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Doing the White Thing: The Politics of Race and Ethnicity in Feminist Critiques of Heterocentrism

BY SUNNY L. BAVARO

In her essay, "Film and the Visible," Teresa de Lauretis relies heavily on psychoanalytic theory to examine Sheila McLaughlin's film *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987). She concludes that the film is an example of the ways visual texts can "work with and against" conventions to create new visibilities and give rise to an alternative sense of "what *can* be seen and represented" (de Lauretis, her italics, 224). Quite rightly, I think, de Lauretis claims the "film is about two women who share a common fantasy, a lesbian fantasy, . . . [that] constitutes them as a lesbian subject" (232).

So, de Lauretis asserts that the film, in part through its own (ab)use of heterocentric conventions, does two things: it critiques heterocentric modes of representing lesbian desire and gendering, and it opens up a space within which lesbian desire and non-phallic masculinity, or butch gender, are represented on their own terms, without roots in heterosexual institutions and genres. This achievement in lesbian representation is particularly important in light of the propensity of mainstream film to be heterocentric and phallogocentric in their representations of butch/femme genders and lesbian desire, respectively. De Lauretis cites Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts* (1985) as one such example; the film tries to paint a picture of lesbian sexuality and butch gender using modes of representation that are still firmly rooted in heterosexual paradigms. For de Lauretis, it is a film in which "heterosexuality as an institution is still actively present in the spectorial expectations set up by the genre" (254).

Ultimately, I don't feel my desires as a lesbian being represented in *Desert Hearts*, but, rather, I am forced to be in a position where I play either the heterosexual man or the heterosexual woman. Or, as de Lauretis puts it, in these films "one may not be born a woman or man, but one can only desire as a man" (254). As a spectator, my desires are subsumed by the "basic formula" of the film – they may be lesbians, but the mold they are cast in causes a heterosexual morphology.¹ The suggestions that lesbian narratives/live are no different than that of heterosexuals, or that we can participate in what Many Merck sees as "... 'the heterosexual tradition of the active pursuit of the reluctant woman'," what we, too, can participate in personal dynamics based in misogyny, is an "equality" that, at the very least, needs to be supplemented with films that push against that heterosexual frame (Mayne 180).

So, with *Desert Hearts* as the example, we would expect that the use of heterocentric frames of representation would engender hetero-tainted versions of lesbian desire and butch/femme positioning. But de Lauretis contrasts *She Must Be Seeing Things* to conventional renderings of lesbian desire and butch gender. Rather than being a film in which heterocentric convention represents heterocentric lesbian desire, she asserts that McLaughlin's film is innovative for its use of the "master's tools" to give rise to a productive critique of heterocentricity, a critique that "turn[s] around, suspend[s], subvert[s] the expected answer":

Now, the originality of McLaughlin's film, in my opinion, consists precisely in its foregrounding of [heterosexual male gaze as the] frame of reference, making *it* visible, and at the same time shifting it, moving it aside, as it were, enough to let us see through the gap, the contradiction; enough to create a space for questioning not only what *they* see but also what *we* see in the film; enough to let us see ourselves seeing, and with what eyes. (255)

Here, de Lauretis implies that *She Must Be Seeing Things* uses hetero-tropes in order to subvert them, creating spaces of lesbian spectatorship and non-phallic masculinity that are not based in heterocentricism. What I would add here is that the film uses hyperbole to force the heterocentric norms – norms that ordinarily police queer desire – to create spaces of radical subversion. This use of what could be called "lesbian camp" makes the tropes excessively visible, working to expose them as just that – tropes, or here, a "frame of reference." These tropes are then moved aside to make way for representations of lesbian vision and desire.²

One example that de Lauretis uses to prove this point is the scene where Agatha (played by Sheila Dabney) goes to the porn shop to buy a dildo. She concludes that the porn shop sequence "explores and ironizes this contradictory relation of Agatha's 'masculine' identification to the representation of phallic desire signified by the gingerly held, ironically 'realistic' dildo" (254). One of the things that I take de Lauretis to mean here is that the scene in the porn shop encourages the viewer to tune into the film's critique of heterocentric representations of lesbian desire, welcoming the viewer to join in with, and take pleasure in, Agatha's campy critique and disavowal of phallic masculinity.

