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**DIFFERENCE, IDENTIFICATION AND DESIRE:
CONTEMPORARY LESBIAN GENRE FICTION**

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Declaration

Earlier versions of parts of chapter two have been published in Sally Munt (ed), New Lesbian Criticism (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) and in Gabriele Griffin (ed), Outwrite (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

Summary

The focus of this dissertation entitled 'Difference, Identification & Desire: Contemporary Lesbian Genre Fiction' is the representation of lesbian identity in four contemporary popular lesbian genres: autobiographical fiction, speculative fiction, romance fiction and crime fiction. The aim of the dissertation is three-fold. Firstly, it seeks to acknowledge and celebrate the large variety of representations of lesbianism produced by lesbian writers working with popular forms of the novel during the past twenty five years. Secondly, it explores the ways in which lesbian writers have reworked popular genres in order to highlight lesbian and feminist concerns and to depict aspects of lesbian existence. It analyzes the effects of introducing discourses of lesbianism into the plots of popular genres, showing how the latter have been subverted or adapted by lesbian use. Thirdly, the thesis seeks to specify the ways in which the generic forms themselves, according to their own codes and conventions, shape and mediate the representation of lesbian identity in the text. In addition to this focus, the dissertation traces a number of themes and concerns across and within the four genres under discussion. These include the relationship in the texts between the sign 'lesbian' and the discourse of feminism, and the oscillation between the representation of lesbian sexual identity in terms of woman-identification and difference-between women. The aim throughout the analysis of contemporary lesbian genre fiction is to identify both that which is specific to lesbian representation and that which is characteristic of the particular genre under discussion. The dissertation represents a contribution to three areas of literary study: Genre Studies and Feminist Studies in general, and to Lesbian Studies in particular.

INTRODUCTION: LESBIAN GENRE FICTION

Le Corps Lesbien has lesbianism as its theme, that is, a theme which cannot even be described as taboo, for it has no real existence in the history of literature. Male homosexual literature has a past, it has a present. The lesbians, for their part, are silent - just as all women are as women at all levels ... (Monique Wittig, The Lesbian Body, p.9)

What is Lesbian Fiction?

Twenty years ago it was scarcely possible to identify a body of literature as 'lesbian'. The lesbian 'genre' would have included Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness (1928), Djuna Barnes's Nightwood, some of the novels of Colette and, perhaps, the 'pulp' fiction of the 1950s by Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor. The main factor linking all these texts is the lesbianism of their authors. With the rise of the Women's Movement in the 1970s these novels, and other works by lesbian writers were claimed as part of a lesbian literary tradition which sought to acknowledge and celebrate the artistic creativity of lesbians, past and present. Moreover, the Women's Movement began to generate its own literature, much of which proclaimed itself as lesbian and celebrated lesbian love.

However, as Alison Hennegan points out, this newly emerging canon does not necessarily coincide with what lesbians actually read as 'lesbian'¹. As readers, lesbians have not allowed the standard of 'lesbian authorship' to determine their understanding of lesbian literature. Rather, we have applied what Mandy Merck calls a perverse perspective to all literature, from both oppositional and mainstream cultures². This historical fact makes the critical task of defining

lesbian fiction a complicated and problematic one. Moreover, between the advent of the Women's Movement in the 1970s, when this process of reclamation began, and the present period of the 1990s, a great deal of critical theory has intervened, which further complicates the task of lesbian literary critics. Post-structuralist and postmodernist theories of literature have overturned the old certainties concerning the relationship of an author to her text, and of a text to its reader/s, to the extent that the object of analysis is in danger of disappearing altogether.

Nonetheless, the topic of my thesis is precisely that configuration 'lesbian fiction'. Despite the claims by post-structuralist critics such as Stanley Fish (in the appositely named Is There a Text in This Class?) that literature as a category cannot be defined positively, there exists in the 1990s a large body of literature which inscribes itself and is hailed as 'lesbian'³. The Women's Liberation Movement is the single most important determinant in this huge upsurge of productivity; without it most of these texts could not have been written. Bonnie Zimmerman refers to the construct of the lesbian writer proposed by the Lesbian Feminist Movement of the 1970s, representing her as a figure who has a strong political commitment to lesbianism and addresses her texts to the 'lesbian community'⁴. In this sense, contemporary lesbian fiction may be seen as a sub-genre of feminist fiction; it is sometimes represented as the exemplary form for feminist writers to employ.

In her essay 'Lesbian Intertextuality' Elaine Marks argues that, since what she sees as the appropriation of Sappho's poetry by

the masculine poetic tradition occurred, no 'sufficiently challenging counter images' of lesbianism were produced in French literature until the advent of the Women's Movement and the writing of Monique Wittig⁵. In her preface to The Lesbian Body, a quotation from which prefaces this chapter, Wittig herself argues that,

Only the women's movement has proved capable of producing lesbian texts in a context of total rupture with masculine culture, texts written by women exclusively for women, careless of male approval. (p.9)

For Marks, the 'J/e' of Le Corps Lesbien is the most powerful lesbian in literature because she re-examines and redesigns the world from a lesbian feminist perspective. Yet, contemporary inscriptions of lesbianism and lesbian identity are as much negotiations and adaptations of pre-feminist representations as they are constructions of lesbian feminism. In this respect 'lesbian fiction' exceeds the category of Women's Movement literature, and exists outside as well as inside it, in a relation of interaction but not of complete identity and equivalence. And, while the socially constructed and historically contingent nature of lesbian identity make allegiance to a lesbian tradition or literary continuum problematic, lesbian writers and readers are formed in relation to earlier models and configurations of the lesbian subject (and to contemporary non-feminist models), and in relation to a discourse of lesbianism, which serves to make lesbian fiction a specific, if not a discrete, category.

The fact that the last ten years has not, as Sara Maitland

comments, seen the emergence of 'The Feminist Novel', which is discrete in structure, form, style, tropes, content, etc., means that a discussion of lesbian fiction necessitates a consideration of the various different genres with which lesbian writers engage⁶. The category of lesbian fiction both cuts across and, in its individual examples, is intersected by, different literary genres and modes. In order to acknowledge both the specificity of lesbian discourse and the construction of lesbian identity in and through a number of different genres, a model is required which neither relegates lesbian fiction to a sub-genre, nor constructs it as an over-arching metanarrative. Lesbian feminist theorists have advanced a number of models in order to construct the category of lesbian fiction. I shall now discuss these, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of each in turn. The models may be defined as: 'lesbian content', 'lesbian authorship' and 'lesbian sensibility'. I shall then consider a structuralist account of lesbian fiction, and the potential of a model based on the notion of lesbian writing and reading communities.

Three Models of Lesbian Textuality: 'Lesbian Content', 'Lesbian Authorship' and 'Lesbian Sensibility'

According to the broad definition which this model implies a text is judged as lesbian if it introduces lesbian characters or themes. The 'lesbian content' model of lesbian fiction is widely rejected by lesbian critics on the grounds that it fails both to distinguish between positive and homophobic representations of lesbianism, and to

identify the specificity of recent lesbian feminist fiction. However, this model is often accepted by lesbian readers who frequently make subtextual readings of even misogynistic or homophobic texts. A recent example of a filmic text which has been read as 'lesbian' by lesbians is Emmanuelle. Despite the criticism of its politics and ideology which the film received from many feminists, some lesbians found its representation of sex between women erotic and appealing. Its popularity with sections of the lesbian community may be explained by the fact that, in contemporary heterosexist society, lesbians are somewhat starved of visual representations of lesbian relations and of lesbian erotic images.

Lesbian characters have featured in western literature throughout its history. The lesbian occupied a central place in romantic fin de siècle literature, most notably in the work of Baudelaire; and the figure of the lesbian frequents the pages of the North American dime novels of the 1950s. These were written by both women and men, and have such intriguing titles as Strange Sisters, The Shadowy Sex and We Walk Alone⁷. For both fin de siècle 'decadent' literature and some 1950s pulp fiction, lesbianism functions, albeit in different ways, as a sign of exoticism, degeneration and transgression. Yet, in so far as this literature does not represent the inscription of identity of a self-conscious sub-cultural group, it falls outside contemporary definitions of lesbian fiction. Clearly the existence of lesbianism in the text, while necessary, is not in itself sufficient to give the text a lesbian identity. The same is true of texts of which it is possible

to make a lesbian reading. Despite the fact that the lesbian overtones of the feelings which Mrs Danvers and the heroine experience toward Rebecca in Daphne Du Maurier's novel have prompted writers such as Mary Wings to create lesbian versions of it, Rebecca is not generally considered by lesbians or non-lesbians as a lesbian novel⁸. With the focus in Margaret Forster's recently published biography on Du Maurier's personal involvements with women, this view of the novel may change⁹. Some critics have suggested that the author herself must either identify as lesbian or have experience of intense female erotic attachments for a novel to be seen as 'lesbian'.

There are two main reasons why the 'lesbian authorship' model of lesbian textuality enjoys precedence with many lesbian critics. Firstly, it reflects the dominant (liberal humanist) belief that notions of origin and originality are central to textual analysis. Many kinds of feminist criticism, such as gynocriticism, demonstrate the difficulty of moving beyond this privileged relationship between author and text, to the exclusion of other relations of production and consumption. Secondly, and more importantly from a lesbian point of view, lesbian authorship has been seen rightly as having political value: the existence of lesbian writers and literature is regarded of vital importance in validating lesbian identity and experience. In a homophobic and heterosexist culture lesbian authorship has considerable significance. Because lesbians have been literally and literarily silenced throughout history, their self-inscription as lesbians is a radical political act in and of itself. One of the most valuable enterprises of feminist and lesbian criticism, therefore,

has been the (re)discovery, via biographical and historical materials, of the lesbianism of supposedly heterosexual writers. Willa Cather is one such example. The discovery that Cather lived with another woman for forty years has led lesbian critics to re-evaluate her novels and uncover a lesbian perspective in her representation of apparently heterosexual love¹⁰. In such cases the text, contrary to New Critical and post-structuralist teachings, has not been sufficient unto itself. The literary strategies of gender, pronoun ambiguity and the concealment of the writers' and/or characters' lesbian identity under a male pseudonym, combined with the sheer weight of heterosexist conventions and criticism which a discussion of these strategies challenges, have made 'corroborative' biographical data, in the form of letters and diaries, of vital importance to Lesbian Studies. As Reina Lewis comments:

It is all very well being told that the sovereign controlling subject is dead, but for groups who were denied access to the authoritative reading and writing position the first time round, there is a very real need to occupy it now¹¹.

Without an insistence on the lesbian biographies, histories and contexts of texts, the silences produced by heterosexist readings and interpretations of them will not be broken. Diana Collecott cites as an example the silencing of H.D.'s lesbianism in the 1983 edition of her Collected Poems, 1912-1944, the editorial of which fails to mention that her poem, 'I said', was addressed to her lover, Winifred Bryher. Collecott asks:

What are the critical implications of reinserting this poem in its lesbian contexts: the contexts of actual lives, then and now, and the literary contexts?¹²

Any attempt to answer this question necessarily requires a concept of lesbian authorship (and readership).

Apart from its political significance, the appeal to lesbian authorship in defining a text as lesbian has an obvious advantage over the lesbian content model. Whereas the latter reduces lesbian literary criticism to a 'lesbian spotting' enterprise, the lesbian authorship model acknowledges that writing is an activity in which positionality - that is, the stance adopted in a text - is crucial. However, proponents of this model often fall into the mimetic 'trap' of assuming that literature can and does 'reflect' that position, whether dominant or marginalised. A one-to-one equation is frequently made between lesbian author-lesbian experience-lesbian text, and these appear as monolithic categories. Alison Hennegan, for instance, in her article on the lesbian novel, represents writing as a transparent medium¹³. The process by which lesbian 'experience' is 'translated' into fiction is not seen by her as an issue. In Hennegan's view, it is unequivocally 'lesbians' who write lesbian fiction. This might not appear such a presumptuous claim were it not for the fact that it excludes the work of many women who engage with lesbianism, either by featuring lesbian characters and relationships in their writing or by challenging the centrality of heterosexuality in women's lives. Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts, for example, have both written of lesbian love in their work, yet neither

identifies primarily as lesbian.

The problems inherent in this approach have been exemplified by the reception of Toni Morrison's novel Sula. Morrison is a Black heterosexual woman writer who created in her novel a powerful female relationship which many women read as 'lesbian'. Morrison herself entered the debate over whether that relationship made Sula a lesbian novel, and denied that it did¹⁴. No doubt on account of Morrison's heterosexuality and her status as author, this judgement was widely accepted by lesbian critics. Yet for many lesbian readers of the novel the opinion and sexual identity of its author is a less important consideration than the positive representation of a loving relationship between women.

The consequences of rejecting authorial identity as the defining feature of lesbian fiction are considerable: it would appear that anyone, including men, can write lesbian fiction. For this reason some lesbians, such as Hennegan, insist on a 'lesbian-only' definition. But, it seems to me that lesbian authorship cannot stand alone as the model for lesbian textuality, largely because it is not a fixed and given category in itself. Women change their sexual identification and the sign 'lesbian' has different meanings in different historical periods. If lesbian authorship were the sole criterion, then Lesbian Studies must always 'prove' the incontrovertible lesbianism of the authors whom it claims by the strategic production of biographical corroboration. The latter ignores the extent to which biography and autobiography are also constructed rather than transparent forms. The lesbian authorship

model also fails to account for the work of lesbian writers, such as Patricia Highsmith, who write predominantly about heterosexual characters in mainstream society. Mandy Merck argues that a more radical and subversive strategy lies in the application of perverse readings, thereby indirectly appropriating texts for a heterogeneous lesbian culture¹⁵. Moreover, lesbian fiction, like any other type, is 'over-determined'; it is the product of a variety of factors, both literary and extra-literary. A simple one-to-one relationship between (lesbian) author and her text therefore becomes untenable.

Similar problems emerge with the 'lesbian sensibility' model, which is often seen as a corollary to lesbian authorship. Hennegan sees a causal connection between lesbian authorship and sensibility:

A lesbian novel for me has become one in which a lesbian author's experience and necessarily oblique vision of the world ... informs her work, regardless of the gender or sexuality of her characters. (p.12)

As Mandy Merck has pointed out, it is as if a mere sexual object choice were sufficient to produce the 'authentic sensibility' which, for Hennegan, emanates from lesbian fiction proper¹⁶. Hennegan's concept of 'lesbian sensibility' has much in common with the gynocritical school of feminist criticism, the goal of which is the correlation of sexual and textual identities in terms of style, imagery, tone and structure. While correlations of this kind certainly do exist, the positivist search for a unifying, homogenizing principle 'behind' lesbian fiction denies differences within and between texts (and similarities with texts outside the

lesbian 'tradition'). It again assumes a more or less unproblematic and essentialist relationship between authorial/sexual and textual identity. It ignores the determining effects of genre, and the ways in which generic conventions and codes affect the construction of sexual identity and cut across any homogeneous category 'lesbian'.

Approaches which are based on this model repress what Barthes calls the text-as-work: the ways in which literary codes construct 'experience'¹⁷. The relationship between experience and text is not one of reflection, nor even, according to post-structuralist theory, one of mediation. Literature does not filter through a pre-existing experience, rather it constructs experience in the text in accordance with historically specific literary modes of production and consumption.

Is there a Lesbian Aesthetic?

Attempts to establish a lesbian literary aesthetic have been undertaken in the context of recent formulations of a 'feminist' aesthetic. A major contribution to the latter has come from the work of French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. In different ways, both these theorists argue that writing is a gendering practice; the sexual identity of a text is produced through inscription, rather than 'mirroring' the biological sex of the author¹⁸. Avant-garde writers of both sexes are more likely to write feminine texts because to write 'as a woman' is to disrupt the linear, goal-oriented sentence of conventional patriarchal discourse. Theories of 'écriture féminine' have an obvious suggestiveness for

lesbian critics engaged in the study of lesbian modernism; Gertrude Stein, H.D., Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf and Colette could all be considered to be practitioners of a 'feminine' writing practice in this sense. Indeed, as lesbian modernists, it could be argued that they are exemplary exponents of écriture féminine.

However, the concept of the 'feminine' poses as many problems for lesbian theorists as it opens promising avenues of enquiry. Not only does it fail to convey any sense of the histories of textual practices, but it threatens to elide lesbianism altogether in the abstract category of 'the feminine'. Moreover, the specificity of lesbian textuality has historically frequently resided precisely in opposition to conventional notions of femininity. It is therefore doubtful if lesbian writing can be re-absorbed so easily, albeit into a new formulation of the feminine. The lesbian writer and theorist Monique Wittig rejects the concept of 'écriture féminine', describing it as 'the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal political fact of the domination of women'¹⁹. Rita Felski has recently challenged the whole enterprise of constructing a feminist aesthetic. One of the main arguments of her book Beyond Feminist Aesthetics is:

the impossibility of a feminist aesthetic, defined as a normative theory of literary or artistic form that can be derived from a feminist politics ... The chimera of a 'feminist aesthetic' has tended to hinder any adequate assessment of both the value and the limitations of contemporary feminist writing by measuring it against an abstract conception of a 'feminine' writing practice, which in recent years has been most frequently derived from anti-realist aesthetics of textuality. I suggest in contrast that it is impossible to speak of 'masculine' and 'feminine' in any meaningful sense in the formal analysis of texts; the political value of literary texts from the standpoint of feminism can be determined only by an investigation of their social functions and effects in relation

to the interests of women in a particular historical context, and not by attempting to deduce an abstract literary theory of 'masculine' and 'feminine', 'subversive' and 'reactionary' forms in isolation from the social conditions of their production and reception. (pp.1-2)

The quest for a Lesbian Aesthetic - a set of stylistic, structural and tonal features which mark a set of texts as 'lesbian' - is therefore a problematic one. Commenting on some of the attempts to delineate a lesbian aesthetic, Zimmerman cautions against ascribing innate characteristics to lesbian textuality:

Why is circularity or strength limited to lesbians, or, similarly, why is love of nature or creativity? It is certainly not evident that women, let alone lesbians, are 'innately' anything.²⁰

Should literary criticism therefore make way for sociology? Sociology can certainly answer important questions about the contexts of the production and consumption of lesbian fiction. However, a purely sociological definition leaves unanswered the specifically literary critical question of what it is about lesbian narrative that makes it 'lesbian'. One possible answer is that proposed by Terry Castle in her suggestive article, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the counterplot of lesbian fiction'²¹. Castle provides an alternative to author-content analyses, and offers a structuralist account of lesbian narrative; she argues that lesbianism inheres in the lesbian novel as plot function or as, in her phrase, 'erotic counterplotting'.

According to Castle, twentieth-century lesbian fiction is characterized by the displacement of the male homosocial triangle

(male-female-male), which she sees as the dominant configuration of western canonical literature. In its stead, lesbian novels install a female homosocial triangle (female-male-female) which, in explicitly lesbian texts, is itself replaced by a female dyadic bond (female-female) in which the male term drops out altogether. From this schematic analysis Castle infers the underlying principle of lesbian narrative itself:

... for female bonding to 'take', as it were, to metamorphose into explicit sexual desire, male [homosocial] bonding must be suppressed ... Townsend Warner's Frederick has no boyhood friend, no father, no father-in-law, no son, no gang, no novelist on his side to help him triangulate his relationship with his wife ... To put it axiomatically: in the absence of male homosocial desire, lesbian desire emerges. (p.226)

Castle goes on to argue that this principle enables the identification of two basic mimetic contexts in which realistic writing plots of lesbian desire are most likely to flourish: the world of schooling and adolescence (the world of pre-marital relations) and the world of divorce, widowhood and separation (the world of post-marital relations). This hypothesis is born out by Gill Frith's study of what Elaine Marks calls the 'gynaeceum', or girls' school novel, a genre of powerful female homosocial and homosexual plotting which had its heyday in the interwar years²². More recently, the political fictions of the 1970s and '80s present other gynocentric situations, such as women's groups and women's centres, which provide settings for homosocial and homosexual plots.

Yet, even given available mimetic contexts for the inscription

of lesbian desire, Castle maintains that lesbian fiction displays a tendency to move away from the mimetic, the plausible, towards the implausible, the fantastic. If 'plausibility' is commensurate with the conventions of patriarchal canonical literature this movement becomes inevitable:

By its very nature lesbian fiction has - and can only have - a profoundly attenuated relationship with what we think of, stereotypically, as narrative verisimilitude, plausibility, or 'truth to life'. Precisely because it is motivated by a yearning for that which is, in a cultural sense, implausible - the subversion of male homosocial desire - lesbian fiction characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades as 'realistic' in surface detail, a strongly fantastical, allegorical or utopian tendency. (p.229)

Lesbian novels which oscillate between the realistic and the fabulous include such generically diverse texts as Woolf's Orlando; Djuna Barnes' Nightwood; Russ's The Female Man; Sarah Schulman's After Delores; and the novels of Jeanette Winterson. Castle's theory also accounts for the emergence and popularity of lesbian speculative and utopian fiction in which both the movement towards the fantastic and the delineation of the lesbian feminist community are most fully realized.

As I have mentioned, post-structuralist analyses tend to ignore the social context of literature. Texts are represented as autonomous, internally-referential systems of signification, isolated from any writing context. In relation to contemporary lesbian fiction, which is strongly dependent on a context of lesbian reading and writing communities, on a self-conscious sub-culture and on a

category of 'lesbian' as an identity, such an approach is clearly inadequate. As Joseph Bristow, in his introduction to the lesbian and gay issue of Textual Practice, comments:

Above all other things, our sexuality is where we place ourselves; sexuality locates our sense of belonging. And it is within the subculture enabling our forms of sexual expression that our reading and writing primarily belong. (p.175)

Therefore, any theory of Anglo-American lesbian fiction must take account of the significance of the reading and writing communities of North America and Britain to such a literature. These communities are the product of twentieth-century patriarchal capitalism, and exist in the context of the political realities of that structure. As John D'Emilio demonstrates, capitalism initially provided the conditions for the emergence of lesbian and gay identities, and then for a politics around those identities²³. In a related way, capitalism also produced and exposed the contradictions of women's social positioning, which in turn facilitated a feminist politics based on the idea of women as a gender-class. Feminism and the Gay Liberation Movement have been fundamental to the consolidation of lesbian communities in Britain and North America and to the literature which they have produced in the past fifteen years.

It is therefore important that lesbian literary criticism does not restrict itself to either author-based or purely formal aesthetics if it is to understand how literature functions in particular social contexts. Recent reader-centred approaches, such as those of Helen Taylor and Janice Radway, demonstrate that fiction

is as much a product of readers and their readings as of writers' writing²⁴. In the act of reading readers (re)produce the text and its meanings in particular ways which are dependent on their frames of reference. The writer may be an authorial identity which the reader reconstructs in the process of consuming/producing the text or, in some cases, notably in genre fiction in which meaning resides more in the conventions of the genre than in the writer-as-origin, someone who does not figure significantly in the text-reader relationship. The attention to context is possibly even more crucial in Lesbian and Gay Studies. As Bristow comments:

What must be acknowledged is that such texts possess specific meanings when consumed within their subcultural contexts because they are a crucial part of securing sexual political identifications. The value of these works is not universal but specific to a particular readership. (p.175)

The lesbian and gay male interpretation of Madonna is a good example of the specificity of subcultural reading practices. Madonna's camp performance and homoerotic imagery have a resonance for lesbians and gay men which they do not have for heterosexual audiences. Her song 'Justify My Love' was seen by many gay people as addressing their claims for sexual legitimacy and, for a period, it became a gay anthem in bars and clubs in North America and Britain. Madonna's 'gayness' is therefore not so much an intrinsic quality of her performance, as a construction of her image by lesbians and gay men.

Lesbian fiction is therefore produced by readers as well as writers, and the focus of my dissertation is on the works of fiction

that anglophone lesbian communities have been reading in the past three decades. Rather than privileging the question of authorial identity and its relation to textuality, I am decentering it and considering it as one of several textual determinants of lesbian fiction. The identity of a text as 'lesbian' depends to some extent on extra-literary factors, such as how it is read and received by the lesbian reading public and, crucially, on how it is packaged and marketed. The latter depends on its place in relation to the publishing industry.

Lesbian Fiction and the Publishing Industry

Contemporary lesbian fiction owes its existence on the bookshelves largely to the lesbian and feminist publishing houses and women's presses. These first emerged in the 1970s as small, independent and committed publishing adjuncts to the Women's Liberation Movement, and were frequently non-profit making and voluntarily staffed. Britain's Onlywomen Press is one example. In North America the Naiad Press was set up with the aim of publishing specifically lesbian writing. In the last decade feminist publishing has become increasingly successful, and it has been in the vanguard of the book industry boom in the 1980s when shares in The Women's Press were floated on the City stock market. Surprisingly perhaps, lesbian fiction has, up to now, benefited from the capitalization of the book world but, as Nicci Gerrard cautions, feminist fiction could, if conditions in the world of publishing change, just as easily be erased from the lists of profit-determined publishing²⁵.

The major British women's presses, Virago and The Women's Press, include many lesbian titles in their lists; Virago publishes the reissue of The Well of Loneliness and other lesbian 'classics', and The Women's Press publishes a number of crime fiction titles. Sheba and the Onlywomen Press, two small, independent houses, publish mainly lesbian and radical feminist writing. Lesbian fiction therefore partly exists as a set of texts on the lists of the women's publishing houses. For lesbian readers in Britain the Virago 'apple' and The Women's Press 'iron' logos have come to signify a brand of literature, just as the soapbox packaging of Mills and Boon signifies a particular genre of romance to its readers. The marketing of lesbian fiction as part of the category of feminist writing is important in terms of who buys the books and how they are read. Just as 'the rose of romance' defines a type of romance fiction, the striped spine of The Women's Press titles is as important a marker of the text's identity as its author or theme. The major commercial houses do not explicitly market texts as 'lesbian'; the word is frequently omitted from the book jackets of texts which do treat lesbian themes. This means that lesbian readers have to rely on other strategies in order to recognise texts with lesbian themes or characters. These include word of mouth, prior knowledge of authorial identity and skimming through the pages or scouring the 'blurb' for intimations of close female friendships. Interestingly, many public lending libraries perform this task for lesbian readers by affixing a double 'woman' symbol to the spines of lesbian texts.

The 'concealed' marketing of lesbian texts within feminist and

women's fiction as a whole has two effects: firstly, it introduces non-lesbians to lesbian themes and narratives, and thereby implicitly validates lesbian experience as part of a continuum of women's experience. Genre fiction is particularly important in this respect. A lesbian crime novel is also an acceptable format for the introduction of lesbian themes to non-lesbian readers in that the conventional genre renders the potentially challenging material less threatening. Non-lesbian and lesbian readers alike appear able to move between lesbian and non-lesbian genre fiction with relative ease. This suggests that lesbian genre fiction, such as crime fiction, retains many of the traditional pleasures associated with that genre, although the sexual identity of the heroine will necessarily have a different meaning for lesbian and non-lesbian readers. (The students on Rebecca O'Rourke's adult education courses are willing to admit that lesbians write the best crime titles!²⁶) Moreover, the popularity of genre fiction among lesbian readers is undoubtedly due in part to the promotion of recent lesbian and feminist fiction in terms of generic categories. When we think of lesbian fiction we think just as much in terms of genres - science fiction, crime - as we do of individual writers.

Whereas in North America a distinctly lesbian publishing industry exists, the British marketing strategy locates lesbian fiction within a wider category of feminist writing, which effectively aligns lesbianism with feminism. To some extent this determines how that fiction may be read and used. It also raises the question of whether the lesbian writing promoted and published by the

mainstream feminist presses constitutes a standard or norm which is assimilable to their wider feminist output. Some of the most challenging and controversial lesbian writing of recent years, such as Sarah Schulman's After Delores (1989) and Pat Califia's Macho Sluts (1989), has been published outside mainstream feminist publishing, by small feminist presses like Sheba or by the Gay Male Press. Anna-Marie Smith, speaking at the ICA Lesbian and Gay Conference in April 1991, explicitly referred to the policing of lesbian texts by feminists in publishing. The refusal of the feminist bookshop 'Sisterwrite' to stock copies of Califia's book, of Della Grace's collection of lesbian photographs and of the lesbian pornographic magazine Quim demonstrates that censorship exists at the point of distribution. It is interesting, too, that until 1992 none of the women's presses in Britain produced a lesbian romance series such as that published by Naiad in North America and greeted with enthusiasm there. This absence is possibly a result of the fact that the romance genre was largely discredited by British Marxists and some feminists, such as Germaine Greer (who famously called romance fiction 'dope for dopes'), and, until recently, it was seen as unserious and trivial²⁷. The romance has historically been an important genre for lesbians because it validates love and desire between women, and a British market for romance fiction has existed for some time. Last year, the Silvermoon bookshop issued a series of lesbian romances under their own imprint as a direct response to British demand.

Lesbian Genre Fiction

Because lesbian writing has been closely associated with feminism, and the women's presses have provided the main outlet for lesbian fiction in the past ten years, it is not surprising that much of this fiction reworks genres appropriated by other women writers. Genre fiction has been one of the main sites of lesbian and feminist intervention in recent years, and feminist genre fiction has proved phenomenally successful in terms of publishing sales. An exemplary instance is the success of feminist crime fiction. Characterized as 'a women's genre' since the start of what has been called its 'Golden Age' in the 1920s and 1930s, crime fiction has attracted a growing lesbian and feminist interest in the 1980s, particularly in North America. There, Katherine V. Forrest was one of the first writers to introduce a lesbian detective to the genre. Clearly then, lesbian genre fiction cannot be seen in isolation from feminist genre fiction, and neither of these can be entirely isolated from the wider genre.

The Women's Press was one of the first UK publishers to produce a women's science fiction list. The Press is the British publisher of Joanna Russ's feminist science fiction of the 1970s. The success of the science fiction series precipitated the move into crime fiction; the Women's Press published Barbara Wilson's Murder in the Collective in 1984. Virago followed suit and also adopted a crime list, obtaining Wilson's third Pam Nilson mystery, The Dog Collar Murders, for publication in 1989. Pandora, an adjunct of Routledge and Kegan Paul, set up to exploit the burgeoning success of feminist

publishing, were quick to establish their own crime list and gained the British rights to Sarah Dreher's Stoner MacTavish (1988).

Given the fierce competition between the women's publishing houses necessitated by the capitalist system in which they operate, small, radical publishers rely to some extent on their political reputations to attract readers and writers, as well as on the loyalty of authors. Anna Livia, whose writing takes the form of an eclectic combination of romance, fantasy and science fiction, has remained with Onlywomen Press, which she co-founded, throughout her writing career. Onlywomen are unusual in the respect that, because of their political commitment to lesbian writing and their relatively small output, they promote fiction as 'lesbian' rather than as genre fiction.

As my discussion indicates, two aspects of the relationship between lesbian writing and genre fiction are particularly important. Firstly, lesbian writers are involved in the feminist reworking and re-appropriation of mainstream genres. Genre-coding offers the opportunity for lesbian writers to slot their concerns into a pre-given, but not immutable, structure. The typical urban setting of crime fiction, for example, permits an exploration of the issue of male violence against women, a topic which lesbian feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Adrienne Rich have written about on a theoretical level. The obverse also operates. Generic categories inform and to some extent structure the representation of lesbian identity, so that the lesbian detective, for instance, is portrayed either as a hard-boiled individualist or as a more cerebral, feminised heroine.

Secondly, lesbian fiction in the 1980s has largely been constructed as genre fiction. Feminist publishers have actively participated in this process by shaping and promoting genre categories into which lesbian texts can be inserted, and in terms of which they can be produced. The collection of feminist crime stories, Reader, I Murdered Him, edited by Jen Green, contains stories produced specifically for that collection. Millie Murray, who contributed 'A Blessing in Disguise', had not written a crime story previously.

The increasing trend towards genre categorization has led to a debate about the value of feminist and lesbian genre fiction. Some feminist critics are critical of this trend. Patricia Duncker, for example, argues against the present popularity of lesbian and feminist genre fiction, claiming that it limits the writer's imagination and results in trite plots²⁸. Bonnie Zimmerman, in her comprehensive study of lesbian literature, acknowledges the generic diversity of lesbian fiction, but chooses to discuss it in terms of concepts of women's community rather than analyse it in terms of genre²⁹. Duncker's view is consistent with the feminist critique of genre fiction of the 1970s, when Greer attacked romance fiction on the grounds of its ideological conservatism and its oppressive images of women. However, as Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple argue in their discussion of women's detective fiction, women writers have historically used genre as a vehicle to explore women's issues, and recent feminist and lesbian writers have subverted rather than reinforced conventional notions of both genre and gender³⁰.

In contrast to the adverse critical view of genre fiction,

Helen Carr, the editor of an invaluable collection of feminist genre criticism, maintains that the use of genre has enriched feminist writing. She argues that the shift towards genre fiction and criticism is a result of the diversification^a of feminism:

[I]t's no longer possible or fruitful to try to discuss women's writing as a single category in the way one could or at any rate did in the 1970s. We now realise that we can't talk of women as a monolithic category. There are questions of race, class, sexuality and historical context, and in writing different modes and contexts of literary production, different conventions and functions, all of which must be considered. To think of women or their writing as a single homogeneous group is nearly as impossible as to talk of 'mankind' or 'great literature'³¹.

On the contrary, as Carr goes on to observe, women's writing 'has now to be seen as pluralistic, protean and diverse'. She claims that genre fiction in its very pluralism resists canonization, and that discussing feminist writing in terms of genre is a way of escaping the pressure to construct an alternative canon of great women writers. Carr also makes the point, overlooked by Duncker, that all writing is dependent on 'genre' (in the original meaning of the term) as a framework or set of codes which is always present to some degree. Whether the text be a feminist novel of ideas or a lesbian thriller, codes 'are what make story-telling possible'. While agreeing with Carr's analysis, I would add that lesbian fiction, in particular, has benefited from the trend towards genre writing. Lesbian characters, as a result of their insertion into genre categories, have become more heterogeneous and diverse than in the past, assuming a wide variety of exciting roles and identities. While

the feminist novel of ideas, championed by Duncker, represents a valuable contribution to feminist literature, there is also room in the lesbian literary canon for the lesbian thriller and the lesbian romance.

The focus on genre in lesbian literature also permits, even requires, a discussion of the role played by pleasure in our reading. Feminist and, indeed, mainstream criticism has recently, and somewhat belatedly it could be argued, acknowledged that the majority of people read for pleasure as much as for education or edification. There is now a growing amount of critical material focusing on the relationship between pleasure, fantasy and cultural practices. As the lesbian demand for romances, thrillers and other popular forms demonstrates, lesbian readers want to be entertained as well as inspired by lesbian fiction. In fact, the 1980s could be characterized as a period when many lesbians sought to emphasize the pleasurable rather than the political aspects of lesbian existence through the exploration of fantasy and the experimentation with style and image. Genre fiction has facilitated this process by offering lesbian readers a diversity of appealing fantasy images of lesbian detectives and romantic heroines. However, as I shall demonstrate, it would be incorrect to characterize this trend as apolitical. Although feminism has suffered the retrenchment common to all radical movements in the 1980s, lesbian genre fiction treats political issues such as violence against women, racism and sexual discrimination. One of the pleasures for feminist and lesbian readers of lesbian crime fiction, for example, is its combining of a critique of male

violence with the cathartic dispatching of the patriarchal villain.

Contemporaneous with the rise of genre fiction as a major lesbian and feminist mode in the 1970s and 1980s, is the proliferation of metafictional writing. Metafiction is usefully defined by Patricia Waugh as:

...a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality³².

A product of, and an enquiry into, the 'postmodern condition', metafiction is characterised by intertextual references, pastiche and the radical mixing of different genres, both literary and non-literary. It therefore represents a challenge to the project of Genre Studies, for it undermines many of the 'structuralist' boundaries which Genre Studies has erected in its delineation of genre categories. However, metafiction and genre fiction cannot be seen as totally distinct, the former as literary 'fashion' and the latter as traditional and familiar, because genre fiction provides the very modes which metafiction appropriates and parodies. Moreover, the different genres of fiction have never been as distinct as separate as some critics claim. Dickens mingles the picaresque genre and the bildungsroman with the thriller and the comic novel. Conan Doyle combines Gothic and the thriller in The Hound of the Baskervilles. The influence of metafiction has led genre fiction to become increasingly intertextual and self-conscious. The science fiction of Jody Scott, for example, combines motifs from the science

fiction and vampire genres and provides a postmodern meta-commentary on the ideological uses of genre.

If genre fiction involves the adherence to or the transgression of a pre-given set of narrative conventions, metafictional strategies ensure that lesbian fiction is transgressing, rather than adhering to, those conventions. In fact, it could be argued that the existence of lesbian genre fiction - and the lesbian detective, the lesbian space adventurer, the lesbian romance heroine who are portrayed in it - is itself a postmodern phenomenon, in so far as it represents a lesbian appropriation of masculine, heterosexual and established forms. Metafiction has consolidated the erosion of clear boundaries between genres and definitions of High/Low Art, making the forms more malleable and fluid, and therefore more suited to lesbian appropriation and use. Lesbian writers have participated in this erosion; they have helped to stretch the boundaries of the possible and the permissible in genre fiction. For the purposes of this analysis, therefore, metafictional texts will not be considered as a separate category, but discussed in terms of the generic categories on which they draw and comment.

The four genres which I have chosen for consideration are lesbian autobiographical fiction, lesbian speculative fiction, lesbian romance fiction and lesbian crime fiction. The latter three are popular forms which have their heterosexual counterparts in mainstream genre fiction. The former, autobiographical fiction, although it is an arguably more 'literary' form, has been included because it has been an important and popular form of the women's,

feminist and, more recently, lesbian feminist novel. The Second Wave of feminism has popularized the confessional novel, emphasizing its political rather than literary value.

My method in this study is, firstly, to describe each genre in thematic and structural terms, relating it both to the mainstream genre and to other types of lesbian fiction. Secondly, I analyse the representation of lesbian identity, subjectivity and sexuality in each genre, emphasizing the particular constructions each genre invites or requires. Thirdly, I examine the ways in which the insertion of a discourse of lesbianism shapes the narrative structure of each genre. My aim throughout is to identify what is specifically lesbian about lesbian genre fiction, and what is formally characteristic and conventional about lesbian genre fiction.

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One consequence of undertaking this study is that I situate myself as a lesbian critic. Lesbian literary criticism lies at the intersection of literary criticism and identity politics. Like feminist criticism, lesbian criticism is a political criticism which both draws on and constructs 'experience'. Whatever the standpoint of the lesbian critic, her work is always taken as evidence of her sexuality. As I have shown, 'identity' is a problematic category on which to base a literary critique. Nonetheless, despite its complexity, the connection remains and, rather than deny it I intend to signal my relationship to the sign 'lesbian' by employing the first person

plural forms 'we', 'us' and 'our'. This is not meant to posit a monolithic concept of the lesbian reader/critic/community, but represents a strategy by which I may signify my political and emotional allegiance.

In addition to the personal satisfaction I have gained from many of the lesbian novels I discuss, one of my reasons for presenting this thesis is a desire to counter what Teresa de Lauretis has called 'sexual indifference', the ideology which renders lesbian sexuality and lesbian textuality invisible. I quote Lauretis here by way of introduction to this endeavour:

[It is necessary to consider] how lesbian writers and artists have sought variously to escape gender, to deny it, transcend it, or perform it in excess, and to inscribe the erotic in cryptic, allegorical, realistic, camp, or other modes of representation, pursuing diverse strategies of writing and of reading the intransitive and yet, obdurate relation of reference to meaning, of flesh to language³³.

Notes

1. Alison Hennegan, 'On Becoming a Lesbian Reader', in Suzannah Radstone (ed) Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), p.169.
2. Mandy Merck, Perversions (London: Virago Press, 1993), p.3.
3. Stanley Fish, Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).
4. Bonnie Zimmerman, The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), pp.14-21.
5. Elaine Marks, 'Lesbian Intertextuality', in G. Stambolian & E. Marks (eds), Homosexualities and French Literature. Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp.353-77.
6. Sara Maitland, 'Futures in Feminist Fiction', in H. Carr (ed), From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p.196.
7. A substantial amount of 1950s pulp fiction featuring lesbian

- themes and characters was written by lesbians, such as Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor. For a lesbian perspective on this fiction see Diane Hamer, "'I am a Woman': Ann Bannon and the Writing of Lesbian Identity in the 1950s", in Mark Lilly (ed) Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp.47-75; and Carol-Ann Uszkurat's work in progress on 1950s' lesbian pulp fiction.
8. Mary Wings sees her novel Divine Victim (London: The Women's Press, 1992) as a lesbian version of Rebecca.
 9. Margaret Forster, Daphne du Maurier (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).
 10. Two recent articles discuss Cather's work from a lesbian perspective: Judith Fetterley, 'My Antonia, Jim Burden, and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer', in Carla Jay & Joanna Glasgow (eds) Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions (New York: New York University Press, 1990), pp.145-163; and Sharon O'Brien, "'The Thing not Named': Willa Cather as a lesbian writer', in Estelle B. Freedman, Barbara C. Gelpi, Susan L. Johnstone & Kathleen M. Weston (eds), The Lesbian Issue: Essays from Signs (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 67-90.
 11. Reina Lewis, 'The Death of the Author and the Resurrection of the Dyke', in S. Munt (ed), New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp.17-32.
 12. Diana Collecott, 'What is not Said: A Study in Textual Inversion' in Textual Practice, No.2, Vol 4, 1990, p.247.
 13. Hennegan, 'What Lesbian Novel?', in Women's Review No.1, pp.10-12.
 14. Quoted in Hennegan, *ibid.*, p.12.
 15. Merck, Perversions, op cit. See, for example, her reading of the television adaptation of Nigel Nicholson's Portrait of a Marriage, pp.101-117.
 16. Merck made her comments in a review of Jan Bradshaw (ed), Girls Next Door, in Women's Review, No.1., p.40.
 17. See, for example, Barthes's structural analysis of the codes of a Balzac short story in S/Z, or his account of intertextuality in 'The Death of the Author', in Stephen Heath (ed), Image, Music, Text (London: Fontana, 1977) pp.*
 18. See, for example, Luce Irigaray, 'La Mechanique des Fluides', in Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un (Paris: Minuet, 1977), pp.103-16; Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in Signs, Summer, 1976; and with Catherine Clement, La Jeune Nee (Paris: Inedit, 1975).
 19. Monique Wittig, 'The Point of View: Universal or Particular', in Feminist Issues 3:2, 1983.
 20. Bonnie Zimmerman, 'What has never been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism', in Elaine Showalter (ed) The New Feminist Criticism (London: Virago Press, 1986), p.206.
 21. Terry Castle, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction', in Textual Practice, No.2. Vol.4, 1990, pp.213-235.

22. Gill Frith, The Intimacy which is Knowledge: Female Friendship in the Novels of Women Writers (PhD dissertation, University of Warwick, 1989), pp.304-35.
23. John D'Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
24. Helen Taylor, Scarlett's Women, Gone with the Wind and its Female Fans (London: Virago, 1989). Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy & Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: University of N. Carolina Press, 1984).
25. Nicci Gerard, Into the Mainstream (London: Pandora, 1989).
26. Rebecca O'Rourke, 'Fingers in the Fruit Basket: A Feminist Reading of Jeanette Winterson's Oranges Are not the Only Fruit', in Susan Sellers (ed), Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp.57-70.
27. Marxist and socialist critics led the attack on popular cultural forms such as romance fiction. North America has less of a tradition of marxist criticism which may account in part for its greater critical tolerance of popular forms, although it was the American Marxist critic Frederic Jameson who stated that mass culture existed merely for 'the legitimation of the existing order' ('Ideology, Narrative Analysis and Popular Culture', in Theory and Society, no.4, Winter 1977, p.144). Germaine Greer made her famous remark about romance fiction being 'dope for dopes' in The Female Eunuch (London: Paladin, 1971).
28. Patricia Duncker, Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)
29. Zimmerman, The Safe Sea of Women, op cit.
30. Rosalind Coward & Linda Semple, 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction', in H. Carr (ed) From My Guy to Sci-Fi, pp.39-57.
31. Helen Carr, 'Introduction: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World', in Carr (ed) From My Guy to Sci-Fi, p.5.
32. Patricia Waugh, Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (London: Methuen, 1984).
33. Teresa de Lauretis, 'Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation', Theatre Journal, Summer, 1989, p.159.

C H A P T E R O N E
LESBIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

'The Personal is Political'

I have chosen to begin this study of contemporary lesbian genre fiction with an analysis of a type of fiction which can be classified, broadly, as autobiographical. Under this umbrella heading I have grouped together a number of different kinds of writing, including confessional writing, the bildungsroman, or novel of development, and the picaresque, or comic novel of adventure¹. Although these forms differ in certain important respects, such as in their respective relationships to notions of autobiographical truth and realism, and together, it could be argued, lack the generic integrity of the other genres I analyse (lesbian romance fiction, lesbian science fiction and lesbian crime fiction), they nonetheless share an important feature: they all grant a pre-eminent place in the narrative to the genesis and development of the lesbian subject. Whether it takes the form of 'biomythography', such as Audre Lorde's Zami (1982); of confession, such as Kate Millett's Flying (1974); of the picaresque, such as Rita Mae Brown's Rubyfruit: Jungle (1973); or of the bildungsroman, such as Jeanette Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985), autobiographical fiction conventionally inscribes a myth of origins, delineating the coming into being of the lesbian subject.

It could be argued that, on the level of everyday experience at

least, autobiography is the exemplary lesbian mode. In life as in literature, lesbians tell stories about themselves which seek to both explain and gain recognition of their existence. The 'Coming Out' story is the paradigmatic form of lesbian oral story-telling, relating the central rite of passage in lesbian life histories. Since the inception of the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1970s, the Coming Out story has represented the public affirmation of lesbian identity, the point at which the lesbian subject declares her existence to the world and moves from social invisibility to visibility. Given the social and personal risks of this undertaking, the Coming Out narrative plays an important political and inspirational role in cementing a shared and communal sense of identity as well as affirming the individual.

Confession, from a lesbian point of view, therefore carries a double sense of urgency: coming out is a matter of psychological urgency for many lesbians because remaining closeted can consign us to silence and invisibility. If lesbians don't 'confess', we will effectively cease to exist, a state of affairs which is summed up in the gay activist organisation Act Up's slogan 'Silence=Death'. If the confessional is the appropriate metaphorical space of self-revelation, the closet is the equivalent space of self-concealment and denial. In her study Epistemologies of the Closet Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that the closet works to sustain major organising distinctions in our culture between public and private, inside and outside, secrecy and disclosure, subject and object. As Alan Sinfield, reviewing Sedgwick's book, comments,

The 'open secret' ... is a powerful policing concept whereby homosexuality is rendered both unspeakable and ominously present; a private matter hovering always on the edge of public exposure. It must not be allowed fully into the open, for that would grant it public status; yet it must not disappear altogether, for then it would be beyond control and would no longer work as a warning against deviance².

By making the secret open, making the 'private' public, and by disclosing lesbian sexuality and disseminating it as lesbian textuality, lesbian confessional writing can work to undermine the logic of the closet. In the 1970s and early 1980s a number of anthologies of lesbian personal narratives were published with the intention of breaking the silence about lesbian existence and bringing the Lesbian Nation into being through the naming power of language. Examples include The Coming Out Stories (1980), The Lesbian Path (1980) and This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1984).

However, some critics challenge the idea that lesbian confession is necessarily subversive. Bonnie Zimmerman, for example, while celebrating the innovative nature of these texts, cautions against a continuing reliance on what she calls the 'politics of trans-literation':

[The] power of the word has been used primarily to name, and thereby control, individual and group identity³.

The history of the reception of Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness (1928) demonstrates that confession can also serve to trap and imprison lesbians in a narrow and constraining definition. As

Foucault demonstrates, the entry of homosexuality into discourse at the end of the nineteenth-century 'made possible a strong advance of social controls in the area of "perversity"'⁴. Hall's text represents what Foucault calls a 'reverse discourse':

Homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified⁵.

The imperative of confession can therefore work both ways; in making visible it can also label and fix identity in ways not of the subject's own choosing. As I will show, recent lesbian autobiographical fiction attempts to negotiate this paradox in a number of ways: by redefining the sign 'lesbian' as a positive feminist identity, as in Anja Meulenbelt's The Shame is Over: A Political Life Story (1980); by representing lesbianism as one of several identities claimed by the narrator in the text, as in Audre Lorde's Zami; or by depicting lesbian subjectivity as largely transcending social constraints, as in Rita Mae Brown's Rubyfruit Jungle.

The public narrative, implied by the term 'coming out', is, of course, intimately linked to another, more personal and anterior narrative which concerns the lesbian subject's own acknowledgement of her sexual difference. These two moments, self-acknowledgement and coming out, are depicted in the lesbian novel of formation which, as Bonnie Zimmerman writes, represents:

... the explanation of how we came to be as lesbians, how our consciousness formed and our identity developed⁶.

The Well of Loneliness by Radclyffe Hall is the earliest and most famous example of the genre. The novel, which is a bildungsroman and a künstlerroman (a portrait of the artist), combines a narrative of confession and a narrative of discovery, in tracing the genesis and development of its 'invert' heroine, Stephen Gordon. Despite the universal opprobrium attached to homosexuality, Stephen is driven by the need for social recognition to identify herself as a member of the 'third sex'. As the original meaning of the word suggests, confession takes on a religious significance in the novel, since Stephen's, or Hall's, Catholicism prompts an appeal to God to 'acknowledge us ... before the whole world [and] give us also the right to our existence'⁷.

