very similar paradox in the liberal ideology of pluralism, where social difference is also, at the same time, social indifference.

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The psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality, wrote Luce Irigaray in 1975, outlining the terms of what here I will call sexual (in)difference, tells “that the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual.”

Within the conceptual frame of that sexual indifference, female desire for the self-same, an other female self, cannot be recognized. “That a woman might desire a woman ‘like’ herself, someone of the ‘same’ sex, that she might also have auto- and homosexual appetites, is simply incomprehensible” in the phallic regime of an asserted sexual difference between man and woman which is predicated on the contrary, on a complete indifference for the “other” sex, woman’s. Consequently, Irigaray continues, Freud was at a loss with his homosexual female patients, and his analyses of them were really about male homosexuality. “The object choice of the homosexual woman is [understood to be] determined by a masculine desire and tropism”—that is, precisely, the turn of so-called sexual difference into sexual indifference, a single practice and representation of the sexual.

So there will be no female homosexuality, just a hommo-sexuality in which woman will be involved in the process of specularizing the phallus, begged to maintain the desire for the same that man has, and will ensure at the same time, elsewhere and in complementary and contradictory fashion, the perpetuation in the couple of the pole of “matter.”

With the term hommo-sexuality [hommo-sexualité]—at times also written hom(m)osexuality [hom(m)osexualité]—Irigaray puns on the French word for man, homme, from the Latin homo (meaning “man”), and the Greek homo (meaning “same”). In taking up her distinction between homosexuality (or homo-sexuality) and “hommo-sexuality” (or “hom(m)osexualité”), I want to remark the conceptual distance between the former term, homosexuality, by which I mean lesbian (or gay) sexuality, and the diacritically marked hommo-sexuality, which is the term of sexual indifference, the term (in fact) of heterosexuality; I want to re-mark both the incommensurable distance between them and the conceptual ambiguity that is conveyed by the two almost identical acoustic images. Another paradox—or is it perhaps the same?

There is no validation for sodomy found in the teaching of the ancient Greek philosophers Plato or Aristotle.


To attempt to answer that question, I turn to a very interesting reading of Plato’s Symposium by David Halperin which (1) richly resonates with Irigaray’s notion of sexual indifference (see also her reading of “Plato’s Hystera” in Speculum), (2) emphasizes the embarrassing ignorance of the present Attorney General of the State of

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2Irigaray, Speculum, 101–103.
Georgia in matters of classical scholarship, which he nevertheless invokes, and (3) traces the roots of the paradoxes here in question to the very philosophical foundation of what is called Western civilization, Plato’s dialogues. For in those master texts of homossexuality, as Halperin proposes, it is the female, reproductive body that paradoxically guarantees true eros between men, or as Plato calls it, “proper paederasty.”

“Why Is Diotima a Woman?,” Halperin argues, is a question that has been answered only tautologically: because she is not or cannot be a man. It would have been indecorous to imply that Socrates owed his knowledge of erotic desire to a former paederastic lover. But there is a reason more stringent than decorum why Socrates’s teacher should have been a woman. Plato wanted to prescribe a new homoerotic ethos and a model of “proper paederasty” based on the reciprocity of erotic desire and a mutual access to pleasure for both partners, a reciprocity of eros whose philosophical import found ultimate expression in the dialogue form. His project, however, ran against the homoerotic sexual ethos and practices of the citizens of classical Athens, “locked as they were into an aggressive, phallic sexuality of domination—and, consequently, into a rigid hierarchy of sexual roles in their relations with males and females alike.” For an adult male citizen of Athens could have legitimate sexual relations only with his social inferiors: boys, women, foreigners, and slaves. Plato repudiated such erotic asymmetry in relations between men and boys and, through the teaching of Socrates/Diotima, sought to erase “the distinction between the active and the passive partner—according to Socrates, both members of the relationship become active, desiring lovers; neither remains a merely passive object of desire.”

Hence the intellectual and mythopoetic function of Diotima: her discourse on erotic desire, unlike a man’s, could appear directly grounded in the experiential knowledge of a non-hierarchical, mutualistic and reproductive sexuality, i.e., female sexuality as the Greeks construed it. It is indeed so grounded in the text, both rhetorically (Diotima’s language systematically conflates sexual pleasure with the reproductive or generative function) and narratively, in the presumed experience of a female character, since to the Greeks female sexuality differed from male sexuality precisely in that sexual pleasure for women was intimately bound up with procreation. Halperin cites many sources from Plato’s Timaeus to various ritual practices which represented, for example, “the relation of man to wife as a domestic form of cultivation homologous to agriculture whereby women are tamed, mastered, and made fruitful. . . . [I]n the absence of men, women’s sexual functioning is aimless and unproductive, merely a form of rottenness and decay, but by the application of male pharmacy it becomes at once orderly and fruitful.”


