The Woman With No Body

by

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Dedication

To the peaceful spirits I’ve already met and to those I have left to meet.


¡Democracia!
¡Libertad!
¡Justicia!

--Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos.
Introduction

The war over my ribs began in front of the mirror. Standing in my underwear in a Cambridge dressing room, I contemplated my reflection. The girl looking back at me had my same round face, my same short brown hair, my same blue eyes, but I no longer recognized her. Imagining myself as a fairy, an impossibly light creature with magic and wings, the splotchy-faced disaster staring wide-eyed back at me made me want to vomit. The liquid layers of fat, the wrinkling of cellulite covering her body, shone in the electric light. Who was she? I knew that mirrors didn’t lie. As a physics student, I could trace the angles of light bouncing off the face of the glass. There was no way that the mirror could be wrong. Something had happened to me. Somewhere along my way, I became disgusting.

For me, anorexia wasn’t about being thin, it was about being perfect. Thinness would never do by itself. I had to be in control of things for a while. The rituals of starving fascinated me with their cleanness. The most beautiful thing in the world, to be in charge of my life, seemed so easy. All I had to do was not eat. Or eat a certain number of calories every day, in a specific order, at specific times. I told myself that the starving wouldn’t last forever, it would only last until I felt better. Just a few good days in a row; maybe I’d try for a week. Running my hands over my thighs at night, they seemed to spread like silk. The fear of expanding grabbed me by the throat.

In the beginning, I ate three Powerbars a day. Wrapped in slick golden foil, their smoothness reassured me. Three Powerbars a day is exactly six hundred and ninety calories, provided that one alternates the wild berry and cinnamon apple flavored bars. Together with seven cups of water and one cup of coffee with two creams and two
sugars, they became my communion. My shot at redemption. I measured everything, but especially my ribs. I invented new mirrors for myself.

Anything can be a mirror if you try hard enough. The bowl of a spoon, the side of the toaster, the windows of parked cars, a glass of water, can reflect your image. Being surrounded by images of myself made me hyperaware of my body, but not in a way that I could control. Looking in the mirror became punishment and pleasure. Sometimes it helped me to see myself changing. The first day that all of my ribs poked through my skin, I felt glittery. My whole being wanted to shine. I hugged myself, pushing my fingers into the new grooves of bone and flesh. The hardness pushing back against me made me smile. I had begun to melt back into the picture of myself I kept in my head. Soon enough, my breasts and hips would also be gone.

Sometimes, though, looking in the mirror convinced me that nothing had changed. Sometimes, I couldn’t see myself without wincing at the way my soft body bent and folded. The terror that I felt when I looked at myself in the mirror and couldn’t see anything besides curves and fat reminded me of all my mistakes: of days when someone made me go out to eat, of times when I got out of control and ate something. The mirror was the only thing I could count on to be able to see my guilt honestly. It rewarded me when I worked hard at starving myself, it reflected my flaws when I cheated.

Hunger is an odd thing. It has three phases, each distinct. The first is nausea. Staying strong through the nausea is difficult; moving myself through my nausea became a sign of my tenacity. The next stage of hunger is faintness. I preferred faintness to nausea because it was gave me distance from my body. Being faint, feeling a little tired and a little jittery, was like letting go of my physical self. A long-distance runner, faintness made running much easier. Setting my body on automatic forward, I could let
my mind float away. Running let me get the endorphins I craved, running helped me to stick to my eating schedule, running gave me a mirror I could like. Instead of having to see my reflection, I measured my shape by the feeling of the wind curling around my ribs. I tapped my fingers on my hip bones in rhythm with my feet. I could feel my skeleton emerging from my body as I ran. My standards for myself slipped away from a specific weight. I no longer wanted to be thin, I wanted to disappear.

The third stage of hunger is clarity. The edges of the world grow bright, and colors begin to glow. I loved existing in this peaceful state. I could barely feel myself; I could sleep without worrying about growing. The problem was that I couldn’t keep myself feeling peaceful forever. To continue to succeed, I couldn’t just do the same thing every day. To keep getting better, I had to keep eating less. While my initial caloric goal had been 750 calories a day, after a few months, it became 500. I ate two power bars, a coffee, and a salad.

Starving is horribly addictive. You can’t starve yourself one day and eat the next, or you ruin your hard work. My success as an anorexic depended on discipline. If something made me overeat one day, it became my responsibility to correct my mistake. Through vomiting, extra running, sit-ups or a cut in the number of calories of the next day, I regulated my behavior. I needed a way to succeed, and starving myself gave me something I could do right. Something that other people would not interfere with, something that only I knew about.

Eventually, I was no longer in control of my eating at all. What had started for me as a way to regulate myself was now an obsession. It demanded all of my time, and my body looked just as soft as ever. What had I done to deserve such a horrible body? When I saw myself naked, the texture of my skin made me want to cry. One day, a friend of
mine tried to talk to me about it. Noticing that I had been losing weight and that I had disappeared from our social circle, she asked me what was wrong. I didn’t know what to say. Wasn’t it obvious what was wrong? How would she like to be covered in ripples?

"Can you roll around on the floor?" she asked. Wrapping her arms around her chest, she rolled back and forth across the hallway. "Sure, I can do that," I answered. Laying down on the floor, the pressure of the tile against my spine made me wince. I tried to make myself roll, but the pain of my bones poking through my flesh brought tears to my eyes. My ribs slipped against the squares of marble with a clicking sound. I could feel bruises beginning to form on my hips and along my backbone. "I can’t roll," I said. "The floor is too hard." My friend bit her lip. "The floor doesn’t hurt me," she answered. "You’re too skinny. You’re starving. You have to do something, or you’ll kill yourself."

Her words echoed against the sides of my skull. What did she mean, kill myself? I was just trying to be in control, I was being very careful about my diet. Besides, I was strong. I ran all the time. "You’re going to die of heart failure if you keep this up," she told me. "It’s true, your heart will starve and you’ll die." I didn’t want to believe her, but the ache of my bruises was too much to ignore.

Eventually, with the help and support of my friends and the MIT counseling and support center, things got better. I started to eat more, and sometimes when I looked in the mirror, I could see someone who looked like me. I tried to figure out what had happened to me. I began to read about eating disorders. The information I found in the libraries and on the internet made me sick. The whole time that I was starving, I thought that I was the only one who had to do this to feel better about herself. According to the American Psychiatric Association, one out of every four female college students has an eating disorder. Of these, about one in ten is anorexic. (APA, 1997:1) Even though the
majority of college anorexics eventually get help, they remain at high risk for heart trouble. Some twenty percent of young women with severe anorexia die of heart failure within five years of being diagnosed with the disease.

Reading this, I wanted to cry. I hadn’t been trying to hurt myself, I had been trying to feel better about myself. For a long time, starving made me feel safe and in control. One pamphlet I read described every instance of anorexia as a suicide attempt. How could they say this about me if they didn’t even know me? Was my starvation really that easily quantifiable? I went from feeling sad to feeling furious. Suddenly, everyone but me seemed to have something to say about my body. I felt like my body was owned by everyone but me; I was a woman with no body.