Despite its focus on a tragic lesbian figure, isolated from a supportive community, The Well of Loneliness, in its final pages, gestures towards a shared, social lesbian identity. The Coming Out narrative, in tracing the identity of an individual, also inevitably invokes a concept of the group with which that individual identifies. Like the slave narrative in the history of Black American literature, lesbian autobiographical fiction is at once a personal and a social narrative. The contemporary lesbian Coming Out narrative differs considerably from Hall's version. The major change resides in the redefinition of lesbianism as a positive, indeed privileged, rather than a tragic, identity. This representational shift has been made possible by the Gay Liberation Movement and the Second Wave of

feminism. Evelyne Keitel has pointed to the importance of autobiographical writing to oppositional subcultures seeking self-definition; she sees it as part of the emergence of a 'counter-public spheres' literature in the 1970s and '80s which articulates the interests and experiences of subordinate groups, such as women and people of colour⁸. Contemporary lesbian autobiographical fiction is part of this counter-cultural literature.

Lesbian Feminism & Autobiographical Literature

In the discussion of contemporary lesbian autobiographical fiction which follows I shall focus on two forms, namely the lesbian feminist confessional novel and the lesbian bildungsroman or novel of development. Both these forms involve the awakening of a feminist and/or lesbian consciousness. The former highlights self-revelation and analysis, and represents lesbianism as a choice based on political identification with women, usually occurring in adulthood through the process of consciousness-raising. In the latter, the lesbian subject reconstructs her origins in order to forge an identity. The moment of lesbian awakening usually occurs much earlier in the protagonist's development, during childhood, and is presented either as a 'true self' or as a product of her response to her socialization. In placing emphasis on the protagonist's formative years, rather than on her politicization through feminism, this form of lesbian autobiographical fiction corresponds more closely to the traditional bildungsroman, or novel of development. Each form emphasizes a different aspect of the lesbian subject. Whereas the

lesbian feminist confessional novel concerns the rebirth of its narrator as a political, woman-identified subject, the lesbian bildungsroman highlights her rebirth as a sexual, woman-loving subject. My discussion will initially examine the treatment of lesbian identity in lesbian feminist confessional texts, but I will subsequently focus more strongly on the lesbian novel of development. The latter, owing to its depiction of childhood experience, offers a wider scope in its representation of lesbian existence.

In Beyond Feminist Aesthetics Rita Felski places feminist autobiographical fiction as a whole in the context of the Women's Movement⁹. Like Keitel, she argues that autobiographical fiction serves an important instrumental role in giving fictional and political shape to women's shared experience and in positing women as a socially oppressed and politically unified group. Felski defines confessional writing as 'a type of autobiographical writing which signals its intention to foreground the most personal and intimate details of the author's life'¹⁰. The feminist genre, however, is inspired by the exemplary feminist model of consciousness-raising which seeks to uncover the political value of subjective experience. Examples of feminist autobiography which function both as personal testimony and as political commentary include Kate Millett's Flying and Sita (1977), Verena Stefan's Shedding (1975), and Anja Meulenbelt's When the Shame is Over.

These examples of feminist confessional fiction, written predominantly in the 1970s, explicitly align themselves with the goals of the Women's Liberation Movement. They chronicle the changes

in consciousness and lifestyle experienced by the narrator as she subjects her life to feminist scrutiny. They frequently focus on the protagonist's feelings of pain, confusion, guilt and self-hatred about sexuality, marriage, children and housework. Feminist confessional texts are 'conversion narratives' which depict the heroine's journey from an inauthentic self to a new 'feminist' self. Elizabeth Wilson characterizes feminist confession as 'an account of struggle, a moral tale, the exemplary charting of a woman's "born again" progress'¹¹. In many confessional texts of the 1970s the true feminist self which emerges at the end of the journey is a lesbian self. This trajectory reflects the influence of the lesbian feminist ideology of the 1970s, in which lesbianism was equated with female autonomy¹². Paradoxically, despite the emphasis on choice, identifying as lesbian became for many lesbian feminists the most authentic way of being a feminist. Lesbianism was reconceived as an elective identity or political choice, rather than as an essence or inborn quality of the self. In the words of one lesbian feminist 'Any woman can become a lesbian'¹³.

The feminist conversion narrative provides a means of dramatizing the lesbian feminist redefinition of lesbianism as a political commitment to women and as an extension of sisterhood. In Marge Piercy's Small Changes (1974) the two female characters central to the narrative move through the early feminism of the 1960s and '70s. One becomes trapped in a destructive marriage, while the other finds sexual fulfilment and autonomy with a woman lover. Anja Meulenbelt's The Shame is Over and Verena Stefan's Shedding likewise

feature protagonists who adopt a lesbian identity in the course of their development. In the latter, the narrator's development as a feminist subject is charted through her sexual relationships which represent her journey from sexual subjugation to sexual autonomy. She has relationships with a socialist white man, a black man and, finally, another woman. However, at the end of the novel the narrator terminates her lesbian relationship and chooses celibacy, an act which suggests that selfhood is more easily achieved through solitude than through relationships with others. Her final words, 'I am my own woman' register the freedom she experiences in finally possessing her own body¹⁴.

The emphasis placed on sexual choice and transformation in these examples is characteristic of feminist confessional fiction. It reflects the feminist belief that the 'personal is political' and that sexuality is deeply implicated in women's subordination. In promulgating the idea that women can go beyond the limitations of heterosexual monogamy and make their own sexual choices, radical feminist ideology, and lesbian feminism in particular, appealed to many women. However, this idea was frequently based on a voluntaristic concept of sexuality which assumes that sexual identity can be consciously transformed. In the majority of confessional narratives, including Shedding, sexual relationships are depicted in a primarily political light, as 'stages' of the feminist journey. Elizabeth Wilson is critical of this aspect of the feminist confessional, commenting that none of the relationships in Shedding is represented with any sense of authenticity. The lesbian

relationship, she complains, comes across as motivated more by ideology than desire¹⁵. Moreover, Rosalind Coward, in an article appropriately entitled, 'Cautionary Tales', remarks that 'the centrality attributed to sexual consciousness has always been a potential problem in feminist novels for it seems to reproduce the dominant ways in which women are defined in this society - through their sexual relationships'¹⁶. Coward's point is a valuable one; however, for lesbian readers and writers, the inscription of lesbian sexual identity and desire in lesbian confessional writing is necessarily a dominant and motivating factor of the narrative.

In addition to the emphasis on sexual choice, the lesbian feminist confessional writing of the 1970s typically strives towards representativeness and a sense of authenticity. In the context of the Women's Movement, the main function of confession is political, serving to unite women in a shared sense of identity. Felski argues that it is the 'representative aspects of the author's experience rather than her unique individuality which are important'¹⁷. Both Anja Meulenbelt and Verena Stefan present their lives as exemplary, as stories for and about 'Everywoman'. In When the Shame is Over Meulenbelt writes:

Whoever thinks that this is all, one woman who wrestled with her shame, one unique herstory separate from all the others has not understood. (p.275)

The lesbian feminist confessional novel focuses on typicality as a means of emphasizing the general applicability of the author's

experiences and of encouraging reader identification. Confessional literature is typically read as a truthful account of the author's experiences, and texts such as Stefan's and the lesbian collection of life stories, Inventing Ourselves (1991), have frequently been used as the basis for group discussions in which readers compare their own experiences to those narrated in the text.

Reader identification is further facilitated by the predominantly realist writing style of lesbian feminist confessional writing. Keitel makes the interesting point that feminist confession has reclaimed the very representative and mimetic function for literature which has been rendered problematic by modernism¹⁸. In the majority of examples of oppositional confessional writing the concern is not so much with the negation or problematization of the self, as with the affirmation of oppositional values and experiences, which serves to identify common norms and bind together members of oppressed groups. Rather than defamiliarizing female experience, confessional texts attempt to generate a process of identification between reader and author. They therefore emphasize the referential and denotative functions of language. In Flying, for example, Kate Millett explicitly de-emphasizes the literary aspects of writing confession, and insists 'this is not literature'¹⁹. Sita, Millett's other confessional novel, is also typical of confessional writing in its focus on inclusiveness and authenticity. It attempts to capture the rhythms of lived experience in a verbatim, almost documentary-style, account of the final painful stages of a dying love affair between the author and an older woman. Millett writes: 'It should be

described as an experiment in charting and recording a relationship. Day to day. No one's ever done that. Surely not of two women'²⁰.

The concept of 'authenticity' is central to the representation of the self in the confessional mode. As Francis Hart states, confession is 'personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth of the self'²¹. The idea of an authentic self has also been central to much feminist and lesbian criticism. Feminists such as Adrienne Rich have repeatedly argued that patriarchy has denied women access to their essential selves, by instilling in women a false consciousness and presenting them with a distorted image of themselves. In the 1970s feminists documented the various ways in which the ideology of femininity operated to oppress women and obscure their real experiences. Audre Lorde was among those who argued that language represented one way of countering women's self-alienation and recovering women's authenticity. Feminist writing, especially confessional texts which aim to raise women's consciousness, was seen as having the potential to liberate women's 'true' identities. Kate Millett confirms this view when she states that the purpose of writing is to discover a buried self and to bring about 'the recovering of my being'²².

The concept of a 'true' female or feminist self lying behind male misrepresentations has been important in challenging patriarchal images of women and in uniting and inspiring women. However, some feminist critics have criticised the emphasis of identity politics on authenticity of experience and the discovery of a 'true' self. Elizabeth Wilson, while acknowledging the important affirmative and

consciousness-raising function of the feminist confessional, ultimately questions its political value, and points to the limitations of the genre. She describes her own autobiography, Mirror Writing (1982), as an attempt to question 'the very authenticity that is the hallmark of feminist narratives':

I wanted something different; I wanted to write about experience freed from the imperative of affirmation, to explore ambiguity, complexity and the 'politically incorrect', to escape the twin poles of suffering and triumph which constitute the approved feminist trajectory. For it is the journey from victim to heroine that characterizes feminist confessional writing, and I was neither²³.

Wilson is critical of writing which promotes positive images at the expense of contradiction and ambiguity. She champions Kate Stimpson's Classnotes (1979) which, in treating the theme of lesbian self-hatred, received adverse criticism from some sections of the lesbian feminist community²⁴. Mirror Writing adopts a different strategy, combining autobiographical anecdote with a discussion of theories of sexuality, subjectivity and ways of writing about the self, in order to foreground the construction of selfhood in the text. However, although Wilson's self-reflexive text can illuminate this process in a way unavailable to narratives of affirmation (or suffering), textual validation of lesbian experience has considerable value. It is particularly important to a lesbian identity which is continually threatened with erasure and social invisibility.

Certain lesbian feminist confessional novels, such as Shedding and When the Shame is Over, in charting the process of an awakening,

also belong to the genre of self-discovery fiction. Felski describes this genre as the form most clearly identified with contemporary feminist writing. In it, she says, 'access to self-knowledge is seen to require an explicit refusal of the heterosexual romance plot'²⁵. The genre represents a re-working of the traditional bildungsroman, and thematizes gender as the central problem for women seeking to reconcile individual and social demands. Other examples of the genre include Margaret Atwood's Surfacing (1979), Joan Barfoot's Gaining Ground (1978), Marge Piercy's Small Changes, and Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1983). In her commentary on these novels, Felski points to parallels between their construction of female identity and the narratives of emancipation which shape feminist ideology itself. Felski argues that the fictional plots devised by women have undergone changes in recent years which correspond to changing ideologies of female identity and, thus, to the changing social contours of women's lives:

Thus the last twenty years have seen the emergence of a distinctive new narrative structure for women, tracing a process of separation as the essential precondition for any path to self-knowledge ... the novel of self-discovery proceeds from the recognition of women's estrangement within a male-defined environment but also articulates the possibility of at least a partial individual liberation from existing ideological and social constraints toward a degree of self-determination. (p.124)

Many of the novels of discovery discussed by Felski centre on their protagonists' negotiation of heterosexual femininity. The emphasis on achieving autonomy means that, as in Shedding, sexuality

tends to be subordinated to the process of self-discovery. Unlike in the traditional bildungsroman, love relations are represented as a subsidiary part of the heroine's education; they are depicted as more often hindering than advancing her progress. Lesbian relationships are an important exception to this rule, precisely because they imply independence from men. Felski argues that in the novel of self-discovery lesbian relationships are 'determined by their narrative function in furthering the protagonist's intellectual and emotional self-understanding'. She continues:

Knowledge, rather than desire, is emphasized as the key to relationships between women; the other woman provides a mirror in which the protagonist discovers herself, finding her own female identity reflected: 'We are doubles; when I encounter her, at the same time I encounter a part of myself'. (pp.131-132)

In so far as lesbian relationship contributes to the construction of an autonomous female identity, it is included as a significant plot feature, as in Marge Piercy's Braided Lives (1983) and Michele Roberts's A Piece of the Night (1978). In these plots the lesbian relationship functions instrumentally and, usually, transitionally, as a means of achieving self-knowledge. The lesbian other is conceived of as an extension of the self, rather than as an eroticised object of desire in her own right. This formulation is typical of texts such as Shedding and When the Shame is Over which were strongly influenced by lesbian feminism and the concept of sisterhood it promoted.

In contrast, autobiographical fiction written by lesbian

writers in the tradition of the bildungsroman does not represent lesbianism as either a transitional moment in the heroine's awakening, or as a choice based merely on political identification with women. In the lesbian bildungsroman lesbianism functions as a sign of the protagonist's difference from other women, rather than as a means of identification with them. Unlike the examples of the lesbian feminist confessional novel discussed above, examples of the lesbian bildungsroman do not highlight representativeness but, on the contrary, focus on atypicality. The heroine's difference is frequently signified by the title of the novel or the terms in which it is advertised: the front cover of Rita Mae Brown's novel of lesbian development, Rubyfruit. Jungle, proclaims: 'A novel about being different and loving it'²⁶. Similarly, Florence King implies her non-conformity in the title of Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady (1985); and Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit by Jeanette Winterson gestures metaphorically towards a 'different' ontology. These lesbian novels fall outside Felski's area of treatment precisely because they diverge from the dominant (lesbian) feminist paradigm in their special privileging and celebration of lesbian love.

The Lesbian Bildungsroman or Novel of Development

This 'different' lesbian trajectory belongs to a specifically lesbian writing tradition, with its roots in pre-Women's Liberation lesbian culture, which inscribes itself both within and against contemporary feminist writing. This form of lesbian plotting does not subordinate sexual desire to self-knowledge and autonomy, but represents them as

interconnected. Just as lesbian detective fiction inscribes lesbian desire as the motivating factor for detective investigation, so the self-discovery plot makes self-knowledge contingent on lesbian identification and active lesbian sexual desire. In Rubyfruit, Jungle and Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady, for example, the heroine's active desire for other women is crucial to her self-definition and the process of self-discovery. This is not to say that knowledge-sharing between women is not important; indeed, in King's novel the protagonist's lesbian identity is first signalled in the context of female pedagogy. Florence's eroticization of the figure of the intellectual spinster explicitly fuses the two themes of knowledge and lesbian desire. However, in all these examples, lesbian sexual desire is given a priority lacking in the feminist narrative.

Whereas the lesbian feminist confessional novel frequently utilizes anti-romantic ideologies, and follows a trajectory of sexual subjugation to sexual autonomy, the lesbian novel is frequently inscribed in terms of sexual/romantic ideologies, and follows a trajectory of sexual confusion to sexual fulfilment and pleasure. The feminist confessional novel tends to focus on the oppressive and unpleasurable aspects of (hetero)sex, and to emphasize sexual independence from men. In the lesbian novel of development, in contrast, the positive benefits of lesbian sexual relationships are highlighted, and a greater emphasis is placed on sexual desire.

Moreover, whereas the lesbian feminist confessional novel tends to strive towards 'realism' and 'authenticity', and to adopt a serious and didactic tone, the lesbian novel of development, in

contrast, is more commonly comic and playful; it tends towards anti-realism and the fantastic. Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady and Rubyfruit, Jungle eschew the moral register characteristic of feminist writing, and adopt an irreverent, amoral tone of voice. Terry Castle discusses the preference for non-mimetic modes in lesbian texts, arguing that it is characteristic of lesbian fiction. 'We might call this "euphoric" lesbian counterplotting', she writes:

Precisely because it is motivated by a yearning for that which is, in a cultural sense, implausible ... lesbian fiction characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades as 'realistic' in surface detail, a strongly fantastical, allegorical or utopian tendency²⁷.

In this context the discourse of 'heroinism' criticised by Wilson assumes a different function. Rather than representing an inadequate account of subjectivity within the terms of realism, lesbian autobiographical fiction, as I will show, frequently eschews realism and adopts a utopian mode as the basis for lesbian representation.

The lesbian novel of development characteristically works as an affirmation of sub-cultural identity but, unlike the feminist genre, it is unlikely to present its protagonist's experiences as typical or representative of women's experiences. This is precisely because as part of a minority group, the lesbian subject is not representative of all women. In order to account for her difference from other women and inscribe her lesbian identity, the lesbian 'confessor' of the 1970s foregrounds her uniqueness and atypicality. The protagonists of Florence King's Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady and of Rita Mae

Brown's Rubyfruit Jungle are exuberant, extroverted and, as the back cover of the latter states, 'gutsy and wild'. They are nothing if not extraordinary. This foregrounding of atypicality is, I would suggest, a result of the desire to mark out lesbian difference in the text. The sign 'lesbian' works to specify a female identity premised on a rebellion against normative heterosexual femininity. Whereas heterosexuality comes across as dull and pedestrian in these novels, lesbianism is the privileged site of adventure and dynamism.

In addition, the lesbian novel of development tends to follow a more linear, egoistic and 'masculine' trajectory than the feminist version. The lesbian protagonist is typically displaced from the traditional female sphere, as if her sexual orientation is propelling her forward. Yet, at the same time, she is frequently located at the heart of the dominant culture and shown as excelling in areas representative of female experience. King's and Brown's heroines are in many ways exemplary 'All-American girls'. Ginny Babcock, the cheerleading heroine of Lisa Alther's Kinflicks (1977), paradoxically proves more proficient at heterosexual sex than her heterosexual sisters. In these examples of American novels lesbian identity, through its inscription as an American identity, is portrayed as a natural or exemplary part of American culture. Stephen Gordon, the aristocratic heroine of The Well of Loneliness, is similarly portrayed as born and bred in the heart of England, and appears more of a country gentleman than the 'real thing'.

The representation of lesbian identity in the contemporary lesbian bildungsroman tends to fall into two categories. The first

portrays it from a position of acknowledged repression and oppression, and involves the representation of internalised self-hatred and sexual abjectness, as in Kate Stimpson's Class Notes and Sharon Isabell's Yesterday's Lessons (1974). The second rejects discourses of damnation, and celebrates lesbian sexuality as a transcendent, triumphant, affirmative and self-realising experience. Examples of the latter include Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Ruby-Fruit Jungle and Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady. Whereas, in the first mode the heroine is often portrayed as guilt-ridden and lacking in confidence, in the second she is represented as shameless, dare-devil and adventurous. These two trajectories bear a striking resemblance to the two categories defined by Catharine Stimpson in relation to twentieth century lesbian fiction as a whole²⁸. In her essay 'Zero Degree Deviancy', Stimpson argues that lesbian literature has followed one of two literary patterns which she calls 'the dying fall' and 'the enabling escape'. The former, exemplified by Hall's The Well of Loneliness, is a narrative of damnation, in which the status of the lesbian is that of a lonely outcast. The latter, illustrated by Woolf's Orlando (1928), represents a reversal narrative, in which the lesbian character successfully rebels against social stigma and self-contempt.

The Stages of Development in the Lesbian Bildungsroman

In representing the genesis of the lesbian subject, the lesbian bildungsroman depicts the protagonist's recognition of emotional and sexual feelings for women, her recognition that such feelings are

taboo and illegitimate in our culture, and the way in which she deals with this understanding. In the majority of contemporary texts this involves a psychological acceptance of her lesbian identity, and a subsequent public affirmation of it. The structure of the lesbian bildungsroman is that of a journey or quest, in which the protagonist moves symbolically and emotionally from the terrain of normative heterosexual femininity to a new lesbian world. Within the journey structure, there are a number of stages through which the protagonist must pass in order to become a lesbian subject. The first stage, as in the traditional bildungsroman, concerns the heroine's negotiation of gender difference. The second stage involves the articulation of her difference in terms of sexual preference and of her nascent feelings toward women. In the third and final stage of her development the heroine explicitly identifies and publically acknowledges her lesbianism, sometimes becoming part of a lesbian community.

In many examples of the lesbian bildungsroman, as in the lesbian feminist confessional novel, the movement towards lesbian identification is presented as a discovery of a 'true' or authentic self, buried beneath layers of 'false' consciousness. This is suggested by the title of Elizabeth Riley's All that False Instruction (1975), a novel which describes the painful experiences of growing up lesbian in Australia in the 1950s and '60s. As the protagonist progresses towards lesbian identification, she rejects the dictates of mainstream society in a series of confrontations

with the representatives of homophobic society: parents, teachers, friends and employers. Molly Bolt, in Rubyfruit Jungle, is rejected by her mother and her first two lovers, and is finally expelled from college on the grounds of 'immoral conduct'. But she remains true to her self-definition, insisting defiantly 'I'm me!'²⁹. Although lesbianism is frequently presented as an essence, something lying dormant and waiting to be awakened or named, the developmental plots of lesbian autobiographical fiction do, in their very structure, acknowledge lesbianism as a process of becoming, rather than a given state. The journey narratives imply movement and change, and the gradual accretion of identity. In some texts the movement towards lesbian identification is presented as a process of divestment, a 'shedding' of the accumulated layers of learned gender roles and behaviour. In Shedding, by Verena Stefan, the protagonist, as the title suggests, casts off the layers of her old self - wife, mother, heterosexual - one by one, in her search for an autonomous feminist self. Likewise, in The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan, by Maggie Redding, Daffodil ultimately moves beyond the role of sock-washing wife which she had previously accepted, joins a women's group and obtains a lesbian lover. In Sister Gin (1979) the fifty-year old Su ironically 'regresses' and, by the end of the novel, she has become an angry ten-year old feminist.

The lesbian bildungsroman typically begins with the lesbian subject's reconstruction of her origins. In seeking to account for her existence, she explores the conditions of her birth and upbringing. Although examples of the bildungsroman depict a variety

of family circumstances, they characteristically inscribe the lesbian subject as, in some way, special. As the narrator of Oranges are not the Only Fruit says in the appropriately entitled first section, 'Genesis': 'I cannot remember a time when I did not know that I was special'³⁰. As the adopted daughter of a pentecostal evangelist, destined to become a missionary, Jeanette is perceived as one of 'the elect'. In Rubyfruit Jungle, Molly's difference is initially inscribed in terms of her illegitimacy:

No one remembers her beginnings ... I didn't know anything about [mine] until I was seven years old ... I learned I was a bastard. (p.3)

When her step-mother, Carrie, informs Molly that her mother was a 'slut', she retorts with angry defiance: 'I don't care. It makes no difference where I came from. I'm here, ain't I?'³¹. As this exchange suggests, Rubyfruit Jungle is a narrative of self-creation: 'I got myself born, that's what counts'³². Of course, Molly's difference is significant in that it sets her apart from 'ordinary' women, and provides the momentum for the lesbian narrative of awakening.

Like Molly and Jeanette, Daffodil in The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan is represented as a foundling, sharing none of the family characteristics. Whereas her sister and father are tall and dark, Daffodil is 'big, blonde, pink and white, with fat legs ...'³³. In its opening sentence, the novel introduces the various themes of the lesbian bildungsroman, including the problematic nature

of the heroine's 'difference', the need to explain it, and her supposition that she has a 'secret self':

In our family there have been many theories put forward to explain why I am such a problem, but I have one of my own which I dare not tell the others. (p.1)

Her physical difference transmutes into a pathological difference through her exacting mother's designation of her as a 'problem'. The novel traces Daffodil's preoccupation with her problematic difference but, whereas Molly's difference is marked as lesbian early on in the novel, Daffodil cannot identify hers. The narrative keeps the reader in suspense, delaying the moment of identification until the final pages.

In common with autobiographical novels by heterosexual writers, the lesbian bildungsroman stages the primary oedipal scene in which the protagonist first becomes aware of the fact that gender difference is mediated by possession or lack of the phallus. In Ruby-Fruit Jungle, Molly learns this distinction when she sees her friend Broccoli Detwiler urinating. When Broccoli asks her not to tell, she responds:

What's there to tell? All you got is a wad of pink wrinkles hangin' around it. It's ugly. (p.4)

The episode represents a humorous feminist deflation of the Freudian myth of penis envy. Rather than registering dismay at her own 'castration', Molly is scornful, and characteristically takes

advantage of the situation by making money from exhibiting Broccoli's penis to other children. However, Molly's reaction could also be seen as an example of the psychoanalytic concept of disavowal: the girl child's refusal to accept her castration. In 'The Psychogenesis of a Case Homosexuality in a Woman', Freud argues that this response is typical of female homosexuals and represents a means of rejecting a passive feminine identification³⁴. Disavowal of the phallus does not, however, represent the only response to gender difference in the lesbian bildungsroman. In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Jeanette does not so much disavow the phallus as fail to notice it: in her strongly matriarchal community 'men were something you had around the place, not particularly interesting, but quite harmless'³⁵. The narrator of The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan exhibits the more typical reaction of curiosity:

Buster was lying there ... his willie exposed. I had never, in my six years seen one before. This was the moment of revelation - boys and girls were different. I had no need to ask. I knew.
(p.2)

When Daffodil touches the object, her mother's horrified reaction leads Daffodil to wonder if 'there are only two reasons for not touching something - it's either dirty or sacred. Which was this?'³⁶. At this point in the text, the voice of the older, knowing Daffodil intervenes to suggest that this fetishization of the phallus combined with her Catholic mother's sexual repression 'was the cause of my problems or rather, my being seen as a problem'. Unlike Molly, Daffodil attempts to conform to society's concept of gender

appropriate behaviour. She desperately wants to 'fit in' but her mother's designation of her as a 'problem child' precludes this. It is only on reflection that she realizes her mother's eccentric values and expectations are implicated in her sense of difference.

Like Stephen Gordon in The Well of Loneliness, who is brought up as a boy, the contemporary lesbian subject's first rebellion is frequently portrayed in fiction as focusing on gender identity. The narrators of Rubyfruit. Jungle and Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady reject conventional codes of femininity and become tomboys. In the majority of examples of the lesbian bildungsroman the heroines do not conform to a stereotypical pattern of girlhood and, whether this takes the form of gender deviance or some other kind of rebellion, it is typically accounted for in terms of a matrix of 'extraordinary girlhood'. Narratives of extraordinary girlhood share a number of key features which may be summarised as follows: the protagonist has an atypical homelife in relation to the wider community. She is set apart from other children and feels 'different' from them. She is unusually intelligent and has a strong sense of self. The protagonist is influenced by a strong maternal figure who is eccentric, domineering and zealous, and with whom the protagonist has a love/hate relationship. The protagonist expresses her 'difference' by rejecting conventional femininity, thus making her a feminist heroine. The protagonist is portrayed adopting a 'masculine' role and her unconventionality eventually finds positive expression in lesbianism. Examples of novels which conform to this pattern include Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady; Oranges are not the Only

Fruit; Rubyfruit Jungle; and The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan.

These novels use humour to portray, in the style of the picaresque, the heroine's adventures as she negotiates family life and clashes with the values of the outside world. They depict a series of comic episodes focusing on eccentric and non-conformist childhoods. Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady, for example, feature strong female relatives with a 'mission'; pentecostal fundamentalism in Jeanette's mother's case, moral educational zeal in the case of Florence's granny. Jeanette's mother wants her to become a missionary while Florence's granny wants her to become a Southern Lady. Both novels present girlhood as an eccentric, ex-centric, almost surreal experience. In each, the comedy is a product of maternal attempts - and failures - to 'invent' their daughters in their own image, and both protagonists assert their individuality and difference through a rejection of heterosexual femininity and an adoption of lesbian identity. Daffodil, in The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan, sums up the predicament of extraordinary girls when she remarks 'Again I was different. Now it was an odd mother that made me different'³⁷.

The extraordinary girls depicted in the lesbian bildungsroman relate more easily to adults than to children, and find difficulty adjusting to their peer group whom they regard as virtually another species. In Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady Florence King comments on her experience at school:

..I was miserable: I wasn't used to children and they were getting on my nerves ... Worse, it appeared that I was a child too. I hadn't known that before; I thought I was just short. (p.59)

Thereafter, Florence refers scornfully to children as 'watery moles' or 'huggy bears'. The families of protagonists of the lesbian bildungsroman are portrayed as treating them like adults and imparting esoteric knowledge to them which makes them appear monstrously precocious to outsiders. Demonstrating this knowledge is a source of pride for the heroines of Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady and Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, and a source of horror and alarm for their teachers. The episode in the former novel in which Florence produces a gory picture of the sinking of the Titanic for a history class parallels the scene in the latter text in which Jeanette stitches an Old Testament prophecy of doom into her biblical sampler. In another episode Jeanette grows a hyacinth for a competition and entitles it, inappropriately from her classmates' point of view, 'The Annunciation':

This was because the blooms were huddled up close, and reminded me of Mary and Elizabeth soon after the visit by the angel. I thought it was a very clever marriage of horticulture and theology, but it didn't win. (p.47)

As the philosophical voice of the narrator's older self then remarks: 'what constitutes a problem is not the thing, or the environment where we find the thing, but the conjunction of the two'. Jeanette's religious world view is deemed unnatural in a child by her liberal-

minded teachers, but is commended by her mother who takes her to the cinema as a reward.

In the majority of examples of the lesbian bildungsroman mothers and female relatives dominate the family home and the child's early life. Fathers are shadowy figures who, in some cases, barely exist at all. In Oranges are Not the Only Fruit, for example, Jeanette refers to her father as 'Mother's husband' and remarks 'I thought he was nice although he didn't say much'³⁸. Much of the novel's humour involves the depiction of a family life in which conventional gender expectations and roles are reversed:

Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn't matter what. She was in the white corner and that was that. (p.1)

In Jeanette's working class community women dominate public life, which is centred on the Church. She is surrounded by strong, organized women who represent the cultural values of the community. On account of the matriarchal character of her community, Jeanette never experiences the sense of gender inferiority common to many bildungsroman heroines. Indeed, as she remarks, 'in terms of power I had enough to keep Mussolini happy'³⁹. Although Jeanette ultimately rejects the values of her mother and her community, she does not deny their role in shaping her identity and in providing her with a strong, if not impregnable, sense of self. Through her mother she acquires the self-conviction, determination and power of 'prophecy' which sustain her as a lesbian and as an artist.

Oranges are Not the Only Fruit shares the tendency of the lesbian bildungsroman to represent the mother's domination of the protagonist's early years as deeply implicated in her development as lesbian. However, it is too simplistic to suggest that these novels represent domineering mothers as responsible for their daughter's lesbianism. Rather, the mother figure provides a feminist model of indomitable female strength and power which the heroine carries over into her lesbian relationships, even as she reacts against aspects of her mother's character. Although there is a tendency to caricature the pattern of dominant mother and lesbian daughter for humorous effect as, for example, in The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan, the lesbian bildungsroman generally resists the temptation and offers a more subtle portrait of the relationship. Gerd Brantenberg's novel What Comes Naturally (1986), which depicts the predicament of growing up as a lesbian in 1960s' Oslo, uses humour to parody stereotypical accounts of the formation of lesbian identity and to question traditional assumptions about 'normal' and 'abnormal' behaviour. Brantenberg lists the various permutations of family background which psychologists have advanced to 'explain' the genesis of lesbian identity. These include the 'abnormal' patterns of strong mother/weak father, strong father/weak mother, an absent father and orphan status. She then mischievously adds:

In normal families, however, daughters tend to become heterosexual.

Apart from a couple of cases in which a girl grows up with a father and a mother and two brothers and a sister ... (p.33)

In other words, the families of lesbians are as diverse as those of heterosexuals. Nonetheless, the lesbian novel of development, in common with feminist writing, does place particular emphasis on the theme of mother/daughter relationships. Hélène Cixous suggests that the figure of the mother is the central metaphor of women's writing⁴⁰. She urges woman to 'write herself' into a woman-text which is both about women and takes the shape of a woman's body, and is, like an egg or a womb, not closed but endless. For Cixous woman and woman-as-text stand in the symbiotic relationship of mother to child:

There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other - in particular, the other woman. In her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter ... She writes in white ink⁴¹.

In the process of writing, according to Cixous, woman will discover the (maternal) body which has been confiscated from her and thereby effect a radical rupture of phallogentric language.

Audre Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of my Name develops, from a black lesbian point of view, the idea of the mother as the source of the female body/voice. Lorde traces her lesbianism back to her mother and to the black women she loved in her formative years. She depicts her return to Carriacou, her mother's home, where 'it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood', and consequently situates her lesbianism in the context of black women's culture⁴². However, Lorde inverts society's idea that the mother is to blame for her daughter's lesbianism, for rather than interpreting her homosexuality as evidence of female pathology, she

celebrates the qualities of strength and sensitivity which she inherits from her mother. Reconciliation with the mother, a feature of the lesbian bildungsroman in general, takes on a particular urgency in Zami, perhaps because the mother-daughter bond offers Lorde, as a black woman in a racist culture, the only positive image of self. Lorde invokes her mother as the source of her energy and 'the power behind her voice'. Although this idea is implicit in many examples of the lesbian bildungsroman, Lorde's emphasis possibly reflects black women's extreme alienation from (white) individualist models of selfhood and the extent to which their sense of self is rooted in a collective identity of black womanhood. It is only in the context of an affirmative female community that Lorde as a black woman can speak at all.

The initial stage of the developmental process as portrayed in the lesbian bildungsroman frequently concludes with the protagonist's first lesbian experience. This is generally represented as a private and 'innocent' affair, as yet unlabelled by the world as deviant or unnatural. When Molly and her childhood friend Leota in Ruby Fruit Jungle caress each other, they have no conception that what they are doing could be labelled deviant. In The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan, Daffodil and her friend Wendy innocently 'play hospitals':

Sometimes, to get to belly buttons, you had to pull knickers down slightly. If you pulled them down a bit more, there were even more interesting things on which to pour water, rose petals and tickle with grass stalks. (p.9)

Although the game becomes an obsession with them, spoken about 'in capital letters' and kept secret from interfering grown-ups who might find it a 'bit rude', it has still not been pejoratively labelled for them by the outside world. However, when Wendy's mother stops Wendy playing the game, Daffodil feels disappointment mingled with guilt. In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit Jeanette is represented, somewhat paradoxically, as simultaneously fully sexual and 'innocent', in contrast to the post-lapsarian view of sexuality. At first she feels no guilt about her sexuality and, in the context of a woman-centred culture, her actions feel perfectly natural. Winterson's emphasis on the naturalness of Jeanette's sexual feelings is also, of course, a means of representing lesbianism positively, in a manner at odds with the condemnatory discourse of 'Unnatural Passions' promulgated in the novel by the Church community.

In the second stage of her development the protagonist has to confront the outside world's hostility and negotiate the label 'lesbian'. Her response may be one of either shame or defiance. The majority of novels represent this process as in some way problematic for the lesbian subject although, in novels written after 1970 which aim to celebrate lesbianism, negative emotions are virtually absent. In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, for example, Jeanette experiences lesbianism as exhilarating rather than shameful despite the stigma the community attaches to her sexual orientation. It reacts punitively, by literally demonizing Jeanette. She is starved, beaten, and forced to undergo a ritual exorcism of her 'demon'. Instead of suffering the more conventional contemporary psychiatric treatment of

a 'sickness' undergone by the lesbian characters in Rubyfruit Jungle and All that False Instruction, Jeanette is punished as a sinner in the traditional religious manner. But, whereas the intolerant religious community views Jeanette as a pariah, she is a heroine for the lesbian reader⁴³. In an ingenious inversion of the demon motif, Jeanette accom^Modates her 'demon' and accepts her lesbian difference, saying 'I'm not getting rid of you'⁴⁴. It is possible to interpret Jeanette's 'demon' as a 'daemon', an aspect of herself which, in an internal dialogue, allows her both to express qualms about her lesbianism and to receive reassurance of its positive value. Winterson's use of elements of magical realism allows her to articulate the tension between 'victimhood' and 'heroism', and represent lesbian existence as a simultaneously dysphoric and euphoric experience.

However, several novels do portray the protagonist as experiencing a more circumspect and problematic accom^Modation to lesbian identity, and represent sexual awakening as a guilty or shameful experience. For example, Classnotes and Yesterday's Lessons present adverse images of the consequences of lesbian identification. Sharon, in Yesterday's Lessons, is racked with shame and guilt and even becomes ill after making love for the first time with a woman:

Her hands were gentle and soft and her mouth was on my chest. All of a sudden I wanted to jump and run. My body was cold and I didn't want anyone to touch me. (p.108)

These novels represent lesbian awakening in terms of a narrative of suffering, similar to that of The Well of Loneliness. Their protagonists internalize the negative images of lesbianism promulgated by homophobic society and, like Stephen Gordon, they experience their bodies and their desires as in some way pathological. Yet, owing to the discourse of lesbian feminism, which promotes a positive image of lesbianism, this kind of dysphoric representation is rare in the contemporary genre, which is much more likely to use a euphoric register and to celebrate the awakening of the lesbian subject. Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady, for example, represents lesbianism as a transcendent identity, which liberates its heroine socially and sexually. Molly, in Rubyfruit Jungle, when challenged about her lesbianism, replies proudly: 'Madam, I am a full-blooded, bona fide lesbian'⁴⁵. In the contemporary lesbian novel, therefore, a reaction of shame is frequently ruled out by the heroine's strong self-belief and the portrayal of lesbianism as liberating. However, as Elizabeth Wilson points out, positive images and the emphasis on celebration are themselves limiting, since they fail to acknowledge and treat the important themes of self-oppression and self-hatred. She approvingly cites Kate Stimpson's Classnotes as a valuable antidote to the conventional feminist narrative of affirmation and heroinism.

Notwithstanding the positive representation of lesbianism in the majority of recent novels, many also register the fearful power that the word 'lesbian' holds for the lesbian subject. As Su says in Sister Gin: 'Lesbianism. I hope I never hear that word again'⁴⁶. The

majority of texts emphasize the first occasion on which the protagonist encounters the word 'lesbian'. In The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan, for example, Daffodil's sister Lena refers to a woman teacher as 'One of those ... Bent. Queer. A lesbian'. At the time Daffodil is aware only that the term is a form of accusation, and replies: 'Don't be ridiculous. She looks quite normal to me'⁴⁷. When she ultimately has a relationship with a woman the episode becomes significant as an example of the gap between personal and public perceptions of lesbianism. In the heterosexual world lesbianism is at best a dirty joke, at worst a perversion, but for the heroine it feels right and good.

The heroine's recognition of the fact that her love for women is atypical, her perception of it as socially illegitimate, and her experience of the outside world's hostility are usually accompanied by another factor; namely, the inadequacy of the first lover who betrays the heroine by repudiating lesbian love and/or becoming heterosexual. This is an important feature of The Well of Loneliness in which Stephen is betrayed by Angela, and it is interesting that contemporary novels have retained this aspect of Hall's text, although they tend to put it to a different use. In The Well of Loneliness Angela's apostasy and Mary's marriage to Martin function to underscore the novel's contention that Stephen's lovers are not 'real', biological lesbians: only the 'invert' Stephen, as a member of the 'third sex', can claim this distinction. In recent novels, which have jettisoned the sexological definition of lesbian identity, betrayal by the protagonist's lovers functions to emphasize the

social stigma attached to lesbianism and to demonstrate the pressures on young women to conform to a heterosexual pattern. Betrayal is therefore represented as a product of a failure of courage, rather than a sexological inevitability. In Rubyfruit Jungle, for example, Molly's first lover, Leota, later repudiates their lesbian love affair, calling lesbians 'sick perverts'. Rather than be cowed by this betrayal, Molly retorts:

Let's stop this shit. I love women. I'll never marry a man and I'll never marry a woman either. That's not my way. I'm a devil-may-care lesbian. (p.220)

Similarly, in Oranges, Jeanette's lover Melanie is overwhelmed by the Church's disapprobation and persecution, and she moves away to get married. In a humorous exception to this pattern, Daffodil's first lover Chris, in The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan, does not leave her to become heterosexual and get married, but to undergo a sex-change! Another interesting feature of the novel is that it does not moralize about this decision: Chris's transsexuality is not represented as a betrayal, but rather as an acceptable choice.

The betrayal of the protagonist in the lesbian bildungsroman also serves to represent her, by means of contrast, in an heroic light; to identify the lesbian subject with feminist courage and integrity. It highlights the difference between the 'true' lesbian feminist and other women, especially bisexuals whom it presents in a pejorative light as 'failed' lesbians. In this respect contemporary use of the motif is commensurate with Hall's strategy in The Well of

Loneliness. On the whole, although negative attitudes towards lesbianism are allowed expression in recent novels when they are voiced by members of the heroine's community, the heroine herself is less likely to express doubts about her identity. She represents instead a more or less unproblematically positive attitude towards lesbian identity. The negative aspects are depicted as far outweighed by the positive benefits of lesbian identification. Molly Bolt, for example, is born apparently without original sin and, as a result, is completely devoid of guilt or shame about her transgressive behaviour. It is the heterosexual world which bears the burden of sexual guilt, while Molly herself is presented in terms of a pre-lapsarian naturalness. Similarly, Daffodil is represented as an 'innocent', bewildered by social and sexual mores. The idea that she constitutes a problem is ultimately dispelled by the implication that the problem is not in Daffodil but in society's attitudes to sex.

While viewing lesbianism in a positive light, the protagonists in the majority of novels experience a gap between self-acknowledgement and the proclamation of their lesbianism. In Elana Nachmann's Riverfinger Women (1974) Inez Riverfinger says, 'To know yourself at seventeen is not the same as saying it out loud'⁴⁸. Daffodil, in Redding's novel, knows she is different, but her difference is not named as lesbian until the final pages of the novel when she starts a relationship with another woman. The novel provides a confusing array of explanations for Daffodil's difference, refusing to articulate this explicitly in terms of lesbian identity. This strategy is inconsistent with the identity politics on which the

majority of lesbian novels of development are modelled, and has the effect of frustrating the lesbian reader in search of affirmation. It is, however, reassuring to non-lesbian readers. The novel is unusual in emphasizing sexual ambiguity and in refusing to name lesbianism as the major organizing discourse of the protagonist's sexual identity. Some readers may feel cheated by this omission, although others may view it as a refusal of fixed notions of sexual identity. In Zami, Lorde represents her assumption of lesbian identity as a gradual process. It is not until she leaves home that she recognizes she might be 'gay'. As a heterosexual woman Lorde finds sex with her boyfriend 'pretty dismal and frightening and a little demeaning'⁴⁹. She later becomes pregnant and has to have an abortion. When she meets another black woman who desires her and suggests that she is gay, Lorde responds positively, but it is only when she falls in love with Eudora, a white radical journalist, that Lorde acknowledges and affirms her lesbianism.

Resistance to the concept of lesbianism as a transcendent identity is more common to lesbian autobiographical novels by black and white working-class lesbian writers who tend to represent lesbianism as one of several identifications adopted by the narrator. In Oranges are not the Only Fruit, for example, Jeanette's working-class and religious upbringing is as important a part of her identity as the discovery of her lesbianism (and the former was allowed to take precedence over the latter in the BBC adaptation). In Alice Walker's The Color Purple Celie's identity as a black woman is as important as her lesbianism. Walker uses the term 'womanist', in

preference to 'lesbian', to refer to close, supportive relationships between black women⁵⁰. Like Adrienne Rich, Walker emphasizes the similarities and continuities in women's experience, regardless of sexual orientation. The term 'womanist' derives from Black American dialect and, for Walker, represents black women's strength and resilience. It is an expansive term, capable of uniting black women. However, as with Rich's redefinition of the sign 'lesbian', it risks eliding the specificity of lesbian existence.

In Zami Audre Lorde adopts a different strategy to that of Walker. She simultaneously emphasizes her identity as a black woman and her sense of lesbian difference, without subordinating one to the other. The novel describes the complex interrelationship between gender, sexual and racial identity, and deconstructs the idea of lesbianism as a discrete category which sets the lesbian subject apart from other women. For Lorde there are no single issues but rather an interlocking of oppressive systems. She demonstrates how racism, sexism and homophobia operate to divide men and women, black and white, gay and straight, and depicts the differences which separate black lesbians from white lesbians, black heterosexual women and, even, from each other:

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. (p.226)

She warns against ascribing 'an easy sameness' to lesbian identity, reminding us that lesbians are not all the same. Lorde explains that as a black lesbian she could not afford to settle for one definition, 'one narrow individuation of self', and that multiple identifications were necessary for her self-preservation and survival. Lorde writes that eventually she came to realize that the place of black lesbians, whom she designates 'sistah outsiders', was 'the very house of difference'⁵¹. Zami narrates the history of Lorde and her sister outsiders growing up in the United States in the 1950s. She writes critically of the racism of the 1950s' lesbian bar scene, from which as a black woman she was alienated. Lying at the intersection of black lesbian history and autobiography, Zami both celebrates and criticizes the lesbian community of which Lorde was a part. Her subtle deconstruction of shifting allegiances and identifications in Zami suggests that the idea of an authentic, uniform identity is in fact the privilege of hegemonic groups who are able to define themselves, rather than be defined by others. The text further implies that the notion of a homogeneous identity is a fiction, and that all identity, even white, heterosexual, male identity, necessarily traverses and is cut across by a variety of discourses.

The Motifs of Intellectual and Sexual Education

As in the traditional female bildungsroman, such as Jane Eyre (1847), contemporary lesbian texts focus on the protagonist's formative years and adolescence. The dominant motif in this stage of development is education, which is inextricably linked to the protagonist's

discovery of love and sexuality. The central importance of education is even signified in the titles of some texts, such as Stimpson's Class Notes and Sharon Isabell's Yesterday's Lessons. Repeatedly in the lesbian bildungsroman the heroine encounters a teacher or older schoolmate who is responsible for teaching her about literature, culture, food and wine, and who arouses strong emotional and sensual feelings in her. In Christina Crow's Miss X or the Wolf Woman (1990) the educational role is occupied by a teacher who seduces the heroine both intellectually and sexually. In Ruby Fruit Jungle, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady, a girlfriend first teaches the heroine the lessons of the flesh. In this respect, contemporary novels continue a long tradition in women's writing: in Jane Eyre, the young Jane's first mentors are her teacher Miss Temple and her schoolmate Helen. Dorothy Strachey's Olivia (1949) and Hall's The Unlit Lamp (1924), novels belonging to the twentieth-century genre of girls' school fiction, imbue close female friendships with a more overt eroticism. Elaine Marks has used the term 'gynaeceum' novel to describe these texts, and has pointed to the way in which they intertwine the motifs of spiritual and sexual education and knowledge⁵². The contemporary lesbian bildungsroman continues and extends the educational conceit to encompass an explicitly sexual, post-Gay Liberation definition of lesbian sexuality and desire. In it, as I will show, the lesbian body is itself represented as a school and site of sexual learning.

In the majority of texts a younger woman is educated by a more powerful and experienced older woman. The relationship tends to be

assymetrical so that one character acts as mentor and the other occupies the role of pupil. A variation to this pattern can be found in Alice Walker's The Color Purple which recounts the journey to empowerment of an abused black woman. The novel utilizes the motifs of spiritual and sensual education to represent Celie's self-discovery through her relationship with Shug, a strong, independent black woman. Shug represents the black female-centred spirituality which is central to the novel and which Walker refers to as 'womanism'. In an episode of 'knowledge sharing', Shug describes her philosophy for survival and teaches Celie to love herself, other women and the world around her:

I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever will be. And when you can feel that, you've found It ... God love everything you love - and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration ... I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. (p.167)

Shug's concept of spirituality as 'the color purple' contrasts radically with the white male God of patriarchal Christianity. This form of spirituality enables Celie to value herself and her love for Shug and to resist more effectively both the racism of white society and the misogyny of the black male community.

The theme of spiritual awakening is combined with that of sexual awakening: Shug also teaches Celie to take pleasure in her body which she previously experienced negatively as an object for male exploitation. In a scene reminiscent of Lacan's account of the mirror stage, in which the subject comes to recognise itself, Celie,

with Shug's encouragement, names and acknowledges her sexuality for the first time:

I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose.

It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? she say ...
It mine, I say. (pp.69-70)

This episode represents Celie's re-birth as a black female subject in her own right, in which Shug acts as the mid-wife or surrogate mother, and the beginning of her resistance to oppression. The novel therefore stages, in a particularly powerful way, the motifs of spiritual and sexual awakening. However, this process is represented as reciprocal, rather than uni-directional. When Shug first arrives at Mister's house, suffering from an illness, she is disempowered. It is Celie who, adopting a maternal role, nurses her back to physical and psychic health, rekindling her joie de vivre. This is accomplished through the traditionally female exchange of food and care: Celie spends hours in the kitchen preparing delicious and seductive dishes with which to tempt Shug, and even bathes her, carefully and lovingly spongeing each part of the older woman's body, in an act of simultaneously sensual and maternal devotion. In The Color Purple, therefore, the mother/child dyad is converted into a powerful myth of black women's mutual self-creation.