4David M. Halperin, “Why Is Diotima a Woman?,” in Halperin, One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love (forthcoming); subsequent references to this work, which is still in manuscript form, will have no page number. See also Halperin, “Plato and Erotic Reciprocity,” Classical Antiquity 5:1 (1986): 60–80.
After remarking on the similarity between the Greek construction and the contemporary gynaecological discourses on female eroticism, Halperin raises the question of Plato’s politics of gender, noting that “the interdependence of sexual and reproductive capacities is in fact a feature of male, not female, physiology,” and that male sexuality is the one in which “sexual pleasure and reproductive function cannot be separated (to the chagrin of Augustine and others).” His hypothesis is worth quoting at length:

Plato, then, would seem to be interpreting as feminine and allocating to men a form of sexuality which is masculine to begin with and which men had previously alienated from themselves by constructing it as feminine. In other words, it looks as if what lies behind Plato’s doctrine is a double movement whereby men project their own sexuality onto women only to reabsorb it themselves in the guise of a feminine character. This is particularly intriguing because it suggests that in order to facilitate their own appropriation of the feminine men have initially constructed femininity according to a male paradigm while creating a social and political ideal of masculinity defined by the ability to isolate what only women can actually isolate—namely, sexuality and reproduction, recreative and procreative sex.

Let me restate the significance of Halperin’s analysis for my own argument here. Plato’s repudiation of asymmetrical paederasty and of the subordinate position in which that placed citizen boys who, after all, were the future rulers of Athens, had the effect of elevating the status of all male citizens and thus of consolidating male citizen rule. It certainly was no favor done to women or to any “others” (male and female foreigners, male and female slaves). But his move was yet more masterful: the appropriation of the feminine for the erotic ethos of a male social and intellectual elite (an ethos that would endure well into the twentieth century, if in the guise of “heretical ethics” or in the femininity [“devenir-femme] claimed by his most deconstructive critics) had the effect not only of securing the millenary exclusion of women from philosophical dialogue, and the absolute excision of non-reproductive sexuality from the Western discourse on love. The construction and appropriation of femininity in Western erotic ethos has also had the effect of securing the heterosexual social contract by which all sexualities, all bodies, and all “others” are bonded to an ideal/ideological hierarchy of males.

The intimate relationship of sexual (in)difference with social (in)difference, whereby, for instance, the defense of the mother country and of (white) womanhood has served to bolster colonial conquest and racist violence throughout Western history, is nowhere more evident than in “the teaching of the ancient Greek philosophers,” pace the Attorney General. Hence the ironic rewriting of history, in a female-only

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Lesbian representation, or rather, its condition of possibility, depends on separating out the two contrary undertows that constitute the paradox of sexual (in)difference, on isolating but maintaining the two senses of homosexuality and hommo-sexuality. Thus the critical effort to dislodge the erotic from the discourse of gender, with its indissoluble knot of sexuality and reproduction, is concurrent and interdependent with a rethinking of what, in most cultural discourses and sociosexual practices, is still, nevertheless, a gendered sexuality. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to work through these paradoxes by considering how lesbian writers and artists have sought variously to escape gender, to deny it, transcend it, or perform it in excess, and to inscribe the erotic in cryptic, allegorical, realistic, camp, or other modes of representation, pursuing diverse strategies of writing and of reading the intransitive and yet obdurate relation of reference to meaning, of flesh to language.

Gertrude Stein, for example, “encrypted” her experience of the body in obscure coding, her “somagrams” are neither sexually explicit or conventionally erotic, nor “radically visceral or visual,” Catharine Stimpson argues. Stein’s effort was, rather, to develop a distinguished “anti-language” in which to describe sexual activity, her “delight in the female body” (38) or her ambivalence about it, as an abstract though intimate relationship where “the body fuses with writing itself” (36), an act “at once richly pleasurable and violent” (38). But if Stein does belong to the history of women writers, claims Stimpson, who also claims her for the history of lesbian writers, it is not because she wrote out of femaleness “as an elemental condition, inseparable from the body” (40), the way some radical feminist critics would like to think; nor because her writing sprung from a preoedipal, maternal body, as others would have it. Her language was not “female” but quite the contrary, “as genderless as an atom of platinum” (42), and strove to obliterate the boundaries of gender identity.


Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood, which Stimpson calls a “parable of damnation,” is read by others as an affirmation of inversion as homosexual difference. In her “Writing Toward Nightwood: Djuna Barnes’s Seduction Stories,” Carolyn Allen reads Barnes’s “little girl” stories as sketches or earlier trials of the sustained meditation on inversion that was to yield in the novel the most suggestive portrait of the invert, the third sex.

In that portrait we recognize the boy in the girl, the girl in the Prince, not a mixing of gendered behaviors, but the creation of a new gender, “neither one and half the other”.... In their love of the same sex [Matthew, Nora and Robin] admire their non-conformity, their sexual difference from the rest of the world....

That difference, which for the lesbian includes a relation to the self-same (“a woman is yourself caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own,” says Nora), also includes her relation to the child, the “ambivalence about mothering one’s lover,” the difficult and inescapable ties of female sexuality with nurture and with violence. In this light, Allen suggests, may we read Barnes’s personal denial of lesbianism and her aloofness from female admirers as a refusal to accept and to live by the homophobic categories promoted by sexology: man and woman, with their respective deviant forms, the effeminate man and the mannish woman—a refusal that in the terms of my argument could be seen as a rejection of the homossexual categories of gender, a refusal of sexual (in)difference.

Thus the highly metaphoric, oblique, allusive language of Barnes’s fiction, her “heavily embedded and often appositional” syntax, her use of the passive voice, indirect style, and interior monologue techniques in narrative descriptions, which Allen admirably analyzes in another essay, are motivated less by the modernist’s pleasure in formal experimentation than by her resistance to what Nightwood both thematizes and demonstrates, the failure of language to represent, grasp, and convey her subjects: “The violation [of reader’s expectation] and the appositional structure permit Barnes to suggest that the naming power of language is insufficient to make Nora’s love for Robin perceivable to the reader.”

