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Acknowledgements

This book was as much born from excitement as indignation: excitement about the growing visibility of lesbian sexuality in Western cultural production, and indignation about the particular settings, or configurations, in which mainstream 'lesbian' images consistently (re)appear and, more often than not, subsequently disappear. Such a combination of irritation and fascination has always been an 'enabling' state of mind for the kind of work in cultural analysis I am interested in. In this case, my ambivalence about recent lesbian configurations got me started on a project that, although I had not been consciously aware of it, had begun to take shape during innumerable conversations with friends, colleagues and students in preceding years. I am grateful to all these various interlocutors who, each in their own ways, have helped me to see what this book eventually should be. Needless to say, responsibility for the views expressed in the chapters that follow rests solely with me.

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only did much to improve the final result, but also, on occasion, forced me seriously to reconsider what I had thought I wanted to say.

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I dedicate this book with love to Pamela Pattynama, to whom I owe more than I can say.

A short section of chapter 1 appeared in 'Heterosexual Screening: Lesbian Studies', in *Women's Studies and Culture: A Feminist Introduction to the Humanities*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik (London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1995). Chapter 3 grew out of an essay published in *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.3 (1995) under the title 'Hard to Swallow: Indigestible Narratives of Lesbian Sexuality'. Chapter 4 first saw the light in *The Journal of Narrative and Life History* as '(Sub)textual Configurations: Sexual Ambivalences in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*', and appears here with substantial alterations. Portions of chapter 5 form part of an earlier and much shorter essay published in *Recharting the Thirties*, ed. Patrick M. Quinn (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995).

Contents

Prologue

> To say that no sign signifies by itself, that language always refers back to language because at any moment only a few signs are received, is also to say that language is expressive as much through what is *between* the words as through the words themselves, and through what it does not say as much as what it says; just as the painter paints as much by what he traces, by the blanks he leaves, or by the brush marks that he does not make.
>
> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*

If the 1970s retrospectively seem to have set the stage for the victorious emergence of Women's Studies in the Western academy, the 1980s appear to be the decade in which Black, postcolonial and African-American Studies have come into their own as autonomous branches of scholarship, if not integral parts of institutionalized academic thought. A growing diversity of ethnic and multicultural studies have since succeeded in establishing – albeit sometimes precarious – positions in the faculties of arts and social sciences in most contemporary institutions of higher education in both Western Europe and the United States. But while the development of this still expanding and diversifying field continues to provoke debates about its integration into existing curricula, the first half of the 1990s might, at least in some circles, also be recognized as that in which another newcomer made its official début into the world of higher learning. The variegated body of theories and practices making up this newly burgeoning field will, in the context of this book, be provisionally subsumed under the head-

ing of lesbian (and gay) studies, with specific emphasis on the humanities.

The multiplication of Lesbian/Gay and Queer Studies programmes in major US and Western European universities, the birth of Queer Nation (as yet largely contained within the boundaries of English-speaking nations), as well as the remarkable upsurge in media attention for lesbian and gay subjects, may lead future historians to depict the early 1990s as the era in which lesbians and gays were granted permission to step out of their subcultural closets in order to take up their roles on the hitherto pervasively heterosexual stage of mainstream (academic) culture. The extent to which lesbian and gay sexualities have gained public visibility and commercial viability – if not official recognition and respectability in substantial sections of contemporary academia – is perhaps best reflected in the growing numbers of learned books on these formerly sensitive, even forbidden, topics, which since the late 1980s have been rolling off not unprestigious university presses. *Lesbian Configurations* aims to contribute to this still-widening stream.

In its initial conception, I wanted to write a book that would present a more or less comprehensive overview of what has been making its way into the academy (and into increasingly lavishly-produced publishers' catalogues) under various banners: lesbian theory and practice, Lesbian Studies, the New Lesbian Criticism, or the lesbian branches of Queer Theory and what Domna C. Stanton has designated the 'new studies of sexuality'.[1] I optimistically envisaged a volume that would give broad if not exhaustive insight into the critical practices and theoretical models that have been shaping the current project of lesbian studies, with a focus on literature and culture. At the same time, I intended to show that, while partly growing out of mainstream academic feminist criticism, lesbian studies' recent bid for relative autonomy and independence from this affiliated field of cultural analysis, which for many of its practitioners had long provided the most viable intellectual home, on the one hand resulted from certain developments within the critical community at large, and on the other occurred in response to the decidedly heterocentrist bias that, despite an unmistakable growth in multicultural and ethnic awareness, continues to ground the majority of feminist thought.