Florence King's Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady represents, in many ways, the exemplary white lesbian bildungsroman. Particularly noteworthy is its treatment of the gynaeceum theme

from a lesbian point of view. The first intimation of lesbian desire in the novel occurs when Florence, at Junior High School, admires her teacher's figure in her New Look skirt. At school Florence starts French lessons which provide her with an 'automatic femininity' and a solution to her identity problem:

Merely by adding an 'e' to adjectives and reflexive verbs, I could establish myself as female without following any of Granny's rules. (p93)

Gender is represented as the product of linguistic convention; Florence becomes a female subject by virtue of her insertion into language. Florence's sentimental education is mediated by the French texts which she devours in French class, such as Racine's Berenice. As Gill Frith points out, the French language or teacher signifies both sexual and intellectual sophistication in the Anglo-American twentieth-century novel of female friendship⁵³. Berenice represents a literary role model for Florence in the respect that since she is neither a Virgin nor a Venus figure, she eludes the two dominant metaphysical categories of femininity postulated by male discourse. And, in the respect that Berenice puts duty before love, she represents the 'masculine' woman, the woman with a career with whom Florence identifies:

I would be a career woman, and have affairs, like George Sand. (p125)

In the High School sections of the novel King satirizes the rituals of the heterosexual dating game from a feminist point of view. Florence's difference is signalled by her lack of interest in boys other than for sexual gratification. Going 'too far' on her first date, Florence is only saved from gaining a 'bad girl' reputation by virtue of her good high school grades. At this point in the novel Florence's sexuality is not represented in terms of attraction to women, but is defined in feminist terms as active rather than passive, initiative rather than responsive. Following her transgression of the rules of the dating game, Florence withdraws into the academic world, gaining a reputation for being 'one of the brains'. She becomes one of an elite group of female students who, sharing an identity and solidarity based on their intellectual prowess and on their rejection of normative femininity, are, without knowing it, part of a feminist freemasonry. As the narrator comments:

If any of us had heard the word 'feminist' we would have thought it meant a girl who wore too much make-up. (p120)

In the absence of a name or identity for independent unmarried women, the protagonist coins the term 'an Almost' in order to describe her difference and register her opposition to normative femininity.

The characteristic mind/body split engendered by the social and ideological division of women into two oppositional categories, the sexual and the intellectual, is shown to be ultimately irresolvable within the terms of heterosexuality. As the problem of the

Venus/Virgin dichotomy closes in on her, Florence veers between the two, now choosing intellectualism, now opting to 'Be Your Own Venus'. Her junior year at college marks a decisive moment in her psycho-sexual development:

My sex drive vanished and I constructed a pristine fantasy imagining myself on the faculty of a girls' boarding school, dressed in a tweed suit and walking shoes and having tea with intellectual spinsters ... (p.154)

At this point in the novel the protagonist ostensibly continues to separate sexual desire from intellectual pursuits. Her preference is for women's company and 'the life of the mind'. Her fantasy represents the desire for a homosocial world without men. Simultaneously however, a new and crucial factor emerges: the invocation of a 'secret self':

The image of myself in a severe tweed suit filled me with a strange, private happiness ... as if I had a secret that I was keeping even from myself. I was caught up in a mood of sexless sensuality that revolved around attractively unattractive clothes. (p157)

The tension here between contradictory designations, in which the dominant figure is oxymoron - 'sexless sensuality', 'attractively unattractive' - reflects a movement from the previous simple opposition of sexual/intellectual, towards a recuperation of the sexual within the intellectual. Split-off sexual desire returns in the form of a fantasy of eroticised pedagogy. Her own body and clothes play a significant part in the fantasy; by dressing up in a

particular style of clothing, the protagonist finds that she can inhabit the sensual and the intellectual simultaneously. The emergence of the 'secret self', although characteristic of much female writing, here signifies the entry of lesbian discourse into the text. The severely suited spinster of the protagonist's fantasy alludes, intertextually, to an entire genre of lesbian writing and, beyond that, to the lesbian subculture itself of which Radclyffe Hall and her severely suited creation, Stephen Gordon, are central figures. Three co-existing elements mark the transition to lesbian discourse: the attraction of masculine clothing, cross-dressing and uniforms; the appeal of all-female communities, in particular the girls' school; and the postulation of a 'secret self' to be discovered and revealed in and through the first two factors.

In lesbian subculture the figure of the 'butch' represents the appropriation of male body style. Although she does not use the term 'butch', the narrator's desire for masculine clothing represents the adoption of butch identity. King exploits the theme of cross-dressing for comic effect, portraying the protagonist's attempts to find 'the suit' and sensible shoes in a 1950s fashion world committed to feminine frills:

The kind of ground-grippers I craved were found only in orthopedic stores. (p157)

The protagonist fantasizes about a suit with an inside breast pocket lined with silk, similar to her father's which she tried on as a child; but the boy's jacket she tries on in a men's clothing store

does not fit her. The combination of masculine tweed and feminine silk represents an androgynous dress code signifying the protagonist's rejection of fixed gender roles. Her quest to secure an identity through male drag is finally successful when she joins the women's marine corps and gets the desired uniform: 'The sight of it sent a thrill up my spine'⁵⁴. In one move Florence receives official sanction both to inhabit the identity of her choice and live in a closed female society:

It sounded like the answer to my problems - the Marine Corps was an elite closed society with limited appeal for most women and none whatsoever for malkins. (p.164)

But Florence finds that the feminine mystique has even penetrated the marine corps. Her colleagues are as obsessed with femininity as the 'malkins', wearing lip stick and perming their hair to dispel 'the lesbian image'. It is in this context, as a slur and term of opprobrium, that the sign 'lesbian' first enters the text.

After leaving the marine corps, Florence returns home to find herself treated as an outsider. Her old friends are suspicious of her difference and make an implicit connection between lesbianism and her rejection of femininity. In order to assert their fragile identities as 'feminine' women, they condemn as 'lesbian' women who are non-conformist or appear 'masculine'. At this point in the text Florence becomes conscious of her difference in explicitly sexual terms and consciously adopts a lesbian identity. This act of naming, of positively identifying with a stigmatised group as a result of which

she is expelled from her sorority, represents a turning-point or moment of revelation in the narrator's journey of self-discovery: 'If y'all are against lesbianism', she comments, 'it can't be too bad'⁵⁵. Florence's aggressive intellectualism and non-conformity is met by hostility and resentment, especially from men. But 'the Look' of hostility is important to Florence because it means that she is taken seriously, it 'saw me'⁵⁶. She needs the hostility such looks contain in order to sustain her new oppositional identity.

In common with other examples of the lesbian bildungsroman the novel operates a three-stage model of the construction of lesbian identity: what began as a focus on the protagonist's familial difference or unconventionality, and developed into intellectual difference, finally becomes an emphasis on overt sexual difference. This recognition propels Florence into the dilemma of the pre-feminist lesbian who hates conventional codes of femininity but loves women:

I had never had a woman friend, but now, even though I despised women, I wanted one. (p.171)

The final stage of the narrator's intellectual and sexual education takes place at University, represented, in this instance, by a traditional, all-female establishment in the Deep South. Her geographical move to Southern Belle country also represents a symbolic movement to the heartland of ideological femininity represented by 'the cult of true womanhood'⁵⁷. However, King subverts this ideology in the respect that the narrator's move to a

women's dorm at the University of Memphis signals the re-emergence of the conventions of the gynaeceum and, hence, of the lesbian plot. King's representation of the women's college also alludes to the genre of women's Gothic. The dorm is located in a house which belongs 'in the tradition of Gothic paperback covers'⁵⁸.

At college Florence finally obtains a 'room of one's own', the prime motif of female novels of discovery. She meets Bres, a classics graduate, who is both an object of desire and an intellectual heroine to Florence, representing the lover/mentor figure typical of female bildungsroman and gynaeceum texts such as Olivia and The Unlit Lamp. As in these examples, the exchange of knowledge, both erotic and intellectual, is mediated through a foreign language; in this case, Latin. The effect on Florence when Bres quotes Latin combines erotic and aesthetic pleasure: '... something that was pure joy ran through me'⁵⁹. The woman-centred culture of the college therefore provides the context in which Florence's mind/body split can be healed through the exchange of love and knowledge and in which her lesbianism can find expression.

The narrator of Christine Crow's Miss X or The Wolf Woman experiences a similar sensual and intellectual awakening in a pedagogical context. The novel narrates the story of Mary Wolfe's love affair with her headmistress, the Miss X of the title, to whom Mary refers as 'My Lady herself, Mentor, Lover all in one'⁶⁰. In common with the majority of contemporary lesbian novels the affair is not depicted as a 'mere school-girl crush'. Furthermore, it represents:

true, reciprocated passion, passion for an older person, a person of Authority, who just happened to be nearly three times my own age, not to mention the same sex as myself. (back cover).

However, unlike the majority of texts in the gynaeceum tradition, Miss X and the Wolf Woman is written in an anti-realist style which aligns it with literary postmodernism. The lesbian love story becomes the basis for a metafictional treatment, and celebration, of the motif of sentimental education. The text consciously invokes a lesbian literary tradition in which Monique Wittig's Le Corps Lesbien stands as a sort of 'ur-text' or model of lesbian writing practice. Significantly, Mary Wolfe also shares Wittig's initials. Crow's text literally exemplifies Sally Munt's comment that 'books play a formative role in the way we construct ourselves as lesbian', and inscribes Mary Wolfe, as both a reader of lesbian fiction and a fictional 'construct', produced in and through literary discourse⁶¹. The central trope of the novel is the figure of the wolf which functions as a sign of lesbianism. The text's allusions to the lesbian connotations of the sign 'wolf' include Baudelaire's concept of the 'femme damnée' as a voracious wolf in the desert in a poem about the forbidden fruits of Lesbos; a pun on the name of the lesbian writer Virginia Woolf; Freud's 'Wolf Man'; and the figure of the lesbian vampire in the guise of a wolf. The text subverts the traditional meanings of the signs and imbues the figure of the wolf with a positive lesbian value. At the end of the novel the wolf becomes a symbol of female autonomy as Mary Wolfe cries triumphantly, 'I am the Wolf Woman now!'⁶². As the range of its sources suggests,

Miss X or the Wolf Woman is an extremely erudite, even academic, text which both dramatizes and analyzes the educational motif and provides a meta-commentary on its use in the gynaeceum tradition of lesbian writing by writers as diverse as Radclyffe Hall, Monique Wittig and Florence King.

Fabulous and Anti-Mimetic Narratives

Like Crow's novel, Jeanette Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit employs a variety of literary discourses in order to explore the construction of autobiographical narrative. A major focus of the novel is the art of story-telling and its relation to public history and 'truth'. The novel's heroine, Jeanette, is quintessentially a story-teller; she is both the narrator of 'her' story, and a compulsive teller of tales. The narratives she purveys include the story of Daniel/Jonah in the lions' den/belly of the whale told in fuzzy felt; the narrative of salvation and accounts of saved souls in her church sermons, and the story of the church camp in Colwyn Bay described in her school essay. The stories which Jeanette grows up reading and telling have one primary source - the master narrative of the Bible. For Jeanette's mother the biblical metanarrative explains the world, absolutely and unequivocally, and has application whether one is on the beach at Blackpool or in the jungles of Africa. In her early years the Bible holds the same explanatory power for Jeanette. But her gradual and painful recognition that the Bible is a story, an account of the world, that its truths are partial at best and lies at worst, and that there are other stories which tell of different

worlds and different ways of living, provides the novel with its dramatic crisis, and signals her disillusion with metanarrative.

In addition to the use of oral history in the autobiographical narrative of working-class life, Winterson employs other non-literary narrative modes, notably fairy stories and folk tales. Although many of these have been written down, by writers such as Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm, they originate in an oral tradition of story-telling, and are typically told to children before they are able to read. Winterson puts these narratives to a variety of different uses. For example, the use of fairy tale serves to challenge the hegemony and centrality of Biblical narrative as a means of explaining the world. The Bible, although itself a mythical narrative, is incompatible with faery, which from a biblical perspective is deemed sacriligious and profane, belonging to a pre-Christian and unenlightened era. The variety of discourses in the text highlights a plurality of narratives explaining the world and challenges the concept of a master narrative.

Winterson's text corresponds to the tendency of lesbian fiction, outlined by Terry Castle, to oscillate between the realistic and the fabulous⁶³. Given that the mimetic literary mode has traditionally silenced female homosociality, argues Castle, lesbian writing continually pushes out of mimeticism into fantastic and fabulous modes, opening up into the terrain of the impausible. Virginia Woolf's Orlando is a celebrated example of this strategy. Ostensibly based on the 'life' of Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West, the novel combines a history of literary forms, a philosophical

meditation on the meaning of time, an analysis of the relationship between sex and gender, and a fantasy narrative about the experience of an immortal, Tiresius-like, cross-dressing figure as s/he moves through the centuries. The fantasy premise of the novel allows for the representation of a lesbian subject unconstrained by the social conventions of gender.

Woolf's use of fantasy also serves to destabilize and interrogate the category 'auto/biography'. Winterson employs a similar strategy. Her use of fairy tale serves to relativize the autobiographical text of the novel, by calling its 'truth' into question, and by suggesting the existence of truths which autobiography, with its investment in realism, cannot capture. At times, the faery sections serve to comment on the main narrative, and appear to stand as an analogue or parable of Jeanette's autobiographical tale. For instance, the tale of Winnet and the sorceror parallels and illuminates, in the structure of its relationships and plot events, the story of Jeanette and her mother. Jeanette/Winnet is an adopted daughter whose mother/ father wants her to keep alive the 'magic arts' and to 'take the message to other places'⁶⁴. All goes well until Jeanette/ Winnet's relationship with a 'stranger' displeases her mother/ father, and leads to her expulsion from the community. Cast out, Jeanette/Winnet determines to travel to a great city where 'the city dwellers didn't sow or toil, they thought about the world'⁶⁵. It is a place without betrayal, where truth matters, and the novel ends with Jeanette/Winnet on the threshold of this new world.

However, while the correspondences between the different narratives offer the reader the pleasures of recognition and rereading the same tale across different genres, the different narratives are not commensurate or reducible to each other. The myth sections do not paraphrase the action of the whole, nor do they merely supplement it by filling in the gaps in the language of fantasy. While they may serve this function, they also unsettle the seeming verisimilitude of autobiography through their uncanny presence in the larger narrative. For what is at stake in the novel is the very incommensurability of different discourses: the understanding that they cannot be reduced to the same measure, and that they literally speak of different worlds.

This discursive relativism or pluralism is articulated not only across the different narrative modes of the novel, but also within the autobiographical narrative itself. This occurs through the incursion of the fantastic and the supernatural into the 'real', so that the fantastic is seen to inhabit the discourse of the real, rather than being simply juxtaposed to it. For instance, the story of Winnet does not merely offer a mythical parallel to Jeanette's story, it inhabits it 'supernaturally'. This is suggested by the fact that Winnet's 'lucky' pebble appears in Jeanette's pocket. Similarly, the orange demon's possession of Jeanette makes no sense in terms of autobiographical realism or oral history. Nor can it be explained in the religious terms of devil possession employed by Pastor Finch and Jeanette's mother. As the demon explains, rather than being the prerogative of the sinful, everyone is assigned a demon - 'the demon

you get depends on the colour of your aura'⁶⁶. Far from being emissaries from Satan, demons are 'just different'. As I pointed out, this meaning of 'demon' suggests the idea of 'daemon' as an aspect of the self. Demonic possession does not entail a Manichean struggle between good and evil in a world of absolutes; but an acceptance of difference, of being other-wise, and a commitment to different 'shades' of experience. That Jeanette accepts her demon signals her acknowledgement of her difference, of her 'orangeness', and of her lesbianism as the sign and expression of that difference.

While Winterson's novel represents lesbian identity as multiple rather than unified, it is still posited as a more or less stable category: Jeanette's demon is, after all, an essential part of her. A more radical destabilization of the concept of identity occurs in Christine Crow's Miss X or the Wolf Woman. Throughout the novel the letter 'X', representing the X-factor or unknown element, is capitalized as a means of drawing attention to language and to signify the indeterminacy of both (lesbian) sexual identity and textual identity. Unlike the majority of examples of the lesbian bildungsroman, the novel resists representing lesbianism as a revelation which resolves the protagonist's quest for identity. Rather, it represents all identity as a fictional construct which is created in discourse. The identity of Miss X is represented as a chain of linguistic signifiers, whose movement resists a fixed and final signified:

'Miss X'; 'My Sex'; 'CeyX'; 'SayX': supposing the whole thing was simply some intoxicated lycanthropic pun? (p.232).

Although the reader is likely to attempt to build a 'realistic' portrait of Miss X from details in the narrative, the text subverts this process, continually calling into question representational discourse, even as it affirms a lesbian perspective. The novel evinces a postmodern interest in the playful aspects of language; puns, literary conceits and language games feature prominently in it. As its anti-realist style suggests, the novel also rejects the journey structure and the developmental plot characteristic of the lesbian bildungsroman. Significantly the text ends where it began, with the protagonist relating her 'story' to her therapist. The novel's closing lines repeat its opening sentence, both for humorous effect and as a means to resist conventional textual closure:

'Do you have a boyfriend' asked the analyst almost right away at the first and last interview.
'Certainly not', I replied sharply, 'and nor do I want one, if that's what you think'. (p.233)

The cyclical and open-ended structure encourages the reader to reflect on the novel's construction rather than view its contents as a satisfying narrative of affirmation. The pleasure of the novel for lesbian readers lies rather in its flamboyant rhetoric and in its audacious deconstruction of sexual and textual identities.

Lesbian Selfhood & Lesbian Nation: Beyond The Limits of Patriarchy?

Miss X and the Wolf Woman is unusual among lesbian autobiographical texts in its metafictional emphasis on the artifice of fiction and in its postmodern refusal to reveal the 'truth' of lesbian identity. The

majority of texts in the bildungsroman tradition are concerned to resolve the narrative both by establishing the integrity of the heroine's lesbian identity, and by addressing the issue of the lesbian subject's place in the world. The question raised in the final pages of lesbian novels of self-discovery and development is where, in her quest for autonomy and selfhood, does the lesbian subject travel to. What lies beyond the borders of patriarchy? As Bonnie Zimmerman points out lesbian novels of development have historically offered three alternative resolutions: accom^modation to, exile, or escape from the patriarchal status-quo⁶⁷. Prior to the advent of Second Wave Feminism, lesbian novels offered the lesbian subject either accomodation to or exile from the hetero-patriarchy. In novels of the former kind, such as 1950s lesbian pulp fiction, the heroine relinquishes lesbian identity and returns to heterosexuality to get married. In the latter, as in The Well of Loneliness, the heroine refuses to compromise and exiles herself but, since she lacks a sense of communal lesbian identity, her exile takes the form of a tragic martyrdom.

A few contemporary lesbian novels also resolve themselves through the heroine's accom^modation to the status quo. In Lisa Alther's Kinflicks, for example, the 'polymorphous perverse' heroine, Ginny Babcock, returns to heterosexuality at the end of the novel, after living in a women's commune with her lesbian lover Eddie. In Alther's novel, women's community is not represented as a viable solution and, more disturbingly, Eddie suffers the fate of traditional fictional lesbians, and is killed in a gruesome snow

mobile accident which culminates in her decapitation.

Since the advent of the Women's Movement and Gay Liberation, however, this solution is atypical in lesbian fiction and has to a great extent been replaced by the third solution - escape. In contemporary lesbian novels this takes two forms. In one type of resolution, the lesbian subject is portrayed as a transcendent and free figure, but as essentially alone and distanced from a social context. Yesterday's Lessons, for example, concludes with an euphoric image of the freedom of the individual lesbian subject who has managed to overcome her fear and self-hatred:

I was flying and I was free and when I was on that bike I was happy. I begin to feel as long as I had that bike I had hope. No matter how many people laughed at me or no matter what anyone said they couldn't take that away from me. My freedom!
(p.206)

Similarly, in Rubyfruit Jungle Molly's exit from patriarchy is defiant, and the novel's open-ended conclusion portrays her determination to continue her picaresque journey towards realizing her ambition of becoming a film-maker:

One way or another I'll make those movies and I don't feel like having to fight until I'm fifty. But if it does take that long then watch out world because I'm going to be the hottest fifty-year old this side of Mississippi.(p.246)

Molly's strong individualism appears to preclude a collective sense of identity, and she is not located in a women's community. The end of the novel gestures at the Civil Rights Movement and the birth of

the Women's Liberation Movement, but Molly does not see these groups as addressing her:

But somehow I knew my rage wasn't their rage and they'd have run me out of their movement for being a lesbian anyway ... Women's groups [would] trash me just the same. What the hell. (p.246)

Whereas, in the novels written prior to the advent of Second Wave feminism, the heroines capitulate to the heterosexual order because they are too vulnerable to survive alone, novels written more recently conclude with the heroine gaining the strength to survive from a positive self-image and a sustaining liberal ideology of individual transcendence. However, although Rubyfruit Jungle promotes the liberal belief in the integration of sexual minorities within society as a whole - Molly demands to be treated the same and does not want her sexuality to make a difference - it actually demonstrates the opposite. It illustrates the fact that integration is not possible within heterosexist society. Molly states 'I'm not going back to where it makes a difference' and, at the end of the novel, she is poised on the edge of a new, undisclosed world⁶⁸.

Another variant on this model of escape can be found in many examples of the contemporary lesbian feminist confessional novel. In this genre the protagonist awakens to the limitations of heterosexuality, but no alternative presents itself as adequate. For example, although after her rejection of heterosexuality, the heroine of Shedding has a lesbian relationship, the novel concludes with her choosing solitude and celibacy as the best guarantee of sexual

autonomy. Unlike the lesbian subject of the bildungsroman, she is not represented as transcending patriarchal culture, but as negotiating a relatively free-space within it.

In contrast to the model of escape as solitude represented by Rubyfruit Jungle, the second form of escape from patriarchy represented in the lesbian bildungsroman involves the heroine's release into an alternative world of a community of women, symbolized by the Lesbian Nation. In her article, 'Exiting from Patriarchy', Bonnie Zimmerman discusses a group of lesbian novels in which the protagonists undertake 'an educational journey through the patriarchal landscape toward a lesbian nation'⁶⁹. Emerging in the context of the Women's Liberation Movement, these novels provide a new vision of lesbian community which:

permits the lesbian to locate herself, perhaps for the first time in this century, at the center of her own experience, to move in from the marginality of 'queerness' to the imaginative reality of a lesbian nation. (p.330)

In fiction of this kind the awakening of the lesbian subject is represented as a transformation, in which she undergoes both literal and symbolic changes and moves from being an outsider to being one who has 'come home'. In Nachmann's Riverfinger Women, for example, Inez is transformed from a 'fat, crazy queer' into part of a community of tough, 'warrior women':

... the dream of my women, the world where all women are strong and beautiful, even me ... (p.60)

Similarly, Monique Wittig's girls' school novel, The Opoanax (1964), concludes with an image of Catherine and her friends walking through a garden, journeying towards womanhood and a world that exists 'at the end of the park', which invokes the nation of women warriors in Wittig's later novel Les Guerillères (1973). In this resolution, the lesbian subject is shown as joining a community of women with a shared vision. As Zimmerman writes:

The lesbian vision of the individual in community, the growth of one into many, expands the developmental motif from that of the formation of individual identity to the formation of communal identity. (p.257)

This ending therefore represents the heroine as a socially located subject, rather than removing her onto a transcendent plane. In Marge Piercy's Small Changes the heroine moves from a patriarchally defined space dominated by husbands and fathers, to a literal female space, occupied by women friends and lovers. These fictional resolutions accord with the 1970s movement for a Lesbian Nation or separate women's community.

Novels written in the 1970s, whether they depict a transcendent individual lesbian subject as in Rubyfruit Jungle or a a community of women as in Riverfinger Women, represent a utopian image of lesbianism. In the 1980s lesbian autobiographical fiction tends to qualify its celebration of lesbian existence. One reason for this shift could be that since the 1970s the political climate in Britain and North America has changed, making utopian celebration a less viable fictional option. Discussing this trend, Yvonne M. Klein, in

her article 'Myth and Community in recent lesbian autobiographical fiction', comments:

The expansive autobiographical lesbian novels of the seventies have something of a hollow ring when read in Thatcher's Britain or Bush's America ... (p.330)

Moreover, the dream of an independent Lesbian Nation, also common in 1970s' fiction, has been challenged by many lesbians and feminists as the product of a falsely universalizing concept of lesbian identity. Audre Lorde's Zami, for example, resists the concept of Lesbian Nation on these grounds, preferring the notion of the 'house of difference'. However, the closing down of this imaginative possibility as a result of social and political circumstance does not mean a return to pre-feminist narrative trajectories in which the heroine is forced to cede to heterosexual strictures. As Klein argues:

A significant and impressive group of novels has emerged, novels which fall clearly into the type of the lesbian of formation, but which resolve themselves neither in defeat nor in a triumphant and irrevocable departure from patriarchy. (p.330)

Klein claims that novels such as Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and Audre Lorde's Zami 'occlude' their endings: rather than looking forward to a new lesbian community, they look back to childhood in order to 'reinvent a mythic history of female power'⁷⁰. A theme central to the endings of these examples is that of the

heroine making peace with her mother. At the end of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, for example, Jeanette returns to her home town and has a reconciliation of sorts with her mother. The latter behaves as if Jeanette had never left home but her very indifference suggests that Jeanette's difference has been accepted if not approved. Significantly, it is her mother who speaks the words of the novel's title when she philosophically admits that 'oranges are not the only fruit'⁷¹.

None *theless*, certain aspects of the resolution of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, such as the depiction in symbolic terms of Oxford as the gateway to freedom for the lesbian artist, are defiantly utopian. Moreover, even in the most utopian of 1970s' texts the lesbian community is not fully realized, but remains a vision or dream of the future. As Bonnie Zimmerman comments, Lesbian Nation is envisaged as an imaginative space, just off the page⁷². Sister Gin, one of the most politically committed of the novels discussed, concludes with Su's exhortation to other women to join in the creation of a new world, 'a safe sea of women'⁷³. The appeal for a Lesbian Nation therefore functions as a utopian ideal, as an inspiration to women to change their lives and make female community a reality. Like the land that is dreamt of at the end of the rainbow, it lies just out of reach in a space beyond the borders of patriarchy and the parameters of the lesbian bildungsroman. Not yet realizable, it can only be gestured towards. But if this utopian ideal is the end point for the lesbian novel of discovery and development, it is the starting point for the imaginative creation of Lesbian Nation in

another popular lesbian genre, lesbian speculative fiction, which I shall now discuss.

Notes

1. Rather than separately treating the different forms of autobiographical fiction, I have chosen to adopt a thematic approach in grouping together those texts which contain an autobiographical element. I have included confessional texts which self-consciously foreground the gesture of self-revelation, and novels of development which trace the childhood formation of identity. Rita Felski explains the rationale for this method: 'While it is still possible to attempt to classify women's writing according to precise formal criteria (diary, autobiography, autobiographical novel ...), classification tends to result in an unwieldy methodological apparatus which is of little help in elucidating the question of the social functions of this literature in relation to its particular audiences' (Beyond Feminist Aesthetics [London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989], p.85).
2. Alan Sinfield, review of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, quoted in The Directory of Lesbian and Gay Studies, No.1, Summer, 1992, p.3.
3. Bonnie Zimmerman, 'The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives' in Signs, Vol.9, No.4, Summer 1984.
4. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume One (London: Penguin, 1990), p.101.
5. Foucault, *ibid.*
6. Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Exiting from Patriarchy: The Lesbian Novel of Development', in E. Abel, M. Hirsch & E. Langland (eds), The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), p.244.
7. Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness (London: Virago Press, 1982), p.447.
8. Evelyne Keitel, 'Verstandigungstexte: Form, Funktion, Wirkung' in German Quarterly, 56, No.3, 1983, pp.431-456.
9. Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989).
10. Felski, *ibid.*, p.87 (subsequent references in the text).
11. Elizabeth Wilson, 'Tell it Like it Is: Women and Confessional Writing', in Susannah Radstone (ed), Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender & Popular Fiction (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), p.28.
12. See, for example, Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 'Political Lesbianism and the Case against Heterosexuality', in M. Evans (ed) The Woman Question (London: Fontana, 1982), p.65, for an extreme statement this view.
13. Attributed to Alix Dobkin in S.L. Hoagland & J. Penelope (eds) For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), p.11.

14. Verena Stefan, Shedding (London: The Women's Press, 1980), p.118.
15. Wilson, op. cit, pp.28-29.
16. Rosalind Coward, 'Cautionary Tales', New Socialist, July/August 1984, p.47.
17. Felski, op. cit, p.94.
18. Keitel, op. cit, p.431.
19. Kate Millett, Flying (London: Hart Davis, MacGibbon, 1975), p.338.
20. Kate Millett, Sita (London: Virago Press, 1977), p.250.
21. Francis Hart, 'Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography', New Literary History, No.1, 1970, p.491.
22. Millett, Flying, op. cit, pp.82-83.
23. Wilson, op. cit, p.22.
24. Maureen Brady and Judith McDaniel, in their article 'Lesbians in the Mainstream: Images of Lesbians in Recent Commercial Fiction' (Conditions, Vol.2, No.2, 1980), criticized Stimpson among other lesbian authors for disempowering lesbians, concluding: 'In these novels we do not read about what we have found in our lesbian relationships - the intimacy, the support' (p.103).
25. Felski, op. cit, p.122.
26. Rita Mae Brown, Rubyfruit Jungle (New York: Bantam Books, 1977).
27. Terry Castle, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction', in Textual Practice, No.2. Vol.4, 1990, p.229 (subsequent references in the text).
28. Catharine R. Stimpson, 'Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English', in Elizabeth Abel (ed) Writing and Sexual Difference (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), p.134.
29. Brown, Rubyfruit Jungle, op. cit, p.107.
30. Jeanette Winterson, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (London: Pandora Press, 1985), p.3.
31. Brown, op. cit, p.7.
32. Brown, *ibid*, p.9.
33. Maggie Redding, The Life and Times of Daffodil Mulligan (London: Brilliance Books, 1984), p.1.
34. Sigmund Freud, 'Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman', Penguin Freud Library, Case Histories II, Vol.9.
35. Winterson, op. cit., p.127.
36. Redding, op. cit., p.3.
37. *Ibid.*, p.18.
38. Winterson, op. cit., p.36.
39. *Ibid.*, p.124.
40. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in Signs, Summer 1976.
41. Cixous, *ibid.*, reprinted in New French Feminisms (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), p.252.
42. Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982), p.4.
43. According to audience response to the television version, Jeanette, notwithstanding her lesbianism, was perceived as a positive heroine. Contrary to expectations, audience criticism

- was almost wholly directed against the religious fundamentalist community. See Hilary Hinds' discussion of audience reaction to the drama in her article in Sally Munt (ed), New Lesbian Criticism (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp.153-172.
44. Winterson, op. cit, p.109.
 45. Brown, op. cit, p.194.
 46. June Arnold, Sister Gin (New York: The Women's Press, 1979), p.102.
 47. Redding, op. cit, p.53.
 48. Elana Nachmann, Riverfinger Women (Plainfield, VT: Daughters Inc. 1974), p.66.
 49. Lorde, Zami, op. cit, p.104.
 50. Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mother's Gardens (London: The Women's Press, 1984).
 51. Lorde, op. cit, p.53.
 52. Elaine Marks, 'Lesbian Intertextuality' in G. Stambolian & E. Marks (eds) Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), p.353.
 53. Gill Frith, The Intimacy Which is Knowledge: Female Friendship in the Novels of Women Writers (PhD dissertation, University of Warwick, 1989), p.304.
 54. Florence King, Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady (London: Black Swan, 1985), p.164.
 55. King, *ibid.*, p.171.
 56. *Ibid.*, p.175.
 57. Barbara Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860', American Quarterly, XVII (1966), 151-174.
 58. King, op. cit., p.188.
 59. *Ibid.*, p.214.
 60. Christina Crow, Miss X or the Wolf Woman (London: The Women's Press, 1990), p.18.
 61. Sally Munt, 'Is There a Feminist In This Text? Ten Years of the Lesbian Novel' in Women's Studies International Forum, Vol.15, No.2, 1992, p.282.
 62. Crow, op. cit, p.232.
 63. Castle, op. cit, p.229.
 64. Winterson, op. cit, p.143.
 65. *Ibid.*, p.153.
 66. *Ibid.*, p.108.
 67. Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Exiting from Patriarchy', op. cit, p.245.
 68. Brown, op. cit., p.64.
 69. Zimmerman, op. cit., p.247.
 70. Yvonne M. Klein, 'Myth and Community in Recent Lesbian Autobiographical Fiction', in Karla Jay, Joanna Glasgow & Catherine Stimpson (eds), Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p.331.
 71. Winterson, op. cit, p.172.
 72. Zimmerman, op. cit, p.257.
 73. Arnold, op cit., p.92.

C H A P T E R T W O

LESBIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION

... I think the future belongs to women. Men have been completely dethroned. Their rhetoric is stale, used up. We must move on to the rhetoric of women, one that is anchored in the organism, in the body¹.

Feminist Writing and Feminist Community

In 1970, in The Dialectic of Sex, Shulamith Firestone lamented the absence of any ideological expression of the goals of the Women's Liberation Movement:

We haven't even a literary image of this future society; there is not even a utopian feminist literature yet in existence².

In the following ten years feminist science fiction (SF) emerged as a genre which aimed to give fictional realization to the ideas and aspirations of women in the Feminist Movement. The relationship between feminist theory, women's activism and utopian writing was a dynamic and productive one. Firestone's theoretical text was itself the inspiration for Marge Piercy's utopian novel Woman on the Edge of Time (1979), and Sally Miller Gearhart's novel The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women (1979) inspired a generation of North American women who were seeking to establish an independent Lesbian Nation in the late 1970s. Indeed, much of the utopian writing which emerged from the Women's Liberation Movement was lesbian in

character, and it is in speculative fiction, more than in any other lesbian genre, that the concerns of feminism and lesbianism overlap in the discourse of lesbian feminism.

Lesbian feminist speculative fiction, like the radical science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s (such as Ernest Callenbach's Ecotopia [1975] and Samuel Delany's Triton [1976]), bears an oppositional relation both to dominant patriarchal ideology and to the overt sexism of popular mainstream SF, while employing many of the latter's conventions and devices. These include reference to the existence of parallel worlds, time travel, and the imaginative extrapolation from the present to alternative realities. It also shares some of the thematic interests of the mainstream genre, including the confrontation with alien life forms, the adventure into the Unknown, and the existence of multiple realities. Yet, whereas much mainstream science fiction depressingly implies that women have no role in future space other than as sex objects or astronauts' wives, the feminist genre makes women the central subjects of narrative quest³.

Science Fiction is ideally suited to lesbian and feminist appropriation in that it is oppositional to dominant, common sense and realist views of the world, in the respect that it presents a fantasy alternative to the 'real' and offers the potential to express marginal points of view. Through imaginative extrapolation and the displacement of aspects of the present onto an alternative scenario, science fiction creates a critique of the repressive aspects of the status-quo which, from a lesbian point of view, is characterised by heterosexual oppression. Heterosexual society can be scrutinized and

subjected to critique, as in Joanna Russ's The Female Man (1976); it is shown to be underpinned by what Adrienne Rich has called the 'institution of compulsory heterosexuality' whereby the legal, religious and kinship systems of patriarchy legitimize relations between women and men at the expense of relations between women⁴. The science fiction convention of the existence of other worlds permits the fictional construction of alternative societies in which same-sex love is not repressed and punished. In science fiction all-female societies, in which love between women is openly expressed, can be positively represented as the norm, providing a counterpoint to the oppressive treatment of its expressions in contemporary society. The utopian mode therefore enables lesbian writers to evoke harmonious all-female worlds, such as that in Sally Miller Gearhart's The Wanderground. In contrast, the dystopian mode, through the trope of apocalyptic war between the sexes, provides scope for an exploration of the theme of lesbian-as-outsider or lesbian-as-survivor in a hostile world. Examples of dystopian fiction include Anna Livia's Bulldozer Rising (1988) and Vicky Edwards's Stealing Time (1990).

Lesbian feminist science fiction can be divided into three main categories: the space adventure such as The Adventures of Alyx (1985), in which either an earth woman travels in space, or a space woman of the future travels to Earth-based societies; the utopia such as The Wanderground, in which sexual antagonism has been erased; and the dystopia such as Bulldozer Rising, in which male domination and female subordination are represented in an exaggerated and extreme

form. Although the utopia and the dystopia are properly subgenres' of science fiction, feminist use of them has made them central to the lesbian feminist genre. Moreover, none of these categories is discrete; the lesbian feminist genre is characterised by hybridization, and employs conventions and strategies from a variety of SF and fantasy forms. Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time, for instance, combines utopian and dystopian narratives; and Jody Scott's I, Vampire (1986) blends postmodernism and gothic references to vampirism with the conventions of science fiction. In emphasizing fantasy alternatives or political opposition to the status-quo, rather than generic cohesion, lesbian feminist science fiction has emerged as an extremely eclectic body of writing; it is united primarily by its focus on women as active, questing subjects and by its critique of the destructiveness of male systems of domination.

Lesbian feminist science fiction has a double relationship to the politics of the Women's Movement in that it functions both as a sounding board for feminist theories of gender difference and women's oppression, and as a site for the inscription of utopian alternatives to the status-quo: it represents a space where women can imaginatively realise their dreams. Lesbian feminist science fiction therefore functions simultaneously as a critical reflection on the present and a fantasy projection of a non-oppressive future. In the past twenty years science fiction has provided lesbian and feminist writers with a space in which to confront and imaginatively work through such political and theoretical issues as the social construction of gender, ecology and the Peace Movement. Reproductive

and social technologies, male violence, and gendered language systems are other issues which it addresses.

The utopian genre occupies a privileged place in lesbian speculative fiction, and has been used by lesbian writers primarily to give imaginative shape to the idea of the lesbian feminist community. In the United States in the 1970s the separatist movement which aimed to create a Lesbian Nation both inspired and was influenced by the creation of all-female societies in lesbian utopian novels. Examples include Katherine V. Forrest's Daughters of a Coral Dawn (1984), Sally Gearhart's The Wanderground, Joanna Russ's The Female Man, Rochelle Singer's The Demeter Flower (1980), Monique Wittig's Les Guerillères (1973) and Donna Young's Retreat! As It Was (1979). These novels portray a variety of all-female societies which are explicitly lesbian in character and, although their representation of separatism differs, they all start from the premise that it is a prerequisite for social change.

The utopia represents the meeting place of political theory and imaginative or speculative fiction, the space where ideas about social policy can be worked out and desire for another order can be expressed. Thomas More's Utopia (1516), Samuel Butler's Erewhon (1872), and William Morris's News from Nowhere (1890) are classic examples of the genre. Despite the masculine associations of the genre, prior to the 1970s women had produced utopian fictions. Sarah Scott, for example, wrote about romantic friendship in an all-female household in A Description of Millenium Hall (1762) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote the feminist utopia Herland (1915) which

describes an egalitarian all-female society. However it was not until the emergence of Second Wave Feminism that the genre became one of the central forms of feminist fictional writing. The popularity of the utopian form among lesbian and feminist writers, both within and outside the SF community, can be explained in terms of the opportunities it affords to work out and explore new social arrangements and relationships, and to critique and denaturalise by contrast the existing status-quo. It also addresses the conscious and unconscious desires of women writers and readers for something which the present lacks. The utopia's appeal is therefore three-fold: it possesses a theoretical/ experimental aspect, a critical aspect, and an inspirational or envisioning aspect.

The majority of lesbian feminist utopias share a commitment to ecologically viable and non-exploitative economic systems. They are mostly 'green worlds' in both senses, depicting rural, subsistence economies founded on a holistic philosophy of Nature/Culture harmony. As Luciente in Woman on the Edge of Time says, 'We don't have big cities - they didn't work'⁵. Generally, industrial capitalism has been superceded by environmentally-friendly economic systems in which production is based on need and co-operation rather than on profit and competition. The operation of feminist utopian systems is described in varying detail. Marge Piercy's Mattapoissett, for example, is represented very fully and realistically; Connie is shown its factories, homes, collective agriculture, meeting places, and her guide, Luciente, describes in detail the parthenogenetic process by which Mattapoissettians reproduce. The Wanderground, by contrast,

gives a very vague representation of systems of production and reproduction. It does not attempt to give a closely defined utopian blueprint for a new society. Instead it privileges the emotional experience of utopian existence, and foregrounds the hill women's close, even symbiotic, relationship with the natural world of rivers, trees and caves. The Wanderground described in the novel is a poetic, mythical world, rather than a tangible and realistic one. The novel's romantic landscape shares many features of the green world myth evoked in lesbian romance fiction, which I discuss in chapter three. In particular, it represents the natural world as an extension of women's bodies, an idea suggested by the cultural feminist equation of femininity with nature. Although the environmentally-friendly societies of Piercy's *Mattapoissett*, Russ's *Whileaway* (The Female Man) and Sally Gearhart's *Wanderground* are informed by ideas from contemporary environmental politics, such as the Ecology Movement and the women's Peace Movement, their harmonious rural societies also hark back to the pastoral, historically one of the dominant myths in western art and literature. The appeal of such societies is partly nostalgic; they signify the image of a lost golden age which existed before the advent of social conflict and contradiction.

A pastoral emphasis is apparent in the socialist fictional utopias of the nineteenth century, and in common with them, the majority of feminist utopias share a commitment to egalitarian, communal and democratic values⁶. The sine qua non of the all-female utopia is of course the eradication of sexism and women's oppression; in a bisexual utopia such as Marge Piercy's *Mattapoissett* men have

been feminized and become mothers, with the result that the basis for gender discrimination no longer exists. Democracy takes the form of communal decision-making and, although for practical reasons not everyone can be involved, attendance of the councils is open to all and varies according to people's interest and inclination. Likewise, in The Wanderground, whenever the community is threatened, as it is on the arrival of a man from the city, everyone participates in a 'Gatherstretch' to decide what action to take. And, although differences of skill, and sometimes of status, exist in the feminist utopia, in the majority of examples class stratification, racism, ageism and the privatised nuclear family have been eradicated. In Russ's Whileaway older women, owing to their experience of life, are the central figures in the intellectual, cultural and philosophical life of the community. Some of these utopias also register a commitment to eradicating racism: the heroine of Woman on the Edge of Time is a Chicana, and The Wanderground is a multicultural utopia which celebrates women and their bodies in all their racial differences.

However, there are exceptions to the egalitarian ethos characteristic of lesbian feminist utopia. Katherine V. Forrest's Daughters of a Coral Dawn, for example, represents a sort of autocratic oligarchy operating in its lesbian utopian community, Maternas. Decisions are taken by the powerful figure of Mother, from whom the entire community is biologically descended, and by Megan, whom Mother appoints on the basis of her traditional leadership qualities. Opposition to Megan's word is given short shrift and

dissenters are shouted down. In the context of the Women's Liberation Movement's commitment to non-hierarchical organisation and its rejection of the cults of leadership and personality, Daughters of a Coral Dawn is politically disconcerting, demonstrating perhaps just how entrenched, and even seductive, leadership cults are - even among groups of women. It also indicates women's desire to be 'mothered' and taken care of by a strong maternal figure. Another novel which makes use of the concept of benign dictatorship is Camarin Grae's Paz (1984). In this novel the utopian heroine Drew possesses an extra-human 'zap' enabling her to erase the memories of those who enter the community. Ostensibly a means of protecting the community from interlopers, her power is nevertheless a form of mind-control which does not sit easily in either a utopian or feminist context. As Bonnie Zimmerman has pointed out, Drew's 'zap' functions as a deus ex machina, or short-cut to utopia, which seeks to overcome the problem of how to get from the present to the desired utopian state⁷. The novel's authoritarianism is a product of the contradiction between utopian vision and the means of achieving it. In the urge to portray a harmonious all-female society the transitional stage, which may include conflict and resistance, is obviated, and democratic means are therefore sacrificed to the desired utopian goal.

Utopias of State and Process

Lesbian and feminist utopias, as a result of the tension between their critical and visionary aspects, tend to fall into two

categories: 'static' and 'in-process'. Static utopias comprise discrete, contained visions of another idyllic world, whereas the utopia of process is more consciously critical of existing society and interrogates the notion of utopia itself by insisting on the necessity of political action and struggle in order to effect change. As E.H. Baruch, an advocate of the latter model, comments:

Utopia is process. It is found in neither past arcadias nor future Elysiums⁸.

Owing to the emphasis which feminism places on social transformation, most lesbian feminist utopias belong to this second type, and recent feminist theorists such as Baruch have criticised the model of the static utopia for its apparent conservatism in failing to show how the 'might-be' of our dreams can be arrived at from the here and now. Nevertheless, the depiction of an ideal 'elsewhere', an example of which can be found in Sally Miller Gearhart's The Wanderground, is an important aspect of the genre, the value of which lies precisely in its status as fantasy. In her study of Gothic fantasy, Rosemary Jackson argues that, rather than being an escapist mode, fantasy is a literature of subversion which, in its very difference, represents a negation of the status-quo:

The modern fantastic ... is a subversive literature. It exists alongside the 'real' ... as a muted presence, a silenced imaginary other ... [It] aims at dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient⁹.

The fantasy aspects of lesbian feminist utopian fiction perform a similar function in relation to the patriarchal order. Female fantasies of a seemingly impossible elsewhere represent an implicit critique of male-dominated society and a desire for an a-patriarchal, pro-woman space. Perhaps a key difference between the two forms is that the static utopia often speaks to largely unconscious desires, whereas the utopia of process makes them into the manifest aims of conscious and political feminist will.

The ability of utopian fiction to address unconscious as well as conscious desires helps to explain the popularity and accessibility of Gearhart's separatist utopia The Wanderground for both lesbian and non-lesbian readers. The novel, which was published in 1979 and quickly became a feminist bestseller, does not attempt to offer a programmatic strategy for changing society; rather, it presents a romantic, pastoral vision of a group of women living in harmony with each other and their natural surroundings. It functions not as a blueprint for a better society, but as a myth of female community. This mythic quality is reflected not only in the rendering of archetypal female experience and character, but also in the narrative structure of the novel. Gearhart rejects the strategy of a linear narrative but presents a series of loosely-linked short stories or episodes, each focusing on different members of a community of hillwomen, and on different aspects of their common experience.

Critical appraisal of the text has emphasized its idealising, mythic quality and its capacity to console and inspire the reader.

Sandy Boucher, reviewing the novel, describes it as presenting 'a world we know in our hearts must surely exist somewhere'¹⁰. Similarly, Elizabeth A. Lynn comments that 'We need such visions. Many women, reading them, will find their own dreams reflected'¹¹. Both these comments suggest that Gearhart's 'vision' corresponds to a register of women's shared psychic experience, particularly their feelings about relation to others and mothering. The novel's mythic realm allows women the freedom to express their love for one another and to rediscover lost forms of female bonding, which in reality have often been inhibited by the male monopolization of female nurturance. The use of maternal and pre-oedipal archetypes allows the novel to address women's emotional needs in an appealing and unthreatening way, which is less available to approaches which highlight struggle and change and which tend to reject myth as inimical to political praxis¹². Sarah Lefanu in her study of feminist SF, In the Chinks of the World Machine, argues that,

In many ways the novel represents an imaginative recreation of an unthreatening childhood world, one that exists before the complexities and dangers of language and sexuality ... The Wanderground is a dream world, a world with its past named only through what it has rejected, a world without history or future, a world in which the questions 'how?' or 'by what process?' are irrelevant¹³.

However, other feminist utopias make the kind of questions raised by LeFanu their central problematic. Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time cleverly combines two literary forms in order to articulate within the narrative the contrast between a dystopic

present and a utopian future, rather than allowing the utopia to represent an implicit critique of the status-quo. As with many other utopias this text uses the device of a time-travelling protagonist, but, in this case the protagonist Connie is very different from the traditional white, middle class, educated male; she is a working-class, American Chicana from whose perspective the present indeed appears dystopic. In this way the novel both demonstrates the social inequalities inherent in contemporary society and gives a voice to those people most excluded from cultural self-expression.

Woman On the Edge of Time portrays Connie's daily struggle to survive in the face of racism, poverty and institutional oppression. At the start of the novel Connie's husband Claude has died of hepatitis as a result of drug experimentation in prison; her daughter Angelina is taken into care; she herself is charged with child abuse, and is shortly afterwards institutionalised in a lunatic asylum. In the meantime Connie discovers that she is a 'catcher', a telepath who can communicate with and then transport herself to a utopian future. Connie is welcomed to the bisexual utopian society, Mattapoissett, by a guide called Luciente who shows her around the community and explains its social arrangements. The novel juxtaposes representations of Connie's experiences in the utopian society with her adventures in the dystopian 'real' world, contrasting and comparing the two. Eventually Connie 'chooses' Mattapoissett as the preferable future for people like her and for her child, yet one of the strengths of the novel is that it does not make this choice appear easy: Connie oscillates between finding the utopia 'too good

to be true' on the one hand, and primitive and disappointing - 'this podunk future' - on the other¹⁴. She raises objections to many aspects of Mattapoisett social practices, most notably the rejection of the privileged female bond between mother and child which for her, in her socially deprived situation, is the only precious aspect of life as a woman.

Joanna Russ's The Female Man represents the most comprehensive and incisive interrogation of the utopian genre. It employs the science fiction devices of time travel, parallel worlds, multiple realities and alternatives to the present in order to deconstruct the utopian myth and, subsequently, to reconstruct utopia to include ideas of political praxis and change. The novel features four female characters who each inhabit one of four parallel worlds. These are a 1940s world in which it is assumed that the second world war never happened, a contemporary world set in the 1960s (the novel was written in 1969), a future dystopian world in which a genocidal sex war is underway, and a lesbian utopian community, Whileaway. The four worlds are shown to be linked, both through the characters of the four J's, Jeannine, Joanna, Jael and Janet, who inhabit them, and through praxis, or conscious political action. Like Gearhart's hill women, Janet, the utopian character, is a dream figure, representing the 'not-yet' of fantasy, and registering the desire for lesbian universality. Yet, unlike The Wanderground, The Female Man incorporates a critical position towards this fantasy, highlighting its fictional or constructed nature, demystifying it even as it insists on its necessity; as Russ writes at the end of the novel:

Goodbye to Janet, whom we don't believe in ... but who is in secret our saviour from utter despair, who appears Heaven-high in our dreams with a mountain under each arm and the ocean in her pocket ... radiant as the day, the Might-be of our dreams, living as she does in a blessedness none of us will ever know, she is nonetheless Everywoman (pp.212-213).

