

**Agnes Bolsø:**

# **Power in the Erotic: Feminism and Lesbian Practice**

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Department of Sociology and Political Science  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Technology Management  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU Trondheim

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This project is about power and sexual desire. The chapter explains the different ways in which ‘power’ is used: as a relational concept for dynamics between individuals, and as a structural societal concept. Power is understood as having a capacity for producing subordination, but also pleasure. The chapter comments upon the feminist debate on power and sexuality. The ambition of the present project is to contribute to this debate, and the analytical approach is sketched out: to investigate lesbian negotiations of power issues known from the feminist critique of heterosexuality.

### **Chapter 2: Sexuality – where inner and outer worlds meet**

Here I seek to establish a notion of ‘sexuality’ that contains aspects of sexual practice, individual psyche, historical changing cultures and the continuous negotiations between the three. Sexuality will be seen as flexible both in the life of an individual and in the history of a society. We create ourselves as sexual and erotic persons, but are also created by the cultures of which we are members and their sexual institutions. ‘Heteronormativity’, a central term in so-called ‘queer theory’, is most important to my understanding of cultural imperatives. Embedded in this term is recognition of heterosexuality as crucial in becoming intelligible men and women, and consequently, heterosexuality as crucial in the process of being understood as human. Linked to heteronormativity is also that the major symbol for active desire, the phallus (or masculinity), is impossible to avoid for any member of the culture. The chapter presents important reworkings of psychoanalytical theory to establish the connection between lesbian desire and masculinity, since this will be a central issue in the first two empirical chapters.

### **Chapter 3: Reflections on methodology, methods and desire**

The project is rooted in political debates about sexuality and power that have been on the feminist agenda the last decades. The aim for the project is to contribute to the debate politically as well as theoretically. In some sense, the aim is to restart a debate within the Norwegian feminist academia. The most controversial feature of the project might be the way heterosexuality is represented, *not* by narratives about a variety of heterosexual practices, but by its power aspects, pointed to by feminists. I use my interviews with lesbians to argue for a specificity of lesbian socio-erotic practice related to this. The representation of heterosexuality and the question of a general specificity to lesbian desire are central issues in the project, and are also complicated issues. This chapter is first of all meant to expose, as many sides of the research process as are considered relevant for the evaluation of

my reasoning. I describe the early start, where I invited a group of lesbians to discuss the coming fieldwork, respond to topics for the interviews, try different kinds of methods and discuss analytical issues. The reasoning behind recruiting 20 informants (17 lesbians, one transsexual becoming a man, one heterosexual woman and one bi-sexual woman) by ‘snowballing’, the composition of the sample of informants (age, social situation, erotic preferences), how I experienced fieldwork and ethical challenges are also described. In this project the interviews are understood both as a ‘report from reality’, and also as the informants construction of this reality. My own story, based on these interviews, is understood as a suggestion of a way of understanding aspects of contemporary sexual culture. I want to argue that my story is a *good* suggestion, and pay in this chapter direct attention to reliability, validity and the potential for generalization. My concern about these issues, is also the main reason why the research process is described as detailed as it is.

As a spring-board to the chapters that present the analysis of the interview material, I outline the main analytical approach; that is, to analyze lesbian sexuality as a reworking of the power domains of heterosexuality. Since the compulsion to heterosexuality is understood as culturally pervasive, no one can escape its creating force. Heterosexuality is thus exploited as a deliverer of premises for the analysis of lesbian practices. In the two analytical chapters that come first, it is the symbolic aspect of heterosexuality and power that is focused. These are the two analytical chapters where I have found it useful to draw on a psychoanalytical perspective, since psychoanalytical theory relates, not only to sexual practices, but also to the imaginary aspects of sexuality.

#### **Chapter 4: When women take**

The verb *to take* someone sexually turned up on several occasions in the interviews. What do women do when they take each other? The word is easily associated with heterosexuality and more specifically in a Norwegian context, men penetrating women. It is not commonly used as a description of heterosexuality, other than in pornography. The reason is probably that it is not compatible with the equality strive in the Norwegian society, also in sexual matters. Why would women use it about what they do to other women? The conclusion of the analysis is that the phallic significance of the word is retained in the sense that ‘taking’ means to be actively desiring. To use the word adds eroticism to the story; to take is *really* to desire. However, the performance of ‘taking’ is ‘giving’, since it is the taken part that is pleased with an orgasm. This represents a distinct difference from most heterosexual ‘taking’, represented as it is mostly in porn, where the penetrator is the one (the man) to reach climax. Lesbian porn is compared with heterosexual porn on this issue, and used in the argumentation.

## **Chapter 5: Masculinity in erotic play**

Men in gray suits are often seen as signaling authority, strength and power. A woman who goes to a meeting and wants to be recognized for her intellectual and management skills, are usually advised to avoid the outfits that exposes her body too much. Appearance is linked to authority, and it has something to do with masculinity and femininity. In my interviews appearance was an issue, and signs of masculinity in particular. Is it an attempt to reproduce masculine power? How does that relate to the sexual dynamics between women? In this chapter, as in the previous, it is demonstrated how the phallic is represented in erotic dynamics between women. Clothes, postures and ways of initializing sex contain masculine signs of crucial importance. The theorizing of the erotic significance of masculinity for lesbians is based on notions of the lesbian phallus (Judith Butler) and masculinity as a lesbian fetish (Teresa de Lauretis). The conclusion is that power is in play between lesbians, and power is seen in the light of a theorization of the phallus as non-paternal, which in this case implies the flexibility and transferability of masculinity.

## **Chapter 6: ‘Hire a woman! What woman would?’**

Meeting a lesbian, who had been selling her sexual services to other women, was a surprise to me during the fieldwork. I first considered this as rare and the exception that proves the rule that women do not buy sex (from other women), but decided that it was worth investigating and analyzing on its own. I use a more exploratory approach than in the two previous empirical chapters, and start with an investigation of the cultural blindness towards women who buy and sell sex between them. It is a case that very distinctly breaks with several discourses in the field of sexuality, especially the romantic discourse that ascribes the mixture of sex and love to women, and a more technically oriented sexuality to men. The second part of the chapter is an analysis of the activities of one of my informants, and also a few other stories about women buying sex from other women. There were not many stories to find. I compare my cases with the rather rich field of research on heterosexual prostitution. The classic feminist critique of prostitution focuses on the objectification of women, the emotional damages and the exploitation in general. The lesbian who serves another woman seems to become less objectified than a woman who serves a man. This may be due to the technical skills that usually are needed to make a woman climax. Other women appreciate these skills. One factor is also that in the lesbian subculture promiscuity may add to the social status of a (butch and competent) lesbian, in a way that does not count to a woman's benefit in a heterosexual context. The promiscuous butch is not easily understood as a fallen woman. One could say that masculinity is part of the protection. The conclusion is that the sex sales between women have a sociality that, to a greater degree than when women sell their services to men, protects the

woman who is engaged in the sex-work. The classic feminist critique of prostitution is not automatically apt.

