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**HARD TO SWALLOW:
INDIGESTIBLE NARRATIVES OF
LESBIAN SEXUALITY**

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In these so-called multicultural times, gender, ethnicity, race, and class enjoy widespread recognition as significant categories in the construction of both private and public meanings. Sexuality, in contrast, is still commonly banished to the shadowy regions of the collective (un)consciousness. In Western culture, only "illegitimate sexualities" are, if not reduced to a question of personal preference, regarded as a (more or less problematic) social issue; at best, sexual deviations are tolerated as forms of cultural diversity. In current theoretical practice, sexuality is frequently overridden by other, more "urgent" issues such as (inter)ethnicity, postcolonialism, and, indeed, multiculturalism—if it is in fact acknowledged as an axis of exclusion at all. Even in otherwise "politically correct" critical practices, the ideological and epistemological implications of sexual differentiation still tend to go largely unnoticed.

It is perhaps ultimately impossible to do justice to all aspects of differentiation at once. Rather than attempting the impossible, I will therefore deliberately restrict my focus and, in what is to follow, concentrate on the mutually entwining operations of sexuality and textuality, of private preference and public privilege, in order to explore their joint significance in contemporary feminist theory and in the text

of Western culture as a whole. My starting point forms the relative absence of lesbian sexuality—and therewith of sexuality per se—as a political and hence epistemological category in mainstream feminist debates, an absence which stands in apparent contrast to the equally conspicuous presence of “lesbian” representations in some recent products of the cultural “malestream.”

An interesting example of the latter is Roman Polanski's *Bitter Moon* (1992), launched on the European market some two years ago but, I believe, only recently released in the US. *Bitter Moon* is very much a narrative film. It is also a film about sexuality. It is not, however, a narrative about sexuality. In fact, the conjunction of the two is such that sexuality, rather than being rendered in narrative form, is shown to be nothing but a story. It is the pictorial act of storytelling which informs the Oedipal tract that constitutes the film's dynamic.

Narrative and narration jointly enact the “reality” of male sexuality. The conceptual framework that serves to maintain the natural order of things is exposed as a fiction, a neverending story. Neither the elusiveness of phallocratic “reality” nor the precarious nature of the dominant myth underlying Western culture will any longer come as a surprise to even a “mainstream” contemporary audience. That the ultimate unsustainability of the Oedipal scenario as the foundation of heteropatriarchy is explicitly and visibly linked to an otherwise still largely invisible deviant sexual scenario is nonetheless remarkable. For what the narrative tract of *Bitter Moon* eventually chokes on is lesbian sexuality. Lesbian sexuality functions at once as the indigestible and indispensable plot space in this male fantasy, as simultaneously the *sine qua non* of the narrative and its vanishing point. My purpose is to explore briefly the critical function of lesbian sexuality in the perpetuation of the Oedipus myth, and at the same time, to show why this specific sexual scenario operates as an ultimately inassimilable configuration in an otherwise highly self-conscious and reflexive, if not parodic, cinematographic enactment of male sexuality.

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Bitter Moon's middle-aged protagonist/narrator Oscar (played by Peter Coyote) is an American-born would-be writer who has settled in Paris. Looking up from his desk, the expatriate artist admiringly stares at the masculine poses of his idealized heroes Ernest Hemingway

and Mark Twain, pictures of whom frame the walls of his characteristic Left Bank apartment. While frankly admitting that he himself projects a rather pale reflection of these notorious machoes, Oscar is apparently satisfied with self-consciously living off of his legendary predecessors' dreams. But although the author *manqué* unabashedly mocks his megalomaniacal sexual fantasies, it is their myths of masculinity he aspires to emulate. In Oscar's retrospectively related, passionate affair with a young French dance-student, Mimi (played by Emanuelle Seigner), everything hence turns on the power of the imagination.

