

Doing It Anyway

Lesbian Sado-Masochism And Performance

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Analogies depend upon maintaining the space between the lines, the categories of difference, the notions of consistency, the theoretical proof of singularity, purity, and detachment...¹ These words are taken from Judith Roof's critique of analogical thinking in feminist literary criticism, *All analogies are Faulty*. Roof's absolutism makes me a little uneasy, but it is perhaps better to err on the side of all when we encounter analogies, for I agree that "analogies abstract, separate, and distance terms from their original, perhaps fearsome, referents."² To Roof's observation that analogical thinking often signals a fear of intimacy, I would add that the "object" of this fear is sometimes one's own most intimate "others"—that is, those differences within that are easier to handle when they are reconfigured as differences between.

Analogical thinking is the staple of feminist arguments against sadomasochism. In two anthologies published over a decade apart, *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (1982)³ and *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties* (1993) most of the contributors rely on drawing analogies at one point or another in their arguments. Basing their comparisons on sometimes the vaguest resemblances, they level all experiences and histories into the same, uncritically endorse and privilege empiricism, repeat and perpetuate the notion of an unmediated access to the truth of perception, and, once again, knowing collapses into seeing. Take your pick: sado-masochism looks like—and therefore is like—Slavery, the Holocaust, Heterosexist Patriarchy, the Jonestown Massacre. Sheila Jeffreys classic attack on sadomasochism juxtaposes a description of SS men torturing a gay man to death with advice from a lesbian safer sex manual about how to trim your nails and lube your hand for fisting.⁴ Jamie Lee Evans tries to convince us that just as the Los Angeles police claimed that Rodney King could have stopped the beating whenever he chose, so lesbian sado-masochists tell us that the bottom is the one who is really in control.⁵

Whatever the choice of the first term in these analogies, the presumption remains that lesbian sado-masochism is a copy, an iconic reproduction of the oppressive model. This resumption cuts two ways. For the Platonic spectator, lesbian s/m can be derided for *merely* approximating the original, as Leo Bersani argues that the straight macho man can look at a leather queen and deride him for his poor imitation.⁶ Or, as feminists against s/m claim, the lesbian sado-masochist should be chastised *for* desiring to emulate the model. In either case, these spectators assume a resemblance between

¹ Judith Roof, *The Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 236.

² *Ibid.*, p. 224.

³ Robin Ruth Linden et al, *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, Calif.: Frog in the Well Press, 1982).

⁴ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution* (North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 1993), pp. 173-4.

⁵ Jamie Lee Evans, "Rodney King, Racism, and the SM culture of America," in *Unleashing Feminism*, ed. Irene Reti (Santa Cruz: Herbooks, 1993), pp. 74-8.

⁶ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 207-8.

the model and the copy that presupposes an internal similarity. If one simply looks at the images of lesbian sado-masochism—the whips, chains, handcuffs, needles, razors, and other instruments; the bodies bound, gagged, tied, and suspended; the humiliating postures of the submissives; the military garb—it is easy to see how these representations are read as iconic. But the mechanism for seeing them as such is resemblance, which proceeds from a thing to an Idea.

Thinking outside this visual economy, where lesbians can only perform resemblances, we could regard the value of dissemblance to lesbian s/m, as impersonations that are not mimesis but mimicry. In her reading of the third section of Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Elin Diamond gives us just such a way when she argues that Irigaray posits “two mimetic systems that exist simultaneously, one repressed by the other.”⁷ The first system she calls “patriarchal mimesis,” in which the “model, the Form or Ideal, is distinguishable from and transcendentally beyond shadows - images in the mirror —mere copies.”⁸ This is traditional mimesis, the system that is not repressed. But Diamond ferrets out another system in Irigaray's text, one that subverts the first one, which she calls “mimesis-mimicry, in which the production of objects, shadows, and voices is excessive to the truth/illusion structure of mimesis, spilling into mimicry, multiple ‘fake offspring’.”⁹

Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry as a “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite”¹⁰ is also a useful way to articulate the dissemblances of s/m. Bhabha's mimicry is a double articulation, a sign that retains the power of resemblance but menaces the authoritative discourse of colonialism by disclosing its ambivalence. Mimicry, as Bhabha describes it, is profoundly disturbing to a dominant discourse because it points out the necessity of producing prohibitions *within* in order to reproduce. Mimicry repeats rather than re-presents; it is a repetition that is non-reproductive. Mimesis operates in the order of the model/copy. Mimicry performs its operations in the realm of the simulacra.