### **Chapter 7: ‘Usually, I will start with her’ – equality issues in the production of an orgasm**

The starting-point for the analysis is to suggest that it is common fairness in Norway, that both women and men have rights to enjoy orgasms, and also that men are simpler than women, who usually need more time. The feminist critique, that in this case could be formulated as an advise, is that 1) men should be more considerate, 2) women should know more about their own bodies and not leave the responsibility to men, 3) the position coitus has as ‘real sex’ (the coitus imperative) should be challenged, since intercourse tends to result in a male orgasm, but not a female one.<sup>1</sup> How is the equality issue connected to orgasm handled when women have sex with women? Again I start the investigation with an explorative strategy. I analyze statements like ‘I had sex with her. She did not have sex with me’ and ‘If she’s aroused, then she’ll get’. The practice of taking turns in giving each other orgasm is also analyzed. I find that my interviewees were service oriented and reliable in producing orgasms, and that orgasm is usually a matter of reciprocity. There are, however, some cases in the interviews where I find the service orientation problematic, in the sense that ‘the provider’ gets no orgasmic pleasure in return. What is striking in these cases is that the *provider* is the more sexually *dominant* in the relation. That is, my investigation shows that ‘masculine’ lesbians more than ‘feminine’ lesbians are in risk of becoming service oriented to an extent that raises feminist concern about equality. The chapter also contains an analysis of penetration in lesbian relations. It is common to ascribe symbolic power to the penetrator. In the interview material I have, this is more likely when penetration is executed with tools, than when it is executed with hands. It is argued that penetration with hands in most cases, not always, has less of symbolic power attached. In any case, penetration is separated from the production of an orgasm, which is achieved with other or additional techniques. The first point of feminist critique was that men should be more considerate. I conclude that if the more masculine (butch) is in risk of anything, it is being *too* considerate. Regarding the second point, that women should know themselves better: double knowledge about the female body probably helps. Three, to challenge the coitus imperative: lesbians negotiate the coitus imperative actively and in a variety of ways (by rejecting, copying or playing on it), but it does not stand in the way of the production of orgasms on both sides.

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<sup>1</sup> These advises coincides with those from sexologists.

## Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity

The analyses in the four foregoing chapters are brought together here. The term 'lesbian specificity', searched for as part of the analytical approach, is now exploited as the synthesizing term. Theoretically, the study is based on assumptions that do not ascribe an inner lesbian essence to individuals with lesbian desire. This is already made clear in the chapter about the term 'sexuality'. However, 'specificity' here becomes central to such an extent, that I have found it necessary to convey a discussion about essentialism connected to 'specificity' in particular. I base the discussion mainly on the ideas of Teresa de Lauretis and Dorte Marie Søndergaard. I use a notion of essentialism that makes it possible to delimit and talk about a lesbian existence, a lesbian specificity, in a dominantly heterosexual culture. However, this is a specificity that constantly undergoes changes, a specificity interwoven with the main socio-erotic culture.

The analytical approach is to work the issue of specificity through two terms: 'modalities' and 'effects' of reworking heterosexual power domains. I conclude that eroticism in the mainstream culture, based on the power difference between masculinity and femininity and represented by signs with reference to the phallic symbolic, is in play in lesbian practices. This is especially evident in the chapters about 'to take' and about masculinity. The theoretical understanding of the phallic signification is based on reworking of psychoanalysis, where the phallus is theorized as non-paternal and transferable from one woman to the other. The analysis of prostitution and the analysis of the sociality of an orgasm contribute in a different manner to 'specificity'. I argue that these cases demonstrate that power issues are negotiated with a more fair result than suggested by the critique of heterosexual discourse. A short description of the synthesis based on this is that lesbian specificity, in a symbolic and social sense, is an erotic specificity marked by flexible power exchange.

The chapter contains a discussion of possible political effects arising from the recognition of the specificity to lesbian sexual dynamics. The question is *first* about direct political influence. Do the heterosexual society have something to learn from lesbian practices? A simple answer is that there is not much to learn on a symbolic level since lesbians as well as heterosexuals exploit the eroticism of the distinction between masculinity and femininity. There could be more to learn when it comes to the more practical results of the negotiations of power. A lesbian exchange of power seems to be typical, and the result of negotiations rather democratic. A *second* aspect of possible effects is given more attention. What are the ontological (subversive, queer) effects of lesbianism? Or, does the existence of a lesbian specificity have the potential of challenging the ways we think and experience sexuality? I demonstrate on the basis of the empirical study, how lesbian specificity challenge binary thinking and asks for ontological status.



## **Epilogue**

The outset for the reflections in this final chapter is in the discussion of ontological issues in the previous one. The greatest frustration in the project has been the feeling of being trapped in discourse and language. Are there other words to use than 'women' and 'men', 'masculinity' and 'femininity', 'give' and 'take', 'have control' and 'relinquish control', 'active' and 'passive'? Are there signifiers other than those that have as their fulcrum phallic power difference? Are there other discourses to relate to than the 'romantic', the 'heterosexual', the 'homosexual'? In terms of symbolizing, describing and analyzing, can we find ways that better mediate the sensation sex sometimes is? The chapter discusses efforts made by other feminists to go beyond empirical evidence and the well-known terms in the field of sexuality studies.

## **Guidance**

A guidance for reading this text fast and still get something out of it, is to read Chapter 1: Introduction, the final part of chapter 3 about methodology, where I sketch out the analytical approach related to the project goal, and Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity where the reader gets the major points in the analysis and also my reflections on what this might mean for theory, public debate and societal change.



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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

People have asked me what this study is about, and often I have said that it is about power and sexual desire. It has not failed; everyone gets the association of sexual harassment and abuse. I *do* discuss subordination in sexual relations, where power is understood as the power to exploit another being for the sexual pleasure of ones own, the power to exploit. I also discuss power and sexuality as a historical and structural issue, where some norms and structures are more for the benefit of some people than for others. This classical sociological understanding of power represents one form power can take, which is empirically investigated in this project. However, power understood as the *power to produce pleasure*, is also a central aspect of power in this project. This last aspect of power is conceived of as the motion between taking control and giving up control for the sexual benefit of the involved parts. I am not focusing in particular on the specific kind of power play that characterizes sado-masochism (s&m),<sup>1</sup> but socio-erotic power regardless of identification with s&m. Thus, power will be seen as productive, with a potential to produce subordination as well as pleasure. In two empirical chapters (chapter 4 and 5), special attention is given to the power of the phallic symbolic, where the phallic is understood as giving meaning to eroticity in contemporary Western societies. Each empirical chapter investigates separate and *concrete power issues* connected to sexuality.

Some will object to using the word ‘power’ since it has all its negative connotations. I use the term ‘power’ mostly because I want contribute to research and debates that already address ‘power’, especially power as it revolves around the binaries man-woman, masculinity-femininity. That is; contemporary theorizing and debate has a language that I have felt necessary to speak. We certainly could need other terms and phrases to set new agendas for the debates about sexuality, and this will often be pointed to in the analysis and discussions in this text. I will discuss this to a greater length later.

Within feminist studies sexuality and power is most often explored in a heterosexual context, and the debates are grounded on the sexual difference between women and men. The power *problem* is then seen as the power men have over women. I want to discuss sexuality within a lesbian context. It may sound paradoxical to some, that the sexual

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<sup>1</sup> In the concept ‘s&m’ is included what commonly is called dominance versus submissiveness (D/s), leather, and bondage practices.

difference then should be one between women and women. This is nevertheless how I understand sexual desire; sexual desire is understood in terms of eroticized sexual difference also when it is homosexual. Desire is in this project perceived as a tension directed towards someone or something outside oneself. To experience this something or someone as 'outside' means that it the other has to be different to be distinguishable, also when it is two women. The negotiations of power in the light of sexual difference between women, is my research topic.

There are different feminist approaches to the critique of the power men have over women in a sexual and erotic sense. Power and sexual desire is a contested issue within feminist thinking (Jackson and Scott 1996, Kitzinger 1987, Segal 1994, 1999, Snitow et al 1984). Within feminism two prominent questions are; is it possible to be a heterosexually practicing woman without being subordinate in some sense? Is eroticity exiting from the back door when equality between the sexes enters? Some have answered that heterosexuality is not compatible with feminism; lesbianism is the consequence of feminism. This view often goes together with an understanding of the erotic between women as being empty of power currency.