In a series of lengthy flashbacks the unequal couple are shown to enact the most exhilarating S-M and other unorthodox sexual scenarios. Dexterously handling a wide variety of appropriately bizarre paraphernalia, they clearly mutually enjoy their enthralling erotic games until their ever more ingenious fairy tales begin to lose their formerly hallucinatory power. Oscar at once loses interest in his playmate, for despite his lofty romantic visions, he has never made a secret of the fact that all he wants out of his "real" life is kinky sex. Mimi, on the other hand, though evidently an expert seductress and well-versed in the discourse of desire, is young enough still to believe in the myth of romance. Once the sexual excitement begins to wear off, she expects their relationship to continue on a more stable, domestic footing. When Oscar brusquely shatters such prosaic illusions and sends the wretched girl packing, Mimi stubbornly refuses to let go of him. From an austere dominatrix alluringly lashing her whip, she rapidly turns into a pathetic supplicant desperately trying to ensnare the hero in her conubial nets. The inveterate *bon vivant* needs all the power he can muster to rid himself of the now utterly despicable clinging creature and ruthlessly subjects her to a range of increasingly degrading humiliations. When he finally believes to have delivered himself from her smothering clutches, Mimi returns on stage to assume the guise of a genuine nemesis. In an agonizing scene, she flips Oscar out of the hospital bed in which he is recuperating from a car accident, irrevocably destroying his already multiply-fractured legs.

Mimi, who had shown herself to be at least as cleverly inventive as her prey, presently takes on a role as sole caretaker of the helpless hero. Successfully tipping the tables in their sexual power struggle, the repudiated female transforms herself into a personification of the phallic mother. Apart from taking complete control of Oscar's life, she has

also quite literally castrated him; the cripple's formerly so impressively potent sexual organ is just as permanently paralyzed as the rest of his limp and lifeless lower body. In accordance with the primitive laws that have governed their relationship from the start, the one-time Don Juan is in his turn exposed to the most excruciating forms of (psychic) torture at the hands of his omnipotent chaperonne. He nonetheless appears to accept his subjection to her sadistic fantasies with remarkable resignation. While ostensibly justifying such acquiescence with an appeal to the law of "fair" exchange, Oscar evidently derives considerable pleasure from his subaltern position, visibly relishing his bitter accounts of the cataclysmic passion that binds him and the goddess of vengeance inexorably together. This suggests that however physically disempowered he may be, the impotent hero's existence is, like a post-modern Rochester's, fully legitimated by his key role as the broken anti-hero of Mimi's vindictive scenario. Indeed, not only is Oscar cast in a central position on a subordinate narrative level, that is, as the leading character in the (female) plot of retribution, as the film's narrator on all of its complexly intertwining diegetic levels, he has thus far also explicitly retained his power as the subject of (his own) discourse. The male's centrality in the film as a whole having actually remained unchallenged, its Oedipal plot can go on unfolding itself. Only when Mimi breaks with the conventions of (Oedipal) narrative per se, must the story come to its startlingly violent ending.

The film reaches its climax when Mimi has sex with another woman. Unlike the extended coverage of earlier sexual frolics, the "perverse" encounter significantly takes place outside both Oscar's and the camera's fields of vision. In this enigmatic moment, the female subject treacherously pulls out of the heterosexual plot and, in doing so, breaks the most fundamental of phallogocentric laws. Both her own role and that of the male protagonist/narrator are conclusively played out. In a desperate attempt to maintain his claim to symbolic power to the end, Oscar "heroically" puts a bullet through his head—but only after having made sure to shoot the sexual transgressor first. Though supposedly a gesture of retaliation, such a brutal act of violence in effect confirms the hero's exclusion from the antagonizing "lesbian" scene. By killing the trespassing female, the ousted protagonist underscores his literal effacement from the "invisible" non-moment that at

once constitutes the narrative's turning point and reveals the film's underlying core of castration anxiety.