Jael, the character who represents political separatism, also serves to demystify Janet's utopian myth of the origins of Whileaway. Janet relates how her world came into being when a plague killed all the men. Like the 'Revolt of the Mother' in The Wanderground, the plague functions as a deus ex machina which avoids the problem of how utopia is to be reached by human agency. As Jael explains:

That 'plague' you talk of is a lie. I know ... It is I who gave you your 'plague', my dear ... I, I, I, I am the plague ... I and the war I fight have built your world for you. (p.211)

In other words, utopia is achieved by struggle; it does not miraculously appear. People, motivated by utopian impulses, rather than God or Nature, are shown to be the only real agents of change. The Female Man rejects essentialism and metaphysical concepts of nature, seeking to represent history as a process of change initiated by political action. Utopia is represented not as a static future, but a coming-into-being through radical action. Russ's emphasis on utopia as a dynamic process also encompasses writing practice. The novel is highly metafictional, in this respect highlighting the fact that it is treating ideas and aiming to directly engage the reader. Russ makes considerable use of metafictional devices such as digressions and authorial addresses in order to emphasize the idea

that writing and reading are participative and active processes in the production of ideological and social meanings.

Feminist science fiction writers like Russ frequently address questions of literary form as well as content in debating the politics of fiction. This focus suggests the existence of an important reason besides political separatism why so many feminist utopias exclude men, namely the difficulty of introducing them in the terms of masculinity as it is at present ideologically constituted. In her introduction to Daring to Dream Carol Kessler points out that, of the fourteen examples of utopian fiction by women published since 1970, half portray all-female societies¹⁵. Peter Fitting, in his article on single-sex worlds, explains this absence of men as a consequence of imagining a world in which women are no longer oppressed; for women, he argues, reaching 'full humanity' entails the abolition of male values, and if it is men who have largely constructed and embodied male values, then the simplest way of creating a female-friendly society is to exclude the male gender¹⁶. For Suzy McKee Charnas, the author of Motherlines, the decision to take this course came through the writing process itself:

The decision to exclude men was not dispassionate and political. I tried to write them in ... [But] no matter what I wrote, men would not fit. Every scene they entered went dead¹⁷.

Fictional utopias express women's personal and collective desires, though not always on a literal level. In excluding men, lesbian feminist utopias are not necessarily advocating male genocide or

writing blueprints for a post-male world; rather, they may be wishing for a time or place in which most of the power does not accrue to one sex, where gender is not organised hierarchically, or for a world free of sexual conflict and contradiction. Excluding men therefore becomes a means of achieving this end.

Charnas's remark suggests that lesbian feminist science fiction functions not simply as a critique of the uncongenial nature of power relations in existing society, but that it also addresses the power relations of fiction itself in which both literary form and point of view can have deadly consequences for women¹⁸. Feminist science fiction at one and the same time releases writers and readers from the constraints of realism and centralises women's experience and perspective:

Instead of having to twist 'reality' in order to create 'realistic' free female characters in today's unfree society, the SF writer can create societies that would produce those characters, not as exceptions of limited meaning and impact, but as healthy, solid norm¹⁹. SF lets women write their dreams as well as their nightmares¹⁹.

Charnas's views, echoed by Joanna Russ among others, lead to the fascinating implication that the precondition for women's representability as discursive subjects is a (literary) world without men. Just as the male speaking subject has historically defined himself against female absence, so women's coming into speech depends on men's symbolic absence. And, as utopian texts suggest, this often also necessitates redefining the female subject as lesbian.

Lesbian Journeying and the Lesbian Guerilla: Lesbian Identity in
Lesbian Utopian Fiction

Lesbian utopian fiction has been influenced strongly by the politics of lesbian separatism. In representing the lesbian utopian subject, lesbian texts tend to employ two different models, both drawn from lesbian separatist theory, which can be identified as focusing on either 'sisterhood' or 'the politics of struggle'. The 'sisterhood' model posits a lesbian subject whose identification with other women is total and exclusive. All women are represented as part of a universal sisterhood, and portrayed as 'journeying' towards self-realisation in and through the Lesbian Nation in solidarity and love. The model based on the politics of struggle, on the other hand, envisages the lesbian subject as a warrior figure, or 'guerilla', perpetually fighting male power. In contrast to the political separatist scenario of woman's continual battle against the forces of male supremacy, is the utopian, wish-fulfilment fantasy of sisterhood and mutual love. Whereas the 'political' model treats the theme of conflict, the 'sisterhood' model focuses on women's community.

The 'political' model, characteristic of the ideals of political lesbianism and revolutionary feminism, represents separatism primarily as a means of undermining male power. It argues that if women cease to co-operate with men on a daily basis, the system of male power which oppresses women will no longer be able to sustain itself. Separatism is therefore envisaged primarily as a tactical weapon, a means to an end. The emphasis is on political

struggle in the here and now, as a group of separatist women writing in the 1970s comment:

Lesbians, by loving women and not men, pose a direct threat to the very basis of male supremacy. From this analysis, we conclude that lesbians have the ability and commitment to women that will be necessary to overthrow male supremacy and its attendant forms of oppression ...²⁰.

The second form of separatism, the 'sisterhood' model, which is characteristic of cultural feminism and the radical feminism of the 1970s, depicts separatism not only as a strategy, but as a final solution to the problem of women's oppression in male-dominated society. The emphasis is not so much on overthrowing the male system as on withdrawing from it for good. Having disengaged from male society, women, it is assumed, will create an all-female world based on the 'female' values of co-operation, non-violence, community, nurturance, motherhood and ecological co-existence:

[We see] ... lesbian separatism as ... a viable, permanent alternative, which will prepare us for the time when we will be able to reinstate new forms of old matriarchal societies and when, once again, the Female Principle will have jurisdiction over the earth²¹.

This model, as I shall demonstrate, is based on an ultimately essentialist notion of female nature, which posits women as biologically and morally superior to men.

A feature of the separatist discourse relating to sisterhood is the construction of the lesbian subject as a member of the collective

rather than as an individual seeking self-identity. The figure of the lesbian 'everywoman' and the idea of 'lesbian journeying' are central features of the discourse. Women's needs are perceived in terms of the need for nurturance, relation-to-the-other and, frequently, in terms of the desire for the pre-oedipal relation to the mother. The goal of feminism is not the individuation of women's identities, but their merger in a common female identity. As Radicalesbians put it - 'To confront another woman is finally to confront oneself' ²². Many utopian separatist writers speak in mythical terms about female identity, invoking myths of rebirth and mutual self-creation. In an article which envisages women's separation from men, Julia Penelope addresses 'the women who created me in love and in life, in our lives, of whom I am and will be in this life'²³. Her own identity becomes merged with her reader/s on a continuum of women loving and creating each other. Penelope's separatist world gives women the freedom to express their love for one another and to rediscover suppressed forms of female bonding, which men have inhibited by monopolizing female nurturance.

Gearhart's The Wanderground, which is based on the 'sisterhood' model of separatism, represents a fictional and literal realisation of the separatist concept of 'lesbian journeying'. In each episode a woman makes a journey which enriches her in some way, and brings her a stronger sense of female interdependence. Fora travels to the cella 'womb' and comes into contact with Mother Earth; Alaka returns from the city to the peace and harmony of the Wanderground; Clana journeys telepathically through women's collective history of oppression in

the remember rooms; and Evona relearns the journeying power of windriding. Although each woman and each episode has individual characteristics and demonstrates a different aspect of female experience, in effect they work interchangeably, as parables. Each mirrors and reinforces the other, underscoring not difference but commonality and homogeneity. The Wanderground's cultural feminism celebrates the mothering aspects of femininity. The hillwomen share in an economy of female desire based on mother-love and maternal creation, as the scene in the 'cella', the womb-like caves where conception takes place, demonstrates:

- Fora imagined herself marching in the cavalcade of her own sowing and implantment. A long line of women surging down the path, their arms and voices linked to each other ... rank on rank, body on body, voice on voice. Entwined by her own arms were Tolatilita and Phtha, two of her seven sisters, and behind them Yva marched, carrying in her cradled hand the precious egg-laden liquid ... Fora reached out her mind to touch each one. Brightly they all swung down the curling passage, to the centre of the Kochlias, to the narrow place at the bottom of the world. (p.46)

In the novel, the terms 'women', 'mothers', 'sisters', are all seen to merge together into a common identity. Fundamental differences between women, such as race and class, appear to dissolve in the text. Skin colour becomes a feature of each woman's physical appearance rather than a marker of cultural identity which may be shared with some men. While the achievement of racial harmony is part of the wish-fulfilment fantasy of the utopia, it also mirrors the radical feminist emphasis on the primacy of sexual oppression over other oppressions in contemporary societies.

In contrast to the essentialist model of femininity, the model based on 'the politics of struggle' rejects the idea of a fixed female nature or sexuality, and tends to see sexuality as socially constructed rather than as innate. Monique Wittig represents this viewpoint and rejects what she sees as the 'biologizing interpretation of history' common to cultural feminism:

Not only is this conception still imprisoned in the categories of sex (woman and man), but it holds onto the idea that the capacity to give birth (biology) is what defines a woman²⁴.

However, in her article 'One Is Not Born A Woman', Wittig goes to the other extreme and defines 'lesbian' oppositionally to 'woman'. 'Woman' has been thoroughly colonized by man; lesbian, as the silent, taboo, or 'outsider' identity, is the only viable identity for the feminist subject:

Lesbian is the only concept that I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (man and woman), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically²⁵.

Wittig argues that lesbian societies are not based on women's oppression; while this may be so, they certainly do not exist outside it. Wittig's theory of lesbian existence is in danger of placing lesbians outside history. Instead of the biologically based lesbian subject, she produces the transcendent political lesbian subject who is somehow entirely (and always) outside the designation 'woman' and, by implication, outside the categories of race and class as well.

Despite problems with her theory, Wittig is a provocative thinker and her central idea, that sexuality is constructed through structural relations which are economic, political and ideological, has been utilized by many lesbian writers. Some science fiction writers have taken it as the starting point of their narratives, with the aim of deconstructing contemporary perceptions of what it means to be male and female. One such writer is Joanna Russ whose novel The Female Man explores the cultural construction of gender roles. This theme is signalled by the title of the novel which, in its use of paradox, provocatively alerts the reader to the central questions it raises: what is meant by the signifiers of gender difference and how does this relate to the way we experience ourselves as gendered beings? The Female Man undermines fixed gender roles and implies that they are merely roles which we acquire, rather than expressions of our inner nature. When Jeannine, who is the representative of oppressed femininity in the novel, insists 'I enjoy being a girl', Joanna's ironic reply demonstrates how ridiculous the statement is: 'Has anyone proposed the choice to you lately?'²⁶. The idea put forward in The Wanderground, that femaleness is an essential property, is rejected in The Female Man as part of the traditional myth of femininity. The novel insists that women are not, as cultural feminists tend to assume, repositories of virtue; women can be stupid, violent and fallible. For example, the utopian character, Janet, is not represented as the ideal woman. On the contrary, she is the least intelligent of the four main characters, and lacks the ability to empathize with her sisters on the earth-

based societies. Moreover, the novel implies that the compulsory superiority of Gearhart's hill women is just as oppressive as enforced housewifery. Whereas The Wanderground approaches the question of gender difference by affirming traditionally feminine qualities, The Female Man interrogates the categories themselves, even to the point of asking whether 'women' can be said to exist. If women are how men define them to be then perhaps it is preferable, as Joanna concludes, not to be one but to become a 'female man' instead.

In The Female Man a positive female identity is envisaged not as the result of a reassertion of existing feminine qualities, but the redefinition and reconstruction of the category 'woman'. This redefinition partly involves a reappraisal, and sometimes a rejection, of heterosexuality. Joanna and Laura start to identify as lesbian in the course of the novel, Janet has always identified as lesbian, Jael fights for women against men, and Jeannine learns a sense of sisterhood. Lesbian identity in The Female Man is not represented as a manifestation of a natural female nature, as it is in The Wanderground, but, in Joanna's case, as part of a process of negotiating and resisting gender difference.

The novel provides a variety of socially situated lesbian identifications. Janet represents the lesbian utopian hero; she comes from the all-female utopian world of Whileaway. This, as she comments, is 'a name for Earth ten centuries from now, but not our Earth ... Whileaway, you may gather, is in the future. But not our future'²⁷. The fact that there is no historical continuity between Joanna's world, which is our Earth in 1969, and Whileaway has the

effect of relativizing their respective realities and forms of lesbian identification. Since heterosexuality and sexual binarism are not a part of Janet's reality, lesbianism consequently carries a different signification. In *Whileaway* lesbian existence is the norm, not the silenced 'other', and homophobia and heterosexism are unknown.

In the portrayal of Jael, the novel presents another version of *Everywoman*. Jael comes from a radically sex-polarised society in which men and women are involved in a struggle to the death. The war between 'Us and Them' represents a 'worst case scenario', in which the struggle for privileged status has become an armed struggle. Jael is portrayed as a lesbian warrior figure, a 'rosy, wholesome, single-minded assassin', akin to Monique Wittig's 'guerilla'²⁸. She articulates a 'political' separatist analysis and her identity is shaped by political imperative, rather than by sexual preference. This is illustrated by the fact that she does not seem to have time for love affairs, although she does make love to a male robot called Davy. Dedicated to 'The Cause', she sees her mission as killing Manlanders: men who have become so debased by violence they are no longer human. Far from feeling guilty about killing men, Jael admits to being strengthened by each murder:

Anybody who believes I feel guilty for the murders I did is a Damned Fool..I am not guilty because I murdered.
I murdered because I was guilty.
Murder is my one way out.
For every drop of blood there is restitution made; with every truthful reflection in the eyes of a dying man I get back a little of my soul; with every gasp of horrified comprehension I come a little more into the light. See? It's me! (p.195)

Her world is described as an absolutist one in which men and women are no longer regarded as belonging to the same species and there is no hope of reconciliation between them. In this 'Us and Them' world, biological difference, as in existing culture, is used to differentiate women and men, except here femaleness functions as the central signifier. For Jael, femininity is not so much acquired, as 'in the blood'. Yet, even this expression of biological essentialism is undercut as Jael ironically adds 'But whose [blood]?', which suggests that there are no inherent sexual properties²⁹. Jael represents the definitive separatist freedom fighter: courageous, militant, independent. Of all the J's, Joanna admires her the most:

..twisted as she is on the rack of her own hard logic, triumphant in her extremity, the hateful hero with the broken heart (p.212).

While Gearhart's journeying hill women represent the 'sisterhood' model of lesbian subjectivity, Russ's Jael character brilliantly conveys the anger and single-mindedness of political separatist psychology. The novel's portrait of Jael has much in common with the autobiographical account of her experience given by an ex-separatist, Janet Dixon, in the magazine Spare Rib. Dixon writes about the motives leading her to adopt an extreme separatist position, commenting that 'the rage and sense of injustice, for a separatist, is not powerfully enough voiced anywhere else'³⁰. Yet, whereas for the real-life Janet Dixon separatist anger ultimately became self-

defeating, Jael, the ultimate revenge-fantasy figure, continues to thrive on and draw sustenance from her anger.

Gendered Language Systems

The exploration of language as a system which both constitutes and perpetuates women's subordination to men is a central focus of lesbian feminist speculative fiction, and the equation of masculinity and femininity with particular linguistic modes has become commonplace in feminist literary practice. For example, in The Wanderground the encounter between the hill women and the gentles (a group of men who have relinquished conventional masculinist values) is conveyed in a different linguistic register to that used by the women amongst themselves. In the male-female encounter thoughts do not travel back and forth harmoniously; instead, words are exchanged combatively. Meaning lies not in the saying, as it does in woman-centred language, but in what is said. The text makes clear that this shift is a result of 'the cock-centred energy' of the male-dominated city and that, in describing sexual intercourse in this context, it is more appropriate to speak of a 'woman-fucker' than an 'enfoldment', the hillwomen's term for erotic experience³¹. In Woman on the Edge of Time Marge Piercy elaborates a woman-centred language system which privileges the present continuous tense and verbalizes nouns, making states dynamic rather than passive. Mattapoissettians make no linguistic distinction between men and women but use the pronoun 'per' to refer to both. This example reflects the linguistic interventions of contemporary feminists, especially the coining of

new, non-gender specific terms in the public world, such as 'chairperson' and 'firefighter'. However, the language systems in many feminist utopian novels are based on the questionable assumption that verbs, especially perfect tense or transitive ones, are somehow masculine, while nouns and states of being are somehow feminine. In privileging the latter, female experience, the writers assume, is validated.

A central theme of Anna Livia's dystopian novel Bulldozer Rising is the gendered nature of language. The novel opposes the City vernacular, the language of 'advanced patriarchy', to the ancient language of Tramontane, a woman-centred language produced by sucking in air and clicking the teeth and lips. Like Piercy's and Gearhart's novels, Bulldozer Rising identifies the present continuous tense, described as the '(ec)static present', with the feminine; it comprises 'soft, warm, golden treacle verbs' with which women write their life stories³². This invented language reflects the feminist emphasis on process; it is dynamic rather than static, and affective rather than instrumental, encoding continual happenings and 'connectings' rather than stating facts and fixing meaning³³. In contrast, the male language of the City is constructed on hierarchical principles, based on a concept of difference and deviation from the male norm, so that everything is 'plus or minus male, plus or minus citizen'³⁴. This formulation bears a striking resemblance to post-structuralist theories of language, in particular to Derrida's critique of the Metaphysics of Presence of western language systems which privilege one term as positive - masculinity -

at the expense of another - femininity. It also reveals similarities with Lacan's idea of the fixing of meaning around a central, transcendental signifier: the phallus³⁵. In Bulldozer Rising all meanings produced in the City revolve around this ultimate signified:

Any substantive could stand for a penis. Any verb for penetration. (p.132)

The linguistic experiments carried out in the novels cited above attempt to undermine what French feminists, Monique Wittig among them, have called phallogocentrism. Hélène Cixous has demonstrated the ways in which patriarchal binary thought works to subordinate the 'feminine' through an equation with the 'negative' pole: Activity/Passivity; Sun/Moon; Culture/Nature; Father/Mother; Head/Emotions; Intelligible/ Sensitive; Logos/Pathos³⁶. However, there is a danger that rather than subverting these constructs, feminist fictional utopias reinforce them by uncritically celebrating the 'feminine' pole. The Wanderground, for instance, utilizes these equations as if they were metaphysical rather than socially constructed categories, and the philosophical and political system which it represents and advocates is based on the very binary oppositions challenged by Cixous.

Many works of lesbian and feminist science fiction also make use of the SF concepts of telepathy and ESP, suggesting that these pre-linguistic systems of intuitive communication are particularly female or feminine. Connie in Woman on the Edge of Time is a natural 'catcher' or telepath; Gearhart's hill women can communicate without

speaking and even enter into the consciousnesses of other animate and inanimate things; and Magdalen in Josephine Saxton's Queen of the States (1986) undergoes an out-of-body experience in order to communicate with alien life forms. These fantasies of telepathic and unspoken communication register women's historical exclusion from the Symbolic Order, the realm of language use and cultural expression, and the desire for another mode of communication which is not constructed by and for men's use. They also register a desire for a pre-linguistic realm prior to the emergence of sexual difference and antagonism. Moreover, the equation of femininity with non-verbal forms of communication also implies the existence of a female nature which exists outside language. As Sarah LeFanu writes:

The implication here of a residue of truth, lying underneath the problematics of language, is the corollary of the notion of an essential femaleness. Language is seen as a barrier between thought and thing; remove it and thoughts become material. Womanness₃₇ exists independently of, and before, the construct of language.

This idea, though superficially attractive, has the disadvantageous effect of undermining the feminist belief that language is a prime site of feminist struggle and that women must have access to it if they are to enjoy full social and political freedoms. If women can better, and indeed fully, express themselves in non-verbal forms, then linguistic struggle becomes unnecessary and redundant.

The essentialist approach to language, which is a feature of Piercy's and Gearhart's novels, contrasts radically with that of Monique Wittig's The Lesbian Body (1986) which enacts in the body of

the text the construction of woman as a desirous, speaking subject. The novel was originally published in French and became increasingly popular in its translated version with English speaking readers. The Lesbian Body stands outside the Anglo-American tradition in its linguistic 'foreignness' but has had considerable influence on the development of that tradition since the 1970s. The text emphasizes the 'amazon' virtues of strength, physicality, violence and militancy, rather than the 'maternal' virtues of empathy and nurturance. It undertakes a remarkable dismemberment of the lesbian body into its anatomical parts in order to deconstruct the representation of woman in patriarchal discourse. For Wittig the affirmation of the lesbian as subject starts with the body and with the body's inscription in language:

To recite one's own body, to recite the body of the other, is to recite the word of which the book is made up. The fascination for writing the never previously written and the fascination for the unattained body proceed from the same desire. (p.10)

Wittig conceives of language as a material reality rather than as a mere tool of communication. In her view the text is itself a kind of body which, like the lesbian body, has to be radically reconceptualized.

Joanna Russ's The Female Man shares Wittig's deconstructive emphasis on language as a signifying practice rather than a mimetic object which mirrors female experience. The novel eschews both realism and the mythopoeic mode in order to interrogate the terms of

fictional representation. Whereas The Wanderground celebrates women's ostensible closeness to nature, The Female Man illustrates how this ideological construction of woman as Nature has excluded women from the category 'human'; as Russ comments:

You can't write woman and human any more than you can write matter and anti-matter. (p.151)

For Russ, as for Wittig, utopia is envisaged not as a static object or state but as a radical literary practice, a way of writing. It is interventionist, disruptive and self critical or self-reflexive, that is, conscious of itself and of its own history and myths. The Female Man addresses the (lesbian/feminist) reader directly, inviting her to participate in the text's utopian project. It represents a cultural intervention in the politics and history of both gender and writing, by consciously placing itself in a tradition of feminist literary and political practice:

Go little book, bob a curtsey at the shrines of Friedan, Millet, Greer, Firestone ... do not complain when at last you become quaint and old-fashioned ... when you are no longer understood ... Do not reach up and punch the readers' noses. Rejoice little book!
For on that day we will be free. (pp.213-214)

Lesbian Feminist Dystopian Fiction

Whereas the fictional utopia centres on women's dreams and hopes for a better world, the dystopia addresses their nightmares and fears of a world which is more oppressive. Like the utopia, the feminist

dystopia takes dissatisfaction with contemporary society as its starting point. However, rather than offering a favourable alternative, it presents a 'worst case' vision of how the present could deteriorate into a situation where male domination and female subordination are rigidly enforced. Nonetheless, there are chinks in the patriarchal machine, points of weakness susceptible to feminist resistance and challenge. Feminism is premised on the possibility and necessity of change, and the feminist dystopia therefore acts as a warning against complacency and political non-involvement.

Because of its rootedness in the present, dystopian fiction tends to employ a realistic mode, rather than the mythic mode characteristic of utopia. The world of Zoe Fairbairns's Benefits (1979), for example, is identifiably that of 1970s' Britain with its crumbling inner city tower blocks and atmosphere of urban decay. Whereas the utopia situates itself in a rural landscape, the dystopian experience is predominantly an urban one, located in the city. The urban settings of feminist dystopias allow feminist writers to register women's fears of city life and their typical experience of the urban landscape as dangerous and threatening. The city represented in feminist dystopias also has affinities with other twentieth century conceptions of the city, notably with 'the mean streets' of Raymond Chandler's crime fiction, and with Fritz Lang's conception of the city as malevolent machine in Metropolis. It underscores the metropolitan concentration of power in centralised authoritarian systems. This is a crucial determinant of women's

oppression in Benefits.

Benefits, a feminist 'classic' of the 1970s, in engaging with one of the major feminist debates of the time around the issue of housework, is a good example of the interconnection between feminist politics and feminist fiction. Exponents of 'The Wages For Housework' campaign argued that housework would only be recognised as work if it was integrated into the capitalist system and financially reimbursed. Other feminists argued that this would only consolidate women's inferior status in the home. Benefits presents both sides of the debate and, through the device of 'extrapolation', asks the question: 'What would actually happen to you, me and the woman next door if a British government introduced a wage for mothers?'³⁸. It convincingly demonstrates that the cost of this policy would be that women who cannot or will not become mothers and who are sexual dissidents, such as lesbians, are marginalised and criminalised, rounded up into re-education centres and in some cases murdered as enemies of the state.

Another example of mainstream feminist dystopian writing is Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1987), which takes the idea of institutionalized and enforced motherhood to its ultimate conclusion. In the oppressive theocracy of Gilead women have been reduced to their biological function. Young, fertile women are forced to become 'handmaids' and they have no other function than to conceive and bear children for the elite class. Infertile, deviant or rebellious women are shipped off to a radioactive wasteland where they face certain death or end up in a city brothel, as does Offred's lesbian friend. The novel illustrates how the male-dominated establishment uses the

capacity for reproduction to divide women; the elite but sterile wives and the enslaved but fertile handmaids are encouraged to hate and fear each other, with the result that solidarity is virtually impossible. Like Benefits, The Handmaid's Tale engages with contemporary feminist politics, specifically with the 1980s' debate about surrogate motherhood. Where Benefits asks what life would be like for women given paid maternity, The Handmaid's Tale asks what it would be like if surrogacy came under the institutionalized control of a patriarchal elite. Both novels register deep suspicion of women handing over to the state the means to control their reproductive power.

In both of these examples of the feminist dystopia the lesbian character occupies a special role as a figure in extremis; she is portrayed as pushed onto the very margins of the woman-hating society and represents the ultimate threat to the phallogentric economy. Heterosexual feminist writers such as Atwood and Fairbairns recognise the potential of the lesbian as a subversive figure; her role in their novels is, however, peripheral and largely functional, rather than psychologically rounded. In the lesbian genre, the marginality of the lesbian qua society persists, but is placed centre stage in the narrative. She becomes the hero, and her resistance to oppression motivates the plot. In Nicky Edwards's lesbian dystopia Stealing Time, for example, the heroine, Al, is a financially deprived lesbian teenager struggling to survive in the socially polarised London of 1999. Al has been categorised as a 'no-hoper' by the system; because of a hearing impairment she is considered 'thick' by her school. The

novel's exploration of the issues of gender, class and disability are clearly located in the 1980s' Britain of Thatcherism, which is displaced onto a near-future setting. References to health privatisation, homelessness and a credit card economy feature prominently in the novel, and the society which they evoke combines a modern computer culture with its Victorian-like under-side of sweated labour, beggars and child prostitution.

Interestingly, the dystopia has been more popular than the utopia in the 1980s, a fact which can perhaps be explained by the political pessimism of the Thatcher and Reagan years and the relative decline of the Left in this period. Whereas the utopia often springs from optimism and enthusiasm for political change, the dystopia can be employed to reflect the disappointments of the present and a disillusion with utopian thought. Moreover, the dystopias published recently, such as Nicky Edwards's Stealing Time and Anna Livia's Bulldozer Rising, also reflect the shift in feminist thought over the last two decades towards heterogeneity and the recognition of differences between women. The central thematic is no longer female versus male society and the sex-gender system tout court, although, of course, sexual power relations remain an important focus; instead there is a focus on interlocking structures of power and oppression, based on class, race, age and disability as well as gender. Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time was a pioneering work in this respect, in concentrating on a working-class Chicana. Recently published novels are therefore more likely to be class-specific, and to address other important issues such as ageism and ableism.

Bulldozer Rising, for instance, offers a comprehensive analysis of the connection between sexism and ageism.

Anna Livia's Bulldozer Rising focuses on a group of elderly women who are outcasts from a Fascist-type society based on an extreme cult of youth which decrees death for the over-40s. They inhabit a subterranean world beneath the City, one of the three co-existing but separate worlds described in the novel. The City, portrayed as the locus of State power, is inhabited by 'Ackademicals', the privileged intelligentsia. These comprise young men, or 'zappers', who police the City; and young women, or 'nellies', trained to be ultra-feminine and attractive to men. The Scrub is an intermediate society of second class citizens similar to Orwell's 'proles'; and the Wilderness or hinterland is described as a free, anarchic space, existing outside the city, inhabited by the 'rock women' who are one hundred years old and blind. The hinterland is the closest place the novel offers to a utopia; like Gearhart's *Wanderground*, it is a natural world the inhabitants of which have rejected 'male' technology. The black moss which grows there is beneficial to women but deadly to men, and the rock women, in their powers of endurance, resemble the landscape itself. Yet, although the outcast group of women flees to the hinterland, the latter differs from the model of utopia envisaged in pastoral myth in its starkness and uncompromising nature. It is a place of danger and, in representing the mere possibility of a future rather than a safe retreat, suggests that a world without men cannot magically dissolve differences and conflict between women.

The physical harshness of the landscape and environment is also registered formally in the prose style of Bulldozer Rising. Unlike the mythopoeic language of the utopian mode, or the solid and familiar realism of other dystopias such as Benefits or sections of Woman on the Edge of Time, the narrative style of Livia's novel is, like its society, spare, cold, disengaged and unemotional. This has the effect of creating a distance between the reader and the text, and of precluding the kind of close identification with the characters which Piercy's novel encourages. However, this style possibly facilitates a more 'Brechtian' engagement with the novel; it encourages the reader to think about what she has read, with the aim of prompting her to action rather than mere sympathy.

Bulldozer Rising operates a number of radical reversals and redefinitions which challenge the contemporary stereotypes which are as prevalent in the lesbian community as outside it. For example, in focusing on the experience of older women, it rejects the idea that the fictional requisite of heroism is youth. It also contradicts the idea that the elderly are incapable of action: the women of the Senectity ('not an organization against the young, but for the old'³⁹) carefully plan and execute their revolt and even turn their shuffling slowness into an advantage to avoid detection from City inhabitants who rush everywhere on speed skates. One of the old women, Soren, moves so slowly that she is mistaken for a heap of rubbish! Like the story of 'The Tortoise and the Hare', theirs is one of reversal in which victory belongs to the under-valued and underestimated.

Bulldozer Rising also offers a powerful indictment of what Naomi Wolf has called the 'beauty myth', the system of ideological values which shapes attitudes to physical appearance and defines what attributes are considered beautiful⁴⁰. In the City beauty is the only indicator of a woman's worth, and without it she is treated as an outcast. The Youngwomen are portrayed as extreme stereotypes of contemporary femininity; genetically engineered to become middle-aged at fifteen, they undergo rejuvenating injections, cosmetic surgery and dieting regimes to stay young. They wear clothes which inhibit their movements and attend training schools to learn passive feminine behaviour. Opposed to this conveyor-belt manufacture of 'beauty' is the image of the old women; often fat, in poor health, and with wrinkled skin, they are everything our society labels ugly. Yet the novel convincingly shows that, in comparison with the male-defined, anorexic 'beauty' of the Youngwomen, the old women possess a more positive, woman-friendly beauty. At one point the novel presents a striking image of a huge elderly Tramontane woman stuffing herself without guilt or shame as a younger woman looks on enviously.

The novel also includes a number of scenes depicting romantic and sexual love between older women. This is an experience rarely described in science fiction, or indeed in any lesbian fiction. Livia challenges the (younger) reader even more directly by refusing to represent it in a sentimental way. Love in the city is depicted as tough and practical and the representation of the frail and unhealthy physical features of some of her characters is uncompromising:

Now here was Karlin suddenly in her arms, weighing less than ... the sack of moss she had carried over the mountains ... As Ithaca ran her hand along the inside of Karlin's calf, secretly aghast at how quickly the muscle had turned to soft putty, Karlin snapped.

'I don't want to be weighed, measured and pitied, Ithaca. I want to be loved.'

'Do you?' said Ithaca quietly, 'And do you love me?' (pp.185-186)

Bulldozer Rising is one of the few novels to present a view of the world from the perspective of an ill and dying woman. Through the character Karlin, the novel depicts the effect of age and sickness on the body while the mind is still alert. It describes how the universe is diminished to the confines of a small room, and how the individual takes a pride in merely standing up. As Karlin regains her sense of smell, the sure sign of ageing in the city as the smell-inhibiting drugs wear off, she smells the stench of her own body. The novel does not idealise old age as the glorious twilight years, but presents it as a frightening experience. But, equally, it shows that this is not natural or inevitable, and illustrates that ageing is socially constructed: the elderly are equated with death and discarded as useless. In the city represented in the novel this marginalization is taken to extremes as the elderly are annihilated. Livia's novel, in foregrounding their experience, gives older people, and older women specifically, a voice and the visibility denied them in contemporary Western society. It depicts older women in three dimensions as resourceful, stubborn, often bloody minded, fighters; as battle-axes who empower themselves. In appearance and behaviour these characters appear, by conventional standards, monstrous. Without mitigating

their repellent characteristics, the novel valorizes female monstrosity as a form of resistance to sexist and patriarchal value systems and as a mode of surviving on the margins.

Lesbian Vampire Fiction

The image of the lesbian as monster is central to another form of science fiction and fantasy: the vampire story. The lesbian vampire has long been a conventional character of male fantasy literature. Reaching her apotheosis in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (1872), she represents to the threatened male psyche the ultimate in monstrous, sexually voracious femininity. Although vampire fiction is not properly part of the science fiction genre - it is more usually connected to the Gothic tradition - recent use of the vampire motif by lesbian writers has made the lesbian vampire a powerful alternative fantasy figure in the science fiction genre. Though commenting on the male tradition, Bonnie Zimmerman suggests a reason for the popularity of the lesbian vampire with women readers:

The myth of the lesbian vampire ... carries in it the potentiality for a feminist revision of meaning ... sexual attraction between women can threaten the authority of a male-dominated society. The lesbian vampire [story] can lend itself to an even more extreme reading: that in turning to each other, women triumph over and destroy men ⁴¹.

Although, as Zimmerman's thesis implies, the opportunities here for lesbian revenge fantasy literature are rife, in fact lesbian writers have not chosen to depict lesbian vampires sucking the life-blood out of patriarchal males! They have tended instead to celebrate the

vampire as a sign of lesbian transcendence and triumphant outlawry. They also exploit the sexual connotations of vampirism to focus on lesbian sexuality.

Although not explicitly a vampire narrative, Ellen Galford's Gothic fantasy The Fires of Bride (1986) features a protagonist whose aristocratic lineage, strange behaviour, Gothic mansion and propensity to take home impressionable young women strongly hints at vampirism. Witch-like and sinister, Galford's heroine nevertheless departs from male versions of the vampire in that her energy and wicked sense of humour make her attractive rather than frightful. Galford's treatment of the vampire motif, indicative of her lesbian perspective, is playful and parodic; she satirizes and gently ridicules the conventions of the genre, replacing the hysteria of (male) vampire and (female) Gothic literature with a gleeful and exuberant engagement with the central myths of both.

Jody Scott's I, Vampire, published by The Women's Press in its science fiction series, is the most comprehensive reworking of the genre from a lesbian perspective. It narrates the story of a seven hundred year-old vampire, Sterling O'Blivion, who somewhat incongruously works as a dance studio instructor in 1980s North America! As this suggests, the novel is essentially a comic parody of the genre. Its central conceit is the identification of lesbianism with vampirism. In chapter one Sterling is ignominiously ejected from her own Garden of Eden, the traditional Transylvanian castle, for committing 'the unspeakable "it"', in legendary style, with a female servant. The euphemism refers simultaneously to vampirism and

lesbianism. Like Stephen Gordon in The Well of Loneliness, Sterling is forced to defend herself eternally against charges of unnaturalness; she comments:

My 'crime' was a normal act. God had made me this way. (p.3)

In the case of both figures a 'defective gene' is responsible for their difference, and both characterizations draw on the idea of an essential nature; like lesbians, vampires can't be 'cured', and Sterling does not want to be; she enjoys herself too much!

Whereas, in the male genre, the lesbian vampire is objectified and seen from the hysterical male point of view, in I, Vampire the first person narrative privileges the vampire's point of view. Sterling offers the reader 'the bottom line on vampire life' and rails against the bigotry of society in which vampires are persecuted and misunderstood, and 'vampire bashing', like 'gay bashing', is tolerated⁴². The parallels between lesbian and 'vampire' experience are also carried through on a linguistic level: the lesbian/vampire speaks for herself, rather than being spoken about. It is the so-called 'normals' who are described from without, in this respect reversing the usual hierarchies of discourse. Just as Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness represents what Foucault calls a 'reverse discourse' of lesbianism in that Stephen, a lesbian, speaks in her own voice using terms invented by medical sexology, so I, Vampire retells the myth from the vampire's point of view⁴³.

I, Vampire is not only a vampire novel. As I have suggested it

uses the trope of vampirism to interrogate assumptions about the realm of the natural. In fact the novel combines a number of genres, including women's Gothic, space adventure and contemporary social satire in a post-modern pastiche which self-consciously plays with the conventions of fiction. It fits more properly into the genre of 'metafiction', described by Patricia Waugh as:

writing which consistently displays its conventionality, which explicitly and overtly lays bare its conditions of artifice, and which thereby explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction⁴⁴.

Waugh identifies parody as a form of metafiction in which a literary genre or text is reworked and commented upon through mimicry. She cites as an example John Gardner's Grendel (1971), which retells the Beowulf story from the point of view of the monster. I, Vampire functions as parody in retelling the vampire myth from the point of view of the vampire and thereby putting the fears and fantasies which motivate the myth into relief. The novel also engages specifically with another text: Virginia Woolf's Orlando (1928). It interpolates not only the earlier novel's time-travelling heroine, who moves effortlessly through history, but also its author. In a diatribe against twentieth-century literature (science fiction is plagued by 'the cant of materialism'; Camus is 'crap'), Sterling singles out Woolf as a literary hero and invokes Orlando as a science fiction 'classic'⁴⁵. In this way, she highlights the significance of lesbianism as a literary tradition as well as a sexual identity. Subsequently in the novel, 'Virginia Woolf' appears 'in person'. In a

hilarious scene Sterling encounters Woolf half-naked and deranged in a Ladies' Room in 1980s Chicago and recognizes that she herself is in love:

'The new Woolf was titanic, Valkyrian and sexy ... I still had the hots for her. I was warm for her form. (p.58)

Although the Woolf figure appears to be a 'real flesh and blood woman', it subsequently transpires that she is really an alien being called Benaroya from the planet Rysemus sent in an assumed form to Save the Earth. She is, like Joanna Russ's characters in The Female Man, 'a hypothetical spacewoman'. Whereas Sterling incarnates the fixed, immutable nature of the vampire, the only absolute in a relativistic world, Benaroya is portrayed as a multi-variant, chameleon, indeed genderless character, whose identity changes at will. The appeal of these two fantasy figures for lesbian (and other) readers resides, on the one hand, in the idea of a transhistorical, transcendent vampire/lesbian essence and, on the other, in the idea of the infinite mutability of identity. The vampire and the alien are both conventional signifiers of disruption and threat, yet in I, Vampire they are redefined within the discourse of lesbianism as images of the creative anarchy and a female autonomy which contemporary western societies deny women. Like Orlando, Sterling and Benaroya transcend the tyrannies of gender binarism and compulsory heterosexuality, as they also transcend human mortality. In this narrative lesbianism conquers all.

As male examples of the genre graphically demonstrate, the

vampire narrative also affords the writer the opportunity to represent lesbianism in a sexual, if not pornographic, light. Perhaps, for this reason, the erotic aspects of the vampire myth tend to be de-emphasized in lesbian vampire fiction. For instance, in Jewell Gomez's short story, 'No Day Too Long', which explores black women's experience of oppression, vampirism is employed as a sign of the heroine Gilda's racial difference from other women. Gilda is a runaway slave who killed a white man and was then rescued by a woman who made her into a vampire and with whom she found love and affinity. As Richard Dyer, commenting on the story, writes:

Vampirism here is a metaphor for lesbianism as something more than sexual preference, a different way of grasping the essence of womanhood, with the resonance of the black feminist concept of 'womanism'⁴⁶.

I, Vampire, however, does engage with the sexual implications of the vampire myth; it describes with relish its heroine's sexy vampirizing activities which mark her difference from other (mortal) women as an active sexual agent:

... that scent of conquest, the noble chase, a game of wits, figuring out how I can penetrate and feast without getting my neck broken. And then the thrill of victory forever new, the ritualized ecstasy as I master the unconscious victim and at long last that slow, marvellous caress on the tongue as the Ruby slips down my throat. (p.5)

While the novel highlights the lesbian vampire's sexuality, it does not reproduce the titillating scenes characteristic of masculine

versions of the myth such as Le Fanu's Carmilla. Like Woolf's Orlando, on which Scott's novel is based, I, Vampire represents the lesbian figure as an active sexual subject, rather than as a sexual object for male delectation.

Utopian Sexuality in Lesbian Science Fiction

Although lesbian feminist science fiction displays an abundance and diversity of positive images of female relationships, portrayals of specifically sexual relations between women are almost absent from the genre. In the 1980s lesbian writers have turned to romance and crime fiction in order to portray erotic relationships between women. Lesbian feminist science fiction has tended to foreground nurturing maternal love rather than (genital) sexual desire. One reason for this may be feminist writers' understandable desire not to reproduce the sexual objectification of women common to male SF and fiction in general. Another reason is the dichotomy explored in many types of feminist fiction between female autonomy and sexual desire (for men), with the latter being seen as an obstacle to the former. Lesbian representation does not encounter this problem because the fulfilment of lesbian sexual desire is not dependent on male co-operation. Therefore, the similarities between the representation of sexuality in lesbian and non-lesbian feminist examples of science fiction must be explained in terms of the particular model of sexuality employed in utopian texts. This model owes much to the lesbian feminist redefinition of female sexuality as mutual caring which became a dominant part of feminist thinking in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Adrienne Rich's 1980 article 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' is one of the most influential articulations of this model⁴⁷. In it she argues that female sexuality exists on a lesbian continuum which encompasses caring, friendship, mothering and sex. Rich does not distinguish sharply between love and sex, and in her account woman's relationships with mothers, sisters and friends are all imbued with erotic overtones.

This redefinition of female sexuality as an extension of sisterhood or as pre-oedipal merging with the mother has dominated utopian representations of relationships between women in all-female environments. This is not surprising given that this redefinition is itself essentially utopian; Rich's lesbian continuum is a potent political myth of female relationality, occupying the same discursive terrain as Sally Miller Gearhart's fantasy evocation of women's community. The popularity of The Wanderground suggests that it accords with many women's, both lesbian and heterosexual, feelings about relationship with others and that lesbian utopianism is capable of addressing non-lesbian women. Yet in foregrounding female sexuality, and in particular, lesbianism, as caring, this model tends to de-emphasize and even marginalize specifically sexual relations between women, as the paucity of overtly erotic science fiction writing by lesbians testifies. Marge Piercy in Woman on the Edge of Time resolves the problems involved in creating a liberating heterosexuality by eliminating gender difference while retaining men, transforming all the characters into bisexual mothers. This device allows her to incorporate sexual scenes such as that between Connie

and (the male) Bee. However, in explicitly lesbian texts the blurring of the distinction between acts of caring and acts of (genital) sex results in the former being emphasized to the virtual exclusion of the latter. Yet some lesbians have argued that it is precisely the sexualization of relations between women which men find so threatening and which patriarchy stigmatizes. Caring, on the contrary, is the role which patriarchy assigns to women and is thus less threatening and challenging. For many lesbians it is their sexual desire for, rather than their identification with, other women which leads them to identify as lesbian. It is this aspect of lesbian existence which is relatively absent from utopian representations.

One novelist who has attempted to represent a specifically sexual depiction of utopian lesbian relationships is Katherine V. Forrest whose novel Daughters of a Coral Dawn expresses a desire for something more than the mother's embrace. Forrest is interesting in that she is not primarily a writer of science fiction or a feminist polemicist using the genre to carry feminist ideas. She is first and foremost a lesbian writer, who writes in a variety of popular genres, including romance and the detective novel, two genres which traditionally prioritize sex, with the aim of introducing lesbian protagonists to a lesbian readership. Central to her project is the portrayal of sexual relations between women, both as a means of affirming lesbian sexuality and of creating erotic fantasy for lesbian readers.

Daughters of the Coral Dawn takes the form of a utopian space romance which combines a science fiction narrative representing women

founding a new matriarchal society on a distant planet with a 'girl-meets-girl' romance narrative. While the novel uses many of the narrative devices and shares some of the thematics of feminist science fiction, it is idiosyncratic and atypical in the emphasis which it places on lesbian sex and in its employment of dualistic gender roles. Bonnie Zimmerman draws attention to the novel's representation of the relationship between the central couple as 'a parody of heterosexual marriage'⁴⁸. Despite its affinities with lesbian feminist science fiction, Daughters of the Coral Dawn has little in common with the fiction directly inspired by the Women's Movement and is motivated by the lesbian community's desire for erotic literature. The emphasis on sex and the novel's anti-democratic character make the text quirky and divergent on two fronts. It is possible that the two features are linked and that the existence of power relations, disparities of age, status, attractiveness, make possible within the terms of traditional romance the eroticization of women's relationships; they add a sexual frisson which is less prominent in the relationships between Gearhart's interchangeable hill women, all of whom are portrayed as belonging to a similar class. The novel unashamedly exploits the power of sex appeal and the personality as the basis of both its social system and its sexual images:

Mother waved a hand ... 'Try to keep one thing in mind at all times. Even in a group such as this, all aspects of leadership psychology apply. Leadership imagery, for instance. Black and white are power colours - so dress all the time as you are now. Power attracts, Megan. Irresistibly. My gifted children are no more immune to the charisma of the leader than anyone else ... especially such a leader as you. Many women will soon want to

occupy your bed ... I'm sure they do anyway', she added, coolly surveying me. (p.33)

In addition to Forrest's novel, some explicitly sexual literature has been written by lesbians employing science fiction scenarios and themes. Two pornographic short stories published in the SAMOIS anthology Coming to Power (1987) exploit the science fiction devices of 'other worlds' and alien life forms in narratives depicting sado-masochistic encounters and aiming to arouse the lesbian reader. 'Mirel', by A.J. Sagan, is set in an unspecified future on the planet Rrawrh which is populated by 'feline humanoids', half woman, half cat. The heroine, an Earthling spacewoman called Kiri, on a visit to Rrawrh, goes to a local inn for a meal where she drinks the local brew 'U'ul', known for its aphrodisiac properties. This induces sexual reveries in the heroine who is 'erotically fascinated' by female Rrawrhians. After a pleasant evening she leaves the bar and is suddenly set upon by three angry Rrawrhian females who tie her up, tear off her clothes and whip her. It transpires that they are acting to avenge the violation of another female Rrawrhian by Earth men, but the text hints that they are also achieving sexual pleasure from the episode. This insight is offered by the Mirel of the title. She is a Rrawrhian and intervenes to 'rescue' Kiri. Mirel, who like many other feminist science fiction characters has healing powers and is gifted with 'empath', comforts Kiri and heals her wounds. Mirel then takes Kiri to her home where Kiri admits her love of cats. Mirel asks her sharply whether she 'owns' her pet cats and Kiri replies that she 'cares' for them. Mirel then asks Kiri to stay

with her, asserting that she wants to 'own' Kiri as her sex slave, whereupon Kiri admits her masochism and submits to Mirel's desires. A description of their love-making follows and the story ends with a sexually satisfied Kiri falling asleep in Mirel's arms.

The interest of the story lies in the ways in which it both deviates from and parallels the genre of lesbian feminist science fiction. Many of its devices and themes are identical to those of conventional generic fiction. These include the visit to a pro-female society, the problem of male violence, the concept of female empathy, the issues of ownership and inter-species relationships. In regard to the latter issue, 'Mirel' plays a role reminiscent of Piercy's discussion of the place of non-humans in Mattapoisett society: animal rights and species equality feature significantly in both narratives. However, the strategy which makes 'Mirel' distinctive is that it gives these conventions an added twist. The Rrawrhian avenging of their molested sister is not just - or even - a matter of feminist justice; it is an occasion for erotic arousal on the part of both characters and readers. Likewise, the discussion of ownership is not so much a restatement of a valuable feminist argument, but an introduction to the world of lesbian sado-masochism. 'Owning' Kiri (with her consent) is precisely Mirel's desired aim. 'Mirel' therefore manages to recast, with some subtlety and ingenuity, an archetypal lesbian feminist utopian scenario into a pornographic universe of sado-masochistic sexual adventure.

Holly Drew's 'The Seduction of Earth and Rain', another story from Coming to Power, is thematically and stylistically even more

consonant with lesbian feminist science fiction than 'Mirel' is. Its episodic, cyclical narrative mode and its central sustaining myth, the equation of 'Nature' and female ontology, make it resemble a sado-masochistic version of The Wanderground. Kurisa, the protagonist, leaves the City Sector to live with the Outwomen in the wild. The Outwomen live in perfect harmony with nature, having adapted to its cycles. However, the natural world described in the story does not reflect the typical lesbian feminist concept of a nurturing, unitary Mother Earth, but represents a powerful system of dualistic forces which act out a series of elemental exchanges. In fact, it represents a reconstruction of sado-masochistic sexual aesthetics. By eroticizing the landscape Drew naturalises SM, representing its rationale as that of Nature. The 'earth' and 'rain' of the title represent the SM roles of 'bottom' and 'top', dominant and submissive:

So close these women are to the ebb and flow, the dominance and submission acted out in this ecology. The two roles overlap, intermix ... there is no grass without rain, no rain without ... moisture ... This most basic of cycles, this most perfect powerplay, gentle, generous, yet unyielding. (p.131)

In fact, part of the Outwomen's adaptation to nature involves the development of bodies equipped with flesh collars, thongs and whips! Kurisa, lacking these, has to make to do with liana vines to pleasure her lover. The role which she gratefully adopts in her initiation into the Outwomen's sexual world is that of the rain, the 'dominant' element:

Yes, I do feel like rain today, like showering down welcomed blows, like cutting chasms with abrading rivulets, like marking a defenceless and vulnerable waiting and pleading earth. (p.131)

Significantly, the imagery in the above quotation is employed in such a way as to naturalize a particular sexual ideology. As soon as a behaviour is coded in this way it becomes conceivable as part of the natural order. Sally Gearhart's The Wanderground operates a similar naturalization of lesbian feminist ideology, and male science fiction has long used natural imagery to reinforce the dominant ideologies of heterosexuality and patriarchy.