In Norway there is now hardly any debate within feminist studies about (hetero)sexual difference, power and the erotic. Karin Widerberg's book *Kunnskapens kjønn* (1995), Monica Rudberg's *Kjærlighetsartikler* (1997), Jorun Solheim's *Den åpne kroppen* (1998) and Anne Britt Flemmen's *Mellomromserfaringer* (1999), are books that had the potential to represent a restart of the debates that took place in the 1970's, but did not.<sup>2</sup> Lesbian s&m and the lesbian subcultural return to images of the butch-femme dynamic,<sup>3</sup> have triggered and informed the debate, seen by some as mere reproductions of heterosexual power inequality (far from an ideal power-free female exchange), and by others as exciting and as promising erotic possibilities for women having sex with other women (for different positions see Harris and Crocker 1997, Hart 1996, Jeffreys 1990, Kennedy and Davis 1993, Lützen 1987, Nestle 1987, 1992). If these debates were not important in academia, they were certainly important in the Norwegian women's movement, especially in

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<sup>2</sup> Marianne Gullestad and Tordis Borchgrevink had equality, inequality and the erotic as central issues in earlier works (Gullestad 1984, Borchgrevink 1989). Borchgrevink points to the equality problem in the field of the heterosexually erotic, suggesting comparative studies of homosexual relations.

<sup>3</sup> For the reader who is not familiar with the term 'butch-femme', it is explained on the first and second page of *Chapter 5: Masculinity in erotic play between women*.

the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's.<sup>4</sup> Organizations were split on sexuality issues. Feminist academia has been less engaged in the questions about the erotic and the sexes, even if there have been some contributions as mentioned. The debates are missing. The aim for this study is to trigger the public and academic debate about sexuality and power, by offering perspectives from a lesbian-based position. More concretely, by presupposing a lesbian sexual difference, and the negotiation of power difference in a socio-erotic sense between women.

In this project lesbian negotiations of power issues are studied on the basis of how *I have learned to know power and equality domains from a feminist critique of heterosexual discourse*. I do *not* compare lesbian power negotiations with the power negotiations of those who live their lives as heterosexuals. Very early in the project, I made the choice that I would not interview heterosexuals, but use feminist critique (politics and scholarship) as a backdrop and a source from which I could pick relevant power issues to discuss in a new context. Feminists have pointed to some of the power aspects of the heterosexual erotic, and in my interviews I find similar issues on a lesbian agenda. Four issues captured my attention in particular: that some informants said that they sexually 'take' their partner, that so many of them expressed attraction to women who show signs of masculinity, lesbian prostitution, and last but not least; the sociality of the production of an orgasm. Orgasmic one-sidedness and service orientation is the topic of the fourth empirical chapter. To have the feminist critique as an outset for the analysis means a focus on different aspects of power in each analytical case. The analytical approach is in principle the same in every empirical chapter; to see how lesbians relate to, negotiate, copy and rework power domains in heterosexual discourse.

The power aspect of the verb 'to take' is embedded in the right the 'taker', usually a man, has to get what he sexually wants. The analysis in chapter 4 of how some lesbians use the verb 'to take' in a sexual sense, is an examining of what actually happens when a woman takes another woman. The symbolic effect of using this word, so easily associated with male power over women, is especially addressed. In chapter 5 about signs of masculinity, the symbolic aspects are the main focus. Masculine symbols are from a feminist viewpoint often connected to having power

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<sup>4</sup> For an illustration of the topics under debate, see the preparatory material for a conference about pornography in Trondheim, October 1990. 21 contributions in an ongoing debate in the Norwegian newspaper Klassekampen are commented. The material is available by contacting Kvinnefronten, Trondheim.

ambitions. How can the lesbian use of masculine symbols be interpreted? The search for an answer is in the position masculinity ('the phallic') still occupies as the main signifier of desire in Western culture.

The *social* aspects of reworking, perceived as analytically distinguishable from the symbolic aspects, is the main focus in the empirical analysis of prostitution in chapter 6, and also in chapter 7 about the production of an orgasm in un-paid relations. Classic feminist critique of prostitution is that prostitution is degrading for the female sex-worker. The power structures of sex sales makes women (and children of both sexes) extremely vulnerable and exposed for exploitation and violence. Is the same critique apt when there are adult women on both sides of the transaction? Several questions are investigated and discussed to suggest characteristic features of the social aspects of this trade. The orgasm that is *not* paid for with money or gifts, is the analytical object of the fourth empirical analysis. As with prostitution, one-sidedness and sexual service is an issue and again the social aspects in terms of possible subordination is shed light on and discussed. What is the outcome of negotiations between women?

In chapter 8, the empirical analysis is extracted and synthesized in the term 'lesbian specificity'. This term is then applied for an analysis of possible *effects* of lesbian desire and practice. Here, 'effects' means direct political effects, and also more fundamental theoretical effects, in terms of altering the concepts with which we experience and think sexuality. This will of course be a most central topic with regards to the aim for the project; to contribute to the debate about power and sexuality. What can be learned from lesbian practices? Is the lesbian existence of any importance for a dominantly heterosexual culture, and in what ways?

I should give a warning regarding the term 'lesbian specificity', because the use of it already in the first analytical chapter otherwise might be confusing. Lesbian specificity is not *only* a way of synthesizing, even if this is the main purpose of introducing such a term. It is also central in the *analytical approach* to power negotiations in the four empirical chapters. The main analytical approach in this study is to *search for the specificity of lesbian sexual desire in the reworking of heterosexual power domains*. That is; 'lesbian specificity' serves as a means of synthesizing the empirical analysis, *and* the existence of a lesbian specificity is also presupposed in the analytical approach. I will emphasize that this must not be read as a search for the final truth about lesbianism. Rather, it should be read more pragmatically as the grip on



the empirical material that is chosen in this investigation. One disadvantage is that *the variations* in the lesbian negotiations are paid less attention in the synthesis.

The text has eight regular chapters, whereof this is the first, and an epilogue. The second chapter gives the theoretical framework for the project, especially how the concept 'sexuality' is understood as a socio-cultural term that needs to be historicized, *and* how it is understood as a human practice with individual psychological significance. One could say that the project theoretically draws on poststructural, and even 'queer' strategies for empirical social science, since theoreticians like Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis are important contributors. However, it might be that my inclination to make general analytical statements disturbs the picture in this respect, such that a more apt label would be 'a queer contribution to feminist studies'. A 'general analytical statement' is for instance expressed through the synthesizing term 'lesbian specificity'. In the third chapter about methodology and methods, the project is seen in relation to several debates about what social science can be. Chapter 3 reflects the dilemma between a poststructural (queer) theoretical foundation and a wish to take the researcher's authority to generalize. I seek to solve it in this text in three steps. Firstly, by making visible the research process, to make the reader as prepared as possible for judging the analysis, discussions and suggestions. Secondly, by taking a position in debates about general validity, reliability and the potential for generalization. The third step is not contained in the methodology chapter, but will come in each of the four analytical chapters that follow after it. I investigate quite diverse issues, exploits different materials, and have thus chosen to have separate discussions of generalization in each analytical case. In the synthesizing chapter *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity* that follows after the analytical chapters (already briefly described), generalization is again a concern. Here are two main issues. One is the risk of 'essentialism' embedded in the use of a term like 'lesbian specificity'. Is it not too much associated with the existence of a 'inner truth about the lesbian', and the drawing of a distinct line between hetero and homo, when I otherwise deconstruct this distinction? The answer could be 'yes', but it could also be 'no'. Hopefully the last part of the chapter proves that a delimitation of the specifically lesbian is needed for a discussion of effects, when the ambition is to base such a discussion on empirical analysis, not only on theory. The epilogue addresses the limitations in language for theorizing and experiencing the sexual, and elaborate on some alternatives to the symbols and concepts used in the empirical analysis.

