

A Lure of Knowledge



LESBIAN SEXUALITY AND THEORY

Judith Roof



Columbia University Press • New York

BETWEEN MEN ~ BETWEEN WOMEN

LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES

Lillian Faderman and Larry Gross, Editors

John Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*

Gary David Comstock, *Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*

Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from
Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe*

Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life
in Twentieth-Century America*

Richard D. Mohr, *Gays/Justice: A Study of Ethics, Society, and Law*

Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*

A Lure of Knowledge



LESBIAN SEXUALITY AND THEORY

江苏工业学院图书馆

Judith Roof 藏书章



Columbia University Press • New York

Columbia University Press
New York • Chichester, West Sussex

Copyright © 1991 Columbia University Press
All rights reserved

The author thanks Yale University Press for permission to quote the poem "Artemis" from *Beginning with O* by Olga Broumas, copyright © 1977 by Olga Broumas. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Roof, Judith, 1951—

A lure of knowledge : lesbian sexuality and theory / Judith Roof.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-231-07486-7

ISBN 0-231-07487-5 (pbk.)

1. Lesbians' writings—History and criticism—Theory, etc.
2. Lesbianism in literature. I. Title.

PN56.L45R66 1991

809'.93353—dc20

91-14705
CIP



Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

BETWEEN MEN ~ BETWEEN WOMEN

LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES

Lillian Faderman and Larry Gross, *Editors*
Eugene F. Rice, *Columbia University Advisor*

John Boswell

YALE UNIVERSITY

Claudia Card

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

Richard Green

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
LOS ANGELES

Gilbert Herdt

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Barbara Johnson

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Rhonda R. Rivera

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

History

Philosophy

Psychology

Anthropology,
Sociology, Political Science
Literature

Law

Between Men ~ Between Women is a forum for current lesbian and gay scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. The series includes both books that rest within specific traditional disciplines and are substantially about gay men, bisexuals, or lesbians and books that are interdisciplinary in ways that reveal new insights into gay, bisexual, and lesbian experience, transform traditional disciplinary methods in consequence of the perspectives that experience provides, or begin to establish lesbian and gay studies as a freestanding inquiry. Established to contribute to an increased understanding of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men, the series also aims to provide through that understanding a wider comprehension of culture in general.

FOR SHARON

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
Introductions	1
ONE A View to a Thrill	15
TWO "This Is Not for You": The Sexuality of Mothering	90
THREE Beginning with L	119
FOUR Freud Reads Lesbians	174
FIVE All Analogies Are Faulty: The Fear of Intimacy in Feminist Criticism	216
SIX Polymorphous Diversity	237
NOTES	255
BIBLIOGRAPHY	269
INDEX	277

Acknowledgments

I WOULD like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who supported this project through the 1988 Summer Seminar for College Teachers conducted by Jane Gallop, where work on this book really began. I would also like to thank the editors of *Arizona Quarterly* for their kind permission to reprint portions of "Freud Reads Lesbians: The Male Homosexual Imperative," and the University of Tennessee Press for permission to reprint " 'This Is Not for You': The Sexuality of Mothering" that appears in a different form in the anthology *Narrating Mothers*, edited by Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy. Copyright © 1991 by the University of Tennessee Press. I owe a debt to Katherine Burkman, Ann Dubé, Mark Auburn, Stephen Heath, and Charles Williams for providing models, tools, materials, and the stimulus to write something; to Richard Feldstein and Ellie Ragland-Sullivan for their insights on psychoanalysis; to Ann Ardis, Dale Bauer, Barbara Gates, Sandra Harding, Melissa Mowry, Bonnie Scott, Michele Shauf, Ellen Wert, and Lynda Zwinger for their helpful readings of manuscript in process; and finally to Jane Gallop, Sharon Groves, Julie Schmidt, and Robyn Wiegman for their friendship, criticism, support, and inspiration.

A Lure of Knowledge

Introductions

Configurations

AN ANECDOTE that appears several times in Anaïs Nin's writings is about Nin and her husband, Ian Hugo, going to a brothel on Rue Blondel to see a sexual "show" performed by two women. In a kind of erotic travelogue, the prostitutes demonstrate exotic positions using a false penis. According to Nin, however, nothing stirs until the women abandon the priapus and demonstrate "lesbian poses."¹ At this point they all—the prostitutes, Nin, and her husband—become aroused: "The big woman reveals to me a secret place in the woman's body, a source of new joy . . ." and "Hugo and I lean over them, taken by that moment of loveliness in the little woman, who offers to our eyes her conquered, quivering body. Hugo is in turmoil. I am no longer woman: I am man. I am touching the core of June's being" (72). Configuring a moment of authentic sexual excitement, the thrilling view of the two women turns Nin into a man who desires a woman.