“Dr. Knox,” Edward began, “my problem this week is chiefly concerning restrooms.”

—Judy Grahn, “The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke”

Ironically, since one way of escaping gender is to so disguise erotic and sexual experience as to suppress any representation of its specificity, another avenue of

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escape leads the lesbian writer fully to embrace gender, if by replacing femaleness with masculinity, as in the case of Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness*, and so risk to collapse lesbian homosexuality into hommo-sexuality. However, representation is related to experience by codes that change historically and, significantly, reach in both directions: the writer struggles to inscribe experience in historically available forms of representation, the reader accedes to representation through her own historical and experiential context; each reading is a rewriting of the text, each writing a rereading of (one’s) experience. The contrasting readings of Radclyffe Hall’s novel by lesbian feminist critics show that each critic reads from a particular position, experiential but also historically available to her, and, moreover, a position chosen, or even politically assumed, from the spectrum of contemporary discourses on the relationship of feminism to lesbianism. The contrast of interpretations also shows to what extent the paradox of sexual (in)difference operates as a semiotic mechanism to produce contradictory meaning effects.

The point of contention in the reception of a novel that by general agreement was the single most popular representation of lesbianism in fiction, from its obscenity trial in 1928 to the 1970s, is the figure of its protagonist Stephen Gordon, the “mythic mannish lesbian” of the title of Esther Newton’s essay, and the prototype of her more recent incarnation, the working-class butch.13 Newton’s impassioned defense of the novel rests on the significance of that figure for lesbian self-definition, not only in the 1920s and 1930s, when the social gains in gender independence attained by the New Woman were being reappropriated via sexological discourses within the institutional practices of heterosexuality, but also in the 1970s and 1980s, when female sexuality has been redefined by a women’s movement “that swears it is the enemy of traditional gender categories and yet validates lesbianism as the ultimate form of femaleness” (558).

Newton argues historically, taking into account the then available discourses on sexuality which asserted that “normal” women had at best a reactive heterosexual desire, while female sexual deviancy articulated itself in ascending categories of inversion marked by increasing masculinization, from deviant—but rectifiable—sexual orientation (or “homosexuality” proper, for Havelock Ellis) to congenital inversion. Gender crossing was at once a symptom and a sign of sexual degeneracy.14 In the terms of the cultural representations available to the novelist, since there was no image of female sexual desire apart from the male, Newton asks, “Just how was Hall to make the woman-loving New Woman a sexual being? . . . To become avowedly

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sexual, the New Woman had to enter the male world, either as a heterosexual on male terms (a flapper) or as—or with—a lesbian in male body drag (a butch)” (572–73). Gender reversal in the mannish lesbian, then, was not merely a claim to male social privilege or a sad pretense to male sexual behavior, but represented what may be called, in Foucault’s phrase, a “reverse discourse”: an assertion of sexual agency and feelings, but autonomous from men, a reclaiming of erotic drives directed toward women, of a desire for women that is not to be confused with woman identification.

While other lesbian critics of The Well of Loneliness read it as an espousal of Ellis’s views, couched in religious romantic imagery and marred by a self-defeating pessimism, aristocratic self-pity, and inevitable damnation, what Newton reads in Stephen Gordon and in Radclyffe Hall’s text is the unsuccessful attempt to represent a female desire not determined by “masculine tropism,” in Irigaray’s words, or, in my own, a female desire not homo-sexual but homosexual. If Radclyffe Hall herself could not envision homosexuality as part of an autonomous female sexuality (a notion that has emerged much later, with the feminist critique of patriarchy as phallic symbolic order), and if she therefore did not succeed in escaping the homo-sexual categories of gender (“Unlike Orlando, Stephen is trapped in history; she cannot declare gender an irrelevant game,” as Newton remarks [570]), nevertheless the figure of the mannish female invert continues to stand as the representation of lesbian desire against both the discourse of homo-sexuality and the feminist account of lesbianism as woman identification. The context of Newton’s reading is the current debate on the relationship of lesbianism to feminism and the reassertion, on the one hand, of the historical and political importance of gender roles (e.g., butch-femme) in lesbian self-definition and representation, and on the other, of the demand for a separate understanding of sex and gender as distinct areas of social practice.

The latter issue has been pushed to the top of the theoretical agenda by the polarization of opinions around the two adverse and widely popularized positions on the issue of pornography taken by Women Against Pornography (WAP) and by S/M lesbians (Samois). In “Thinking Sex,” a revision of her earlier and very influential “The Traffic in Women,” Gayle Rubin wants to challenge the assumption that feminism can contribute very much to a theory of sexuality, for “feminist thought simply lacks angles of vision which can encompass the social organization of sexuality.”15 While acknowledging some (though hardly enough) diversity among feminists on the issue of sex, and praising “pro-sex” feminists such as “lesbian sadomasochists and butch-femme dykes,” adherents of “classic radical feminism,” and “unapologetic heterosexuals” for not conforming to “movement standards of purity” (303), Rubin nonetheless believes that a “theory and politics specific to sexuality” must be de-