The examples from Coming to Power are, however, unusual in utilizing science fiction as a vehicle to depict sexual relations between women. As I have shown, the majority of lesbian contributors to the genre have prioritized political rather than sexual themes. Other genres, such as the romance and the thriller, have provided lesbian writers with greater opportunities for representing the sexual in explicit ways. The crime genre has to a great extent displaced science fiction as the most popular form of lesbian feminist genre writing in the 1980s, and I discuss the reasons for its popularity in chapter four. However, the romance represents the traditional vehicle for the inscription of lesbian sexual desire, and the treatment of sexual and romantic themes in lesbian romance fiction is the focus of chapter three.

Notes

1. Marguerite Duras, from an interview by Susan Husserl-Kapit in Signs, Winter 1975.

2. Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution (New York: Morrow, 1970).
3. For example, the science fiction of Philip K. Dick which, although radical in many respects, stereotypes women in just these limited roles.
4. Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in Signs, Vol.5, 1980.
5. Marge Piercy, Woman on the Edge of Time (London: The Women's Press, 1979), p.68 (subsequent references in text).
6. Examples of nineteenth century fictional utopias include Samuel Butler's Erehwon (1872) and William Morris's News from Nowhere (1890).
7. Bonnie Zimmerman, The Safe Sea of Women (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1990), p.155.
8. E.H. Baruch, in R. Rohrlich & E.H. Baruch (eds), Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers (New York: Schocken, 1984), p.207.
9. Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (London: Methuen, 1981), p.180.
10. Sandy Boucher, back cover review, Persephone edition of The Wanderground (1979).
11. Elizabeth A. Lynn, back cover review, *ibid.*
12. See Nancy Chodorow, in The Reproduction of Mothering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), for a full account of the pre-oedipal relation to the mother and its significance for women. See also my discussion of Chodorow's work in relation to lesbian sexuality in chapter three.
13. Sarah LeFanu, In the Chinks of the World Machine (London: The Women's Press, 1988), pp.67 & 69.
14. Piercy, *op. cit.*, p.72.
15. Carol Kessler (ed), Daring to Dream: Utopian Stories by United States Women: 1836-1919 (Boston: Pandora, 1984), Introduction, p.18.
16. Peter Fitting, 'For Men Only: A Guide to Reading Single-Sex Worlds', Women's Studies, Vol.14, 1987, p.103.
17. Suzy McKee Charnas, 'A Woman Appeared', in Marleen S. Barr (ed) Future Females: A Critical Anthology (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1981), p.105.
18. The nineteenth century classic realist text traditionally offers women two resolutions, both of which deny female self-determination: marriage or death. Examples of the latter include George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina and Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles.
19. Charnas, Khatru, 3 & 4.
20. Alice, Gordon, Debbie and Mary, 'Separatism' in Sarah Lucia Hoagland & Julia Penelope (eds), For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), p.31.
21. *Ibid.*, p.32.
22. Radicalesbians, 'The Woman-Identified Woman' in For Lesbians Only, *op. cit.*, p.17.
23. Julia Penelope, 'A Cursory and Precursory History of Language, and the Telling of it', in For Lesbians Only, *op. cit.*, p.55.
24. Monique Wittig, 'One is not Born a Woman', in For Lesbians Only,

- op. cit, p.440.
25. Wittig, *ibid*, p.447. Reprinted in The Straight Mind (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).
 26. Joanna Russ, The Female Man, (London: The Women's Press, 1976), p.86 (subsequent references in text).
 27. *Ibid.*, p.7.
 28. Russ, *ibid*, p.187. Monique Wittig's 1971 novel Les Guerillères (New York: Avon, 1973) is a mythological narrative about a community of Amazonian women who fight to establish a female society.
 29. Russ, *ibid.*, p.187.
 30. Janet Dixon, 'Separatism' in Spare Rib, no.192, June 1988, p.11.
 31. Gearhart, *op. cit.*, p.172.
 32. Anna Livia, Bulldozer Rising (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), p.19.
 33. See also Makiko Minow-Pinkney, Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels (Brighton: Harvester, 1987) for a discussion of Woolf's attempt to create a feminine mode of writing.
 34. Livia, *op. cit.*, p.132.
 35. See Jacques Derrida, Spurs (University of Chicago Press, 1979); and Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', Écrits: A Selection (London: Tavistock, 1977)
 36. Hélène Cixous, La Jeune Née (Paris: Inédit, 1975), p.115.
 37. Sarah Lefanu, *op. cit.*, p.68.
 38. Zoe Fairbairns, 'On Writing Benefits', in No Turning Back (London: The Women's Press, 1981), p.255.
 39. Livia, *op. cit.*, p.184.
 40. Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990).
 41. Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Lesbian Vampires', Jump Cut, No.24/25, March 1981, pp.23-24.
 42. Jody Scott, I, Vampire (London: The Women's Press, 1986), p.7.
 43. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol.1, (London: Penguin, 1990), p.101
 44. Patricia Waugh, Metafiction (London: 1984), p7.
 45. Scott, *op. cit.*, p.36.
 46. Richard Dyer, 'Children of the Night', in Susannah Radstone (ed), Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender & Popular Fiction (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), p.67.
 47. Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality', *op. cit.*
 48. Bonnie Zimmerman, The Safe Sea of Women, *op. cit.*, p.154.

C H A P T E R F O U R

LESBIAN ROMANCE FICTION

Then Stephen took Angela into her arms, and she kissed her full on the lips, as a lover. (Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness, p.126)

Lesbianism, Feminism and Romance Fiction

The romance genre has a special place in the lesbian literary canon, for it is the most common form of the twentieth century lesbian novel; and the best known example of lesbian fiction, Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness, is a romance as well as a bildungsroman. Some fifty years after it was written, The Well of Loneliness sells more copies each week than any other lesbian novel and, notwithstanding the Second Wave of feminism and Gay Liberation, still has considerable ideological and imaginative influence on contemporary lesbian heroines, readers and writers¹. At first glance, however, the contemporary lesbian romance appears very different from Hall's famous text. In the former the religious pleas to a benign God have disappeared, as have the expressions of tortured masochism and Christ-like martyrdom, the references to congenital inversion and, most strikingly, the rigidly assigned sex roles. But, if contemporary lesbian romance eschews the religious and sexological discourses of Hall's novel, it nevertheless retains its central quest for the meanings of lesbian identity and desire.

In the late eighteenth century the romance became the predominant mode of women novelists, such as Ann Radcliffe and Fanny

Burney, who focused on the sexual trials and tribulations of single young middle-class women pursued by aristocratic rakes. Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847) and Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights (1847) continue this romantic tradition in nineteenth-century literature, establishing sexual power relations and the transcendent nature of love as central themes of the genre. In the twentieth-century, romance has evolved into the industries of mass market fiction and Hollywood film. The most striking and naturalised feature of mainstream romance fiction is its privileging of heterosexual love and, indeed, the increasing hegemony of heterosexual romance coincides historically with the social oppression of same-sex love and its classification as deviant and illegitimate².

The conjunction of romance with heterosexuality therefore presents lesbian writers with a problem, which writers of different periods have confronted in different ways. For Hall it meant returning to the origins of the lesbian subject; to the birth of the invert, who is obliged to justify her very existence in order to be allowed the right to love. It meant assuming a 'masculine' position in relation to the love object, in order to conform to the model of romantic love based on gender difference. Many writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries took literally the demand for a heterosexual pattern and used a male persona to articulate desire for a female love object. The heroine of Willa Cather's My Antonia, for instance, is seen through the admiring eyes of a male narrator. Moreover, in this period, as Sonja Ruehl has pointed out in relation to The Well of Loneliness, only men were credited with an

active sexuality³. The use of gender roles in novels by lesbian writers therefore facilitated the eroticization of lesbianism.

There is, however, a literary tradition specifically concerning romantic attachments between women which originated in the eighteenth-century concept of romantic female friendship⁴. In the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries this developed into a popular fictional form depicting romantic relationships between girls and young women in all-female communities, typically a girls' school or college. Dorothy Strachey Bussey's autobiographical novel Olivia (1949); Radclyffe Hall's The Unlit Lamp (1924); Rosamund Lehman's The Ballad and the Source (1945) and Colette's Claudine at School (1900) are examples of this tradition of writing about lesbian love. Gill Frith argues that this fiction constitutes a discrete genre, which she calls the 'gynaeceum' novel⁵. Although it is not exclusively lesbian, and sometimes depicts lesbian love as a passing phase, the gynaeceum novel does privilege and affirm the value of female relationships, allowing for the portrayal of strong feelings between women. Moreover, the motif of the women's community is still common in contemporary lesbian fiction. Sarah Aldridge's 1978 novel All True Lovers, for example, focuses on the sexual love between two teenage schoolgirls growing up during the American depression, and Katherine V. Forrest's Curious Wine (1983) uses the settings of a consciousness-raising group and a women's holiday retreat.

In addition to this middle- and high-brow literary tradition of novels which treat same-sex love, there is also a popular tradition of literature about lesbian love which emerged in the United States

in the 1950s and '60s. Generally classified as 'pulp' or mass market fiction, it was published and read on a vast scale, and was available in dime stores and bus station book shops as well as from the more clandestine mail order services⁶. Over a fifteen year period paperback originals were published in great numbers, including work by lesbian writers such as Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor and Paula Christian. The novels of these writers, such as Women in the Shadows (1959) and Another Kind of Love (1961), have influenced contemporary lesbian romance fiction in a number of important ways. Many recent lesbian romances use a similar plot of two women meeting and falling in love in the face of heterosexual opposition and, like the earlier novels, they depict explicitly sexual love between women. Recently published romances frequently offer a rewriting of the earlier novels by providing a positive or happy resolution for the lesbian relations depicted instead of the ambivalent or tragic ending common to 1950s' fiction. In the earlier novels lesbianism is presented as a highly tabooed subject and identity, whereas in the more recent novels it is celebrated as a legitimate lifestyle. Katherine V. Forrest's An Emergence of Green (1990), for example, can be read as a rewriting of Valerie Taylor's Strangers on Lesbos (1960). Whereas in the latter the married woman eventually returns to her husband, in Forrest's version she leaves him to explore her new identity as a lover of women.

On another level, that of reading communities, the earlier and more recent examples of romance fiction are linked by a generation of lesbian readers who, having read pulp lesbian romance in their teens

and twenties, have rediscovered it in its 1970s and '80s lesbian feminist reincarnation. Moreover, some of the earlier texts are now being republished by the feminist and lesbian presses. Naiad, for instance, has brought out the novels written by Ann Bannon in the 1950s, such as Odd Girl Out (1986) and Beebo Brinker (1986). Even mainstream publishing houses are participating in the revival, as is illustrated by the recent publication by Penguin of Patricia Highsmith's Carol. The novel first appeared in 1959 as The Price of Salt under the pseudonym Claire Morgan. This example illustrates the most notable difference between lesbian publications then and now. In the 1950s, the majority of lesbian fiction was published pseudonymously as part of mainstream publishing, whereas there is now an independent lesbian publishing industry which emerged as a result of the liberation movements of the 1970s.

The Feminist Movement of the 1970s radically altered the social meanings of lesbian love and lesbian identification. The first element to disappear was the invert or 'third sex' invented by the sexologists and popularized by The Well of Loneliness⁷. In the 1970s, lesbianism was disassociated from invertism and masculinity and redefined in terms of woman-identification. Woman-bonding became a way of celebrating and acknowledging our femaleness instead of denying it. Radical feminists, such as the group Radicalesbians, argued that what made lesbians different from other women was the fact that they prioritized women's relationships over relationships with men⁸. Feminism therefore offered lesbians an alternative identity to that of the outlawed invert of Hall's novel and to that

of the woman-centred 'decadent' upper class lesbianism of the Paris salons; an alternative based on political identification. Lesbianism was wrested from its identification with a perverse biology, and re-presented as the very condition of female emancipation. Far from being 'sick', lesbianism became a healthy and positive ideal for many women. Lesbian feminists, such as Sheila Jeffreys and Adrienne Rich, argued that heterosexuality was damaging to women and pointed to the evidence of women's refuges, pornography, prostitution and rape crisis lines⁹. Lesbian feminism, by contrast, was seen as affirming women's experiences and sexuality, and as offering an alternative model of relationships in the form of supportive and egalitarian lesbian feminist communities. The power of these arguments and their impact on women's liberation and women's lives cannot be overestimated: lesbian feminism did, and does, articulate a compelling critique of contemporary heterosexuality and its implication in women's oppression, and has made lesbianism a positive choice for thousands of women, rather than a stigmatizing 'accident of nature'.

Much of the lesbian fiction which came out of the Women's Movement had the political aim of representing lesbianism as a positive force in women's lives. Novels such as Joanna Russ's On Strike Against God (1980) and Marge Piercy's Small Changes (1974) are 'conversion' narratives which present lesbianism as a positive alternative to heterosexuality. Many lesbian writers, such as Russ, eschewed romance and stressed the importance of identifying politically with other women. While strong emotional bonds and

satisfying sexual relationships are frequently portrayed in such novels, they refuse to represent lesbianism in terms of the romance. The romance typically individualizes desire, and locates it in terms of private relationships between individuals. Lesbian feminism, in contrast, emphasizes the community and the interrelationships between women. The desire articulated through the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s was therefore different in kind to that of romance, it was a social and political desire based on the utopian impulse towards the liberation of a gender-class. In this sense, the goals of romance and those of women's liberation have little in common.

Certain lesbian feminist discourses, such as Political Lesbianism, are incompatible with romance because the latter is dependent on an ideology of 'falling in love' as an involuntary mechanism, and on a notion of interpersonal relations as private rather than political. Political lesbianism does not support a discourse of 'true love' or a concept of the subject as an individual divorced from the social. Conversely, romantic discourse, in privileging the personal and the individual at the expense of the social and the political, is resistant to the demands radical feminism would make of it. Romance constitutes the subject as transformed and fulfilled through another person. Yet a concept of the self that does not involve a change in the system is, for Political Lesbianism, untenable. Lesbian writers, such as Sally Gearhart and Joanna Russ, turned to other genres, particularly science fiction and utopian fiction, in order to emphasize the political dimension of relationships, to focus on women's community,

or to present women's relationships in a positive light.

However, the 'gay-affirmative' model of lesbian and gay identities, which emerged out of radical psychology and Gay Liberation, does recognise the realm of the 'personal', and is therefore capable of providing an account of the desiring subject. Based on liberal ideology, it stresses the opportunities for personal fulfilment and 'self-realization' offered by same-sex relationships. This model provides the rationale for the lesbian appropriation of the romance which perceives 'true love' as the fullest and most sublime expression of individual desire. The 'gay-affirmative' model has also been incorporated into the populist discourse of 'positive images' which seeks to present lesbianism as a happy and healthy lifestyle. The majority of lesbian romances promote positive images, and by emphasizing the naturalness and normalcy of lesbianism and by celebrating rather than problematizing lesbian identity, they seek to undermine homophobic stereotypes.

The success of lesbian publishing houses such as the American Naiad Press, established in the 1970s, and the popularity of their contemporary and (reprinted) 1950s' lesbian 'pulp' romance titles, suggests that these novels answer certain needs in lesbian communities. These include the need to see ourselves in narratives of sexual desire, to articulate the strength of our passion for women, and to celebrate it. In fact, the lesbian romance, and other types of lesbian genre fiction, such as the thriller, provide precisely what much lesbian feminist polemical writing fails to provide, namely representations of lesbian sexual desire. Some lesbians have been

critical of what they see as the radical feminist denial and omission of precisely that factor that led them to identify as lesbian: their physical desire for other women, a desire that feels organic and essential to them as desiring subjects, and is not a byproduct of the political choice to disassociate from men¹⁰. Lesbian romance fiction therefore provides a site for the inscription of lesbian sexual desire, pleasure and fantasy, which are absent from both mainstream society and, as I have shown, from some lesbian feminist utopian and polemical literature.

Since the 1970s and the advent of Second Wave Feminism the genre of the romance has been used by lesbian writers to celebrate lesbianism as an attractive and positive lifestyle and to portray erotic feelings and encounters between women. Lesbian romance has served an important function both as erotic fantasy, and as a corrective to images of lesbians as sick or sinful, promulgated by mainstream culture. It has developed a language and an imagery of its own, based partly on the conventions of the traditional women's romance, and partly on lesbian feminist discourses about sexuality. In particular, as I shall argue, the lesbian romance has exploited the cultural feminist equation between female sexuality and nature and the lesbian feminist claim that lesbianism is morally superior to heterosexuality to represent lesbian object choice as, paradoxically, both natural and politically preferable.

The Differences between the Heterosexual & the Lesbian Romance

In seeking to establish the legitimacy of lesbian object choice, the

lesbian romance differentiates itself from the heterosexual genre by offering an explicit critique of heterosexuality and by breaking with its narrative trajectory and structural rules. The heterosexual romance traditionally involves a strong male character and his romantic liaison with a less powerful heroine. As many commentators, such as Tania Modleski and Janice Radway, have pointed out the romance conventionally treats themes of male power and women's attempt to negotiate it from a subordinate sexual and economic position¹¹. Central to the genre is the issue of women's economic and social status. The heroine's goal is marriage and assimilation into the patriarchal kinship structure. The romance narrative is therefore about class as much as gender; it tells stories focussing on economics as much as ones about love. Pamela, the classic proto-romance, concerns the attempts of a servant girl to avoid being seduced by her master. The threat of rape is finally removed by their marriage which both rewards her virginity and gives her class and kinship status. Similarly, Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights concern themselves as much with class and kinship relations as they do with gender relations. These texts therefore address themselves not just to patriarchal ideology, but to bourgeois patriarchal ideology. Whereas these classic romances make explicit the relationship between sexual and economic power relations, the modern 'mass market' romance prioritizes the romance plot and represses the economic determinants of gender relations, displacing women's desires for social status onto romantic desires¹². None the less, it is still possible to discern their genealogy in the formula

of 'lower class girl meets rich and powerful man'.

The lesbian romance genre differs considerably from this model. Firstly, from a social viewpoint, lesbian lovers tend to be more equally matched, and the desire for class status does not emerge as a motivating factor in their relationships. Whereas the heterosexual heroine of mass romance is portrayed as starting out financially disadvantaged, and frequently achieves wealth in the course of the story, lesbian heroines tend to retain their class and economic status. It would appear that lesbian protagonists' relative economic independence is a pre-condition for their insertion into the romance genre. In Katherine V. Forrest's Curious Wine, for example, the heroines, Lane and Diana, are both professional women, and economic status does not emerge as an issue in the novel. The representation of the lovers in lesbian romance fiction owes much to the lesbian feminist definition of lesbian relationships as egalitarian. In this view lesbianism is seen as an important common denominator between women which transcends and cancels out divisions and differences. Many examples of the lesbian romance utilize this definition, presenting lesbianism as the 'great leveller', and assuming, idealistically, that lesbian identification transcends barriers of class and finance. There are, however, exceptions to this model, as I will show subsequently.

Common to all examples of the lesbian romance genre is the idea that dependency on a man represents an obstacle to self-determination and to lesbian fulfilment, and such dependency is frequently used as a device to increase the romantic tension. In Forrest's An Emergence

of Green, Caroline has to break away from her husband and comfortable suburban lifestyle in order to achieve love and fulfilment. Independence rather than class status is the key factor in the lesbian genre, and it represents the pre-requisite for a lesbian relationship and lifestyle. Jane Rule's The Desert of the Heart, for instance, begins with the divorce of the heroine Evelyn, making possible her romance with Ann, her growing sexual independence and her emergent sexual identity as a lesbian. Lesbian romance therefore tends to follow the opposite trajectory to that of heterosexual romance. Whereas the latter is concerned with the heroine's integration into patriarchal society, lesbian romance enacts the lovers' separation from it and their retreat into their own idyllic space. The representation of lesbian space as a private retreat in many examples of the lesbian romance is in marked contrast to that of the lesbian feminist novel of ideas, which is more closely associated with the fiction of the Women's Movement. Marge Piercy's Small Changes, for example, also enacts a separation of the lesbian protagonists, but depicts their movement into a wider lesbian community. Therefore, whereas the genre of heterosexual romance argues that men, beneath a tough exterior, are really sensitive and nurturing, the lesbian romance challenges this myth, arguing instead that women really can find love and happiness outside male-dominated and homophobic society.

The plots of recent 1980s' lesbian romances, like their heterosexual counterparts published by Mills and Boon and Harlequin, tend to follow a standard pattern: girl meets girl and, after

overcoming obstacles and misunderstandings, the lovers recognize their true feelings and embark on a life together. Despite superficial variations, lesbian romances tend to conform to a basic structure which involves a triadic female-male-female relationship being replaced in the course of the narrative by a female dyad. Terry Castle has identified this pattern in an early British novel, Summer Will Show (1936), by Sylvia Townsend Warner, and argues that it is characteristic of lesbian plotting¹³. Certainly, the majority of recent lesbian romances follow this pattern which has the advantage of both distinguishing lesbian from heterosexual relationships and providing a factor of tension between the lesbian and male rivals. A notable exception to this structure is Jane Rule's The Desert of the Heart which lacks any heterosexual/male opposition to the lovers' relationship. The two main male figures, Ann's adopted brother, Walter, and Sylver's lover, Joe are wholly sympathetic and do not feel threatened by lesbian relationships. The tension originates entirely within the relationship itself, as Ann and Evelyn attempt to find a way of relating to each other as lovers. Interestingly, in the 1985 film version of the novel, an external obstacle was introduced in the hostility of Kay's adoptive mother to her daughter's lesbian lifestyle. One might speculate that this addition reflected an attempt to inject the element of melodrama, absent from the original, which is characteristic of the romance mode.

The vast majority of lesbian romances are 'conversion narratives' and, following the pattern of the lesbian novel of sexual awakening, portray the protagonists' journey from heterosexual to

lesbian identification. Jane Rule's The Desert of the Heart and Claire Morgan's The Price of Salt are two early examples of this narrative structure, while Katherine V. Forrest's Curious Wine is a more recent example. The latter novel portrays two women's discovery and realization of their lesbian desire. The minimal plot centres around a 'get away from it all' holiday, in which a group of women spend a week relaxing and getting to know each other in a cabin at Lake Tahoe. At the start of the holiday Diana and Lane, who have not previously met, identify as heterosexual, but they find themselves strangely attracted to each other, although neither can explain why:

The two women exchanged glances, Diana realised that they had developed an awareness of each other, an affinity. (p.26)

It soon transpires that they are both disillusioned with men, since they find them emotionally unsympathetic, although Diana was sexually fulfilled in her relationship with Jack. As with the heroines of Mills and Boon romances, their ideal mate has eluded them up to the present time. However, in Curious Wine it gradually dawns on each woman that her ideal partner is not a man but another woman.

Like the heterosexual romance, the lesbian romance functions partly as a wish-fulfilment fantasy, articulating emotional and libidinal desires, and offering fantasy resolutions. Both operate as fantasies which apparently explore, but frequently repress, real power relations between and among men and women. Whereas the heterosexual romance tends to transform the potential rapist into the loving husband, lesbian romance often places the idealised

lesbian couple outside social reality. The romance narrative tends to erase differences between women so that it can concentrate on the elaboration of a romantic plot between equals and offer a utopian depiction of lesbian love. However, while this emphasis on the affinity and identification of the lovers accords with the theory of lesbian feminism, in practice this has resulted in a narrow focus on white, middle class women in the genre of lesbian romance. The vast majority of lesbian protagonists, of which Forrest's heroines are exemplary types, are young, white, single, childless and middle class. Forrest's two romances, Curious Wine and An Emergence of Green, function as fantasy, largely relegating conflict and difference to the space outside the lesbian dyad. In Curious Wine, an analysis of sexual politics, in the form of the women's encounter group sessions, reminiscent of the feminist novel of ideas, is combined with a lesbian narrative of requited love and romantic fulfilment. The two narratives employ contrasting discourses, that of 'realism' on the one hand, and fantasy on the other, but the fact that the love relationship is lesbian enables it to be presented as the 'solution' to women's sexual and romantic quests. The text counterposes a feminist critique of heterosexuality with a fantastically idealized representation of lesbian sexuality, which ultimately elides the difference within lesbianism. While gender difference is acknowledged as a problem between the sexes, there is no acknowledgment of the power differentials relating to age, class, race, and economic status which exist between women.

Not all lesbian romances offer this kind of fantasy evocation

of lesbian relationships. In common with feminist rewritings of the genre, such as Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle and Fay Weldon's The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil which offer a critique of the conventions of romantic love and the power relations it involves, some lesbian novels, such as The Desert of the Heart and June Arnold's Sister Gin (1975) question the romantic myth from a lesbian point of view. The latter, written in the 1970s when the concepts of marriage and monogamy were under attack from feminist writers such as Germaine Greer, portrays the debilitating consequences of insular monogamous relationships between lesbians. The novel is also atypical in presenting love relationships between older women; the heroine Su falls in love with the seventy-seven year old Mamie Carter, who offers her an open-ended relationship located in a community of women, rather than in a private space. Two remarkable novels by the black American writer Ann Allen Shockley, Say Jesus and Come to Me (1987) and Loving Her (1987), confront the issues of race and racism in lesbian relationships, and are exceptional in depicting interracial love in the lesbian romance.

However, despite the feminist critique of romantic conventions in the 1970s, lesbian romances portraying fantasies of monogamous romantic bliss between white women were popular with a lesbian readership. This popularity would suggest that, notwithstanding lesbian feminism which aimed to unite the two, there was a contradiction between the theory of feminism and the desires of lesbian readers. In the 1980s this contradiction became more visible in the 'sex debates' between lesbians who advanced a fundamentally

political definition of lesbian identification, and lesbians who emphasized sexual desire. It could also be argued that the feminist re-evaluation of the romance genre in the 1980s has given credence to the latter group. On the whole, the lesbian romance genre has flourished since the emergence of Second Wave Feminism, and this is undoubtedly because it marginalizes heterosexuality. In the heterosexual romance genre the central problematic hinges on sexual power relations between men and women, and on women's anxieties concerning their desires for man, the 'oppressor'. This is not an issue in the lesbian genre, where men feature not as objects of desire, but as obstacles and threats to women's love for each other. As a result, the positive images and fantasy ideals offered in lesbian romance have, if anything, been encouraged rather than undermined by feminist discourse.

Lesbian romance offers not only a fantasy depiction of idyllic lesbian love, but a female-revenge fantasy in which the male threat is expunged. Lesbian romances frequently display a one-sided and highly critical attitude towards heterosexuality, which is invariably portrayed as damaging to women. Masculinity is also represented in the worst possible light, and male characters are often portrayed as brutal stereotypes. In An Emergence of Green, for example, Carolyn's possessive and violent husband Paul functions as the obstacle to her relationship with Val. Whereas Val's love is depicted as liberating and nurturing, Paul's is destructive and debilitating. At one point in the novel he rapes her. The climax of the book comes with the expulsion of Paul as a threat when Carolyn chooses lesbian love over

heterosexual marriage, or as the novel implies, freedom over bondage. In Iris (1983) by Janine Veto, masculinity is presented as uncompromisingly and deliberately malevolent, with the sole exception of the representation of a sympathetic male doctor. The eponymous heroine is pursued by the misogynistic Harold, who manages his repressed homosexuality by attacking women; and by her brother-in-law Dion, who having abused her as a child, harasses, rapes and, finally, apparently murders her. Despite this extreme level of victimization, Iris is able, through the love and help of her lesbian lover, Dee to 'connect with the source of her powers' and take her Cassandra-like revenge on her male aggressors¹⁴. The verdict on masculinity is delivered, shamefacedly, by the good doctor:

[Violence] is something men do to each other and to women ... it is men, my sex, that do this thing to their fellow human beings, that is why I am ashamed. (p.176)

Lesbian romance fiction has therefore succeeded in naturalizing lesbianism, and in problematizing, even pathologizing heterosexual relationships. The lesbian romance serves an important emotional and political purpose in critiquing heterosexuality, validating women's fears about male violence and legitimizing lesbianism. It is designed to make lesbians feel good about themselves in a culture which does the opposite. However, this means that it presents a very one-dimensional account of lesbian identity and relationship. Negative feelings are typically laid at the door of heterosexuality or homophobia in the lesbian romance narrative, and it seldom allows

for the expression of ambivalent feelings about lesbian existence itself. The characters might have doubts about adopting a stigmatised identity, as Val does in An Emergence of Green, but while this ambivalence allows for the expression of fears about being a lesbian in a homophobic culture, it is largely perfunctory and is used as a device to create suspense and delay the moment of self-recognition when all problems are resolved by love. Although the characters may doubt their true identities, in the majority of lesbian romances the only negative remarks about lesbian existence are made by homophobic commentators, usually jealous husbands, and lesbianism itself is presented as innately good.

The idea of women's natural 'goodness' or benignity is central to the ideology of cultural feminism which was influential in the late 1970s when many of these novels were written. As I demonstrated in my analysis of lesbian utopian fiction, cultural feminism utilizes an essentialist notion of 'true womanhood' in order to claim moral and ideological superiority for women as a group. An important aspect of this argument is the belief that women are both closer to nature and, in some sense, a part of nature. Feminist activists, such as the women's Peace Movement and those involved in the creation of Lesbian Nation in the early 1980s, for example, drew explicitly on this idea. As many critics have pointed out, the identification of women with nature is neither a new nor, necessarily, a radical idea. There is a long tradition in Western Philosophy of equating femininity with the natural order, and this has typically operated to the detriment of women, denying them access to the symbolic realm.

However, the recent feminist identification of women with nature has had the political intention of undermining the male symbolic order. Rather than restrict women to a domestic realm, cultural feminism has attempted to create the world anew in woman's image. In the genre of lesbian romance the identification of women and nature serves to create an imaginative feminized space: a new lesbian symbolic realm.

The Green World Myth in Lesbian Romance

Lesbianism, in the lesbian romance, represents a literal and symbolic safe haven from the dangerous heterosexual culture outside. Lesbian romance writers have created a discrete topographical or spatial universe based on this motif, symbolised in the settings and locations of lesbian romance. The defining feature of this topography is the realm of the natural: nature, in a variety of guises, locates and defines the lesbian couple. Lesbian romances typically create what Bonnie Zimmerman calls a 'green world' or edenic garden which stands for both natural innocence and the very possibility of lesbian love¹⁵. The most famous example of the green world motif in lesbian literature is Stephen Gordon's country estate Morton in The Well of Loneliness, which explicitly draws on the biblical Garden of Eden, but which carries a different meaning to the green world myth in the contemporary lesbian romance. Morton represents ancestral roots, class privilege and social inheritance, and is therefore a patriarchal space. Moreover, nature is represented as affirming, not lesbian relationships, but the heterosexual order, as a result of which Stephen is cast out of Eden. Since Hall's time, the lesbian

feminist redefinition of lesbian sexuality as woman-identification and the equation of femininity and nature have permitted lesbian writers to reclaim the green world archetype as the signifier of lesbian space.

In Katherine V. Forrest's An Emergence of Green, the lovers, one of whom is an artist, create their own green world:

She smiled into Carolyn's green eyes. 'I think I've definitely entered a green period. I'd like to be in a place where it's all green'. (pp 268-69)

In this novel the green world of lesbian love is signified by the conceit of painting. Other romances locate their heroines in settings which approximate to a state of nature, and common backgrounds include orchards, caves, woodland, islands, nests, secluded cabins and holiday homes. The holiday trip is a frequently used setting for lesbian romance indicating, as in Curious Wine, a suspension of the normal heterosexual world from which the protagonists escape. As the title of Forrest's An Emergence of Green suggests, the green world signifies both an oasis and a refuge from heterosexual and patriarchal society, a fantasy space which underlines the separateness and closeness to nature of the lesbian lovers, and provides a counterpoint to lesbian readers' actual experience of the social world as hostile and threatening. Like the fantasy worlds of lesbian utopian fiction, the green worlds of lesbian romance represent an idyllic 'elsewhere' in which lesbian love can flourish. One of the most popular green-world romances is Patience and Sarah by

Isabel Miller in which the pioneering heroines create a rural idyll on an isolated farm in Greene County, New York, in a lesbian version of the American dream.

Frequently, as Bonnie Zimmerman has pointed out, the green world motif is combined with 'wet' world images: water in all its forms, oceans, seas, lakes, streams, appears as a background to and symbol for lesbian love and, in particular, the supposed liquidity and fluidity of lesbian erotic experience¹⁶. The 'hot tides of passion' have become a cliché in lesbian sexual writing and watery references immediately signal sexuality to initiated lesbian readers. In The Desert of the Heart, Ann and Evelyn's first erotic encounter takes place on a beach on the shores of a Reno lake, and in An Emergence of Green, the previously heterosexual character, Carolyn, feels the first stirrings of lesbian desire as she watches her neighbour Val swimming in her pool. Carolyn is scared of water and can't swim. Val offers to teach her and the overcoming of Carolyn's fear symbolizes her sexual awakening. Later in the novel the lovers first make love in a cabin near the sea to the sound of crashing waves. Just as the green world motif makes use of the Eden myth, the trope of water draws on the biblical connotations of water as a baptismal cleansing or re-birth in order to suggest the awakening of lesbian desire. The use of water imagery also refers to a tradition within the female novel of self-discovery in which the heroine's immersion in water signifies her self-discovery. One example is Kate Chopin's The Awakening. Whereas in this tradition water symbolizes an existential awakening, in the lesbian genre it

symbolizes the sexual awakening of the lesbian subject.

Colours are also an important part of the novel's symbolic system. Val is an artist whose art blends the colours of nature. The green of the title is simultaneously associated with deep emotional feeling and lesbian desire. Carolyn's eyes are green and Val paints her a green picture which represents Carolyn's 'aura' or inner self. The novel ends with the lovers about to go on a trip to Oregon, depicted as a kind of lesbian Emerald City. Carolyn says, 'All that rain and mist and fog, all those green trees ... it sounds like absolute heaven'¹⁷. The prolific, not to say overabundant, use of colour symbolism and green world imagery characteristic of lesbian romance fiction is the target of Fiona Cooper's romantic parody Jay Loves Lucy (1990). The novel is both a celebration and a satire of the genre's linguistic excess. In the following passage she employs a profusion of nature and colour images in an exuberant parody of the green world myth:

That night Jay dreamed in glorious technicolour with full Dolby stereo ... she was driving through a heliotrope dusk, a summer evening in deep country lanes, green trunks leopard shadowed, a billion emerald leaves overhead greying as she drove. Lucy was beside her, smiling and weary. No words. But all the sweet and strange scents of the evening, the chill of night. And the Pergolese largo enhancing the enchanted dusk with sparse fluidity, unearthly serenity, When I behold the body ... (p.18)

Despite the fact that Jay Loves Lucy is actually set in London, all Jay's sexual fantasies have rural settings. She imagines making love to Lucy in gardens, country hotels, on beaches and, at one point in her dreams, she and Lucy are transported to an island. Indeed, their

love is consummated anywhere but in the city and, as Jay Loves Lucy is about unrequited love, this underscores the myth, also characteristic of lesbian science fiction, that urban locales are dystopian, inimical to lesbian romantic fulfilment.

The island is another key topological archetype in lesbian romance fiction. Used both literally and symbolically, the island motif embodies the notion of the autonomy and integrity of lesbian love. Monique Wittig's novels, The Guerillas and The Lesbian Body, evoke fantasy worlds of strong, Amazonian warrior women forging and occupying an island-based Lesbian Nation. Iris, by Janine Veto, combines all the afore-mentioned elements of colour, water and island imagery into a complex symbolic system. The novel is a lesbian romance and adventure story full of exotic settings. Iris and Dee meet in Hawaii and immediately fall in love; understanding that theirs is the perfect relationship, they decide to live together on their island paradise. But the outside world intervenes, forcing Iris to flee Hawaii and take refuge on an isolated Greek island. As the back cover maintains, the narrative focuses on the lovers' efforts to be reunited, dramatizing the 'trial of their love to survive'. In the novel, the lesbian body and lesbian spirituality, symbolised by Iris herself, and then by the love between Iris and Dee, merge with the island landscape, and become an extension of it. The island is therefore invested with a spiritual, metaphysical value which is, nevertheless, rooted in naturalism. As Dee, speaking of Hawaii, says to Iris:

The greatest gift of this island is naturalness. (p.55)

Earlier in the novel Iris has a green-world vision of Hawaii as a refuge and retreat. The island represents Iris's difference and separateness from mainland, mainstream society:

Islands ... reminded her of her own isolation, gave her boundaries and the notion of vast depths of nothingness that surrounded her. (p.18)

In the course of the novel another mythic narrative is superimposed onto this island mythology; that of Greek revenge tragedy. The novel, which resonates, in theme if not in style, with Wittig's sapphic myth, establishes mythical connections between its contemporary lesbian lovers and the ancient Greek goddesses who inspire their revenge. At one point Iris is explicitly portrayed as a goddess figure:

Spiritual, mystic and violent; the full range of passions. Yes, the greek landscape suited her. Though not of greek descent, Iris seemed to spring from the misted mysteries of the ancient world. (p.106)

After the women's lesbian idyll is destroyed by the sexual, then murderous, pursuit of Iris by her brother-in-law, Dion, Dee, Iris and her sister, now converted to the women's cause, exact their terrible revenge on Dion. Patriarchy, the novel suggests, ultimately has no power over the ancient, amazonian forces of the female spirit world. The idea contained in Iris of a transcendent female power or essence

has affinities with the transhistorical concept of matriarchy promulgated by American lesbian separatists in the early 1970s. At the time, some groups, such as The Furies and the Gutter Dyke Collective, drew inspiration from Greek mythology, invoking female figures such as Sappho, and matriarchal communities such as the Amazons¹⁸. A popular slogan of the period declared that 'Sappho was a right-on woman', and the manifesto of one group claimed that:

Just as the Amazons fought to defend matriarchy, we will develop a new kind of Amazonianism to destroy patriarchy and to bring us forward to a new matriarchy¹⁹.

Iris was published in 1983, at a time when it was still possible for many lesbians to believe in the imminent creation of Lesbian Nation. Since then, the political climate has changed, and the dream of a new matriarchy has receded.

The Representation of the Lesbian Couple.

The natural settings of lesbian romance both locate and define the lesbian couple, the two-in-one heroine of lesbian romance. As Bonnie Zimmerman writes in her study of lesbian fiction:

If the first myth of origins in the lesbian novel is the formation of the lesbian self, the second is the definition of the lesbian couple²⁰.

In seeking to define the lesbian couple, lesbian writers in the romance tradition draw on a number of ideas and myths about the

nature of female sexuality and relationship, which are themselves based on a variety of sexological and psychological discourses produced both within and outside lesbian feminism. These include psychoanalytical accounts of female sexuality and the mother/child dyad, the radical feminist concept of sisterhood, and the lesbian myths of identification, merger and sameness.

Repeatedly in lesbian romance the erotic experience is presented as the merging of the two lovers. For example, the final image in Loving Her, by Ann Allen Shockley, is one of fusion in which the lovers, Terry and Renay, transcend their own identities and merge with each other:

They remained silent in each other's arms ... Two as one, one as two, waiting for the morning, which promised to be ^{even} better than the night. (p.187)

The love of woman for woman is depicted as a blurring of the boundaries between self and other in which the physical and, by extension, psychological similarity of the lovers is presented as the basis for total fusion. With the emergence of lesbian feminism in the 1970s this concept of mutual merger was given a political dimension: lesbian love came to represent the transcendence of masculinist models of the discrete body and of sex as possession. The lesbian myth claims that total union between two women is made possible by their shared biology and socialization. According to the lesbian feminist Irene Yarrow,

Being a woman loving women ... the lines blur. With great beauty though, like undulating lines of sun on the waves, in the middle of the ocean, half-way between one continent and the next, the lines of definition barely existing, at least always moving, never holding still, between being a woman loving yourself and being a woman loving women. Same breasts. Same warm skin. Same softness, and particularly female sense of life and joy, such laughter and nurturing possible²¹.

This claim is supported by both feminist and non-feminist theorists who argue that women are more likely to experience fusion with another owing to the permeability or instability of their boundaries of self. Nancy Chodorow, a psychoanalytically-based theorist, identifies this as a potential identity problem for women²². She argues that whereas boys are brought up to be autonomous, girls are brought up to relate closely to other people. Owing to this socialization, girls find it more difficult than boys to separate from their mothers and, in consequence, they never entirely overcome their initial pre-oedipal attachment to the mother. But, as Yarrow's lyrical passage suggests, lesbian writers have tended to celebrate rather than problematize the fluid relationality of the pre-oedipal realm. Adrienne Rich, for example, argues that the generosity of female sexuality enables a better quality of relationship, based on mutual nurturance²³.

The idea of mythic identification is also indebted to another psychoanalytic theory which posits homosexuality as a form of narcissism. Once again, the lesbian use of the myth gives it a positive, political, interpretation, rather than a negative, pathological, one. Consequently, the image of the other woman as a mirror proliferates in lesbian literature as a positive image of

psychic health, reflecting female self-love. As Bonnie Zimmerman has argued, the mirror functions as a symbol of relation, not of narcissism²⁴. In Iris the fundamental identity of the two lovers is made explicit:

... Watching her gestures and movement, it gradually dawned on Dee who Iris reminded her of. Iris was her younger self. Of course. Why hadn't she seen it? The physical resemblance was striking. (p.33)

Likewise, in Rule's The Desert of the Heart Ann is likened to Evelyn's younger self, suggesting a relationship of identity rather than difference. An episode in Dacia Maraini's Letters to Marina (1987) places a more uncanny and Freudian emphasis on the lovers' shared identity, at the moment of sexual knowledge:

Only when I find myself face to face with your sex melted by sensation and by desire do I have that moment of panic. Now the last resistance has given way and what do I find myself confronting? My own self. (p.34)

The episode represents a panic-inducing 'confrontation' rather than a pleasurably fluid 'merging'. Maraini problematizes rather than celebrates the myth of female identification. This extract demonstrates that the lesbian response to this theme is not monolithic but, on the contrary, that lesbian writers have treated psychoanalytic themes in a variety of ways.

A related theory which associates lesbianism with identification is the feminist theory of sisterhood which also posits

a fundamental female identity. Radicalesbians, for example, argue that:

To confront another woman is finally to confront oneself ...
And in that mirror we know we cannot really respect and love
that which we have been made to be²⁵.

However, feminist theory has long stressed the importance of autonomy for women. Lesbian romance fiction partly acknowledges this, valuing independence as well as fusion. It tends to combine the two requirements by presenting lesbianism as the means by which women can achieve autonomy through relationship. In many novels the heroine achieves a sense of self in the process of discovering her love for women. In Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, for example, the heroine's identity as a free-spirit is linked to her sexual identity as a lesbian. In An Emergence of Green Carolyn recognizes that she has repressed her true self in her marriage to Paul. In this novel separateness is acknowledged only as separateness from men, and in such idealised romances separation between the lovers is perfunctory. When Carolyn goes on holiday with her husband, her desire and love for Val increase, and the episode performs the function, common to the romance, of merely delaying the final climactic reunion.

Some lesbian romances, however, exhibit a definite ambivalence towards the myth of fusion, qualifying the desire for merger with an acknowledgement of the need for autonomy and separation from the other. In The Desert of the Heart, the initial impression of Ann and Evelyn's identification is belied by the fact that they are separate

individuals whose resemblance is 'a memory, not a likeness'²⁶. The novel rejects the mirror theory of female identity as an inadequate representation of the complexity of the women's relationship. And when, at the end of the novel, Ann and Evelyn

... turned and walked back up the steps toward their own image, reflected in the great, glass doors ... (p.244)

it is with an understanding of their differences as well as their similarities. In Harriet Gilbert's The Riding Mistress (1985) the differences between the two lovers are underlined from the start of the novel. It recounts, in a first person narrative, the love of a naive younger woman for her sophisticated, older riding teacher. Not only are there disparities in their age, status and maturity, but the novel delineates a passion which does not provide the positive images typical of lesbian romance fiction. The girl's love becomes obsessive and destructive and the novel shows that love between women is not immune from the problems of dependency and over-investment that often characterize close relationships between men and women, or mothers and children. The Riding Mistress therefore debunks the myths of lesbian romance, highlighting difference rather than sameness, inequality rather than mutuality, and obsessive desire rather than love's fulfilment.

Loving Her, by the black American writer Ann Allen Shockley, treats another kind of difference between women, that of race: Terry is white and Renay is black. The novel is unusual both in depicting interracial love and in employing the conventions of romance fiction

in which to do so. Yet it demonstrates persuasively that even if love is blind, it must be racially aware. Running through all the romantic descriptions of the couple's love-making, is the cognisance that sexuality is not only a personal and private affair, but that it also has social and political dimensions:

Tracing the whiteness of Terry's skin with her finger, Renay thought, It is amazing how I can lie here and see and feel this skin and not think of the awful things others of her color have done to us. And yet, my skin is light ... Someone, somewhere in the past, must have done and thought and felt like this with another - or hated in a different and helpless way. (p.100)

Another motif common to the lesbian romance is that of the mother/child dyad. At its best, this motif is used to represent the mutual nurturance of the lovers. But frequently it appears as a more one-sided affair in which one woman nurtures the other. In The Desert of the Heart, for example, Ann and Evelyn initially act out the asymmetrical roles of mother and daughter, precipitating them into what, the novel suggests, is a limiting Oedipal situation. By the end of the novel, the women reject these roles, establishing a more equal relationship. The Desert of the Heart explores the mother/child pattern with considerable subtlety, acknowledging its power in women's lives, yet moving beyond it. Similarly, Letters to Marina explores the psycho-sexual ramifications of the mother-daughter bond from the point of view of the novel's lesbian narrator for whom, during sex, the lesbian body is elided with that of the mother:

But there at the very bottom of your open sex was my mother ... and I was filled with all the terror recalled by a forgotten

incest ... I couldn't help knowing that it was also the lacerated flesh of my mother's heart - a mother I had loved and lost in some far-away dream ... (p.35)

Only by an act of rebellion against what she calls, echoing Freud, 'the father's prohibitions' on the mother's body can the narrator overcome her uncanny feelings and separate the body of her lover from that of her mother.

Bertha Harris, in her novel Lover, explicitly acknowledges the power of maternal mythology when she writes:

There is no intimacy between woman and woman which is not preceded by a long narrative of the mother. (p.173)

Nuns and Mothers (1984), by Aileen de la Tourette, could be said to be a meditation on this theme. The novel is narrated by Helena Carnet, an American bisexual woman, who is married with children and resident in England. She returns to the United States to revisit her childhood neighbourhood in order to 'take stock' of her life and confront the phantoms of her past. Foremost amongst these are her fanatically Catholic mother, Marguerite, and her lesbian lover Georgia. The novel, using mother-daughter relations, lesbian relations, and the girls' convent school as paradigms, represents a sophisticated analysis of female identity, relationship and community. It explores the complexity of lesbian sexual experience, and the complex theories that have been advanced to explain it. The novel reworks the Freudian idea of female homosexuality as

narcissism, giving it a positive interpretation, as in the description of Helena's relationship with her first woman lover:

We indulged a blissful femininity together [and] gave our narcissism free rein'. (p.91)

The text also depicts the interconnectedness of lesbian sex, female affection and mothering:

Her hand caresses the top of my head for a moment, in a gesture at once sisterly, maternal and sexual. (p.89)

The idea that maternal feelings are strongly implicated in lesbian relations is also made by Joanna Ryan, in an essay which reworks Chodorow's ideas about mothering. She writes:

... precisely such emotions are involved in our sexual relationships ... and often they are even more overwhelming with women than with men, just because of where they 'come from'. Perhaps what we can now do is recognise the threads in our adult relationships that connect with our earliest homosexual affections without the necessity of defending ourselves against yet another invalidation of lesbian relationships, and without denying either the sexuality or the ambivalence involved².

Similarly, while acknowledging the intimate connections between mothers, daughters and lesbian lovers, Nuns and Mothers ultimately refutes the reductive psychoanalytical notion that lesbianism merely represents a refusal to give up the mother, showing how lesbian relations reproduce in a displaced form aspects of mother-daughter

relations.

This is demonstrated in the novel's central love scene between Helena and Georgia. Depicted from Helena's point of view, it represents the complexity of the sexual relationship between the two women, as she (and the reader) move through a number of different identifications and subject positions. It begins with a mother-child scenario:

She's the mother, taking my arms out of my sleeves, trying not to break them ... like a mother with a baby, also like a little girl with a doll, half-smiling, biting her lip. It's nice to change around, being mother and daughter ... (p.122)

However, as they make love Helena feels more like a sister than a daughter, and then experiences self-fragmentation, anonymity and a loss of identity. A memory of the dictionary definition of 'tribadism' occurs to her as ^{she} reaches orgasm, her body disputing its implication, telling her ' ... it counts. As real sex' and, finally, as the feeling subsides, she moves towards separation and individuality ('Can I have a cigarette now?')²⁸.