In this scene Nin brings together many of the conventional cultural conceptions of lesbian sexuality. The women's use of a dildo and Nin's masculine transformation establish the sexual activity of the two women as either faked heterosexuality or as masculine. A performance, it belongs to the realm of a licentious underworld. Despite

the fact that it begins as an act, its spectacle becomes authentic, exciting both Nin and her husband. Watching it, Nin gains some essential knowledge about female sexuality. But in Nin's scene, the women only momentarily relate to one another sexually as women; the lesbian core of the story is buttressed at beginning and end by masculine transformations (the dildo, Nin's masculinity) compelled by a complementary two-term logic whose obvious superimposition divulges the heterosexual gloss framing the lesbian display. The passage thus exemplifies how attempts to depict lesbian sexuality expose the governing binary logic of heterosexuality. By implicitly challenging the habitual heterosexual paradigm, representing lesbian sexuality conspicuously unmasks the ways gender and sexuality normally coalesce to reassert the complementary duality of sexual difference.

The various figures employed in this depiction of lesbian activity typify its representation. While lesbian sexuality epitomizes the central moment of an authentic and dangerous arousal, the arrangement of these transforming metaphors as they combine both to represent lesbian sexuality and effect a defensive evasion of it produces a configuration—a performance of portrayal and defensive transformation. Its depiction as a nuclear instant of genuine, exciting display can only occur because it is surrounded by a protective, defensive, heterosexualized husk of description. The configuration represents lesbian sexuality, defends against that representation, and exceeds its representation to stand in for something else—in this case secret knowledge of female sexuality or sexual arousal. But configurations also expose what is threatened by the representation of lesbian sexuality in the very terms that constitute the threat—in this story, the primacy of heterosexuality itself.

Nin's alterations of this scene in other texts enact additional, symptomatically visible configurations of lesbian sexuality. Examining Nin's modifications, we see performed a range of configurations that each reveal a similarly complex exposure of the investments of culture and representation in a two-gender, heterosexual model. The version above is from *Henry and June: From the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin*, published posthumously in 1986 by Nin's estate trustee. Because this is from a diary that has presumably not been doctored, it is Nin's "authentic" confession or the "true" version. Only this account contains Nin's profession of her arousal as the effect of watching the lesbian acts; the others either replace that admission with something

else or omit it entirely. As Nin rearranges and polishes her *Diary* for publication, for example, she not only transposes her husband into Henry Miller, but she also elaborates the posed, theatrical portions of the episode, embroidering her descriptions of the physical ambience of the brothel, the prostitutes, and the element of travelogue. In her *Diary* account, the moment the women shift to their lesbian acts, the arousal they excite is displaced from Nin and her husband exclusively onto the prostitutes, whose response is more colorfully described than in the "unexpurgated" passage. This version ends abruptly: "A moment later they both stood up, joking, and the mood passed" (60).²

In this second configuration, excitement evoked by the lesbian moment is experienced only by the participants; even for them, it is a fleeting "mood." Its authenticity is reduced to a joke by Nin, a necessary defense against any possible effect of the moment. Nin's emphasis on the opulent setting of the brothel situates the entire experience as tacky excess, and the women "like mother and daughter" reiterate a grotesque version of what might be simple familial intimacy (59). Within this configuration, however, Nin's allusion to mother and daughter is also a slip—uncanny testimony to a fearsome perception of lesbian sexuality as narcissistic incest. The configuration not only simultaneously represents and defends against lesbian sexuality, but reveals the incestuous terms that instigate the defense.

The episode reappears in Nin's *Delta of Venus*, a collection that bears on its cover the tantalizing inscription: "She did it for a dollar a page. Now over one million copies in print."³ Its pornographic context doubled (brothel and erotic fiction), the anecdote of the lesbian show becomes part of the story of the well-endowed Basque, a regular client of the establishment. Enclosed by the story's emphasis on the Basque's superb penile fortitude, the women's activities with the dildo are described at greater length and in greater detail, emphasizing close-up descriptions of the action of the rubber penis. This time "the women" are "beautifully matched, without timorousness or sentimentality. Women of action, who both carried an ironic smile and corrupt expression" (169). Their performance was requested by "foreigners" who "must have asked to see a man and woman together, and this was Maman's compromise" (169). A "foreign" desire and a "compromise," the women's performance is witnessed by the Basque from a prearranged voyeuristic vantage point. Though the foreigners are "fascinated," the women never begin any

sexual activity without the dildo or drop their pretense of heterosexuality. At the moment where in other versions they do, the Basque enters: "Viviane looked at him gratefully. The Basque realized she was in heat. Two virilities would satisfy her more than that teasing, elusive one" (170). They are saved by the phallus at the point where their behavior might have become overtly lesbian.

The candid lesbian moment of other versions replaced by a scene with two phalli, the anecdote is completely heterosexually recuperated in a way that suggests almost a male homosexual performance in the active presence of two penes. What threatened to be lesbian is completely recovered by the Basque's hyper-heterosexual entrance. The suggestion of lesbian activity, heterosexual simulation as it is, becomes only foreplay to the greater climax introduced by the Basque. This passage configures lesbian sexuality as the spectacle that instigates heterosexual intervention and relief. A "compromise," it can only lead to something better and more fulfilling. In this narrative, which drives toward completion rather than arousal, as Nin's first version did, lesbian sexuality becomes the inauthentic rather than the authentic, a "foreign" imitation that prepares for the real thing.