Deleuze argues that the simulacrum is “an image without resemblance,” but then, not quite. The simulacrum “still produces an *effect* of resemblance,”¹¹ but it is a looking like that takes place in the trick mirror where the spectator lacks mastery. The observer cannot dominate the simulacrum because it has already incorporated her point of view. Before the simulacrum, the spectator is mastered. If we think of the erotic interplay of lesbian s/m as resignifications that are no doubt enabled by certain heterosexual or homosexual models but at the same time dissonant displacements of them, we might move toward a better understanding of their erotic dynamics and better grasp the political and ethical controversies they have raised.

⁷ Elin Diamond, “Mimesis, Mimicry, and the ‘True-Real’,” *Modern Drama* 32. 1 (Mar. 1989): 64.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Diamond, “Mimesis, Mimicry, and the ‘True-Real’,” p. 65.

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *October: The First Decade. 1976-1986*, ed. Annette Michelson et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), p. 318.

¹¹ Giles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum,” *October* 27 (Winter 1983): 49.

If some feminists insist that lesbian s/m is merely re-semblance, according to the psychoanalytic paradigm, lesbian s/m is only a semblance, at best. Radical feminism and psychoanalysis seem to have little in common. If the former sometimes takes the position that women *are* masochists who need to have their consciousness raised, the latter theorizes that lesbian sado-masochism is *impossible*.

The essayists in *Unleashing Feminism* continue to see many of the same problems that plagued the women's movement in the 1970s. In her book, *A Taste for Pain*, Maria Marcus remembers a women's studies conference in 1972 when Germaine Greer, the keynote speaker, was interrupted by a young woman from the audience who suddenly cried out: "But how can we start a women's movement when I bet three-quarters of us sitting in this room are masochists?" Greer replied: "Yes, we know women are masochists—that's what it's all about!"¹² Although twenty years later, I am more likely to hear the complaint that all women are masochists in the context of lesbians lamenting the scarcity of tops in the community, the mainstream, public image of feminism is still much closer to the attitudes expressed by anti-pom/s/m feminists.¹³

Ironically, while feminists continue to argue with each other about lesbian sexual practices, "masochism," the term that has become synonymous for some feminists with internalized oppression, has undergone a theoretical renaissance in which the erotics of submission have been reclaimed by a diverse group of scholars as an emancipatory sexuality for men. Leo Bersani's argument, which strikingly concludes that "sexuality—at least in the mode in which it is constituted—could be thought of as a tautology for masochism,"¹⁴ leads the way in rendering arguments about the relationship between the fore-pleasures of the erotogenic zones (strongly associated with both femininity and the "perversions") and the end pleasures of discharge (the ejaculatory climax associated with masculinity) irrelevant. For as Bersani reads Freud, sexuality is the dialectic of seeking the end of pleasure through discharge and repeating the tension in order to increase it. Thus Bersani concludes that sexuality is masochistic and that "masochism serves life," for it is what allows the individual to "survive the gap between the period of shattering stimuli and the development of resistant or defensive ego structures."¹⁵ Masochism, far from being a reversal of sadism or an internalization of oppressive patriarchal norms, is a survival mechanism.

¹² Maria Marcus, *A Taste for Pain: On Masochism and Female Sexuality*, trans. Joan Tate (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), p. 181.