So I started looking for my body. While I’ve been unable to reduce my anorexia to one simple cause, I know that my guilt about my sexuality and my inability to find a healthily sized role model contributed to my problem. There was no way for my body to be beautiful, because I couldn’t see a queer body like mine reflected anywhere. I had no way to eroticize myself. Being an invisible queer, a femme bisexual, none of the erotica I read had a character like me in it. Biphobia, alive and well in the lesbian community, punished me over and over for my inability to swear off men. Being told that I wasn’t a real queer, that other women wouldn’t date me because they were afraid that I’d leave them for a man, wrecked my queer self-esteem. My femmeness, my appropriation of a 1940’s glamorous aesthetic, furthered my invisibility. I didn’t want to shave my head, I didn’t want to get a tattoo, I didn’t like Doc Martens. I wasn’t willing to try and pass as a lesbian. I desired women, but I was undesirable.
Finally, I turned to lesbian pornography for healthy images of queer women's bodies. Pornography, I thought, would be free of the obsessions with lesbian correctness or authenticity enforced by the lesbian community. As traditional lesbian-feminist and radical-feminist discourses have derided pornography for being a tool of patriarchal oppression, I assumed that anyone brave enough to make lesbian pornography would be free of prejudices about lesbians and their bodies. Within a marginalized art form, I wouldn't have expected to find any of the obsessive policing of boundaries and identities so common in other lesbian media.

I was wrong. Of the thirty lesbian porn movies I watched for my project, more than three quarters explicitly emphasize in the marketing material the authenticity of their lesbian actresses and acts. These movies offer a road map for finding a correct lesbian sexual identity. From clothing to food, these movies provide a model for good lesbian behavior. The problem is that they all offer the same made of good lesbian behavior. With carefully enforced regulation of the colors, classes, and shapes of women who can perform in these movies, they serve to make "lesbian" a carefully constructed, highly specific identity.

Watching thin, young, white, carefully androgynous women be sexually active with each other can be exciting. But when these are the only people whose lesbianism is authenticated, then what are other women to do? After months of frustration with accessible movies, I decided to make my own. I knew that I couldn't identify what might make other women feel sexy, but that I could provide them with a means to express their sexiness. Gathering a group of five young actresses, of diverse racial, cultural and class background, I served as executive producer and writer of the movie Vamptyre.
This paper explores the possible historical and social causes of the lesbian obsession with lesbian authenticity, the potential value of pornography as a tool, and discusses the process of self-eroticization that my cast and I undertook in the production of our movie. Examining the racialized economics of lesbian identity and the market pressures informing the production of lesbian pornography, I hope to provide my own road-map for pornography production. I don’t want other people to have to starve themselves to feel safe. I want positive models of bodies and their beauty to be accessible to anyone.

I. Acts and Identity

Is sexual identity a matter of the material body or of discourse? This question is at the heart of both queer studies and national policy. As the creation and location of homosexualities have changed over the last century, the homosexual body has been created and destroyed. Despite these changes in theory, forces from the federal government to ACT-UP have attempted to regulate the homosexual body and soul. From creating legislation such as Clinton’s Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell policy to locating gay male sexuality on particular parts of gay men’s bodies, everyone is implicated in the process of defining homosexuality. As gays and lesbians have gained economic power and media access, the problem of being a sexual other, of creating a personal identity and community, has changed. What was invisible can now be represented, but still within a broader, heterosexualized context. The creation of lesbian pornography has enabled lesbians to create a language of lesbian eroticism. It is an attempt by lesbians to locate their sexual identities, to give form to their pleasures, to regulate their bodies, and to enforce the boundaries of their community. Examining the production and erasure of the
lesbian body since the birth of homosexual identity will provide historical and economic context for analyzing the phenomenon of lesbian (created and consumed) pornography.

With the development of sexology in the late nineteenth century, homosexuality shifted from being an act that people do to being something that people are. In his *Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, David Halperin tributes Charles Gilbert Chaddock with the invention of homosexuality. He writes, "An early translator of Krafft-Ebing's classic medical handbook of sexual deviance, the *Psychopathia sexualis*, Chaddock is credited by the Oxford English Dictionary with having introduced 'homo-sexuality' into the English language in 1892, in order to render a German cognate twenty years its senior." (1990: 15)

Popular discourses around sexuality up to that time connected sexual object choice to gender; sexual inversion included but was not limited to homosexual desire. The subsequent isolation of sexuality "from questions of masculinity and femininity made possible a new taxonomy of sexual behaviors and psychologies based entirely on the anatomical sex of the persons engaged in a sexual act (same sex vs. different sex)." (Halperin, 1990: 16) Since that time, scientific, religious, and popular mythology have located homosexuality on the body; attempts to explain its existence have been largely grounded in biology.

Lillian Faderman traces the lesbian appropriation of this biology-based discourse from the early twentieth century onward. The explanation of homosexuality as a congenital defect provided some women with an explanation of their desire. The biological was the excusable; an essentialist notion of sexuality offered much that was positive to these women. The heroine of *The Well of Loneliness*, Stephen Gordon, is an excellent example of this understanding of (upper-class, white, urban) lesbianism.
Stephen’s gender is not in harmony with her sex; she is an invert. Her masculine attributes, including her enjoyment of hunting, fencing, men’s clothing and motorcars, indicate her sexuality. Accepting herself as an invert offers Stephen a guilt-free existence. The problem, as Stephen sees it, is with society’s treatment of inverts, not with her status as an invert. Her status as an invert enables her to do things such as drive an ambulance and rescue Andrea’s dog. Her strength and independence are a direct result of her sexuality. Stephen Gordon is an early version of the biology as destiny view of sexuality responsible for the recent search for the gay gene.

There is an enormous amount of funding provided for research attempting to isolate the biological causes of homosexuality. From examining the brains of dead gay men to correlating lesbianism with hearing to experimenting with how (genetically identical) twins develop sexuality, hundreds of studies have been to prove that homosexuality has a biological cause. The theory behind such research is that if it can be proven that homosexuality is a congenital defect, then discriminating on the basis of it will be illegal. As the Wall Street Journal reported in 1993:

> the discovery of a definitive biological cause of homosexuality could go a long way toward advancing the gay-rights cause. If homosexuality were found to be an immutable trait, like skin color, then laws criminalising homosexual sex might be overturned.

(quoted by Ussher, 1997: 143)

This argument has been taken very seriously by some gays and lesbians, for whom the notion of bodily inversion is a crucial part of identity. When gays and lesbians are denied the same protections and rights under law that heterosexuals take for granted, the desire to win those rights can become overwhelming. It is impossible to grow up within such a society and not internalize some homophobia. Normalizing oneself under heterosexual standards can be a way for homosexuals to exist in a world that seeks to
erase them. However, these standards don’t necessarily allow for the destruction of homosexual guilt. Sometimes, looking for a cause of homosexuality is as much about convincing the rest of the world to treat one fairly as it is about convincing one’s self that such treatment is deserved.

The simplification of behavior to a simple set of physiological or psychological variables is troublesome. Seeking to find a biological cause for homosexuality problematizes it. Looking for a physical anomaly to explain homosexuality implies that it is also an anomaly. Homosexuality can’t be normal if it is a sickness.

