

Susan STEWART



Elena I and II, 1991.



Beth I and II, 1991.

“QUEERING” THE IMAGE:
Creating A Lesbian Subjectivity

by Josephine MILLS

Speak and I will listen

listen and I will speak

you and I will swim together in this void

dive and come up dripping wet

dine and smell sweet with satisfaction

divine inspiration, connection

speak all wet and close

dine on fruits of love and labour

listen through finger tips

taste velvet heat when you orient

your ear and your eye

yourself

Before addressing the strategies Susan Stewart, Nina Levitt, and Donna Quince employ to create lesbian subjectivity in their photographs, I must first outline my general theoretical focus on strategies for establishing an active lesbian subjectivity. Overall, I am interested in theorizing methods of communication and exchange that will help establish active, complex lesbian and female subjectivity. Metaphoric representations, both visual and written, offer great potential in this process, especially in terms of undermining traditional public discourses (such as theoretical writing or accepted representational forms, such as portrait photography).

I want to make clear that I assume that the subject is the effect of discourse and not its cause. I work from the Lacanian idea that "a subject does not represent an idea by means of a signifier for another subject (a version of the commonly held communicational model of language whereby the sender transmits a message to a receiver); rather, a signifier represents a subject for another signifier" (Grosz, p. 97). In other words, the combination of signs in a chain of signification produces a subject as effect rather than a unified individual arranging signs to convey an intended meaning. However, the individual agent (artist, writer, speaker) can manipulate signs within a representation to shape what subject will be the effect of that representation. I am interested in the kind of lesbian subjects that are the effects of Stewart's, Levitt's, and Quince's work and in their strategies to construct these subjects. Most importantly, I am concerned with the ramifications of these strategies for changing the current possibilities for lesbian subjectivity.

"I'm telling you stories. Trust me."¹

A key feminist tactic to establish subjectivity for women is to collapse the difference between "objective," public discourses (such as theoretical writing or accepted traditions of visual representation like portrait photography) and "subjective," private discourses (basically anything "outside" or not-traditional). Subjective writing can shift signifiers and produce a myriad of subject effects whereas "proper" academic writing still produces the straight white male (the objective subject). We might be able to discuss other subjects in theoretical writing but it is most difficult to produce different subjects as its effect. The call to change the boundaries of theory is made often enough but still "objective" theory has higher value as a means of addressing deep, meaningful concepts. For instance, quotations from fiction are only allowed into theoretical work as specimens for study. Why can't they be part of the context and support of theoretical ideas?

Another way to change the boundaries of proper theory and intellectual thought would be to make loving exchange a basis for these kinds of interaction and communication. Love is a much simplified idea, relegated to the private world of letters and diaries and not proper to deep and meaningful theory. Why not? Because a shift to such an exchange would pull the rug from beneath the mind/body separation, subject/object asymmetrical separation and other basic tenets of patriarchal, heterosexist, racist order. But what about the energy, inspiration, connection and the desire to speak that love can inspire? This is only kept out of correct, public discourse because of its potential to empower Others and to undermine the dominant order.

Amour, mon brûlant vouloir dire. Amour veut ma langue féconde, mes dents précises, bien ajustées, ni trop acerbes, ni trop prudentes. (Leclerc, p.119)

Love letters have always been written from the body, in connection with love. Leclerc wants all writing to have that connection; she wants love to enter into general circulation, inscribed knowledge, rather than remaining private and secret. ... We women must continue to write from our loving bodies, but we must break "discretion" and "intimacy" and "risk that subversion" in public, in print, in general circulation. (Gallop, p.108)

Viens, approche-toi, corps de mon corps, douceur de ma peau, acuité de mon regard, espace de mon oreille; ma langue mourra si la tienne n'y vient apposer sa tiède salive. (Leclerc, p.119)²

It is necessary for a symbolism to be created among women in order for there to be love between them. This love is in any case only

possible at the moment between women who can speak to each other. Without that interval of *exchange*, or of words, or of gestures, passions between women manifest themselves in a ... rather cruel way. (Irigaray, p.44)

I would go farther than Irigaray, albeit less politely, and say that without loving exchange, women's intense interactions all too often become bitchy competition. If we attempt to interact on the male model, frustration is the inevitable result because we are not truly subjects within these parameters and therefore our ability to articulate is limited. Also, male language is based on using woman as the object of exchange (the predicate to the male subject) and therefore women speaking within these rules use themselves and each other as objects.