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veloped apart from the theory of gender oppression, that is feminism. Thus she goes back over her earlier feminist critique of Lacan and Lévi-Strauss and readjusts the angle of vision:

“The Traffic in Women” was inspired by the literature on kin-based systems of social organization. It appeared to me at the time that gender and desire were systematically intertwined in such social formations. This may or may not be an accurate assessment of the relationship between sex and gender in tribal organizations. But it is surely not an adequate formulation for sexuality in Western industrial societies. (307, emphasis added)

In spite of Rubin’s rhetorical emphasis (which I underscore graphically in the above passage), her earlier article also had to do with gender and sexuality in Western industrial societies, where indeed Rubin and several other feminists were articulating the critique of a theory of symbolic signification that elaborated the very notion of desire (from psychoanalysis) in relation to gender as symbolic construct (from anthropology)—a critique that has been crucial to the development of feminist theory. But whereas “The Traffic in Women” (a title directly borrowed from Emma Goldman) was focused on women, here her interest has shifted toward a non-gendered notion of sexuality concerned, in Foucault’s terms “with the sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures, and the nature of impressions.”

Accordingly, the specificity of either female or lesbian eroticism is no longer a question to be asked in “Thinking Sex,” where the term “homosexual” is used to refer to both women and men (thus sliding inexorably, it seems, into its uncanny hommo-sexual double), and which concludes by advocating a politics of “theoretical as well as sexual pluralism” (309). At the opposite pole of the debate, Catharine MacKinnon argues:

If heterosexuality is the dominant gendered form of sexuality in a society where gender oppresses women through sex, sexuality and heterosexuality are essentially the same thing. This does not erase homosexuality, it merely means that sexuality in that form may be no less gendered.

I suggest that, despite or possibly because of their stark mutual opposition and common reductivism, both Rubin and MacKinnon collapse the tension of ambiguity, the semantic duplicity, that I have tried to sort out in the two terms homosexual and hommo-sexual, and thus remain caught in the paradox of sexual (in)difference even as they both, undoubtedly, very much want to escape it, one by denying gender, the other by categorically asserting it. As it was, in another sense, with Radclyffe Hall, Newton’s suggestive reading notwithstanding. I will return to her suggestions later on.


It is certain, however, as Rubin notes, that “lesbians are also oppressed as queers and perverts” (308, emphasis added), not only as women; and it is equally certain that some lesbians are also oppressed as queers and perverts, and also as women of color. What cannot be elided in a politically responsible theory of sexuality, of gender, or of culture is the critical value of that “also,” which is neither simply additive nor exclusive but signals the nexus, the mode of operation of interlocking systems of gender, sexual, racial, class, and other, more local categories of social stratification.18 Just a few lines from Zami, Audre Lorde’s “biomythography,” will make the point, better than I can.

But the fact of our Blackness was an issue that Felicia and I talked about only between ourselves. Even Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. “We’re all niggers,” she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would always be false.

It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female, and gay. To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal. And if you were fool enough to do it, you’d better come on so tough that nobody messed with you. I often felt put down by their sophistication, their clothes, their manners, their cars, and their femmes.19

If the black/white divide is even less permeable than the gay/straight one, it does not alone suffice to self-definition: “Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. . . . Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self” (226). Neither race nor gender nor homosexual difference alone can constitute individual identity or the basis for a theory and a politics of social change. What Lorde suggests is a more complex image of the psycho-socio-sexual subject (“our place was the very house of difference rather [than] the security of any one particular difference”) which does not deny gender or sex but transcends them. Read together with the writings of other lesbians of color or those committed to antiracism (see note 8 above), Lorde’s image of the house of difference points to a conception of community not pluralistic but at once global and local—global in its inclusive and macro-political strategies, and local in its specific, micro-political practices.

I want to propose that, among the latter, not the least is the practice of writing, particularly in that form which the québécoise feminist writer Nicole Brossard has

called "une fiction théorique," fiction/theory: a formally experimental, critical and lyrical, autobiographical and theoretically conscious, practice of writing-in-the-feminine that crosses genre boundaries (poetry and prose, verbal and visual modes, narrative and cultural criticism), and instates new correlations between signs and meanings, inciting other discursive mediations between the symbolic and the real, language and flesh. And for all its specific cultural, historical, and linguistic variation—say between francophone and anglophone contemporary Canadian writers, or between writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Michelle Cliff, Cherrie Moraga, Joanna Russ, Monique Wittig, or even the Virginia Woolf of Three Guineas and A Room of One's Own—the concept of fiction/theory does make the transfer across borderlines and covers a significant range of practices of lesbian (self-)representation.

Lesbians are not women
—Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind"

In a superb essay tracing the intertextual weave of a lesbian imagination throughout French literature, the kind of essay that changes the landscape of both literature and reading irreversibly, Elaine Marks proposes that to undomesticate the female body one must dare reinscribe it in excess—as excess—in provocative counterimages sufficiently outrageous, passionate, verbally violent and formally complex to both destroy the male discourse on love and redesign the universe. The undomesticated female body that was first concretely imaged in Sappho's poetry ("she is suggesting equivalences between the physical symptoms of desire and the physical symptoms of death, not between Eros and Thanatos," Marks writes [372]) has been read and effectively recontained within the male poetic tradition—with the very move described by Halperin above—as phallic or maternal body. Thereafter, Marks states, no "sufficiently challenging counterimages" were produced in French literature until the advent of feminism and the writing of a lesbian feminist, Monique Wittig.