Social constructivists and post-structuralists from Judith Butler to Marjorie Garber challenge this essentialized view of homosexuality. They argue that sexual identity is discursively created, that sexuality is performance. For them, sex acts depend of context; what makes an act sexual and typed varies with space and time. Atara Stein traces Butler’s explosion of identity in her 1999 article, "'Without Contraries is No Progression': S/M, Bi-nary Thinking, and the Lesbian Purity Test" According to Stein, Butler’s theory takes sexual practices and differences as its "primary object" (see Stein, 1999: 46; Butler, 1991, 1-7), disrupting essentialism’s monolithic notion of sex. Butler makes sex performative by divorcing it from identities and bodies. In "Imitation and Gender Subordination," she writes, "I’m permanently troubled by identity categories." Butler avows "the sign’s strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism.)" (1991:14, 19) Butler’s call for politics of inclusion in lesbian thinking has been only partially successful.

Garber questions the very notion of a homosexual identity. Examining the diverse partner choices of painters Georgia O’Keefe and Frida Kahlo, she argues that no single relationship or identity was for them the "real" one. During the course of their lives, their
partners were each real; instead of performing identity, they were performing desire. (Garber 1995: 115) Fixing a single name to evolving desire freezes it. When considering identity, one must be willing to accept the mutability of desire. Everything depends upon context.

The lesbian-feminists of the late 1970s developed a basis for lesbian identity founded not on congenital defect or mental perversion, but on rage against the patriarchy. Creating a lesbian continuum onto which all women could be placed (as long as they behaved appropriately), Adrienne Rich allowed for the creation of a lesbian community. Lesbians could be celibate, they could be married, they could be in long-term monogamous relationships with other women as long as they came to recognize the importance of rebelling against the patriarchy. (Rich: 1980) Rich and her contemporaries accepted lesbianism as a feminist tool. The notion of a homosexuality based on inversion or defect was replaced with one based on shifting the balance of power. Unfortunately, accepting all women as lesbians became very difficult for the lesbian-feminists when some women persisted in having the wrong kind of sex with the wrong kind of people. The structure of identity based on act returned. Instead of learning to tolerate ambiguity, the notion of an authentic lesbian was created.

If sex acts are context depend, than people living within a particular socio-economic context (ie, women in the lesbian community) have the power to decide which acts have what meaning. They can identify some acts and bodies as sexually appropriate, and make membership in their community dependent upon conforming to these standards. The standards of the lesbian-feminists, instead of making the lesbian community more inclusive, became a means of exclusion.
In her collection of essays, *I Used To Be Nice*, Sue O’Sullivan warns of the dangers of identity politics. Though they may create a language for women to articulate their desires, identity politics may also "come to grief and confusion...[because] fast on the heels of those fabulous feelings of identity certainty...come the discordant calls of deviation and distinction, leading, in its most fractured and absurd stages, to hierarchies of oppression which soared higher and higher as newly delineated differences were claimed and named." (Sullivan, 1996: 141, in Abraham, 1999: 117)

An exclusive hierarchy of lesbian-ness has been established within the lesbian community. Bisexual women, transwomen, and leatherwomen are only a few of the people this lesbian community has alienated. Becoming an authentic lesbian is like struggling through an obstacle course. The importance of balance and agility, the ability to negotiate success based on the actions of one’s body, has become crucial to the development of a personal lesbian identity. The codes and trappings of lesbianism have changed since the days of radical- and lesbian-feminism, but the notion of defending lesbianism from outside assault has not. In *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig pleaded, "may your understanding embrace the complexity of the play of the stars and of the feminine agglomerations, may you yourself in this place strive in a frenzied confrontation whether in the shape of the angel or the shape of the demon." (1986: 145) The rigid insistence by lesbians and gay men on either material or discursive bases for identity makes Wittig’s dream an impossibility.

What about the economics of sexual identity? The shift of homosexuality back to being something that people do posited by the social constructivist and post-structuralist movements supports an economic basis of identity. In "Capitalism and Gay Identity", John D’Emillio examines the historicity of homosexual identity in an economic context.
He argues that with the development of capitalism in England and the United States in the late nineteenth century, the transformation of demographics from rural to urban centers allowed gay men and lesbians to exist without economic pressure to marry. This independence, he believes, facilitated the refashioning of homosexual desire into homosexual identity. Escaping the isolation of rural life allowed gay men and lesbians to congregate within cities. Able to exist as single people, the rules governing their expression of sexuality became much more fluid. (1992)

Capitalism also allowed for the creation of a gay market. Products and services became necessary to code oneself as gay; the advertising and consumption of homosexuality created visibility. With visibility came vice and virtue. Lesbians and gay men could now be identified as a class of people. As a class, they could be punished; they became a political force to be both protected and regulated. The focus on the material, both within the gay and lesbian community and within popular culture, led to the internal and external enforcement of acts on bodies. Negotiating identity as a sexual other in a heterosexualized world and developing a personal sexual identity created a desire for sex-act regulation within the queer community. Nowhere is this enforcement more blatant than in lesbian pornography.

Because women can have (same-sex) sex without identifying themselves as lesbians, lesbian identity is problematized. What is the difference between a straight woman who has sex with other women and a lesbian? Sex acts are material. Studying the historical treatment of homosexual behavior provides some context for the current social treatment of it and its location on the body. In US Federal Law, the distinction between status and conduct, between being homosexual and performing homosexuality, determines what discrimination is legal.
Clinton’s Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell policy exemplifies the conflation of the fear of the material act with the economics of discrimination. While Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell attempts to diffuse sexual tension within the military by disallowing homosexual acts, it does so by forbidding people to identify as homosexuals. Homosexuality is punishable in the military when a forbidden act is committed or implied. Sex acts, including the act of coming out, are social landmines. This is due to their material significance, their real implications of social and economic change. The military is one of the most physically powerful institutions in the world. If the very chance of a homosexual act is grounds for expulsion from it, then surely homosexuality (whether it is based on act or body) must be a powerful, transformative force.

Recognizing the power of exposing the homosexual body or act motivates the production of lesbian pornography. However, the regulation of lesbian sexuality and bodies created by the notion of the authentic lesbian prevents lesbian pornography from achieving its transformational potential. For this reason, my production company and I created our own lesbian porn film. Though we could not hope to describe the range of queer women’s desire, we wanted to provide ourselves and our peers with a framework for articulating desire.
II. The Politics of the Gaze

Beginning in the 1970s, feminists examined the power of the gaze in cinema. Influenced by the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, they began to use the tools of psychoanalysis, semiotics and structuralism to analyze women's representation within film. This work led to an understanding of cinema as a signifying process, of a way of producing meaning. Examining how film constructed sexual difference, these feminists came to question the relationship of women in film to language.

Linguistically, "semiotic" refers to the pattern of sounds that underlie the meanings of words. Semiotics color both spoken and written language; Kristeva expands this notion of semiotics into a means of understanding the way that culture is structured. In *Powers of Horror*, she uses the notion of the semiotic to make the body a potentially subversive force. (Kristeva, 1980) Through their semiotic relationship to culture and language, bodies acquire meaning. Learning to manipulate the nuances of the body's cultural vocabulary within its social context provides a powerful way for women to relate to language, whether this language is one of movement, desire or word.

