"WHICH ONE OF YOU IS THE MAN?": ACCOMMODATION AND RESISTANCE IN LESBIAN TEXTS

by

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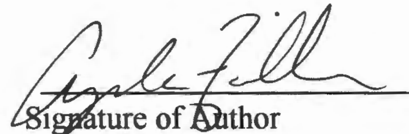

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Dedicated to my grandmother, Genevieve Kennedy

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Abstract

The politics of representation is critical to a theoretical analysis of the ways power is implicated in cultural discourses. Representation is infused and constructed by systems of meaning and discourses to both create and repeat those power relations which exist to regulate social activities such as desire. Textual narratives which include representations of lesbianism must be interrogated in order to envision how "subversive" sexual practices and representations may be used to resist dominant cultural narratives and relations/regulations of power.

The texts to be examined in this thesis are Patricia Rozema's When Night Is Falling (feature film), Jeanette Winterson's "The Poetics of Sex" (short fiction), and Kiss & Tell's Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall (photographic art). The intention of this project is to explore how dominant narrative conventions are accommodated and resisted in lesbian texts through representational strategies which allow for the possibility of, or, the space for the mobilization of lesbian subjectivities. Throughout this discussion I will argue that dominant cultural narratives cannot be entirely superceded and that narrative, itself, is an inevitable filter. A postmodern strategy of "parodic" accommodation *as resistance*, however, will be shown to be effective in denaturalizing dominant narrative conventions *within* existing narrative forms to create a space for lesbian subjectivities to be represented.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The politics of representation is critical to a theoretical analysis of the ways power is implicated in cultural discourses. Representation is infused and constructed by systems of meaning and discourses to both create and repeat those power relations which exist to regulate social activities such as desire. The discourses of cinema, literature and photographic art are, therefore, discourses worthy of examination in an attempt to identify the possibilities of sexual representation, specifically, those representations of lesbian subjectivities and lesbian desire. Textual narratives which include representations of lesbianism must be interrogated in order to envision how "subversive" sexual practices and representations may be used to resist dominant cultural narratives and relations/regulations of power.

What makes a text a "lesbian text?" This question is often answered by consideration of such criteria as if the subject matter is "lesbian," if the context within which a text is displayed is "lesbian," or, if the readership/viewership is "lesbian." These criteria, however, do not ensure that a "lesbian text" is politically challenging in ways that encourage a diverse representation of lesbian subjectivities, or, that they create new possibilities for sexual representations which transgress normative categories of gender and desire. Beyond these criteria, then, my concern here is with whether (or to what extent) the text functions as an *effective* lesbian text; that is, does a text resist dominant cultural narratives or conventional representations of desire in order to create the "narrative space" necessary for various lesbian subjectivities to be effectively mobilized?

The texts to be examined in this thesis are Patricia Rozema's When Night Is Falling (feature film), Jeanette Winterson's "The Poetics of Sex" (short fiction), and Kiss & Tell's Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall (photographic art). I am calling these texts "lesbian" not (only) because they have in common lesbian plots, lesbian characters and/or lesbian authors, but because they are attempts at creating *lesbian narrative space*. Again, the intention of this project is not to discuss what makes a text a "lesbian text." Instead, it is to explore how dominant narrative conventions are accommodated and resisted in lesbian texts through representational strategies which allow for the possibility of, or, the space for the mobilization of lesbian subjectivities. Specifically, conventions associated with the traditional romance narrative and its function in lesbian texts will be discussed, as each text I have chosen can be considered some version of a "love story."

Throughout this discussion I will argue that dominant cultural narratives cannot be entirely superceded and that narrative, itself, is an inevitable filter. Therefore, lesbian subjectivities are unavoidably constituted *within* the dominant narrative discourse of heterosexuality.[1] A strategy of "parodic" accommodation[2] *as resistance*, however, will be shown to be effective in denaturalizing dominant narrative conventions *within*

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I am using the term "subjectivities" in this thesis to designate those positions and locations which are occupied by the viewers/readers/spectators of a text or character-subjects within the text. These positions/locations include gender, sexual practice, race, ability, age (or generational location), and cultural or geographical location.

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The strategy of "parodic accommodation" is one whereby a conventional image or literary trope is "installed" into a representation in such a way that parodies or "ironizes" the "original" it, thereby resisting or undermining the assumptions which underlie the so-called "original".

existing narrative forms to create a space for lesbian subjectivities to be represented. The theoretical discussions employed in this analysis will include the following: a deconstructionist analysis of the discursive limits/possibilities of "narrative"; specific filmic, literary and photographic conventions of representation; a feminist analysis of gendered, racialized and classed subject positions within the narrative text; representations of "normative" and "subversive" lesbian subjectivities;[3] and, the use of "postmodern" representational strategies.

defining narrative

> Carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. . . . Caring nothing for the divisions between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes as quoted in Alice Doesn't 103)

As Barthes suggests, the narrative is ever-present in that which is produced as a cultural artifact or a cultural representation. More specifically, narrative is a system of meaning, or, a set of assumptions and conventions, that serves as a framework through which categories and subjectivities are represented and produced. The narrative, itself, is a conceptual/ideological construction, functioning in the production and maintenance of

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"Normative" or "preferred" lesbian subjectivities and practices include those which are most accepted or privileged within lesbian communities and mainstream culture. These usually consist of subjectivities and practices associated with privileges of class and race, and those which are most compliant with normative gender/sex categories. "Subversive" lesbian subjectivities might then be considered those excluded by "normative" or "preferred" ones.

meanings, interpretations and cultural myths. In a text, for instance, the narrative regulates how subjects/characters and events are portrayed. For the spectator, viewer or reader of the text, the narrative works to ensure that character and plot development occur in familiar, previously known, and "logical" ways, thereby providing the text with continuity and intelligibility. As such, narratives are usually (and unavoidably) formulaic and stereotypical systems. The conventional romance narrative, for example, follows a certain predictable plot movement: meeting (of the heterosexual couple), complication (obstacles which threaten the fulfilment of the relationship), and resolution (usually at the expense of the female subject's autonomy). In a sense, then, the narrative is *both a pattern and a constraint* within which subjectivities, conventions, and cultural representations are established.

textual narratives, cultural narratives, and "culturally constitutive constraints"

The notion of "narrative" can be understood in two ways. First, "narrative" can describe a framework which is constructed within a text. This is achieved through the use of conventions such as the "positioning" of the narrator's voice, the "subject positions" of the characters, the sequence of events (plot), and the use of symbolism and metaphor. Second, "narrative" can refer to a cultural system which organizes and limits social subjectivities, public representations, and cultural relations. In this sense, heteronormativity, male dominance, economic elitism, and white supremacy can be

considered dominant cultural narratives of Western societies.[4] Cultural narratives and textual narratives work in a *dialectical relationship* by informing each other in order to maintain conventional power dynamics. For example, male dominance ensures that the "active" and "desiring subject" in a literary romance narrative is usually a male or masculinized character, while the female or feminized character is typically assigned the position of "passive," "object of desire." Alternately, then, these literary representations serve to perpetuate and legitimate cultural traditions of male dominance.

Narrative *conventions*, on the other hand, are distinct from "narratives." Narrative conventions refer to specific structural elements and strategies constructed *within* a narrative. In textual narratives, these include elements such as the sequence of the plot, the representation of characters and subject positions, and the positioning of the narrator's voice. It is the combination of these various narrative elements that form the narrative system. Just as the narrative is constructed through narrative conventions, however, narrative conventions are simultaneously constituted through the assumptions which underlie the narrative system. For example, the assumption of heterosexuality, which underlies Western romance narratives, ensures that the protagonists of the love story are male and female. Conversely, the conventional positioning of a male or masculinized desiring subject and a female or feminized object of desire accomplishes the heterosexual plot required of the conventional romance narrative.

Another way to understand the relationship between textual narratives and

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It is important to note here that these dominant cultural narratives or "grand narratives" are what the postmodern project and postmodern strategies (discussed later) aim to critique.

cultural narratives is to recognize that textual narratives are subject to particular *culturally constituted constraints*.[5] These "constraints," which are perpetuated through cultural relations of power (such as heteronormativity, sexism, racism, and classism), delimit what can be *intelligibly* represented in texts. As a result, certain privileged subjectivities and certain privileged narratives dominate conventional texts while other subjectivities and narratives are marginalized or rendered impossible. Lesbian subjectivities and lesbian narratives are examples of those which are both marginalized and negated.

the romance narrative

Traditional romantic narratives concern a potential heterosexual love relationship whose fulfilment is threatened by various obstacles (Stacey 97). The plot of the narrative is, thus, constituted by the movement through the relationship and its obstacles in the formulaic sequence of "meeting," "complication," and "resolution." Whatever the barrier or obstacle to the romantic union, the question which sustains the narrative tension is: "will they (and importantly, how will they) or won't they overcome it?" (Stacey 97). In these narratives, "boy-meets-girl" encompasses the "meeting." The "complication" often involves another lover, a haunting past, an illness or death, geographical separation, class, race or national difference, non-mutual affection, or, any

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This notion is borrowed from Judith Butler's notion of "constitutive constraints". Constitutive constraints are the limitations placed on gender, sex and sexuality through the "symbolic domain", or, through dominant cultural/conceptual frameworks to make certain identities impossible while others are produced and maintained (Bodies 96-97).

combination of these (Stacey 97). The "resolution" or closure of the narrative is commonly signaled by heterosexual consummation and/or marriage (Farwell 40-41), and, as mentioned earlier, is usually at the expense of the female character's autonomy.

In a psychoanalytic context, the conventional romance of Western culture reflects Freud's assumptions underlying the Oedipal myth/narrative of desire (de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't). This narrative is formulated according to the notion that, for women, "normal" or "mature" sexual development is achieved through accepting her "lack" of a penis, and replacing this "loss" with a male love-object. Accordingly, the romance narrative arranges for the female subject's "femininity" (=sexuality) to be fulfilled through heterosexual union. In the case of the lesbian, however, her feminine potential is not fulfilled. Instead of replacing the "loss" of the penis with a male lover, the lesbian is assumed to "take on the phallus" herself by appropriating a masculine identity, along with a desire for the male's love-object choice, the female (de Lauretis, The Practice of Love 243). As such, the conventional lesbian romance is often structured around a "masculine identified" lesbian's pursuit of another woman.

Despite their obvious differences, then, lesbian romances also have a set of formulaic narrative conventions. These conventions include the event of "meeting" where butch-meets-femme or lesbian-seduces-straight-woman. The obstacles facing the lesbian relationship involve a male lover, homophobia (internalized and/or external threats), and/or psychological trauma of one or both of the women lovers (Stacey 97). Lesbian romances often end in one of the lovers returning to a heterosexual relationship, death, or, occasionally, transcendence (usually at the loss of things which constituted a

subject's previous identity: career, home, community, family, friends.) My analysis of the three texts in this thesis will acknowledge how these romance conventions are both accommodated and resisted in the representation of lesbian subjectivities and lesbian desire. Further, it will address the extent to which these accommodations and resistance delimit the political efficacy of the texts.

dominant narratives and the ontological pattern of sameness

Characteristic of dominant narratives is the construction of oppositions, reflecting the binary structure of Western, modernist thought. These include active/passive, mobile/immobile, "desirer"/ "desiree," narrator/narratee, mind/body and culture/nature; each binary actualized through the gendered subjectivities "male" and "female" (or "butch" and "femme") respectively. For the dominant/conventional romance narrative of Western culture, the construction of gender difference or gender *opposition* constitutes the narrative as heterosexual. Thus, according to Marilyn Farwell, a way in which to subvert the heteronormative narrative to make room for a lesbian narrative is to create a space of *sameness* by refusing traditional oppositional subject positioning (Farwell 1990: 97). She calls this the construction of a "narrative and ontological pattern of sameness" whereby "[w]hat is written on the beloved's body is also written on the narrator's body, and the reconstitution of the [lesbian] love relationship is accomplished by repositioning the lovers as the same" (Farwell 1996: 192-193). Throughout this thesis, however, I will argue that such construction of sameness as resistance to the heterosexual/heteronormative narrative, creates a homogenizing or normative representation of lesbian desire/subjectivity based on an artificial equality or unity between women.

subject positions and the representation of lesbian subjectivity/desire

The construction and positioning of characters/subjects are central to supporting the narrative. In dominant cultural and textual narratives, it is crucial that subject

positions are constructed and represented within the limits of gender, class, race, (hetero)sexual, and bodily conventions. Because of its challenge, particularly, to conventions of gender and sexuality, the construction of lesbian subjectivity is a potential site from which narratives may be subverted or resisted.

The representation of lesbian subjectivity/sexuality/desire, in itself, threatens the conventional romance narrative because the conventional narrative is definitively heterosexual. Representing lesbianism does this by undermining conventional active/passive positionalities of desire, which are occupied by the mobile, male desiring subject and the immobile, female object of desire, respectively (Farwell 35). Thus, the representation of a lesbian romance or relationship not only perverts the dominant narrative discourse of desire, but also disrupts gender boundaries/conventions. Constructions of lesbian subjectivities, however, are not beyond accommodating and perpetuating other dominant narratives such as racism and classism. This occurs especially under the assumption of lesbianism as equality or sameness between women where significant differences between women (ie. race and class) are potentially ignored and where "lesbian" becomes constructed/represented as a sexual subjectivity unaffected by cultural relations or cultural narratives of racism and classism.

accommodation and resistance

Because the narrative framework or narrative system is achieved through the use of narrative conventions, the disruption/subversion of these conventions is required to effectively resist the narrative(s). "Resistance," then, can be understood as the

intentional disruption or subversion of narrative conventions, with the effect of being politically and subversively significant. "Accommodation," on the other hand, is compliance with or conformity to narrative conventions, which effectively reinforces the dominant narrative and limits opportunities for subversive or challenging representations. However, accommodation and resistance often occur simultaneously, inconsistently, implicitly and explicitly. In other words, a text is a contradictory combination and fluctuation between resistance and accommodation. Furthermore, there are usually multiple and overlapping narratives at work in a text which accommodate and resist each other. For example, a lesbian romance novel within the cultural context of heteronormativity is, first, at least partially resistant because of its non-heterosexuality, but, second, is likely somewhat accommodating of heteronormative conventions in order to remain available/intelligible to its readers who interpret texts within cultural systems of meaning dominated by heterosexual signifiers and heterosexual codes.