Nuns and Mothers uses the idea of the 'bi-located' subject to deconstruct the notion of a stable lesbian identity. Helena is 'split' between different locations - England and the United States, childhood and adulthood, lesbianism and heterosexuality - and the novel prompts the questions is Helena a nun or a mother, lesbian or heterosexual? It also undermines the centrality of the idea of the lesbian couple as the ideal and natural lesbian unit which is, undoubtedly, the most entrenched myth of lesbian romance fiction,

surfacing in the romances of writers such as Katherine V. Forrest and Sarah Aldridge. The heroines of Patience and Sarah, living together and alone in the American backwoods, are a typical example of the fantasy couple. Yet some novels provide a critique of this myth. Valerie Taylor's Prism (1961), for example, while alluding to mythic lesbian couples such as the Ladies of Llangollen and, indeed, to Patience and Sarah, also argues that lesbian couples must ultimately be part of a community if they are to thrive. The separatist myth, it suggests, just is not viable. Another demythologising novel is Anna Wilson's Cactus (1980) which, although it cannot be classified as a romance, aims to debunk the myths which inform the romance genre, in particular the myth of the separatist rural idyll. The novel depicts the disillusion of a couple of political lesbians who leave London to live 'naturally' in the countryside. An older lesbian character confronts them with the reality that a rural lifestyle is not a form of lesbian heaven but just as much of a struggle as urban living.

Sister Gin, by June Arnold, also criticizes the idea of the monogamous lesbian couple as the firmest basis for lesbian community. It suggests that far from being the ideal, the lesbian couple is a debilitating private unit which needs to be broken open to allow for both the experience of a wider community and a politics based on that experience. The two lovers, Su and Bettina, have taken refuge in a relationship which limits their potential to develop as individuals. It is only when they separate that this becomes possible. An alternative model of lesbian existence is offered by the character of Mamie Carter who stands for intimacy without dependence and

suffocation. With Mamie, Su embarks upon a new open-ended relationship, which is part of the women's community rather than sealed off from it.

As I have shown, the critique of monogamy was an important aspect of feminist theory in the 1970s. Sister Gin, published in 1975, reflects this critical stance. At the time lesbian relationships seemed to offer a radical alternative to the unhealthy aspects of patriarchal heterosexuality which included dependency, possessiveness and jealousy. As Bonnie Zimmerman comments:

Open, non-monogamous relationships and plentiful sexual experimentation were expected, indeed mandated, for politically savvy lesbians. So one myth, that of Patience and Sarah or the Ladies of Llangollen faithful until death do them part, was countered by another, that of Molly Bolt sleeping her way through the rubyfruit jungle²⁹.

Rita Mae Brown's Rubyfruit Jungle, as I discussed in chapter one, concentrates not on a romantic couple, but on an individual, the irrepressible Molly Bolt, recounting her sexual exploits in the form of a bildungsroman. Nonetheless, the focus on monogamous relationships in the lesbian romance genre is not incompatible with depictions of plentiful sex. Indeed, one of the major reasons lesbian romances are read by lesbian readers is undoubtedly for their representation of sexual relationships between women.

Images of Sex and Love in Lesbian Romance Fiction

It is also the case that some lesbian readers are unsatisfied with this representation. In the introduction to Wendy Bergstrom's Rapture

and The Second Coming (1990) there is a conversation between the narrator and her girlfriend, Nickie, about the representation of sex in lesbian fiction. Nickie comments

I must read every lesbian novel that's written, just to squeeze out the one or two sex scenes ... What I'd like is a book that's more sex than novel. (p.10)

The narrator thinks that such a book would be 'politically incorrect'. 'What's political about sex?' Nickie answers, 'Women love sex'. To which the narrator replies:

No ... Women love Love. (p.10) [my emphasis]

As this exchange suggests, lesbian romance fiction, especially that written in the 1970s and early 1980s, places more emphasis on romantic love than on sex itself. Indeed, until recently, explicitly sexual language has been muted in the lesbian novel as a whole. This is partly a result of the feminist redefinition of lesbianism as identification with, rather than desire for, other women, encouraging expressions of emotional, as opposed to sexual, love. As I will show in chapter four, lesbian writers wishing to emphasize sexual relations between women have frequently appropriated the male thriller genre. It is also true to say that, whereas lesbian fiction written before the emergence of Second Wave Feminism was frequently forced to censor itself for fear of being labelled 'obscene', feminist literature since the 1970s has often done so voluntarily.

Owing to the ways in which female sexuality is represented in mainstream culture, particularly in pornography and advertising, lesbian feminists, understandably, have been reluctant to write explicitly about sex and sexuality, for fear of reproducing patriarchal stereotypes of femininity. In particular lesbian feminists have voiced the concerns that images of lesbian sexuality encourage voyeuristic attitudes on the part of (male) readers and viewers, and duplicate the very objectification of women which feminism is supposed to challenge³⁰.

However, in the genre of romance, lesbian writers necessarily attempt to portray love and desire between women. The treatment of sexuality in the lesbian romance is largely determined by its renegotiation of sexual ideologies, and by the extent to which it acknowledges the feminist arguments outlined above. Some writers explicitly confront the problem of finding a language for the lesbian body that is not already co-opted by patriarchy. In the preface to The Lesbian Body, Monique Wittig comments on the absence of a feminist language to articulate lesbian sexuality:

Le Corps Lesbien has lesbianism as its theme, that is, a theme which cannot even be described as a taboo, for it has no real existence in the history of literature ... The lesbians ... are silent ... (p.9)

Rather than attempting to construct such a language, her novel represents an astonishing deconstruction of the (lesbian) body into its anatomical parts, written 'in a context of total rupture with masculine culture'³¹. This approach overcomes the problem lesbian

writers face of reproducing the male sexual gaze and of reducing lesbian love to a spectacle. Contract with the World (1982) by Jane Rule, points to this problem in another way: Alma and her lover have no language for their experience of each other's bodies and make love without reference to any nouns representing parts of the body. Alma echoes the feelings of many lesbians who find silence preferable to expressing themselves in the derisive or embarrassing sexual language available to them.

However, there is also a more populist tradition of lesbian romance, offering copious and detailed descriptions of lesbian love-making, which draws on the emphatic sexiness of 1950s' lesbian pulp fiction and the repressed eroticism of women's romance fiction. Contemporary 'pulp', dubbed 'light reading for girls', while frequently treating feminist issues such as male violence, female sexual choice and autonomy, is less concerned with the philosophical problems of phallogentric language, than in providing lesbian readers with romantic and sexually charged encounters between women³². Since Wittig commented on the absence of a language for lesbian sexuality, there has been a dramatic increase in works of erotica by lesbian writers as the number of explicitly sexual anthologies of love stories and romance novels testifies. Erotica by lesbians has developed considerably since Hall, fifty years ago, wrote 'And that night they were not divided'³³. However, it is true to say that although there is no longer any lack of lesbian writing about sex, it is overwhelmingly couched in terms of the romance, often using traditional romantic language. Bergstrom's own contribution to the

genre, for example, attempts to prioritize the sexual aspect of lesbian existence in order to fulfil its intention of providing 'more sex than novel'. Its heroine, Gwen, attempts to forget an unhappy love affair by acting out her sexual fantasies. These include a ménage à trois in the ubiquitous log cabin, an impromptu bubble bath for two, and a sexual encounter on a crowded subway train with a mysterious stranger. But, despite the open-ended playfulness of the fantasy scenarios, the novel nevertheless succumbs to the imperative of the romance to provide romantic closure by placing Gwen in a 'happy ever after' relationship. Ultimately, loving commitment rather than sex is the privileged theme of Rapture.

The key term in the sexual vocabulary of lesbian romance, around which most descriptions of lesbian sexual love turn, is 'softness'. The word 'soft' and related epithets such as 'gentle', 'tender', 'yielding' occur repeatedly in the pages of the lesbian romance, signifying both the quality of women's bodies and their love-making. The 'soft yielding' aspect of lesbian romantic description has undoubtedly become a cliché, as the following quotations illustrate:

They lay quietly, submerged in each other, softness sinking into its own³⁴.

Laura put her thigh between Chana's and felt the softness of the skin that pressed her own³⁵.

She slid her arms around Val, then yielded to Val's arms gathering her into softness, into the rich contours of her body³⁶.

Still experiencing the gentleness, the softness, the chasteness of the lips that had so briefly touched hers, knowing only that she wanted them again ...³⁷

Curious Wine, by Katherine V. Forrest, makes use of the concept of softness, in a way characteristic of lesbian romance fiction, in order to differentiate lesbian sexuality from heterosexuality, and to identify what is specific to lesbian love. The heroines, Diana and Lane, both experience lesbian sexuality as qualitatively different from heterosexuality. This is important in terms of the conversion narrative because, were it the same, the narrative would lose its rationale. In order to consolidate its claim for the otherness of lesbianism (or, rather, the otherness of heterosexuality versus the naturalness of lesbianism), the novel draws on lesbian feminist ideology in redefining the concept of attraction as dependent on 'identification'. Lane and Diana have a relationship because they identify with one another as women. In the text identification is signified by their mutual 'softness'. The novel therefore attributes sexual characteristics according to the conventional masculine/feminine polarity in which men are 'hard' and women are 'soft'. This produces a definition of lesbian sexuality as soft, gentle, tender, etc., one which employs all the associations of traditional femininity:

... on every surface of her body that pressed against the woman she held in her arms, Diana felt exquisite softness. Her senses were flooded and stunned with softness. (p.94)

However, having established gentleness and a diffuse sensuousness as characteristic of lesbian sexuality, the text at times moves away from this model to inscribe a more active, even aggressive sexuality:

They kissed again, without any gentleness at all. (p.160)

The depiction of 'hard' sex towards the end of the novel is dependent on the prior inscription of softness as the defining characteristic of lesbian sexuality, necessitated by the need to establish difference and to justify different object choice.

The novel both exploits and inverts the conventions of romantic writing, relying on but playing with sexual stereotypes. In a more challenging, and arguably more interesting, subversion of traditional definitions of the feminine libidinal economy, the novel deploys the 'female gaze' as a mode of sexual exchange between women. It is striking how much of the novel involves scenes of women watching each other; not competitively, or jealously, but lustfully and desirously: 'Diana's eyes lingered on Lane Christianson'³⁸. The 'look' is even distinctly voyeuristic at times:

Rapt and fascinated, she stared at her, at the innocence of her face in repose. (p.23)

And, as Lane washes up: 'Diana watched her with pleasure, enjoying her beauty'³⁹. Looking is therefore used as a mode of sexual pleasuring, rather than to carry connotations of dominance and power. It is particularly appropriate in situations where touching is forbidden, such as between two women in public. The gaze functions here as both an active expression of desire - a desiring act - and as a device by which the reader can identify with the looker, and vicariously enjoy the pleasure of looking. And, although Diana is presented as the main point of identification in the novel, the gaze does not operate all one way as it does in conventional relations of looking in which men (=active) look at women (=passive), but is a reciprocal act:

[Diana] looked up from time to time, knowing that each time she would meet eyes made blue by the blue of Lane's pullover: and when she looked away she felt the blueness on her, warming her skin, her body, her blood. (p.92)

The female gaze is therefore both the bearer of female desire and a challenge to traditional relations of looking. In Curious Wine the power of the gaze at times subverts ostensibly conventional renderings of femininity. In the following passage, for instance, the traditionally heterosexual image of enclosure - of the vagina enclosing the phallus - is subverted to produce a different sexual configuration:

Diana first saw gray-blue color, then growing awareness - then tenderness. Lane's eyes widened, closed, slowly opened again. Diana gazed at her longing to surround the tenderness with warmth, wanting to hold it closed and protected, wishing she

could hold her face in her hands. (p.32)

In this episode the consciousness-raising encounter group is used as a narrative device to initiate Diana and Lane's empathy for each other, and to establish a feminist discourse in which women's mutual gazing blurs the boundaries between identification and desire. The trope of enclosure figures the erotic, but it is a scene from which the phallus is absent: what Diana longs to enclose and surround is 'the tenderness', which refers the reader back to Lane's eyes which 'widened, closed and slowly opened again'. Opening and closing represents female sexuality, and usually denotes acceptance or refusal of heterosexual coitus. However, in this passage, it is the feminine which seeks to enclose the feminine; the 'hole' of Diana's cupped hands seeks to enclose the 'hole' of Lane's wide eyes. Desire is therefore constructed outside of a phallic economy of the penetration of holes by solids in a way reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's account of female sexuality in This Sex Which Is Not One⁴⁰.

Even in the 'touching' encounter, the reader is encouraged to return to the image of Lane's eyes - the one part of her face Diana cannot touch. The eyes are already figuratively associated with sexual access, with the vagina - with the 'door' to Lane's sexuality; but Diana does not want to 'penetrate' them, but to gaze at them, in a mesmeric, orgasmic way:

Their eyes met for a single moment so intensely connecting that Diana felt it as a caress. (p.33)

In the 'encounter group' sessions eyes carry all the erotic burden and mark out the 'difference' that effectively constitutes lesbian desire in the novel: the female gaze.

In addition to her use of the concept of softness, Forrest's novels also share the tendency of lesbian romance to employ images and metaphors drawn from the natural world in descriptions of lesbian sex and the lesbian body. In the romance pearls, coral, jewels, shells, sea anemones, caves, forests, fruit and flowers figure as common tropes for the lesbian body, as the following quotations illustrate:

Opening to [ecstasy] slowly, fully, perfectly, like a flower⁴¹.

The flower of her made a honey-damp dew between her legs⁴².

The light magic of Terry's hand sought and crept into the forest of her, covering the enclosure ... a butterfly without flight⁴³.

... her body cleaved to Terry's, quivered as a wind-swept leaf ... and fluttered to earth⁴⁴.

Relief flooded slowly ... and a sensation of glorious blossoming, like a Japanese paper flower dropped into water ...⁴⁵.

Green world symbols such as these are frequently accompanied by watery images which underscore both the supposed fluidity and closeness to nature of lesbian sexuality. In An Emergence of Green

Carolyn and Val make love in a wet world setting, in 'a gray curtain of mist', to the sound of 'green waves breaking powerfully over dark rocks with plumes of pure white spray', and in Loving Her Renay experiences 'Delicate kisses [which] showered her body like light rain'⁴⁶. Although water and breaking waves are also common sexual tropes in heterosexual romance, in the lesbian genre they acquire a specifically lesbian reference through the complicated symbolic analogies between nature and the lesbian body. As these examples suggest, lesbian romance largely eschews commonplace sexual terminology, employing instead a highly euphemistic, metaphorical language. In contrast to Wittig's anatomical precision, specific bodyparts are left unnamed as in Contract with the World, or else they are poetically rechristened in the tradition of romance fiction. This mode of representation is partly determined by the romance genre itself, which characteristically employs a heightened, poetic language. But it is also a result of the feminist attempt to find a non-patriarchal means of expressing lesbian sexuality by disassociating it from pornography and relocating it in 'nature'. This strategy finds a parallel in other spheres of lesbian feminist art, and since the 1970s lesbian artists and film-makers have developed a distinctive floral-vaginal imagery, reminiscent of the work of Georgia O'Keefe, in order to create an erotic language for depicting the lesbian body.

Ironically, the use of natural imagery to portray female sexuality in a non-phallogentric way has been criticised for reproducing the traditional patriarchal identification of woman and

nature. As I showed in chapter two in my discussion of Sally Gearhart's The Wanderground, there is a danger that rather than symbolizing a new woman-oriented language, this imagery merely consolidates the relegation of women to the natural realm and further compounds their oppression. Nonetheless, despite the strength of these arguments, it is also important to acknowledge that through this identification lesbian feminism sought to wrest lesbianism from its associations with sickness and sin. By locating the lesbian body in nature, lesbian feminism succeeded in naturalizing lesbianism, thereby imbuing it with the ontological validity previously reserved for heterosexuality.

However, while the natural aesthetic was undoubtedly innovative and challenging in the 1970s when Judy Chicago made her sculpture, 'The Dinner Party', and lesbian film-makers superimposed images of female genitalia onto natural forms and shapes, by the late '80s it had become a predictable and clichéd mode of lesbian representation. Just as in the mainstream heterosexual romance genre images of crashing waves appeared laughable, for many lesbians the 'soft yielding', euphemistic vocabulary and natural imagery of lesbian erotica became something of a joke, no longer capable of exciting or delighting.

Jay Loves Lucy, by the British writer Fiona Cooper, is a playful satire on the romance genre, humorously ridiculing its hackneyed language of love and parodying its many sexual clichés. Focussing on Jay's all-consuming love for the elusive Lucy, the novel foregrounds romance as a narrative of continual emotional excess:

'Mid-thirties and Jay was Falling in Love. She joked that it was her favourite occupation'⁴⁷. It exposes the cherished illusions of lovers, especially their tendency to over-rate the loved one: 'In love again, the new beloved was perfect and miraculous'⁴⁸. The novel employs the style of exuberant literary 'camp', paying homage to the hyperbole, effusiveness and sentimentality of gay culture in general and lesbian romance fiction in particular. Yet, at times the novel's textual parody transcends mere satire, achieving, through an innovative combination of sexual clichés, outrageously mixed metaphors and sexual colloquialism, its own poetic brilliance:

I adore fucking you. Feel it's what I was born for. Everything in me shoots high like a hot spring, like the fourth of July when my fingers meet your flowing cunt, my face twisted in an agony of pleasure. Inside you I feel like a tango, the rose of your breast between my teeth ... It's nothing to do with coming, it's everything to do with intoxication, flesh-frenzy, reckless rampant effervescent fever. Coming is easy, roundabouts and swings, and fucking you is a big dipper with no brakes flying out across a midnight ocean under a chandelier of stars. (pp.76-77)

In this passage Cooper draws on images from a variety of disparate, and apparently incongruous, discourses, including fun fairs and public holidays, condensing them together into a form of literary Baroque. The poetic effect is further heightened by the use of alliteration, particularly of the letter 'f'. The dazzling rhetoric produces an effect of originality, spontaneity and breath-taking energy.

As the back cover of the novel states, 'There's plenty of writing about sex, but very little about lust'. The novel seeks to

rectify this discrepancy by exploring the agonies and ecstasies of unrequited love and desire. Indeed, in contrast to the pulp romances it parodies, actual sex between the heroines is virtually absent. Instead, the novel represents the intensity of Jay's misdirected sexual fantasies, revealing the gap between wanting and having when, on the single occasion she and Lucy do make love, it proves disastrous. In contrast to the euphoric conversion narratives of lesbian romance fiction which represent a world full of heterosexual women on the brink of coming out, Jay Loves Lucy functions as a cautionary tale to lesbians. This is a conversion narrative with an anti-romantic sting in its tail, in which the 'zealous dyke' fails to get her girl. Notwithstanding this bitter twist however, the novel is a tribute to and celebration of the lesbian romance genre. The fact that such affectionate parody is possible testifies to the importance and the popularity of the romance genre in the lesbian literary canon.

As Bonnie Zimmerman has remarked, the most sensual language in lesbian literature is not about sex at all, but about food: food as both a metaphor for lesbian sexuality, and as a sensuous experience in itself⁴⁹. In Trash (1990), for example, Dorothy Allison points to the material and symbolic importance of food in women's lives:

Food is more than sustenance; it is history. I remember women by what we ate together, what they dug out of the freezer after we'd made love for hours. (p.151)

Culinary images function in the novel as a symbolic system of amorous exchange between women, suggesting intimacy, nurturance, warmth and sensuality. Recording her memories of her lovers and the meals they ate together, Allison's sensuous descriptions of red beans and rice, sweet duck with scallions, cream cheese and raisin Danish, perform all the appetite-whetting functions traditionally accorded to writing about sex. Food is also a central part of lesbian experience and lifestyle in Sarah Schulman's The Sophie Horowitz Story (1984), which Bonnie Zimmerman describes appositely as a 'culinary picaresque'⁵⁰. The novel offers a "foodies" guide to New York: Sophie, the heroine, spends much of the novel engaged in oral pursuits, visiting lower East Side dairy bars and eating Chinese in SoHo. As Sally Munt has pointed out, even the image on the book's cover, of two women in an open-mouthed kiss, looks like 'an attempted swallow'⁵¹. For Renay, the black heroine of Loving Her, food is both a tangible connection with her black American culture and a symbol of her love for her white lover, Terry, whom she initiates into the joys of 'soul food':

I'm introducing you tonight to what is commonly referred to as soul food. That there is what y'all is smelling is known as black folks' delight - chitterlings, hog nuts, or Kentucky oysters ... like my mother used to make. (p.86)

Yet, despite the sensuousness and originality of many of these examples, food symbolism has also become something of a cliché in lesbian writing. Frequently lists of edible goods are substituted not only for erotic experience, but for any attempt to go beyond the familiar formulae of sexual description. Jay Loves Lucy, whose

heroine is 'into labour-intensive food for the beloved⁵²', parodies the ubiquitous use of the 'seduction dinner' in the lesbian romance:

First there was Caribbean sea-food ... fresh limes, hand-ground spices, fresh coriander, hot-juiced ginger, a sloosh of Barbados rum ...

Then came a salad, forty luscious shades of biting green and purple, roasted sesame seeds, toasted sunflower seeds, walnut oil and red wine vinegar. And hazlenut stuffed aubergines, mozzarella cheese, parmesan, the tiniest button mushrooms she could find.

And then meringues, liqueur whipped cream and crushed raspberries from Andalucia.

Pretty damn good, Jay! (p.83)

As Cooper's parody of the genre demonstrates, the representation of sex in the lesbian romance is highly metaphorical, lacking reference to specific bodies and acts. Moreover, although lesbian romance is full of images of falling in love and sexual gratification, it has little to say about desire and loss, and the more painful aspects of love. In order to find accounts of pain and loss in lesbian fiction, it is necessary to turn to other genres such as the lesbian confessional (Kate Millett's Sita) or the lesbian thriller (Sarah Schulman's After Delores). Perhaps, as a response to the limitations and clichés of the lesbian romance genre a new subgenre of lesbian fiction has emerged in the late 1980s which deconstructs the myths of romance and depicts lesbian love and sexual experience in new and startling ways.

Narratives of Transgression: Lesbian Anti-Romance Fiction

One commentator wittily summed up the clichés of lesbian romance fiction in the following terms:

a land of tan, athletic gay women and creamy-complexioned straight ones on the brink of coming out, their downy thighs and circling tongues all tangled up in front of ski-lodge fireplaces and on the widely available deserted beaches.

This satirical description of lesbian romance comes from the back cover of Don Juan in the Village (1990) by Jane de Lynn, a novel which represents the emergence of a new kind of lesbian fiction which rejects both the wish-fulfilment fantasy of lesbian romance fiction and, more controversially, the 'positive image' discourse of lesbian feminism. The positive images of lesbianism promoted by the latter tend to define lesbianism either in utopian terms, as an ideal form of relationship, or in political terms as an expedient alternative to heterosexuality. The chief aim of 'positive images' is not 'realism', but to counter the negative representations of lesbianism in a phallogentric culture. While this serves an important function, the emphasis on the positive aspects of lesbian identification makes difficult the exploration of (sexual) power relations between women and the acknowledgement of the existence of 'negative' emotions and desires within lesbianism. Elizabeth Wilson has written about this aspect of lesbian fiction which seeks to promote positive images of lesbianism, commenting that,

...the power of positive thinking will never help us to understand the darker and more poignant elements of sexual

desire, the many ambiguities of sexual attraction, the mixture of the masculine and feminine in each of us⁵³.

It is this darker side that is the subject of anti-romance fiction. The subgenre of the lesbian anti-romance has developed after, and out of, the romance as a deliberate critique of the latter. It consciously eschews the romantic terms of most lesbian writing about erotic feeling, and rejects the romance narrative as an inadequate form for the representation of lesbian desire. The anti-romance represents a shift from love to lust, and from fulfilment to unsatisfied desire. Whereas romance deals with the joy of falling in love, the thrill of anticipation, and the gratification of desire in gentle 'merging' unions, anti-romance concerns thwarted passion, negative feelings like jealousy and obsession, and sometimes violent sexual encounters.

Anti-romance differs from romance in its representation of lesbian sex and sexuality in a number of significant ways. Whereas romance fiction always places sex in the context of a loving relationship, anti-romance frequently portrays anonymous or casual sex. The former highlights erotic feeling, offering fantasies traditionally associated with women's romance fiction. The latter emphasizes sexual desire - or lack of it - and sexual acts, and uses language more traditionally associated with male pornographic writing. This is not to say that lesbian romance is not pornographic. As I have shown, the genre contains many detailed descriptions of love-making which the reader is invited to vicariously enjoy. Forrest's novels have sex scenes in almost every chapter. However, in

the romance the emphasis is on sexual love as a transcendent, quasi-spiritual experience, which unites the lovers, whereas the anti-romance adopts a demythologizing approach, and undermines the myths of merger and sexual transcendence. Don Juan in the Village, for example, expresses a cynicism about sexual love entirely absent in the romance genre. The text, a collection of short story episodes, is a sexual picaresque chronicling the roguish narrator's sexual experiences and her quest for love and sexual gratification. It highlights power relations and power struggles as an integral part of sexual relationships, rather than focusing on mutuality and reciprocity, as the romance does. Don Juan illustrates the lack of mutuality and common feeling that can accompany sexual experience, focusing on the frustration, anxiety and trauma this engenders. It depicts love-making as, at best, hard work, at worst, a misery-inducing ordeal. Desire, in Don Juan, usually exceeds the pleasure gained or, as in the following episode, is altogether absent:

With a total lack of desire I began to lick her. I could have been a chimpanzee grooming myself, so completely without reference to passion of any sort were my actions. She lay with her legs spread, indifferent as always, watching TV ... When at last she came she lay silent a long time, then she told me it was the first time. I felt flattered and rather proud, as if a daughter of mine had graduated with good marks from high school ... [Then] ... she tried, also for the first time, to work a similar magic on me. (pp.15-16)

In its focus on power relations the anti-romance is more likely to portray 'deviant', 'non-vanilla' and SM sex. In an episode in Don Juan, the heroine gets perverse sexual pleasure from being 'fist-

fucked' by a woman whom she finds unattractive and disgusting. In After Delores, by Sarah Schulman, the heroine seeks humiliation from her idol the actress Charlotte in a scene reminiscent of SM. Like Don Juan, After Delores treats themes largely absent from romantic and political lesbian feminist discourses. It describes its heroine's obsession with fantasies of killing, her alcoholism and masochism, and uses the theme of sexual violence to explore power relations between women and the relationship between fantasy and reality. Schulman is explicitly writing against the feminist tradition of positive images in creating a heroine who fantasizes and acts out violent sexual scenarios, which include the fetishization of a gun left in her possession:

... I pulled out my gun from under the couch and held it, first in the palm of my hand, then gripped it cowboy style. It smelled like stale liquorice or polished wood and it tasted like Dolores. I decided that day that I would carry it with me at all times ... (pp.117-118)

The distinction between the two genres is partly a matter of sexual vocabulary and of the discourses of sex and the body which they employ. Whereas the romance employs a euphemistic, poetic language, using words like pearl and jewel to signify female genitalia, the anti-romance is more likely to use a pornographic vocabulary, using words like 'fuck' and 'cunt'. Indeed, its sexual vocabulary draws on a tradition more commonly associated with male writing in order to represent active and autonomous sexual desire. This is not just a matter of subjective taste, but represents

political choices, such as the decision to create a natural female imagery or to reclaim words from patriarchal usage. The different effects of the two modes also reflect discursive choices: romance is a euphoric mode and always speaks in a heightened, poetic language, whereas the anti-romance is a cynical, disillusioned mode and uses a more realist paradigm of everyday, commonplace language to describe sexual experience and reveal the gap between sexual fantasy and reality:

In search of my trance I slid down Cherry's body ... I tried to match my breathing to her breathing so she'd know I knew how she was feeling (although I did not), which usually leads to feelings of trust, togetherness, and increased excitement - but this was hard because the noises she was making sounded false to me and it was hard to mimic them sincerely ... (p.123)

As this passage from Don Juan suggests, the most striking difference between the two modes resides in their respective accounts of sexual relationship and attraction. In contrast to the romance, the anti-romance refutes the myth of merger and represents lesbianism as a relation of difference, not of sameness, heightening the differences between women as the basis for lesbian eroticism. Similarly, Unusual Company (1987), by Margaret Erhart, represents lesbian love not as a romantic 'home-coming', but as its opposite: homesickness and an aching loss. Like the attraction of the Puerto-Rican women for the narrator of Don Juan, Claire is an object of fascination and desire for the heroine. It is precisely Claire's dangerous otherness that attracts Franny to her.

Another difference between the two modes is in the deployment

of 'the gaze'. In Don Juan, for example, the heroine is portrayed openly sizing women up in her frequent cruising excursions to the bar scene. Her gaze is represented as overtly sexual and consuming, thereby breaking with the feminist injunction against the objectification of women. One critic of After Delores commented on the novel's objectification of women 'in a way reminiscent of the male gaze', complaining that 'lesbians, apparently, look at other women just like men do!'⁵⁴. Lesbian romance fiction is also full of sexual looking and gazing. In Curious Wine, for instance, Lane is seen through the admiring eyes of Diana. The difference between the two lies in the fact that in romance the gaze operates within a discourse of emotional and sexual transcendence or mutuality. As Lane and Diana gaze lovingly into each other's eyes desire merges with identification and the subject/object dichotomy dissolves. The anti-romance, on the other hand, refuses this myth of merger, retaining the subjectivity of the look. Moreover, whereas romance offers the reader an untroubled voyeuristic reading position, the anti-romantic emphasis on power relations makes more demands on the reader. After Delores, for example, which I explore further in chapter four, requires the reader to engage with the debate about sexual violence rather than simply enjoy the sex.

The anti-romance therefore problematizes lesbian relationships and demythologizes the representation of lesbian sexuality offered by lesbian romance. Unusual Company provides an extreme, dystopian portrait of lesbian love. The novel focuses on Franny's obsessive love for Claire, an enigmatic, elusive older woman who inhabits an

exotic and dangerous demi-monde in New York's SoHo district. In Unusual Company lesbian eroticism is presented as more evil than benign, and love involves danger and violence, rather than security and nurturance. The novel employs urban, rather than rural, myths to portray the intensity of Franny's desire. As the long, hot summer in the city progresses, a building burns down and a pair of lovers kill each other. The heat functions as a metaphor for the women's relationship which becomes claustrophobic and destructive. If, as the metaphor of inflamation suggests, love is an all-consuming flame, then it is motivated by the death drive, Thanatos, rather than by the Eros of lesbian romantic myth.

Whereas the romance is a euphoric mode, the tone of the anti-romance is tormented. The nameless heroines of Don Juan and After Delores suffer an existential angst for which they can find only temporary relief in casual affairs or alcohol, while Franny in Unusual Company embraces nihilism. Whereas the heroines of romance fiction find themselves through the love of a good woman, and the subjects of lesbian feminist political discourse are integrated into a supportive community, the anti-heroes of anti-romance are essentially alienated and alone. This is underlined by the first person narration of anti-romance: the heroines inhabit a subjective world, and are trapped in an individualistic and narcissistic subject position. Like The Well of Loneliness, these novels address the painful and lonely aspects of lesbian sexual identity. In this respect they represent a return to Hall's image of the lesbian as an outsider, existentially exiled from the world. Lesbianism is once

more described as an experience of dislocation, in contrast to the majority of contemporary lesbian fiction, which represents it in terms of integration into a lesbian community. However, it is impossible to see the contemporary anti-romantic heroines in the same tragic light as Stephen Gordon. Their sardonic humour and self-irony prevent this.

The lesbian anti-romance, notwithstanding the emergence of the women's and gay communities, voices a doubt that lesbian identity and lesbian community can resolve our problems, realise our desires or fulfil our needs, and registers a scepticism about the lesbian feminist myths of community and sisterhood. In doing so anti-romantic texts are consciously iconoclastic and provocative. In Don Juan sisterhood and woman-identification, the central tenets of lesbian feminism, are entirely absent. The heroine has no particular respect for or identification with women, and she is portrayed in terms of her difference rather than sameness to other women. The narrators of Don Juan and After Delores are located outside a monogamous relationship and distanced from a community of women, thus distinguishing them from romance heroines. In Don Juan, the heroine is part of a New York artistic community, but expresses disdain for it and spends most of the novel trying to escape from both it and herself. After Delores does register the importance of community and portrays the heroine's loyalty to and love for her group of friends, but it also registers a scepticism about the myth of the lesbian feminist community as an all-embracing, supportive sisterhood. The novel shows disagreements and antagonisms between women, highlighting

differences rather than similarities. It depicts the heroine's isolation within the feminist community and the lack of communal support or understanding for her behaviour. At one point in the novel the narrator, having sent her ex-lover a revenge note saying how much she would like to kill her, is visited by a group of women who say they are from the Rape Crisis Centre. They harangue her and charge her with having committed violence against women. It transpires, however, that the women are friends of Delores and are really part of a rock group called Useless Phlegm! The scene is treated as comedy, a satirical expose of feminist prescriptivity and ideological extremism. This kind of satire characterizes Schulman's novels; their tone is ironic and playful rather than serious.

The anti-romance challenges both the romantic and the political models of lesbian identity. Whereas the romance only recognises the lesbian subject in relation to another woman, as part of a loving couple, lesbian feminist political discourse emphasizes the significance of the group over the individual. This model, developed in the 1970s and early '80s, is far more radical than the traditional liberal humanist concept of the individual as a self-determining entity. Lesbian feminism recognises that we are constituted in relation to others and to social groups which provide the basis for an identity politics such as feminism. However, the anti-romance registers a dissatisfaction with both the romantic and political models of lesbian relationship and the emphasis which they place on caring relationships in couples or groups. The anti-romance portrays the lesbian subject primarily as an individual, and resists

both the primacy of communal identity and the merger of the self with another. It expresses a need to acknowledge separateness, individuality and differences between women which tend to be subsumed in the other models. It rejects the utopianism of the romantic and community models, and portrays lesbians as falling in and out of love, moving in and out of groups, exceeding romantic and community definitions of their identities.

However, this does not necessarily imply a rejection of togetherness or relationship (indeed the narrator of Don Juan spends her life seeking her kindred spirit), so much as a problematization of notions of lesbian identity. In Don Juan the differences between the narrator and others appear irreducible; the novel is an extreme statement of individual integrity. Yet, ironically it also deconstructs this identity, showing how the narrator is both distanced from and constructed in relation to others. This is best illustrated by the bar scene episodes in which the narrator spends hours deciding how to dress, how to behave, what to say. In other words, she decides which identity to adopt in order to belong and become part of the group. Don Juan in the Village and After Delores both evince an interest in sexual and social roles which is a feature of postmodern feminism. Judith Butler, for example, has written on gender as a performative, rather than an existential, category⁵⁵. The lesbian anti-romance shares this postmodern emphasis on 'the self' as a collection of identifications, roles and projections, in contrast to the assumption of many lesbian romances, especially those written in the 1970s, of the existence of a true, essential self. And,

although Don Juan concentrates obsessively on the individual, it is also an elliptical history of American culture, embracing the sexual revolution, and the Women's and Gay Movements. It uses its narrator's exiled status and perverse perspective to comment on the social and sexual mores of the past twenty five years.

Although at times extreme in its dystopian representation of lesbian existence, the lesbian anti-romance is perhaps an inevitable response to the saccharine fantasies offered in the lesbian romance genre and the sometimes reductive positivism of lesbian feminism. Just as feminist literature in the 1970s confronted patriarchal myths and stereotypes about women, and explored women's own negative feelings about their bodies, their sexuality and their relationships with men and one another, so lesbian literature in the late 1980s is beginning to deconstruct the myths of lesbian feminist discourse, and to address many of the taboo and sensitive issues around lesbian sexuality, such as role-playing, sado-masochism and woman-on-woman violence. Within lesbian genre fiction it is in the pages of crime fiction and the lesbian thriller that these issues have been raised and explored most thoroughly.

Notes

1. Silver Moon, the London women's bookshop, reported The Well of Loneliness as its best-selling lesbian novel in the 1980s.
2. See Michele Roberts's article 'Write, she said', in J. Radford (ed.) The Progress of Romance, written as an amusing apochryphal conversation between the author and the fourteenth century romance writer, Christine de Pisan about the relative merits of medieval and modern romance. As a means of subverting the genre, Roberts advocates the writing of a romance featuring a lesbian sado-masochist. Two novels, Sarah Schulman's After Delores and Jane Delynn's Don Juan in the Village, written after Roberts's article, fit her description.

3. Sonja Ruehl, 'Sexual Theory and Practice: Another Double Standard' in S. Cartledge & J. Ryan (eds.) Sex and Love (London: The Women's Press, 1983).
4. See Lillian Faderman's account of romantic friendship between women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Surpassing the Love of Men (London: The Women's Press, 1985), pp.74-230.
5. Gill Frith, The Intimacy which is Knowledge: Female Friendship in the Novels of Women Writers, (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Warwick, 1989), pp.304-335.
6. For an in depth study of 1950s' lesbian pulp fiction, see Carol Ann Uszkurat's work in progress. A recent article by Joke Hermes in Feminist Review (No.42, Autumn 1992) compared romances from the 1950s and 1980s, and Elisabeth Wilson and Angela Weir's article, 'The Greyhound Bus Station in the Evolution of Lesbian Popular Culture', in Sally Munt (ed) New Lesbian Criticism (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), examines the importance of urban culture in the fiction and experiences of lesbians since the 1950s.
7. The best known examples of the literature on sexology include Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Psychopathia Sexualis (New York: Surgeons Book Co., 1925); and Havelock Ellis Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1911). The term 'congenital invert' was coined by Carl von Westphal in a case study published in 1869, 'Die Kontrare Sexualempfindung', Archiven fur Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten, Vol. II, pp.73-108.
8. Radicalesbians, 'The Woman-Identified Woman' in S.L. Hoagland & J. Penelope (eds) For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), pp.17-22.
9. Sheila Jeffreys, Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution (London: The Women's Press, 1989), and Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' in Signs, Vol.5, No.4, 1980.
10. See, for example, Sonja Ruehl's criticism of the emphasis Faderman's account places on female bonding rather than lesbian sex in 'Sexual Theory and Practice', op. cit.
11. Tania Modleski, Loving With a Vengeance (London: Methuen, 1982). Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy & Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
12. See Radway, op. cit.
13. Terry Castle, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction', in Textual Practice, Vol.4, No.2, Summer, 1990, pp.213-235.
14. Janine Veto, Iris (Boston MA: Alyson Publications, 1983).
15. Bonnie Zimmerman, The Safe Sea of Women (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1990), pp.79-86.
16. Zimmerman, *ibid*, p.82.
17. Katherine V. Forrest, An Emergence of Green (London: Silver Moon Books, 1990), p.269.
18. See For Lesbians Only for polemical pieces by the Furies (pp.24-26); The Gutter Dyke Collective (pp.176-177); and many other little known, but fascinating, lesbian separatist groups.

19. Alice, Gordon, Debbie & Mary, 'Separatism' in For Lesbians Only, op. cit, p.32.
20. Zimmerman, op. cit, p.77.
21. Irene Yarrow, 'Woman Becoming', in Gina Covina & Laurel Galana (eds) The Lesbian Reader (Guerneville, CA: Amazon Press, 1975), p.8.
22. Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
23. Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', op. cit.
24. Zimmerman, op. cit, p.88.
25. Radicalesbians, op. cit, p.21.
26. Jane Rule, The Desert of the Heart (London: Pandora Press, 1986), p.10.
27. Joanna Ryan, 'Psychoanalysis and Women Loving Women' in S. Cartledge & J. Ryan (eds.) Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions, op. cit, p.208.
28. Aileen La Tourette, Nuns and Mothers (London: Virago Press, 1984), pp.123 & 124.
29. Zimmerman, op. cit, p.93.
30. See, for example, Patricia Duncker, Sisters and Strangers (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
31. Monique Wittig, The Lesbian Body (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p.9.
32. Jeanette Winterson uses the 'tongue in cheek' phrase 'light reading for girls' in the back cover blurb on Silver Moon Books, publishers of a series of lesbian romance titles.
33. Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness (London: Virago, 1982), p.316.
34. Ann Allen Shockley, Loving Her (Tallahassee: The Naiad Press, 1974), p.140.
35. Maureen Brady, 'Care in the Holding', in Irene Zahava (ed) Lesbian Love Stories (Freedom CA: The Crossing Press, 1989) p.50.
36. Forrest, An Emergence of Green, op. cit, p.151.
37. Ibid, p.150.
38. Katherine V. Forrest, Curious Wine (Tallahassee: The Naiad Press, 1983), p.3
39. Ibid, p.26.
40. Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). See, especially, the section 'Mechanique de fluids', pp.103-116.
41. Forrest, Curious Wine, p.94.
42. Shockley, Loving Her, p.28
43. Ibid., p.140.
44. Ibid., p.187
45. Joanna Trollope, A Village Affair (London: Black Swan, 1990), p.141.
46. Forrest, An Emergence of Green, op. cit, p.147; Loving Her, op. cit, p.27.
47. Fiona Cooper, Jay Loves Lucy, p.11.
48. Ibid, p.12.
49. Zimmerman, The Safe Sea of Women, op. cit, p.104.

50. Ibid, p.104.
51. Sarah Schulman, The Sophie Horowitz Story (Tallahassee: The Naiad Press, 1984), p.107.
52. Cooper, op. cit, p.82.
53. Elizabeth Wilson, 'I'll Climb the Stairway to Heaven: Lesbianism in the Seventies' in S. Cartledge & J. Ryan (eds) Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions, op cit., pp.180-195.
54. Ruth Waterhouse, review of After Delores in Rouge, Spring, 1990, p.45.
55. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (London: Routledge, 1990).

C H A P T E R F O U R

LESBIAN CRIME FICTION

The Lesbian as Detective Hero

Lesbian crime fiction is, pre-eminently, the lesbian genre of the 1980s, having emerged in Britain and the US as one of the most popular - for both readers and writers - forms of the lesbian novel. Although romance fiction and, to a lesser extent, science fiction remain important categories of lesbian writing, the lesbian thriller genre has become a major vehicle for the exploration of lesbian and feminist concerns. This generic shift can be explained in terms of both the general trend in lesbian and feminist fiction and the features of the genre itself. As I showed in chapter two, lesbian feminist writers of the 1970s focused mainly on the commonality of women and their shared oppression under patriarchy. Sexual politics took precedence over sex which was relatively de-emphasised. In much of the fiction which came out of the Women's Liberation Movement lesbian sex is seen as a safe haven from the violence of heterosexual relations, rather than being represented for its own sake in terms of pleasure and desire. The often *punitical* or idealised representation of lesbian sexuality in lesbian romance and science fiction texts of the 1970s has given way to a desire to write explicitly about all aspects of lesbian sex and sexuality. While this is still a controversial project within the Women's Movement, the success of Joan Nestle's A Restricted Country (1987) and of Serious Pleasure (1989), edited by the Sheba Collective, demonstrates that there is a

large lesbian readership for sexual fiction and writing.

Despite the continuing popularity of the romance, especially in North America, the thriller has increasingly emerged as an alternative site for the inscription of sexual discourses. In the majority of the novels, sexual quest is at least as important as investigative quest; the title page dedication of Maud Farrell's Skid (1989) reads: 'Love is the only true adventure'. Unlike science fiction, crime fiction traditionally incorporates a sexual plot; as Sally Munt has noted, 'The sexual encounter is intrinsic to the thriller'¹. One reason for the popularity of the genre resides in the opportunities for sexual representation which it affords. The thriller format provides lesbian writers with a mode in which the sexual can be articulated outside the terms set up by the romance, with the emphasis on 'sexy' rather than 'romantic'. The fiction of Mary Wings exemplifies this use of the genre, and she has commented that she sees her work as an attempt to write pornography for women².

The appropriation by lesbian writers of the thriller genre also reflects the trend in feminist fiction to explore the differences rather than the similarities between women. The identity of the detective heroine is frequently contrasted to that of the novels' other female characters, and her status as investigator underlines her differences from other women rather than their commonality. Barbara Wilson's mystery novels, for example, which focus on the protagonist Pam Nilson, dramatise contemporary debates within feminism between women with different class backgrounds and political perspectives, and Pam is frequently forced to confront her racist and

classist assumptions.

In one sense, too, the popularity of detective fiction reflects the 'Me-generation' philosophy of the 1980s in that thrillers and detective novels focus on a single central character. While novels of the 1970s, such as Michele Roberts' A Piece of the Night (1978) and Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), also featured central female protagonists, 1980s' crime fiction tends to celebrate the isolation and individualism of the heroine in a way which is at odds with the concept of a shared femininity which informed the earlier novels. Some critics have argued that the propensity of detective fiction to individualise sets the heroine apart from other women and precludes an authentic feminist politics³. Certainly, the status of hero which the lesbian detectives assume is part of their appeal for lesbian readers. The 1980s' desire for heroes is as apparent in lesbian culture as it is in the mainstream. In the age of Rambo lesbian crime busters setting the world to rights have flourished.

In her illuminating essay, 'The Inverstigators', Sally Munt points to two features of the genre which make it particularly conducive to lesbian appropriation. Firstly, the classic detective hero is portrayed as a crusader:

a redemptive figure, single-handedly stemming the tide of chaos.⁴

Munt sees a close connection between this aspect of the detective persona and evangelical aspects of feminism in its struggle with the

'chaos' of patriarchy. Secondly, the detective hero is traditionally an outsider, even an outlaw: a lone figure operating on the margins of society. This is precisely the historically constructed position assigned to lesbians, a position reflected in our literature as much as in our real life situations. This marginality, Munt suggests,

endows lesbians with a superior vantage point from which to analyse the vagaries of institutionalised heterosexuality⁵.

A third correlation centres on the activity of detection rather than on the detective hero per se. Throughout the twentieth century lesbians and gay men have developed subcultures in which increasingly sophisticated codes of dress and behaviour have functioned as visible markers of sexual preference and as a means of identification. Recent gay male culture, for instance, has produced 'ear-ring' and 'handkerchief' codes, while the lesbian community has adopted the double-headed axe as a sexual and political signifier. Lesbians and gay men have also expropriated the collection of traits implied by the categories of masculinity and femininity, and parodied these in the rituals of butch and femme. Recognising and perfecting these codes has involved lesbians and gay men in an ongoing activity of 'detection', very much akin to the traditional methods used by detective heroes. It involves knowing where to look, the reading and correct interpretation of 'clues' or signs, and entering into a fairly closed system of signification which is highly coded and self-referential. In both detective fiction and gay subcultural life, apparently innocent, 'denotative' signs - a footprint, a pair of Ray-

Ban sunglasses - are filled with connotative, second-level meaning, and become semiotically over-determined, capable of signifying 'murder' or 'dyke' to the initiated detective. Adam Mars-Jones, writing on the genre of gay male detective fiction, comments that this fiction is 'true on the level of myth'⁶.

Classically, the detective hero is depicted as a crusader, an outlaw and a reader of codes. These characteristics have a close correspondence to the lesbian of historical and subcultural myth, making the lesbian an ideal candidate for insertion into the thriller genre. The lesbian thriller also reflects the fact that lesbians stand largely, although not exclusively, outside the institutions of marriage and the nuclear family. However, the portrayal of the lesbian as inevitably childless and lacking ties with family reinforces the myth of the isolated lesbian promulgated in popular culture. This exaggerated representation of the lesbian as an isolated individual is at odds with other kinds of contemporary lesbian fiction. The novels of May Sarton, Caeia March and Anna Wilson, for example, portray lesbians with children, family and dependants. These novels serve to highlight the artifice of the thriller genre and its narrow construction of the lesbian subject as a free-wheeling loner.

The thriller genre also perpetuates the patriarchal division between the sexy, young, childless woman and the unsexy figure of the mother and older woman. As Paulina Palmer has demonstrated, the lesbian thriller genre is almost totally lacking in positive images of older women⁷. All of the heroines are youthful and there are few

subsidiary characters who are older women. Sarah Dreher's Stoner MacTavish (1988) features a positive portrayal of an older woman, but despite her liberal views and strong presence in Stoner's life, the aunt conforms to the stereotype of the eccentric and non-sexual older woman relative. The novels of Mary Wings, in particular, celebrate a lesbian youth culture in which older women have no part. She Came in a Flash (1988) does feature an older woman in a peripheral role who is presented in a sexual light. The heroine, Emma Victor, finds the lawyer, Willie Rossini, sexually attractive. But Rossini is presented only from Victor's objectifying point of view and the novel, in common with most lesbian thrillers, gives no space to the experience of older women. The youthful detective is characteristic of the hard-boiled genre of the thriller. The English detective novel, on the other hand, does make room for the older woman heroine. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, despite the conservatism of her views, represents a positive portrayal of the mature older woman who is mentally astute and self-possessed. Unfortunately, a lesbian counterpart of Miss Marple has not yet been created.

Class status has proved an important factor in the lesbian crime genre. The majority of lesbian detectives are middle-class, and their privileged class status justifies their investigations, even as it frequently makes these problematic in the feminist terms of the narratives. For instance, in Barbara Wilson's Sisters of the Road (1986) the middle-class heroine, Pam, is initially motivated to get involved with the murder of a young runaway out of sympathy for the victim's friend, Trish; a sympathy which she later realises is

patronising and classist. Pam's protectiveness is informed by the belief that she could never be a victim like Trish, a belief which is bolstered by her class position. Pam's 'social worker' mentality, her unstated belief in her own superiority, is dramatically overturned when, in an episode towards the end of the novel, she is raped. Suddenly, the power relations between 'detective-protector' and 'victim' are reversed; and for the first time she sees Trish as an equal:

We were both polite, hesitant, afraid of treading new ground. I felt an awkwardness I hadn't had when I was trying to save her from herself. A new vulnerability ... It had been so long since I'd had anybody to hold me, so long since I had been able to admit that I needed any kind of help at all. I stopped thinking that I was the one who was older, that I was supposed to be protecting her. I held her. I let her hold me, and I cried myself out. (p.198)

Wilson explores the theme of class from the perspective of a middle-class protagonist for whom the option of 'following a cause' is available. Three novels, namely Valerie Miner's Murder in the English Department (1982), Rebecca O'Rourke's Jumping the Cracks (1987) and Sarah Schulman's After Delores (1990), are written from the perspective of a working-class 'heroine'. My use of inverted commas is intentional because, as I shall demonstrate, one of the consequences of these protagonists' class status is to subvert and problematize the concept of the detective hero, and indeed of the detective hero. Nan Weaver, Rats and the nameless heroine of After Delores are unwilling investigators, and do not revel in the excitement and adventure of the quest. Alienated and vulnerable,

these anti-heroines demonstrate that the pleasures of traditional detective fiction are dependent on the gender and class privilege of the hero.