According to Lacan, women's relationship to language is a negative one. When women acquire language, he wrote, they simultaneously learn that they lack a phallus. (Lacan, 1992) The phallus signifies sexual difference. Lacan finds evidence of this difference both in literature and in society; he emphasizes the sheer force of the phallus as the sign around which sexuality is ordered. The phallus establishes subjectivity. (Lacan, 1992) In patriarchal society, the signifying power of the phallus places women outside of language. Their dreams cannot be articulated; their desires cannot exist.
This theory had serious implications for cinema. Hollywood cinema was seen by feminists as structured using the language of the patriarchy. Within this context, women in film do not represent themselves, but rather represent the body on which male desire can act. In terms of language, women in film do not function as signifiers for a signified. Instead, they are a sign that represents something in the male unconscious.

Two Freudian concepts, fetishism and scopophilia, have been used by these feminists to figure out what women represent. Scopophilia refers to the transfer of pleasure from one's own body to pleasure in watching other people having sex. Using scopophilia and fetishism, they have tried to construct a male viewer in terms of his unconscious. According to Ann Kaplan, cinema relies on instinct, making the spectator a voyeur. In her 1983 essay "Is the Gaze Male?", she writes:

"The drive that causes little boys to peek through keyholes of parental bedrooms to learn about their sexual activities comes into play when the male adult watches films, sitting in a dark room. The original eye of the camera, controlling and limiting what can be seen, is reproduced by the projector aperture that lights up one frame at a time; and both processes duplicate the eye at the keyhole, whose gaze is confined by the keyhole 'frame'."

In this context, all images of women on screen are sexualized, regardless of plot. According to Laura Mulvey, this eroticization of women on screen is constructed from three male gazes. (Mulvey, 1975: 436) First, there is the gaze of the camera in the situation where the events are being filmed. She calls this gaze the profilmic gaze. While a camera is technically sexless, Mulvey argues that this look is inherently voyeuristic and that most directors are male. The second male gaze in film is the gaze of the male character in the narrative. This gaze is structured so as to make women the subject of it. Finally, Mulvey locates a third gaze in the gaze of the viewer, who imitates the first two gazes. (1975: 439)
Film, and therefore the male gaze, Kaplan continues, thus objectifies women. It empowers men to act, it prevents women from acting. Women receive and return a gaze, but without any of the power of the male gaze. Eroticizing women in this way renders them harmless. Their actions have no consequence, their lives are completely contained within the camera’s eye.

The threat of objectification is central to feminist film theory, which teaches that objectifying women both eroticizes and erases them. According to psychoanalytic theory, women are signs of castration. Objectifying women renders the threat of castration harmless. Objectification, psychoanalysts believe, turns the woman into the phallus. This phenomenon is called fetishism. Replacing the threat of castration with a woman-sized phallus fetishizes women. Through fetishization they become something reassuring instead of something dangerous.

To what extent do these theories hold true today? How are they applicable to lesbian pornography? During the time in which Kaplan and Mulvey were writing, the majority of directors were male. Is film still a male apparatus designed for a male spectator? As women have increased their participation in the workforce, as they have gained economic power, their ability to make their own movies has increased. If women represent a market of potential consumers, then advertising will be directed at them. Over the past twenty-five years, the number of female directors has greatly increased. The emergence of the "chick-flick", of Hollywood movies designed for a female audience, began to shift the power of the gaze. In a capitalist society, media control comes with money. Women with the money to go to movies, women with the money to make movies and women with the money to distribute movies, now have tangible options. Pornography provides lesbian directors with a space relatively free of the pressures
confining traditional narrative film. Non-linear narratives are common in both queer and straight pornography. Moreover, making pornography is relatively inexpensive.

What happens to the gaze in lesbian pornography? Mulvey described the gaze in terms of three components, functioning together to oppress and objectify women. In lesbian pornography, these components are subverted. The first gaze, the inherently voyeuristic eye of the camera, is usually directed by women instead of men. Even in the case of lesbian pornography directed by men, the director is aware of the queerness of his subject. Making lesbian desire and sex public is a way of self-identifying as queer. Self-identifying as queer switches the direction of power that the word "queer" normally has. Queer is a word of shame; lesbian sex is similarly ripe with shame. Displaying queerness or filming lesbian sex celebrates the shame of the act. The power of this shame is transferred from the homophobic public onto the director and actresses.

Objectification is a necessary part of eroticization. For years, feminist cinema was completely devoid of pleasure. Scared at the prospect of objectifying women by displaying them as the subjects or objects or pleasure, directors preferred to hide women’s bodies or to neuter them. All displays of women’s physical pleasure were erased from feminist film. Recently, with the production and diversification of lesbian pornography, directors have come to realize the power of being objectified.

Mulvey’s second gaze, the gaze of the men within the film’s narrative, is likewise displaced by lesbian pornography. The vast majority of pornography used in my research does not feature any male characters. There is no male gaze within the narratives of my films. The absence of a male character changes the structure of these films. Whether or not they use linear narratives, the voices and eyes tracing these narratives are female. The characters in these movies see as women. The world is filtered through their perceptions,
it is shaped by their desires.

The third gaze, the gaze of the voyeur/spectator, parallels the first two gazes. If these first two gazes are female gazes, then the third gaze also looks as a woman looks. But what does it mean to look like a woman? Sex and gender are socially constructed categories. The people we call women come from diverse class, ethnic, racial, religious, educational and geographic backgrounds. Because being a woman means so many different things to different people, it is impossible to codify the female gaze. There is no one way of looking like a woman. Essentializing women, reducing the female gazes to one gaze, risks alienating some of them. Throughout the history of the lesbian movement, women who were not considered socially acceptable by the leaders of the movement were denied access to it. Pornography has the potential to include these women, to make a space for them within queer society.
III. Invisibility and Authenticity

The lesbian pornography that I watched for this project markets itself as authentic lesbian pornography. The notion of lesbian authenticity created by these movies is highly specific. To be an authentic lesbian is not simply a matter of having or acting on same-sex desire; to be an authentic lesbian, one must conform to a specific set of race, class, age, and gender stereotypes. Lesbian pornography details the kinds of sex practices in which "real" lesbians engage, while also enforcing moral lessons about how to pick women up, the role of violence in sex, and the importance of outness.

Intersecting race with class, lesbian pornography supports mainstream cultural stereotypes about the sexuality of women of color. In the majority of the films I watched, Latina and Black women tended to occupy working class, labor-intensive jobs. Latina mechanics and biker girls and Black convicts and construction workers accounted for more than half of the women of color in my thirty films. These women, and the white working class characters, the butches, were responsible for the majority of the penetration in these movies. Their sexual behavior was highly specific; these women were the bad girls, the imitators of men, the owners of the phallus. Other women of color were largely absent from these films. Asian women, when they appeared, were typically cast as femmes; with long nails, blood-red satin dresses and bright lipstick, they functioned as seductresses. (See Appendix 1 for details)

My goal in this chapter is to examine the causes and tools of invisibility within the queer women's community, not to suggest that visibility is impossible. In order to confront invisibility, it is necessary to understand how it is created. Racism and classism are the primary ways in which the (white) lesbian community enforces its borders. Why
does the lesbian community, a community all too familiar with oppression, recreate these stereotypes in its pornography? To answer this question, I examined the history of women of color within the lesbian community. Audre Lorde, a writer and mother who defined herself as a Black lesbian, offered the following statement:

"Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me.’ In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside in this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing."  