Polanski's cleverly composed nightmare supports my contention that it is not the fantasy of the phallic mother that marks the end of masculinity. Oscar's phallic competence may be literally annihilated by *female retribution personified*; it is clearly the threat of lesbian Otherness that heralds the invalidated male's final obliteration. The film thus unmistakably points up the function of lesbian sexuality in the phallogocentric imaginary. Conspicuously veiled, the critical "lesbian" moment, however, has little to do with lesbian sexuality; that is to say, with an active mode of female sexuality autonomous from men. Still less does the film suggest the viability, or even allow for the possibility, of lesbian subjectivity: Mimi's wandering from the straight path results in instant execution, whereas her one-night female lover (obviously rather taken aback by the unexpectedly violent turn of events), is resolutely restored to her stuffy British husband. The fleetingly suggested female same-sex desire that plays such a pivotal part in the plot's development is reduced to a subordinate factor in the film's dominant heterosexual scenario, being presented as assimilable to the prevailing tract of masculine desire. The implication is that the lesbian menace is most effectively contained by the projection of hugely distorted images of putative lesbians on the big silver screen, in order to reinscribe their potentially disruptive force in the sexual/textual scripts that narratively control them. Functioning as imaginary objects, as products of a collective imagination in which sexual difference equals heterosexual difference, such objectified figures are never to show themselves as subjects in their own right.

Since the malestream conceptual framework is built on an economy of the Same, on a system of "ho(m)osexuality," lesbianism represents a specific mode of psychosexual Otherness, whose position within the Western symbolic is very unlike that of male homosexuality.¹ As Judith Butler has pointed out, gay males generally "enjoy" cultural reality as "prohibited objects." Lesbian sexuality, in contrast, is neither named nor prohibited within the Law. Rendered invisible, indeed, "unthinkable" within dominant grids of cultural intelligibility, lesbianism belongs to the unconscious abject of the Western imagination. That the figure of the lesbian is a cause of inordinate cultural anxiety, a

subversive force that must be repressed into the negative realm of “un-thinkability” is adequately illustrated by the metaphysical overkill with which popular films like *Bitter Moon* and also *Basic Instinct* insist on removing the “impossible” subject from view: already having reduced lesbian sexuality to a function in their Oedipal plots, they additionally insist on violently obliterating the unnameable abject from their discourse altogether.

In seeking to control lesbian Otherness, these films effectively exploit the subjugating effects of interactive discursive operations such as objectification, appropriation, and subordination. By inserting lesbian images into the very master narratives that keep patriarchy going, they implement strategies of containment with which women in general—and feminists in particular—are all too familiar. An illuminating articulation of such repressive ideological procedures appeared in the 1993 Summer issue of the Dutch edition of the international *Avant Garde*. Dutifully picking up on a trend set slightly earlier by other mainstream magazines such as *Newsweek*, *U.S. News* and *Vanity Fair*, this popular glossy evidently saw potential profit in appealing to its cosmopolitan female audience with a titillating item on same-sex desire. Under the eye-catching headline, “Getting the Hots for Your Girlfriend,” lesbianism is presented, not as a potential form of cultural “identity,” nor even as a particular private “preference,” but rather as an exciting “new lifestyle” (58). Sensitive to its readers’ presumed interests, the story begins with thrilling reports on the emergence of the “lipstick lesbian” among the pleasure-seeking smart sets of London and Los Angeles. These observations lead to the extraordinary inference that it has “suddenly become fashionable to approach one’s girlfriend as sex object.” Perhaps a bit too disquieting, the unexpected suggestion is, however, immediately succeeded by the reassuring remark that “pretending to” will do just as well, providing that “you are both young and beautiful, and do not underestimate the tantalizing effect your performance is intended to produce” (61)—that is to say, on men. For after dishing up some delightfully “sick” rumors about such megastars as Madonna and Sharon Stone, the article hastens to its conclusion, which, in its very predictability could not be better formulated than it is, by one of the interviewed “designer dykes”: “OK, let’s be honest about this. What could be the fun of making out with a woman if there were no men around ready to offer you a cure?” (61). The “glam-

orous" lesbian lifestyle turns out to be a rather mild disease, nothing medicine will not cure, and that happens to be easily available in the therapeutic sexual powers of (fortunately omnipresent) straight men.