In this scene, the critique is initially enacted by drawing parallels between the viewer, Agatha's vision/subject position at this point in the film, and the subject position of the straight man in the suit buying sex toys. But because the straight man is made to look excessively ridiculous, as evidenced by the camera's lingering on the female employee's annoyed stare as she deflates the "Judy doll" he is about to purchase, what is brought into relief is the difference between Agatha's desire as a butch lesbian and the desire of the straight man in the suit.

As the man in the suit becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the piercing gazes of the women in the shop, Agatha looks at the straight man one last time, then looks

at the dildo, puts it back down on the counter, and leaves the store without buying anything. It is through the female counterworker's attitude toward the straight man that both the viewer and Agatha learn to see: we are encouraged to join the film's critique of heterocentric representations that portray lesbian desire as nothing more than women aping the desires of straight men (remember *Desert Hearts*?) and, also, to critique representations that conflate straight phallic masculinity with butch gender position. In other words, the viewer, along with and through Agatha's point of view, realize that to have made any previous parallels between lesbian desire and heterosexual gazes and desires is, as matter of fact or fantasy, ridiculous; there is a huge difference between the butch lesbian subject position and male heterocentric representations that misrepresent lesbian desire. Agatha, and the viewer, leave the store beginning to feel as if phallic heterocentric desire for women is not representative of her own lesbian desires for women – that it is not representative of her butch gender identity.³

This critique of heterocentric representations of gender and sexuality is, as de Lauretis suggests, quite progressive. I believe that it is extremely important to critique cinematic representations that deploy heterocentric codes and institutions in representing lesbian desire and gender, especially when they conflate male heterosexual desire and butch lesbian desire. Well to its credit, not only does *She Must Be Seeing Things* critique heterocentrism, it uses conventions and norms to make way for representations of lesbian desire. In other words, it not only disrupts heterocentrism by turning it on its head, it subverts it. In this way the film is both subversive and accessible, vis-a-vis butch lesbian desire. Yet, as other critics have suggested, the film ends up leaving much to be desired

in terms of its representations of race in relation to sexuality and gender.

According to de Lauretis, the question of race exists within the film, “but not in such a way that allows me to rethink and say something interesting about the relations of race, sexuality, and desire” (273). Perhaps this has something to do with the terms that she sets out in the beginning of her analysis. She states, “... [Mc Laughlin's film] takes up a different position of enunciation [then those of mainstream films] and addresses the spectator in what I will now, *rashly*, call a lesbian subject position – reminding you that, of course, address is quite another thing from audience” (228). What is at stake in this theoretical rashness?

Although I appreciate her owning up to this theoretical slight of hand in terms of the difference between who a film claims to address and how those who are actually included will receive the message, another rash move that is buried in this assertion is the marginalization of race, of which both de Lauretis and McLaughlin are complicit in. Jane Gaines suggests “[white middleclass feminist's] criticism should work to demystify this apparent separation (between sexual difference on one hand and considerations of race and class on the other), by raising questions of race and class exactly where they have been theoretically disallowed” (Gaines 198). With Gaines in mind, it seems that the fact that both *She Must Be Seeing Things* and her own theo-

retical framework did not allow de Lauretis to consider race a pressing issue in the film is precisely the reason why it is absolutely necessary to investigate the film in terms of representations of lesbians of color. In fact, both the article and the film leave much to be desired in terms of their work with race. So, what exactly are the ideological effects in both the film's and de Lauretis's marginalization of race?

Take, for example, the very first shot of the film. The movie begins with an extreme close up of the face of a woman of color. This woman's hair appears to be cut short or simply pulled back, bringing to (some) viewer's attention that this may be a representation of a butch woman. Also, we cannot help but notice that this is a brown face. In fact, the shot is so close to the skin of Agatha at this moment, that we can actually see her pores. This face of this woman features darting eyes, which, when the image finally gives way to the title card, signify at least one set of eyes that will be doing the "seeing things" that is indicated in the title.