Irigaray writes that "It is necessary for a symbolism to be created among women in order for there to be love between them." I think here she addresses heterosexuals (considering that love between women is part of the definition of lesbian). Irigaray's text is meant for the (far too many) women who have yet to understand the importance of loving exchange. Not surprisingly, such women are often marked by intense homophobia. A loving exchange between women frightens them because it shuts them out of communication if they rely on male-defined representational rules.

A loving exchange could allow for a complex understanding between women, of each other, during the process of communicating. In other words, this connected exchange could move away from the primacy of the individual and the validation of a subject through hierarchical separation. A loving exchange could facilitate Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's insistence that "There has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?" (Spivak, p.179).

I say I'm in love with her. What does that mean?

It means I review my future and my past in the light of this feeling. It is as though I wrote in a foreign language that I am suddenly able to read. (Winterson 1987, p.122)

The symbolism of which Irigaray speaks does already exist between lesbians--how else could we recognize each other? Nina Levitt participates in this symbolism when she recognises Alice Austen's work as "submerged" lesbian identity. Straight women may touch and show affection but there is much more to the double embrace in Austen's image. Levitt, like other lesbian artists, is part of an ever shifting and expanding process: from a basis of love, passion and sex we build systems of exchange; from a basis of exchange we build love, passion and sex. I am not assuming that all lesbians are intrinsically superior and outside of any cruel exchange, but our communication based on mutual love and passion could provide models for furthering our lesbian subjectivity and guiding straight women.

She wades into the water with me, deep enough to wet the bottom of her hair, and takes my face in both her hands and kisses me on the mouth. Then she turns away and I watch her walk back across the sand and up over the rocks. I begin to row, using her body as a marker.

I always will. (Winterson 1989, p.103)

A lesbian economy is a different structure than the patriarchal economy and (straight) women's relation within this symbolic. Our exchange is similar to that which Irigaray envisions for mother/daughter relations: "A woman would be directly in intersubjective relation with her mother. Her economy is that of the *between-subjects*, and not that of the subject-object relation"

(Irigaray in Whitford, p.45). Lesbians speak to each other as subjects but do not use an Other as exchange: we do not avoid speaking *about* ourselves when we speak about ourselves. No Other is being used and silenced nor is the "other woman" being obliterated in the attempt to speak like a male subject.

I certainly do not wish to sound as if I think that Queers can be reduced to purely romantic or sexual aspects. Rather, I would cast light upon the complexity of implications that arise from sex: from exchange and communication of passion in the most physical, in minds and bodies connected.

One myth, particularly popular in the first half of our century, claimed that (butch) lesbians have unusually large clitorises and that they seduce passive femmes. This myth stems from heterosexuals' need to solve their confusion about what lesbians do in bed by defining our sexual practice in terms of their own. Proper heterosexual sex entails a subject-object relation (penetrator-penetrated, active-passive). Inter-relating subjects, such as lesbians whose differences from each other cannot be defined by one term, are "unimaginable" in this male order.

It is not surprising that the clitoris is completely irrelevant to the heterosexual penetration model of sex because the clitoris acts for autonomous female pleasure, for women defined in terms of ourselves and not by comparison to the male. The clitoris must be effaced (or mocked as lesbo-deformity and pseudo-penis) to remove the possibility of women's self-defined subjectivity whereas the vagina can be appropriated for binary opposition to male genitals.