For a text to be accessible, then, it must *refer* to dominant narratives and dominant conceptual frameworks. This referral is accomplished whether a text accommodates or resists dominant narratives; for both the process of accommodation and resistance *only occur in conscious relation to an already existing or familiar narrative*. A lesbian narrative, for example, cannot possibly be unconscious or unrelated to the heterosexual narrative because the lesbian plot depends on the obvious subversion or refusal (at least to some extent) of heterosexuality. This refusal is also how the lesbian narrative becomes distinguishable from the heterosexual narrative. Similarly, the heterosexual narrative depends on the absence or suppression of any "lesbian" plot or

lesbian narrative. As such, the notion of a totally resistant narrative, then, is quite impossible; for it would be unintelligible as it did not rely on any narrative reference or conventional discourse of meaning and interpretation which currently operate in our culture. The reader/viewer subsequently interprets such a narrative with previously known, familiar, or dominant discourses in order to make sense of the representations which do not conform to or confirm conventional narratives, again, only to reinforce (dominant) existing systems of meaning and understanding.

Hence, "lesbian" texts do not and cannot avoid conventional narratives or narrative conventions entirely. Instead, these texts work consciously against existing narrative conventions in attempts to create new narrative *arrangements*. "Lesbian" texts must invent ways of re-presenting, re-cycling, and re-visioning traditional narrative conventions, and to resist creating normative representations of lesbian subjectivity. The challenge of creating a lesbian narrative space is to push the boundaries of narrative by re-arranging conventional narrative elements and directly challenging cultural narratives from *within* the text. Furthermore, "narratives" themselves cannot be superseded, for they are the ideological systems of meaning which are mobilized through textual representations — no matter how conventional, subversive, complex, or contradictory.

mobilization of the textual narrative

A textual narrative is mobilized or made effective by several means: through the construction of the elements of the narrative itself (plot movement, subject positions, narration, etcetera); through the social relations and cultural narratives/contexts the

narrative is constructed within; and, through the discourses the reader/viewer/spectator[6] brings to the text, or, through "spectatorial location."[7] The scope of this project, however, does not allow for an *elaborate* analysis of how spectatorial location is implicated in the mobilization of narrative, although I have implicated my own positioning at certain points in the analysis. As such, my main focus will be the former two: the elements of narrative; and, the context within which the narratives are constructed. Nevertheless, the significance of the spectator's role in mobilizing the narrative should not be underestimated. Therefore, some consideration will be given to the extent to which the spectator/viewer/reader is invited to "interact" with the text as part of the construction of the narrative, particularly in Kiss & Tell's Drawing the Line.

cross-media analysis

In doing a cross-media analysis such as I am undertaking here, several considerations must be made. First, different media have different capacities and technologies for representation. This difference affects what can be represented, what a spectator expects, and how a spectator responds to the mediated text. Thus, expectations and responses may be different depending on the text's format and viewing context. For example, viewing a film in a theater on a large screen may be experienced

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The terms "spectator", "viewer", and "reader" may be used interchangeably in this analysis, however, I will usually refer to "spectator" in relation to film, "viewer" in relation to photography, and "reader" in relation to literature.

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I am using the term "spectatorial location" to refer to the spectator/viewer/reader's social position in terms of gender, class, race, sexual orientation and her historical, geographical and generational locations, which are significant to the process of experiencing and interpreting a narrative.

differently than watching the same film on home video. Similarly, photographs published as fashion magazine advertisements versus photographic "art" exhibited in a gallery will likely incite different expectations and responses (and probably a different viewer audience). Hierarchies between and within different media forms also affect the content of representations, spectator expectations, and responses to texts. The way in which an independent film[8] is received, for example, may be different from the way a Hollywood film is received.

The three texts examined in this thesis not only represent three different mediums (film, print, and photography), but are also positioned differently with respect to the cultural mainstream or popular consumer culture. This factor partially determines how accommodating or subversive a narrative/text can be in order to be "successful" or "effective." As well, the level of interaction and the type of interaction the spectator/viewer/reader has with the text will affect how the narrative is actualized. As well, the unique historical backgrounds of different media and their histories of representing lesbianism will likely affect the way that lesbian subjects and/or lesbian narratives are constructed and interpreted in texts. Lesbian erotic photography, for instance, a relatively new genre compared to lesbian fiction, has a distinct relationship to sexual representations from that of lesbian fiction. Such acknowledgments will be made throughout this thesis.

A cross-media analysis provides certain opportunities, as well as challenges, to

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"Independent film" in this context refers to a film which is not produced or sponsored by a major media corporation but rather by an independent film production company. These films are also sometimes referred to as "low budget" or "B" films.

this project. Because I am using a similar analytical framework to examine three texts of different media, this examination may be limited in its nonspecificity to the particularities of the different media. However, asking similar questions of all three texts such as "how are the subject positions in this text constructed to accommodate and/or resist dominant narratives?" creates a meaningful link/system of interrogation into how cultural narratives permeate textual narratives *across* different media. Thus, my particular choice of the three texts examined herein is largely based on an effort to show the pervasiveness of dominant narratives in the construction of lesbian representations regardless of media form. Furthermore, textual narratives, of every form, are similarly conveyors of messages and language which refer to the dominant system of meaning within the culture they are produced.

Conclusion

When theorizing about the possibility of narrative space for the mobilization of lesbian subjectivities, several questions arise: considering the constraints placed on subjectivity and desire through relations of culture and power, how does one produce imagery that has been previously unintelligible and relatively invisible (ie. lesbian sexuality)? How will these images be interpreted? When heterosexuality and male sexual subjectivity are dominant conceptual frameworks and ways of knowing/recognizing signs of desire, how can subjectivities that resist or do not accommodate these conceptual references be represented? What are the possibilities for representations of lesbianism within conventional narrative structures? How can

resistance occur in the form of "parodic" accommodation? The following discussion will attempt to address these questions through an independent analysis of each chosen text, and by making connections among the three texts which will highlight the comparative effectiveness of various representational strategies in their ability to resist conventional narratives and hegemonic representations of lesbian subjectivity and desire.

Chapter 2

Patricia Rozema's When Night Is Falling

Introduction

"Lesbian cinema" or "lesbians in film" has become a notable topic in recent studies of queer theory and contemporary, feminist film analysis.[9] The increasing representation of lesbians in film is significant, in itself, considering that lesbians are almost invisible in mainstream cinematic history, except as evil or "negative" characters (Becker 26). The construction of lesbian subjectivities in film presents an opportunity for conventional categories of gender, sexuality, desire and subjectivity to be contested. For as Teresa de Lauretis suggests, gender and sexuality *are* representations, constructed through social discourses and technologies such as cinema (Technologies 2). It is through and within the "master narratives" of dominant cultural discourses (including literature, photography and cinema), then, that lesbian subjectivities are produced. Therefore, it is significant to explore the ways lesbian desire is constructed in relation to dominant filmic and cinematic conventions in order to identify how lesbian subjects may resist dominant cultural representations.

Film, the medium of cinematic representation, borrows narrative techniques/elements from both photography and fiction. From photography, film inherits the capability to reproduce visual imagery and aesthetic details. As a moving image, the filmic text can represent complicated visual signifiers and descriptions which

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On this topic see Florence 1993; de Lauretis 1994; Gibbs 1994; Hammer and Budge 1994; Creekmur and Doty 1995; Wilton 1995.

reappear to serve as links or references between characters and events of the narrative. These signifiers partially replace the function of the narrator/speaker of the literary text, allowing the spectator of the film, in a way, to *become like* a narrator through observing the details of the story's setting and characters. From fiction, film borrows the "story" process of the literary narrative. This includes plot movement, character positioning, and often literary references, such as the use of mythology (as will be shown in both When Night Is Falling). Distinct from fiction, however, film requires the performance of *actors* to mobilize/represent the characters of the narrative. For this reason, I will suggest that film lends itself appropriately to an analysis of performance, or what Judith Butler calls "performativity" (Gender Trouble 128-141).[10] Performativity will be useful particularly in analyzing how subjectivities of race, class, gender and sexuality are performed and constituted through/within the filmic narrative of When Night Is Falling.

THE FILM

> *I want it to feel like just another love story, but I want people to be surprised at that. So I use fairly conventional techniques; the romance genre is very evident.* (Patricia Rozema on When Night Is Falling as quoted in Sneddon and Baker)

> *It's much more of a rich, full-bodied glass of wine — if it gets you drunk, I'll feel I've done my job. Something kind of subtle on the palate, but with an insouciant edge.* (Patricia Rozema on When Night Is Falling as quoted in Files)

When Night Is Falling (Crucial Pictures Inc., 1995) is Canadian director Patricia

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10

Note, however, that this literal notion of performance or performativity is extended by Butler to include an analysis of performativity concerning all social subjects, that is, not only those who are literal performers/actors/characters in textual narratives.

Rozema's third feature film. Following her less renowned, but critically acclaimed, I've Heard the Mermaids Singing (1987) and White Room (1990), When Night Is Falling earned Rozema international prestige by winning Audience Choice awards for appearances at the 1995 Berlin Film Festival, the 1995 Sydney Film Festival, the French Women's Film Festival, and the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (Files). It also won the award for Best Film at the Melbourne Film Festival in Australia. Surprisingly, this gentle love story was initially given a harsh MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) rating of NC-17 (No Children under 17 years of age) because of its display of "sex, nudity and profanity" (Keough).[11] Since, however, When Night Is Falling has been successful in mainstream, commercial theaters in North America and has been produced and widely distributed on video cassette.[12]

When Night Is Falling tells the story of Camille, a theology professor at a Protestant College, who is "charmed away" from her fiancé/colleague Martin by a female circus performer, Petra. Camille and Petra first meet, symbolically, in a laundromat where Petra consoles Camille who is weeping over the death of her dog, Bob.[13] The tension of the narrative is subsequently built around the internal and external conflicts Camille experiences between her security with Martin, her loyalties to her

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This rating demonstrates how lesbian content in film is culturally censored, considering how mainstream films with significantly more explicit (hetero)sexual content and/or violence receive ratings of lesser severity.

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Alliance Video is the Canadian distributor.

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The symbolic significance of Camille and Petra's meeting, and the death of the dog, Bob, will be explored further in this chapter.

profession and identity as a "fine Christian woman," and her intensifying desire for Petra. Camille's dilemma is eventually resolved through a process of self-realization and transformation. As such, the narrative constructs a conventional, formulaic romance plot sequence (meeting, tension, resolution), developed through the love triangle between Martin, Camille and Petra. The potential for narrative resistence, then, does not occur through a disruption of the plot's linearity, but in the development of character subjectivities.

When Night Is Falling is indeed both a palatable and arguably conventional love story as director Patricia Rozema herself suggests in the quotation above.[14] Most interesting, though, is *how* palatable Rozema has managed to make this film which tells the unconventional tale of a lesbian love affair between the Black, "exotic," avant-garde circus performer, Petra, and the white, uptight, (previously) heterosexual Christian professor, Camille. Rozema achieves this general consumability (illustrated by its popularity among audiences) through the use of traditional narrative and filmic conventions, as well as through precise and extensive attention paid to the film's visual aesthetics. Portrayed are beautiful female lead characters, lush scenery, creative theatrical/circus performances, mythical metaphors, dramatic symbolism and gracefully choreographed sex scenes. The most significant exception to the film's conventionality, however, is a parody of female domesticity which is woven through the story. My analysis, then, will focus on how representations and metaphors in When Night Is Falling

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To borrow a phrase from Jackie Stacey, When Night Is Falling is "the sort of movie you can take your mother to" (98).

alternately accommodate and resist dominant narrative conventions, particularly, those conventions associated with the romance narrative. The following themes will facilitate this discussion: subject positions; dreams; fantasies; mythology; constructions of difference; constructions of sameness; performance and performativity; and, transformation.

on subject positions

The subject positioning of characters in a story is crucial to the narrative's development of the events which constitute the story's plot. In the conventional romance narrative, the positioning of the main characters as "desirer" and "desiree" "sets the stage" for the development of a love relationship, which is then followed by the narrative events of "complication" and "resolution" involving the relationship. In When Night Is Falling, the narrative "space" occupied by the subject positionings between the main characters, Camille and Petra, at first alternate between desirer and desiree (or subject and object of desire). In the beginning, Petra is the obvious pursuer/seducer of Camille, inviting her with lines such as "Camille, I'd love to see you in the moonlight with your head thrown back and your body on fire" (When Night). However, this order is soon reversed when Camille pursues Petra with an unexpected, feverous kiss. Camille's character quickly adopts the role of an active subject while Petra is subsequently placed in the reactive position. Later in the film, Camille finally confesses to Petra, "I love to look at you, talk to you. I love you" (When Night). Looking, speaking, and desiring, in this instance, again establish Camille as the active subject. Petra's position as the object

of desire, on the other hand, is reinforced through her portrayal as a circus performer. She is sexualized and objectified at once by the gaze of Camille, by the circus audience, and by the spectators of the film, who are invited to visually consume her body as she performs various dances in "provocative" costuming.

Representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality also establish the characters' subject positions. From the beginning of the story, Petra is cast as the Other because of her lesbianism, her Blackness, and her unconventional work as a circus/theater performer. In one instance, Camille patronizingly refers to Petra as "people like you" (When Night), reinforcing Petra's position as an "outsider." In addition, Petra's sexual otherness is implicated in a scene which portrays the homophobic declarations of Camille's Protestant/Christian school board and Camille's complacent response to the matter. When the reverend reminds Camille that homosexuality is against the church's teachings, Camille weakly replies, "Yes, of course" (When Night). Additionally, in contrast to Camille, a professional academic living in an upscale Victorian apartment, Petra's occupation as a traveling circus performer and her trailer-home dwelling reinforces a class/power hierarchy between the two.

Petra's racial and sexual subjectivities can also be read as stereotypically "exoticized" through her character's portrayal as a circus performer in the sensual and surrealist Sirkus of Sorts. And although the difference of race, specifically, goes seemingly unacknowledged in the characters' dialogue and actions, Petra's Blackness is repeatedly visually contrasted with Camille's whiteness on screen through techniques of lighting, clothing and their physical juxtapositioning, establishing them, to some degree,

as opposites. This contradiction, the visual but not verbal attention paid to Petra's racialization, further silences this significant power difference between Petra and Camille. Seemingly, gender remains their only position of similarity.