Appearing through the range of Nin's work, textual transformations of this anecdote enact multiple symptomatic configurations of lesbian sexuality related both to common cultural perceptions and their specific literary contexts. Even in her correspondence with Henry Miller, Nin comments. "Certain gestures (I felt that in the Rue Blondel) destroy the magic."⁴ Here the editor asserts in a note attached to the name Rue Blondel that Nin went to the brothel on the "recommendation" of Miller, with whom Nin was having an affair. At the time, as Nin recounts in her *Diary*, she was also attracted to Miller's wife, June. The episode thus not only centers around an authentic, biographical "core," but this core appears only in the "authentic," but albeit still fictional version and increasingly becomes more and more defended as it is more and more fictionalized.⁵

In configurations analogous to those employed by Nin, lesbian sexuality occupies certain specific locations or positions in the arguments, subject matter, and rhetoric of cinema, psychoanalysis, Western European and American literature, and literary criticism. Across these discourses, lesbian sexuality tends to be represented in the same range of configurations in similar rhetorical or argumentative positions. As titillating foreplay, simulated heterosexuality, exotic ex-

cess, knowing center, joking inauthenticity, artful compromise, and masculine mask, configurations of lesbian sexuality embody the conflicting impetuses of representational insufficiency and recuperation. Operating as points of systemic failure, configurations of lesbian sexuality often reflect the complex incongruities that occur when the logic or philosophy of a system becomes self-contradictory, visibly fails to account for something, or cannot complete itself. Simultaneously, lesbian sexuality instigates the overly compensatory and highly visible return of the terms of the ruptured system that mend and mask its gaps. As a point of failure, lesbian sexuality is the phenomenon that evades the rules; as a point of return, it is the example that proves the rule and reveals the premises upon which the rules depend. Attempts to depict or explain lesbian sexuality spur anxieties about knowledge and identity—two terms that inevitably and often unaccountably appear linked in discourses as diverse as Freud's psychoanalytic writings, soft-core pornography, and feminist reader-response theory. Revealing or forcing logical inconsistencies, configurations of lesbian sexuality undo discursive claims to mastery and wholeness and occupy positions of penultimateness, immaturity, and incompleteness that exist alongside of, but not in opposition to, neat systemic closure.

I chose these four discourses—psychoanalysis, cinema, literature, and literary criticism—because they are all, though not exclusively, both discourses and metadiscourses about sexuality and the way sexuality is perceived in and through Western culture. And while none of these discourses may contain the "truth" about any sexuality, all enact the terms by which sexuality is culturally understood. Configurations of lesbian sexuality in these discourses are complex representations whose particular location in a text and strategic combination of elements reveal not lesbian sexuality per se, but the anxieties it produces. Because the collision of gender and sexuality becomes so visible in configurations of lesbian sexuality, they also illustrate how irreconcilable conflicts between the two are representationally resolved. Thus by reading these discourses for the lesbian sexuality in them and analyzing its textual enactments, we see how lesbian sexuality is configured and how that configuration functions in the text, in the discourse, and, by extension, in the culture.

This is different from an analysis of lesbian images, a study of lesbian portrayal, or making any claims for lesbian women or lesbian

sexuality per se.⁶ While the discovery and analysis of images is important, I am more concerned in this book with the political context of those representations: how lesbian sexuality is used as a figure signifying something else and why it appears when and where it does. Configurations, like representations, have very little to do with any facts about the wide range of lesbian women, either as authentic descriptions of their lived experience or as accurate accounts of development or cause. Insofar, however, as configurations affect self-representations or the cultural positioning of groups of individuals, the rhetorical presence of configurations of lesbian sexuality is a symptom of the kinds of perceptions that underlie cultural treatment and placement of lesbian women, since these same discourses reflect and shape cultural myths. Politically and critically, understanding these configurations may help us identify the oppressive sources of ideology that tend to delimit the cultural possibilities of individuals. It can also help us understand the ideology and rhetoric of sexual difference itself and how gender interacts with other paradigms of difference, helping us pierce through what seem otherwise to be gender-neutral formulations.

The quandary of how to define the lesbian sexuality that demarcates these configurations is already a product of the complex intersection of political, historical, and identificatory issues. Because the arguments of this book do not depend on biographical verifiability, but rather on a broad cultural category operating in textual representations, I define lesbian sexuality as women's real or imagined sexual desire for or sexual activity with a woman. This definition is clearly a product of a heterosexual ideology that privileges sexual categories, but it is also the concept most typically identified as "lesbian" in Western culture. The political and critical issues about definition I take up in chapter 3 in the context of feminist reader-response criticism. Studying configurations of lesbian sexuality does not stake a claim exclusivity for the functions they perform. Other figures or moments—male homosexuality, colonized non-Westerners, the figure of the witch, the female body, Woman—serve as analogous but slightly different configurations in Western thought and culture.⁷ Alice Jardine's *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, for example, takes up one aspect of the figure of Woman in modernist discourse and culture.⁸ Finally, though these configurations are historically determined, this book focuses on their striking repetition through differ-

ent discourses and times rather than on any concentrated attempt to define a cause/effect relation between particular historical circumstances and the appearance and shape of the configurations.