"Only the women's movement," concurred the writer in her preface to the 1975 English edition of The Lesbian Body, "has proved capable of producing lesbian texts


in a context of total rupture with masculine culture, texts written by women exclusively for women, careless of male approval."

If there is reason to believe that Wittig would no longer accept the designation lesbian-feminist in the 1980s (her latest published novel in English, Across the Acheron, more than suggests as much), Marks's critical assessment of The Lesbian Body remains, to my way of seeing, correct:

In Le corps lesbien Monique Wittig has created, through the incessant use of hyperbole and a refusal to employ traditional body codes, images sufficiently blatant to withstand reabsorption into male literary culture. . . . The j/e of Le corps lesbien is the most powerful lesbian in literature because as a lesbian-feminist she reexamines and redesigns the universe. (375-76)

Like Djuna Barnes's, Wittig's struggle is with language, to transcend gender. Barnes, as Wittig reads her, succeeds in "universalizing the feminine" because she "cancels out the genders by making them obsolete. I find it necessary to suppress them. That is the point of view of a lesbian." And indeed, from the impersonal on [one] in L'Opoponax, to the feminine plural elles [they] replacing the generic masculine ils [they] in Les guerillères, to the divided, linguistically impossible j/e [I], lover and writing subject of The Lesbian Body, Wittig's personal pronouns work to "lesbianize" language as impudently as her recastings of both classical and Christian myth and Western literary genres (the Homeric heroes and Christ, The Divine Comedy and Don Quixote, the epic, the lyric, the Bildungsroman, the encyclopaedic dictionary) do to literary history. What will not do, for her purposes, is a "feminine writing" [écriture féminine] which, for Wittig, is no more than "the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal political fact of the domination of women" (63) and so complicit in the reproduction of femininity and of the female body as Nature.

Thus, as I read it, it is in the garbage dump of femininity, "In this dark adored adorned gehenna," that the odyssey of Wittig's j/e-tu in The Lesbian Body begins: "Fais tes adieux m/a trés belle," "say your farewells m/y very beautiful . . . strong . . . indomitable . . . learned . . . ferocious . . . gentle . . . best beloved to what they call affection tenderness or gracious abandon. No one is unaware of what takes place here, it has no name as yet." Here where?—in this book, this journey into the body of Western culture, this season in hell. And what takes place here?—the dismemberment and slow decomposition of the female body limb by limb, organ by organ, secretion by secretion. No one will be able to stand the sight of it, no one will come to aid in this awesome, excruciating and exhilarating labor of love: dis-membering

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and re-membering, reconstituting the body in a new erotic economy, relearning to know it ("it has no name as yet") by another semiotics, reinscribing it with invert/inward desire, rewriting it otherwise, other-wise: a lesbian body.

The project, the conceptual originality and radical import of Wittig's lesbian as subject of a "cognitive practice" that enables the reconceptualization of the social and of knowledge itself from a position eccentric to the heterosexual institution, are all there in the first page of Le corps lesbien. A "subjective cognitive practice" and a practice of writing as consciousness of contradiction ("the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you," she wrote in Les guérillères); a consciousness of writing, living, feeling, and desiring in the noncoincidence of experience and language, in the interstices of representation, "in the intervals that your masters have not been able to fill with their words of proprietors." Thus, the struggle with language to rewrite the body beyond its precoded, conventional representations is not and cannot be a reappropriation of the female body as it is, domesticated, maternal, oedipally or preoedipally en-gendered, but is a struggle to transcend both gender and "sex" and recreate the body other-wise: to see it perhaps as monstrous, or grotesque, or mortal, or violent, and certainly also sexual, but with a material and sensual specificity that will resist phallic idealization and render it accessible to women in another sociosexual economy. In short, if it were not lesbian, this body would make no sense.

Replacing the Lacanian slash with a lesbian bar

—Sue-Ellen Case, "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic"

At first sight, the reader of The Lesbian Body might find in its linguistically impossible subject pronoun several theoretically possible valences that go from the more conservative (the slash in j/e represents the division of the Lacanian subject) to the less conservative (j/e can be expressed by writing but not by speech, representing Derridean différence), and to the radical feminist ("j/e is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is m/y writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute m/e as subject," as Wittig is reported to have said in Margaret Crosland's introduction to the Beacon paperback edition I own). Another reader, especially if a reader of science fiction, might think of Joanna Russ's brilliant lesbian-feminist novel, The Female Man, whose protagonist is a female genotype articulated across four spacetime probabilities in four characters whose names all begin with J—Janet, Jeannine, Jael, Joanna—and whose sociosexual practices cover the spectrum from celibacy and "politically correct" monogamy to


live toys and the 1970s equivalent of s/m.28 What Wittig actually said in one of her essays in the 1980s is perhaps even more extreme:

The bar in the j/e of The Lesbian Body is a sign of excess. A sign that helps to imagine an excess of “I,” an “I” exalted. “I” has become so powerful in The Lesbian Body that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and assault the so-called love, the heroes of love, and lesbianize them, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and the goddesses, lesbianize the men and the women. This “I” can be destroyed in the attempt and resuscitated. Nothing resists this “I” (or this tu [you], which is its name, its love), which spreads itself in the whole world of the book, like a lava flow that nothing can stop.29