In a scene of conflict between Martin and Camille, a conventionally gendered representation is constructed whereby the character-subjects are oppositely positioned as active (masculine) and passive (feminine). In this scene, Martin deliberately silences and denies Camille's voice by commanding her, "Just think before you speak" (When Night). This incident reinforces the narrative convention of male dominance and female submission, also implicating Martin as the rational subject and, alternately, Camille as irrational or impulsive. Furthermore, the scene re-establishes the male privilege of being a speaking subject which is coherent with modernist, patriarchal ideologies. Significantly, it is this convention and this relationship (associated with traditional heteronormative narrative construction) that Camille eventually rejects to be with Petra.

on dreams

Dreams and dream sequences are significant to the construction of character subjectivity in the narrative because they are often used to represent a character's subconscious anxieties or desires. The event of a dream may serve to foreshadow emotional tensions and conflicts that the character-subject will encounter as a result of these subconscious anxieties/desires. Dreams are also occasions where the spectator gets an "inside peak" into a character's psyche. In these ways, dreams serve to identify and develop certain character-subjects more deeply or intimately than others. For example, in

the film, the spectator experiences Camille as the most fully developed character-subject of the narrative, or the "focalizer" of the narrative, because the spectator learns of her subconscious, "inner" desires through the presentation of her dreams.[15] Therefore, this narrative strategy further reinforces Camille as an active, desiring subject. Likewise, through her dreams, the object(s) of Camille's desire is/are also established.

In the opening scene of the film, two female figures, naked and illuminated, gracefully swim and dance around each other underwater (as in this case, underwater is traditionally used as symbolic of the unconscious). One of the figures is Camille (who has not yet been formally introduced in the narrative). The other figure is a woman with long red hair whose face is not shown. Camille swims up to a transparent wall and seems to be restrained by it. At this point, the scene cuts to Camille waking up in bed. The spectator realizes that the swimming scenario was a dream and Camille is now visually identified as the main swimmer-subject in the dream. Several things are achieved through this representation. First, Camille is established as the active/desiring subject because she is the protagonist in the dream. Second, the object of Camille's desire is suggested to be the other female figure in the dream. This figure, however, is faceless and unidentifiable. Thus, we do not yet know that Camille desires a *particular* woman; only that her desire is established or, at least suggested, to be for a female love-object. Third, the act of Camille swimming up to the wall in the dream suggests the barrier or anxiety she will face in pursuit of her desires.

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I am using the term "focalizer" here to name the primary figure "who sees the events or action" of the narrative and whom the events or actions of the narrative are centered around (Farwell 30).

Later in the film, as Camille is freezing/dying in the snow, she dreams again of herself swimming naked underwater. This time, as she approaches the transparent wall, snow is falling on it. The suggestion here is that Camille's fear and anxieties about pursuing her "homosexual feelings" may result in death, the death/loss of her newly found desires and potential freedom. What is hopeful, however, is that Camille simultaneously dreams of Petra and the circus, reestablishing her desire and thus creating a resistance to this notion of death. In this way, her physical "brush with death" also parallels her sense of a jeopardized identity, which is eventually superseded by the realization that she will survive *through* the pursuit of her desires. The spectator is left to wonder whether fear or desire will triumph, and what will be the consequence for Camille's identity should either occur.

on fantasies

Fantasies, distinct from dreams, are assumed to represent a subject's more *conscious* desires. It is assumed that the subject has some control and can make conscious decisions about the content of her fantasies/daydreams. Thus, the fantasy or daydream can be read as an even more explicit establishing of the active subject and her desires than the subconscious dream is. There are two fantasy scenes in When Night Is Falling where this establishing can be observed. First, the spectator is subjected to and subjugated by (from my lesbian subject position) a disturbingly "fleshy" sex scene between Martin and Camille. While Martin is on top of Camille, the spectator is led to follow Camille's wandering gaze over to the bedroom wall. Headlights from a passing

vehicle shine through the window, casting two glowing spheres. The spheres of light begin to juggle on the wall, imitating a juggling/dancing light act that Petra performs at the circus earlier in the film. It is clear that Camille is desiring or fantasizing about Petra. Although physically absent, Petra is once again constituted as the object of Camille's desire, and Camille is reconstituted as the desiring subject by actively *fantasizing* Petra as the object of her desire (despite/against the hetero-sex in which Camille is involved during this scene).

In the second fantasy scene, Camille stands daydreaming at her kitchen sink while she is doing the dishes. She imagines Petra silently approaching her from behind, sensuously touching and kissing her face and neck. Despite Petra's role as the sexual initiator in this fantasy, Camille maintains her position as the active desiring subject since she has intentionally designed/defined Petra's role in this way. In other words, into whatever position Camille puts herself or Petra *in her fantasy* (whether it is an active or passive position), her position within the *film's narrative* as desiring subject is maintained because the act of fantasizing, itself, reinforces this active/desiring position. However, at this point in the film, Camille is not yet able to *act* on her own desires in "reality," as she struggles with her lingering heterosexual consciousness.

on mythology

Mythological references are commonly used within the romance narrative. They serve to culturally or ideologically contextualize a narrative, or, to make a narrative culturally intelligible to its audience. The reference to Cupid in the film, for instance,

hints to the viewer that (at least) two people in the film will likely fall in love; since this is how Cupid (or Eros in Roman mythology) is implicated and understood within Western culture. In this sense, mythological references also function as foreshadowers, similar to dreams, in that they will predict a development in characters or in the plot movement. The most visually explicit reference to Cupid occurs in a scene where Petra, costumed in tights and a red tam, shoots a plastic arrow (with a sorry note attached) through Camille's apartment window. Camille is immediately "struck," so to speak. She marches downstairs, invites Petra into the doorway/entrance of her apartment and kisses Petra unexpectedly and feverously, for the first time. Ironically, and despite her having previously chosen to be a professor of mythology, an overwhelmed Camille does not know what has "struck" her. But the spectator/audience knows it was Cupid's/Petra's arrow, and suspects that she is falling in love with Petra.

The second direct reference to Cupid occurs after Camille and Petra return from their hang-gliding experience/tumble. Camille has agreed to let Petra massage her sore knee, a result of the flight. Petra asks Camille to tell her a story while she is massaging (perhaps to distract Camille from her wandering hands). Camille proceeds with the myth of Cupid: "Cupid, for instance, was a god who fell in love with a mortal, Psyche. Now, this was a big taboo, you see, because gods and mortals were not aloud to mix. So, umm . . . Cupid stole her away to a secret palace . . . " (When Night). Through the telling of this myth, Petra and Camille's relationship is made analogous to Cupid and Psyche's. The reference "gods and mortals were not aloud to mix" implicates and reinforces the racial, class and sexual differences which exist between Camille and Petra, and the

taboos surrounding their relationship because of these differences. Not only, then, does When Night Is Falling reinforce traditional/conventional narrativity through its use of mythological analogies, it also reestablishes dominant, hierarchical oppositions between Camille as white, middle class, and heterosexual, and Petra as Black, working class, and lesbian. Nevertheless, in the myth of Cupid and Psyche, their differences are breeched and their union is dared. Cupid and Psyche eventually produce a daughter named Pleasure.[16] Thus, the question is posed for Petra and Camille: will they face the consequences of crossing their differences and the taboos surrounding their relationship? Will they transgress these "obstacles" in the pursuit of "Pleasure?"

on difference

Differences constructed as fixed oppositions reinforce traditional power dynamics and conventional subject positions in a narrative. Thus, it is necessary to deconstruct the binary oppositions presented in When Night Is Falling in order to determine the ways in which their presence accommodates (and/or resists) dominant narrative conventions. The following oppositions, constituted through the subjectivities of Petra and Camille (respectively), can be identified: black/white; pagan/Christian; physical/intellectual; bodily/non-bodily; corporeal/cerebral; god/mortal; trailer-home/Victorian apartment; mythological figure (Cupid)/mythology teacher; performer/academic; homosexual/heterosexual; colorful and extravagant costumes/conservative clothing;

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This detail was offered to me in a conversation with Ursula Kelly.

etcetera. It is not surprising, given Camille's general position as socially privileged (in respect to Petra) as made obvious in these oppositions, that she maintains the dominant position of active desiring subject throughout the narrative. Petra, on the other hand, although appearing to dominate in her attempts to seduce Camille, is essentially regulated to the exoticized, eroticized, position of love-object as predicted by her racialized, socially disadvantaged location. Yet, these binaries eventually (somewhat) collapse through the crossover of Camille and Petra's lives and their "coming together" as partners.

Interestingly, the construction of Camille and Petra as opposites might also serve a strategic, subversive purpose. The portrayal of Camille as an academic and Petra as a theatrical/circus performer parallels earlier literary (Western) narratives of the 18th and 19th centuries which commonly antagonized the conventionally feminine female protagonist with another version of femininity: "women of the theater" (E. Allen). These acting/performing women were presented as bawdy, bodily, sexual, extroverted, unrefined, uncultured, irrational and excessively unnatural (read "Petra"). Notably, women's performances in the theater during this time also often included cross-dressing and playing roles of male characters (Rogers); an obvious affront to Victorian-era femininity. Conventional femininity, on the other hand, was portrayed as natural, essential, introverted, intellectual, cultured and non-bodily (read "Camille"). This juxtaposition was meant to reinforce the naturalness of conventional femininity by showing the unnaturalness and vulgarity of theatrically constructed femininity. However, using Butler's notion of gender performance as a destabilizing/denaturalizing strategy,

consider the opposite effect: conventional femininity is undermined by the mere notion of femininity as a construct or a performance, as demonstrated by women of the theater. The positioning of Petra in contrast to Camille in When Night Is Falling, then, can potentially be read as a resistance to the conventional narrative construction of femininity which Camille is initially intended to represent.[17]

on sameness

In contradistinction to the extensive construction of oppositions in the film, director Rozema overlaps a narrative pattern of "sameness."[18] In other words, she creates a pattern or theme of sameness between Camille and Petra which, on the surface, might seem to alleviate some of the tension created by their differences (or their "different worlds"). Sameness, twinning or mirroring between female characters, is a traditional literary trope used to represent lesbian desire (C. Allen 76). The assumption underlying this trope is that lesbian desire is based upon an essential sameness, unity, or equality between women. Sameness is suggested, for example, at the beginning of Camille and Petra's massage scene where the two are wearing nearly identical clothing in color, texture and style. Not only does this construction deny significant differences between Camille and Petra (such as race), but it also dilutes or softens the sexual tension between

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Note, however, that this subversive reading is contingent upon the reader's access to deconstructive or counter discourses of meaning, perhaps delimiting the possibility and effectiveness of this representation as an explicitly subversive one.

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Marilyn Farwell's notion of a "narrative pattern of sameness" (193) will be developed further and extended in the following chapter.

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the two by suggesting a sisterly-type dynamic.

Nonetheless, the notion of sameness also subverts the convention of oppositional (heterosexual) subject positions (as in active/passive, masculine/feminine, dominant/submissive). In this manner, perhaps Rozema's construction of female sameness creates an authorized space to represent an alternative to the conventions of the traditional heterosexual love story. Indeed, as the stunning, twin trapeze artists fly high through the air mirroring and miming each other in perfect symmetry, Camille and Petra are making (nearly synchronized) love below them on a bed of lush, wine-colored draperies. Despite the subtly displayed difference of their skin color in this scene, the two are strikingly physically similar in their naked, slender bodies. At times, the spectator is even unclear about whose legs are whose, and whose . . . And, indeed, their sexual encounter appears to be almost banally "egalitarian" and balanced.

on performance and performativity

Judith Butler argues that categories of gender identity are *performative*. Rather than based upon an essentially true or inherent core identity, gender is "*a corporeal style*, an 'act' . . . which is both intentional and performative" (Butler 139). "Performative," here, suggests "a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler 139). In more familiar terms, certain stylized performances and acts create the look or the *effect* of gender - which is all gender ever is (independent from power relations); a look or an effect - according to Butler. The significance of understanding gender or sexual identities as performative is to *denaturalize and destabilize* these identity categories

which have been culturally constructed in essentialist, hierarchical, ways. I would suggest, then, that performativity *within a filmic narrative* can potentially denaturalize, destabilize, and effectively resist categories of conventional/dominant narrative subjectivity.

There are different levels or kinds of performances/performativity in When Night Is Falling. First, there are the performances of the *actors in the film* (Pascale Bussières, Rachael Crawford, Henry Czerny, etcetera) as the characters of the narrative. Second, there are the performances of the *characters in the narrative* which serve as symbols, metaphors and/or parodic narrative resistance. Third, there are the "performances within the performance," the *theatrical performances* of the Sirkus of Sorts in the film: the trapeze artists, the stilt lady, the hairy faced man, the tarot card reader, the leather-clad fire jugglers, and Petra's hybrid dance performances with costumes and props. These three types of performances are not entirely separable from one another. However, by focusing on the performances of the characters in the narrative and the "performances within the performance," an analysis of performativity will be applied.

Discussed already have been the metaphors and analogies created by the performances of the twin trapeze artists, Petra as Cupid, and Petra and Camille wearing identical clothing. Clothing and/or costume are effective examples of performativity in that they are culturally coded and interpreted acts which display/reveal something about a person's identity/subjectivity (whether it is gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or profession). It is significant, then, that Camille and Petra first meet in a laundromat. If the laundromat can be understood as a metaphor for a dressing room or a backstage, this meeting

foreshadows Camille and Petra's upcoming performances. Even further, this theatrical metaphor suggests Camille's taking on a new "role" or becoming someone other than whom she has "played" in the past.

After Petra has secretly arranged a "switcheroo" of her's and Camille's laundry, Camille finds herself at home with a pile of Petra's outrageous clothing. From the pile she picks out a tight, black shirt with a silver zipper across the chest and tries it on. As she stands admiring her new, more risqué self, Martin arrives early to pick her up for their meeting with the reverend of the Christian college. He is briefly entertained/aroused by Camille's ensemble but quickly suggests that she "get ready." Camille refuses to change her shirt: "It's got sort of a reckless charm, don't you think?" (When Night) she smirks at Martin. It is in this scene that the spectator becomes more aware of the transformation Camille is already beginning to undertake. Her performance, inspired by the "putting on" of Petra's shirt, can be interpreted as meaning several things: rebellion against Martin's desires; rebellion against the authority of the reverend/church; release from her normally constrained/reserved behavior; and/or, expression of sexual liberation. One can be sure, however, that this performative act suggests a significant change to occur in Camille's identity.