¹³ For example, it is striking to notice that in a recent issue of *Ms.* magazine, the panelists brought together to discuss the issue of pornography tended to be dominated still by the Mackinnon/Dworkin theory that pornography causes violence against women. Although Marilyn French challenged the panel to stop "tiptoeing around" the issue of the censorship within feminist ranks, this panel hedged on the "problem" of pom created by and for women. When Andrea Dworkin was pushed, she said: "about the lesbian pornography.. they are reifying the status quo... And I think that lesbian pornography is extremely male-identified" *Ms.* 4. 4 (Jan./Feb. 1994): 39.

¹⁴ Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The notion of a sexual ontology is clearly problematic. Nevertheless, Bersani's theory has the advantage of freeing sexuality from parental identifications where sexual difference seems to get unavoidably reproduced. Furthermore, Bersani's theory challenges the teleological narrative that ends with heterosexual genital sex. Thus, in his view: "somasochistic sexuality would be a kind of melodramatic version of the constitution of sexuality itself, and the marginality of somasochism would consist of nothing less than its isolating, even its making visible, the ontological grounds of the sexual."¹⁶

For feminists who are struggling to articulate a sexual subjectivity that does not submit to the psychoanalytic imperative of an exclusively masculine libido, which ineluctably consigns femininity to a masculinized fetish, Bersani's theory might be welcomed, since it takes us out of the discourse of the symptom into a "nonreferential version of sexual thought."¹⁷ Parental identifications, which inevitably reify Oedipus, are no longer constitutive; and the "lost object," which is relentlessly relegated to a feminized fetish, is diffused so that any object and any Part of the body can become an erotogenic zone. This theory does not of course undo the historical/social attribution of masochism to women, but it does suggest a psychic model in which the sexual positions one takes up are not necessarily gendered. Nevertheless, Bersani implicitly assumes the now privileged masochistic position as a male prerogative, and hence claims sexuality itself for men. This presumption is clearer in his essay "Is The Rectum a Grave?" when he describes the dominant culture's revulsion at the sight of a man seductively and intolerably imaged with "legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman."¹⁸

This is a graphic enactment of Freud's third form of masochism, "feminine masochism," which he also presumes to be occupied by a male subject in a feminine situation. The male subject in this space signifies "being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby."¹⁹ Since women presumably already experience one or more of the above, the notion of a feminine, "feminine masochism" is redundant at best, if not impossible. According to this logic, women cannot *perform* the masochistic role because they are masochists. To borrow J. L. Austin's terms, masculine feminine masochism would be performative, while feminine feminine masochism would be *constative*.²⁰ (R) Male masochism would not report or describe anything; it would be a doing rather than a describing; it would perform not after but *before* the referent.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁸ Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," p. 212.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem in Masochism," *SE*, Vol. 19, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 162.

²⁰ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962). Austin's most famous example is the "I do" in the Christian marriage vow, which effectuates the bond in its enunciation: "in saying these words we are doing something— namely, marrying, rather than reporting something, namely that we are marrying," pp. 12-13.

Feminine masochism, on the other hand, would merely report an adequation; it would correspond with the “facts” of femininity. If sado-masochism is a melodramatic version of sexuality itself, women have ironically been barred from playing on this stage that in all other contexts has seemed to most suit them.

Kaja Silverman acknowledges that psychoanalytic sexual difference relegates female masochism to a virtually ontological condition when she defends her focus on male subjectivity by explaining that the female subject’s masochism is difficult to conceptualize as perverse because it represents “such a logical extension of those desires which are assumed to be ‘natural’ for the female subject.”²¹ She nonetheless unproblematically accepts and repeats the terms of a psychoanalytic symbolic in which there is only one libido and it is masculine. Women are denied sexual agency because they are incapable of mimesis. Their options are to take up the position of passive “normal femininity,” or to reverse the position and appropriate masculine subjectivity and its desires, in which case they can “perform” sexuality, but only through their “masculinity complex.” Bersani’s desire is aimed at the pleasures gay men might experience from an alignment with femininity, as is Silverman’s, though her project is to produce a revolutionary subject in a “feminine” yet heterosexual man. Both of these analyses add weight to feminist arguments against sado-masochism, for following their logic the lesbian masochist is either enacting the dominant culture’s degradation of women or she is playing out the desire to be a man. In either case, the terms of sexual difference remain intact. These theories that posit male masochism as emancipatory thus continue to depend on the impossibility of desire between women. In this context, truth claims about lesbian sexuality such as this one made by Jan Brown:

We practice the kind of sex in which cruelty has value, where mercy does not. What keeps those of us who refused to abandon our “unacceptable” fantasies sane is the knowledge that there are others like us who would not leave because we scream “Kill me,” at the moment we orgasm... We lied to you about controlling the fantasy. It is the lack of control that makes us come, that has the only power to move us...²²

would easily fall prey to the argument that lesbian sado-masochists are merely reproducing heterosexist models, or at best, male homosocial ones. The referent for Brown’s “lies” can be located in earlier rhetoric by s/m practitioners who justified the acting out of their fantasies by claiming they were means of exorcising their real hold on the individual. Tacitly accepting the feminist contention that s/m lesbians had internalized cultural misogyny, these defenses asked for a tolerant reprieve, a period of playing through the fantasies in order to transcend them. S/m then, ironically, became therapeutic, like a homeopathic cure.

Theatrical metaphors were central to this defense. Susan Parr, for example, described s/m as “pure theater,” “a drama (in which] two principals .. act at being master

²¹ Kaja Silverman, “Masochism and Male Subjectivity,” *Camera Obscura* 17 (1988):

²² Jan Brown, “Sex, Lies, and Penetration: A Butch Finally ‘Fesses Up,’” in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), p. 412.

and slave, play at being fearsome and fearful.” She cites the clues to the drama in the interchangeability of the roles and the repetitive, scripted dialogue. Even though, she acknowledges, much of the scene may be “pure improvisation,” it is still “theater.”²³ This dialectic between the scriptural and the spontaneous is prevalent in early pro-s/m accounts. On the one hand, there is the insistence that the scene is rigidly controlled, with a decided emphasis on the bottom’s mastery of the limits. On the other hand, the eroticism depends on the anticipation that the limits will be pushed to the breaking point, that the “scene” will cross over into the “real.”

To a certain extent, the controversy about whether s/m is “real” or performed is naive, since we are always already in representation even when we are enacting our seemingly most private fantasies. The extent to which we recognize the presence of the edge of the stage may determine what *kind* of performance we are enacting, but willing ourselves to forget the stage altogether is not to return to the real, as s/m opponents would have it; rather, this will to forget is classical mimesis, which, as Derrida points out, is “the most naive form of representation.”²⁴ Nevertheless, it is precisely this most naive form of representation that would seem to be the most desirable of sexual performances. Bersani’s objections to the frequent theorization of such things as “the gay-macho style, the butch-femme lesbian couple, and gay and lesbian sado-masochism” as.. “subversive parodies of the very formations and behaviours they appear to ape,” rather than, “unqualified and uncontrollable” complicities with, correlatively, “a brutal and misogynous ideal of masculinity” [gay macho],...“the heterosexual couple permanently locked into a power structure of male sexual and social mastery over female sexual and social passivity” [butch-femme], or “fascism” [s/m], are clearly based on his contention that these sexual practices are *not* performative. Parody, Bersani states emphatically, “is an erotic turn-off, and all gay men know this.”²⁵ Although Bersani audaciously speaks for all gay men, I would have to agree with him and add that many lesbians know this too. Self-conscious mimicry of heterosexuality is a side show; when the main act comes to town, we all want the “real thing,” or, more precisely, we all want the *Real* thing. That is, sexuality is always, I think, about our desire for the impossible-real, not the real of the illusion that passes for reality, but the Real that eludes symbolization. Whereas early radical lesbians spoke of a contest between “realesbians” and imposters, as psychoanalysis would have it, lesbians are the Real. If the “realesbian” of lesbian-feminism was a socially impossible identity, so in the psychoanalytic symbolic are lesbians only possible in/as the “Real,” since they are foreclosed from the Symbolic order—they drop out of symbolization. If they can be signified at all it is only as an algebraic x. Given that the “Real” is in part, the brute, inscrutable core of existence, the “Real” lesbian is in this sense coincident with the “realesbian.”