Two More Examples

PROPHYLACTIC INTRODUCTIONS

The two examples of multiple configurations of lesbian sexuality that follow are introductions written by editors or translators to books containing lesbian subject matter: Francis Birrell's introduction to Diderot's *Memoirs of a Nun* and Joseph Collins's introduction to Colette's *The Pure and the Impure*.⁹ In the specific context of literary value, these introductions reflect the cultural conflict and anxiety around questions of moral decency, cultural significance, and the underlying economic interests of the publisher, who often benefits from the artfully indirect implication of a book's impropriety. The introductions' investment in explaining, defending, and evaluating the texts they precede makes them particularly prone to contradictions and evasion, especially when the text that follows is famous for containing what some might consider scurrilous content. The introductions try to neutralize the books' material, making them consumable without guilt while ensuring their marketability. Given their contradictory tasks, these introductions contain a plethora of lesbian configurations, more concentrated, perhaps, because of the immediacy of the problem.

Sometime before 1928, Francis Birrell undertook the translation of Denis Diderot's *La Religieuse* for the Broadway Library series of eighteenth-century French literature. In his brief introduction to the volume, Birrell defends what he sees as the "artistry" of Diderot's novel while disavowing its admittedly "perverse" content. To deflect imputations of voyeurism and pornography, Birrell concentrates on the literary history and historical context of the novel. "*La Religieuse* is in great part a practical joke," he affirms, "a fact which should be borne in mind by readers over-inclined to be serious" (vii–viii). It is "little more than a *pièce justificative* intended to make "more convincing" Diderot's faked letters from a "Madame Madin," protector of the escaped nun Suzanne Simonin, to the Marquis de Croismare, who was interested in her case and whom Diderot and his friend Grimm

hoped to lure back to Paris (viii). The novel's spectacular and shocking lesbian content was a lure, according to Birrell, employed by Diderot to enhance the reliability of the letters that accompany the account. But while "Diderot certainly got carried away by artistic enthusiasm, . . . it is well to remember that the author's tongue was probably never for a very long time together completely out of his cheek" (viii).

Otherwise, for Birrell the graphic lesbian activity in the novel primarily reflects both the range of Diderot's worldly knowledge and his realist abilities. "As a study of female perversion in three different forms, *La Religieuse* is extremely subtle and staggeringly modern in treatment" (ix), a fact that reveals Diderot's "enormous knowledge of life in all its forms." And despite Birrell's recommendation that "the proper way in which to approach *La Religieuse* . . . is after all the simplest one, the artistic approach" (viii), the novel's artistry resides in its authentic portrayal of Diderot's extraordinary human and sexual knowledge. "*La Religieuse* is interesting because it is a splendid novel, full of character, variety and human feeling. . . . For this reason the commentary and erudition have been reduced to the minimum necessary to show the realistic detail which Diderot employed, presumably the better to mystify M. de Croismare" (x). Finally, Diderot's knowledge and realist adeptness exceed his translator's abilities. As Birrell confesses at the end of his brief introduction, "I have on occasion been much embarrassed by the undiluted femininity of the society described, and have found my vocabulary sadly at fault. . . . It has been found necessary to omit a few words and phrases which, however, do not in any way interfere with the meaning of the paragraphs in which these omissions occur" (xi).

The specter of an educated reading audience infected with a twentieth-century squeamishness (as Birrell seems to imagine) might invite this mercurially apologetic, defensive, laudatory, and ultimately diverting introduction to a novel that overtly depicts sexual activity among cloistered nuns. But in addition to rescuing Diderot from his readers' prudish misunderstandings and eliminating any idea that the author might have applauded or enjoyed the nuns' behavior, Birrell's contradictory, evasive, and euphemistic rhetoric also reflects his own reaction to the sexual subject matter of Diderot's novel. The parts Birrell "found necessary to omit" are the portions of Diderot's descriptions of lesbian activity that take place below the waist.¹⁰ Some-

how, words fail him here, and the loss of these parts (omissions signified not with asterisks, as Birrell advises, but, symptomatically, with ellipses, making invisible even the locations of these omissions) does not "interfere with the meaning of the paragraphs," since without the phallus, there is no meaning.