Lorde argued that race, class, religious and gender variations must be acknowledged in order to create functional community and personal identities. Lesbian studies and women’s studies have tended to focus on people whose primary political and "ethnic" identification is gay. White members of the lesbian community are able to organize life around their homosexuality because the homosexuality of the lesbian community is constructed to meet their needs. The ethnocentrism of the lesbian community is one way in which a notion of an "authentic lesbian" is constructed. The authentic lesbians portrayed in lesbian pornography are almost always white because the notion of lesbian identity is built on notions of visibility and performativity normalized around whiteness. Sexuality is contextual; the meaning for a woman to have a sexual identity is related to the meaning given to sexuality for women within a particular culture. Ignoring the multiplicity of identities possible in a multicultural society, the lesbian community, with its rules for authenticity, excludes women whose sexuality is
Diversity and the Coming-Out Process. She writes, "For example, coming out is assumed to be an individual process, related to a person's self-concept and identity. It is presumed that acknowledging a lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual orientation is important to heterosexuals in reducing their homophobia by providing positive role models of gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Failure to acknowledge one's sexual orientation publicly is assumed to represent a form of denial. Many times, coming out is characterized as a dichotomous situation - one is either in or out of the closet - with little consideration of what takes place between the two extremes." (1997: 288)

Consider the costs of coming out for African American women. The burdens of oppression carried by those living as gay, lesbian or bisexual include stigma, discrimination and harassment. For an African American woman, oppression based on both race and gender amounts to "double jeopardy" (1997:288). If the woman is also poor, aged or disabled, then she must navigate more dimensions of oppression. Discrimination based on sexual orientation would add another level of risk to her life. The decision not to come out may be seen as a refusal to take on yet another level of hardship. Exercising control over the disclosure of a stigmatized aspect of her identity may be adaptive. (1997:288)

Race exceeds color. Cornel West, in *The Radical Democratic Tradition*, writes "If all black folk and yellow folk and red folk and brown folk disappeared tomorrow from America, America would still be multicultural but there wouldn't be a debate about multiculturalism. There's something called whiteness that has been constructed, that hides and conceals a very rich multiculturalism among brothers and sisters of European descent in America." For Armand Cerbone, a gay Italian who grew up in Boston during and after World War II, whiteness is a fiction. It is a "social construct used to unite very
different people against others who are different in color. Whiteness is but another construct created to make and keep others utterly other." (Cerbone, 1997:119) Describing the violence between Irish and Italian immigrants he witnessed as a child, Cerbone acknowledges the diversity that exists within different white ethnic groups.

Being Italian presented Cerbone with culturally specific models of manhood. "Being Italian meant being earthy and lusty. Italian men were Latin lovers, dark and suave romancers of women." (1997: 121) The pressures Cerbone experienced to be a proper man were specific to his ethnicity. Irish masculinity is different from Italian masculinity; the trappings of heterosexuality (and hence, homosexuality) are also different from one ethnic group to another. Irish masculinity and Italian masculinity also varied with class; Cerbone's models of masculinity were specific to his working-class background.

Cerbone's recognition of the myth of whiteness and its role in his life allowed him to identify with the oppressions faced by people of color. He writes, "When all was said and done, I was still white in a country that made larger distinctions between black and white than among whites. Still, the intense contempt reserved for my kind felt pernicious, toxic and painful to me." (1997:118) Cerbone learned from the oppression he faced and was able to assimilate this knowledge into his practice of his sexuality. If contemporary lesbian theorists were able to do the same, then their insistence upon an "authentic" lesbian identity, whether it is essential or constructed, would necessarily change.

The authentic lesbian is an identity built upon a highly specific gendered myth of whiteness. Analyzing literature from 1970s through the 1990s, Myra Hird and Jenz Germon found several examples of lesbian enforcement of this myth. With the fear that
fake lesbians, who were secretly collaborating with heterosexuals, were invading their community, some lesbians sought to categorize the differences between "genuine" and "pretend" lesbians on the basis of gender. Hird and Germon site the following passage written in 1996 by Julia Penelope as an example of this:

"The essence of The Feminine consists of a repertoire of facial expressions, gestures, body postures, and ways of moving silent language of acquiescence, of yielding, that signal DANGER to the Dyke. I say "danger" because she is a likely betrayer, someone who wants to conform to the demands of male society."

Penelope continues to explore the "external signs of acquiescence" that will identify these dangerous imposters. Fake lesbians can be identified, she writes, by any of the following: "dresses, skirts, and blouses, make-up, high heels (anything over a 1/2 inch), plucks her eyebrows, has longish to long hair, and adorns herself with certain types of jewelry—pearl necklaces or diamond broaches." (Penelope, 1996:129, cited in Hird, 1999:107) Outness is also a criteria for membership in the lesbian community. "At the 1987 [Aukland] Lesbian Festival, a woman in the process of coming out was denied entry to a dance, illustrating the rejection of lesbians deemed 'inauthentic' because of the perceived association with heterosexuality." (1999:107)

Outness and femininity, carefully regulated by the myth of the authentic lesbian, are related to race and class. The role that they play in the process of sexual identity and community formation must be acknowledged if it is to be confronted. The subversive potential of queer sex depends on the recognition and celebration of both diversity and commonality.
IV. Sex Practices

Analyzing lesbian sexuality requires understanding that it is impossible to completely separate material from discursive factors. As Jane Ussher writes in *Framing the sexual ‘Other’*, "Our analysis of what it means to be lesbian or gay, or to engage in a sexual act which might be deemed ‘homosexual’, is irrevocably tied to the material body -to corporeal connections, to desire, to the performance of sexual acts which are deemed transgressive or normal at any point in time, and to physical appearance (the ways in which women and men signify their lesbian or gay status through dress or style.) Yet it is also tied to discourse - to the shifting interpretations made about acts and attitudes, to the changing social definitions of what it means to be lesbian or gay." Analyzing lesbian sexuality (or any sexuality) requires understanding how that sexuality is reproduced by the individual given the material and discursive social tensions enforcing and regulating its practice.

While lawmakers and scientists, members of the clergy and queer theorists all have different understandings of the creation and consumption of lesbian identity, they all work to regulate the lives and bodies of lesbians. Lesbians, confronted with other people’s theories about who they are, how they should behave, and what their legal status should be, must constantly define themselves. (Here, I am acknowledging that the majority of women within the lesbian community are white, middle class women, who are economically and socially privileged enough to come out.) They are continually engaged in a coming-out process. It is through coming-out, over and over again, that growth is possible. Coming-out allows lesbians to change their relationship to society. As lesbians change their relationship to society, they allow social change to happen. Lesbians and mainstream heterosexual society need each other to provide pressure for
change. It is the need for visibility and control of self-image that motivates the production of lesbian pornography. Making lesbian pornography creates a record of one's desire. Displaying lesbian sex is itself a coming-out process; it gives form and voice to the invisible.