## CHAPTER 2: SEXUALITY – WHERE INNER AND OUTER WORLDS MEET

In the last hundred years of western culture, certain aspects of being human are understood as *sexuality*. Most people, both learned and laymen, think and feel that this sexuality has existed through all times and is the most natural of all there is and ever was. The diversity of phenomena that the concept covers is neither randomly nor consciously chosen but is on the other hand no more ‘naturally’ given than are the ethical, political and moral values ascribed to the phenomenon. Sexuality is a real fiction of tremendous psychological, socio-cultural and political importance. It is a complex phenomenon.

Between partners and friends, and when sexuality is on the agenda in the media and in education, usually it has to do with the body. It is about what we do with our bodies, it is about genitals, hands, sense organs for looking, smelling, tasting etc. How individuals experience themselves as sexual persons in a bodily sense varies considerably, and makes the psychological and socio-psychological aspects also important. The impact on one’s sexuality that a childhood of sexual abuse has, is different from that of a childhood surrounded by responsible and caring adults. Sexuality is colored by both pain and pleasure, by feelings of inadequacy and blissful satisfaction. We are advised in talking about sexuality to make the most out of it. However, the term ‘sexuality’ not only contains the personal and private sphere between individuals. Sexuality is also legislation and organization of areas as contraception, abortion, marriage and domestic partnership, insemination, different sexualities, education, counseling, pornography, and commercial sex. Other important facets involve scientific ideas, film and fiction; how we theorize and how we create images of sexuality. Indeed, we would have had no ‘sexuality’ were it not for *the idea* about it, and the politics conducted in the name of sexuality. In this chapter I develop a notion of sexuality that seeks to account for all these features of the phenomenon, and connect it to the empirical analysis in this project.

My interviews are narratives about what women *do* and how they think about it. I need a notion of sexuality that takes care of the aspect of ‘practicing sex’. The interviews are interpreted in a historical and cultural context. Secondly, I thus need a notion of sexuality that allows me to see practices, not only as the likes and dislikes of individuals, but also as reflections and negotiations of ideas, practices and institutions that are dominant or at least available in contemporary culture. These features are what I have called the ‘discursive aspects’ of sexuality.

Thirdly, there is the question of sexuality and individual psychology. This chapter also scrutinizes the possible usefulness of psychoanalysis, and an account of two contributions that I understand as fundamental reworkings of classic psychoanalytical theory. The ideas of Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis are central to the interpretation of the *psycho-symbolic* representation of masculinity in the lesbian erotic. Finally, these aspects of sexuality come together in a social and psychological dynamic ‘movement’: sexual structuring. The idea is to see sexuality as flexible and changeable in the life of an individual as well as in culture. Sexuality is in this project understood as a continuous process of sexual structuring, a negotiation of inner and outer worlds.

### **Sexuality as practice and lived experience**

The Swedish sociologist Gisela Helmius has this to say in her study of adolescent sexuality:

‘Humans have from before birth, the physiological presuppositions required to experience the realization of sexual desire. However, no particular *values* connected to the variety of physiological sexual reactions are contained by this *biological* determined system. The *social* expressions of sexuality – when, where, how, why and with whom – depend on culture, differ between societies and vary over time. Certain values and meanings are attributed to physiological sexual reactions’ (Helmius 1990, p5, my translation).

The distinction between biology (physiological presuppositions, biological determined system) and culture (values connected, social expressions) is central to this line of argument. Such and similar distinctions (nature-culture, body-mind dichotomies, etc) are not as easy to make as they once were. Within feminist studies this is especially manifested in the debate over the sex-gender distinction (Butler 1993a, Haraway 1991, Moi 1998). I agree with those who say that nothing can be altogether biological, disconnected from historical and social contexts and unmediated by language and interpretation, and I will return to this. However, to understand the biological as culture and vice versa, should not prevent us from having a conversation about sexuality as physicality and ‘body-cultural’ practice. When I talked with my informants in the research interviews, we spoke about sexuality as experiences and desires of bodily significance.

Psychologist Elsa Almås and physician Esben Benestad, well known Norwegian sexologists, have written a handbook of sexology. The aim of the book is to inform others who are professionally interested to help clients to get more pleasure out of sex. For this they need a practice-oriented understanding of sexuality. Sexuality is seen as something we do to ourselves or in encounters with others. They give the following clarification of the terms 'sex' and 'sexuality', which they use interchangeably:

'In this book sex and sexuality will be used as collective terms for onanism, masturbation and petting, and as terms for the emotions, acts and incentives<sup>5</sup> related to sexual intercourse<sup>6</sup> between human beings' (Almås and Benestad 1997, p53-54, my translation).

If they had written in English, Almaas and Benestad would not have conflated the terms sex and sexuality. 'Sex' is in Norwegian used exclusively in the realm of the erotic. We have the term 'kjønn' to communicate anatomical body differences, and the same word for gender differences, a term which the authors indeed discuss in other parts of the the book.

From Almaas and Benestad I have taken my understanding of the term *to have sex*, a practice-oriented term, but a term that is not concurrent with sexual practice. In this text the latter is *also* used with the broader meaning of 'practices that are about sex', thereby containing cultural aspects of sexuality. Hermius above, used the term 'expressions of sexuality' for the practice aspect, which will be done sometimes here too. And from the British sociologist Gail Hawkes we get yet another practice-term: 'expression of sexual desire'. Hawkes reflects upon words and meanings in *A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality* (1996). Like Hermius, she starts with the physical body:

'Biological sex is allocated by the possession of definitive physical and physiological 'markers': externally, genitalia, penis, testes, vagina, clitoris; internally, verifiable uterus, ovaries, vas deferens, prostate gland. Non-microscopic yet equally discernible chromosomes and hormones, again (though now less definitively) provide biochemical support for these categories. Yet the meanings given to these anatomical distinctions have a social origin' (Hawkes 1996, p7).

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<sup>5</sup> 'tilskyndelser' translated with incentives

<sup>6</sup> 'seksuelt samkvem'

Different constructions of sex are possible, based on the ‘possession of definitive physical and physiological markers’. In a historical perspective we have seen several, and Hawkes here makes references to the work of Thomas Lacquer. The physically sexed body is one thing, but what about the *sexually desiring* body? She continues:

‘But how have the connections been made, connections which are of such import, between the possession of particular organs – which, as human physiology will illustrate, share very similar response characteristics – and expressions of sexual desire? For the anxieties or the celebrations which accompany social attitudes to sex and sexuality do not have their centre in the intrinsic qualities of bodily parts, but their deployment in expressions of sexual desire. Yet such expressions cannot, in the commonsense view, even in the writing of some scholarship, be seen to be synonymous with ‘sexuality’. For if sexuality were simply defined and understood as the mode of expression of sexual desire, then the largely intact connection between sex and gender would be severed, and the grounding of sexuality in behavior alone would be challenged’ (Hawkes 1996, p8).

According to Hawkes we cannot delimit sexuality to modes of expression of sexual desire (sexual behavior). As I understand Hawkes here, expressions of sexual desire are manifold and diverse. If sexuality were this practice, the link between sex and gender (read as cultural aspects of physical sex) would have been manifold as well. But, according to Hawkes, this is usually not the case (a great majority of individuals who look like men, actually have a penis, my comment). I agree with Hawkes that there is more to sexuality than expressions of desire. There are theoreticians who claim that sex and sexuality regulate us. I agree with Judith Butler who says that ‘sex’ has ‘the power to produce-demarcate, circulate, differentiate-the bodies it controls (1993a, p1).