²³ Susan Parr, “The Art of Discipline: Creating Erotic Dramas of Play and Power,” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981), p. 185.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 234.

²⁵ Bersani, “Rectum,” p. 208.

Hence as both real/Real, these figures make her “identical with [her] existence— self-identical—raw, sudden, and unfettered,” but impossible to “see, speak or to hear, since in any case [she] is always already there.”²⁶

One sexual practice that has begun to figure much more prominently in lesbian erotica is the use of dildoes. Although it may be difficult to conceptualize strap-ons as s/m play, one rarely finds such representations outside the literature that is marked as s/m. Writers, visual artists, and practitioners have become increasingly assertive about claiming dildoes as the “real thing.” Although strap-ons are advertised as “toys,” *inside* the narratives and testimonials of lesbian s/m practitioners, references to an outside or a “model” are most often discarded in favor of descriptions that simply occupy the status of the real. So, for example, it has become common to speak of “watching her play with her dick,” or “sucking her off,” or “your dick find[ing] its way inside of me.”²⁷ As one contributor to *Quim* puts it: “When I put on a strap on I feel male. I feel my dick as real otherwise I can’t use it well.”²⁸ Rarely if ever does one find lesbian erotica that refers to the dildo as a joke, an imitation, or a substitute, whether these narratives are explicitly in an s/m context or in the more prevalent accounts of butch/femme vanilla erotica. On the contrary, the erotic charge of these narratives depends on both tops and bottoms, butches and femmes exhibiting nothing less than respect for the “phallic” instrument. -

Bersani’s argument about gay macho depends on this notion of respect for masculinity as a model. But the slide from gay macho to lesbian butch-femme and s/m is too facilely made. Whereas gay machos “mad identifications” are between gay and straight men, which he argues is a “direct line (not so heavily mediated) excitement to sexuality,”²⁹ the identifications made by b/f and s/m lesbians follow a more circuitous route in which the condensations and displacements are more complex. Most obviously, gay macho’s relationship to straight masculinity remains a Aommo-sexual affair, whereas lesbian b/f and s/m, as long as we are caught within the logic of this binary, would be Petero-sexual. In both cases, however, the erotic charge can only be articulated within the terms of a symbolic order that depends for its coherency on maintaining the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Nonetheless, even within the terms of this symbolic order, which I presume is what Bersani refers to when he speaks of sex “as we know it,” there is already dissidence, rather than resemblance, in the image of a woman penetrating another woman with a dildo. Although both might be interpreted as a yearning toward “masculinity,” in the gay man’s case it is a

²⁶ Catherine Clement, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 168-9.

²⁷ *Quim* 3 (Winter 1991): 10, 13. Similar language can be found in almost any issue of *On Our Backs* or *Bad Attitude*. And, in fact, in periodicals such as the now defunct *Outrageous Women* (which was published during the 1980s) one also finds such references to “lesbian dicks,” sometimes without the qualifier. What is apparent is that s/m dykes have always considered their dildoes to be the “real thing.”

²⁸ Anonymous. *Quim* 3 (Winter 1991): 36.

²⁹ Bersani, “Rectum,” p. 208.

masculinity that the dominant culture at least marginally assigns to him and that he thus might willingly surrender. In the lesbian top's case, it is a "masculinity" that she aggressively appropriates without any prior cultural ownership, only then to give it up. If we look at it from the bottom's perspective, there is quite a difference between the gay man who cannot "refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman," and the lesbian who is presumed by the dominant sexual order already to be a woman.