Camille has returned to the Sirkus of Sorts to find Petra in the middle of a performance. Petra and two other women are dancing in synchronicity beside each other. They are wearing pastel taffeta gowns with black leather army boots and are swinging irons (yes, the kind for ironing clothes) above their heads. The women stomp and swing to dramatic classical music, achieving the distorted humor the piece intends. It is a

parody of female domesticity, a refusal of traditional femininity. It might also be an accentuation of Petra's unconventionality in contrast to Camille's conservativism. Regardless, the dance undermines the stereotypical notion of female domesticity, resembling more a Western showdown than "women's"daily house chores. Camille startlingly looks on as the women stagger forward, draw their irons and defiantly shoot steam into the air. The dance is calling her to reject the traditional female role she has been patronizing and to join the (lesbian) performance!

on transformation

"Transformation" is a central theme in When Night Is Falling. It underlies the movement of the narrative's plot and Camille's passage from "one world to another." In conventional romance narratives, either consummation or transcendence (in the form of metamorphosis) is used to mark the narrative's movement toward closure (Farwell 40-41). In When Night Is Falling, however, Camille's transformability also marks her *mobility*; a mobility which is typically denied female characters and the conventional static, female/feminine subject positioning. In this sense, the traditional romance narrative has been transcended; especially since Camille's transformation has meant a rejection of conventional (heterosexual) femininity and a crossing of sexual boundaries. Furthermore, because Camille leaves Martin, her career, and, we assume, her heterosexuality to be with Petra, she has traversed boundaries of class and race (even if this is only implicitly suggested). Thus, transformation also serves as an idealistic metaphor for the transcendence of difference and the harmonization/homogenization of

"different worlds." In this second sense, however, the romance narrative has *not* been resisted but rather supplanted with the essentialist notion of a lesbian utopia where difference is to be transcended and surrendered for sameness.

There are several occasions upon which Camille's transformation, in particular, is foreshadowed or marked. Near the beginning of the film, during one of her lectures at the college, she speaks of the "human need for change, progress, movement . . ." (When Night); a subtle hint to the spectator to expect Camille's impending metamorphosis. Other clues or symbols of change include Camille's putting on of Petra's shirt and her accidental "coming out" onto the stage at the circus on two separate occasions in the film.[19] Similarly, the spectator is reminded of Camille's "conversion" when she graduates from referring to homosexuals (and Petra) as "people like you" to acknowledging them as "people like me" (When Night). Most visually symbolic, however, is the scene in which Camille and Petra go hang-gliding together. Here, flight becomes an analogy for freedom and transcendence, and Camille is effectively "released" by taking up Petra's challenge to fly.

The culmination of Camille's transformation is portrayed in the final death-resurrection or reincarnation scene; an event which complies with the notion of the female character being "trap[ped] . . . in a fatalistic apparatus" (Farwell 27), as formulated in the conventional romance narrative. In a desperate attempt to find some

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The first occasion is when Camille is looking for Petra at the circus and accidentally walks out onto an audition stage. She realizes her mistake and corrects the auditioner ". . . but I'm not an acting person" (When Night). The second occasion is when Camille returns to the circus in an attempt to make "just friends" with Petra and accidentally bursts out from curtain behind the curtain during the dress/boots/iron dance by Petra and the other two performers.

comfort during her difficult situation with Martin and Petra, Camille takes a bottle of cherry brandy out to the snowy hang-gliding forest to bury her dead dog, Bob. Unluckily, Camille lies down on the ground, drunk and in despair, only to pass out and be covered in snow herself. She is found, however, by the hang-gliding crew who informs Petra of Camille's hypothermic state. Camille wakes up in Petra's arms and soon decides to join the circus. She leaves her reality, her past life as a mortal, to accompany Petra and the gods in the surreal Sirkus of Sorts. Magically, Bob (the dog) eventually wakes up too. He shakes the snow off himself and is essentially "reborn," humorously paralleling the sexual "rebirth" of his owner.

conclusion

All is not lost for the heterosexual plot, however. Reminiscent of the laundry switcharoo, Camille and Tori (the circus co-director) also perform a switcheroo. Tori leaves the hectic unpredictable life of the circus noting, "a little house in the suburbs is sounding pretty good right now" (When Night). Coincidentally/fatefully, Tori finds Martin at a coffee shop after Camille joins the circus and the trading of places becomes nearly complete. At this late point in the film, the spectator is reminded of the heterosexual/marriage ideal by the suggestion of Martin and Tori's union. Thus, the heterosexual narrative is partially reestablished, diluting the defiance/resistance attempted by the lesbian love story.

Does Rozema, then, accomplish her goal in making When Night Is Falling "feel like just another love story" (Sneddon and Baker)? Is accommodating the conventional

romance narrative necessary in order to successfully portray a lesbian love story for mainstream audiences? Is this just a lesbian plot in a heterosexual narrative? How subversive is it to show a lesbian love story in traditional/conventional narrative form? Rozema has succeeded in making When Night Is Falling a general audience pleaser, but does this mean that the film is not subversive? Perhaps Rozema's use of romantic conventions to portray a lesbian love story can be read as ironic resistance. However, this irony is only made clear during the iron-dance scene, which, in my view, remains effective in its parody, specifically, of female domesticity. Nonetheless, the film, by itself, fails to render a critique of heteronormative narrativity or to transgress representations of normative lesbian subjectivity.

Chapter 3

Jeanette Winterson's "The Poetics of Sex"

Introduction

Historically, "lesbian fiction" can be traced through a movement of several ideological themes. Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness (1928) marked the onset of a significant body of literature continuing through the late 1920s into the 1940s which began to portray identifiably lesbian subjects, albeit they were usually represented as "predatory, masculine, infantile, or hopelessly unhappy lesbians" (Zimmerman 8). These portrayals reflected observations of sexologists during the time (and prior) who diagnosed lesbians as "sexual inverts" or "transvestite women"; women who displayed "inappropriate gender behaviour" and "inappropriate sexual object choice" (Faderman 41). The 1950s and 1960s followed as the era of "pulp paperback" romance novels. Typically, these novels depicted lesbians as "tragic, maimed creatures trapped in a world of alcohol, violence, and meaningless sex" (Zimmerman 9), similarly, reflecting society's view of lesbianism as deviant and immoral.

Lesbian fiction in the 1960s and 1970s, however, brought a transformation in the representation of lesbian subjectivities as a consequence of the popularization of feminist discourse in North America (Zimmerman 10-20). Writings of this period portrayed lesbians as strong, independent, "woman-identified women." Lesbianism was represented as the feminist ideal, and separate women's cultures or lesbian utopias were envisioned as ultimately liberating (Monique Wittig's Les Guérillères, 1969). "Coming out" stories, stories of women's communities, science fictions and lesbian detective

novels were common forms of this literature.

Into the 1980s, authors began writing about experiences of sexual, racial and class differences *among lesbians*, an important challenge to the hegemonic notion of "sisterhood" which had been the tenet of lesbian-feminism and much of the lesbian literature of the previous decade. This period included many works by women of colour such as Audre Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982). In the late 1980s emerged novels which told the stories of lesbians' recoveries from traumatic events like incest, child abuse, rape, alcohol and drug abuse, or eating "disorders"; novels which included Dorothy Allison's Trash (Zimmerman 212). These semi-autobiographical fictions can be considered a type of second "coming out" for these authors, which, importantly, demystified the lesbian idealism presented in fictions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Authors such as British novelist Jeanette Winterson have since revised what may have once been recognized as "lesbian fiction." Her stories evoke gender flexible, semi-fantastical, and excessive characters. Their plots reinvent historical figures and events in perverse and parodic ways. Her language is artful and proficient, supporting her clever reinventions. Through the blending of narrative elements from across the historical palate of lesbian fiction, she also illustrates the postmodern strategy of "intertextuality" (Doane 138), challenging conventions of the traditional, fictional narrative.

Winterson, herself, is considered among the avant-guard of new literary types. She is a controversial figure in the literary community, both because of her intellectually bold writing style and her infamously egotistic public persona. Nonetheless, she has

earned acclaim in past works including Oranges are not the Only Fruit (1985), The Passion (1987), Sexing the Cherry (1989), Written on the Body (1992), Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery (1995), Art & Lies (1995), and most recently Gut Symmetries (1997). "The Poetics of Sex," a short fiction by Winterson, commissioned for and published in The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories (1993), can be characterized, at once, as romantic, utopian, fantastical, anti-romantic, and critically postmodern. For my project, it presents an interesting opportunity because of its resistance to both the dominant discourse of heterosexual desire and conventional versions of the lesbian romance.

"*Why Do You Sleep With Girls?*" (412) is the sentence which begins this love story between two women. Significantly, Winterson names these two "Sappho" and "Picasso" after the Greek poet Sappho and the Spanish sculptor and painter Pablo Picasso.[20] Sappho tells a story of their relationship interrupted by a series of typical, condescending heterosexist questions such as "*Which One of You is the Man*?" (413) and "*Don't You Find There's Something Missing*?" (419). The story progresses through the meeting of the two lovers, a point of tension between them and, finally, the resolution of their relationship. As such, the tale initially appears to involve a familiar and traditional romantic plot movement. However, the narrative possibilities created particularly through Winterson's (re)construction of gender, desire and lesbian subjectivity, constitutes its unconventionality and subversiveness. This chapter, then, focuses

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The significance of these namings will be discussed later in the chapter.

specifically on how lesbian subjectivity is constructed, with respect to positionalities of gender and desire, to disrupt and subvert narrative conventions in "The Poetics of Sex." In order to facilitate this discussion, the following elements will be explored: narrative structure/framework; subject positions; constructions of lesbian desire and subjectivity; and, masculinized signifiers and new gender boundaries in narrative categories of subjectivity.

on narrative structure/framework: the questions

"The Poetics of Sex" is structured or framed by eight anonymous questions (two are repetitions), obviously intended for lesbians, to which the narrator, Sappho, dissidently responds. Instead of answering the questions directly, she tells the story of her and Picasso's love relationship *amidst* them. The questions, read alone, form a narrative framework, anticipating answers based on the heterosexist terms of their queries. The narrator, however, refuses these terms by refusing the subject positions that the questions demand (Farwell 175-6). In other words, Sappho assumes control of the narrative, denying the stereotypical subject positions imposed by the narrative framework, and instead reconstructs lesbian subjectivity through the telling of the love story. Thus, the traditional narrative and the system of meaning which underlies it is subverted/resisted through the narrator's reinterpretation of the questions and redefinition of conventional narrative subject categories.

There are two questions which are repeated in "The Poetics of Sex." The first is "*Were You Born a Lesbian?*" (416) which is asked consecutively as both the fourth and

fifth questions. The reason for this repetition is due to Sappho's evasiveness in her first response: "I could say yes, I could say no, both statements would be true . . ." (416). In response to the question the second time around, however, Sappho delivers a sarcastic, deliberate sub-version of the Annunciation and the Christ's birth: a queer-angel-Gabriel-type ("a fairy in a pink tutu") arrives to announce the birth of Sappho ("a sex toy who has a way with words") to the un-Mary-like Picasso (416). Finally, this nativity scene is totally perverted when Picasso "mate[s] with this creature she ha[s] borne . . . flesh of her flesh she fuck[s] her" (417).

The next repeated question is "*Why Do You Sleep With Girls?*" (412, 421). Significantly, it is asked both first and last in the story. The unknown author of the question either misunderstands or ignores the answer/explanation Sappho provides the first time around and, thus, asks again. Its repetition and positioning emphasize the question's ignorance and stubbornness along with the heterosexist assumptions that underlie it and the entire set of questions which make up the narrative framework. Beyond the narrative, this relentless questioning also reminds us how deep-seated and persistent homophobia/lesbophobia is in Western society. Such questioning reflects the ambivalence of heterosexist culture to understand lesbian subjectivities, and reminds us that even repudiation/disavowal such as Sappho's cannot render immobile the relationships of power which keep these assumptions in place.

As well as representing heterosexist assumptions about lesbian subjectivity, these questions are the same ones asked by the curious/naive tourists on a "lesbian sightseeing tour." In the story, Sappho describes a boatman named Phaeon who runs a business

called Lesbian Tours. He circles his motorboat around the island of Lesbos pointing out famous lesbians to his sightseers. One sightseer pleas with Phaeon, "'Can't you just ask one of 'em?'. . . 'I can ask them anything,' says Phaeon, who never waits to hear the answer" ("Poetics" 421). Here, Winterson constructs Phaeon as the "male gaze" or the "male voyeur" for whom female desire (and lesbian desire) is assumed to exist.[21] Her sarcastic representation of Phaeon, however, reveals the mistaken presumptuousness of this assumption.

Similarly, Winterson's sarcasm is meant to undermine the myth of Phaeon. The myth claims that because of an unrequited love for this young boatman, Sappho leaped to her death from a cliff on the island of Levkás ("Phaeon"). Thus, Phaeon historically served as a literary invention/convention created to portray Sappho as heterosexual rather than lesbian. Unlike Rozema's *accommodation* of the myth of Cupid and Psyche in a conventional construction of Camille and Petra's relationship, Winterson has *subverted* the traditional cultural myth, denying its significance to the construction of the narrative while reconstituting Sappho as a lesbian subject.

on subject positions

In conventional romance stories, the protagonist and her/his love interest occupy specific narrative categories which, according to de Lauretis, are the *active* and *passive* positionalities of desire (Alice 143). Earlier, I have called these the subject positions of

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See Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in Feminism and Film Theory. Ed. Constance Penley.

"desirer" and "desiree." They are associated, respectively, with mobility and immobility, sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification, active desire and passivity, and masculinity and femininity. As such, these positionalities of desire are consistently used to reinforce the traditional gender hierarchy and (hetero)sexual oppositioning. This section aims to show how these conventional narrative categories are resisted in "The Poetics of Sex" by Winterson's non-traditional construction of subjectivity and her representation of gender and desire.