### **Sexuality as discourse**

This paragraph is organized as follows: first I explore some basic concepts that are crucial in discursive gender analysis. I will then apply them more concretely in the realm of sexuality, which means perspectives on sexuality that some scholars prefer to denote as ‘queer theory’.

### Discourse, language, difference and deconstruction

Michel Foucault is a prominent theorist and frequently referred to when social scientists use discursive approaches. Foucault rejects an understanding of reality as something essential, a core truth to be revealed by science. Rather, truth and reality are discursively produced through processes of powers of definition. This does not mean that reality is non-existent, but that the main topic for scrutiny is how we have come to give something the status of truth. A discourse is a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs. Its meaning is elaborated through conflict and the power to define, which since the Enlightenment also implies scientific claims to knowledge. Discourses are not only to be read in written texts, but also in organizations and institutions. Discursive fields overlap and compete; in some cases they confirm one another mutually, such that some cultural phenomena seem self-evident and beyond invention (Foucault 1978).

Heterosexuality as a cultural norm is an illustrative example of a discourse that contains all the above characteristics. I will return to this later under the heading ‘heteronormativity’, since this is central to the analyses in this study. Another discourse of importance in this project is ‘the discourse of sex and romance’. Women in particular are in Western societies the bearers of ideas and practices that connect expressions of sexual desire with the loving relationship between two individuals. As will be demonstrated in the analysis of lesbian prostitution, this makes it difficult to even get sight of the female customer in commercial sex.

The American historian Joan Scott made an influential contribution to feminist discourse theory in 1988 with her article *Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference. Or, the Uses of Poststructural Theory for Feminism* (Scott 1988). In addition to ‘discourse’ she here gives prominence to the terms ‘language’, ‘difference’ and ‘deconstruction’ as useful terms for feminist theory. Far from being simply a vocabulary shared by a given group of individuals, language is conceived as a system that constitutes meaning.

‘... that is, any system – strictly verbal or other – through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices organized and by which, accordingly, people represent and understand their world, including who they are and how they relate to others....Without attention to language and the process by which meaning and

categories are constituted, one only imposes oversimplified models on the world, models that perpetuate conventional understandings rather than open up new interpretive possibilities' (Scott 1988, p34-35).

Not only would much be gained by reading *written* texts within this perspective on language. In this connection 'text' is utterances of any kind, included cultural practices. And of course, my interviews are texts. Language will be of special importance in *Chapter 4: When women take*, where the use of the verb 'take' in a lesbian context is read in the light of its meaning in the mainstream culture. And also, language is important because it is determining for the analytical concepts I use. When for instance I see homosexual desire related to the heterosexual, I have already set analytical premises that easily may preclude the possibility of other desires and practices than the ones already discursively given as a binary concept. I will return to this at several points below in this chapter, and also in the course of analysis.

'Difference' is the third term Joan Scott accounts for as useful to feminist theory, and she regards it as a dimension of poststructural<sup>7</sup> analyses of language. Meaning is made through contrasting: a positive definition is based on the negation or repression of something represented as antithetical to it:

'Any analysis of meaning involves teasing out these negations and oppositions, figuring out how (and whether) they are operating in specific contexts. Opposition rest on metaphors and cross-references, and often in patriarchal discourse, sexual difference (the contrast masculine-feminine) serves to encode or establish meanings that are literally unrelated to gender or the body. In that way, the meanings of gender become tied to many kinds of cultural representations, and these in turn establish terms by which relations between women and men are organized and understood' (Scott 1988, p37).

According to this, binaries are not oppositions, but first of all interdependently linked terms. With references to Jacques Derrida and

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<sup>7</sup> Scott's article is, as the title indicates, a discussion of poststructural theory and its uses in feminist theory. I will not discuss the containment, history and debates over the term 'poststructural theory'. I am pragmatic in relation to labeling my work as a member of this or that category. However, my theoretical foundation and analytical approach owes much to what is often labeled poststructural and queer.

Elizabeth Grosz, Scott asserts that fixed interdependent oppositions are hierarchically arranged, with one term dominant or prior. Binaries should not be considered exhaustive. Since they contain knowledge about how meaning is produced, they must be 'deconstructed' to understand their process of production. 'Deconstruction', Scott says, again with reference to Derrida:

'... involves analyzing the operations of difference in texts, the ways in which meanings are made to work. The method consists of two related steps: the reversal and displacement of binary oppositions. This double process reveals the interdependence of seemingly dichotomous terms and their meaning relative to particular history. It shows them to be not natural but constructed oppositions, constructed for particular purposes in particular contexts' (Scott 1988, p37).

Joan Scott relies upon Barbara Johnson in her formulation of claims about differences *within* entities:

'The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the working of differences much harder to pin down. The differences *between* entities...are shown to be based on a repression of differences *within* entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself (...) The 'deconstruction' of a binary opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values of differences: it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of a binary opposition' (Johnson quoted in Scott 1988, p38).

Joan Scott demonstrates the relevance of poststructural approaches by analyzing a trial in an American courtroom. Two feminist historians testified on opposite sides in a case in which a company was charged with breaching the law against sex discrimination. Basically, they disagreed on the understanding of why men and women have different positions in corporate life. And following from this: is the struggle for equality between the sexes a struggle for a society where gender differences is irrelevant/non-existing *or* is it a struggle for the acceptance of women as different from men? Scott here analyses the debate that in short is called 'equality versus difference' debate. She illustrates how the dichotomy works to constrain and construct specific meanings, and how it structures an impossible choice. Instead of being trapped in this binary form, she suggests the critical examination of the very terms. Deconstruction of binaries is important in all parts of this project. Both



theoretically and analytically I question the distinction between masculinity and femininity, and heterosexual versus homosexual. Furthermore, I deconstruct phenomena that have a certain history and interpretation in a heterosexual context, by investigating them within a lesbian sexual dynamic. An example here is 'sexual service', that usually in the feminist critique of heterosexuality is seen as subordinating for women, since they most often are the ones to execute the service so as to pleasure men sexually. I ask, can sexual service in other contexts be liberating? And in that case, how can we speak it?

The main focus for this project is not the forming of the subject, how we become subjects in the world. Nevertheless, this will sometimes be part of the analysis, and I will comment briefly on how it is understood in this study. Sexual subjection is embedded in the notion of 'sexual structuring', outlined in the last part of this chapter. Subjectivity is conceived as being assumed in a process of negotiations with culture, and the subject might even be seen as spoken into existence through culture. I use Judith Butler's reflections on subjectivity as constructed, to theoretically reflect upon the possibilities for the disruptions, the breaks, and the fissures in language, in discourse, and dichotomies. This will be central in the discussion about possible changes in heterosexual discourse. Butler's focus is on the erasures and exclusions through which this subject-construction operates. She states that an inquiry into *the exclusions* will make it clear that the forming of the subject can be thought of neither by means of essentialist nor constructionist perspectives. 'For', as Butler says:

'there is an «outside» to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute «outside», an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse; as a constitutive 'outside' it is that which can only be thought - when it can - in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders. The debate between constructivism and essentialism thus misses the point of deconstruction altogether for the point has never been that «everything is discursively constructed»; that point, when and where it is made, belongs to a kind of discursive monism or linguisticism that refuses the constitutive force of exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, abjection and its disruptive return within the very terms of discursive legitimacy' (Butler 1993a, p8).