Excess, an exaltation of the “I” through costume, performance, mise-en-scene, irony, and utter manipulation of appearance, is what Sue-Ellen Case sees in the discourse of camp. If it is deplorable that the lesbian working-class bar culture of the 1950s “went into the feminist closet” during the 1970s, when organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis encouraged lesbian identification with the more legitimate feminist dress codes and upwardly mobile lifestyles, writes Case, “yet the closet, or the bars, with their hothouse atmosphere [have] given us camp—the style, the discourse, the mise-en-scene of butch-femme roles.” In these roles, “recuperating the space of seduction,”

the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together. . . . These are not split subjects, suffering the torments of dominant ideology. They are coupled ones that do not impale themselves on the poles of sexual difference or metaphysical values, but constantly seduce the sign system, through flirtation and inconstancy into the light fondle of artifice, replacing the Lacanian slash with a lesbian bar.30

The question of address, of who produces cultural representations and for whom (in any medium, genre, or semiotic system, from writing to performance), and of who receives them and in what contexts, has been a major concern of feminism and other critical theories of cultural marginality. In the visual arts, that concern has focused on the notion of spectatorship, which has been central to the feminist critique of representation and the production of different images of difference, for example

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Recent work in both film and performance theory has been elaborating the film-theoretical notion of spectatorship with regard to what may be the specific relations of homosexual subjectivity, in several directions. Elizabeth Ellsworth, for one, surveying the reception of *Personal Best* (1982), a commercial man-made film about a lesbian relationship between athletes, found that lesbian feminist reviews of the film adopted interpretive strategies which rejected or altered the meaning carried by conventional (Hollywood) codes of narrative representation. For example, they redefined who was the film’s protagonist or “object of desire,” ignored the sections focused on heterosexual romance, disregarded the actual ending and speculated, instead, on a possible extratextual future for the characters beyond the ending. Moreover, “some reviewers named and illicitly eroticized moments of the film’s ‘inadvertent lesbian verisimilitude’ [in Patrice Donnelly’s performance] . . . codes of body language, facial expression, use of voice, structuring and expression of desire and assertion of strength in the face of male domination and prerogative.”

While recognizing limits to this “oppositional appropriation” of dominant representation, Ellsworth argues that the struggle over interpretation is a constitutive process for marginal subjectivities, as well as an important form of resistance. But when the marginal community is directly addressed, in the context of out-lesbian performance such as the WOW Cafe or the Split Britches productions, the appropriation seems to have no limits, to be directly “subversive,” to yield not merely a site of interpretive work and resistance but a representation that requires no interpretive effort and is immediately, univocally legible, signalling “the creation of new imagery, new metaphors, and new conventions that can be read, or given new meaning, by a very specific spectator.”

The assumption behind this view, as stated by Kate Davy, is that such lesbian performance “undercut[s] the heterosexual model by implying a spectator that is not the generic, universal male, not the cultural construction ‘woman,’ but lesbian—a subject defined in terms of sexual similarity . . . whose desire lies outside the fundamental model or underpinnings of sexual difference” (47). Somehow, this seems too easy a solution to the problem of spectatorship, and even less convincing as a representation of “lesbian desire.” For, if sexual similarity could so unproblematically replace sexual difference, why would the new lesbian theatre need to insist on gender, if only as “the residue of sexual difference” that is, as Davy herself insists, worn in the “stance, gesture, movement, mannerisms, voice, and dress” (48) of the butch-

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femme play? Why would lesbian camp be taken up in theatrical performance, as Case suggests, to recuperate that space of seduction which historically has been the lesbian bar, and the Left Bank salon before it—spaces of daily-life performance, masquerade, cross-dressing, and practices constitutive of both community and subjectivity?

In an essay on “The Dynamics of Desire” in performance and pornography, Jill Dolan asserts that the reappropriation of pornography in lesbian magazines (“a visual space meant at least theoretically to be free of male subordination”) offers “liberative fantasies” and “representations of one kind of sexuality based in lesbian desire,” adding that the “male forms” of pornographic representation “acquire new meanings when they are used to communicate desire for readers of a different gender and sexual orientation.” Again, as in Davy, the question of lesbian desire is begged; and again the ways in which the new context would produce new meanings or “disrupt traditional meanings” (173) appear to be dependent on the presumption of a unified lesbian viewer/reader, gifted with undivided and non-contradictory subjectivity, and every bit as generalized and universal as the female spectator both Dolan and Davy impute (and rightly so) to the anti-pornography feminist performance art. For, if all lesbians had one and the same definition of “lesbian desire,” there would hardly be any debate among us, or any struggle over interpretations of cultural images, especially the ones we produce.

What is meant by a term so crucial to the specificity and originality claimed for these performances and strategies of representation, is not an inappropriate question, then. When she addresses it at the end of her essay, Dolan writes: “Desire is not necessarily a fixed, male-owned commodity, but can be exchanged, with a much different meaning, between women” (173). Unless it can be taken as the ultimate camp representation, this notion of lesbian desire as commodity exchange is rather disturbing. For, unfortunately—or fortunately, as the case may be—commodity exchange does have the same meaning “between women” as between men, by definition—that is, by Marx’s definition of the structure of capital. And so, if the “aesthetic differences between cultural feminist and lesbian performance art” are to be determined by the presence or absence of pornography, and to depend on a “new meaning” of commodity exchange, it is no wonder that we seem unable to get it off (our backs) even as we attempt to take it on.