The establishment of positionalities of desire are achieved partially through the distinction/separation of the "narrator" from the "narratee." Conventionally, the narrator represents the active desiring subject and the voice of phallic/masculine authority. The narratee, on the other hand, is positioned as the voiceless, feminized object of desire. Shameem Kabir describes this dynamic and the implications of the domination of the masculine/phallic voice and its language for the construction of desire within the narrative:

> The consequence of phallic languages is to fetishize the woman, to seek in her the phallus we lack, and to render her an object of our voyeurism, where our visual knowledge of her meets the need for mastery and control . . . Desire itself is introduced through the phallus, where speaking subjects take their social positions according to whether they have or 'lack' a penis. (Kabir 172-173)

Significantly, Winterson's naming of the narrator of this story "Sappho," after the historical lesbian writer/poet Sappho of Lesbos, replaces the masculine narrative voice and its phallic language with a voice that invents a female-centered language: "When I see a word held hostage to manhood I have to rescue it . . . I like to be a hero, like to come back to my island full of girls carrying a net of words forbidden to them"

("Poetics" 418). Thus, Winterson creates a narrative space for desire to be articulated in non-phallic terms, a space for the articulation of lesbian desire.

In another section of the story, Sappho describes how both Picasso and her are *narrators and narratives* of forbidden words and inspiring messages: "Making love we made a dictionary of forbidden words. We are words, sentences, stories, books. You are my New Testament. We are a gospel to each other . . ." (418-419). Winterson succeeds again, here, in rescuing the narrative voice from masculinization by having the narrator, Sappho, share narrative and authorial space with Picasso, relieving the domination of the narrator's voice and the opposition of male-speaker/female-listener.

Throughout the text, Sappho and Picasso alternately and, often, simultaneously occupy the positions of desirer and desiree. The following passage exemplifies a sequence of this alternating. Sappho is first the initiator, then becomes the "taken" and, finally, the positions are reversed again by Sappho's reclamation of her sexual subjectivity through a description of Picasso as the object-recipient of her desire:

> I [Sappho] made the first move. I took her by her pony-tail the way a hero grabs a runaway horse. She was taken aback. When she turned round I kissed her ruby mouth and took a sample of her sea blue eyes . . . We went back to her studio, where naturally enough, there was a small easel and a big bed. 'My work comes first,' she said, 'Would you mind?', and not waiting for an answer she mixed an ochre wash before taking me like a dog my breast hanging over the pillow. Not so fast Picasso, I too can rumple you like a farm hand, roll you like good tobacco leaf against my thighs. I can take that arrogant throat and cut it with desire. I can make you dumb with longing, tease you like a doxy on a date. ("Poetics" 415)

By alternating between positions of subject and object of desire, the figures of Sappho and Picasso blur the boundaries of the conventional active/passive categories of narrativity. The categories become unstable, inconsistent and untrustworthy. They are

rendered useless. Their original purpose, to distinguish the traditional role of a masculinized, active, desiring subject from a feminized, passive, object of desire is redirected. The refusal of a masculinized/feminized opposition now denies the necessity of the male/female heterosexual romantic narrative.

on the construction of lesbian desire and subjectivity

Characteristic of lesbian separatist, utopian discourse (recall the lesbian fiction, particularly, of the 1960s and 1970s) is the narrative construction of lesbian relationships in terms of women's "need for nurturance and relatedness and, frequently, in terms of the desire for the pre-Oedipal relationship to the mother" (Andermahr 138). Uncritically, Winterson accommodates this discourse by portraying Sappho and Picasso alternately and simultaneously as lovers *and* mother and child: "I am proud to be Picasso's lover in spite of the queer looks we get when holding hands on busy streets. 'Mummy, why is that man staring at us?' I said when only one month old. 'Don't worry dear, he can't help it, he's got something wrong with his eyes.'"(416). A similar situation occurs when, after the characters' first sexual union, the omniscient narrator[22] observes that Picasso, "who thought she had seen it all before," smiles "like a child" and falls in love with Sappho (417). Again, the couple occupy positions of lover/lover and mother/child, although, this time, it is Picasso who is positioned as childlike.

The analogy of sight or vision is conventionally used as a metaphor for active

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This is one of the unusual places in the narrative where the narration is done from an omniscient point of view.

desire and *masculine* subjectivity. John Berger explains the gendered assumption underlying this analogy: "*[M]en act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 47). Feminist writers, such as Marilyn Frye, however, have reclaimed sight or "seeing" as a metaphor for lesbian subjectivity. She explains,

> . . . lesbians are in a position to see things that cannot be seen from within the system. What lesbians see is what makes them lesbians and their seeing is why they have to be excluded. Lesbians are woman-seers. When one is suspected of seeing women, on is spat summarily out of reality, through the cognitive gap and into the negative semantic space. (Frye 173-174)

In "The Poetics of Sex" Winterson attempts to reclaim this "semantic space" and "lesbian sight" by analogizing the heterosexist view with blindness:[23] "The world is full of blind people. They don't see Picasso and me dignified in our love. They see perverts, inverts, tribades, homosexuals. They see circus freaks and Satan worshippers, girl-catchers and porno turn-ons. Picasso says they don't know how to look at pictures either" (416).[24] She has thus reversed the masculine/heterosexual domination of visual subjectivity by depicting Picasso and Sappho as "seers," instead rendering the homophobes "blind" or "sightless."

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Winterson's choice of the term "blindness", here, to express the concept of ignorance is a problematic one with respect to the stigmatization of disability. She also displays racial insensitivity with her specific use of the terms "Eskimo" and "igloo". These instances seem to contradict Winterson's overall attempt to subvert hegemonic and discriminatory assumptions.

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Recalling the terms "perverts, inverts, tribades, homosexuals", here, Winterson reappropriates the language and discourse of the sexologists reflected in lesbian fiction from the 1920s to the 1940s. Also note Winterson's reference to "circus freaks" as reminiscent of the positioning of Petra, the circus performer in When Night Is Falling, as Other.

In conventional narratives, lesbians subjects have been negatively portrayed as masculine, excessive, monstrous, or grotesque. However, Pauline Palmer suggests that a deliberate endorsement of this portrayal can also serve as a subversive strategy (Palmer 91), whereby the lesbian subject denies the typical passive position of femininity and instead takes on a resistant, powerful one. By intentionally representing the lesbian as excessive or grotesque, she represents "an alternative image of womanhood to the passive, docile one constructed by patriarchy; she epitomizes 'the Female enraged' and, as a result, manifests attributes which society regards as 'unspeakable'" (Palmer 91). Consequently, the ability of lesbian characters such as Sappho and Picasso to resist the passive, normative feminine subject positioning, can be understood as mobilized through a portrayal of their characters as excessive, masculinized, or grotesque:[25]

> The stench of her, the brack of her, the rolling splitting cunt of her. Squat like a Sumo, ham thighs, loins of pork, beefy upper cuts and breasts of lamb . . . She rushes for me bull-subtle, butching at the gate as if she's come to stud. She bellows at the window, bloods the pavement with desire. ("Poetics" 412)

Winterson also reconstructs lesbian subjectivity through resisting the heterosexist assumptions of lesbian identity/desire/subjectivity implicit in the subtitle-questions. To the question "*Which One of You Is the Man?*" ("Poetics 413), for example, Sappho again refuses to answer directly or to accommodate the terms of the question. Instead, she resumes the telling of the love story between herself and Picasso, with an emphasis on their mutual femaleness. In particular, she describes Picasso's menstrual bleeding and

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Also, note that the sexual explicitness/excessiveness throughout the story is contradictory to the "demureness" of traditional romantic narratives (especially explicit descriptions of female character's desires).

refers to the bearing of her own breasts to Picasso (413-414). This emphasis on "femaleness" refuses the inherent assumption of lesbian masculinity in the question. It is made explicit that neither Picasso nor Sappho identify as "male," nor that lesbian desire, generally, aspires to model itself after heterosexuality by creating male/female roles within lesbian relationships.

An emphasis on mutual femaleness, however, also serves to reinforce the problematic ideal that lesbianism is necessarily about "woman-woman identification"; that is, an essential "female unity" based on an assumption of sameness and equality between women. This representation occurs in the story not only through the accentuation of both Sappho and Picasso as female, but also in their portrayal as identical twin-like: " . . . true too that our feet are the same size . . . leaving a trail of footprints two by two in identical four. I don't know that anyone following could have told you which was which and if they had there would have been no trace by morning" ("Poetics" 414); and "What we were we were in equal parts and twin souls to one another" (419-420). Winterson's twinning of the characters creates what Marilyn Farwell observes in Written on the Body as a "narrative and ontological pattern of sameness"; "[w]hat is written on the beloved's body is also written on the narrator's body, and the reconstitution of the love relationship is accomplished by repositioning the lovers as the same" (Farwell 193); or, what Carolyn Allen calls an "erotics of resemblance" whereby resemblance infers "sexed body likeness and, by extension, psychic expectations that two like bodies will also have been similarly marked by socialization" (C. Allen 79). Although this construction of sameness or resemblance denies the active/passive oppositioning of

heteronormative positionalities of desire, it also denies relationships of difference and privilege between women such as race, class, and ability. Furthermore, reinforcing lesbian subjectivity as based upon an essential sameness of "womanhood" or "femaleness" creates a normative/normalized concept of lesbian subjectivity/desire which excludes lesbian practices constituted through notions of difference, like butch/femme role playing.[26] Butch/femme practices, for instance, are rendered illegitimate by an assumption of sameness which views them as imitative of the unequal positionalities of heterosexual desire.

In response to "*Don't You Find There's Something Missing?*" ("Poetics" 419) Sappho answers, "There is something missing and that is you" (420). Refusing the heterosexist assumption that it is the penis that is lacking in lesbian relationships, Sappho responds that it is her female lover, Picasso (who is temporarily absent), whom she misses instead. Similarly, in "The Lure of the Mannish Lesbian: The Fantasy of Castration and the Signification of Desire" Teresa de Lauretis refuses the notion of the missing penis, the "castration complex," or the "masculinity complex" as the inspiration for "male identification" or "homosexuality" in women (The Practice of Love 29-78). This Freudian myth assumes, as does the question "don't you find there's something missing?", that lesbian subjectivity (especially butch or "mannish" lesbian identity) derives from a woman's over-anxiety for her lack of possessing a penis. To make up for this missing thing or for its loss, the woman presumably takes on "male" qualities and

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Also, lesbian relationships between women of differently racialized positions, different classes, different abilities are deligitimized by this assumption.

desires in hopes of filling the empty gap/hole that the missing/castrated penis has left. This includes appropriating masculinized physical and psychological characteristics and developing sexual desires for other women (ie. lesbian desire). de Lauretis, however, offers a different explanation for why lesbian sexuality is constituted, in Western culture, through the appropriation of masculinized/phallic signifiers:

> [N]ot only is masculinity associated with sexual activity and desire, imaged in the erect penis and its symbolic or ritual representation in the phallus; but . . . in a cultural tradition pervasively homophobic, masculinity alone carries a strong connotation of sexual desire for the female body. *That* is the lure of the mannish lesbian - a lure for her and for her lover. The fetish of masculinity is what both lures and signifies her desire for the female body, and what in her lures her lover, what her lover desires in her *and with her*. Unlike the masculinity complex, the lesbian masculinity fetish does not refuse castration but disavows it; the threat it holds at bay is not the loss of the penis in women but **the loss of the female body** itself, and the prohibition of access to it. [bold mine] (de Lauretis 243).

It is not the penis that the lesbian misses, therefore. It is the power, sexual subjectivity, and access to the female body as an object of sexual desire, which the penis represents, that the lesbian is denied. According to de Lauretis, it is through the lesbian appropriation/fetishization of masculine signifiers that the lesbian's sexual subjectivity and her access to the female as a love-object is reconstituted. Although Picasso's literal absence may not be equatable with de Lauretis' metaphorical "loss of the female body," a parallel can be drawn in both narratives concerning the reconstitution of lesbian subjectivity through the use of masculinized signifiers.

on masculinized signifiers and new gender boundaries

> *Oh yes, women get erect, today my body is stiff with sex . . . a woman can get hard and keep it there all night and when she's not required to stand she knows how to roll. She can do it any way up and her lover always comes. There are no frigid lesbians, think of that.* ("Poetics" 417-420)
>
> *When you have sunk me to the pit I'll mine you in return and we shall be husbands to each other as well as wives.* (419)
>
> *For seven years she and I had been in love. Love between lovers, love between mother and child. Love between man and wife. Love between friends.* (419)
>
> *Her seas are thick with fish for my rod. I have rodded her through and through.* (422)

Masculine/phallic signs and metaphors such as "matador," "rod," "sword," "horn," and "stud" are reappropriated and given erotic significance within the context of lesbian desire. Winterson uses this approach effectively to reclaim masculinized language/words and conventional expressions/metaphors of masculinity:

> "There's more to life than Art."
> "Where?" said Picasso . . .
> "Between you legs," said Gabriel.
> "Forget it. Don't you know I paint with my clit?" ("Poetics" 417)

The appropriation of masculinized signifiers also contradicts Winterson's previous portrayal of lesbianism as female "sameness," thereby reenabling the possibility of lesbian practices such as butch/femme as meaningful forms of desire for lesbians. She has also reinvented and extended boundaries of gender and sexuality by constructing lesbian subjectivity through relations of mother/child, male/female and male/male. She crosses or transcends gender by naming the female narratee after the 20th century male painter/sculptor "Picasso." Significantly, Picasso was known to sculpt figures of

women's bodies in the likeness of vessels (Slatkin 158), reinforcing the sexist notion of women's sole worth being of their reproductive capacities. Winterson's resignification of Picasso as female and lesbian, therefore, parodies the chauvinist and masculinist bias of Pablo Picasso and his work. Finally, although Winterson still makes use of traditionally feminine signifiers in her representation of lesbian sexuality ("I will cover you with my petals, cover you with the scent of me" (412-13)), she has succeeded in resisting conventional narrative positionalities through the flexibility of her female/lesbian characters' gendered and sexual subjectivities.

Conclusion

The phraseology "poetics of sex" refers to the way sex and sexuality is written about, spoken about, or expressed. The "poetics of sex," then, might be creatively thought of as a discourse of sexual subjectivity and desire. In this story, the eight questions which frame the narrative, alone, reflect a heterosexual/heterosexist poetics and discourse of sex. Winterson, however, resists and reclaims this discourse by creating Sappho's version; a version which has been shown in this chapter to undermine the conventional romance narrative founded upon heterosexist assumptions and conventions of gender and desire.