Within the four and one-half pages of Birrell's prefatory frame, we find that the cloister culture and its sexual activity constitute an "undiluted femininity" for which the translator has no words. Sexual acts that approach the genital both lack signifiers and have no meaning anyway. We find that the realistic depiction of such activity is evidence of Diderot's extraordinary knowledge and constitutes a lure and mystery for M. de Croismare, designed to pique his desire to return to Paris. We also are told that the novel depicting such activity is a joke and—whether or not this is a suggestive slip of Birrell's tongue—in writing about it, Diderot's tongue is rarely out of his cheek. In this introduction, lesbian sexuality, rather than simply serving as a representation of two women who are sexually engaged or even as part of the subject matter of a novel, functions as the place of mystery, as a lure, as evidence of Diderot's knowledge, as an untranslatable, "undiluted" femininity, and as the elliptical gap, the place where the translator's abilities break down.

As the simultaneous point of systemic return and reinvigoration, the depiction of the lesbian galvanizes controlling strategies that reintroduce, with a vengeance, defensive and often conservative mechanisms prototypical of literary/critical discourse. For Birrell, the lesbian sexuality of the novel is contained not only by the circumstantial unnaturalness of the cloister, but also by its literary/critical function as both lure and joke. It is, finally, practically eliminated: as a lure, it is misleading—not what it seems to be. As a joke, it no longer exists at all. Historical context eliminates literary content; author and culture are saved from the veritable existence of such "unnatural" practices. And in so doing, the author is celebrated for his insight and an artistry that relies upon the simultaneous depiction and erasure of lesbian sexuality.

The introduction to Collette's *The Pure and the Impure*, another book with lesbian content, adds to the configurations of lesbian sexuality present in Birrell's introduction and makes even more apparent the kind of defensive overcompensation necessary to neutralize lesbian subject matter. Translated into English by Edith Dally in 1933,

Colette's collection of portraits *Ces Plaisirs . . .* (1932) was published in the United States under the title *The Pure and the Impure*. Subtitled *A Case-book of Love* for the purposes of its American publication, Colette's essays are preceded in the American edition by a verbose table of contents, replete with pithy descriptive quotations from the chapters, and an introduction by Joseph Collins. Like Birrell, Collins finds it necessary to "save" the author by simultaneously appealing to the depths and circumstances of her unusual knowledge and distancing her from the culture about which she writes. Beginning with a connection between sexual exploits and gossip, Collins performs the perverse gymnastics necessary to license and recover Colette:

Many years ago, the author of *The Pure and the Impure* gained a certain reputation, deservedly or undeservedly, of not being like other girls. She has liked to talk about it, and in this book she likes to tell about it. The net result of her narrative insofar as it concerns herself is that her amatory feeling and her genic instinct were directed mainly to the normal—though they sometimes peeped, they never strayed. She had, and has, a lively sympathy with those who are otherwise gaited and she understands them—at times she applauds them. She tells why when young, she aped man in dress and manners, and she gives lengthy and brilliant description of her contacts and intimacies with the strange sisterhood. (ix-x)

Like Diderot, Colette has a superior knowledge, a knowledge Collins reaffirms again and again in introductory overkill. But equally important to Collins is Colette's self-salvation from the "strange sisterhood" whose stories she writes in fits of excess, in an inability to keep "sin" silent. Fortunately, according to Collins, Colette has the appropriate sympathetic heterosexual perspective on the lesbian phenomenon, one he does not hesitate to repeat: "She is firmly of the belief that love-making amongst women is far less common than between men and that it constitutes an entirely different sociological and ethical problem. In her own sex it derives largely from idleness, ennui, and alcohol, and from the activities of vicious and depraved prose-lyters" (x).

That these women are worth writing about is also argued by a perplexed Collins who undertakes to explain the mysteries of God to prospective readers: "I think it was Job who said that God does things past finding out, unsearchable things. One of these unsearchable

things is that out of every one hundred human beings created in His image, there at least are two who can be incited to the emotion of love only by persons of their own sex" (xi). Having justified their pedigree and their worthiness as Colette's subject matter as well as Colette's own "platonic intimacy" with them, he states again their intrinsic interest, not as lesbians, but as "anomalous" talent who are also interesting characters:

It is of the [gifted], their conversations and conduct, their antics and antimonies that Mme. Colette writes. When women got off the leash, they began to wander—they found that the street called 'Straight' was difficult to stay on. There seemed to be an increasing inclination to get off it in couples, and Mme. Colette met and played around with a lot of them and a considerable part of this book is taken up with telling their daring and their doing. (xii)