Whether or not it was her intention, McLaughlin's choice to use an extreme close up of a *brown face* sets up the spectatorship of a woman of *color* as the potential agent of the narrative. It encourages the audience to expect not only a film which focuses on female spectatorship and even butch spectatorship, but the spectatorship of lesbians of color. As the film unfolds, however, it continuously raises the issue of racially-informed spectatorship, to ultimately leave it severely underdeveloped and problematic. With an irony that begins with this opening shot of Agatha's face and continues through the first few minutes of the film in which shots of Agatha are interspersed with those of the very light skinned, blonde-haired Jo (played by Lois Weaver), the film encourages the viewer to focus on the critique of the (white) heterocentric representations of lesbian desire and butch-femme gender roles and Jo's attempts to re-see these things, while marginalizing and relegating race politics to a mysteriously (in)visible place within the rest narrative regime. In fact, the film undercuts the issue of race by having the woman of color in the position of "seeing things" incorrectly from a heterocentric masculine position, while having a white filmmaker be the one who teaches her to see things clearly.

In terms of race, then, the film is guilty of the same thing it accuses heterocentric paradigms of doing with gender and sexuality – misrepresentation and marginalization. In other words, viewers cannot help to think about race politics, mostly because Agatha gets so much screen time and her brown face is lingered on in the opening shot. Yet the film does not consider how race affects a feminist critique of the (white) heterocentric representation butch gender and lesbian desire. "Lesbian" as typically used in feminist discourse is also "rashly" laden with an implied and assumed whiteness and I would argue that *She Must Be Seeing Things* is a film in which (white) lesbian desire is presented as the desire/spectatorship of lesbians of color.⁴

To return to a scene discussed earlier, in addition to the gender and sexuality critique, how does race function in the porn shop scene? The scene encourages us to make a gender and sexuality critique by initially drawing parallels between Agatha and the man in the suit, and then bringing into relief her (and our) sense that the

straight man is neither an adequate representation of lesbian desire nor an adequate representative of butch gender positioning. What we are also encouraged to marginalize, however, is the race politics of the scene. In other words, the film does not comment on the fact that Agatha's vision/subject position is also different from the man in the suit on account of race, nor does it suggest that this difference in any way comes into play, or intersects, with its critique of heterocentric representations of lesbianism. To be blunt, Agatha's racial difference is subsumed, ultimately used to enact a critique of white heterocentrism.

In addition, the effect of the choice to cast a white man as the object of the critical gaze, and as the representative of Agatha's problematic spectator position at this moment in the film, is that a racially "generic" – that is, *white* – lesbian non-representability becomes the issue in the scene. Here, Agatha's race seems function as only a gesture to signify nonspecific difference, and in the film as a whole, her status as woman of color appears to be "inserted to legitimate the liberal credentials of the film or the white characters in it," but is ultimately marginalized within the scene (Richard Fung in de Lauretis 270).

Perhaps the scene just before she goes to the porn shop, in which Agatha tells Jo that she "identifies" with her *Brazilian* father, only to and slide neatly into a discussion of how she at times desires a penis but does not want to be a man, is equally instructive here. It becomes apparent that the film encourages us to see Agatha's subject position as one that is both aligned with white heterocentric lesbian desire and phallic masculinity, and that she is beginning to have problems with the latter, without addressing the former. We, and she, are to focus on penises, not skin color. And the lesson that we learn through her taking up of the dildo/phallus in the porn scene is that straight phallic representation does not speak to her desire or her gender identification. In this way, the porn shop scene is a perfect of example of de Lauretis's claim that the film trots out these heterocentric conventions only to move them aside. But it says nothing about how these issues intersect with race.

This raises the question: is it significant that each of the spectator positions Agatha is aligned with in the scene are implicitly *white*? I think so. For example, the porn shop scene goes to great lengths to suggest that the drama in the shop be taken as possible representations of her relationship to her own lesbian desire. Toward this end, there are two available spectator positions played out in the scene for Agatha to side with: the white heterosexual man and the white woman behind the counter who looks at the man with disdain. It is this woman who Agatha and the viewer are encouraged to see as possessing the "right" gaze, a gaze that looks back at the heterosexual male and masculine behavior with disgust. But this "right" gaze is also a "white" gaze, and although the film could suggest that Agatha might also look back at the two white representations of the gaze with equal non-identification, it does not do so. In fact, bell hooks suggests that most women of color resist identifying with the gazes of white women (121). The way the scene is shot downplays the fact that for a woman of color to "look back" is a very different thing from even a white woman looking back.