Over a decade ago, Monique Wittig implicitly enjoined us to write *The Symbolic Order* with a slash through the article, just as Lacan writes *The Woman*, when she made her then startling announcement that "Lesbians are not women."³⁰ The straight mind, she pointed out, "speaks of *the* difference between the sexes, *the* symbolic order, *the* Unconscious...giving an absolute meaning to these concepts when they are only categories founded upon heterosexuality..."³¹ Returning to this article, it is interesting to remember that the example Wittig chooses to demonstrate the material oppression effected through discourses is pornography. Pornography, she argues, signifies simply that "women are dominated."³² Thus Wittig might be aligned with Mackinnon when she argues that pornography "institutionalizes the sexuality of male supremacy, fusing the eroticization of dominance and submission with the social construction of male and female."³³ It is this position that Bersani perversely asks us to reconsider when he temporarily allies himself with Mackinnon and Dworkin only in order to argue for the necessity of proliferating pornography rather than banning it. However, if the ultimate logic of the radical feminist argument for the realism of porn is "the criminalization of sex itself until it has been reinvented,"³⁴ whether one takes up a position for or against pornography on this basis are we not then already acceding to the "straight mind" that can only think homosexuality as "nothing but heterosexuality?"³⁵

What has fallen out of these discussions is heterosexuality as a *social contract*, one that as Wittig argues can not only be but already *is* broken by practicing lesbians. For when we hear of "sex as we know it" or the ultimate logic of anti-porn feminists as the "criminalization of sex," this "sex" is always already heterosexuality, and implicitly, a relationship of identity between the phallus and the penis. Lacan seems to free us from this difficulty when he argues that the phallus is a signifier (without a signified), not a body part, nor a partial object, nor an imaginary construct.³⁶ However, in her reading of Lacan's "The Meaning of the Phallus," *back through* "The Mirror Stage," Judith Butler shows that Lacan's denial of the phallus as an imaginary effect is "constitutive of the

³⁰ Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³³ Catherine A. Mackinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 3, 172.

³⁴ Bersani, "Rectum," p. 214.

³⁵ Wittig, "Straight Mind," p. 28.

³⁶ Jacques Lacan, "The Meaning of the Phallus," *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), pp. 74-85.

Phallus as a privileged signifier.”³⁷ At the risk of reductively summarizing her nuanced argument, what Butler’s essay seems to conclude is that the symbolic is always only *a* masculine imaginary that produces the phallus as its privileged signifier by denying the mechanisms of its own production.

Lacan’s move to locate the phallus within the symbolic presumably breaks its relation of identity with the penis, since symbolization “depletes that which is symbolized of its ontological connection with the symbol itself.”³⁸ Just as Magritte’s painting of a pipe is not a/the pipe, so the penis and phallus are not equivalent.³⁹ But, as Butler points out, they do retain a privileged relationship to one another through “determinate negation.”⁴⁰ If symbolization is what effects ontological disconnection, we might ask what happens to those “pipes” that are excessive to representation. Would not those things that cannot take place within any given symbolic not end up accorded a radically negative ontological status? Would they not, in other words, become that which *is real*, and *therefore* impossible?

When Wittig argues that rejecting heterosexuality and its institutions is, from the straight mind’s perspective, “simply an impossibility” since to do so would mean rejecting the “symbolic order” and therefore the constitution of meaning “without which no one can maintain an internal coherence,”⁴¹ she seems to suggest that the straight mind simply denies the possibility of lesbianism. But phallogentrism/heterosexism does not merely secure its dominance through a simple negation. Rather, it *needs* lesbianism *as* a negative ontology. It needs its status as both radically real *and* impossible.

That this is the case can be seen in Silverman’s reconceptualization of the borders of male subjectivity in which her analysis at once ignores lesbian sexuality and persistently *depends* on it as yet another instance of a constitutive outside. Determined to undo the tenacious assumption that there are only two possible sexual subject positions, Silverman ends by positing three possible “same-sex” combinations: 1. two morphological men, 2. a gay man and a lesbian [both occupying psychically masculine positions], 3. a lesbian and a gay man (both occupying psychically feminine positions).⁴² Given Silverman’s sophisticated psychoanalytic rendering of the body’s imaginary production, it might sound naive to suggest that the latter two positions are morphologically heterosexual, i.e. one of each. Yet she retains the category of two morphological men, so there is obviously still some recourse to a materiality of the body outside its imaginary formations.

³⁷ Judith Butler, “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary,” *differences*, “The Phallus Issue,” 4. 1 (Spring 1992): 156.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. and ed. James Harkness (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

⁴⁰ Butler, “Lesbian Phallus,” p. 157.