Possibilities for women's subjectivity exist around the interaction of women recognizing the active sexuality of the clitoris. We can model our exchange and communication on the lesbian sexual relation of active female subject to active female subject: extending from our sexual experience, an exchange already exists based on

mutual recognition of the other woman's subjectivity and of your own in relation to her. An exchange could exist based on connection between "two of the same," between two not defined in asymmetrical opposition to each other but by each on her own terms.

You may have heard of Rapunzel.

Against the wishes of her family, who can best be described by their passion for collecting miniature dolls, she went to live in a tower with an older woman. (Winterson 1989, p.52)

Levitt and Quince use similar strategies in that they both work with re-appropriating existing images and emphasizing the lesbian subjectivity erased by the dominant representation of those images. Stewart's project is quite different, not just because of her process of working with the models and producing "new" images, but more importantly because she constructs a complex lesbian subjectivity and subverts the naturalization of fixing singular meanings.

To put it simply, Levitt's and Quince's work is the equivalent of pointing to a woman and saying, "Listen up, she is a lesbian." Most Queers could identify with the codes in representations of Calamity Jane, such as Calamity Jane as outsider, as desiring to shift gender norms or as desiring an active identity in opposition to prescribed feminine norms. Most heterosexuals would work hard to read only the challenge to femininity but not the positive implications of lesbian subjectivity. For Queer viewers, Levitt's work brings relief and validation in having the connection made for us and in having that connection made visible and clear in the heterosexual context of a gallery. For Queers, this piece points out the obvious (an all too rare treat) while for non-Queers it points out the process of automatically assuming heterosexuality.

Quince creates a lesbian subject position with her ironic combination of text which erases lesbians through over-definition from a heterosexual view and images which erase lesbians through assumption of a heterosexual norm. The work mocks heterosexual stereotypes of lesbians and of femininity. Again, like Levitt's, the work supports lesbian viewers in reading lesbian potential in images of women while pointing out heterosexual assumptions and lesbian existence to straight viewers.

Quince and Levitt's strategy is essential because it "Queeries" fixed stereotypes. Patriarchal, heterosexist ideology has much invested in presenting signs as fixed, single, timeless and un-changeable and must distract from language structures or processes which remind one that language lacks a fixed core of meaning and thus has potential to shift and change. Masking dominant ideology as natural, timeless ideas relies on the concept of definitively attaching a particular signifier to a particular signified to produce a sign with a fixed meaning. In order to maintain dominance, patriarchal ideology must disguise the fact that signs are intrinsically unstable and that language produces meaning as chains of signifiers *slide* over chains of signifieds. In establishing this description of language, Lacan emphasizes that the relation between signifiers and signifieds is historically determined and thus is not natural or timeless and can be changed.³

The way to change the oppressive effects of dominant language/representation is to refuse the naturalized modes of representation (such as binary comparison) and instead focus on the areas which dominant ideology strives to cover-up. Elizabeth Grosz emphasizes that metaphor and metonymy are "the two main means by which new meanings, ambiguities and extended usages occur" (p.98). For me, metaphor and metonymy help answer the question that if language is patriarchal, heterosexist and racist, then how do Others speak their subjectivity and how can we ever change language? With metaphor and metonymy one can shift signifiers towards

diverse meanings and away from (attempted) dominant fixed meanings. At the same time, one can direct attention to the process of shifting meanings which should help undermine the process of maintaining patriarchal norms.

Because Stewart creates lesbian subjectivity primarily with metonymy, she can produce complex and indefinite lesbian subjects. Stewart's strategy is the visual equivalent of fiction:

On the way home Lila and Emily stopped for plums.

"I'll buy you a plum," Emily said, as each woman picked out her own. Their plums rested on the counter. Lila's was dark, round with a tone of soft, rich purple. Emily's was tighter, not as ripe, in a shiny reddish skin. When Lila bit into her plum, it split and the inside was warm and sweet as she sucked it out of its bitter shell. It was red, it was golden, it filled every corner of her mouth and oozed its sweetness between her teeth. Then, Emily put her arm around Lila's waist and they walked along. (Schulman, p.171)

Eating fruit is a common metaphor for love but of course it is usually heterosexual. Sarah Schulman shifts this metaphor to produce lesbian subjectivity as the effect of her text. Similarly, Stewart arranges signs to convey what the model likes, what she does, as a means to imply a complex lesbian subject as the effect of her representation.