An important point for reiteration, here, is that the conventional romance narrative is undermined in "The Poetics of Sex" from *within* its own framework. Winterson deliberately arranges the narrative in this way by positioning the heterosexist questions to surround Sappho's "poetics." From *within*, then, Sappho destabilizes

dominant assumptions of gender, sexuality and lesbian subjectivity to render the heterosexist questions/narrative insignificant and inconsequential to the love story. As such, Winterson utilizes a "parodic strategy," whereby a "double process of installing and ironizing" (Hutcheon 93) is mobilized. First, the narrative convention (in this case, the heterosexist framework) is intentionally "installed" and, then, it is "ironized" through Sappho's disavowal and through the portrayal of a lesbian romance.

Chapter 4

Kiss & Tell's Drawing the Line and Lesbian Photographic Art

Introduction

Photography is a powerful and impacting medium. It is easily reproducible and, therefore, widely available and accessible. Photography is present in forms from mainstream mass media and advertising to "high art." It is utilized for its precision in representation ("realism"), its ability to capture what is assumed to be true or real ("documentation"), and its competence in achieving "naturalness" ("look natural for the camera!"). Despite its "naturalness," the medium of photography is about imitation, duplication, simulation, and representation of what is "real." Thus, the major representational "code" of the photographic image is "one that pretends to look uncoded" (Hutcheon 45). Nonetheless, the process of producing photographic images is highly contrived and increasingly *unnatural*. Contemporary photographic technologies, for example, have the capacity to manipulate an image into unrecognizable "perfection." In its final form, then, the photographic image is usually quite distant from its represented/original subjects.

Because of its (unnatural) capacity to reproduce impressionable and realistic images, photography reinforces the "naturalness" of subjectivities and identities. For this same reason, however, photography is an appropriate site from which to challenge or contest the "naturalness"of identity. Photography may provide the opportunity to simultaneously *destabilize* "truths" about normative sexual identities, and create a space to represent those sexual identities, such as lesbianism, which are abnormalized in

Western culture. Through photographic representation of sexualities/sexual practices that are not typically portrayed and/or sexual subjectivities that are considered "unnatural" or subversive, and through the denaturalization of normative (hetero)sexual practices, dominant cultural narratives about sexual identity and conventions of sexual imagery in photography may be resisted. The genre of "lesbian erotic photography" is one site of such challenges.

Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser describe "lesbian erotic photography" in the way that I will argue is effective in resisting cultural and narrative conventions:

> . . . there are those photographers who deal overtly with lesbian issues; in the main they do not assume that their sexuality could ever in itself be the defining factor for their work or that content, or the style they deploy, could ever be essentially lesbian. What they do share is an interest in subversive strategies of representation and a skepticism about the reflective nature of the photograph . . . (Boffin and Fraser 552-553)

This kind of lesbian photographic imagery, then, is not intended to capture a lesbian "essence" through the lens of the camera. Instead, the photographic image is used to demystify the notion of an essential lesbianism and challenge normative conventions surrounding lesbian sexual identity and sexual representation. Furthermore, it presents an opportunity for representations of differences among lesbians to be made visible/available/accessible. It is an opportunity to re-create images that challenge the privileged and normalized versions of lesbian sexuality and subjectivity. Kiss & Tell attempts to do this work.

Kiss & Tell

Kiss & Tell is a collective of three artists, Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackbridge

and Lizard Jones, working out of Vancouver, British Columbia. In 1991 Kiss & Tell published the postcard book Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall (Press Gang Publishers) based on their first collaborative effort as an art collective. Since then the group published Her Tongue On My Theory (1994 Press Gang Publishers) which includes essays inspired by reactions to and discussions on Drawing the Line and by discussions and debates in lesbian/queer/art communities on censorship, pornography, artistic collaboration and the production of lesbian sexual imagery/lesbian erotic photography. Her Tongue On My Theory also includes a series of sex fantasies/stories written by the artists, and several photo images taken from a multi-media/video and performance piece by Kiss & Tell called True Inversions. Although my focus for this project will be specifically on images from the Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall, I will frequently refer to Her Tongue On My Theory for analysis of the theoretical assumptions which underlie Kiss & Tell's work, as well as for details concerning the social/political context and methodological approach/process of their work which is integral to an understanding of Drawing the Line.

Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall

Drawing the Line began as a photo exhibit of one hundred images of lesbian sexuality. Susan Stewart was the photographer and Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones were the "models." The exhibition was made an "interactive event" where women viewers were invited to write their reactions directly on the walls around the photographs. Men wrote their comments in a book. The photos represented a variety of

lesbian sexual practices and were intentionally designed to cover a range of controversial issues including censorship and sexual representation. Subsequently, Kiss & Tell also produced Drawing the Line as a video and a postcard book; the latter titled Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall (1991 Press Gang Publishers); the work to be examined herein. The postcard book includes forty of the one hundred originally exhibited photo images, and selected viewer comments on the back of each postcard taken from different gallery walls during the exhibitions. The images range from the portrayal of two women cuddling, fully clothed on a bed, to a woman sitting, entirely naked, tied and constrained by rope and blindfolded and gagged with a cloth. The comments range from "This is about love and I love it!" to "This is what the man who raped me said women like" (Drawing). It seems that the explicitness of the postcards is intended to gradually increase from the beginning to the end of the book, inviting viewers/readers to "draw the line" at some point along the way (or perhaps not at all). However, the postcards are designed to be removed *or* rearranged within the book, which undermines the conventional relation of the narrative to photographic sequencing (Hutcheon 43).

> *The act of taking a culturally degraded image of yourself and transforming it into something beautiful is a profoundly subversive act. One of the most satisfying aspects of producing lesbian sexual representations is the sweet freedom this transgression implies.* (Her Tongue)

Kiss & Tell's production of lesbian sexual imagery is an explicit and deliberate challenge to dominant/traditional representations of sexual imagery. Mainly, it challenges the representation of sexual images which adhere to the

conventional (heterosexual) romance narrative. Also, it challenges conventions surrounding the production of "art." Both of these are achieved not only through the content or subject matter represented in their work, but also through their "alternative" methodological and theoretical approaches to erotic photography. In the following analysis I intend to explore the assumptions which underlie the main themes in Kiss & Tell's work (focusing on Drawing the Line), and discuss how these assumptions/themes allow for the accommodation and/or resistance of dominant narratives: representation and viewership; performativity; cultural and political contextualizing; self-positioning and reflexivity; collaboration and community; and, the narrative/myth of the "genius art star."

on representation and viewership

The relationship between representation and viewership in Drawing the Line is particularly significant due to Kiss & Tell's reliance upon the interactivity or collaboration of their viewers/readers in mobilizing the readings of the photographic representations and the narratives of the text. The artists acknowledge, however, that the diversity of lesbian subjectivities and lesbian sexual practices of their viewers cannot possibly be represented by their work alone, since, as a collective, they consist of three, slim, white women. Considering this, Kiss & Tell makes efforts to give up the power of authorial voice or control over the interpretations of the images they produce. On reactions to Drawing the Line, the photo exhibition, they note:

> No two responses to any single image were ever the same. Before long it became very clear that the notion of any single, unified account of what a lesbian body was or could be was an utter impossibility. The most we

> could do for our work was to provide it with a lesbian context. The "body" in that work was an untamed and unpredictable creature open to interpretation by whoever viewed it. (Her Tongue 18)

Therefore, rather than trying to define the "lesbian body" through their photography, Kiss &Tell aspire to provide a "lesbian context," or, at least an alternative narrative space to that of the dominant (hetero) narrative space; the latter of which relies upon the control of the artist over the process of viewership and interpretation in order to mobilize the image/work according to conventional, hegemonic discourse.

Although Kiss & Tell admit not being able to represent all lesbian identities, they do attempt to construct a diversity of images of lesbian sexual practices. In this way, not only do they challenge the assumption of normative heterosexuality, they also question normative or culturally "preferred" lesbian subjectivities/practices. For example, in one photograph the artists portray two women having sex while a male is present in the room. This image is responded to by comments from the wall such as "Surely real lesbians wouldn't allow a man in the room to watch. I question the validity of this as an example of lesbian love" (Drawing). Here, the response, *as a linguistic message which accompanies the photograph*, serves a dual purpose. First, to borrow Roland Barthes' concepts, the response/message serves as an "anchorage" to reinforce the notion that this image represents an unacceptable or illegitimate practice of lesbian sexuality. Second, the response/message also serves as a "relay" to confirm the challenge this image intends, a challenge to notions of who "real lesbians" are and what "real lesbian sex" is.[27]

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On Roland Barthes' points about "anchorage" and "relay" see Hutcheon 124-125.

In the latter sense, then, Kiss & Tell's imagery, *including the written text of the viewer's response*, resists normalized lesbian practices and essentialized lesbian identities.

Kiss & Tell admits having constructed images/representations for Drawing the Line which would place them within debates about censorship and sexual representation. The most obvious examples of this include images of fetishized religious symbols, bondage and sadomasochism. Comments from viewers and critics such as "Religious symbols have no place in these pictures. This is obscene"(Drawing), "[This] looks more like an infringement of human rights than an erotic interlude" (Shepherd 12), and "I am a lesbian and I am not into rape and violence. This to me is BULLSHIT" (Drawing) reveal how powerful and ideologically value-laden the signifiers and symbols used in these images are, even as *representations*. Linda Hutcheon explains why this type of representational strategy is effective:

> Reappropriating existing representations that are effective precisely because they are loaded with pre-existing meaning and putting them into new and ironic contexts . . . de-naturalizes them, makes visible the concealed mechanisms which work to make them seem transparent, and brings to the fore their politics, that is to say, the interests in which they operate and the power they wield. (Hutcheon 44)

Juxtaposing conventional religious icons such as crucifixes and rosaries with lesbian sex scenarios achieves the effect Hutcheon describes by drawing attention to the power and authority that Christianity or patriarchal religions have in constituting dominant, homophobic cultural discourses/narratives on sexuality. Represented in the present context, these symbols are denaturalized or *disempowered*; or, at least, their unquestioned authority is made visible and problematized.

on performativity

Recently, queer theorists have sidestepped the debate about which sexual practices/subjectivities are more natural or more legitimate than others by claiming that *no* identities of gender and sex are natural or legitimate; rather, all identities of gender and sex are "performative" (Butler, Gender Trouble). This means that identities such as "heterosexual" or "lesbian" are actually *accomplished* through acts, gestures and expressions of desire to create the illusion of a coherent, categorizable and natural identity (Gender Trouble 136). There is no such thing, then, as an essential or authentic "lesbian" identity. Instead, "lesbian" is performance:

> . . . lesbian performance occurs constantly, on the street, in the bars, and in our bedrooms. As lesbians we continuously perform for each other. It can be as simple as a discrete triangle worn at the ear, the cut of a jacket, a way of walking, or as flagrant as the live sex shows we organize in our bars. We are consummate actors. Some of us have been practicing stagecraft from our earliest years. We've learned to perform lesbian to find and attract each other and we've learned to perform straight when disguise is our best defense for survival. Staging lesbian performance in a theatrical context implies theater within theater. (Her Tongue 21)

Kiss & Tell's acknowledgment of the way that identities are performative is apparent in their photography. Drawing the Line bears an image of a woman (who we assume is a lesbian because of the "lesbian context" within which this image is presented) with long, curly, windswept hair in a black lace bra. She is also wearing a black, Charlie Chaplin-style, top hat and a thick, dark moustache. The hilarity of this image almost overshadows the serious challenge it poses to conventional notions of

femininity, lesbianism, and romantic photography. Nonetheless, the "genderfuck"[28] portrayed here is an effective example of Kiss & Tell's attempt to destabilize representations of gender and lesbian identity.

Similar to the way in which Winterson appropriates signifiers of masculinity in the representation of lesbian subjectivity/desire in "The Poetics of Sex," Kiss & Tell also challenges dominant representational imagery through the appropriation, performance, and subversion of what are generally coded and interpreted as heterosexual signifiers. Representations of butch/femme lesbian subjectivities might arguably be an example of this strategy.[29] A photo which portrays a model in a taffeta dress and rhinestone jewelry with her breasts exposed, being touched by a nearly-off-camera woman in a black leather jacket with her hair pulled back, draws a comment which chastises the photo for representing "Boy sex" (Drawing). Presumably, "boy sex," here, is a reference to the notion of a heterosexual desire which is designed for male pleasure and female objectification/exploitation. This response demonstrates the prevalence of how specific gendered signifiers are interpreted as conceptually heterosexual, even when they are represented within the context of "lesbian" sex. It also suggests how lesbian sexual

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My usage of "genderfuck" here corresponds with a definition given by June L. Reich who describes "genderfuck" as "the effect of unstable signifying practices . . . the destabilization of gender as an analytical category . . . [t]he play of masculine and feminine on the body . . . subvert[ing] the possibility of possessing a unified subject position" (Reich as quoted in Evans and Gamman 41).

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Though butch/femme is not necessarily an imitation/appropriation of heterosexuality, it does use signifiers of masculinity and femininity which are culturally coded as heterosexual or male/female.

subjectivity is often interpreted as sexually *indifferent* from heterosexual male desire.[30] These gendered signifiers, however, need not be read necessarily as heterosexual or male; as another commentor responds, "Why boy sex? What's diamonds and dresses got to do with boys?" (Drawing). Quite possibly, as Kiss & Tell show, these signifiers may be reappropriated or re-signified to represent forms of lesbian desire.

The woman in taffeta and diamonds (mentioned above) also has her arms raised to reveal unshaven armpits. A far cry from the Marilyn Monroe/Material Girl aesthetic, this image serves to undermine Western ideals of female beauty and romance, and to challenge stereotypical gender signifiers (body hair = masculinity). This image exemplifies the reappropriation/reinterpretation of cultural symbols (like the fetishization of religious iconography) as new signifiers of lesbian desires and lesbian subjectivities. Critic Eve Beglarian summarizes this tactic: ". . . every time we co-opt what was previously assumed to be a straight representation and turn it into our own turn-on, we are doing that subversive thing the Kiss & Tell collective told us about" (47). That "subversive thing" Kiss & Tell does, includes the representation of gender as performance. In Drawing the Line, this "genderfuck" technique plays a significant role in constructing a resistance to dominant hetero/romance narratives by displacing the

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In The Practice of Love (see page 10) Teresa de Lauretis explains the paradox of "sexual indifference": lesbian desire continues to be conceptualized as sexually indifferent or as similar to that of male, heterosexual desire (which is established by desire for women as love/sex objects).

conventional subject positions of male/female, active/passive and subject/object.