For my project this would imply that to approximate heterosexuality as a discursively constructed field must also contain as part of the analysis, the exclusions, erasures, etc that represent the constitutive outside of the

discourse. That is needed because the field of abjections will have its disruptive return within the law of the discourse. Without recognizing and giving an account for the abjected (deconstruction), the understanding of compulsory heterosexuality<sup>8</sup> and the potential for change will be incomprehensible. If we now replace ‘heterosexuality as a discursively constructed field’, with ‘lesbianism as a discursively constructed field’ it will go like this: to approximate lesbian sexuality as a discursively constructed field must also contain as part of the analysis, the exclusions, erasures, etc which represent the constitutive outside of the discourse, because the field of abjections will have its disruptive return within the law of the discourse. That is, we cannot understand lesbianism without analyzing the processes of abjected heterosexuality. The ambition in this project is to say something about both of these processes of abjection and return.

#### Queer theory - discursive perspectives on sexuality

Discursive (poststructural) approaches to sexuality are these days usually put into the category ‘Queer Studies’ and their theoretical foundations into the category of ‘Queer Theory’. The term ‘queer’ was originally an insulting term for homosexual men and women in the USA and England. Activists removed it from the terminology in the 1970’s, and would use ‘gay’ instead. In the 1990’s ‘queer’ has been reestablished, and this time used with pride, both as a term connected to the discussion of identity and identity politics, and for academic critical strategies (Kulick 1996). Queer theory, or perhaps better; queer strategies,<sup>9</sup> is obviously in progress as an apparently uniform theory. Some would say this is disquieting. Judith Butler says in an interview:

‘I remember sitting next to someone in a dinner party, and he said that he was working on queer theory. And I said: What’s queer theory? He looked at me like I was crazy, because he evidently thought that I was part of this thing called queer theory. But all I knew was that Teresa de Lauretis had published an issue of the

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Compulsory heterosexuality’ is seen as synonymous with ‘heteronormativity’, which will be explained.

<sup>9</sup> Dorthe Gert Simonsen and Christel Stormhøj use the term ‘kritiske strategier’ (critical strategies) with regards to poststructuralism. This I find productive as a collective term (Simonsen 1996, Stormhøj 1999). In the book *Kønnets grænser*, Simonsen motivates the term: poststructuralism are strategies that seek to demonstrate how truth is produced, rather than to formulate theories about truth behind representations (Simonsen 1996b, p7, my translation). The same argument is just as relevant with regards to queer theory.

journal *Differences* called «Queer Theory». I thought it was something she had put together. It certainly never occurred to me that I was part of queer theory. I have some problems here because I think there's some anti-feminism in queer theory. Also, insofar as some people in queer theory want to claim that the analysis of sexuality can be radically separated from the analysis of gender, I'm very much opposed to them' (Butler in interview with Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, Osborne and Segal 1993).

Butler is saying at least two things here: people are beginning to interpret her work as integral to a stream called 'queer theory'. She recalls having heard the label, but does not identify with it. She is concerned about the tendency of anti-feminism and the radical separation of sexuality and gender that seems to be part of queer theory. In the interview, Judith Butler mentions Teresa de Lauretis, a literature and film critic also frequently referred to in queer studies. de Lauretis states that the concept 'queer theory' 'has quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry' (de Lauretis 1994b, p297). The historian David M. Halperin, expresses skepticism towards the efforts to make queer theory house-trained with regards to the academic contexts: '... the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer «queer theory» can plausibly claim to be' (Halperin 1995, p113). I share such views, and also the caution given by the British literature historian Tamsin Spargo when she reminds us that queer theory, like other theoretical approaches, is best understood in '... Foucauldian terms as part of a dynamic network of different but overlapping fields of knowledge and discursive practice' (Spargo 1999, p42).<sup>10</sup>

These are kinds of critical reflections that not only apply to queer theory, but also to poststructural strategies in general. Michel Foucault, together with Judith Butler, is probably the name most often referred to by scholars who identify with poststructuralism. According to the Norwegian literature critique Eivind Røssaak, neither Michel Foucault nor several other French theorists called or call themselves poststructuralists or postmodernists. The labels are too much of an American construction (Røssaak 1998, p20). Some even questions the novelty value of these new strategies. The Norwegian anthropologist Jorun Solheim invites us to acknowledge previously developed theoretical and methodological positions. In her opposition to the Danish researcher Dorte Marie Søndergaard (self-identified poststructuralist), she mentions semiotics, the philosophy of language and anthropology as

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<sup>10</sup> For further critique, see also Grosz 1994b, fn3, p153-154

examples of disciplines where poststructural approaches were used long before the concept existed (Solheim and Søndergaard 1996). In the introduction to her book *Den åpne kroppen* (1998) she is no less critical.

My own position is that I find the development of queer theory, which I rather understand as queer strategies, proliferating in sexuality studies. I identify to a large extent with this stream of theoretical and empirical work. On the other hand, I am critical of the attempts to present queer theory as a unified body of scholarship. If we can talk about a specificity of ‘the queer’ at all, part of the specificity must be that it is a broad and manifold contribution that resists normalization and respectability. And of course, queer theory has a historicity that is deeply rooted in the history of all critical theory. As I said in the introduction, I prefer to see this text as a queer contribution to feminist studies. With these critical considerations and cautions in mind, I will give an account of elements in queer theorizing that are useful for my work. The prominent topic in queer theory is to criticize the hegemony of heterosexuality, to theorize the position heterosexuality has as ‘nature’ beyond ‘culture’, and discuss the normative effects upon society and individuals. This complex issue is often called ‘heteronormativity’ (or ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, Rich 1983).

### Heteronormativity

Don Kulick claims that what unifies the different perspectives within queer theory are that heterosexuality is regarded as a problem that needs explanation. He continues:

‘Instead of being persuaded by the stories heterosexuality repeats about itself, different queer perspectives ask: Why is it that heterosexuality believes that it is natural and original? Why does it have this strong need to convince about its self-evidence? And, by the way, what *is* heterosexuality after all? How is its history? How is it organized? How is it performed? How is it experienced? And to what degree and how is it dependent on homosexuality to be existent and persuasive at all? By asking such questions, queer scholars have created a totally new object for investigation, namely heterosexuality’ (Kulick 1996, p10, my translation).

This is to investigate and seek to denaturalize heterosexuality instead of unilaterally treating homosexuality as the object of scrutiny and explanation (and of juridical and medical measures). The theorization of heteronormativity is often based on the works of Judith Butler.

To Butler, heterosexuality and the individual assumption of one of two sexes and genders are linked in the process of becoming an intelligible human being in this culture. Heteronormativity and the 'normalcy' of categorizing individual human beings into two sexes are the effects of this process, rather than the cause. The law of normative heterosexuality is embedded in the process of making sexed subjects; failing to conform means to be abjected and culturally un-readable, culturally unintelligible. The construction of sexed subjects operates through the reiteration of norms. Every reiteration means a possible failure, so sex and sexuality are both produced and possibly destabilized in this operation. It is the ritualized practice of repetition that makes sex emerge as natural (Butler 1993a, p10).

Heteronormativity implies that sex and heterosexuality emerge as natural through repetition. One can argue that the effects of such ritualized repetition are the division of human beings into two sexes, heterosexually defined, and that this appears to be of pure nature, beyond change. At the same time, these effects *produce* 'the law' as a law pertaining to a natural state. In a country like Norway one can obtain a dispensation from 'the law' and, for instance, exercise one's right to a domestic jural partnership for homosexuals. However, this does not necessarily change 'the law'. Another example is that the majority of Norwegian women, despite the increased opportunities to 'arrange their lives according to their own preferences', continue to adopt a traditional model (Haavind 1998, p252). Haavind says:

'To tolerate lesbian relationships, to respect the voluntarily childless, and to accept separation as a not too difficult way out of a failed relationship, are all important ingredients in constructing the trajectories of the majority of women who are guided by personal choice' (Haavind 1998, p252).