⁴¹ Wittig, “Straight Mind,” p. 26.

⁴² Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 381.

Silverman concludes her book by asserting that her third paradigm for male homosexuality has the “most resonance for feminism,” which she claims to represent politically. But what is striking is that this is the only place in her analysis where lesbianism is represented. For it is in this most politically productive model of male homosexuality that the “authorial subjectivity” can be accessed “only through lesbianism.”⁴³ What could this “lesbianism” be if not two morphologically female bodies, which oddly do not appear in her liberating models for “same-sex” desire? The feminism that Silverman speaks for politically is once again a heterosexual feminism; for her ability to make cases for imaginary gay sexualities is only intelligible *through* the assumption of a lesbian sexuality that remains stable and constitutively outside her recombinations of the relationships between psychic identifications and imaginary morphologies. Thus she depends on the orthodoxy of the impossibility of lesbian desire in order to challenge and break with the other orthodoxies that limit sexual choices for (heterosexual) women.

The model that proposes the impossibility of lesbian desire, constructed as two morphological females with psychic feminine identities, is impossible within psychoanalytic terms precisely because there is no desire without a phallic signifier. In order for lesbianism to escape from its stabilizing function as the place-holder of a lack, Butler’s Active lesbian phallus would seem to be indispensable. Yet there is still in this formulation a submission to psychoanalytic orthodoxy; and lesbian sado-masochists have thought of much more interesting ways to practice dominance and submission.

Consider the following excerpt from *Bad Attitude*, which exemplifies the common s/m motif of the top’s (literal) securing of the bottom, followed by a hiatus in which the bottom is left alone for an indeterminate amount of time to contemplate the acts that will follow:

Will you please fuck me before I go mad? She smiled modestly, then said, “Not yet sweetie. I think you should learn a little patience. I’m going to have some breakfast now...” Lying there helpless and horny, I could hear [her] making her meal. The refrigerator door opened and closed, dishes clinked, the microwave hummed and beeped...I thrust my hips against the pillow. I writhed, I moaned, I wiggled, I got hornier...Connie returned after 20 minutes...“Did you miss me?” she whispered in my ear.⁴⁴

S/m’s (form)ality depends on a stillness, a waiting that is acted out through both the suspense of deferred gratification as well as the re-enactment of suspense within the sexual scene itself. Hence the pleasure of binding, restraining, often literally suspending the bottom corporealizes the prolonged psychic negotiation. As opposed to the fluidity of conventional representations of sexual intercourse, the s/m scene is broken up, interrupted. This is a different model of continuance; for if suspense is understood as a desire to extend the scene for as long as possible, even when a “consummation”

⁴³ Ibid., p. 387.

⁴⁴ Liz Lasher, “Hot Buttered Bum,” *Bad Attitude* 1. 4, p. 23.

occurs it is not an endpoint, or goal, but rather a means to reproduce conditions that guarantee the necessity for endless returns.

If all desire is the perpetual pursuit of a lost object, s/m is the sexual practice that *formalizes* desire, repeating its movement with consciousness, deliberation, and ritualized control. And, quite selfconsciously, s/m recognizes the body as the site of these transactions. Resisting the abstraction of the body as a signifier that refers only to itself, s/m practices are not about “speaking sex,” but about *doing it*, and insisting upon the distinction. S/m acts out the word as bond—it effectuates the performativity of language.

Now suppose we agree with Bersani’s argument that phallocentrism is “*above all* the denial of the value of powerlessness in both men and women,”⁴⁵ and consider what value women might find in powerlessness. I would agree with Tania Modleski that from a heterosexual woman’s perspective there might not be much to value in powerlessness. But from a lesbian perspective things look different. Although Modleski acknowledges that lesbian sado-masochists’ arguments must be taken seriously, and she points out the unresolvable contradiction between the acting out of power and the presumption of consensuality, I take exception to her assertion that the “defining feature of s/m [is] the infliction of pain and humiliation by one individual on another.”⁴⁶ As Modleski’s *own* discussion indicates, the s/m relationship resists that definition. What is important to point out here is that Modleski subtly posits the same distinction as Silverman between the “feminist” reader and the “lesbian.” The former is a heterosexually gendered subject; the latter is something like the exception to the feminist “rule.” Thus, once again, the lesbian becomes the constitutive outside—the necessary exterior—that facilitates the feminist argument.