The very frequency with which lesbian sexuality consistently reappears in the popular press and on the Hollywood screen, only to be immediately denied existence in "the real," intimates that the male subject's fear of emasculation cannot be eradicated by the killing off of individual lesbians: such terror is deeply entrenched within the masculine psycho-system. Underscored by a collective imagination in which lesbian sexuality is at once "impossible"—by rendering the concept of heterosexual gender irrelevant—and paradoxically, the condition upon which the myth of masculinity depends, it is precisely on account of its fantastic nature, as a product of male angst, that the lesbian Phoenix always threatens to rise again. The stereotypical image of the devouring lesbian vampire hence continues to be reborn, sustaining itself on the lifeblood of those who envisage themselves her prospective victims.

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The overt visibility of "lesbian" representations in popular culture thus succeeds in rendering invisible precisely that which makes lesbian sexuality a potential force of disruption. To put it bluntly, within the terms of dominant discourse the lesbian subject simply does not exist. Whoever lays hands on her girlfriend merely gives another twist to a longstanding cultural myth, and does so with only one purpose in mind—to present an enticing spectacle to the benefit of an all-male audience. But how does the lesbian subject fare in front of her straight sisters? What role is lesbian sexuality allowed to play in contemporary feminist debates?

The concept of sexual difference, in the sense of woman's difference from man, has traditionally occupied a central place in feminist theory. Since the latter half of the 1980s, mainstream (that is, white, middle class, heterosexual) feminists, dutifully taking into account the lessons taught by poststructuralist and deconstructive theories, have increasingly tried to expand their critical focus to encompass more than just gender distinctions. However, as Judith Roof has effectively shown in *A Lure of Knowledge*, this apparent willingness to incorporate multiple differences into mainstream feminist theoretical practice generally issued in no more than a token acknowledgement of "deviant"

perspectives. Regarded as merely so many variations on a single theme—sexual difference—the radical “Otherness” of black and lesbian perspectives were largely presented as no more than forms of cultural diversity, and therewith categorically divested of their theoretical implications.

The initial token acknowledgement of black perspectives in feminist criticism gradually led to a recognition of the profound influence of racial differences on both cultural and theoretical practices. Lesbian, as well as ethnic voices other than black, however, were still kept “separate but equal,” persistently being inserted into mainstream theoretical frameworks, so that their potentially subversive implications could continue to go unnoticed. When the issue of “political correctness” began to dominate academic debates at the end of the 1980s, mainstream feminism once again shifted its focus, this time to concentrate on the questions of race and class. Around the same time, the figure of the lesbian disappeared from the theoretical arena altogether. While the re-politicization of feminist debates took the shape of an explicit solidarity with the most visibly oppressed social groups, lesbian perspectives were essentially deprived of both their political and theoretical significance.

This de-politicization within mainstream feminism has not substantially subsided in the 1990s, nor has it remained restricted to the “politically correct” American academy. Indeed, a notable heterocentrist bias is equally apparent in mainstream feminist discourse outside the Anglograph critical community. For instance, in the early 1990s France saw the publication of a five-volume history of gender in Europe from ancient Greece to today, edited by Georges Dubuy and Michelle Perrot. Jointly reviewing the French original of this much-acclaimed *Histoire des Femmes* as well as its Dutch translation, lesbian historian Dorelies Kraakman recently presented the results of a careful perusal of all the variously indexed subjects that could possibly be related to lesbian sexuality. Having spent many hours eagerly scanning a total of ten hefty tomes, she found herself confronted, however, with a pervasive, indeed “aggressive” silence on anything that might even suggest the (historical) existence of the “love that dare not speak its name.” The “indifferent equality” towards lesbian love, sex, and desire, permeating this monumental overview of Women’s History, hence leads

to the staggering conclusion that such a prestigious project of feminist scholarship has no significance whatsoever for lesbian history. Or, as the disappointed reviewer herself tersely puts it: "Five Times Nothing Equals Nothing."