Giving Colette authority without implicating her, Collins performs the symptomatic list of cultural perceptions about lesbian sexuality. Animal-like ("off the leash"), often "aping" men, they are bored alcoholics, anomalous anomalies (less prevalent than male homosexuals), but sometimes gifted. Their emergence seems to be a result of a liberation—something like feminism—that left them uncontrolled, taking the wrong path (away from that street called "Straight"). But they are nonetheless interesting, worthy of a view. The redemption process undertaken by Collins on behalf of culture, Colette, and God is continued in those features added to the American edition. The change of title from *Ces Plaisirs . . .*, a simple, pleasant reference to the phrase "ces plaisirs qu'on nomme, à la légère, physiques . . ." ¹¹ from *Le Blé en herbe* is translated into the melodramatic and binary *The Pure and the Impure*. The shift from pleasure to categories of purity is a shift from an unmoralized license to moral judgment and issues of sexual virtue, lending the book a righteous fervor not present in the essays. The interpolation of the "case-book" subtitle not only makes Colette's descriptive portraits scientific, distancing them from her tone of familiar friendliness, but also overtly imitates psychoanalysis in situating Colette's portraits as the study of anomalies, of unusual cases. Science explains and authorizes Colette's knowledge as well as its transmission. Protecting both the public and Colette by transferring her sympathetic descriptions into the proper realm of psychological study, the case-book approach insulates readers from the poten-

tially deleterious example of such figures as Pauline Tarn and makes the lesbian subject matter safe for consumption. Though originally concerned with interesting lesbian characters, the rest of the book is transmuted into a lesson in what to avoid.

What Follows

THIS BOOK is organized loosely around the broad categories of seeing, writing, and reading. In the context of each of these processes, configurations of lesbian sexuality tend to bring into question central assumptions or axioms within discourses. In practices of viewing or perceiving, configurations of lesbian sexuality challenge the stability of a visible, rigidly defined sexual difference. The first section of chapter 1, "A View to a Thrill," takes up questions raised by the cinematic imaging of lesbian sexuality. The regular use of lesbian scenes in soft-core pornographic films such as *Emmanuelle* and *Melody in Love* reveals not only how lesbian sexuality functions in narratives devoted to heterosexuality, but also how the semiotics of lesbian scenes brings into question theoretical issues about the relation between gender and viewing and the dependence of film theory on clearly delineated categories of sexual difference. The second section examines the overly defensive portrayal of lesbian sexuality in the mainstream women's films *Desert Hearts* and *Lianna*, observing that the cinematic portrayal of lesbian sexuality in these instances is highly fetishized. In the third section an analysis of feminist depictions of lesbian sexuality in *Entre Nous* and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* suggests that they both create "a different measure of desire" in a visual and narrative aesthetic based on sustaining and frustrating both narrative and visual pleasure.

In the context of questions about creativity and writing, lesbian sexuality configures both the desire to desire and an authorizing originary moment that is subsequently emphatically denied. At the center of the two chapters on writing, "This Is Not for You: The Sexuality of Mothering" and "Beginning with L," is the projection of a pre-oedipal, utopian lesbian origin that is both asserted and denied by feminist theorists. The paradox of this sexualized mothering as it appears in the writings of Julia Kristeva and Nancy Chodorow is the subject of chapter 2, which compares their mainly heterosexual utopian vision of mother/daughter relations with the denial of the mother

in such lesbian novels as Jane Rule's *This Is Not for You* and Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Comparing the position of the mother and particularly the mother's connection to an accessible, preoedipal origin leads to an understanding of a differing structure of narrative desire that exists between Kristeva's and Chodorow's accounts and the novels.

Chapter 3 treats feminist theories of writing and reading. The first section, "The Lure of Origins," explores the relation between questions of origin and theories of women's writing and community as formulated by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Like Kristeva and Chodorow, both Cixous and Irigaray want to premise a lesbian originary moment that they evade and deny. While their descriptions of feminine experience look suspiciously like descriptions of lesbian sexuality, they propose a somewhat different feminine aesthetic from that practiced by the lesbian poet Olga Broumas. The section on reading, "The Lure of Identity," examines how the figure of Emily Dickinson incites questions about the relation of reading, gender, and identity. Reading through the work of such critics as Adrienne Rich, Judith Fetterley, Patrocínio Schweickart, Jean Kennard, Bonnie Zimmerman, Dale Bauer, and approaches such as encodement theory, this section traces how the threatening multiplicity of lesbian sexuality becomes the assurance of a more centered feminist identity.

Chapter 4, "Freud Reads Lesbians," focuses on the relationship among identity, desire, and knowledge configured in the body of Freud's work by lesbian sexuality. A reading of his treatment and theories about lesbian patients yields the configurations of lesbian as a decoy for knowledge, as a mask for both male homosexuality and heterosexuality, and as a fleeting, transitory stage that functions metonymically.

The final two chapters of the book treat critical questions that arise as the contexts of seeing, writing, and reading coalesce in more pragmatic circumstances. Chapter 5, "All Analogies Are Faulty: The Fear of Intimacy in Feminist Criticism," examines how black and lesbian become symptomatic parts of an oppressor/oppressed analogy prevalent in feminist criticism. The unacknowledged reliance upon this analogy actually keeps differences separate and prevents the development of critical diversity. In chapter 6, "Polymorphous Diversity," the differences among lesbians are explored through a reading of homophobia instigated by Margaret Court's criticism of Martina

Navratilova, an analysis of Butch/Femme, a mention of s/m and a brief prolegomenon to a lesbian critical practice.