As such, the white woman behind the counter as representative of the critical gaze cast on heterocentric representations suggests that this is the only subject-position that is available for lesbians of color, the only one from which they could enact a critique of heterosexual patriarchy. But this assertion marginalizes how the particulars of race intersect with gender and sexuality, suggesting that race is not an important consideration in representing lesbian desire and in critiques of heterocentricity – as hooks also points out, “... many film critics continue to structure their discourse as though it speaks about ‘women’ when in actually it speaks only about white women” (122). As becomes obvious in this film, implications of unmarkedness are almost always reinforcements of dominant ideologies of privilege: in this scene, whiteness is the central racial reference point from which the film’s critiques are enacted, and Agatha’s position as a lesbian of color becomes an unimportant happenstance. As de Lauretis rashly commented after she wrote “Film and the Visible,” “... [Agatha] is a lesbian, but not a lesbian of color” (271).

To make matters more frustrating, the porn shop scene does take the one opportunity that arises in the film to comment on the racial politics of gender and sexuality, and marginalizes it within the visual regime. Agatha asks for a dildo that is realistic, the white man behind counter says, “depends on what you mean by realistic.” As Agatha is holding the large, white dildo and is “looking back” at the heterosexual white man in the suit, the employee who is helping her takes out a series of dildos, the first of which is dark. Within the visual frame, this “dildo of color” is marginalized, by being set in the background of an overwhelming number of “realistic” and caucasian colored dildos. In a similar way, the film marginalizes Agatha’s race/ethnicity, attempting to render it unimportant, or significant only as a liberal token in a narrative that finally colonizes racial difference to enact its (white) gender and sexuality critique.

The representation of lesbians of color in this film, as I have suggested, leaves much to be desired. Raising opportunities to discuss how race politics intersects with gender and sexuality politics *without following through* allows the film to be read as erasing black lesbian desire. The start of the film, as I note, highlights Agatha’s racial/ethnic position; we see that the film is interested in this woman of color’s vision. But again and again, her vision is displayed as erroneous and corrupt. The only person who believes in Agatha’s sight is her friend and coworker, also a woman of color; as the film unfolds and we find that Agatha has, indeed, been just seeing things, her friend becomes yet another example of the inability of women of color to “see right.”⁵ The film suggests that lesbians of color have only the (dis)ability to “make visible” the heterocentric conventions, and, as a result of this (dis)ability, become delusional. However, white lesbians, as represented by Jo, have an immense three-fold power: the power make visible their heterocentric conventions, the power to use those conventions for the (re)construction of lesbian desire through filmmaking, and, ultimately the power to teach lesbians of color how to “see.” As such, Agatha portrayed as Jo’s white (wo)man’s burden.

The trajectory of the film, then, is one in which Agatha is taken into the light, via a film about a white medieval woman, in order to see properly. For all the positive work that the film may do with respect to critiquing heterocentric representations of (white) lesbians, when the race politics of the film are examined, McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* becomes problematic in its representation of lesbians of color.

Just as *She Must Be Seeing Things* critiques mainstream and independent representations of lesbian desire for not disrupting and subverting heterocentric gender and sexuality norms, the film appears to be culpable of a similar crime in its replicating norms of race – that is, deploying whiteness, like heterosexuality, as the standard, the “center.” It is true that, as de Lauretis points out, multiple perspectives and politics point out that “‘everything’ has to be considered,” and yet, this everything cannot “be done at the same time and fitted into a single comprehensive theory,” and, after some squirming about her own privileging of whiteness, she suggests that her reading of the film could be used in the future as a foundation for an argument about the racial politics of lesbian spectatorship and fantasy (270). While I do think that using her texts as a framework is worth taking up, it would also be productive to (re)consider that the failure of both McLaughlin's film and de Lauretis's analysis to take race seriously points directly to the race bias of feminist filmmaking, critical and theoretical practices.