In addition to the predominance of lesbian detectives of middle-class status, white identity also represents a privileged factor. To date, I know of no black lesbian detective, and this is perhaps hardly surprising given the racial politics and white supremacist connotations of the traditional genre. Given also the complex triple oppression of black lesbians, it is perhaps more likely, as has been the case, that black writers should choose to explore this experience in genres which are less formulaic and less implicated in terms of race⁸. However, in the wider thriller genre, black detectives do exist: a male hero in Briton Mike Philips' work, and a black woman narrator in Millie Murray's crime fiction-inspired 'A Blessing in Disguise'⁹. Barbara Wilson's novels feature a strong black woman character, June, who functions as a foil to her protagonist, Pam. June's presence in the novels is significant in that she serves to challenge and question Pam's motives and investigative enthusiasm. Despite Pam's detective successes, June remains resolutely unimpressed and her perspective is anchored in 'the real world', as opposed to Pam's detective fantasy world.

The Lesbian Crime Genre: The Detective Puzzle & The American Thriller

Traditionally, crime fiction falls into two main categories: the American thriller school, which includes hard-boiled works of fiction, and the 'English' detective mystery or 'puzzle'. The latter

mode typically involves a detective of superior intellect and perceptions, and a closed community of suspects. It follows a narrative trajectory of disequilibrium-equilibrium, in which the detective plays the role of restorer of law and order. The narrative sets up a puzzle and provides all the relevant clues for its solution. Part of the pleasure of these narratives for the reader lies in the attempt to solve the puzzle before the detective. The novels of Agatha Christie are typical of this genre.

The detective novel, with its investment in authority and an idea of superhuman intelligence, has been seen as ideologically conservative by some commentators and, indeed, it does not lend itself well to lesbian feminist appropriation. Val McDermid's Report for Murder (1987) is in this tradition and, in keeping with convention, is set in a girls' school. Its heroine, Lindsay Gordon, uses all the traditional methods of the detective: rational deduction, observation of clues and interrogation of suspects. Her Poirot-like insensitivity to suspects and victims alike is at odds with the ostensible feminism of the text, and the novel is permeated by the precious class elitism of the detective 'puzzle' fiction, despite Gordon's stated socialist politics. The resolution of Report for Murder is predictable and glib, as Coward and Semple have noted, in that its male villain is the only real candidate for the role of murderer¹⁰.

Lesbian sexuality sits more easily than feminist politics in the novel, and McDermid neatly subverts the conventions of the girls' school mystery in the respect that, unlike other writers, she does

not implicate lesbianism in the crime. But strangely, Lindsay's sexuality has no implications for the narrative; her friendship with a lesbian teacher in the school merely provides her with a case, not an occasion for a sexual encounter. Neither does McDermid use the opportunity to explore the sexuality of girls' schools. A conflict between Lindsay's investigative role and her romantic involvement with Cordelia is stated but never creatively explored, and Cordelia only maintains her presence in the novel by becoming Lindsay's sidekick in her investigative activities.

The majority of lesbian thrillers draw on the American crime novel. Within this category, two types of lesbian thriller, whose interests and themes overlap, have emerged: those which more or less consciously inscribe themselves within the hard-boiled tradition, exemplified by Chandler, Hammett and Spillane, and those which draw more on the political fiction and novel of ideas associated with the Women's Movement of the 1970s and early 1980s. The first group, exemplified by the novels of Mary Wings, Sarah Schulman and Eve Zaremba, mimic and/or parody the macho, monologic style of the hard-boiled tradition. Like their male counterparts, the heroines of these novels are portrayed as 'alone, sexy, competitive'¹¹. Writers of hard-boiled fiction frequently use the genre as a means of representing lesbian sexual relationships and emphasize eroticism rather than politics.

The second group, of which Barbara Wilson's novels are examples, place a far greater focus on sexual politics and issues of race and class than on eroticism, and use the genre to explore

traditional feminist concerns and issues. Whereas hard-boiled fiction tends to be consciously written against the tradition of Women's Movement literature and to celebrate the macho address of crime fiction, 'soft-boiled' fiction is written from within the perspective of the Women's Movement, and registers an uneasiness about and a more critical attitude towards the male tradition of crime writing.

These variants are not hard and fast categories within lesbian crime fiction, but trends which reflect the differing emphases in the genre and the different uses to which it has been put. Two interesting novels, published recently, do not follow this trend. Eve Zaremba's Beyond Hope (1989) shares none of the interest of the other hard-boiled novels in lesbian sex and sexuality. Zaremba's heroine, Helen Keremos, has no sex life (and virtually no emotional life), and is constructed entirely through her investigative activities. Zaremba's novel is intricately plotted and her heroine is continually on the move; the vicarious pleasures of physical, not sexual, adventure are offered to the reader. In contrast, Sarah Dreher's Stoner MacTavish features a very 'soft-boiled' heroine; like Pam Nilson, Stoner lacks the requisite self-assurance and detective 'chutzpah', and shares her qualities of charming gaucheness and feminist fallibility. But Stoner lacks Pam's political commitment and is not strongly identified with a feminist position. Sexual politics are subordinated in the novel to a romantic quest for love and personal fulfilment. Like the hard-boiled Emma Victor of Mary Wings' crime novels, Stoner is constructed in terms of a discourse of

sexual preference and romantic fulfilment.

At first glance, the fact that much recent lesbian crime fiction draws on a hard-boiled tradition which itself represents a masculinization of the genre through the interventions of writers such as Chandler, Hammett and Fleming, might appear discrepant. Yet, while heterosexual feminist writers, such as Amanda Cross and Antonia Frazer, have drawn on the (mainly British) feminized tradition represented by Christie, Tey and Sayers, which stresses cerebration in the drawing room rather than physical action in the streets, the hard-boiled genre has proved more fertile for lesbian writers. Besides the fact that literary lesbians have never been very happy in the drawing room, this is partly owing to the fact that many of these writers are American, and are therefore culturally familiar with hard-boiled crime fiction which specifies an American experience, even as it insists on the gendered nature of this experience. But, beyond this cultural explanation, there are reasons intrinsic to the form itself which explain why lesbian writers should adopt a genre so apparently saturated with the ideologies of masculinity and individualism. These lie partly in the persona of the detective hero and in the activity of detection outlined above, and partly in the 'language of the body' inscribed in the hard-boiled tradition.

Hard-boiled fiction by male writers utilises a language of the body which insists on the integrity and autonomy of the detective hero's (male) body. The pre-occupation with putting the male body through physical ordeals, which characterises the genre, may be seen, in psychoanalytical terms, as a means of triumphing over the threat

of castration and as a denial of sexual ambiguity. Homophobia is as much at the root of many of these fictions as misogyny; as David Glover writes:

Homosexuality represents the ultimate terror, the loss of self-possession and control, the threat of physical degradation through possession by an Other¹².

Yet, it is precisely the discourse of the body invoked in the hard-boiled genre which provides lesbian writers with a means of representing the lesbian body. Whereas homosexuality in the (heterosexual) male genre frequently represents the loss of autonomy and narrative dissolution, in the lesbian genre it represents, in the figure of the lesbian body, the very condition of narrative movement and desire, of female autonomy and self-determination.

The insertion of the lesbian body into the hard-boiled genre is not achieved simply through role reversal, which David Glover has argued is the narrative strategy at work in Sara Paretsky's novels which feature a heterosexual woman detective¹³. The lesbian detective, in the majority of the crime novels considered here, is not 'physical' in the same way as either the male 'dick' or Paretsky's 'gun-toting' heroine; that is, she does not make a habit of beating up or killing people. (Two exceptions to this construction are Katherine V. Forrest's Kate Delafield, who is unusual in being a policewoman, and Eve Zaremba's Helen Keremos who, as I have noted, is not constructed in terms of a lesbian sexual discourse.) Rather, the physicality of the lesbian detective is almost entirely sexual and is

aimed at pleasuring herself and other women. Mary Wings' Emma Victor, for instance, puts all her physical energy into the sexual encounters which are dispersed throughout the text, and relies on fast-thinking and subterfuge in order to solve crimes.

The Representation of Sexuality in the 'Hard-Boiled' Thriller

The use of the thriller genre by lesbian writers as a means of writing sexually explicit material for lesbian readers is in marked contrast to its use by heterosexual feminist writers. The latter have tended to downplay sexual narratives and have privileged the heroine's cerebral powers or non-sexual physical abilities. Of course many contemporary non-lesbian heroines, such as the heroines of Antonia Frazer, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky, are shown leading sexual as well as professional lives. But in these novels the sexual narrative is peripheral to the main detective narrative, and sex is relatively de-emphasised. This may well be owing to the fact that the heterosexual heroine has more at stake in sexual relations with men, in that her qualification for the detective role is premised on her independence from men, her loner status, and her investment in an identity that is not defined in primarily sexual terms.

In her essay on the novels of Sara Paretsky, Nicole Decuré writes that V.I. Warshawski 'can be a detective because she is a feminist', and points out that Vic 'likes to remind her cop friend Bobby Mallory that she is a happy detective and used to be an unhappy wife'¹⁴. But Vic can also be a detective because the erotic takes second place with her:

Grand passion and burning romance are not for her...She never loses control...and remains detached...nor does she engage in the classical game of (affective) dependency¹⁵.

In the heterosexual crime genre there is a fundamental dichotomy between the detectives' erotic and social/working lives. The heterosexual woman detective is always in control in matters of sex, and because sex poses the risk of the loss of selfhood, sexual contacts are brief and temporary. Decuré succinctly describes a typical Warshawski relationship:

She shows no sentimentality and, with Robert the romance has to end because, although he needs her, she does not need him because he has never taken her seriously as a detective and therefore never taken her seriously as a whole person¹⁶.

Heterosexual detectives are required to be sexually self-possessed and in control, and therefore expressions of sexual desire which might be out of synch with the positive images of strong, self-reliant, liberated women which these novels inscribe, are banished. The lesbian thriller does not confront this problem because, in making love with women, rather than with men, the lesbian detective's sexual pleasure is not contingent on establishing equitable relationships with men. The heroine's autonomy - from men, marriage, patriarchal society - is no longer a sexual issue. That lesbian sexual desire inscribes itself outside the hetero-patriarchy gives lesbian thriller writers considerably more freedom to include sexual narratives, and to explore (lesbian) sexuality other than in the brief interludes and highly controlled situations of the non-lesbian

genre.

In the lesbian thriller sexuality is often experienced as adventure, risk and loss of control. The heroine of Sarah Schulman's After Delores purposely seeks out situations where she is sexually dominated and can yield up total power to the other. The sexual narrative affords the same sorts of questing pleasures as the investigative game itself. The pursuit of erotic pleasures is frequently as important as the pursuit of the villain. The lesbian genre can also explore the power relations involved in sexual relationships in ways not available to the heterosexual feminist genre. If V. I. Warshawski became involved in sado-masochistic sex with a male cop, or worse, with a suspect, as Emma Victor does in She Came Too Late (1986), her credibility would be called into question in the feminist terms of the novel, and both her 'independence' and 'moral standing' with (feminist) readers would be undermined. Such a relationship would more likely become the basis for an analysis of a male sexuality that denigrates rather than pleases women.

Heterosexual feminist crime fiction resolves the problem of the apparent generic requirement to include a sexual narrative by splitting it off from the main narrative action and by rendering it safe and unproblematic for the heroine:

(Warshawski's) affair in Deadlock plays a minor role, as if there had to be a love interest in the story, but her heart is not in it, so to speak.¹⁷ The sex scene between them is (not) described in a few lines¹⁷.

Lesbian crime fiction, on the other hand, does no such thing. In the lesbian genre the sexual narrative is usually central, and the heroine's heart is always in it. In Stoner MacTavish, for example, the main action concerns the heroine's complicated relationship with Gwen, and the crime mystery takes second place, at times seeming incidental. Dreher's Stoner, Wings' Emma Victor and Wilson's Pam Nilson all spend large parts of the story time in pursuit of, and in the arms of, the women they desire. In the majority of lesbian crime fiction there is no disjunction between subjecthood and sexual identity. This is not to say that neither is problematic, indeed many of these novels explore questions of sexual identity; but for these heroines the sexual is bound to their investigative personae. In Stoner MacTavish the heroine's desire for Gwen is intimately bound up with the progress of her investigation into Gwen's engagement to Brian Oxnard. Ultimately, his plot to murder Gwen is unveiled, and Stoner 'wins the girl' by saving her, thereby affording both the traditional pleasure of crime fiction of solving the crime and the pleasure of sexual consummation offered by romance fiction.

Although lesbian crime fiction often invokes masculinity, it is not a masculinity commensurate with either biological maleness or the macho fantasies of the male crime genre. The masculinity which informs these texts is a product of the lesbian subcultural renegotiation of gender identities. The identity of the masculine lesbian famously invoked in Radclyffe Hall's Stephen Gordon was cemented in a particular way in 1950s' lesbian subcultures as the 'butch dyke'¹⁸. But this archetypal figure is rare in contemporary

fiction; 'butch', in the fiction of the 1980s, has become less an identity, with all the fixity and solidity that term implies, and more an attitude, a pose, a performance. In one sense, butch has always implied this quality of performance, and as such has always been recognised as part of a social repertoire, rather than an essence or an innate ontological state. Joan Nestle argues strongly that butch and femme in the 1950s were not fixed and rigid categories, but fluid constructs allowing for considerable flexibility and diversity:

Butch-femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas.. Women..were asked: 'Well, what are you - butch or femme?' ... The real questions behind this discourse were, 'Are you sexual?' and 'Are you safe?'. When you moved beyond the opening gambits, a whole range of sexuality was possible. Butch and femme covered a wide variety of sexual responses¹⁹.

Nonetheless, the eighties-style butch of recent lesbian fiction is no longer a way of life or a coherent identity, but a temporary subject position in which play is the primary characteristic.

Mary Wings' novels typify this conceptualization of butch as playful pose and pleasurable masquerade. In She Came Too Late the identity of the heroine, Emma Victor, oscillates between butch and femme; where butch and femme are not fixed identities but clusters of signifiers - codes of dress, attitude and behaviour - which temporarily locate Victor within their reference systems. This ambiguity is most evident in Victor's continual experimentation with her image. Getting dressed for a party, she dons navy wool pants, a

cream cotton shirt and black leather boots. Wings then has her put on some eye-makeup but allows her to state that 'after a few minutes and several products I changed my mind and washed it all off'²⁰. A butch identity is represented not as the result of 'congenital inversion', but of a carefully chosen outfit and the simple absence of make-up. In another example of the dressing-up ritual in the novel, Victor achieves an exaggeratedly 'femme' identity with the aid of a little black dress, stilettos and black stockings. Admiring herself in the mirror, Victor approves her disguise: 'I saw it was good. I was a girl'²¹. Subverting the myth of creation, the episode combines the pleasures of transvestism and 'drag' with those of feminine adornment.

In Wings' novels, role-playing is characterised by ambiguity and irony, and this is one source of their pleasure for contemporary lesbian readers whose lesbianism is informed by feminism and by an awareness of the history of lesbian identities. The condemnatory attitude which feminism sometimes adopts towards 'pre-feminist' role-playing has given way, in Wings' texts, to a playfully postmodern negotiation of the categories of butch and femme which, far from being seen as limiting and trapping identity, are regarded as offering the lesbian subject a versatile and exciting array of identities without undermining the concept of identity itself. It is not sexual identity per se which is deconstructed in Wings's texts, but the masculinity/femininity polarity. Victor's appeal lies in her self-conscious parodying of lesbian identities, past and present, and in her ability to 'have it both ways'. Portrayed as both butch and

femme, tough and soft, she combines the traditionally masculine attributes of activity, physical integrity and authority with the traditionally feminine ones of passivity, narcissism and desirability. Because these styles are coded as lesbian, she is able to experiment with them without ultimately threatening her lesbian identity.

Katherine V. Forrest's detective novels, Amateur City (1984) and Murder in the Nightwood Bar (1987), are in sharp contrast to Wings' focus on cross-dressing and play on gender identity. Forrest's hard-boiled heroine is represented in a different, less subversive mold. Kate Delafield is a product of the 1950s and therefore formed her identity as a lesbian in a pre-feminist generation. Her characterisation corresponds, in many respects, to the figure of the 'old-style' butch. Aware at a young age of her 'essential difference' from other girls, Delafield displays a singularity that sets her apart, just as it did Stephen Gordon. Like that of Stephen, Delafield's physical appearance is masculinised; she is tall, athletic, and her body is 'full and solid'²². She has 'strong, square hands', and her thighs are 'smooth columns' of 'muscular strength'²³. Her sexual encounter with Ellen O'Neil is presented as an encounter between 'hard' and 'soft', although both women take the initiative equally.

Although Forrest is a feminist writer, and Delafield does display a feminist sensibility in many of her attitudes, it is interesting, as Sally Munt has noted, that Amateur City employs a 'discourse of damnation' in its construction of lesbian identity²⁴. Sex functions in the novel as a sort of balm to Delafield's wounded

psyche; a sweet reward for her suffering and mental anguish. The cause of her suffering is, admittedly, not her lesbianism but the death of her lover in a car crash, but this suffering serves the same purpose of setting her apart as the lonely, lesbian souffrante. Her private suffering is set against her public identity as a policewoman, and it is here that Forrest creates a positive image of lesbianism. Delafield is supremely competent, conscientious and much respected by her male colleagues:

A Kate Delafield investigation was solid, meticulous, documented, a logical tapestry of fact - no sloppiness, no loose ends, no nasty surprises to ambush a district attorney, none of those holes you could drive a truck through so that a contemptuous judge would throw the case out before a jury had warmed its chairs. (pp.8-9)

The pleasure which Amateur City offers the lesbian reader derives from the possibilities for identification with a strong woman cop who is also a lesbian, and who can look after herself 'in a man's world'. Delafield's positioning as an authority figure enacts a gratifying fantasy of power and control which is at odds with a largely oppressive and power-denying reality.

Among the young lesbian readership of the 1980s Forrest's heroine is less popular than the more 'hip' Emma Victor. This is surely because Kate Delafield is identified with a lesbian identity associated with an older generation, and with sets of characteristics which are associated with that identity - singularity, essential difference, the tragic 'wound' - from which many younger lesbians seek to distance themselves. Nevertheless, Forrest's contribution to

the genre is valuable precisely because her novels explore with sensitivity an identity which has been important to an older generation of lesbians and which has, in the 1980s, gone out of fictional vogue.

As detective fiction Forrest's novels work very well; strongly plot-driven, they emphasize the intricate details of Delafield's cases in the tradition of the 'police procedural'. In the earlier novel, Amateur City, Forrest uses the traditional device of the 'closed community of suspects'. The plot concerns an institutional crime; the murder victim is a hated office colleague in an insurance company. In a 'surprise' twist at the end it is the 'Mr Nice Guy' who, true to form, emerges as the villain. The plot and setting of Amateur City are fairly conventional. However the novel displays its lesbian and feminist credentials in the delineation of the heroine, in her sexual encounter with Ellen O'Neil, and in the critique it offers of sexism in the workplace and the police force.

Murder in the Nightwood Bar, Forrest's second novel, integrates the lesbian and detective narratives in a more interesting and challenging way. Here, the murder victim is a young lesbian, Dory Quillan, and her body is found in the car park of a lesbian bar. While the novel therefore represents the lesbian woman in the conventional role, as a victim, the fact that Delafield and the bar's clients are lesbians, ensures that the representation of lesbianism is not exhausted by the 'victim' role. The ensuing investigation forces Delafield to reassess her rigid compartmentalization of her 'professional' and 'lesbian' identities.

As she walks into the bar for the first time, the narrative makes clear that she has not so much entered the scene of the crime as 'come home':

What if someone asks pointblank if I'm a lesbian? They won't ask. She was looking into the faces of the women at the bar. They don't need to. She felt stripped of her gray gabardine pants and jacket, her conservative cloak of invisibility in the conventional world. In here she was fully exposed against her natural background.

She recognised herself in each of the women staring back at her. In the assertiveness of one woman's posture, in the stocky build of another, in the untouched gray of a short hairstyle in the practical clothing and unmade-up faces and serviceably pared nails ... (p.11)

In presenting the women of the Nightwood Bar as mirror images of Delafield, Forrest's narrative breaks down the dichotomy, which detective fiction frequently sets up, between the representative of the law and those implicated in crime, between governors and governed. The women's shared lesbian identity and the dissolution of boundaries which this entails is literally figured in this section of the text in the gradual disappearance of punctuation marks.

Forrest extends the hermeneutic of disclosure which characterizes crime fiction to embrace questions of sexuality and sexual identity. Walking into the bar and being recognised becomes a radical act of disclosure for Delafield, with which she must come to terms. She is also sensitive to the women's fear of exposure occasioned by publicity about the murder. The simultaneous fear of, and movement towards, disclosure is also made strikingly manifest in Delafield's sexual encounter with Andrea Ross, one of the women from

the bar. Rebuffing Kate's advances, Andrea suddenly pulls off her shirt to reveal the scars of a radical mastectomy. Rather than being repulsed, as Andrea expected, Kate embraces her:

Kate reached to her, needing to protect the rawness of those scars, needing to protect Andrea's nakedness from the coolness of this green room. She grasped Andrea's bare shoulders to warm her, rubbing, chafing the cool flesh under her hands, and looked at eyes that stared in amazement into hers. (p.99)

Despite the fact that Andrea's scars look suspiciously like a displacement of Delafield's own psychic wound (she is apparently incapable of a pain-free sexual relationship), disclosure operates here, as in the bar scenes, to bring the self in relation to an Other. Kate progressively moves out of the splendid isolation of the lone lesbian outsider and into a community of women with whom she identifies. Disclosure therefore facilitates the movement towards communitas, epitomised, in the novel's climactic ending, by Delafield's participation in a Gay Pride march. As Munt comments:

The moment of closure and resolution in Murder at the Nightwood Bar is not the arrest of the murderer but the integration of one lonely dyke into her culture²⁵.

'Soft-boiled' Heroism and The Lesbian Feminist Novel of Ideas

Whereas the hard-boiled heroine represents an 'ideal self', embodying a fantasy of power and control, or a lesbian stereotype which refers to a discrete lesbian experience rooted in gay culture and in butch, soft-boiled heroines are drawn in a more realist tradition of

characterization which facilitates readerly identification rather than desire. Pam Nilson, the heroine of Barbara Wilson's three crime novels, Murder in the Collective (1984), Sisters of the Road and The Dog Collar Murders (1988), is in many ways a crime fiction counterpart of the feminist characters in 1970s and early 1980s 'political' fiction²⁶. Wilson's detective novels share the same preoccupations of male violence, sexual politics, and the exploration of feminist consciousness and practice as novels such as Marilyn French's The Women's Room (1986) and Marge Piercy's Small Changes (1974), and Wilson's novel Ambitious Women (1983) is itself a 'political' fiction.

Drawing on the same realist tradition as the feminist novel, Wilson consciously eschews the hard-boiled model of the detective hero and subjects it to a feminist critique. Her heroine is firmly grounded in a community of political activists, and through Pam's interactions with others inside and outside that community - leftwing men, her black friend June, her heterosexual sister, and Trish, a working-class prostitute - Wilson is able to dramatise the complex of gender, race and class relations with some subtlety. In common with much 1980s' fiction, however, there are no examples of easy solidarity between women. Wilson shows the differences as well as the affinities between women in the Movement, and demonstrates the ways in which their experience inflects their political perspectives. Female identification is therefore a less monolithic phenomenon in her novels, and feminism is presented not as a set of beliefs but as an ongoing process of discovery and negotiation. When, for instance,

in Sisters of the Road, Pam is faced with the 'otherness' of Trish's life as a prostitute, she recognizes that her intellectual and 'anthropological' understanding of this experience is inadequate:

There were things here that I needed to feel as well as witness. (p.53)

Pam's lesbianism is dealt with in a similar way: the novels are as much about the process of becoming a lesbian and about ways of being lesbian as about the solving of crimes. Pam is therefore presented as a subject-in-process and this representation deconstructs the notion of the detective as a transcendental ego-type. Socially located, Wilson's heroine also debunks the myth of the detective hero as an isolated individual somehow beyond social relationship. Pam is shown negotiating complex ideologies which lead her to question her own identity and political values.

In individual terms, Pam differs from the hard-boiled heroine in that she is characterised by self-doubt and fallibility, rather than by the confidence and omniscience of an Emma Victor or Helen Keremos. Pam is unsure of herself, easily intimidated, anxious and hesitant. On feminist and political, as well as romantic, questions she is a fence-sitter. In The Dog Collar Murders, for example, a novel which explores the politics of pornography and lesbian sadomasochism, Pam vacillates between aligning herself with the sexual liberals and the anti-pornographers, describing herself as one of the 'sexual mugwumps on the fence that divided the perverts from the puritans'²⁷. As this extract suggests, the humour of the novel

derives from a combination of Pam's naivety and her initiation into the 'mysteries' of lesbian sexuality.

The Dog Collar Murders occupies the terrain of lesbian feminist politics even more strongly than Wilson's previous novels, and undertakes an exploration of the multiple meanings of lesbian sexuality. Whereas in Murder in the Collective and Sisters of the Road Pam individuated herself as a lesbian largely against the heterosexuality of her leftist co-workers and friends with the result that lesbianism is relatively unproblematically juxtaposed to heterosexuality, in The Dog Collar Murders she is confronted with different and competing lesbian sexualities, and has to locate her own lesbianism in terms of diverse sexual articulations.

Wilson constructs the novel around a conference on sexuality/pornography in which lesbian and feminist activists rehearse the arguments for and against pornography and censorship. Prior to the final panel discussion a prominent lesbian activist and anti-pornographer is murdered with a leash and dog collar, an emblem of SM. The conference and the murder which takes place set in motion a 'triple quest' narrative in which Pam's investigative quest for the murderer is interwoven with her exploration of the politics of sexuality and her own psycho-sexual quest for identity. The central problematic of Sisters of the Road, of how Pam can play the detective game without compromising her feminist politics and objectifying another woman as victim/object of the quest, is taken a step further in The Dog Collar Murders, for the enemy, it appears, now lurks within the feminist community itself. The villain is no longer the

'pimp', the 'john' or the 'patriarchy', but one of the 'sisters' themselves. The murder investigation is played out within the highly-charged debate over lesbian SM. Division and acrimony characterise the community, and Pam has to negotiate these politics at every level of her investigation. The detective is no longer an outsider; she is deeply implicated, politically and personally, in the world she investigates.

One consequence of Wilson's construction of Pam as a subject in the process of negotiating the meanings of sexuality, and of Pam's indecisiveness, is that the novel becomes accessible to a wide readership. 'Pam' addresses the lesbian and the non-lesbian reader in an unthreatening, and perhaps, ultimately, an unchallenging way. The general address of Wilson's novels therefore offers non-lesbian readers a positive, non-pathological image of lesbian identity and allows them to explore without inhibition the meanings around lesbian sexuality.

In setting the crime in The Dog Collar Murders within a gathering of the lesbian feminist community, Wilson creates a 'closed community of suspects', a traditional device of detective fiction. She uses the same device in Murder in the Collective in which the killer is revealed to be a male co-worker in Pam's print collective. Anne Cranny Francis argues that in placing the burden of guilt onto a single individual, Wilson subverts the political project of her text which is to demonstrate the socio-political basis of exploitation and corruption²⁸. Francis compares the novel unfavourably with Valerie Miner's Murder in the English Department which refuses to apportion

individual blame and places the murder of Angus Murchie, a sexual harasser, in the context of a system of power relations premised on, and sanctioning, sexism. Although Miner's narrative is also a 'closed community' fiction, the tendency of fiction using this device is to scapegoat one of the members of the community, and to portray the cause of crime in terms of individual grievance or deviance. A similar scapegoating occurs in The Dog Collar Murders. The novel makes repeated reference to the feminist argument that society sanctions habitual violence against women and that pornography contributes to this violence, yet when a woman is killed it transpires that the crime has nothing to do with this analysis. Rather, the female killer is motivated by the fear of exposure. Sonya Gustafson kills to prevent her victim from revealing her past involvement in a porn movie. What is at stake is Gustafson's personal reputation as an anti-pornography campaigner, and the public profile of that campaign. While 'political shennanigans' are implicated in the crime, the crime narrative is not made the basis for an explanation of violence in terms of socially constructed power relations as it is in Miner's novel. The Dog Collar Murders provides a conventional crime narrative in which a guilty individual is brought to justice and the reader is offered the pleasure of resolution and closure.

However, for the text's other narrative, which explores the politics of pornography, to succeed, it is important that the killer is neither a radical feminist who opposes pornography, nor an advocate of lesbian SM. Wilson's carefully staged debate between

feminists would be prejudiced if either were the case. The moral majority politics and religious bigotry of Gustafson ultimately place her outside the feminist community and exonerate it from implication in Loie Marsh's murder.

The denouement of The Dog Collar Murders is staged in a classic Christie mode with Pam gathering together for confrontation all the suspects. The contrived nature of this device in an otherwise realist text is registered in a tongue-in-cheek and self-conscious invocation of Poirot, the fictional detective par excellence: 'If Hercule Poirot could carry it off, why couldn't I?'²⁹. The unconvincing nature of this device is underlined by means of intertextual parody and by the fact that Pam cannot carry it off; Gustafson attempts to kill her before the confrontation.

Wilson does, however, attempt to suture the crime fiction and the sexual-politics narratives by providing her heroine with a realistic rationale for her detective activities. She suggests that Pam's investigative activity becomes a way of coming to terms with her feelings of loss around the 'meaningless' death of her parents:

Sometimes I thought it all had to do with my parents, this odd need to pursue the causes of people's deaths. If I could find a reason for a murder, maybe there was a reason for accidental death as well. Following a line of investigation was an active response ... You didn't just sit there, stunned with sorrow, you asked questions, you demanded answers, you looked for motives, causes, a pattern.

And sometimes there were answers, sometimes there were causes, sometimes there was a pattern. My curiosity was justified, my grief, temporarily, assuaged. (p.125)

Sally Munt, in her essay 'The Inverstigators: Lesbian Crime Fiction', places her reading and discussion of the lesbian thriller in the context of her own mother's death, and makes a similar connection between apparently arbitrary loss, and the quest for motive and meaning, in order to ward off the sense of dissolution:

The cancer was the mystery - we didn't understand it, only its shadow, a negative, a growing silhouette. This inevitable death had a murderer of sorts, but one with no motive. I had a body but no explanation. So, I read books full of bodies and reasons; crime novels, dozens of them³⁰.

Repeatedly, in lesbian crime fiction, there is a more or less conscious connection, indeed a causal connection, made between the orphaned status of the protagonist and her assumption of the detective role. This relation is made explicit in Maud Farrell's Skid in which the murder of her father, a private eye by profession, motivates the heroine, Violet Childes, to hunt down the killers and avenge his death. Her name, in fact, is suggestive of an Oedipal scenario. Sarah Dreher's Stoner MacTavish, Mary Wings' Emma Victor and Katherine Forrest's Kate Delafield are similarly all apparently parentless. Moreover, the death of a nurturing lover/'mother' is significant in the construction of the detective personas of Kate and of Nyla Wade, the heroine of Vicki P. McConnell's crime novels. The profound sense of loss, the motivation of desire and the quest for meaning operating in much lesbian crime fiction resonate with the account given by Lacan of the process of becoming a subject, in which entry into the Symbolic realm engenders Lack and its concomitant,

desire. Entry into language, narrativization, precipitates these lesbian heroines into a quest for the lost plenitude of the Imaginary, for unfragmented identity and full meaning. This quest is particularly urgent for lesbians because their existence is denied by the Symbolic Order. Heterosexual men are compensated for the loss of the Imaginary realm through the social status that accrues to them if they choose to identify with the Symbolic father. Heterosexual women are denied this status but, in so far as they align themselves with men, they have a recognised social role. If, as Lacan says 'woman does not exist', the place of lesbians in the Symbolic structure could be termed a double absence³¹.

Merger and Separation of the Self in Lesbian Crime Fiction

Sally Munt suggests that it is Freud's account of oedipalization that is most relevant to lesbian detective fiction in its propensity to symbolically 'murder the father'³². The dispatching of the male villain enacts a gratifying fantasy in which the powerless who lack the phallus triumph over the symbolic fathers and expell them from the Symbolic. But the desire to 'murder the father' is also registered by the heroine's orphaned status which signifies her evasion of Oedipal law. Lesbian crime fiction therefore reconstructs the Oedipal drama in terms of the acquisition of lesbian identity. Its heroines have symbolically murdered their fathers in order that they themselves can act in the world and individuate themselves as self-determining and sexual beings. Parental death is closely linked to assuming lesbian identity; at one point in The Dog Collar

Murders Pam wonders whether her parents would have accepted her lesbianism. What is significant, however, is the fact that she is free from their possible censure.

In the Freudian scenario the child desires to murder the father in order to regain possession of the mother's body and regress into the pre-oedipal condition of symbiotic union with the mother. In his earlier work, Freud argued that although this is a desire shared by both sexes throughout life, the girl's desire for merger is palliated by resentment of her mother whom she blames for her 'castration'³³. However, his attitude to the importance of pre-oedipal mother-daughter relationship changed and, in his later years, he began to see it as increasingly significant³⁴. Nancy Chodorow, whose work centres on the mother-daughter bond, argues that women experience more, not less, desire for the pre-oedipal because, unlike men, who can approximate this state through their relationships with nurturing women, women's desires for nurturance are normally and habitually frustrated³⁵. Joanna Ryan, as I showed in chapter three, discusses the implications for lesbianism of Chodorovian theory; she suggests that lesbianism offers some women the possibility of experiencing the self-in-relation, and of combining eroticism and emotional attachment³⁶. Ryan argues that we acknowledge that the pre-oedipal impulse is strongly implicated in lesbian sexuality, without simplistically equating the two. Wilson's subtle depiction of lesbian identity in the Pam Nilson mysteries represents one such acknowledgement by a lesbian writer.

In her quest for identity, Pam is motivated partly by the

desire for female nurturance, emotional security and unconditional acceptance by the m/other, and partly by the desire for separation and individuation. For most of her life Pam experiences herself as her twin sister's 'shadow', without a separate identity of her own. She compensates by becoming 'mother's little girl':

... Penny had always been Dad's favourite, two minutes older than me but for all that the biggest, the brightest, the bossiest ... I compensated by growing smaller and weaker so I could really be the little sister and take my place in the family cosmology ... I was Mama's baby, and some of the happiest days of my childhood were spent at home ... (p.79)

When her parents die Pam places Penny in the role of surrogate mother. When, therefore, in The Dog Collar Murders, Penny marries the father of her child, Pam's identity and place in a familial structure is threatened; she feels 'left out' and abandoned. While she outwardly criticises Penny for capitulating to dominant bourgeois values, on a deeper level she desires for herself the normalcy, security and sense of social belonging that marriage and the nuclear family can bestow. Pam's comment, 'It's all so reactionary', masks her own psychic investment in 'reactionary' values³⁷.

In constructing a biography for her heroine, Wilson locates Pam's lesbianism in terms of the dynamics of the family and early childhood experience. Pam's lesbian relationship with Hadley is, in part, an attempt to re-experience the early identification with the mother. Through it Pam receives both sexual gratification and the sense of connectedness with a nurturing female body. Her adult sexuality expresses the aspiration towards an original homosexual

intimacy. When Hadley suggests non-monogamy and living apart, however, this aspiration is jeopardized and Pam's old insecurities re-emerge. Only through the cathartic process of detective work which increases her self-confidence; by accepting Penny's separate life; by coming to terms with the loss of her parents, and by acknowledging non-monogamous desires in herself does she move towards a concept of lesbian love that does not involve overdependence and possessiveness.

Paradoxically, Pam's lesbianism is both a means of retaining a connection with the mother's body and a means of individuation and separation. Becoming a lesbian and a detective is a way for Pam to individuate herself from Penny and to assert an autonomous identity. That lesbianism is a discourse which is both transgressive and capable of organising and ordering identity ensures Pam's radical differentiation from her heterosexual sister and provides her with a strong sense of self. In constructing Pam, Wilson holds in tension two conflicting impulses - one towards merger, the other towards separation - to create a complex and dynamic characterization of the soft-boiled lesbian detective heroine.

Mary Wings' hard-boiled heroine, Emma Victor, is much more concerned with individuation than with merger. Indeed, in She Came Too Late and She Came in a Flash, merger is perceived as a threat to autonomous lesbian identity. Whereas the lesbian and feminist communities in Wilson's novels are constitutive of a positive lesbian identity, allowing Pam to identify in relation to other women and providing her with group validation of personal experience, Victor is

distanced from the collective and is represented in terms of a discourse of individualism.

In She Came in a Flash Wings takes her heroine from her women's hotline job in Boston to California to do PR for a women's benefit concert. Victor is inscribed simultaneously as being displaced (she moves from east to west), and as being linked to a community of women in doing a job in that community. Her relationship to the women's community is an interesting one, dictated partly by the feminist politics of the novel and partly by the requirements of the hard-boiled thriller tradition within which the novel locates itself. The hard-boiled 'dick' is traditionally represented as a loner, divorced from ties of family and community; following his (sic) own individualist path, he is highly suspicious of 'relationships', fearing the threat to the self-sufficient ego they imply. Victor shares all these characteristics, yet she also calls herself a feminist which implies investment in, and commitment to, other women. She is therefore in the paradoxical position of being both an insider and an outsider in relation to the women's community against which she individuates herself.

A major thematic of traditional detective fiction is that of the individual-versus-the-collective, and the threat that the collective, or a collective with too much power, poses to the individual is a central theme of She Came in a Flash. The novel articulates the fear of the loss of selfhood and, through Victor, argues for the need for individuation and the retention of autonomous identity. In this case the collective is represented by a religious

commune which becomes the focus of Victor's investigations when one of its members disappears. In caricaturing the collective as a dubious spiritual organisation which turns out to be motivated by greed and profit and has no respect for the individual, it could be argued that Wings manipulates readers' own (unconscious) fears of ego-disintegration without having to directly confront the clash between the discourse of individualism embodied by Victor and the discourse of collectivity represented by the women's community. She does, however, register an ambiguity in Victor's response both to the collective and to the disintegration of identity which merger with the group implies; merger is depicted as at once threatening and seductive.

Victor's conscious attitude to the Vishnu commune is overtly hostile and sceptical. She stands apart from all the 'yellow people' who attend the therapy session, and sees them as pathetic dupes. When Laileka tells Victor that she must discuss her problems in a group setting Victor explodes:

In the group, in the group, in the group. Didn't two personalities ever get a chance here? (p.98)

And when she comes across another 'blue sheep' in the yellow crowd, Victor is relieved - 'I was grateful to find somebody who had not merged with the whole'³⁸. Victor's sceptical attitude to the collective is typical of the cynical detective who is traditionally suspicious of totalizing belief systems and so-called dogmas. Like the hard-boiled 'dick' she uses humour to manage anxiety; her

constant wise-cracking is a distancing and self-protective device, as well as a means of asserting her autonomy.

Yet, like the traditional male detective, seduced against his conscious will and better judgement by the charms of the femme fatale, Victor, despite her cynicism, is seduced by the eroticism and exoticism of the Vishnu lifestyle. On her first encounter with Vishnu, Victor is scornful of his fawning acolytes who react with glee to his every cryptic word. But when he singles her out from the crowd to tell her 'Your doubts do not matter', Victor's cynicism is tempered by empathy:

I felt a curious elation. This sort of nonsense was contagious ... There was something riveting about his attention. I started to feel a little paralysed. Like I couldn't, like I didn't want to move ... I felt the blood drain out of my face and I started wondering who really did write his dialogue.
(p.40)

As soon as Vishnu turns away, however, the spell is broken and Victor is disillusioned: 'He was a class act, a cosmic comedian who didn't have to stand up for long'³⁹.

Vishnu's uncanny recognition of Victor's reasons for visiting the commune is left unexplained by the text, and the episode undermines not only Victor's claim that mysticism is merely 'nonsense', but its claim, as crime fiction, to explain everything. Victor's experience of the rahami breathing exercise challenges, in an even more unsettling manner, the rationalistic discourse of crime fiction and the realist epistemology of the text. At first Victor

goes through the motions without losing self-control, but then she begins to hyper-ventilate and hears Vishnu's voice speaking to her:

'Do not look to the fruit', said a deep, slow voice ... It was Vishnu ... The voice was green with endless chlorophyll ... The words became flowers, opening up and blooming like a time-lapse movie, red roses bursting open with every word he said ... Just to follow that voice, that was all I wanted. What was it saying now? The words upon the wind, the lack of words? It wasn't making any sense. (p.54)

The hermeneutic of crime fiction is displaced at this moment in the text by a discourse of impenetrability, in which words become flowers and interpretation is rendered impossible, even undesirable. Such moments are inexplicable in the realist terms of the text's crime fiction discourse, and remain resistant to textual elucidation. In so far as this mystical subtext is unresolved, it operates to demystify the rationalistic and individualistic discourses of the thriller genre.

Throughout this 'other' text, the image of fruit figures as an overdetermined sign of mystery, mysticism, exoticism and eroticism; an eroticism which is associated with lesbian sexuality. On her first visit to the commune, Victor goes to its coffee shop expecting 'brown rice and lentils', but is surprised to find a gorgeous buffet of mouth-watering foods. Wings dedicates a lengthy passage to a sensuous description of its sumptuousness, concluding with the 'finale' at the end of the table:

A candelabrum with twelve tapers flickered and shone over an impossible mound of melons, pomegranates, mangoes shining with

dew, and sea-green guavas. At the bottom three pineapples lolled on their sides in a lake of seedless grapes. (p.46)

If Victor rationally rejects the commune's religious creed, she emotionally succumbs to its sensuous features. Later, the love scene between Victor and Bumper is presented as a double seduction; Victor is seduced as much by the delicious food and drink as by Bumper. The sensual mood is compounded rather than dispelled by Bumper's loaded references to Hindu aesthetic theory and amorous goddesses. When Victor, referring to the dessert, says 'The chocolate sin was great, infinite in the way only chocolate could be', her parodic appropriation of a spiritual concept of the universe expresses lesbian desire⁴⁰. The text makes explicit at the point of seduction the link between fruity foods and lesbian sex:

(Bumper's) words rode on sweet vegetarian breath...she bent over slightly and put her mouth on mine. Her hors d'oeuvre had been terrible but she sure knew how to end a sentence. (p.112)

As Gill Frith has shown, the device of the 'sharing of food' is characteristic of the (British) novel of female friendship, and is used to signify a 'moment of sensual awakening'⁴¹. In the lesbian novel the trope is eroticised so that the imagery of 'shared tastes' explicitly denotes the sexual in a way which, as Frith notes, also avoids reproducing male voyeurism.

This discourse gives way to a language of 'pure body' in which the personality dissolves, and the self is experienced as the physical locus for a 'multitude of sexual reactions'⁴². Ego

dissolution and abandonment can be pleasurable as well as threatening in the time-honoured form of sexual ecstasy. But this is not without its dangers; Laileka takes advantage of Victor's lowered defences to join them, but Victor, re-asserting her sense of self, declines, and the crime plot resurfaces.

At one point in the novel the two discourses of crime fiction and mysticism appear to merge. It is the point at which Victor is at her most vulnerable; she has been incarcerated in a basement 'cell' for days and subjected to light deprivation and a persistent disco beat. Disoriented, Victor tries to hold onto a sense of self and to focus her mind. Suddenly, she remembers Vishnu's words:

I had a sudden memory of red roses ... His words flashed before me: 'The seasons plant and ripen. It is all the parts and no parts at all'. (p.159)

Is this a metaphor for the mystery narrative itself, or a clue to the identity of the criminal? Has Victor, through brainwashing and sense-deprivation, come to a transcendental understanding of Vishnu's words? It is impossible, ultimately, to know, for the text does not provide a position from which the moment's significance can be read. It can only gesture towards an other register of meaning.

The sequence which follows marks the climax of Victor's ordeal. The anxiety she feels extends beyond her immediate situation and is generalised as a sort of life crisis in a passage of allegorical soul-searching in which her lesbianism is implicated:

Why didn't I just order the bittersweet cocktail of life and drink it? Because I was too busy gazing into the face of the cocktail waitress serving it. She would look into my eyes with a gaze of permanent affection. We would go home. At least that's what I used to think. But now I knew that even if I found her it wouldn't matter. I knew I would have to pick up the crystal glass off the polished tray, open my mouth and put the sharp edge between my lips. I would drink. It wouldn't be milk and honey. It would be a young vinegar from good grapes, or a wine of character hiding behind a discount label. It would be complicated and not quite what it seemed. I would gag at first and then swallow. And after that nothing would hurt so much. I would have an educated palate. But the waitress would never look the same. (p.160)

This passage represents a textual hiatus or rupture which interrupts the smooth, linear progression of the crime narrative. Its suggestion that Victor must go through a process of disillusionment is at odds with the text's delineation of her as a cynical realist. The process described parallels the Freudian account of the subject's rejection of the pleasure principle and acceptance of the reality principle. Victor must get beyond the mesmerizing gaze of the cocktail waitress, whose ideal image does not exist in reality, in order to acquire 'an educated palate'. Moreover, her prison meditation on life and sexuality speaks as much about the nature of its own discourse - 'It would be complicated and not quite what it seemed'. Victor's existential awakening - 'That was the moment I really arrived in California' - coincides with the abrupt cessation of the disco beat⁴³. The crime narrative resumes as the music is turned off and Victor is released from the cell by Delphy. Back in the world of investigation, detective quest once more motivates the narrative; Victor tells her/us: ' "I need company" ... But what I really needed was a story'⁴⁴ [my emphasis].

If humour is used in She Came in A Flash to manage the anxiety of the heroine, it is more consistently used, in Wings' novels and in the lesbian genre as a whole, as a narrative strategy to subvert the dominant male paradigm of the thriller genre. The lesbian thriller takes for granted lesbian and feminist terms of reference and consciously addresses lesbian feminist readers, assuming readerly conversance with different strands within feminism and a knowledge of lesbian subcultural lifestyles. The humour of Wings' novels, for example, relies for its effect on this sort of proficiency in its readers. When Victor says - 'I hoped my imitation Ray Ban sunglasses and knife-pleated tuxedo shirt would make a good impression' - she is not gratuitously detailing her outfit; she is appealing, humo rously, to a convention of lesbian dress codes⁴⁵.

Wings' novels can be read as affectionate satires on the feminist milieu and women's community within which the stories are set. The target of Victor's satiric wit in She Came in a Flash is a Californian variety of cultural feminism, whose idealism and dubious spiritualism Victor pokes fun at:

'Why the Women's Foundation? I mean, what does Vishnu's philosophy have to do with women?'

'Well, Emma, if you're a feminist you should know. Our whole culture is left-hemisphere biased ... linear, scientific, absolutist. Masculine. Aggressive.'

'And the right hand side' - she raised a hand ... towards Alcatraz - 'the other side of the coin has been ignored ... intuitive, receptive, feminine...'

'But who does the dishes?' (p.24)

Victor's witty line in reparté, her quips and one-liners, put her in the tradition of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, but, whereas their humour spoke out of a macho, sexist male culture, and was directed against women, Victor's humour satirizes aspects of feminist and gay culture from within those cultures, and is specifically addressed to women. Wings' comic achievement is to retain those same joke formulas while simultaneously subverting them and appropriating their pleasures for lesbian readers. When she has Victor say - 'I could have gone through the menopause waiting to get Nebraska Storm's manager on the phone' - the form of her utterance is Chandleresque, but the content could never be spoken by Sam Spade⁴⁶. This is a distinctly female humour.

Wings' comic speciality is a humour addressed specifically to lesbian readers and centering on lesbian sexual practice. Sexual allusions that vary from the implicit to the explicit run through her novels, and afford lesbian readers both erotic and identificatory pleasures. During her lunch date, in She Came in a Flash, with Bu Mu Per (whose name, of course, is significant), Victor, who is narrating, delivers a 'classic' line:

'You may not realise it, but our hearts are a little in the same place', she said with a kind of intonation that made me think that our hands had been in the same kinds of places too.
(p.27)

This joke formula is typical of the hard-boiled genre and, indeed, the joke itself is reminiscent of a similar one which occurs in Farewell, My Lovely. At one point the hero intones: 'I could feel a

lump in my pocket, and it wasn't my gun'⁴⁷. Wings' 'spooof' reproduces the comic style while excising the phallocentrism of the classic version.