When I began to stake out the possible contents of a book that could introduce the uninitiated reader to this blossoming new field of critical inquiry, lesbian studies constituted a still fairly negotiable range of writings and readings that seemed relatively easily to fit into the structure of a one-volume study. In the course of the last five or six years, however, lesbian and gay studies have grown into a rapidly expanding, broadly interdisciplinary realm of scholarly investigation; a field, moreover, that has begun to generate some of the most radical and influential ideas about the socio-cultural processes of meaning-production to date. As such, gay/lesbian and queer theories have provided a basis for innovative models of thought relevant not only to the growing ranks of lesbian and gay scholars themselves, but also to cultural critics and analysts whose primary political and intellectual focus lies with other, interrelated axes of differentiation, such as gender, 'race', class, and ethnicity. Hence, even though it had been clear from the start that I would restrict myself to lesbian studies only, I found myself facing an impossible task: the sheer interdisciplinary breadth and theoretical scope of what had, it seemed, almost overnight transformed itself from an extremely marginal field of 'special interest' into a flourishing mode of theory and practice at the cutting edge of socio-political and cultural analysis, rendered the idea of a comprehensive overview as much intellectually unviable as it was physically impossible.

Rather than perversely attempting the impossible, and ending up with a book that would inevitably be too sketchy and overly generalizing to be of any use to even the most maverick students of lesbian criticism and culture, I chose to organize my material somewhat differently than first intended. What follows, then, are a series of chapters that more or less stand by themselves, but that also form constitutive parts in an ongoing investigation of those critical and theoretical issues that lie at the heart of lesbian cultural studies today.

Lesbian Configurations sets out to explore and further develop those enabling ideas coming out of recent lesbian theoretical work that appear most promising for the present and future practice of lesbian scholarship. To realize this overall objective, individual chapters largely retain their basis in the detailed textual analyses in which they find their starting-point. Most centre on

specific literary or cinematographic texts, in order to zoom in on certain theoretical questions more directly, or otherwise to engage variously interrelated bodies of thought. Chapters do not all conform to the same format or run to the same length, nor do they approach their subject matter in exactly the same manner. All, however, find common ground in the fact that the book as a whole is centrally concerned with critically investigating the theoretical as well as political potential of a distinctly lesbian mode of cultural analysis and social critique. Furthermore, I have throughout sustained a line of inquiry that forms the second, though not necessarily secondary, preoccupation underlying the project's general scheme: by giving voice to and reflecting on my own, often apprehensive and sometimes downright suspicious reactions to the ways in which popular Western culture has recently been tapping in on the 'voguing' of queerness. In other words, as well as showing the potential of lesbian theory in practice, and probing its liberatory force within the larger project of radical sociocultural critique, I hope to shed some light on what seems a less fortunate aspect of the coming-out of queerness in the academy, that is, the striking side-show of popular 'lesbian' figures and images that has gradually been emerging along with the waxing stream of critical discourse on the subject of lesbianism – a subject, one might almost forget, that only a few years ago was as invisible as it has traditionally been unspeakable.

In her aptly entitled book, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle argues that the 'literary history of lesbianism ... is first of all a history of derealization.' Tracing its inscription in Western art and literature through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she remarks that lesbianism, or even its possibility, 'can only be represented to the degree that it is simultaneously "derealized" ', made to disappear from view through the 'infusion of spectral metaphors':

> One woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one. Passion is excited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized. The vision is inevitably waved off. Panic seems to underwrite these obsessional spectralizing gestures: a panic over love, female pleasure, and the possibility of women breaking free – together – from their male overseers. Homophobia is the order of the day, entertains itself (wryly or gothically) with phantoms, then exorcizes them.[2]

If such a description of the lesbian's ephemeral existence, its characterization in terms of 'ghosting', seems pertinent to Western art and literature of earlier centuries, it has by no means lost its significance in the present day. Castle's focus is, in this instance, on French male-authored texts originating in the eighteenth century. In this book, in contrast, I will concentrate on twentieth-century reincarnations of this 'spectral lesbian', and on the continuous re-inscription of lesbian sexuality and desire as a 'phantasmatic enterprise'.[3] To demonstrate that the recreation of such 'ghostly' incarnations is neither the prerogative of the male imagination, nor restricted to either the popular or the more traditionally literary domain, the specific appearance of the elusive lesbian figure is interrogated in both male- and female-authored texts. While some of these texts have become part of the established canon, though largely on different grounds, others, far from being recognized as in some way or other classifiable as 'lesbian' will be less familiar, or perhaps completely unknown to most readers.