This survey and analysis reveals a kind of haunting regularity to the positions occupied by lesbian sexuality. Despite cultural perceptions of its marginality—as Colette observes, it is “less common” than male homosexuality—its configurations are surprisingly central. As Freud observes: “Homosexuality in women . . . is certainly not less common than in men, although much less glaring . . .¹² And even if lesbian sexuality is less visible, its very evasiveness promises a thrill that is finally only a lure of knowledge and a desire for desire.

■ O N E

View to a Thrill

Just a “Foretaste”: Lesbians in Pornography

I’VE NOTICED as I’ve watched (probably 100 times) the clips for the films I discuss that I’m still both stimulated and embarrassed by them. I suspect the titillation comes from two divergent places: my acquiescence to the voyeuristic structures of the apparatus and my identification with the activity and characters on the screen. It’s hard to determine which comes first, my seduction by the apparatus or my identification with something on the screen, or if either does: they seem to coexist in a kind of circular interdependency that creates both tension and pleasure as I view. My identification with whatever—the characters, the activity, the idea of the activity—is the sign of my undoing, because that engrossment means that I’ve also been lured into an alignment with a camera, an identification with a third party who looks from a distance. This voyeuristic scope both enables my identifications (it is the condition that fosters them) and alienates me from the image, embarrasses me, and obstructs my pleasure, making me want in turn to distance myself, to dissociate myself from the screen image, which I do by analyzing, theorizing, writing a book to erase my discomfiture, trying to master the apparatus as it has mastered me.

As a viewer I find myself in two double-binds. I am subject to the

contradictory tensions of cinematic identification—identification with on-screen characters and identification with the camera view—experienced by most film spectators. But I am also caught in the peculiar impasse of the female spectator, a chronic dilemma exacerbated by pornographic films' overt appeal to metacinematic structures of voyeurism and the erotic as they operate conspicuously in the field of sexual difference. On the one hand, by consenting to watch these films, I submit myself to their masculinist ideological and political constructions of viewer identification that posit the female image as the object of a voyeuristic consumption in a narrative that controls and degrades her. Accepting the film's conventions and its point of view, I can "enjoy" the film. On the other hand and at the same time, unless I forget I am female, I am continually alienated from images produced by an apparatus that is antinomic to my position as viewer, which poses me simultaneously as voyeur and as chastised recipient—witness—of a patriarchal lesson in sexual regulation. Watching these films, like discussing them, seems to require a tension of pleasure, denial, and masochism.

The only moment in porn films where this dilemma seems to dissolve itself is the conventional lesbian interlude. Remarkable for its superficial erasure of on-screen sexual difference (two women, no man), the cinematic depiction of lesbian sexuality seems momentarily to enfranchise the female as a sexually aggressive participant, erasing some of the objectification of the woman, and appearing to provide a simple screen identification and place for the female viewer, at least as a lesbian. But even if there is a site on the screen for a female viewer's sympathetic identification, the apparatus itself tends to reproduce its scopophilic posture; the two women are still objects of the viewer's voyeuristic look. And narratively, while enhancing the heroine's libertinism and desirability, soft-core porn's inclusion of lesbianism as merely one of a number of sexual permutations provides another version of erotic domination for the male viewer.

Even if the lesbian scene is included expressly for voyeuristic purposes, the portrayal of lesbian sexuality renders uncomfortably visible the narrative operations and semiotic strategies by which women and sexuality are represented. That two women occupy traditionally heterosexual positions makes visible the gender stereotypes that inhere in representations of sexuality. While the project of imaging a phallusless sexuality results in a scene that is in some ways more

conventionally portrayed than heterosexual scenes, that lesbian sexuality is forced into a traditionally heterosexual model causes the images to slip away from and break down these conventions. With the absence of two "complementary" genders, something on the level of the operation of the apparatus breaks apart, disturbing the alliance between camera and viewer, between viewing subject and screen object, freeing up the lines of cinematic identification and the conventional objectification of erotic images. Why the portrayal of lesbian sexuality would incite this temporary cinematic breakdown is part of the subject of this chapter.

Because there is a tendency to explain lesbian sexuality in terms premised upon a heterosexual norm, I want to question the genderment and heterosexism of film theory itself by looking at these cinematic depictions of lesbian sexuality, points where sexual difference, sexuality, and the visual are asymmetrically misaligned. I will focus my examination on soft-core pornography because it is widespread, aired on television, easily available in video stores, artily narrative, and cornily stylized to make it seem worthy of consumption by the self-proclaimed "art" film viewer. The pretense of soft-core porn toward art, discretion, and a mixed audience makes its exploitation of sexuality more insidious than that of hard-core porn. Its distinguishing difference from "hard-core"—sexual scenes are faked rather than authentic—gives soft-core porn an artistic leeway that enables representational latitude. Not tied to the cinematic exigencies of portraying real sexual activity, soft-core porn can instead concentrate on playing symptomatically with the tensions of voyeurism and sexual excitement. I realize that in looking at pornography at all, I risk valorizing a genre that is generally oppressive to women, but I think it is crucial to understand how such oppressive forms are constructed, how they oppress, how they titillate, and why they regularly include the lesbian.