Wings also humorously subverts generic and social conventions of distributing gender roles. She continually plays on the reader's own preconceptions and expectations, using subversion to expose the cultural and textual construction of gender difference. In She Came in a Flash, for instance, the hot-shot lawyer, Willie Rossini, turns out to be a woman, and her secretary, a man: 'A blonde receptionist with a moustache asked me to take a seat'⁴⁸. Setting the novels in and around the gay community allows Wings to draw on a rich culture of gay humour and innuendo based on mutual recognition and shared understanding; an understanding which sometimes misfires:

'Visiting hours are over', said a nurse who popped into the room. He gave us an exaggerated wink, misjudging the level of intimacy I had with Nebraska. Usually it was swell being in the homo-erotic atmosphere of Northern California. I started to do a warm fade. (p.200)

The Critique of 'Positive Images' of Lesbianism

If the heroines of lesbian detective fiction are outsiders in a heterosexual world, the majority, like Emma Victor, protected by the 'homoerotic atmosphere of Northern California', are socially located as 'insiders' of alternative or counter-cultural communities. These communities of sexual preference or shared understanding locate the reader as lesbian, as well as constituting the identity of the lesbian detective heroine. The pleasures of recognition and

affirmation operate both within the text and between the text and its lesbian readership. It is not the case, then, that the lesbian detective heroine, sui generis, is a lonely outsider operating outside any network of social relations. Community, and the sense of identity that community bestows on the lesbian detective are crucial features of this fiction. Without it the detective would lack the requisite self-determination to act.

Two novels in which community-bestowed identity is lacking, and the lesbian detective is depicted as virtually alone, are Rebecca O'Rourke's Jumping the Cracks and Sarah Schulman's After Delores. The working-class heroines of these two novels are denied the privileges and relative freedoms the pink pound/dollar buys their middle-class sisters in the thrillers by Wilson and Wings. O'Rourke's heroine, Rats, and the nameless heroine of After Delores are inhabitants of the city underworlds of crime and violence which the more socially privileged heroines investigate and then retreat from. If gender and sexuality effect a radical transformation of the genre in the novels featuring middle-class heroines, the insertion of a working-class heroine stretches the genre to its limits. Rats and the narrator of After Delores lack all social legitimation and authority. Locked out of a social system which recognises only money, male power and the institution of heterosexuality, their gender, sexuality and class position render them powerless and vulnerable. The effect of the social isolation and powerlessness of these heroines is to transform the power relations of detective fiction, rendering them both victims of an alienating social system and

vulnerable to the violence that system engenders. Above all, their social positioning challenges and undermines the myth of the detective hero.

In Jumping the Cracks O'Rourke articulates a critique of British society as experienced by a working-class lesbian alone in London. Without family, friends or the support of a lover, Rats is threatened with unemployment, homelessness and alienation. Everything about Rats is antithetical to the classic detective persona. Lacking self-assurance and control over her life, she does not choose to be alone as the traditional 'dick' does. Above all, crime holds for her none of the thrill and excitement it does for conventional detectives. Rather than a spur to action, violence immobilizes her:

She stood there, scared and trapped ... and as the silence resounded in her head, (the phone box) seemed to ring out in the dark, wet street, saying there is no contact, no relief. There are only panes of glass, little enough between you and the dark, wild street ... and the body up the road, its life drained out onto the rutted broken pavement. (p.2)

Whereas the traditional detective is aloof and detached from the crime he witnesses, Rats feels personally assaulted. Entering the scene of a crime and finding a body turns her into a potential victim. Paralysed by fear, she is possessed by the memory of being followed home by a drunken man, an event that occurred when she was nine years old. The crime is thereby connected with the omnipresent threat of violence felt by women; a connection which is absent from the male genre. Only the curiously ambivalent description of Rats

from the point of view of her lesbian friends accords in any way with the conventional detective persona, and the picture it paints of androgynous self-sufficiency is not borne out by the text:

... to her lesbian friends she was nothing but Rats - strong and silent, who held her drink and kept her head: coming or going as she pleased ... as tall as she was short, as slim as she was broad ... A cold fish? Maybe. Like many a person hunched in the prison of denim and leather she was more sensitive than she'd ever dare admit... (p.25)

The paralysis which is the consequence of women's fear of male violence not only immobilizes the detective in the novel, it also impedes narrative progression. Crime fiction ordinarily draws its momentum from investigative curiosity and movement; without it there is no story. In Jumping the Cracks, on the contrary, narrative progression is repeatedly threatened, and the vulnerability of the woman detective is reflected in the fragility of her narrative as detective fiction. There is a similar moment of arrest in Sisters of the Road in which narrative progression is abruptly stopped at the point where Pam is raped. In the classic male examples of the genre the alternation of progression and retardation is necessary in order to create suspense as, for instance, when Bond is captured in the novels by Ian Fleming. But in the lesbian feminist genre such checks to the hero's movement are more likely to threaten the very status of the narrative, and to be the occasion of fragmentation rather than suspense:

It was like ... nothing I'd ever felt before ... my whole being reduced to a tiny pinprick that cried no: I felt that whatever

made Pam a person, whatever I had known about myself was being crushed out of me, spinning into fragments like a planet smashed by meteors. (p.194)

And when Rats comes face to face with the man she suspects of murder, instead of coolly questioning him for clues and leads, as a male detective, or Paretsky's V I Warshawski, or even Emma Victor on a dare-devil day, would do, she is overwhelmed with fear:

She tried to control her fear, to think calmly, but her body rebelled. Her legs and hands shook, her back was drenched with sweat, her heart pounded ... (pp.43-44)

Eventually, Rats does start on the work of detection, with a dogged persistence, but the text makes clear that her relative financial security is a condition of the investigation. Getting a job has given her the freedom to act. Nevertheless, Rats continues to weigh her desire to solve the murder against her desire to keep her job and safeguard herself.

Jumping the Cracks functions as a demystification of the thriller genre. Violence and crime are not fetishized as they invariably are in male versions of the genre, and, indeed, in the feminist thrillers of Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton. The novel fails to offer the reader the vicarious pleasures of fantasized violence, representing it as a disempowering experience - for women in particular. For this reason, Jumping the Cracks is not wholly satisfying as an example of detective fiction. However, as I shall show, the novel does offer the reader other types of pleasure,

notably identification with Rat's circumstances and with her 'average lesbian' status.

Traditionally, the crime novel fetishises the detective's world. The 'phallic' femme fatale, the gun-as-erotic-symbol, the seedy bars and meanness of the 'mean streets' are all central components of the genre. Their significance is rarely questioned, and few crime novels ask what made the streets mean. The work of writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, who wrote in the period following the Depression years, is exceptional in this respect in including social criticism. Jumping the Cracks follows in this more radical tradition of interrogating the institutions of contemporary society. Rats takes nothing for granted; she interrogates every convention, every fetishised object. Sipping a cocktail in a lesbian bar, Rats is placed in a situation typical of crime fiction - the bar scene. O'Rourke characteristically interrupts the detective narrative and has Rats speculate on the origins of her cocktail parasol:

As she opened it out, sipping her drink and glancing around she wondered whether the parasols were made by hand or machine. She wondered what it would be like to make them day in, day out... (p.20)

When Rats' job is transferred to the Seamen's Mission, a rundown hostel for down-and-outs, O'Rourke uses the typical crime fiction setting in order to provide a socio-economic explanation of poverty and destitution. The 'lowlife' are not merely part of the generic

background; they have been brought low, and Rats is interested in the reasons why:

Rats speculated on the circumstances that had brought the men to this place, wondered if she would ever meet them. There must be places like this for women too. She tried to imagine what it would be like to call this place home. (p.48)

In Jumping the Cracks lesbian identity is constructed in terms of society's hostility towards lesbianism. The novel represents the life of a young lesbian as a struggle against social opposition and prejudice, economic hardship, isolation and alienation. The stark realism of O'Rourke's text is in marked contrast to the fantasy of power operating in the hard-boiled thrillers of Wings and Forrest. In the novels by Wilson and Wings lesbianism is presented in terms of a discourse of personal liberation; the stress is on the positive benefits and pleasures it offers. O'Rourke, on the contrary, stresses lesbianism as a social stigma and represents it in terms of a discourse of oppression. The pleasures offered to the reader in each case are therefore different; the former offer the positive possibilities of 'escapist' fantasy, whereas O'Rourke's text offers political insight and validation of the lesbian subject as a survivor.

O'Rourke, like Wilson, furnishes her heroine with a biography and a family history. Rather than accounting for Rats' difference in sexological or psychological terms, O'Rourke locates Rats' lesbianism politically, depicting it as a refusal of male domination and a rejection of the lives of frustration and disappointment of her

mother and the women around her. Like Forrest in Amateur City, O'Rourke invokes the concept of 'difference' to account for her heroine's lesbianism, and her emerging consciousness of it:

She had never been able to stand the office gossip, the questions about what you did with who; engagement, pregnancy, marriage. In her early years Rats hadn't gone out much, had no boyfriend. She had simply been awkward, unlike the others, but different too from the temps, the students, women clear about what they were doing ... Gradually, painfully, she had begun to sort out her differences with the rest of the women, her family and her friends. (pp.6-7)

But, unlike in Forrest's text where difference is presented as essential, invoking a discourse of damnation, the problems Rats experiences with heterosexual femininity are shown to have a markedly social basis. The problem, in fact, is not in her but in what society has to offer her as a woman.

Jumping the Cracks and After Delores both treat the psychological impact of violent crime on the consciousness of a working-class lesbian. The third person narrative of O'Rourke's novel enables her to articulate a critique of the social system which engenders the power structures locating crime, alienation and powerlessness through an authorial critical consciousness. In the first person narrative of After Delores there is no narrative consciousness external to the narrator's own. As a result, there are fewer markers between what the narrator, in her alienated and disturbed state of mind, imagines or fantasizes takes place, and what actually happens. The narrative is therefore caught up in her nightmare world, and the line between fantasy and reality is blurred

and frequently elided. It is the other characters in the novel, rather than an authorial consciousness, which provide an alternative perspective on the action.

In After Delores the object of the heroine's obsession is not a corpse as it is in the O'Rourke text and many other examples of the genre, but an ex-lover, the eponymous Delores, who jilts the heroine for another woman, a 'yuppie' called Sunshine. The novel operates a double quest narrative; the heroine searches for the killer of Punkette, a young exotic dancer whom she befriends, and seeks revenge against Delores and Sunshine. Her quest for vengeance increasingly obsesses her and comes to overshadow the investigative quest. The novel's title refers both to this revenge quest and to the painful aftermath of her broken-off relationship with Delores.

Of the lesbian detective novels considered here, After Delores is the most subversive and controversial. Not only does it reverse the usual crime fiction hierarchies of male power and female powerlessness, and of the omnipotent detective and the passive victim, but it challenges the trend of recent feminist re-workings of the genre. In all the examples of the lesbian thriller discussed so far, the 'morality' of the heroine is never in serious doubt. Pam Nilson may be politically naive, but she is basically 'good'. These heroines represent 'positive images'; they are personable, humourous and clean-living. The reader 'knows' that, despite their often messy emotional lives and wrong choices, their personal attractiveness will be rewarded and their problems resolved. Thus these heroines invite pleasurable identification. Even the risqué Emma Victor, whose sex

life carries sadomasochistic overtones, does not ultimately threaten the discourse of 'positive images', because she is 'her own person' and meets her partners on an equal footing. She relinquishes power voluntarily, and always retains it in the end. The pleasure that these heroines offer lesbian readers resides in their confirmatory function; they assure us that our identities are secure and that we have integrity. To a greater or lesser extent, and with more or less success, they resolve the contradictions of lesbian identity.

Although, superficially, After Delores is conventionally feminist in introducing a male villain, its heroine's obsession with fantasies of killing, her disturbed state of mind, her alcoholism and her masochism make her an ambiguous bearer of justice. Schulman is explicitly writing against the feminist tradition of 'positive images' in creating a heroine who fantasizes violent sexual scenarios, finds perverse pleasure in sexual and emotional pain, and makes a sexual fetish of a gun. Schulman, in After Delores, challenges the boundaries of what it is possible to say in the lesbian and feminist novel about the relationship between sexuality and violence by exploring this theme in terms of lesbian sadomasochism.

Lesbian Sadomasochism and the Politics of Sexuality

Sadomasochism (SM) has become a central issue for the lesbian communities of Britain and North America and, as Barbara Wilson suggests in The Dog Collar Murders, has assumed a significance which it does not, perhaps, merit. The issue has effected a division

between lesbians in the community; between 'vanilla' lesbians who view SM as exploitative and 'male-identified' behaviour, and between practitioners who believe it to be a safe and honest way of exploring the power relations inherent in all relationships. SAMOIS, the American lesbian feminist SM organisation argues that sadomasochism is the eroticization and dramatization of power relations in sexual practice⁴⁹. The arguments in the 1980s around the setting up of the London Lesbian and Gay Centre clearly illustrated the polarization of the two groups and the lack of common ground between them. Other recent events, such as the screening of Sheila McClaughlin's film, She Must Be Seeing Things, in London and Manchester, have failed to encourage constructive dialogue between the pro- and anti-SM groups, and have left many lesbians, unidentified with either position, confused at the intensity and rancour of the debate.

It is in the context of a community polarized over the issue of SM that Schulman's novel was published in 1990, and this situation goes some way towards explaining the ambiguous responses it received from reviewers. Ruth Waterhouse, for instance, writing in the lesbian and gay magazine Rouge, found the novel 'masculinist', and argued that it could not be considered feminist:

... I fail to see how anything which objectifies women's bodies in a way reminiscent of the 'male gaze' can really be considered feminist. Schulman uses masculinist words to objectify women in a way that many straight men would recognise and applaud; lesbians, apparently, look at other women just like men do!⁵⁰

The allegation that lesbian SM practice replicates heterosexual behaviour patterns is central to anti-SM arguments. Adrienne Rich adopts this stance, for example, in her influential essay 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence'⁵¹. It is clear how assertions of male-identified behaviour arise given the theoretical equation of heterosexuality and sadomasochism, where masculinity represents the sadistic position, and femininity represents the masochistic position. Such arguments are based on an essentialist notion of gender difference and sexuality. A similar argument, challenged by Joan Nestle, has also been used to discredit butch-femme relationships.

Lesbian sadomasochists have countered this argument in two ways. Firstly, they have argued that lesbian SM is not reducible to heterosexuality, because women have a different relation to power than men. Secondly, they argue that roles are not rigidly assigned, but are exchanged between partners, and that SM allows for more sexual freedom and experimentation than is available in the 'vanilla' relationship. This last point, however, is usually informed by an essentialist notion of sexuality similar to that of the anti-SM position. Instead of seeing SM as inherently oppressive, it is seen as inherently liberating.

SM arguments which stress the flexibility and transgressive nature of lesbian SM have an affinity with accounts generated from a psychoanalytical perspective. In her essay, 'Of Female Bondage', Parveen Adams argues that lesbian SM, far from being a recapitulation of 'normal' heterosexuality, represents a new sexuality;

that is, one which is not organised around the paternal phallus⁵². Combining the work of neo-Freudians such as Deleuze, Bersani and Dutoit, Adams puts lesbian SM in the context of the perversions identified by Freud. She then demonstrates how lesbian SM differs from these in being non-pathological, and therefore represents a genuinely new organization of sexuality freed from Oedipal Law.

Adams isolates four factors central to masochistic sexuality: fetishism, disavowal, fantasy and the factor of suspense. The first of these, fetishism, is the essence of masochism; and fetishism always concerns disavowal. Disavowal is the refusal on the part of the child to recognise that the mother does not have a penis. In order to deny the existence of sexual difference, the child avows the existence of the mother's penis in some other part of the body or in some object. This part or object represents the fetish. When disavowal leads to fetishism and beyond that to (sado)masochism, Oedipal Law has been set aside and the father is abolished as the privileged possessor of the phallus. In such a situation anybody can possess the phallus, and desire is therefore potentially freed into a multiplicity of representations. Adams argues that lesbian SM is unique in achieving precisely this mobility. Whereas the traditional clinical masochist is sexually constrained by the rigidity and repetition of his compulsion, for the lesbian sadomasochist there is:

... an erotic plasticity and movement: she constructs fetishes and substitutes them, one for another; she multiplies fantasies and tries them on like costumes. All this is done quite explicitly as an incitement of the senses, a proliferation of bodily pleasures, a transgressive excitement; a play with

identity and a play with⁵³ genitality. It is a perverse intensification of pleasure⁵³.

In this account the lesbian sadomasochist has successfully divested the paternal phallus of its power and released sexuality from the determination of gender difference.

Despite the complexity of Adams' thesis, which I have not been able to fully recount here, and the extravagance of her claims for lesbian SM as opposed to lesbianism per se, the same sorts of account, albeit in less psychoanalytically inflected terms, have been offered by lesbian sadomasochists themselves⁵⁴. Moreover, such accounts are finding expression in lesbian fiction: the features of lesbian SM identified by Adams, fetishism, disavowal, fantasy and suspense, are present in Schulman's text.

The elements of fantasy and suspense, which are central, 'concealed' features of the thriller genre, are foregrounded in After Delores. Their generic function in motivating desire is made explicit through the construction of the narrative as a series of fantasies of which the two central ones, fantasies of killing and revenge, are ultimately acted upon by the heroine, thereby ending the suspense built up in the narrative. Fantasy is privileged in the text as a heightened, but dangerous, mode of living, and is juxtaposed to the dullness of the 'real' which it supercedes. The narrator confesses her admiration for the flamboyant 'femme', Priscilla, because 'she had the courage to live out her fantasy'⁵⁵.

Fantasy mediates the relationships between the narrator and the other characters in the novel, and between the other characters

themselves, to the extent that they become players in each other's fantasy scenarios. The narrator uses fantasy as a means of relating to her friend, Coco Flores, who is a Lower East Side poet/philosopher and story-teller. Coco's stories are poignant and erotic tales about the integrity of love between women. Sometimes presented as real events, sometimes as fiction, but always essentially 'true', the stories achieve a balance between the pornographic and the lyrical.

For the narrator, Coco's stories have the effect of 'therapy or hypnosis'; they momentarily give her relief from her 'real self'⁵⁶. Yet, in foregrounding the fantasy mode, in which identities are mobile and multiple, the text challenges the notion of a 'real self'. Fantasy entails a multiplication of identifications and identities which are limited only by the fantasist's own desires. Fantasy is characterised by role-playing, and the fantasist may cast herself in the roles of seducer, seduced, voyeur, in all or none of these, as the space or relationship between positions. So, for example, in the scene where the narrator watches the lovers Charlotte and Beatriz making love, she casts herself in the role of voyeur:

My palms left sweaty handprints when I pressed up against the door to look inside. The light was out in the hallway, so I stood, like a thief in the night, like a traitor committing espionage. I looked in and they were naked. (p.126)

But this subject position is subverted by her subsequent identification with the two women as she is drawn into their love-making as a conspirator and participant:

I was one of them now. I was so evil. I was in love with them
(p.126).

Significantly, several of the characters are involved in theatrical productions; Charlotte is an actress and the heroine first meets her in a theatre. Theatre functions metaphorically in the novel to suggest the role-playing and fantasy elements of everyday experience. Charlotte, in particular, personifies the fantasist's ability to generate and control fantasy scenarios. Like Delores, Charlotte is an enigmatic figure, but whereas Delores is defined by her absence, Charlotte is defined by her powerful chameleon character. She is both the object of the narrator's sexual fantasies and, for a time, the subject of her murder investigation. The narrator is fascinated by her ability to continually shift her identity in such a way that all her theatrical personae - Irish coalman, champion, resistance fighter, English lady, king - seem real. In all her parts Charlotte is the narrator's 'hero':

I was in my private movie and Charlotte was the star.
(p.83)

The novel makes repeated cinematic references, and the narrator's continual comparison of her life to a movie serves to underline the sense of illusion and masquerade and points to the register of fantasy within which she functions.

The narrator finds the fluidity of Charlotte's identity both desirable and disconcerting. She interprets Charlotte's ambiguity as

duplicity and suspects her of murdering Punkette. However, her suspicions do not diminish her desire for Charlotte; on the contrary, she fantasizes the 'murder' scene as a violent sexual scenario which expresses her own masochistic desires to be dominated by Charlotte:

I remembered those giant hands that would fit so perfectly around Punkette's neck. Those hands were the size of taxicabs. First they would stroke Punkette's hair, one hand covering her entire skull. Then they would caress her little breasts and slide between her legs, sloshing around in her wetness. And, in that quiet, out-of-breath moment, right after she came, Punkette would look up, flushed and grateful, to see Charlotte's hands, with the same ease, crawl up her neck and break it without any effort at all. Without a thought. (pp.110-111)

This episode invokes the imagery of hard-core pornography and the ultimate SM statement in the 'snuff' movie. It refers back to the moment where Charlotte grasps the narrator's arm until it hurt ('I loved the feeling of pain that was taking over my arm'⁵⁷), and to their sexual encounter which leaves 'the impression of her grip inside me'⁵⁸. Charlotte as the narrator's fantasy figure is both lover and killer. The narrator's sexual encounter with Charlotte takes the form of a fantasy rape scene. It is initiated, as in SM practice, by the narrator's cry of 'no'. It incorporates the SM elements of coercion, physical abuse and the testing of limitations. The pain inflicted on her arouses the narrator's desire, and she experiences 'more pain than I had ever imagined' in a moment of 'feverish clarity'⁵⁹. The scene represents the heroine's seeking out of pain and humiliation for sexual and emotional gratification.

Violence does not, however, exhaust the narrator's and other

characters' sexual imaginings, and the narrator does not always adopt a masochistic position as her sexual encounter with Priscilla and her emotional response to Coco's stories demonstrate. The range of fantasy scenarios offered to the reader in the novel is impressive. They encompass tenderness and brutality, genital arousal and the dispersal of pleasure across the body. After Delores registers that sense of erotic diversity which Parveen Adams argues is the characteristic of lesbian SM. However, unlike Adams, Schulman problematizes sadomasochistic patterns in lesbian relationships. Significantly, whereas Adams discusses sadomasochistic practices which take place in controlled situations, the narrator of After Delores has clearly lost control. Her sadomasochism is represented as implicated in her oppression, rather than purely in terms of sexual liberation. The novel is concerned to represent the destructive effects of alienation and oppression on the psyche of the working-class lesbian heroine. Rather than simply celebrate or condemn sadomasochism, it explores the ways in which the context and function of SM fantasy determine its meanings.

The central motif in the novel's representation of sadomasochism is the fetish of the gun which is, of course, the ultimate fetish of crime fiction. But, whereas in male examples of the genre, the gun is a symbol of masculine assertion and a defence against the threat of castration and against woman-as-other, in After Delores the gun-as-fetish represents a disavowal of the paternal phallus and an erotic symbol of exchange between women. The "ladies' model" gun, which is given to the narrator by Priscilla, later her

lover, represents sexual and psychological empowerment: it is the narrator's 'trump'. Gradually, it becomes the focus of her fantasies of sex and violence, and the mediator of her desire. It is both the means of retribution and sexual arousal. At first the narrator keeps it in the refrigerator, taking it out occasionally to clean and look at. As its erotic significance in her fantasies increases, however, she increasingly incorporates it into an autoerotic ritual of phallic appropriation:

All day at Herbie's I wore the gun wrapped in a clean side towel, in the middle pocket of my apron. It felt great, hitting against my pubic bone. (p.119)

The gun is closely associated with the lesbian body and lesbian sexuality. Priscilla always carries one for 'protection' but, for her as for the narrator, guns also carry an erotic significance. After they make love, Priscilla tells the narrator a story of a past experience with a lover in which a male voyeur is caught masturbating while they make love. The naked lover turns her gun on him and he flees 'knowing she would blow his balls off'⁶⁰. The voyeur is symbolically castrated and the 'male gaze' is dispelled from the scene through an act of lesbian appropriation of phallic power for which the gun is a symbol. Priscilla's story, like those of Coco, can also function as a fantasy, in which the male gaze can be admitted for the purpose of lesbian sexual arousal because it is (unconsciously) understood that women retain control of the scene.

In using the gun to shoot the Punkette's killer, the narrator

enacts another fantasy of expelling the male gaze; quite literally, she shoots into his eye which is framed by the peephole in the door. The scene represents the final gratification of her desire for vengeance, repeatedly figured but endlessly postponed in her fantasies. And, as in her sadomasochistic fantasies, there is the element of ritual preparation and the eroticization of violence:

I took the pearl-handled gun out of my pocket and squeezed it between my hands ... I passed it between my legs and in my mouth, in every secret part of me. I rubbed it over my face, pushing its nose into my cheeks, cleaning the trigger with my tongue. Then I was ready. (p.151)

The moment of pulling the trigger is the moment of orgasm, registered by the shock of electricity which passes through the narrator's body on contact with the electrified door, and her gesture of slumping to the floor - 'I was completely exhausted'⁶¹.

The transgression of Oedipal Law represented by the appropriation of the phallus for lesbian sexuality, is mirrored in her transgression of social law in killing with impunity. Unlike in the other crime novels considered here, where ultimately the police take over and justice is done lawfully, in After Delores the law is totally absent, and 'rough justice' is the only kind which operates:

I got the guy who killed Punkette. I made everything right. I suffered but I never gave up and now I have a victory, do you hear me? I have a goddamn victory. I won. (p.152)

The final pages of the novel invoke an Old Testament discourse of 'an eye for an eye' to justify her actions. The idea of society as an anarchic place in which 'the powers that be' are ineffective and unjust is common to both the mainstream crime fiction and Western genres. In these narratives individual interventions are sanctioned so that 'good' may triumph over 'evil'. Schulman, however, subverts this ideology in creating a heroine antithetical to the traditional crusader/redeemer. Her moral crusader is a working-class lesbian whose transgressive sexuality is traditionally the harbinger of evil. However, the novel does provide an alternative perspective on the narrator's behaviour. Beatriz, for instance, offers a very different interpretation of the narrator's actions to her own. At the end of the novel Beatriz rejects the narrator's account of her 'moral crusade', saying:

You weren't going through all this to find some man. You are just a lonely person who had absolutely nothing better to do. Don't fool yourself. (p.152)

In offering the reader erotic pleasures and fantasies around 'forbidden' desires, not least within lesbian feminism itself, After Delores functions as lesbian pornography. But unlike pornographic writing, Schulman's novel also incorporates a critique of violent social relationships. The novel can therefore be read simultaneously on two levels. It provides reading positions from which to enjoy its 'forbidden' pleasures and to critically explore the fantasy/reality continuum. After Delores does not endorse indiscriminate violence

against women and, it could be argued that, rather than reproduce the 'male gaze' as Waterhouse claims, After Delores, unlike much 'positive image' writing actively disempowers and dispels it. In many ways the novel is intensely 'moral': the heroine is guided by a strict code of personal morality which condemns infidelity to and betrayal of friends and lovers. She perceives her two-fold revenge as a moral duty and obligation. Yet, her concept of justice, with its overtones of Old Testament vengeance, sits uneasily in a feminist context. Although the heroine of After Delores achieves the same outcome as other lesbian detectives, the 'neutralization' of a male killer of women, the eroticization of violence and the imbrication of sexuality and violence, make the novel deeply subversive of the feminist genre.

In the feminist genre violence is perceived as an external threat and is located in the dominant culture. Although the villains of Wilson's The Dog Collar Murders and Murder in the Collective are ostensibly group members, in each case they are shown to be interlopers from the outside world. Jeremy is revealed to have been working for a US intelligence organization involved in the deportation of illegal immigrants, and Sonya is aligned with the right wing moral majority. The integrity and security of the subculture are never seriously threatened from within. The feminist genre therefore sets up an opposition between the 'safe' subculture and the 'dangerous' dominant culture. While this does indeed reflect the experience of many lesbians, the dichotomy makes it difficult to explore (sexual) power relations between women and to acknowledge the

existence of 'negative' emotions and 'hateful' desires. Elizabeth Wilson, as I mentioned previously, criticizes the 'positive images' promoted in lesbian fiction for their failure to register the many ambiguities of sexual desire.

Sadomasochism, as depicted in Schulman's novel, potentially represents one way in which the myth of lesbian subcultural innocence and benignity is challenged. It locates (sexual) violence in the heart of lesbian culture and breaks down the opposition between internal harmony and external violence. Although the ostensible project of The Dog Collar Murders is precisely an exploration of subcultural discord through the trope of SM, this project is ultimately undermined by the requirements of the crime narrative to establish the community's innocence. The novel deals with SM in terms of an academic debate and mediates the reader's confrontation with SM through Pam's distancing gaze. The novel invites the reader to participate in the debate as a 'sexual mugwump'; there is no imperative to engage emotionally with SM.

But Pam and the reader really have nothing to fear from SM and its practitioners turn out to be not so very different from anyone else. Ultimately the 'otherness' of lesbian SM is tamed and domesticated. Oak, a 'hard-core' SM'er, is revealed to be quite ordinary beneath her SM gear; she cries easily and lives in a house full of lace doilies and ceramic pots. SM as an engagement with the power dynamics of sex is never explored; all it amounts to finally is a leather-gear shop and a torture chamber in the basement. Pam's flirtation with SM is distinctly tame and unchallenging: while she

and Hadley fantasize about sleeping with men, having anonymous sex on a plane and being a prisoner in a harem, the dominant image in the scene is that of Hadley's feet 'endearingly shod in socks with little red Christmas trees'⁶². The coziness and humour of this image works to undermine and deflate any sense of the transgressiveness of lesbian fantasy.

After Delores, on the other hand, explores what Wilson calls 'the darker and more poignant elements of sexual desire'⁶³. It admits into the lesbian novel the largely unacknowledged feelings of hostility and aggression between women, and precipitates the reader into a world of confusion and violence. This confrontation with what is really taboo in Wilson's text, and in the majority of lesbian novels, is undoubtedly what makes After Delores unacceptable to many feminist critics. As Ruth Waterhouse's response demonstrates, the novel disrupts the identity politics on which the majority of lesbian feminist texts are based. As I have shown, the utopian representation of women's community is predominantly a political, feminist vision which de-emphasizes lesbian sex. In this respect, it could be argued that After Delores addresses the consequences of sexualizing relationships between women in a way utopian discourse refuses to do. It demonstrates that the lesbian feminist concepts of community and identity, as they have been articulated, are, in fact, threatened by the introduction of a sexual discourse of lesbianism. Shulman's writing and some other recent works such as Don Juan in the Village illustrate the limits of identity politics. This type of fiction recognises, after Lacan, that sexual identity, as a post-oedipal

phenomenon, is also the product of separation and difference. Desire is always caught up with the sense of loss that emergent difference incurs and, as a result, we can never realize the dream of a common female identity which has been such a powerful myth in lesbian feminist writing.

Notes

1. Sally Munt, 'The Inverstigators: Lesbian Crime Fiction' in Susannah Radstone (ed), Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988).
2. Cited in Patricia Duncker's article 'Writing Lesbian' in Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality? Vol.2, (Amsterdam: Free University, 1987).
3. Paulina Palmer, in her essay 'The Lesbian Feminist Thriller and Detective Novel', makes the point that the ideology of individualism that informs the novels of Mary Wings makes its feminism appear 'exclusive and elitist' in E. Hobby (ed).
4. Munt, op. cit. p.93
5. Munt, ibid.
6. Adam Mars-Jones, 'Introduction: Gay Fiction and the Reading Public' in Adam Mars-Jones (ed), Mae West is Dead: Recent Lesbian and Gay Fiction (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).
7. Palmer, 'The Lesbian Feminist Thriller' op cit. p.25-26.
8. As I demonstrated in chapter one, black feminist writers have employed the autobiographical mode as an effective means of inscribing black female/feminist consciousness. See, for example, Alice Walker's The Colour Purple (London: The Women's Press 1983) and Audre Lorde's Zami (NY: The Crossing Press, 1982).
9. Millie Murray, 'A Blessing in Disguise' in Rebecca O'Rourke (ed), Reader, I Murdered Him (London: The Women's Press, 1988). Claire Maquet's Looking for Ammu, in which a white woman searches for a charismatic Asian feminist, uses the thriller format to treat the theme of heroine-worship in the women's community.
10. Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple, 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction' in Helen Carr (ed), From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World (London: Pandora, 1989), p.53.
11. Jerry Palmer, 'Thrillers' in C Pawling (ed), Popular Fiction and Social Change (London: MacMillan, 1984), pp.76-98.
12. David Glover, 'The Stuff that Dreams are Made of: Masculinity, Femininity and the Thriller' in Derek Longhurst (ed), Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure (1989), p.52.
13. Glover, ibid.
14. Nicole Decur e, 'V I Warshawski, "A Lady with Guts": Feminist

- Crime Fiction by Sara Paretsky' in Women's Studies International Forum, Vol.12, No.2, 1989, p.231.
15. Decuré, *ibid.*
 16. Decuré, *ibid.*
 17. Decuré, *ibid.* pp.232
 18. Joan Nestle describes the meanings invested in butch identity in 1950s' North American lesbian subcultures in A Restricted Country (New York: Firebrand, 1987). See especially 'Butch-femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s', pp.100-101.
 19. Nestle, *ibid.* p.100.
 20. Mary Wings, She Came Too Late (London: The Women's Press, 1986), p.58.
 21. Wings, *ibid.* p.90
 22. Katherine V Forrest, Amateur City (London: Virago, 1984), p.97.
 23. Forrest, *ibid.*
 24. Munt, *op. cit.*, p.95.
 25. Munt, *ibid.* p.96.
 26. My use of the term 'political' fiction corresponds to that of Paulina Palmer in her book Contemporary Women's Fiction. Palmer uses the terms 'political' and 'psychoanalytical' to differentiate between different kinds of contemporary fiction. She perceives a shift from a focus in the 1970s on the social oppression of women to a focus in the 1980s on the implications of female oppression for the female psyche. The lesbian thriller of the 1980s uses both models. Barbara Wilson's crime novels are examples of 'political' fiction; whereas the novels of Sarah Schulman are better understood in terms of the 'psychoanalytical' model.
 27. Barbara Wilson, The Dog Collar Murders (London: Virago 1989), p.71.
 28. Anne Cranny Francis, 'Gender and Genre: Feminist Rewritings of Detective Fiction' in Women's Studies International Forum, Vol.11, No.1, 1988, pp.80-82.
 29. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.184.
 30. Munt, *op. cit.* pp.91-92
 31. Jacques Lacan, 'Propos directifs pour un congrès sur la sexualité féminine', Écrits (Paris: Seuil, 1966).
 32. Munt, *op. cit.*, p.106.
 33. Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality' in On Sexuality, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol.7, 1979.
 34. Freud, 'Femininity' in New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, PFL, Vol.2, 1973.
 35. Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
 36. Joanna Ryan, 'Psychoanalysis and Women Loving Women' in S. Cartledge and J. Ryan (eds), Sex and Love, (London: The Women's Press, 1983), p. 203
 37. Wilson, The Dog Collar Murders, *op. cit.* p.4
 38. Mary Wings, She Came in a Flash (London: The Women's Press, 1988), p.93
 39. Wings, *ibid.* p.40
 40. Wings, *ibid.* p. 111
 41. Gill Frith, The Intimacy Which is Knowledge: Female Friendship

- in the Novels of British Women Writers, p. 309.
42. Wings, op. cit. p.112
 43. Wings, ibid. p. 98.
 44. Wings, ibid. p.103
 45. Wings, ibid. p.14
 46. Wings, ibid. p.13
 47. Raymond Chandler, Farewell, My Lovely (London: Penguin, 1988), p.14.
 48. Wings, She Came in a Flash, op. cit. p.140
 49. Samois, Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981).
 50. Ruth Waterhouse, review of After Delores in Rouge, Spring, 1990, p.45.
 51. Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' in Signs, Vol.5, No.4, 1980, pp.630-660
 52. Parveen Adams, 'Of Female Bondage' in Teresa Brennan (ed), Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.247-265.
 53. Adams, ibid., pp.262-263.
 54. See, for example, Pat Califia, 'Feminism and sadomasochism' in Heresies Vol.3, No.4, Issue 12, 1981; and Califia, Sapphisty: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality (Tallahassee, The Naiad Press, 1983).
 55. Sarah Schulman, After Delores (London: Sheba Press, 1989), p.32
 56. Schulman, ibid. p.65
 57. Schulman, ibid. p.83
 58. Schulman, ibid. p.94
 59. Schulman, ibid.
 60. Schulman, ibid. p.130
 61. Schulman, ibid. p.152
 62. Wilson, The Dog Collar Murders, op. cit., p.146.
 63. Elizabeth Wilson, 'I'll Climb the Stairway to Heaven: Lesbianism in the Seventies' in S. Cartledge & J. Ryan (eds) Sex and Love (London: The Women's Press, 1983), p.194.

C O N C L U S I O N

DIFFERENCE, IDENTIFICATION & DESIRE: LESBIAN GENRE FICTION

Lesbian genre fiction, as I hope to have shown, provides a variety of representations of lesbian existence. In each of the genres I have discussed both the codes and conventions of the genre and the particular discourse of lesbianism employed shape and influence the representations of lesbian identity. In chapter one I argued that the lesbian feminist confessional novel incorporated the emphasis of the confessional form on authenticity of experience, and employed the lesbian feminist emphasis on choice and transformation in order to represent the feminist subject in predominantly political terms. I also argued that the lesbian bildungsroman, in contrast, highlighted sexual difference and desire rather than political choice. Some examples of the genre such as Rubyfruit Jungle employ a discourse of liberal individualism to represent the lesbian subject as a free-spirit who transcends social and sexual conventions. Others such as Zami, while emphasizing difference, provide a more complex representation of the lesbian subject's relationship to social structures such as race and class.

In chapter two I argued that lesbian speculative fiction tends to represent lesbian existence in terms of either the concept of sisterhood or the politics of struggle. The former constructs the lesbian subject as a member of a group of women, journeying in the Lesbian Nation. The latter represents the lesbian subject as a guerilla figure fighting against male supremacy. The emphasis in

utopian literature on harmony and community invites a representation of lesbian existence which foregrounds women's similarities and shared experience. The use of the pastoral myth in lesbian utopian fiction highlights the analogy between the natural world and female identity. In contrast, the lesbian dystopia utilizes the motif of a dangerous urban landscape in order to represent women's alienation from male-dominated society. In the dystopian mode the lesbian figure represents a survivor and an outsider who has qualities of integrity and courage. In lesbian vampire fiction, the lesbian vampire is similarly an outsider; she also, however, represents a transcendent figure who has escaped social and sexual convention.

In chapter three I demonstrated that lesbian romance fiction employs many of the motifs of lesbian utopian fiction to represent the lesbian couple as the ideal lesbian unit. The relationship may be characterized in terms of the lovers' fundamental identity as in Veto's Iris, or as a complementary one as in Forrest's An Emergence of Green which introduces elements of butch-femme role-play. The motif of the mother-child dyad also features strongly in lesbian romance fiction, and is used to highlight the qualities of intimacy and nurturance in sexual relationships between women. In a few examples such as Rule's The Desert of the Heart the myth of woman-identification is challenged and a more complex account of lesbian relationship is provided which acknowledges both identification and desire. The representation of difference within lesbianism is most extreme in the lesbian anti-romance which seeks to challenge the feminist myth of woman-identification and represents lesbianism as a

primarily sexual phenomenon.

In chapter four I argued that lesbian crime fiction provides opportunities to depict lesbian sex and sexuality in ways unavailable to other genres. It represents the lesbian protagonist as either a hard-boiled, 'masculine' persona, emphasizing her agency and desire, or as a feminist subject in the process of negotiating different lesbian identifications. The emphasis in crime fiction on urban dislocation and the individuality of the detective hero invites a representation which highlights diversity and difference rather than similarity. In contrast to its depiction in other genres, especially lesbian speculative fiction, the urban landscape is also seen to be a source of pleasure and excitement as well as danger for the lesbian hero.

The heroes of lesbian genre fiction function as objects of identification and/or desire for lesbian readers. In lesbian crime fiction the hard-boiled heroine represents a pleasurable fantasy of power and control, whereas the 'soft-boiled' heroine functions as a point of identification for lesbian readers. Some examples of lesbian speculative fiction and lesbian romance fiction articulate another form of desire: the desire for merger with the other which, in Chodorovian terms, represents the desire for relationship with the pre-oedipal mother. The lesbian romance and lesbian thriller both provide descriptions of sexual relationships between women which readers may vicariously enjoy. The lesbian bildungsroman offers possibilities for identification with the heroine's predicament and for the expression of the desire to transcend limiting circumstances.

The fantasy resolutions which occur in examples of all four genres allow both for the affirmation of lesbian identities and for the pleasurable gratification of readerly desires.

In examples of all four genres there is an oscillation between similarities and differences between women and among lesbians themselves; between woman-as-self and woman-as-other. Lesbian utopian fiction, which is strongly influenced by the lesbian feminist concept of woman-identification, represents the strongest statement of this concept. Lesbian anti-romance, which developed as a critique of the romantic myth of merger, represents the strongest articulation of the differences within lesbianism. However, developments within feminism as well as within lesbian subculture have led to an increasing emphasis on the differences between women in lesbian feminist fiction. Barbara Wilson's fiction exemplifies this development in the respect that it focuses on the points of conflict as well as identification between women. Sarah Schulman's novels can also be regarded as reflecting the diversification of feminisms and the movement away from identity politics towards the coalition of diverse groups. In lesbian and gay terms this tendency finds expression in Queer Politics in which the sign 'queer' functions as a sign of anti-establishment identities.

The history of genre fiction illustrates how each generation of readers and writers reuses and remakes particular genres for its own purposes, selecting those most appropriate to its needs, whether these be ones of politics or fantasy. It also demonstrates that at different historical moments some genres present themselves as more

appropriate than others. I would argue that autobiography is a crucial form during the formative moments of lesbianism as a sexual and social identity. The twentieth century has seen two such moments: the first occurred in the early part of the century with the rise of sexology; the second occurred in the late 1960s with the emergence of the Women's Movement and Gay Liberation. In both periods autobiography was central to the consolidation by lesbians of lesbianism as an identity. Two of the most influential lesbian novels in lesbian literary history, The Well of Loneliness and Rubyfruit Jungle, are autobiographical. In the 1980s autobiography has become increasingly pluralistic, embracing historiography, myth and magical realism. Examples include Lorde's Zami and Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.

The utopian genre is central to lesbian and feminist politics and to the literature of the 1970s, and has been revived and expanded by lesbian and feminist writers of that period. Lesbian writers have employed the utopian mode as a means of both representing women's community and critiquing the patriarchal and heterosexist nature of contemporary society. In particular the utopia articulates the desire of political lesbians and some radical and cultural feminists for a Lesbian Nation. This dream, for external and internal political reasons, evaporated in the 1980s. The dystopia has been more popular in recent years, representing lesbians' capacity for survival in the face of an oppressive culture.

Lesbian crime fiction is the quintessential mode of the 1980s in that it is revisionist and frequently ironic. In the thriller

genre, lesbian subcultural mores and debates within feminism such as pornography and SM are subjected to self-conscious analysis. Lesbian crime fiction also reflects the 1980s' lesbian subcultural emphasis on sex and sexuality, and has, to some extent, displaced the lesbian romance as a means of depicting sexual relations between women. The lesbian romance has itself become more self-conscious and parodic since the 1980s as Cooper's Jay Loves Lucy demonstrates. Interestingly, since its emergence in the early part of the century, the lesbian romance has produced a reversal of the models of lesbian relationship with which it operates. Initially inscribed as butch/femme, the lesbian couple was transformed by feminism into a relationship of equality and identity, but recent representations evince a renewed interest in role-play as a means of depicting lesbian sexual desire.

The oscillation between ideas of similarity and difference in contemporary lesbian genre fiction can be understood, in part, in terms of the tension between two fundamental models of lesbian identity: a primarily political definition and a primarily sexual definition. As a result, the concept of a harmonious women's community which represents in one type of fiction the ideal social relationship, is in another type threatened by the introduction of a sexual discourse of lesbianism. Barbara Wilson's The Dog Collar Murders exemplifies this paradox in the respect that lesbian SM stands as the sign of a lesbian sexuality which represents a potential threat to the (sexually) innocent feminist community. The novel, in common with other examples of lesbian feminist fiction,

carries the subtext that while identification is seen as the proper basis for female solidarity, sexual desire is potentially disruptive and divisive. As Joan Nestle points out, the tension also inhabits the very designation 'lesbian feminist' in which the first term represents difference and desire, and the latter represents politics and identity¹.

Some examples of recent lesbian fiction exploit this tension in order to distinguish lesbianism from feminism. They exhibit a dissatisfaction with the political model and seek to emphasize the specificity of lesbian sexuality. The most developed statement of this tendency is Jane deLynn's Don Juan in the Village which rejects entirely the concept of woman-identification and demonstrates just how 'other' other women can appear, especially when sexual desire is involved. Such fiction represents a reaction to lesbian feminist inclusiveness; it asserts its lesbianism against a 'feminist' identity which threatens to subsume or erase it. In my opinion such fiction is valuable in re-articulating the specificity of lesbian experience and insisting on the sexual component of lesbianism. The writing of deLynn and Schulman is also arguably more challenging to a variety of readers, not least lesbian feminists, than the lesbian feminist novel of ideas. While the latter generally functions to confirm politically correct ideas, the former subjects these to fresh scrutiny and is able to deconstruct lesbian feminist myths.

The tension between the two models of lesbianism outlined above has, however, always been present in lesbian fiction and culture. It represents the difference between Natalie Barney's feminine Sappho

and Hall's masculine 'invert'. Second Wave Feminism changed the terms of lesbian identity, but did not displace the dualism. While some feminist discourses have attempted to resolve the dualism, by acknowledging identification and desire, ultimately it is a product not of lesbian discourse per se, but of the social construction of sexuality as determined by gender. Given the availability of only two sexual subject positions, masculine and feminine, lesbian identities will necessarily be forged in terms of these positions, some privileging masculinity, others foregrounding femininity. It is possible to posit a lesbian aesthetic according to which lesbian textuality is understood in terms of its acknowledgment of both poles - similarity and difference, identification and desire. Accordingly, a text such as Zami would emerge as an exemplary lesbian text owing to its subtle mapping of the continuities and discontinuities between and among lesbians. However, such an aesthetic would marginalize those texts, amongst which are some of the most powerful examples of lesbian fiction, which adopt a stance strongly privileging one term or the other.

As my discussion of recent novels by Jane deLynn and Sarah Schulman indicates, lesbian fiction in the late 1980s and early 1990s is no longer primarily concerned with the representation of positive images of lesbianism, which was the main aim of earlier texts such as Rubyfruit Jungle and The Wanderground. Recent fiction displays a willingness to address issues of conflict between lesbians which were largely de-emphasized or unacknowledged in texts written in the 1970s. If lesbian fiction has moved away from an agenda dominated by

the necessity for positive images, to a more critical representation of lesbian existence, it is not because the social and political climate has made lesbians feel more secure in their identities. Indeed, in the 1980s, in Britain and the United States, there were moves to further discriminate against lesbians². Lesbian existence appears to be as vulnerable as it was in the 1970s. Our institutions are also under threat by central government cuts and the erosion of local government democracy. The provision of lesbian facilities such as phone lines, centres, libraries and educational courses has been repeatedly challenged and in some cases reduced or curtailed. In important ways, feminism as a grassroots organization has diminished. As feminists frequently aver, the women's community no longer exists in an identifiable form. Nonetheless, despite the odds, lesbian culture has diversified and consolidated itself. It has moved location from its previous 'centre' in women's groups to the 'diaspora' of clubs and pubs and the academy. The development of lesbian culture is in this sense no different from that of other oppositional cultures, all of which have witnessed an official shrinking in the 1980s.

Despite these trends which do, overall, represent a certain depoliticization of lesbianism, lesbian fiction has not lost a political focus. Sarah Schulman's novels, for example, are concerned with the social criticism of capitalist society and urban poverty, and adopt a political standpoint towards the falsely universalizing concept of women's community. Her work looks to 'Queer', as well as to feminist, politics for its models of community and activism, and

for its inspiration. Moreover, examples of all the genres under discussion have demonstrated an increasing awareness of issues such as race, class, sexual diversity, ageism and ableism. The cheerful liberalism of Rubyfruit Jungle and the principled separatism of The Wanderground are no longer adequate fictional responses to the complexities of contemporary lesbian and feminist culture and politics. In this context, universal statements about lesbian identity appear less valid and less desirable. Lesbian fiction is becoming simultaneously more diverse and more specific, as fiction by and about lesbians of colour, older lesbians, SM lesbians, and other groups beginning to find a voice, appears.

In addition to the variety of genres I have discussed in representing the generic variety of contemporary lesbian fiction, other forms have recently begun to emerge. These include postmodern lesbian literature, a magical realist lesbian style, and lesbian Gothic fiction. Lesbian writers have also appropriated other popular genres such as the western, as in Fiona Cooper's Rotary Spokes (1988) and Cecil Dawkins's Charleyhorse (1987), and historical melodrama, as in Ellen Galford's Moll Outpurse (1992). These developments cut across the high/popular cultural divide and demonstrate the increasing diversification of lesbian literary practice. As I hope to have shown, none of these forms is archetypally or essentially 'lesbian'. The lesbian identity of a genre, a literary style or a text depends, as I commented in the introduction, on a variety of textual and extra-textual factors, not least of which is the particular definition of the sign 'lesbian' with which writers and

readers work. Heterogeneous ideological constraints, as I have demonstrated, exist within and beyond every genre or literary mode. But these constraints should be seen, following Foucault, as creative and enabling, as well as limiting and inhibiting. They make possible the phenomenon of lesbian fiction, and produce the plurality of lesbianisms and literatures. What stands out for me as a lesbian reader and critic is the apparent ingenuity and creativity with which lesbian writers and readers have appropriated and remade literary genres, against the heterosexual bias of the latter, according to their changing and contradictory, but insistent desires.

Notes

1. Joan Nestle, A Restricted Country (NY: Firebrand, 1987), p.106.
2. Section 28 of the Local Government Act, which came into force in Britain during 1988, forbade local authorities to promote homosexuality or 'pretended family relationships'. In the United States right wing groups attempted to legislate against homosexuality in a number of states, most notoriously in Colorado where Martina Navratilova joined the gay protest against discrimination.

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