As I understand Haavind here, there are still hegemonic patterns in the gendering of the Norwegian society, but contemporary young women present this as consciously made *choices*. There are therefore alternative routes that most young women do not choose, even if they consider it. This opens up for, among other things, a tolerance of lesbianism, which of course does not mean that heterosexuality is denaturalized. Is 'the law' changeable at all, or is this pure determinism? Later in this chapter I return to the more psychological aspects of this, and in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity* discuss it theoretically and empirically. However,

some general theoretical remarks about cultural change seem apt here. Judith Butler puts it this way:

‘As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the *deconstituting* possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which ‘sex’ is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of ‘sex’ into a potentially productive crisis ’ (Butler 1993a, p10)

Sex is both produced and destabilized in the process of reiteration. The effect of the reiteration is a sexing of the culture that seems to be natural. To reiterate is also to be threatened by failure and shortcoming; sex is not something natural that comes by itself; it requires work and one risk both success and failure. In the case of homosexuals, feminine men and masculine women for instance, the process is obviously only incomplete, however, most important, *this is what it always will be*. The straightest individual with apparently no gender confusion risks failure in the process of reiteration and confirmation of his or her gender position. The instability, the deconstituting possibility, the productive crises, do not, and this is important, *automatically* change the norm. ‘The structure of the demand that the law makes’ (Butler 1993a, p105), is not necessarily changed even when individuals ‘fail’, or societies fail (for instance by giving homosexuals equal rights). The norm continues to have regulative effects on individuals. It is the symbolic field that evades change, even when we get amnesty before the law. This is the main concern in this project, regarding ‘the queer’ and the potential for societal change. I will return to this issue in the course of what follows.

I explained in the introductory chapter how in my analysis I understand ‘power’ as the ability to subordinate others for one’s own sexual pleasure, but also to produce pleasure in a dynamic of taking control and giving up control. It will be demonstrated how this notion of power is given meaning *also* as a dynamic within *discourses* of power, as for instance in the chapter where I analyze a lesbian use of the concept ‘to take’ someone sexually. The women ‘take’ each other, but it is not just *any* ‘taking’. The verb has a meaning that is connected to power structures in heterosexual discourse. Michel Foucault is a prominent scholar on discourse and power. In volum one (1976) of his work

*Histoire de la sexualité*, translated into several different languages in the years that followed, we find a radically new analysis of power and also of how ‘power’ is central to the inauguration of ‘sexuality’ as a regulatory system in society (Foucault 1978). I will start with his understanding of ‘sexuality’, and proceed more specifically with his notion of ‘power’.

### ‘Sexuality’ in a Foucauldian sense

According to Foucault sexuality is a western invention that became an object for scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century. In his account, a ‘Scientia Sexualis’ based on a law of what is forbidden or permitted (useful), has replaced the former ‘ars erotica’, where truth is ‘drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience’ (Foucault 1978, p57). Already from the eighteenth century one can distinguish four power and knowledge strategies, that gradually developed coherence, effectiveness and productivity:

- a hysterization of women’s bodies – the female body was seen as being saturated with sexuality, integrated into the sphere of medicine as inherently pathological and placed in organic exchange with the social body
- a pedagogization of children’s sex - children indulge or are prone to indulge in sexually dangerous activity. Onanism was considered particularly bad, and parents and other educators were expected to prevent children from masturbating
- a socialization of procreative behavior – economical, political and medical socialization of (heterosexual) couples
- a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure – sexuality was seen as an autonomous, biological and psychic instinct, that could be played out according to normal manners. However, pathological incidents occurred, and became objects for treatment

These strategies are *not* a struggle against sexuality, an effort to gain control and more effective regulation over it, an attempt to mask unwanted aspects of sexuality, and it is *not* a way of formulating sexuality and acceptability. In Foucault’s argumentation, the four strategies were none of this.

‘In actual fact, what was involved, rather, was the very *production of sexuality* (my italics). Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is

the name that can be given to a historical construct:<sup>11</sup> not to a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formulation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power' (Foucault 1978, p105-106).

Foucault here describes sexuality as a historical device or apparatus, invented and constituted through the interweaving of distinguishable strategies and discourses. Furthermore, sexuality might be understood as 'the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology' (Foucault 1978, p127). When one's juices flow and one's heart beats and one engages in certain activities and relations with oneself or others, for specific reasons linked to technologies of power and knowledge this is called sexuality. The effects (the juices, the heartbeat, the things one does) confirm the existence of sexuality. These effects achieve the status of biology and nature and nothing to be historically or sociologically questioned. According to Foucault, this is how sexuality becomes sexuality, and heterosexuality becomes the one normal and natural form.

### Power and law

Power, for Foucault, is not to be understood in terms of formal laws, state sovereignty or mechanisms for obtaining subservient acquiescence. These are merely terminal forms power takes. 'It seems to me', he says:

'... that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional

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<sup>11</sup> David M. Halperin is not pleased with the English translation of the French 'dispositif' into 'construct'. Halperin suggests 'apparatus' or 'device' as relevant alternatives (Halperin 1995, fn6, p188). In the Norwegian translation from 1995, Espen Schaanning uses 'anordning', which should be very close to Halperin's suggestions (Foucault 1995, p117).



crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies' (Foucault 1978, p92-93).

That power is organized and outspoken is, according to Foucault, the least important feature. Power is everywhere, not because it consolidates everything 'under its invincible unity' (p93), but because power relations are moving substrata, that form and shape states of power that are both local and unstable.

As we saw, Judith Butler uses the term 'law' for the power of normative heterosexuality. She uses 'the law', 'the symbolic' and 'normative heterosexuality' interchangeably. 'The law' in Butler's *Bodies that matter* (1993a) is the structuring realm of symbols and norms that engender human subjects in such a way that the heterosexual relationship between the masculine man and the feminine woman seems natural. Other options will be repudiated on all levels of human activity. This law is, however, not to be perceived as fixed and already present, preceding the subject. Rather, in order to be a law it needs to be cited, and it gains its power from being cited.

Foucault and Butler both understand sex and sexuality as produced in the production of 'sexuality' as a regulatory regime. According to Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler adds a third term; gender. Grosz asserts that 'for Butler, performance is the term that mediates between sex and gender: gender is the performance of sex' (Grosz 1994b, p139). Grosz here ascribes to Butler an account of 'sex' as a pre-established foundation. Toril Moi on the other hand interprets Butler quite differently. According to her, Judith Butler is '... a person who believes that sex is an effect of gender and "regulatory discourses"' (Moi 1998 p83, my translation); that is: Grosz and Moi read Butler in fundamentally different ways. Or do they? Perhaps the most important feature of Butler's work is that she actually operates with a distinction between sex and gender even if she does not like it. Which one there is to be read as prior to the other may depend on what text of her you are referring to. Let us see what Judith Butler says in terms of her understanding of the relation between these two concepts:

'Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the

discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or a “natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive”, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts’ (Butler 1999, p11).

But, this does not mean, as I read her in other contexts, that gender precedes sex. Sex and gender are both effects of cultural processes that work to regulate what is to be conceived as human. This compels Grosz to say that the notion of ‘gender’ is irrelevant or redundant. I agree with both, but my practice will be to use both terms. When I use the term ‘sex’ it will be to indicate that it is primarily anatomical difference we are talking about. I use ‘gender’ when I find it irrelevant to distinguish between sex and gender, when I discuss sex in which aspects other than the anatomical and biological are central, or simply because in my mother tongue, Norwegian, sex and gender are not distinguished by two separate words.