Powerlessness, in Bersani’s argument, seems to mean little more than submitting to penetration. When he takes anatomical considerations into account, he refers to the “real” of bodies which are constructed in such a way that “it’s almost impossible not to associate mastery and subordination with intense pleasures”.⁴⁷ If the value of powerlessness is equivalent to being penetrated, note that the “woman” in Bersani’s imaginary must be either a heterosexual female or a gay man. Not only does Bersani then retain an equivalency between the phallus and the penis, but he also reinforces a morphological conflation of the vagina and the anus. At the same time, he insists upon a fantasmatic gender distinction that depends on these anatomical parts as referents. Bersani’s argument then surely exceeds his intentions. For while he means to value the powerlessness of both men and women, it is paradoxically between these two penetrable orifices, which are at once the same and different, that on their front-to-back axis the illusion of an *impermeable* male body is sustained. As D. A. Miller puts it: “only between

⁴⁵ Bersani, “Rectum,” p. 217.

⁴⁶ Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age* (New York; Routledge, 1991), p. 154.

⁴⁷ Bersani, “Rectum,” p. 216.

the woman and the homosexual *together* may the normal male subject imagine himself covered front and back” (my emphasis).⁴⁸

If, as Butler argues, Lacan retains a relationship of identity between the phallus and the penis through “determinate negation,” it is also possible to understand the valorization of a masochism that is explicitly male as further consolidation of this relation of equivalence. For male masochism, which presumably relinquishes the phallus by occupying the *being of* woman, would necessarily assume that she is the one who does not “have it.” In other words, it is only by giving it up that one gets it. Hence the continuing postulation that female masochism is impossible depends on the assurance that she has nothing to give up. The female masochist would have to give up something that she does not have; and if she were represented as giving it up, then it would have to be admitted that the phallus is nothing more than an imaginary construct. According to Freud’s narrative, women are presumed to have once “had” the penis. The phallus/penis as “lost object” always refers us to the past of a woman’s body and the dreaded future of a man’s body. Hence the cultural horror associated with “becoming a woman.”

Lesbians who regard their strap-ons as the “real thing” instigate a representational crisis by producing an imaginary in which the fetishistic/hallucinatory “return” of the penis on to a woman’s body goes beyond the “transferable or plastic property”⁴⁹ of the phallus to other body parts by depicting a phallus that has no reference to the “real” of the penis. The lesbian-dick *is* the phallus as floating signifier that has no ground on which to rest. It neither returns to the male body, originates from it, nor refers to it. Lesbian-dicks are the ultimate simulacra. They occupy the ontological status of the model, appropriate the privilege, and refuse to acknowledge an origin outside their own self-reflexivity. They make claims to the real without submitting to “truth.” If the phallus was banned from feminist orthodoxy because it was presumed to signify the persistence of a masculine or heterosexual identification, and butch lesbians or s/m tops who wore strap-ons were thus represented, as Butler points out, as “vain and/or pathetic efforts] to mime the real thing,”⁵⁰ this “real thing” was at least two real things, which were only each other’s opposites. There was not much difference between the straight “real thing,” and the lesbian “real thing,” since the latter was only the *absence* of the former. Both these prohibitions converged on the assumption of an identity between the phallus and the penis. Without that identification, the top who wears the strap-on is not the one who “has” the phallus; rather it is always already the bottom who “has it” by giving up what no one can have. In the lesbian imaginary, the phallus is not where it appears. That’s why so many hitches, as most lesbians know, are bottoms.

⁴⁸ D. A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” in *Inside/Out*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991). p. 135.

⁴⁹ Butler, “Lesbian Phallus,” p. 138.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Notes

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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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