The process of coming-out encompasses four general stages: awareness, testing and exploration, identity acceptance, and identity integration. (Sophie, 1985-1986) Studying the stages of coming-out necessary for the development of a lesbian identity makes it possible to abstract these stages and apply them to different identities. The process through which lesbians come to invent and represent themselves is exactly analogous to the process through which other marginalized groups create their own identities. Coming-out is as much about enabling other people to come-out as it is about creating one's self. Coming-out is a form of advertising. Lesbian pornography advertises the eroticization of women's bodies and the richness of lesbian fantasy. It can create a language of woman-centered desire.

Language, according to philosopher Benjamin Whorf, shapes what we are capable of thinking and how we are capable of behaving. He writes, "A language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade." (Whorf, 1980:114) Language shapes possibility; "we cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because of language." (Whorf, 1980:114) Whorf's theory applies not only to spoken language, but to the physically practiced language of sexuality. The words and actions available within our language limit our possible ranges of sexual behavior. Lesbian pornography seeks to articulate the possibilities of lesbian sex practices using the
language of cinematography. Creating a varied sex vocabulary using cinematography should offer lesbians the possibility to imagine themselves as erotic beings. While they are continually assaulted by homophobic rhetoric from the mass-media, lesbian pornography brings a new potential, through the creation of a vocabulary to describe their experiences, for self-acceptance and celebration.

Learning to eroticize one’s self is of limited use without a means for eroticizing other people’s bodies and responding to their desires. Lesbian pornography also provides women with a space for fantasy, with a means of partner communication. As Julia Inness writes in her 1999 essay, *Lesbian Sex Renegades?*, "But it is not enough for lesbians to talk sex -fantasy is also needed. Whether [in personal ads] gay men discuss varied sexual scenes they wish to act out, participate in drag or dress themselves up as an impossible combination of cowboys, construction workers and college boys, they are establishing themselves as authors of their own sexual scripts." (Inness, 1999:129) Sex becomes something to be acted out.
The prominent feminist discourses, especially lesbian feminism and radical feminism have neglected to give serious consideration to the value and pleasure that pornography holds for some women. Catherine MacKinnon’s underlying assumption throughout her work is that pornography replicates patriarchal institutions, thus perpetuating patriarchal and hegemonic power. Writing about sadomasochism (SM), Patrick Hopkins suggests that there is a difference between the replication of hegemonic power relationships and the simulation of them. He writes, "Replication implies that SM encounters merely reproduce patriarchal activity in a different physical area. Simulation implies that SM selectively replays surface patriarchal behaviors onto a different contextual field. That contextual field makes a profound difference." In both pornography and SM, there are immense differences between, for example, a staged rape and an actual rape. The most important of these difference is consent. In pornography and SM, staged violence can provide lesbians with a framework for examining, exploiting and nullifying patriarchal power games.

The feminist responses to pornography are markedly similar to their treatment of sadomasochism. Why? Both SM and pornography create a play space, a space in which bodies and power dynamics can be safely examined. Lesbian SM and pornography both give flesh to the taboo. They provide an "arsenal for power play" (Hornsby, 1999:69) where bodies and identities are rearranged, where the boundaries of the body become the boundaries of the social. Mary Douglas positions the body and the boundaries of the body as symbolic of culture and the boundaries between cultures. She writes that, "the body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened and precarious" (Douglas, 1966:115). Following
Douglas, if the lesbian body stands for an existing social system, then what is done on and to the body become ways to explore changing that system.

Judith Butler writes that the limit of the body, "is never merely material, but that the surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become the limits of the social per se" (1990: 131). Lesbian bodies, in pornography or SM, becomes vehicles to manipulate the "limits of the socially hegemonic" (1990:131). The trick is figuring out what gets subverted. Hornsby, examining this question, writes, "The point at which culture breaks the boundaries of the skin is the point that the social system and the body collide. The result is that the boundaries become blurred, the interiors of the body become exterior, they spill out into culture, and it is no longer clear where the body ends and the culture begins: either culture subsumes the body or the body subsumes culture."

Lesbian pornography, like SM, has the potential to be a revolt against the patriarchy. Oppression of all kinds, from sexism to racism, from classism to homophobia can be examined, manipulated and unlearned in porn's sexual playground. The boundaries of current culture can be reworked.
VI. Visibility and Explicitness

If women are separated from language, how are they to construct their own desire? How can the invisible become visible? How is material that cannot be expressed within a language identified and defined? "Invisibility is an unnatural disaster," wrote the Japanese American poet Mitsuye Yamada, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color.* (Moraga, 1984:35) As a queer woman growing up in Iowa, I was invisible. There existed neither social nor political tools with which I could define myself. Without any role models, without any way to name my desires, I was an impossibility. This invisibility was both painful and welcome; because we had no space in our culture for queer people, I never experienced any violent homophobia or biphobia. It took moving to Boston for me to be beaten up for being queer.

At the same time, I was lonely, scared and confused. I told myself that my dreams of sex with women, and my passionate friendships with other girls, were completely normal. They were simply part of a growing-up process that I would eventually grow out of. But as I went through high school, watching my friends date, get knocked up by and marry (usually in that order) boys, I became increasingly aware that I would drown if I stayed in Iowa. I knew only two things for sure: that the lesbians I’d heard about who lived in San Francisco and New York were bad, hell-bound crazies, and that I was not. My desires seemed entirely normal to me, even if I couldn’t quite quantify them. I only knew what felt good to me, and that I could have some but not all of it in Iowa.

So I moved to Boston and tried to find myself within the lesbian community. In the process, my family disowned me for being one of the hell-bound lesbian crazies, and I was just as lonely as before. The Boston lesbian community, or at least the Boston
lesbian community visible and accessible to me, was no more inclusive than my community back home had been. Their codes for membership, namely having a specific kind of haircut, a specific set of overalls, tank tops and sandals, dating monogamously, being able to spend ten dollars a night going to clubs and community film festivals, and liking the same horrible organic grains (quinoa? what?), did not allow me to express any of the parts of my personality that were important to me, besides my desire for women. As long as I was willing to bleach myself into an acceptable lesbian, they would not accept me into their community.

Young, scared and seeking control, I eventually became anorexic. When I finally realized that I didn’t want to be invisible, my body had already suffered from starvation. The power that I got from self-starvation, as intoxicating as it was, was exhausting. I realized that I wasn’t going to find a representation of myself, no matter where I looked. If I wanted to exist, I was going to have to use the tools that other people created to create my own representations of myself. I struggled to make a space for myself and my starved body within lesbian pornography, before I realized that I could not be contained within the genre. I needed to say that I was desirable, that my friends were desirable, and that we were neither alone nor invisible. So I took the energy that I had been putting into my anorexia and put it into my writing and my art. Collecting a group of my friends, from a variety of different class, race and ethnic backgrounds, I made Vamptyre. Naming our production company the Lesbian Porn Phactory, we sought to define our sensualities and sexualities using the tools of video pornography.