* * *

I have argued that malestream culture seeks to suppress the threat of lesbian Otherness by turning it into a titillating spectacle to be subsumed by, if not violently obliterated within, the myth of masculinity. Mainstream feminism succeeds in wiping lesbianism off the political/theoretical agenda by implementing similarly effective methods of containment, tactically exploiting the strategies of subordination, tokenism, and/or muting. The net results, however, are virtually the same. The lesbian specter, never more than a shadowy, derivative figure within the system of gendered heterosexuality subtending either mode of discourse, haunts the edges of these fields of power/knowledge as a minor irregularity or, more accurately, constitutes a negative presence within them. What could be the grounds underlying the lesbian's paradoxical presence/absence in the conceptual realms of, respectively, the cultural malestream and the feminist mainstream? What could these otherwise so dissimilar modes of meaning-production have in common to account for such striking similarities? In addressing these questions, I must briefly turn to psychoanalytic theory.

In *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), feminist film theorist Kaja Silverman assigns a central place to the concept of (symbolic) castration. In a Lacanian framework, the notion of symbolic castration refers first of all to the loss of the Real, that is, the break-up of the primordial mother/child dyad upon the infant's perception of her/his own reflection in the mirror. A culminating moment in the earliest stage of subjective formation, the end of the "mirror stage" constitutes the trauma of primary alienation: what the child henceforth will come to accept as her/his self is no more than an illusion of identity, an imaginary construction of Self in/by that which is utterly Other. The second critical moment in the process of subjectivity occurs somewhat later, when the child enters into language, and therewith learns to identify her/himself by means of the symbolic markers that organize the social order. Assuming her/his appropriate place in the discursive realm, that is, the

preexisting field of power/knowledge in which each individual must position her/himself in order to become a full subject, s/he acquires, among other things, a recognizable gender-identity.

At once marking the onset of the subjective process and the traumatic rupture that puts an end to presymbolic bliss, the primary moment of symbolic castration does not yet recognize sexual difference: male and female subjects are equally symbolically castrated. (The fact that women nonetheless principally carry the social and political weight of this primary loss has more to do with patriarchal power relations than with psychosexual realities.) Within the terms of patriarchal folklore—to which both Freudian and Lacanian thought fundamentally belong—male castration anxiety calls into action two defense mechanisms, two protective psychic reactions identified by Freud as “disavowal” and “fetishism.” In very simple terms, this means that the male subject perceives but refuses to acknowledge his castrated condition: he imagines himself to be in possession of the phallus; and he displaces his fear of losing the vital instrument onto the female subject, or rather, onto her body. The female body’s physical “lack” becomes the symbol of what he has to lose and is therewith transformed into a phantasmatic fetish/phallus. “Woman” in patriarchy represents that which must be continually conquered and appropriated to authenticate the male’s noncastrated existence. Her “lack” serves to guarantee the man’s continued possession of the phallus, of what Lacan terms the “ultimate signifier.” In such a framework, the difference between male and female subjectivity is thus a question of either having or being the phallus. The female subject consequently seeks recompense for her “factual” lack by directing the focus of her desire—a desire which is never to be fulfilled—onto a substitute phallus, a (preferably male) child. In this way, both the female body and her desire are effectively made available to the male subject, at least within the closed system of a heterosexual economy.

However, if we pursue Silverman’s line of argument and assume that male and female subjects are equally symbolically castrated, what can we discover about the operations of such protective mechanisms as disavowal and fetishization in relation to the female psyche? Who or what is set up as the fetish/phallus that must simultaneously symbolize and mask her inescapably castrated condition? Or, to return to the question that most concerns me here, who or what might be said to

serve as a screen onto which the feminist theoretical subject can project her lack of symbolic power, her need of discursive authority within the social order—a lack moreover, which she, *qualitate qua*, cannot but refuse to accept? In view of what I have argued above, I think a viable answer here would be, “the lesbian,” or more specifically, the lesbian theoretical subject.