Metaphor and metonymy will help denaturalize assumptions of singular meanings by moving away from binary, linear relations of communication. Also, by moving towards shifting, complex approaches to communication, these processes could help denaturalize the hierarchy and asymmetry of exchange that comes with binary relations. In our current patriarchal and capitalist

order, one party must benefit from an interaction with others (increase their status or sense of self worth or "receive a return on their investment"). Of course this means that those others then suffer psychically, economically, et cetera, in this exchange. Hierarchy in exchange does not have to be the preferred option; we can displace this dominant fixing of one meaning and exclusion of other potentials. Relations of exchange could be based on connection instead of separation, on sending out instead of hoarding,⁴ on a respecting interaction instead of an individual mind striving for "status" in comparison to others.

In the crucifixion series, Stewart collaborates with the models and the models interact with each other along the lines of a respecting and loving interaction. Artist and models reform this well known signifier by depicting a female Christ with another woman worshipping/mourning her crucifixion. By supplanting the expected male, this image both makes visible the absence of women's subjectivity in Christianity and implies which gender, and which kind of love, really suffers in this religion.

As importantly, the meaning of the traditional women mourners at the base of the cross is also radically altered in this shift. Suddenly she is not an object within male exchange, a two-dimensional symbol functioning in terms of male meaning, but potentially another subject inter-acting with the woman crucified. She too has a crown of thorns and other signs of torture and binding by the symbols of this religion. She worships something more relevant to her spirit and subjectivity than straight white men and their claims of self-sacrifice for the universal good of others: she mourns the torture of women by this religion and at the same time she shows her love for another woman. Stewart and the model shift the signifier to a loving, respecting signification, and in the process, they also highlight both the possibility of reforming a sign and the impossibility of claiming fixed meaning.

Stewart makes the rules of address in the public discourse of portrait photography problematic by engaging in a loving, respecting exchange with the model. Stewart rejects the traditional linear address from the Artist to the viewer using the model as object to facilitate this communication. Instead, she disperses the power of authority by speaking with and listening to this "other woman," and thus Stewart's images facilitate discourse between-subjects.


In conclusion, I do agree that Quince's and Levitt's strategies are likely to succeed at making a lesbian subject visible because their strategies are literal and thereby clearer. It would be difficult indeed to dismiss the lesbian subjectivity in these pieces. In comparison, Stewart's work takes risks because the subject is not defined or fixed and therefore is not resistant to erasure or appropriation. The work could not be successful, a viewer could miss the complex, dispersed subject that is the effect or a heterosexual viewer could ignore this subject.

But this risk must be taken because traditional, public discourse will only produce the traditional subject as effect. I fear my own text could fail in this way. When I write theoretically (properly) then I must mimic the straight, white, male norm of academic work. I can try

and insert fiction to break this effect but it is only in metaphoric or metonymic representation that Other subjects could hope to appear. This does not mean that traditional representation should be left unchallenged but that our strategies of challenge should undermine the assumptions which maintain those traditions. What better model for accomplishing this dual task than lesbians and our active clitorises engaging in complex, diverse, loving interaction between-subjects?

I touched her skin
I kissed her lips
I looked into her eyes.

She laughed and licked
and tasted sweet
we shared a plum.

I knew I was there. 

—Josephine MILLS

NOTES

¹Winterson repeats this line throughout *The Passion*. She first uses it on p. 13.

²Gallop's article is about "La lettre" which I quote here. "La lettre" has not been translated.

³In this section I am drawing on Grosz, chapter 4.

⁴For elaboration of this point, see Cixous.

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