With Vamptyre, the Lesbian Porn Phactory and I experienced first hand the power of grass-roots art movements. Mitsuye Yamada, in a speech celebrating the power of grass-roots activism, said "As a poet and writer who grew up with no encouragement to
fulfill my dreams, who has struggled against multiple environments which would either stereotype me or render me invisible, or mold me into a model of my own culture's version of a good girl/woman, I am among the many writers and teachers who, through the years, have encouraged grass-roots arts groups in our own communities. Our purpose was to generate as many creative expressions as possible to let the world know that 'we are here.' " (Yamada, 1997) Taking Yamada's words to heart, I tried to generate my own creative expression of visibility.

To create a theoretical framework for our movie, I examined the processes by which other invisible people became visible. Examining semiotic tools of visibility and their use in Black Lesbian literature provides a model for the process of moving from invisibility into visibility that can be applied to the creation of queer women's pornography. For the early Black Lesbian writers, whose experiences were not given voice by the feminist movement, there were few opportunities to recognize themselves in the existing cultural mirrors. But as black women began to earn their economic independence, alternative women's presses were built. These presses, which allowed black women writers to describe their own experiences, published writers from Zora Neal Hurston to Barbara Smith, from Audre Lorde to Alice Walker.

As Smith writes in her essay *The Truth That Never Hurts*, "The political and aesthetic strength of this writing, is indicated by its impact having been far greater than its actual availability. At times its content has had revolutionary implications." Writers like Smith were able to create their own Black Lesbian literature. They created mirrors for other women, black and non-black, lesbian and non-lesbian, to use to examine themselves and their desires. The women they saw reflected in books like Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982)
allowed them access to a language that had previously been unable to contain their desires.

Smith describes the expression of alternative sexual identities for black women in *The Color Purple* as an example of writing "that is sufficiently sensitive and complex, which places Black Lesbian experience and struggles squarely within the realm of human experience and concerns. "(Smith, 1990:700) While Walker’s characters, Celie and Shug, are fantastic in that they never have to confront internal or external homophobia, they are free to explore their relationship without violent consequence. Their relationship, though unusual within their community, is not faced with rejection. Rather, the beautiful bonds that exist between the black women in the book provide a model for building a diverse community where people of different genders, races and classes can peacefully coexist. *The Color Purple*, Smith suggests, can teach anyone who is invisible how to establish a home. (Smith, 1990:700)

Sexualities that did not exist within either the lesbian or the heterosexual communities were free to exist in this literature. Shug, Smith postulates, is bisexual, even though this term did not exist during her time. Perhaps using this word to quantify her desire is inappropriate; she would likely not have labeled herself that way. Still, the model of sexual behaviour that she represents, an earnest desire for both male and female partners, through this literature has become accessible to people today. Books like *The Color Purple*, because they were economically supported by an alternative market, could provide this market with new role models. Smith writes, "Perhaps these transformations go unnoticed because in Walker’s woman-centered world, in order to change, they must relinquish machismo and violence, the very thought of which would be fundamentally disruptive to the nonfeminist reader’s world-view. " (Smith, 1990:711)
Walker's characters are mythic. They provide a vision of how the world could be, not of how the world is. Celie and Shug, who may not be accepted by the world as authentic Lesbians, are granted peace within the pages of the novel. While this problematizes the categorization of The Color Purple as a Lesbian novel, Celie and Shug nonetheless present a model of a black woman-centered sexuality and lifestyle. Whether or not the word "lesbian" should be attached to them is irrelevant; Walker's vision of the world, where black women are not forced to lose their families, their community, or their lives because of who they love is made accessible, using words, to the rest of the world. Walker accomplishes visibility by ignoring the potential violence and shame that the rest of the world would inflict upon her characters. She takes what she wants from this world and leaves the rest.

Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of My Name presents a "biomythography", a mixture of history, myth, and biography. This genre allows Lorde the resources she needs to create a tale of Black Lesbian experience with both "verisimilitude and accuracy." (Smith, 1991:707) What allows Lorde to weave such a story? Why does she succeed? Zami, we learn from Lorde, is a Carriacou word meaning "women who work together as friends and lovers." Within the culture that she was raised, there already existed a word for what Lorde would become. Modeling herself on the example provided by her mother, Lorde had a vocabulary of her mother's desires, which she used to articulate her own. In the book, Lorde uses the language taught her by her mother to create her own Black Lesbian literature. She creates her own visibility within US culture by using the tools taught her by Carriacou language and applying them to US language. Zami: A New Spelling of My Name does not provide the idyllic vision of Black Lesbian experience that is found in The Color Purple, but it does teach Black Lesbians a possible means of
identification within today's world.

Black Lesbian literature has enabled the creation of a history of queer black women that is both complex and compelling. Despite the repeated silencing of black women's voices, Black Lesbians have provided all women with an example of people who seek and win their own autonomy through their self-representation. Telling their own stories has created a language for other people to tell their own. Of particular significance are the semiotics of Black Lesbian literature. While both *The Color Purple* and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* are written in English, they are written in the English of their authors. Using the letters and sounds, the syntax and rhythm of English, Walker and Lorde create an authentic Black English. They own their language, and use the tools of the colonizer to express themselves. By understanding the intricacies of the English language, Walker and Lorde are able to subvert it. In the end, language is owned by no one. It is a tool that some people use to oppress other people, but it can be claimed by the oppressed for their own purposes. What lessons can be taken away from *The Color Purple* and *Zami*? Langston Hughes, in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," wrote:

*We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.*

In order to apply the tools learned from Black Lesbian literature to lesbian pornography, it is first necessary to understand the process by which women are constructed in relation to desire. According to psychoanalytic and semiotic theory, the
penis is the primary referent which "gives full meaning to the lack or to the desire which constitutes the subject during his or her insertion into the order of language." (Kristeva, 1975: 450) Subjectivity, then, is discursively and linguistically constructed using the language of the body. Ordering the world around the absence of the penis means that personal identity is also constructed this way. Catherine Belsey, explaining the formation of subjectivity, writes, "In order to speak, the child is compelled to differentiate; to speak of itself, it has to distinguish 'I' from 'you.'" (Belsey, 1985: 596) To articulate its needs, the child has to learn to identify with the first person singular pronoun. This identification becomes the basis for subjectivity; from identifying as I, a new set of subject-positions (including he, she, we, they, boy, girl, etc) must be learned. To relate oneself to others, one has to have words for the others. Because the penis functions as the primary signifier through which this system is established, women, lacking the penis, become the space onto which desire is projected.