Another striking difference between Kiss & Tell's erotic imagery and that of mainstream sexual imagery, is the way in which the models are *unaware* of the camera or the viewer's viewing. Conventionally, and especially in masculinist representations of "lesbian sex," the models' look is directed *toward* the camera or the viewer of the image. This serves to create the impression that the models are engaged in sex *for the camera or the viewer's pleasure*. The women in Kiss & Tell's imagery, however, are focused on each other (or themselves), thus denying the voyeurism of the (usually) male "surveying gaze."[31] This observation is reinforced by a comment from the wall: "To me this isn't erotic. These women are interested in each other; to watch is to be an outsider" (Drawing).

on cultural/political contextualizing

Crucial to a critical reading of Kiss & Tell's work is having an awareness of its political and cultural situatedness. In Her Tongue On My Theory (1994), the group explicitly discusses the social, political and cultural contexts from which Drawing the Line (1991) arose. According to the artists, Drawing the Line was both a response to debates about sex and sexual imagery within the feminist, gay, lesbian and arts communities, and a visual representation of these debates (typified by the responses on the gallery walls from members of the communities). Specifically, Drawing the Line was

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The notion of the "male surveying gaze" is referred to by John Berger in Ways of Seeing (46).

prompted by a set of lesbian sex photographs published by artist Li Yuen in Angles, a local, gay, lesbian and bisexual community newspaper in Vancouver. The contradictory and ferverent responses to Yuen's work inspired Kiss & Tell to explore the issues of lesbian sexual representation and erotic photography with various communities as they toured Drawing the Line, the art exhibition (Her Tongue 16).

A more general context/climate which plays a significant role in the production and distribution of lesbian erotic imagery such as Kiss & Tell's is the current attack on the arts and on people of color, gays and lesbians, and feminists by right wing groups. According to Kiss & Tell, queer art and literature is subject to the homophobic/misogynist threats of other artists, writers, curators, and funding bodies (Drawing: introduction, Her Tongue). In Canada, imported queer art and literature has been seized at the border by Canada Customs, jeopardizing Canadian bookstores and refusing Canadians' access to these cultural artifacts.[32] After a Kiss & Tell performance in Banff, Alberta, right-wing responses and homophobic reviews in the media stirred conservative politicians to try to deny artists such as Kiss & Tell access to government funding and government-funded institutions (Her Tongue 59-74).

The significance of Kiss & Tell's inclusion of criticisms in their artwork of particular, powerful organizations and financial support bodies (the media, Canada Customs, the Canadian government, and the National Arts Endowment fund), upon which artists like Kiss & Tell are partially dependent, is a radical and dangerous strategy

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Recently, Little Sister's Bookstore, a lesbian and gay bookstore in Vancouver, initiated a lengthy court case with Canada Customs over Custom's refusal to allow lesbian and gay materials, which were destined to the store in Vancouver, to cross the border.

for the obvious reasons of potential sponsorship and censorship. For the viewers of Kiss & Tell's work, however, it serves to contextualize not only their work but, even further, the debates within which their work resides. Conventional narratives rarely, if ever, include a criticism of the communities and cultural situations from which they emerge.[33] Political contextualizing is, generally, contradictory to the mobilization of a dominant, hegemonic narrative which strives to accommodate the status quo by portraying political "neutrality."

on self-positioning and reflexivity

As well as contextualizing their work within larger cultural communities and debates, each member of Kiss & Tell, in Her Tongue On My Theory, explicitly discusses her own locationalities and personal experiences in relations of class, race, ability, gender and sexuality, reflecting upon how these contribute to their work and their approaches to lesbian sexual representation:

> In this book [Her Tongue on My Theory], my identity as a woman and a lesbian are always in the foreground, my identity as a Euro-Canadian comes in and out of focus, and having learning disabilities virtually disappears . . . [p]arts of my identity jump out or are forgotten . . . I can't always tell when that means I'm writing from a cultural blind spot, and when I'm just writing from a specific point of view. (Persimmon Blackbridge in Her Tongue 107)

Explicitly acknowledging their own historical, social, cultural and political locationalities, and admitting the subjectiveness and partiality of their knowledges and

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However, even when one is considering the genre of "feminist art", for example, which is not typically considered "conventional", there is often an element of non-reflexivity which does not allow for the work to be critical of its own political situatedness.

their work, the artists challenge dominant assumptions about the possibility of universal knowledge. By contextualizing or situating the particularities of both the reception and production of their work, the collective also challenges the concept of the transhistorical universality of visual experience; instead, "the address to the viewer . . . is specific and historical, pointing directly to the different cultural restraints on interpretation [and representation]" (Hutcheon 122). Finally, Kiss & Tell's explicit self-locating and reflexivity also allow the reader/viewer to assume more control in experiencing an alternative reading according to the unique discourses she brings to the text.

on collaboration, power and community

The reflexivity Kiss & Tell displays in their work is epitomized by their collaborative structure and their involvement/interaction with the community. The assumption underlying this approach is that the artists do not claim sole ownership for their work, the ideas behind the work, or the collective efforts that went into the production of the work. However, as Susan Stewart describes, this approach does not necessarily avoid an uneven distribution of power. For instance, regardless of their attempts at presenting their art as a collaborative effort, it is often interpreted/constructed differently by others:

> Although Drawing the Line was a collaborative project, because it is photography, a hierarchy is consistently assumed. Camera equals control; model equals passivity. The medium implies an inherent power relationship that is very difficult to lose, despite the fact that we consistently exposed our process as a collaboration. The common assumption is that the person who runs the medium [the photographer] controls the representation (Her Tongue 33).

Despite the fact that the members of Kiss & Tell work collectively on the ideas, concepts and production behind all the photo imagery, Stewart (as the photographer) is often credited as the sole producer of the work while Jones and Blackbridge are acknowledged, simply, as "models." In order to maintain a power balance, then, Kiss & Tell must constantly reflect upon power relations within the collective and its effects on the potential of the group's work:

> Unaddressed, a power imbalance that is acutely felt by one member and unnoticed by others has the potential to fracture a collective. Within Kiss & Tell, each of us has been alone on the losing end of a power imbalance more than once. Negotiating power, attempting to understand how it works, learning to give it up when necessary or to take it on when needed, analyzing state power, empowering ourselves through our work - these issues of power are constant threads in our lives and in our collaborations. This is one of the challenges of collaborative work and one of its great strengths. In this process of grappling with power relations rests the means of transforming them, both at a personal level, and socially and politically. Collaboration is an alternative and highly resistant model of creative interaction. It is a process that demonstrates a method of art making which can be democratic, transformative, and empowering, and which has the potential to renew and build community. (Her Tongue 43-44)

Kiss & Tell's collaboration with the community is also integral to their art work. In Drawing the Line (the art exhibition), the responses written on the gallery walls by the public actually became part of the art work itself, and perhaps play a role in structuring the narrative similar to the way Winterson's questions structure "The Poetics of Sex". In the postcard book, the respondants' comments from the wall are included on the backs of the postcards. The reader of the postcard book is invited to participate in the collaboration process and the representation of the photo images by rearranging or removing the postcards to created a new narrative plot/sequence. This strategy has

allowed Kiss & Tell to successfully disrupt the artist/viewer hierarchy, to acknowledge the significance of the role of viewer interpretation in the representation of lesbian erotic imagery, to undermine the notion of artistic ownership and, finally, to resist the traditional, singular, linear/continuous narrative plot.

on the narrative/myth of the Genius Art Star

Related to the barriers collective artists face concerning issues of power and material rewards are different gender and class assumptions/associations with collective art versus independent/individual art. The marginalization of collective art has much to do with the fact that collective art is done predominantly by women, and by women who do not necessarily work in traditionally male-dominated elitist art forms (i.e. oil painting). Much women's art has also been traditionally categorized as "craft" which, in Western elite art cultures, is undervalued (Parker and Pollock 1987). Certain male artists (remember Pablo Picasso), however, have had access to resources and greater support from "high art" culture, and have thus been afforded to work as individual or solo artists in more traditionally valued and rewarded forms. Persimmon Blackbridge describes how the latter, dominant, privileged notion of artistry undermines the potential of collaborative/committee art:

> There's this cliché about Committee Art. Like everyone knows that great art can only be made by one individual Genius Art Star who doesn't bow to public opinion, political fashions, or anyone else's ideas. Unfettered and free, he goes where no man has gone before, and he goes alone or else it doesn't count. Committee Art is dull and predictable. Any Genius Art Stars involved are pulled down to the lowest common denominator. All risky and innovative ideas are vetoed and mediocrity rules. (Her Tongue 27).

Kiss & Tell, however, reject the Genius Art Star narrative/myth. They contend, first of all, that artists do not work alone. Second, artists' ideas are never independent of their social circumstances and locations or the influence of others. Third, the concept of "high art," where the individual genius artist's work is assumed to be located, is the cultural establishment of art snobbery and elitism based on privileges of gender, class and race (Her Tongue 28). Lizard Jones comments on the construction and maintenance of the reification of elitist art:

> The concept of "art" and its attendant institutions feeds and is fed by (among other things) the idea that there is such a thing as universally good and bad taste; concepts of individual genius located in white men; monetary valuation of single art object over art forms available to everyone, like community dances or quilts. (Her Tongue 28)

Working collaboratively for Kiss & Tell, then, means subverting the myth/narrative of the Genius Art Star and acknowledging the collective/community process of art and the potential for creative sharing. This approach also requires them to "challenge the notion of a universal aesthetic" (Her Tongue 29) and move beyond their individual artistic tendencies toward a diversity of inspirations.

conclusion

In this analysis I have shown the work of Kiss & Tell to be explicitly "political" and effective in its resistance to dominant cultural narratives and conventional representations of erotic imagery. Nevertheless, the work is not without contradictions. In fact, these contradictions render it an effective "postmodern" representational strategy. Kiss & Tell portrays images that, *decontextualized*, might appear to accommodate certain

heteronormative or masculinist conventions of sexual representation. *Contextualized*, however, these photo images, including their textual elements (the comments from the wall), constitute the work as critical and self-reflexive. From my position, then, a major obstacle Kiss & Tell faces in their attempts to deconstruct normative representations of female/lesbian sexual subjectivities is that their models are quite conventionally pleasing; as in, they are white, slim, and, usually, long-haired. This "obstacle" places the Kiss & Tell imagery in a "risky" political position. As Lisa Tickner notes,

> [T]he depiction of women *by* women (sometimes themselves) in this quasi-sexist [pornographic?] manner as a political statement grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual exploitation but then, within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and confusion. The more attractive the women, the higher the risk, since the more closely they approach conventional stereotypes in the first place. (Tickner as quoted in Hutcheon 158)

Aside from this obstacle or potential risk, I will maintain that Kiss & Tell has succeeded in creating an "effective" lesbian text. Beyond Rozema's When Night Is Falling and Winterson's "Poetics of Sex," Drawing the Line presents the most explicit challenge to normative lesbian subjectivities, thus creating narrative space for other representations of lesbian desire within the photographic *and* romantic narrative context.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

REVIEW OF THE TEXTS

Central to the interrogation of all three texts has been an analysis of the ways that subject positions, elements of the romance narrative, and the representations of lesbianism and femininity have been constructed within the narrative. A brief overview of these constructions will begin to draw some connections between the texts. It will also lead into a discussion which addresses the questions which have guided my analysis thus far: considering the constraints placed on subjectivity and desire through relations of culture and power, how does one produce imagery that has been previously unintelligible and relatively invisible (ie. lesbian sexuality)? How will these images be interpreted? When heterosexuality and male sexual subjectivity are dominant conceptual frameworks and ways of knowing/recognizing signs of desire, how can subjectivities that resist or do not accommodate these conceptual references be represented? What are the possibilities for representations of lesbianism within conventional narrative structures? Can resistance occur in the form of "parodic" accommodation?

on subject positions

Perhaps the most obvious subversion of conventional (heterosexual) romance narrative subject positioning is the construction of both the desiring subject and the object of desire or, the "desirer" and "desiree," as female. This construction occurs in each of the three texts examined. However, positioning the desirer and desiree as both

female does not necessarily avoid the *oppositioning* of desirer and desiree as typically active and passive characters/subjects in the narrative. As shown in When Night Is Falling, Camille, the protagonist, generally maintains the position of active subject and "focalizer" (or central subject) of the narrative while Petra remains the passive or reactive object of desire, despite their mutual femaleness. This seems to suggest that, regardless of gender, narrative subjects are *inscribed* into conventional, heterosexual positions of active/masculinized and passive/feminized roles by the necessity/tendency of narratives to represent or reestablish masculine sexual subjectivity and female sexual objectification. Furthermore, Camille and Petra's positions in terms of race and class are stereotypically reinforced through their oppositional positioning as (white, middle class, intellectual) active and (black, working class, bodily) passive subjects respectively.

Contrary to this, the characters of Sappho and Picasso in "The Poetics of Sex," also both female, *alternate* between positions of desirer and desiree. This dynamic has the effect of destabilizing and resisting static active/passive subject categories. As well, the alternating positions of desirer and desiree between lesbian subjects undermines the dominant oppositional foundation of subject positions, thus creating space for narrative subjectivities other than heterosexual. In addition, when Picasso (the narrator) states "Making love we made a dictionary of forbidden words. We are words, sentences, stories, books. You are my New Testament. We are a gospel to each other, I am your annunciation, revelation" ("Poetics" 418-419), this comment suggests a denial of sole ownership of narrative or authorial voice which resists conventional positioning of the narrator as the controller of language, the text, and, to some degree, the narrative itself.