In this way, *She Must Be Seeing Things* and de Lauretis's work on the film can be seen as a call to action: we must find ways to negotiate the imperative to become conscious of and work against our complicity in practices that replicate our own privilege, while simultaneously allowing that we cannot do all things at all times. Perhaps part of this project is in reexamining crucial feminist texts from perspectives previously invisible. As bell hooks has taught us: “from margin to center.”

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Endnotes

- ¹ That *Desert Hearts* participates through heterosexual convention is evident through one viewers review of the film, "bj lucky":

The heterosexual audience has had this classic romantic tension story for years - guy doesn't know he needs to settle down, meets girl, gets knocked off his feet and changes his life's direction—sometimes unnerving himself and other people. Okay, it's schlocky, but it's a mainstay. So why not such a movie for us gay gals? *Desert Hearts* is stylistic, has a basic formula, and can get a bit tedious in places - it isn't a perfect movie. Thousands of young women have come to recognize themselves in it. That makes it a gem!

Although I am sure many "gay gals" have a similar response, my personal gay gal relationship to the film is filled with a bit more tension. While on one hand, it is pleasurable to see any kind of "lesbian" love on the screen, and the "schlocky"-ness is part of that pleasure and the "shlocky"-er the better, I can't quite ignore all of the stakes in such "schlocky"-ness. Although I see the problems with "positive image" criticism, I do think that there may be something to fully interrogating "negative images." As a lesbian, I am constantly looking for replicas of myself, looking for an image that there are others out there like me, and sometimes they even end up the subject of the big and little screens. As such, I have seen one too many films like *Desert Hearts* which, for all their wonderful campy (femme?) pleasure, make me

feel that to be a “real” lesbian is, in fact, to work within a hetero-paradigm, that my desire is no different than “normal” heterosexuals. In fact, they make me feel that I would get along alright if I would just get it though my thick head that “ ‘homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality’ ” (de Lauretis 256).

- 2 Of course, I don't always want to throw out the silly and wondrous play involved in camp. In fact, I tend to read *Desert Hearts* in a campy way. This either accounts for my pleasure in watching the film, or allows me to feel less anxious about its potential pitfalls. Whether the film is conscious of using conventions, like in McLaughlin's film, or I am, as in *Desert Hearts*, both of these films enact the radical subversive nature of camp, although deployed in different ways. In fact, one could make a case for camp *as* lesbian desire, as I am sure some have, and although it is not my project here, I would love to look at the whole of McLaughlin's film through theories of camp and performativity.
- 3 I have to say that the way the film conflates the use of dildos with heterosexual male desire, and the suggestion that women who use dildos want to have penises is, to my mind, a really reductive way of thinking about lesbian desire. It also seems to be symptomatic of the ways that McLaughlin's film both marginalizes particular lesbian subject positions, or deploys them in service of, a critique heterosexual formulations of butch lesbian desire. What the dildo scene suggests, in part, is that lesbians who use dildos are not expressing 'real' lesbian desire and/or identification. I say, why the hell not?
- 4 I believe that the race blindness displayed by both de Lauretis's article and the film is a result of the fact that both use psychoanalytic theory as the theoretical framework for their critic of cinematic heterocentrism. As many critics have insisted, including Jane Gaines and bell hooks, psychoanalytic theory has a very hard time dealing with issues of race. I would suggest that this is not because racially neutral, but, rather, it is always already a domain of whiteness. Much in the same vain that critics have (ab)used sexist psychoanalytic frameworks in the service of feminist analysis, I think it is worth investigating whether or not we can (ab)use psychoanalytic frames in a similar manor for a feminist race politics.
- 5 This scene really deserves further treatment because it is the only moment of the film that is set in a place where there are no white people. In addition, the conversation between Agatha and her friend, although not explicitly talked about in terms of race, are discussing the various forms their desire takes. I think it would be fruitful to think about what this scene contributes in terms of the race politics of the film.