How binding is this system of subjectivity? What possibilities for transformation exist, if the penis, like the big bang, is the center of the known universe? (Kristeva, 1975: 450) Lacan theorizes that conscious subjectivity is precarious; that being aware of one's existing relationship to language is the key to changing it. Through the process of acquiring language, the child must split its identity into the 'I' that is perceived and the 'I' that does the perceiving. Words, through their semiotic relationships to one another, create relationships between one's self and other people. But because using words requires recognition of the separation of one's self from the rest of the world, language creates personal distance from the social while enforcing a social framework.
There is a discontinuity between the speaking self and the conscious self. Lacan calls this space the unconscious. Belsey, explaining Lacan’s understanding of the unconscious, writes, “The unconscious comes into being in the gap which is formed by this division. The unconscious is constructed in the moment of entry into the symbolic order, simultaneously with the construction of the subject.” The unconscious becomes the space for dreaming, the space before language acquisition, where one’s pre-linguistic signifiers exist. The self, as soon as it is constructed, is also divided. Giving a child language allows it to vocalize its desires, but because of the split-subjectivity that language creates, it also prevents the child from ever articulating its unconscious, inarticulate desires. “The self is thus the site of contradiction, and is constantly perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a process lies the possibility of transformation.” (Belsey, 597: 1985)

Invisible people, without the economic freedom to articulate their desires using mainstream media, must look to alternative production companies, publishing houses and presses to represent themselves. I believe that for women, particularly queer women, to explore the sexual and erotic possibilities of their bodies, they must have access to erotic material focused on their desires. Pornography affectively and effectively addresses the boundaries and the limitations of the queer body. It extends, complicates, and questions the supposed simplicity (or non-existence) of queer women’s desires.

Pornography is often seen to be the ultimate expression of male power, because it is the genre in which the penis is explicitly used on the body it signifies. The meaning of the female bodies in pornography, particularly in heterosexual pornography, is to act as the subject of the penis. The language of desire is written on the body, using a language
that many fear cannot be used to represent themselves because they are positioned outside of it. Being aware that one is outside of the dominant culture’s social framework allows one to manipulate this framework.

Making our movie, Vamptyre, I was acutely aware of my position outside of mainstream, heterosexual America’s sexual norms. Studying the meaning attached to the female bodies in lesbian pornography, the class and race politics of who penetrated whom and with what, (namely, that working class butches and women of color, particularly Latinas and Black women, were responsible for the majority of the penetration in these films) I became aware of my position outside of the mythic lesbian community’s sexual norms. My awareness of my difference, both from mainstream America and from the established Boston lesbian community, enabled me to use their tools to ascribe my own meaning to my body.

Unsure of the meaning that my actresses wanted to ascribe to their bodies and acts, I purposefully left their roles within the film very self-directed. Every actress was told that she needed to prepare a solo "getting ready to go out to dance" scene, a "dancing at the club and picking up girls" scene, a "being tied up or tying someone up" scene and a "role reversal" scene. The specifics of these scenes, from what the actresses wore to who they chose to interact with in their scenes, were left up to the actresses. Hence, my biases, as a white, working class, Midwestern, femme, rural, bisexual woman, about how women of different races, classes, sexual identities, and ethnicities should construct their desires were neatly avoided.

I acknowledge that because I wrote and produced the movie, my biases are inherent in the structure of the narrative. I tried to avoid inflicting my stereotypes about what makes a pornographic narrative, namely that there is a basal level of explicitness
necessary, on my actresses. Explicitness is not the issue in pornography; it cannot be used to define the pornographic, because explicitness must be defined in relation to dominant culture's norms. In the United States, Paul Smith writes, "Explicitness defines access to such texts and is a defining factor in both the legal codes which dictate availability and also the codes of self-censorship deployed by the Hollywood and TV industries. That is, even cable subscribers currently never see on their pay channels an erect penis, an open vagina, or any kind of penetration, heterosexual or homosexual, of any male or female body. Most importantly for my purposes here, they will never see what the industry calls "cum" - the sexual suppuration of the body."(Smith, 1988:1022)

Because two of my actresses were underage at the time of filming, showing nudity was illegal. This helped us all to examine what about our bodies, besides the naked facts of our skin, breasts and genitals, made us sexy. Alison, one of the lipstick lesbians at the beginning of the film, chose to solve thermodynamics questions on a white board while wearing a tight gingham dress. Whitney, a self-described goth nerd girl, typed angrily at her computer and then laced herself into a tight corset in her getting-ready scene. These women, locating their sexiness on both their bodies and in their minds, exemplify the kind of self-directed representation of desire that I needed to find.

In our film, the sexual suppuration of desire is found in our ability to change. While we begin the movie as a set of submissive good girls and dominant, vampire bad girls, we each undergo a transformation within the film. The film created for us a space in which fantasy was allowed. Given the tools (whips, chains, red velvet handcuffs, showers, boots and lipstick) to experiment with our sexualities, we did. Climax(es), the last scene of our film, features every member of the Lesbian Porn Phactory who found a comfortable way to express her desire doing so. In the end, we are being ourselves.
In the space of our film, the Lesbian Porn Phactory and I learned to claim our own sexiness, desire and desirability. While our screenings of the film have so far been only partially publicly successful (people claim to be disappointed at the lack of nudity and orgasm in our film), we have succeeded in finding ourselves within cultures and genres that seek to erase us. We’ve also found unexpected allies. While the older lesbians to whom we’ve shown our film have not expressed much excitement at our accomplishment, our MIT peers, regardless of sexuality, have enjoyed it tremendously. Perhaps somewhere in our film, they see some part of themselves reflected. In the end, echoing Hughes, whether or not other people like our film doesn’t matter. We do.
VI. Heads and Tails: In Conclusion

The question of how to conclude this thesis has bothered me for some weeks. My main creative interests are bilingual poetry and fiction; writing a long work of serious non-fiction has been a continual challenge. In the end, this thesis was an exercise in ascribing meaning to bodies. Throughout the body of this work, I’ve explored the literary, feminist and queer theory that academics use to construct queer women’s bodies and desires. However, my thinking about these issues has been influenced by creative writers as well. Therefore, in conclusion, I want to include a creative piece that has been indispensable in allowing me to develop my thoughts as well as my feelings. Below is ee cumming’s *since feeling is first*:

```
since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a far better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don’t cry
--the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids’ flutter which says

we are for each other: then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life’s not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis
```
Appendix:

Taxonomy of Videos

Videos marked with an asterix (*) feature the race and class stereotypes of lesbian sexuality that I mention in the body of my thesis.

I. By Genre

History/Biography:
- Nitrate Kisses
- Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle

Independent/Art Film:
- How to Tell a Yam From a Sweet Potato*
- Bed
- Strait
- Inversion

S/M:
- The Sassy Schoolgirl*
- Elegant Spanking
- Black Glove
- The Boiler Room*
- Top of the World*
- Why I’ll Never Trust You In 200 Words or Less
- Regarde-moi
- Double Entente

Sci-Fi/Fantasy:
- Chameleons*
- Cynara*

Vampire/Dark:
- The Hunger*
- Anna Obsessed*
- Amanda by Night*

Vanilla:
- Creme de Femme*
- Desire
- Fantasy Dancers*
- Femme*
- San Francisco Lesbians (Volumes 1-4)*
Suburban Dykes*
Dyke Bar*
Clips

Women in Uniform:
Hey, Sailor, Hey Sister*
Prison World*


Hale, C. Jacob. "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies." *Social Text*,


Weston, Kath. *Render Me, Gender Me: Lesbians Talk Sex, Class, Color, Nation, Studmuffins*. New York: Columbia University Press,