Chapter 1 stakes out some of the aims and the specific potential of lesbian cultural criticism. Using the contested status of Alice Walker's best-selling novel *The Color Purple* (1982) as a starting-point, the chapter begins by raising the question of definition. What makes a text into a lesbian one? Must the author be a lesbian to make it so? And what if she is 'known' to be a lesbian, but does not explicitly deal with the subject in her work? Does that still qualify as 'lesbian'? And what about language? Does sexuality enter into the ways we speak and write? Is there such a thing as lesbian writing, even a lesbian aesthetic, as distinct from a gay male, a female or feminist one? And finally, how are we to approach the role of the reader/critic? To what extent do critics determine what counts as lesbian and what not? And if they do, does this mean that any text may be read from a lesbian perspective?[4] A brief analysis of the ambivalent procedures by which lesbian desire is narrativized in Walker's novel aims to illustrate what such a perspective may entail, revealing that the mere presence of lesbian characters, or a thematic focus on lesbian desire, does not necessarily prevent a text from effecting precisely the kind of 'exorcizing' process by which the lesbian figure ultimately evaporates. Or, in Castle's terms, by which

lesbian love, sexuality and desire are at once 'disembodied' and 'decarnalized'.

Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, that the process of 'ghosting' to which the lesbian has historically been subjected has hardly subsided today will become even clearer in chapters 2 and 3. These chapters critically engage with recent (male-directed) films in which female same-sex desire is centrally invoked only to be obscured and, eventually, violently eradicated. Starting with a theoretical discussion of the lesbian's in/visibility in Western culture at large, chapter 2 concentrates on the material inscription of such in/visibility in a representative example of 'lesbian' imagery in contemporary Hollywood cinema, the controversial sexual thriller *Basic Instinct* (1992), directed by the Dutch filmmaker Paul Verhoeven. At the time of its release Verhoeven's first international success provoked a great deal of debate, both in the mainstream media and in various segments of the gay community. The main focus of debate was the extremely hostile way in which the film represents its (extraordinarily large) cast of lesbian characters. Rather than reiterating such critiques – which, in fact, would amount to no more than stating the obvious – my discussion serves to bring to light the less obvious ways in which *Basic Instinct* succeeds in reinscribing earlier 'spectralizing gestures' with regard to the lesbian, and thus, despite its postmodern gloss, continues a tradition of 'ghosting' that goes back at least as far as the seventeenth century.

Revealing the pervasiveness of this mainstream cultural tradition, and showing that homo-, or rather, lesbophobia is still the order of the day, not just within the notoriously phobic and panic-driven realm of the Hollywood Dream Machine, chapter 3 presents a critical analysis of a less well-known European film, *Bitter Moon* (1992), directed by Roman Polanski. Expanding on a line of argument developed in the preceding chapter, the discussion of this deceptively self-reflexive narrative of anxious masculinity, rather than focusing on the fearful fascination of the cultural 'malestream' with female same-sex desire *per se*, concentrates more particularly on the significance of the lesbian as a figure of Otherness in a hegemonic (straight white male) cultural imaginary that finds itself increasingly under threat in our postmodern, multicultural times.

Dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural production may be differently situated in the larger socio-symbolic realm; both are inevitably bound to the restrictive as well as the enabling operations of prevailing signifying processes. It is not surprising therefore to find that female authors, past and present, have used strategies of revelation and concealment not dissimilar to those employed by their male counterparts in articulating lesbian desire or presenting lesbian characters in their work. This is not to say that the strategies of 'derealization' that serve to obliterate the threat of female same-sex desire in most male-authored texts are merely copied or employed in exactly the same way or, by extension, to the same effect in cultural production bearing a woman's signature. Censorship laws and fear of social disapprobation have forced many lesbian writers in the past to deal with their scandalous subject in masked or coded terms. Some of these texts manifest an internalized lesbophobia that underlines the overwhelming impact of dominant ideologies of sex and sexuality on even the most intellectually acute and otherwise self-aware of twentieth-century women writers and artists. Others, in contrast, display a striking ingenuity in sidestepping the rules of silence and invisibility that have traditionally determined the lesbian's cultural role. Working around the edges of language, they have succeeded in creating a variety of symbolic markers – sustained patterns of imagery, metaphors, personal names, and other tropes – that are at once recognizable as expressions of the 'love that dare not speak its name' to those who know how to read them, but that look innocent enough to pass the attention of censors and other, less knowledgeable readers.