Kiss & Tell also challenges the active/passive, subject/object categories, going beyond the character/subject positions portrayed in their photographs by encouraging a "blurred" boundary between artist and viewer through the participation of viewers/readers in the construction of the narrative itself. The viewer/reader is no longer positioned as "passive receptor" but as "active subject" in the process of constructing the photographic representations or in "making art." This positioning is achieved by including written comments of viewers as part of the collective's imagery, as well as by providing the opportunity for readers to rearrange the photos in the postcard book, allowing for various interpretations and orderings of the text's narrative(s). In this way, the active participation of the viewing subject also draws attention to the constructedness of textual representations and, by extension, the contextual nature of cultural narratives.

on elements of the romance narrative

Perhaps the most obvious subversion of the conventional romance narrative is, again, the positioning of both the desirer and desiree as female. The portrayal of lesbian desire or of a lesbian love story in itself undermines traditional romance narratives in which the main plots are based on heterosexual assumptions. However, I have noted that "lesbian" romances have their own set of conventions as well. Thus, devices of character, plot sequence and narrative tension are each subject to normative or dominant representations regardless of whether the romance is heterosexual or otherwise.

Similar to the conventional heterosexual romance narrative, the normative lesbian narrative follows the plot sequence of meeting-complication-resolution. This sequence is

constructed in both When Night Is Falling and "The Poetics of Sex." Although, in "Poetics," the plot movement is continually interrupted by the heterosexist questions which frame the narrative. This aspect of the text complicates the presentation of the narrative sequence, even if it does not break the linearity of the plot entirely. Kiss & Tell's Drawing the Line, as mentioned previously, resists the notion of a fixed or formulaic narrative sequence in a more direct way by allowing the structure and plot movement of the text to be flexible and nonlinear as the reader is invited to "rearrange" the photo sequence.

The "tension" or "complication" element of a romance plot involves obstacles which potentially threaten the development/resolution of the love relationship. In When Night Is Falling, these obstacles resemble those which are typical to lesbian romance stories: lesbian-has-to-"convert"-straight-woman as obstacle, man/boyfriend/husband as obstacle (Martin), and homophobia as obstacle (Camille's internalized homophobia, the homophobia of Camille's church/school). In "Poetics" homophobia or heterosexism is also constructed as an obstacle but through Sappho's disavowal of the heterosexist questions, Winterson refuses to give heterosexism recognition as a legitimate obstacle to Sappho and Picasso's relationship.[34] Kiss and Tell deals uniquely with the man-as-obstacle problem by rendering him a non-obstacle within the context of lesbian desire. In fact, in the photograph of two women having sex while a man is intentionally included in the room, Kiss & Tell uses the man, inverting the conventional representation of

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Note that differences such as class or race are not represented as obstacles in either of these stories or typically in other normative lesbian texts.

lesbian sex as existing for the pleasure of the male voyeur. Here, the man is utilized as a turn-on *for the two women* engaged in sexual practice. Nevertheless, the image lingers as a reminder of one of several ways in which lesbian desire has been presented and co-opted in masculinist pornographic representations.

Also characteristic of conventional romance narratives is the overt legitimation of heterosexuality, usually through the literal or metaphorical representation of marriage or consummation (Farwell 40). In When Night Is Falling, although the main character, Camille, defies heterosexuality to be with Petra, Camille's ex-lover Martin and the significantly less developed character Tori are conveniently united near the film's end to subtly reestablish the legitimacy of heterosexual romance or heterosexuality previously rejected. In contrast, Winterson explicitly undermines heteronormativity through her disavowal and sardonic responses to the heterosexist questions which frame the love story of Sappho and Picasso. Furthermore, Winterson's use of sexually explicit language to describe Sappho and Picasso's desire for each other serves not only to threaten heterosexuality as the normative expression of desire, but to reclaim women/lesbians as sexual agents and challenge the insistence on modesty in conventional representations of heterosexual or lesbian "romance." Kiss & Tell, then, is perhaps the most resistant to the enforced "decency" of the romance genre. One outstanding example is their fetishization of religious objects in Drawing the Line. Here, Christianity, which is typically used as a signifier of asexuality or chastity, has been "perverted" and resignified through its placement within the context of lesbian sexual imagery. If Kiss & Tell's work is considered in comparison with mainstream pornography, however, the representation of

man-as-voyeur-during-lesbian-sex would seem to be accommodating of and complicit with heteronormative pornographic representations (of lesbianism). It is this type of pornography that has been heavily criticized by lesbian feminists as a "tool of the patriarchy." This contradiction, however, is what has made the work of Kiss & Tell, a self-identified lesbian feminist collective, necessarily self-reflexive and controversial.

on representations of lesbianism and femininity

The narrative construction of lesbianism as "sameness" and/or "equality," and lesbian desire as an "erotics of resemblance," plays a significant role in both When Night Is Falling and "The Poetics of Sex." In the former, differences of race and class (and possibly sexual difference) between Camille and Petra are never overtly acknowledged in the film's dialogue. These differences appear to be overlooked (or transgressed?) by the two women as they are brought together by their mutual desire. Difference, here, is sacrificed for union while Camille leaves her former life behind to join the circus and to live *like/as/with Petra*. In "Poetics," Winterson represents the notion of sameness and equality between Sappho and Picasso by having Sappho describe their relationship in the following way: "What we were we were in equal parts and twin souls to one another" ("Poetics" 419-420). However, this construction of (female) sameness is simultaneously subverted as Winterson characterizes the lovers as mother and child and husband and wife (419). Moreover, her reclamation of masculinized signifiers to represent the characters Sappho and Picasso challenges an essentialist notion of femaleness upon which the lesbian relationship is based, thus disrupting the myth of lesbianism as an

inherent “female-identification” between women.

Kiss & Tell attempts to compensate for their failure to represent different types of women by showing different sexual practices and by having women play different/opposite sexual roles. While this technique seems to avoid the artificial construction of lesbianism as sameness by portraying, for example, butch/femme role playing, the “models” still appear to reflect current Western ideals of (white, thin) female beauty. Yet, through their portrayals of sexual practices such as gender role playing or the use of dildos, Kiss & Tell undermine the “maleness” of the phallus by subversively reappropiating heterosexual/phallic signs as signifiers of lesbian desire while simultaneously denaturalizing conventional versions of “femininity” and female sexual subjectivity.

The construction of femininity in When Night Is Falling is, perhaps, the most complex and resistant narrative strategy of the film. Rozema’s positioning of Petra in contrast to the conventionally feminine Camille can be read as a challenge to the femininity and domesticity which Camille is initially intended to represent. Unfortunately, this reading may be overshadowed or lost because Camille and Petra are portrayed as oppositions in so many other obvious ways: racially, economically, and sexually. It seems to be their same-sexedness, and indeed, their mutual femaleness/femininity, which is accentuated in the development of their same-sex/lesbian relationship. The differences between the construction of their respective “femininities”, therefore, become invisible or unacknowledged, similar to the way that the significance of their racial and class differences are minimized. Perhaps these

differences are too complex for the dominant narrative within which the film is suspended. Unless the plot of Camille's sexual "conversion" can be more overtly connected to her rejection of conventional femininity, the potentially subversive representation of contrasting femininities is neutralized.

REVIEWING "NARRATIVE" AND SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES

Cultural practices and representations are filtered through cultural narratives and relations of power. In this sense, both power relations and "narratives" are seemingly inescapable. Returning to a description of narrative by Roland Barthes captures the inevitability of narrative construction:

> Carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. . . . Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes as quoted in Alice Doesn't 103).

By describing narrative as international, transhistorical and transcultural, Barthes acknowledges the pervasive and permeable nature of narrative as a cultural framework. This is not to say that *specific* narratives are universal or that narratives are static and unchanging, but that narrative itself is always, inevitably present. In other words, that which exists and is produced in/through culture cannot be "narrativeless," precisely because cultural relations *are* narratives which both represent and maintain the current organization of power even as it shifts and is challenged.

Narratives constitute and are partially constituted by cultural representations and

images. By virtue of their existence as cultural representations, then, textual narratives both inform and are informed by specific cultural, social and historical contexts. As Linda Hutcheon observes, "[w]hether the medium be linguistic or visual [or both] we are always dealing with systems of meaning operating within certain codes and conventions that are socially produced and historically conditional" (Hutcheon 143). Regardless of their differently mediated forms, film, literature and photographic art are similarly conveyors of messages and (re)producers of language. And, as Hutcheon reminds us, regardless of their different methods of conveying messages, each text is subject to the dominant discourses and dominant cultural conventions within which it is produced.

Like texts, subjectivities are also constructed in relation to the dominant discourses and cultural conventions within which they are produced. According to Judith Butler, the gendered subjectivities "male" and "female," for example, are not essential, factual positions but, rather, "*citational practices instituted within a juridical domain — a domain of constitutive constraints* [emphasis mine]" (Bodies 108). In other words, male and female are not fixed subjectivities but, instead, are practices or performances signified *within* the juridical domain of language, whereby language functions as a "constitutive constraint" through which certain subjectivities are produced and maintained while others are made impossible (Bodies 96). Similarly, then, the dominant systems of meaning or languages of contemporary Western culture set limitations and constraints on how, or even if, lesbian subjectivities are produced/represented. What this implies for lesbian subjectivities *within the textual narrative* is that they are unavoidably constructed within the cultural constraints of heteronormativity, the dominant system of

meaning, language, and expression of desire. In addition, lesbian subjectivities are constructed in relation to normative lesbian practices. Thus, whether they are accommodating or resisting dominant/normative forms of heterosexual desire, lesbian subjectivities are still articulated in reference to a definition of what "lesbian" has been culturally constructed as; that is, normative expressions of lesbian subjectivity and lesbian desire.

Precisely because there is no "lesbian" subjectivity completely separable from heterosexuality (and vice-versa), lesbian subjectivities are only recognizable in visual/symbolic/textual contrast to heterosexual subjectivities. It is necessary, therefore, that heterosexuality is explicitly acknowledged as the dominant and normative expression/interpretation of desire within a textual narrative, so that lesbian subjectivities may function as resistant. Winterson achieves this in "The Poetics of Sex" by making obvious the heterosexist assumptions which underlie stereotypes of lesbianism. With these assumptions made explicit, Winterson is then able to construct lesbian subjectivity in such a way as to undermine them, while still working within certain narrative constraints/conventions.

According to Linda Hutcheon, this textual/representational strategy is also characteristic of "postmodern art" (Hutcheon 93). "Postmodern art" makes use of conventional narratives or images by representing them in parodic or sarcastic ways, thus calling into question their discursive foundations and their constructed authenticity (Hutcheon 93). In a sense, then, postmodern art *does* accommodate dominant conventions by inserting them as part of its imagery/representation. However, by

including other visual or textual elements which draw attention to the *unnaturalness* of the hegemonic conventions it aims to undermine, postmodern art takes a critical approach. Returning to the example from Drawing the Line, Kiss & Tell portrays a stereotypical butch/femme image of a woman in a leather jacket with her hair tied back, touching a woman in a taffeta dress wearing rhinestone jewelery and long hair. While this image could be interpreted as an accommodation of the heterosexist assumption that lesbians/lesbian sexual practices aspire to imitate heterosexual/gendered norms, the inclusion of written text (comments from the wall) question the assumption of these signifiers as heterosexual or as masculinized sexual representations: "What's diamonds and dresses got to do with boys? Even if men have these fantasies, can't they be ours too?" (Drawing). Thus, the Kiss & Tell photo images *by themselves* may not function as politicized representations if the images did not also show the viewers' comments or if Kiss & Tell did not also include their own explicit statements about the intention for the work to be politically challenging to dominant sexual imagery.

One dilemma postmodern artists face is the lack of a guarantee that this type of doubly-coded resistance will be read as subversive instead of compliant. To use the representation of butch/femme again as an example, ". . . butch/femme always works at least two ways, to confirm *and* to unsettle the naturalness of gender and the heterosexual norms it subtends, because the simulacrum of gender can always be naturalized as the real" [emphasis mine] (Lamos 99). From this point, the question then arises, is it possible for change or transcendence to occur through representation or are representations simply re-cycled in such a way as to repeat the narratives it seeks to

undermine? This interpretive dilemma is similarly expressed in feminist debates over lesbian pornography. Is it subversive for women to produce sexually explicit imagery of women? Or will this imagery be interpreted as merely complicit with masculinist, female-exploitive, capitalist consumerism? This dilemma is why the text is important to the politicization of Kiss &Tell's imagery. This dilemma is why Winterson's representation of the heterosexist questions as a narrative framework is important to "The Poetics of Sex"; the questions create a contextual reference to dominant norms which makes obvious the subversive intention of the love story. This dilemma is why When Night Is Falling may be considered "dangerously" complicit. From my lesbian subject position, there is not adequate political contextualizing or challenging *within the filmic representations* of the dominant conventions portrayed that constitute the film itself, as an entire text, resistant.[35]

The "double process of installing and ironizing" (Hutcheon 93) conventional imagery through "postmodern" parodic deconstruction is a strategy with risks. Related to the dilemma of being interpreted as merely representing the conventional, the simultaneous portrayal of accommodating and subversive representations runs the risk of one canceling the other out, perhaps leaving the text seemingly apolitical. It is my argument, however, that because cultural narratives are inescapable, we must challenge those narratives, not by ignoring them, but, rather, by explicitly acknowledging and working *with* them, as shown particularly in "The Poetics of Sex" and Drawing the Line

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With the exception, perhaps, of the satirical play on domesticity which, in my opinion, is not strong enough to seriously undermine the narrative's accommodations.

through the process of denaturalizing the assumptions which underlie dominant narratives in order to create new narrative spaces for resistant representations of desire.

Conclusion

The question "Which One of You is the Man?" illustrates the way heteronormative constraints or limitations are placed on textual representations of lesbian subjectivities by dominant cultural narratives. It also demonstrates the narrative tendency to heterosexualize lesbian desire by assuming that lesbian sexuality must somehow correspond to conventionally masculine/feminine identifications. Dominant narratives depend on lesbian desire to be represented in this manner in order to reinforce heterosexuality as the "legitimate" or "natural" form of sexual expression. Essentially, dominant narratives depend on the suppression of lesbian desire and lesbian subjectivities as legitimate forms of narrative sexual representation. As Marilyn Farwell observes, "the narrative consistently attempts to force [narrative subjects] into recognizable gender categories" (Farwell 61). For this reason, I suggest that the lesbian subject can potentially serve as a resistant one by vigilantly subverting the normative positioning/categorizing of the female subject in sexual opposition to the male subject. However, as I have argued throughout this thesis, resistance to dominant narratives of desire within a text must necessarily be made explicit through political contextualizing and through a conscious effort to acknowledge cultural narratives within which the text is constructed.

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