The king does not count lesbians
—Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*

The difficulty in defining an autonomous form of female sexuality and desire in the wake of a cultural tradition still Platonic, still grounded in sexual (in)difference, still caught in the tropism of hommo-sexuality, is not to be overlooked or willfully

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bypassed. It is perhaps even greater than the difficulty in devising strategies of representation which will, in turn, alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of what can be seen. For, undoubtedly, that is the project of lesbian performance, theatre and film, a project that has already achieved a significant measure of success, not only at the WOW Cafe but also, to mention just a few examples, in Cherríe Moraga’s teatro, Giving Up the Ghost (1986), Sally Potter’s film The Gold Diggers (1983), or Sheila McLaughlin’s She Must Be Seeing Things (1987). My point here is that redefining the conditions of vision, as well as the modes of representing, cannot be predicated on a single, undivided identity of performer and audience (whether as “lesbians” or “women” or “people of color” or any other single category constructed in opposition to its dominant other, “heterosexual women,” “men,” “whites,” and so forth).

Consider Marilyn Frye’s suggestive Brechtian parable about our culture’s conceptual reality (“phallocratic reality”) as a conventional stage play, where the actors—those committed to the performance/maintenance of the Play, “the phallocratic loyalists”—visibly occupy the foreground, while stagehands—who provide the necessary labor and framework for the material (re)production of the Play—remain invisible in the background. What happens, she speculates, when the stagehands (women, feminists) begin thinking of themselves as actors and try to participate visibly in the performance, attracting attention to their activities and their own role in the play? The loyalists cannot conceive that anyone in the audience may see or focus their attention on the stagehands’ projects in the background, and thus become “disloyal”
to the Play, or, as Adrienne Rich has put it, “disloyal to civilization.”35 Well, Frye suggests, there are some people in the audience who do see what the conceptual system of heterosexuality, the Play’s performance, attempts to keep invisible. These are lesbian people, who can see it because their own reality is not represented or even surmised in the Play, and who therefore reorient their attention toward the background, the spaces, activities and figures of women elided by the performance. But “attention is a kind of passion” that “fixes and directs the application of one’s physical and emotional work”:

If the lesbian sees the women, the woman may see the lesbian seeing her. With this, there is a flowering of possibilities. The woman, feeling herself seen, may learn that she can be seen; she may also be able to know that a woman can see, that is, can author perception. . . . The lesbian’s seeing undercuts the mechanism by which the production and constant reproduction of heterosexuality for women was to be rendered automatic. (172)

And this is where we are now, as the critical reconsideration of lesbian history past and present is doing for feminist theory what Pirandello, Brecht, and others did for the bourgeois theatre conventions, and avant-garde filmmakers have done for Hol-

lywood cinema; the latter, however, have not just disappeared, much as one would wish they had. So, too, have the conventions of seeing, and the relations of desire and meaning in spectatorship, remained partially anchored or contained by a frame of visibility that is still heterosexual, or hommo-sexual, and just as persistently color blind.

For instance, what are the "things" the Black/Latina protagonist of McLaughlin's film imagines seeing, in her jealous fantasies about her white lover (although she does not "really" see them), if not those very images which our cultural imaginary and the whole history of cinema have constructed as the visible, what can be seen, and eroticized? The originality of She Must Be Seeing Things is in its representing the question of lesbian desire in these terms, as it engages the contradictions and complexities that have emerged subculturally, in both discourses and practices, through the feminist-lesbian debates on sex-radical imagery as a political issue of representation, as well as real life. It may be interestingly contrasted with a formally conventional film like Donna Deitch's Desert Hearts (1986), where heterosexuality remains off screen, in the diegetic background (in the character's past), but is actively present nonetheless in the spectatorial expectations set up by the genre (the love story) and the visual pleasure procured by conventional casting, cinematic narrative procedures, and commercial distribution. In sum, one film works with and against the institutions of heterosexuality and cinema, the other works with them. A similar point could be made about certain films with respect to the novels they derive from, such as The Color Purple or Kiss of the Spider Woman, where the critical and formal work of the novels against the social and sexual indifference built into the institution of heterosexuality is altogether suppressed and rendered invisible by the films' compliance with the apparatus of commercial cinema and its institutional drive to, precisely, commodity exchange.

So what can be seen? Even in feminist film theory, the current "impasse regarding female spectatorship is related to the blind spot of lesbianism," Patricia White suggests in her reading of Ulrike Ottinger's film Madame X: An Absolute Ruler (1977). That film, she argues, on the contrary, displaces the assumption "that feminism finds its audience 'naturally' " (95); it does so by addressing the female spectator through specific scenarios and "figures of spectatorial desire" and "trans-sex identification," through figures of transvestism and masquerade. And the position the film thus constructs for its spectator is not one of essential femininity or impossible masculinization (as proposed by Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey, respectively), but rather a position of marginality or "deviance" vis-à-vis the normative heterosexual frame of vision.

Once again, what can be seen? "When I go into a store, people see a black person and only incidentally a woman," writes Jewelle Gomez, a writer of science fiction.