EMMANUELLE AND MELODY

Emmanuelle, a prototypical soft-core porn film, and *Melody in Love* both contain lesbian scenes.¹ Narratively, these are not central or climactic moments in the films, whose plots generally consist of a series of episodic sexual encounters. Both films appear to be aimed at a mixed audience and contain the formula typical to soft-

core porn films: a series of sexual encounters arranged in an episodic narrative about the sexual initiation of a woman or a young man. Combining initiation rite, sexual education, and erotic travelogue, *Emmanuelle* and *Melody* are structured around the acquisition of sexual knowledge; these narratives follow their heroines through a series of sexual lessons, in which they are tutored by a more experienced, liberated teacher whose role it is to help the young women lose their hampering inhibitions. Loosely set in a trajectory toward perfect sexual satisfaction, the lesbian scenes occur only in the first half of the film following episodes of autoeroticism, but preceding the resolution offered by the films' "satisfying," climactic heterosexual encounters. In this way the parallel between narrative and sexuality becomes overtly apparent in a trajectory that links completion to heterosexual intercourse and often to violence.²

Emmanuelle is about the young wife of a French embassy official, who travels to Bangkok to join her suave and presumably liberated husband, a man interested only in promoting his wife's complete sexual education. He disavows jealousy and possessiveness and urges her to experiment in the bored French colony of diplomats, recommending particularly the erotic sexagenarian Mario as guide.³ Emmanuelle ventures into this community and attracts both the precociously promiscuous Marie-Ange (her "sex professor") and Ariane, a jaded, jealous, middle-aged, controlling diplomatic wife. But Emmanuelle is interested in the colony's outcast, Bea, an archaeologist with a mysterious reputation. Though Marie-Ange attempts to educate Emmanuelle with a masturbation exhibition and Ariane tries to introduce her to the joys of sex in a grope on the squash court, Emmanuelle pursues Bea at a party while (and not coincidentally) Mario makes overtures to Emmanuelle, setting a date that Emmanuelle breaks to follow a hesitating Bea into the wilderness. Though still professing love for her husband, Emmanuelle is completely taken with Bea, but Bea rejects her, admitting, after a brief sexual affair at an archaeological site, that she doesn't love Emmanuelle. The heartbroken Emmanuelle returns to her husband, who has been angry and jealous at Emmanuelle's defection with a woman. Still sexually inhibited (relatively speaking), Emmanuelle allows herself to be tutored by the hedonistic Mario, who, through a series of lessons in passivity (including gang rape), teaches Emmanuelle to be a "real" woman.

An imitation of *Emmanuelle*, *Melody in Love* follows the sexual

initiation of Melody, who has come to visit her suave and liberated cousin Rachel on a volcanic island. Naive and virgin, Melody wants only Rachel as lover until Rachel convinces her that men are better, setting her up with a cute hotel manager whom the married Rachel tries out first. Melody's attachment to Rachel, who is depicted as a nursing mother, is clearly the attraction of a child to a parent. At Rachel's insistence, Melody timidly tries out heterosexuality, but never quite satisfactorily until she and the manager are caught on the volcanic slope during an eruption, when, in rhythm with the spurting lava, Melody learns to shed her inhibitions. The Melody plot is paralleled by the sexual initiation of a native girl, who, in love with her homosexual teacher, tries to follow him on vacation only to end up in the arms of Rachel's husband, Octavio, and ultimately in a three-way sexual encounter with him and Rachel.⁴

The lesbian episode is carefully situated as part of a natural development in the films' lessons about the inherent qualities of female sexuality, part of the education offered both to the heroines and to the viewers. The knowledge they seek is natural rather than cultural; the process involves a return to nature—to bestial natives in the case of *Emmanuelle*, to primordial volcanos in *Melody*. The plots of the films as well as the characters' sexual educations are unified under the aegis of nature, which orders the homosexual and heterosexual, making a place for both. But "nature" consists of a contrived path of female sexual development only posed as natural. For Emmanuelle, the process is artfully arranged by her husband; her deviation from the heterosexual as well as her return to it are seen as normal, necessary, and predictable stages in a female sexual exploration. In fact, the naturalness of her experimentation is emphasized precisely at the point when the question of lesbian behavior arises between Emmanuelle and her husband. When he asks Rachel if she wants to make love to Marie-Ange, Emmanuelle rejects the possibility, but adds that what is attractive about Marie-Ange is that her sexuality is "natural" and, further, that sexuality itself is "all natural."

Melody's progress is even more tritely "natural," following the timing of a volcanic eruption on the island. Clearly a stage of "normal" development set within a familial, even oedipal model, Melody shifts from her desire for the mother figure, Rachel, to desire for the father, to an interest in men outside of the family. In this trajectory (quite like the one Freud posits for female development), Melody's lesbian