From the emergence of “second wave” feminism in the late 1960s onwards, lesbians have played a crucial part in furthering the cause of women’s liberation. As we have seen, this key role in the sociopolitical movement is barely reflected in current theoretical debates. Yet, it is precisely in its significant absence that the lesbian position proclaims its critical presence within mainstream feminist thought. The persistence with which the lesbian figure curiously tends to disappear behind the political horizon is closely connected with the symbolic trick whereby sexuality itself continually ends up in the dim margins of the collective consciousness, and hence testifies to the function of lesbian sexuality as an overdetermined configuration in Western culture generally. The phallogocentric universe is made up of a complex network of disciplines, theories, and (un)consciously received ideas that are structurally informed by a notion of sexual difference conceived of in mutually exclusive, hierarchical terms. While the binary concepts of gender produced by this system of masculinity and femininity may vary considerably from one society to the next and may further undergo significant shifts in the course of history, the duality of gender itself nonetheless necessarily presupposes an immutable and biologically determined opposition between the categories of sex, between male and female. The binary frame of sex in its turn depends on an unquestioned assumption of a “natural” heterosexuality. Within this heterocentric universe lesbian sexuality can have no place. The reduction of lesbianism to a negative semantic space in mainstream feminist thought is therefore not so much exceptional as symptomatic of the dominant symbolic order in which feminism manifests itself as reverse discourse. Excluded by the ideological apparatus designated by Adrienne Rich as the system of “compulsory heterosexuality,” the lesbian cannot be recognized in either the dominant/masculinist or the nondominant/feminist grids of cultural intelligibility. Indeed, since the “unthinkable” subject falls outside the conceptual boundaries of the “straight mind” in which both modes of meaning/production are equally deeply embed-

ded, lesbianism could be argued, as Judith Roof persuasively does, to constitute the "vanishing point" of Western metaphysics per se.²

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Masculinist discourse defuses the potentially disruptive force of lesbian sexuality by taking recourse to the strategy of disavowal. In Freudian terms, the disavowed object represents the repressed contents of a simultaneously acknowledged and repudiated psychic perception. Feminist discourse also employs this defense mechanism; the practice of tokenism renders the lesbian into a symbol, a token of difference, something that may not and/or cannot be seen. But mainstream feminism additionally implements a protective measure against the threat of lesbian disruption that is even more directly generated by anxiety, that is, the strategy of negation. In its Freudian sense, the process of negation entails that the "ideational content of what is repressed" is temporarily prevented from reaching consciousness. Its outcome is a "kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists" (Freud 263). In order to achieve the required effects, negation implies that unwanted psychic materials, prior to being repressed, are both verbally and emotionally articulated, albeit in negative terms. It follows that the unconscious contents of the repressed are at once denied and confirmed, for in order to be liable to negation they must have been posited first. The intertwining operations of these combined repressive mechanisms shed significant light on the mottled career of the lesbian within feminist theoretical practice over the past eight to ten years. Initially acknowledged under the separate heading of "cultural diversity" and henceforth subordinated to the metadiscourse of mainstream theoretical debates, lesbian perspectives have gradually been rendered invisible altogether, being effectively obscured by more "urgent" questions such as race, class, and ethnicity.

These admittedly bald claims may seem highly exaggerated, or even appear to stem from a particularly paranoid frame of mind. It might further be objected that things are not as bad as I have made them out to be: more and more Western universities are currently offering (under)graduate programs in Gay and Lesbian Studies, books with a specific focus on lesbian criticism are rolling off (not the least prestigious) academic presses, and the growth of interest in the rapidly

expanding field of what Domna Stanton has termed "The New Studies of Sexuality" is unmistakable (1). These overt signs of "success," however, though certainly cause for rejoicing, at the same time strike me as a possible source of concern. For the emergence of Lesbian and Gay Studies as a separate field of scholarly research indicates that the lesbian feminist has not been able to gain a firm foothold within the epistemological realm of her straight sisters. Just as the "impossible" subject is simply struck off the record in two thousand years of Women's History, so are her contributions to mainstream feminist debates more often than not written off as not theoretically specific, or, at worst—*anxiously if not "aggressively"*—reduced to silence altogether.