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and author of at least one vampire story about a black lesbian blues singer named Gilda. “In an Upper West Side apartment building late at night when a white woman refuses to get on an elevator with me, it’s because I am black. She sees a mugger as described on the late night news, not another woman as nervous to be out alone as she is.”38 If my suspicion that social and sexual indifference are never far behind one from the other is not just an effect of paranoia, it is quite possible that, in the second setting, the elevator at night, what a white woman sees superimposed on the black image of the mugger is the male image of the dyke, and both of these together are what prevents the white woman from seeing the other one like herself. Nevertheless, Gomez points out, “I can pass as straight, if by some bizarre turn of events I should want to . . . but I cannot pass as white in this society.” Clearly, the very issue of passing, across any boundary of social division, is related quite closely to the frame of vision and the conditions of representation.

“Passing demands quiet. And from that quiet—silence,” writes Michelle Cliff.39 It is “a dual masquerade—passing straight/passing lesbian [that] enervates and contributes to speechlessness—to speak might be to reveal.”40 However, and paradoxically again, speechlessness can only be overcome, and her “journey into speech” begin, by “claiming an identity they taught me to despise”; that is, by passing black “against a history of forced fluency,” a history of passing white.41 The dual masquerade, her writing suggests, is at once the condition of speechlessness and of overcoming speechlessness, for the latter occurs by recognizing and representing the division in the self, the difference and the displacement from which any identity that needs to be claimed derives, and hence can be claimed only, in Lorde’s words, as “the very house of difference.”

Those divisions and displacements in history, memory, and desire are the “ghost” that Moraga’s characters want to but cannot altogether give up. The division of the Chicana lesbian Marisa/Corky from the Mexican Amalia, whose desire cannot be redefined outside the heterosexual imaginary of her culture, is also the division of Marisa/Corky from herself, the split produced in the girl Corky by sexual and social indifference, and by her internalization of a notion of hommo-sexuality which Marisa now lives as a wound, an infinite distance between her female body and her desire for women. If “the realization of shared oppression on the basis of being women and Chicanas holds the promise of a community of Chicanas, both lesbians and heterosexual,” Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano states, nevertheless “the structure of the play does not move neatly from pain to promise,” and the divisions within them remain

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41Michelle Cliff, “A Journey into Speech” and “Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise,” both in The Land of Look Behind, 11–17 and 40–47; see also her novel No Telephone To Heaven (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987).
unresolved. The character Marisa, however, I would add, has moved away from the hommo-sexuality of Corky (her younger self at age 11 and 17); and with the ambiguous character of Amalia, who loved a man almost as if he were a woman and who can love Marisa only when she (Amalia) is no longer one, the play itself has moved away from any simple opposition of “lesbian” to “heterosexual” and into the conceptual and experiential continuum of a female, Chicana subjectivity from where the question of lesbian desire must finally be posed. The play ends with that question—which is at once its outcome and its achievement, its éxito.

What to do with the feminine invert?
—Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian”

Surveying the classic literature on inversion, Newton notes that Radclyffe Hall’s “vision of lesbianism as sexual difference and as masculinity,” and her “conviction that sexual desire must be male,” both assented to and sought to counter the sociomedical discourses of the early twentieth century. “The notion of a feminine lesbian contradicted the congenital theory that many homosexuals in Hall’s era espoused to counter the demands that they undergo punishing ‘therapies’ ” (575). Perhaps that counter-demand led the novelist further to reduce the typology of female inversion (initially put forth by Krafft-Ebing as comprised of four types, then reduced to three by Havelock Ellis) to two: the invert and the “normal” woman who misguidedly falls in love with her. Hence the novel’s emphasis on Stephen, while her lover Mary is a “forgettable and inconsistent” character who in the end gets turned over to a man. However, unlike Mary, Radclyffe Hall’s real-life lover Una Troubridge “did not go back to heterosexuality even when Hall, late in her life, took a second lover,” Newton points out. Una would then represent what The Well of Loneliness elided, the third type of female invert, and the most troublesome for Ellis: the “womanly” women “to whom the actively inverted woman is most attracted. These women differ in the first place from normal or average women in that . . . they seem to possess a genuine, though not precisely sexual, preference for women over men.” Therefore, Newton concludes, “Mary’s real story has yet to be told” (575), and a footnote after this sentence refers us to “two impressive beginnings” of what could be Mary’s real story, told from the perspective of a self-identified, contemporary femme.

The discourses, demands, and counter-demands that inform lesbian identity and representation in the 1980s are more diverse and socially heterogeneous than those

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Lois Weaver in *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987), directed by Sheila McLaughlin.
Photo: Anita Bartsch.
of the first half of the century. They include, most notably, the political concepts of oppression and agency developed in the struggles of social movements such as the women’s movement, the gay liberation movement, and third world feminism, as well as an awareness of the importance of developing a theory of sexuality that takes into account the working of unconscious processes in the construction of female subjectivity. But, as I have tried to argue, the discourses, demands, and counter-demands that inform lesbian representation are still unwittingly caught in the paradox of socio-sexual (in)difference, often unable to think homosexuality and homomosexuality at once separately and together. Even today, in most representational contexts, Mary would be either passing lesbian or passing straight, her (homo)sexuality being in the last instance what can not be seen. Unless, as Newton and others suggest, she enter the frame of vision as or with a lesbian in male body drag.45

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