The extent to which female authors are capable of *self-consciously* employing such strategies of disclosure and concealment, in order to articulate some form of lesbian desire, varies considerably, being largely dependent on the socio-historical context in which they are situated and within which they write. Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate such differences. Moving away from both the contemporary scene and the motion picture, each chapter explores configurations of lesbian sexuality in literary texts written by women, originating in highly distinct socio-cultural moments in twentieth-century Western history. Close textual analyses make it clear that attitudes towards sex and sexuality

generally, and towards lesbian sexuality in particular, have not, in the course of the century that is now drawing to its close, developed in a progressive line of increasing liberation.[5] While a general loosening up of traditional sexual taboos is unmistakably part of larger socio-historical developments in modern Western societies, lesbianism, it appears, has not equally enjoyed growing visibility and social acceptability. Indeed, by reversing the chronological order in which they originally appeared in discussing these texts, I seek to underscore such discontinuity. But apart from showing the discontinuities in the history of lesbian representation that have occurred since the sexualization of the socio-cultural domain at the turn of the century up until the emergence of the women's liberation and gay and lesbian movements in the late 1960s, my purpose in this section is to illustrate how deconstructive theoretical tools may be constructively deployed and utilized in a practice of 'symptomatic' lesbian reading. In other words, to show how recently developed critical tools may be employed 'anachronistically' in order to wrest unsaid – or indeed unsayable – sexual meanings from seemingly straightforward, pre-liberation texts.

Chapter 4 offers such a 'perverse' reading of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), a novel whose legendary status largely derives from what has usually been read as a horrifying, and implicitly heterosexual, inscription of 'beset womanhood' in McCarthy's America. Jumping across the Atlantic Ocean and thirty years back in time, chapter 5, in contrast, centres on a short novel written in England in the first half of this century, *Friends and Relations* (1931) by the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen. Apart from highlighting the historically determined differences in the ways in which women writers have attempted simultaneously to express and to conceal female same-sex desire in eras preceding 'second wave' feminism and gay liberation, the chapter interrogates the long-standing association of lesbianism with textual figurations of female adolescence.

Veering away from the 'literary' and interpretive mode of the foregoing inquiries, chapter 6 resumes and continues various theoretical conversations initiated in earlier sections. Picking up on an issue briefly commented upon in chapter 1, and thus bringing the line of this book's narrative quest full circle, my main concern

in this chapter is the difficult relationship between feminist critical discourse and lesbian cultural studies. First, the complexities and barely disguised tensions that have characterized the relations between lesbianism and feminism from the early 1970s onwards are subjected to critical scrutiny. Drawing on a selection of both feminist and lesbian writings; the complex causes underlying the strained relations between these affiliated fields of study are further explored from the perspective of (neo)-Freudian and (neo)-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, in order to shed some light on the underlying grounds of such complexities. Following closely upon the line of argument set out here, the epilogue briefly outlines a notion of lesbian scholarship as a mode of 'participative thinking,' as a practice of thought and of everyday life, which, in interrelation with other politically informed modes of cultural analysis, may help us better to perceive some of the significant blanks lining the Western collective imagination. As a specific form of participative thinking, lesbian cultural criticism, I ultimately argue, enables us more fully to read those cultural expressions of sexuality that speak, to recall Merleau-Ponty's words, 'as much through what is *between* the words as through the words themselves'. By allowing us to understand, at least to some extent, what those 'ghostly' yet significant spaces in between the terms of gendered heterosexuality may mean, the radical potential of lesbian critical theory and practice may – as I hope this book will succeed in conveying – yet turn out to be indispensable, not only to lesbian critics and theorists, but also to practitioners of cultural analysis in general.