If lesbian feminists are presently forging a discursive alliance with their queer brothers, such a development is, it appears to me, no more and no less than a newly enforced cohabitation. In view of the notable differences between these distinct groups of sexual Others, in sociopolitical terms as well as with regard to their respective theoretical traditions, "Queer Theory" constitutes a joining of forces that has, to a considerable extent, been born of dire necessity. What is more, the modest success with which Lesbian and Gay Studies are currently establishing themselves in the academy may actually be used as an ostensibly legitimate pretext for leaving the heterosexist bias of established critical practice as a whole unchallenged, while inadvertently strengthening the disconcerting ease with which mainstream feminists are inclined to overlook the potentially disruptive implications of lesbian theory for their own models of thought. Just as the sociopolitical reduction of nonnormative sexualities to a question of "personal preference" enables the maintenance of the heterosexual norm as a "natural" fact, so does the separate existence of lesbian studies offer mainstream feminists the possibility to continue to avoid a serious questioning of their own internalized heterocentrism.

Jane Gallop has suggested that the cultural disavowal of lesbian sexuality may be read as a symptom of the "heterosexual teleology" that underlies both literary criticism and Western culture as a whole (199). From this perspective, it seems fair to assume that the repression of the lesbian Other in mainstream feminist thought is a direct result of the latter's implicated position within the dominant structures of heterosexual gender ideology.

If such an assumption can be maintained, it follows that the figure

of the lesbian does not merely imperil the precarious balance within dominant gender relations and their underlying sex/textual scenarios. The lesbian epistemological subject, then, also threatens to disrupt feminist theories based on a binary notion of sexual difference and the “heterosexual teleology” underpinning them. As a site of negativity, the figure of this sexual Other adequately serves as a shield to protect mainstream feminism against the risks of losing its voice, being capable of at once symbolizing and masking such dangers as follow from a genuine attempt at recognizing the possible blindspots of longstanding, often ardently cherished conceptual paradigms. As an apolitical, nonepistemological category, the radical Otherness of lesbianism is eminently suited for its role as fetish. It is therefore not so surprising that the lesbian specter was compelled to move back into the feminist closet precisely around the time when the Western media began to celebrate the beginning of a new “postfeminist” era. What little social authority feminist discourse had acquired with great difficulty in the mid-1980s at that point came under the threat of what was soon to become a full-blown “anti-feminist backlash,” a threat which has hardly diminished since (see Faludi). Within the context of a multicultural *Zeitgeist* emerging simultaneously, it was the lesbian Other that could still function as a screen onto which mainstream feminists could project their justified fear of a further loss of symbolic authority.

Fear, however, has never been known to be a reliable counsellor. Any critical project—especially feminism—which has set itself the task of gaining insight into the ideological structures by means of which gender as well as other axes of exclusion serve to enable and legitimate all sorts of sociocultural marginalization, would do well to disregard such a bad source of counsel. As Henry James observed: “The house of fiction has . . . not one window but a million” (7). The same holds true for the house of theory, in particular that of feminist theory. In view of the growing multivoicedness of the world surrounding this epistemological abode, it seems to me that the lesbian voice deserves a full hearing—both inside and outside its weathered walls.

Notes

1. “Hom(m)osexuality” is a term coined by Luce Irigaray. Diacritically punning on the French word *homme*, meaning “man,” and the Greek *homos*,

meaning "same," it serves to indicate that in an economy of the Same, the female Other can merely function as an object of male exchange.

2. See Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge*, especially Chapter 4, "Freud Reads Lesbians." I take the phrase "the straight mind" from Monique Wittig's essay of the same title in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*.

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