What about sex/gender as a regulation, as normative, as law, and the potential for changes/subversion? According to the theoretical considerations above, sex and gender are creations that not only regulate individuals but also make these individuals human. This implies that we cannot even describe and talk about gender relations without reiterating the normativity embedded in the notions of sex and gender. How then is ‘resistance’ possible?<sup>12</sup>

This is a crucial question in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity*. Lesbians obviously resist normative heterosexuality by desiring women, and, as we shall see, by practicing sexuality in modes that is possible to delimit and describe. Since I analyze and describe this within the language that is accessible to me - a language that entails regulations of the phenomenon it seeks to describe - gender seems to escape from subversion. This is one major critique of queer perspectives, namely that change is impossible. Contrary to this view, another critique argues that change is perceived as too simple. One example is Judith Butler’s theory about performativity. In her book *Gender Trouble* she uses drag as a site for change. Her critics say that you cannot simply put a man on stage in a woman’s dress and expect society to change. In the preface to the 1999 edition, Judith Butler evaluates the reading and critique of this book. Here she says that no ‘revolution is possible without a radical shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real’ (Butler 1999, pxxiii). Applied

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Resistance’ understood not only as planned and conscious repelling of normative forces, but also as slippages in discourse etc.

in this context it means that when in my analysis of lesbian desire I have chosen an analytical term like ‘masculinity’, I have not made this ‘radical shift’. I have not explored other possible ‘realities’, and the revolution is now postponed. Subversiveness, resistance, change of existing orders and ‘laws’ are difficult matters, and their slipperiness will be demonstrated later, especially in a discussion about language and the use of analytical concepts. In the empirical analysis I use formulations like ‘heterosexuality inside of homosexuality’, ‘the binary hetero and homo dissolves’, and other formulations that indicate that linguistic distinctions are at stake. I will now present a ‘queer’ theoretical foundation for a perception of inside and outside as interwoven.

#### Inside and outside as mutually constitutive

Sigmund Freud wrote that not only is every human being capable of making a homosexual object-choice, they have ‘in fact made one in their unconscious’ (Freud 1977, p56). *Any* choice of sexual object is a result of ‘restriction in one direction or the other’ (p57). It is Freud’s position that psychoanalytic research is against ‘any attempt at separating off homosexuals from the rest of the mankind as a group of a special character’ (p56). His idea about mourning and melancholia, as they are interpreted by Judith Butler, entails a lost love (for instance the sexual object of the same sex) is internalized and becomes part of the ego. The lost ‘other’ is set up inside the ego, contributing to a new structure of identity (Butler 1999).

Judith Butler puts it this way:

‘In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, «inside» the subject as its own founding repudiation’ (Butler 1993a, p3).

Both Freud and Butler understand such processes of exclusion (loss) and identification as constitutive for gender and for the choice of object for one’s sexual desire.<sup>13</sup> Homosexuality is melancholically denied or preserved in the heterosexually framed production of gender. My

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<sup>13</sup> Unlike Freud, Butler does not see masculinity and femininity as ‘dispositions’ in the ego. To her this would be to accept the heterosexually framed ‘masculinity’ versus ‘femininity’ as part of identity in the outset. ‘Far from being foundational, these dispositions are the result of a process whose aim is to disguise its own genealogy’ (Butler 1999, p82).

understanding is that we can search for the excluded 'other' (it being a desire, a gender expression, an identity) within that which is the excluding entity.<sup>14</sup> As will be demonstrated later, the analytical approach in this study is to search for lesbian specificity as the reworking of heterosexual discourse, to search for the heterosexual within the homosexual. In a theoretical sense I understand 'the excluded' as being part of 'the inside', and that this is relevant for subjects as well as cultures. As already mentioned with reference to Butler: that which is excluded, foreclosed, and abjected, may have a disruptive return within the discursive legitimacy; homosexuality is within, and may even disrupt the heterosexual hegemony.

I have now given accounts of some of the terms and debates within queer theory. By referring to two examples I want to demonstrate how a queer strategy might change our approach to theorizing compared to how we are used to approach phenomena within the context of what is called 'gay and lesbian studies'.<sup>15</sup>

#### When 'queer' makes a difference

The first example is 'the closet'. In this project I use a notion of 'the closet' that is familiar from traditional gay and lesbian studies and from 'coming-out' stories. The 'closet' is here the secret place to hide when one is too afraid to inform those in one's surroundings about one's sexual preference. To be 'closeted' is not considered healthy and coming out often means an improvement in life quality. It is also understood as liberating for the individual and for others who need open gays and lesbians as role models. In the chapter about prostitution, the one who is selling sex is an 'open' lesbian, while the customers are in 'the closet'. Neither the customer nor the 'sex worker' wants the commercial aspect of the transaction to be known. For the closeted customer there is also a second secret; the homosexual character of the transaction. This, I argue, gives a power advantage to the prostitute. Thus the closet has still a concrete social function in the lives of homosexuals. The queer questioning would be: what does it mean to come out of the closet? What do I actually say when I reveal that I am a lesbian (Butler 1993b)? That I am the same as the others who also call themselves lesbians? But apart

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<sup>14</sup> Trine Annfelt (forthcoming) bases a line of argument on this theoretical perspective in her lecture *Jazz og maskulint rom* (Jazz and Masculine Space, my translation), where she analyses the bonding between male jazz musicians on stage.

<sup>15</sup> The distinction between queer studies and gay and lesbian studies is not absolute and distinct, no more than the distinction between poststructural feminist studies and 'classic' feminist studies.

from the fact that I desire women (also?), like other lesbians do, I believe that I have more in common with my heterosexual sisters (we are country girls, we appreciate to be together, and we always play and have a lot of fun). So why is it that I have kept on ‘coming out of the closet’ for years and years? There is one important explanation embedded in epistemology.

In her book *The Epistemology of The Closet* from 1990<sup>16</sup> Eva Kosofsky Sedgwick says that ‘so resilient and productive a structure of narrative will not readily surrender its hold on important forms of social meaning’ (Sedgwick 1993, p45). Leaning on Michel Foucault she argues that in the late eighteenth century, ‘knowledge’ and ‘sex’ became conceptually inseparable from each other, such that ‘knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance; and epistemological pressure of any sort seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion’ (p49). She not only demonstrates how knowledge means sexual knowledge, but also how secrets are sexual secrets, and that this, by the turn of the century had become current, ‘as obvious to Queen Victoria as to Freud’ (p49). The sexually legitimate and the sexually forbidden (the closeted) had become fundamental to scientific knowledge.

The other example of the difference a queer questioning makes is about identity. The identity categories ‘homophile’, ‘homosexual’, ‘gay’, ‘dyke’, ‘lesbian’ etc. have been most crucial for the struggle to get civil rights and life quality improvements for homosexuals. It used to be quite simple, it was ‘us’, the homosexuals, against an oppressive culture where we were seen as sick and criminal, or at least sinful. Gay and lesbian studies served to strengthen homosexual identity and the struggle for equality, where the queer question would be: ‘to what price?’ Gays and lesbians are *not* the ones to share a genuine interest in the maintenance of the distinction that for so long has worked to their detriment. In Sedgwick’s words:

‘Far beyond any cognitively or politically enabling effects on the people whom it claims to describe, moreover, the nominative category of «the homosexual» has robustly failed to disintegrate under the pressure of decade after decade, battery after battery of deconstructive exposure – evidently not in the first place because of its meaningfulness for those whom it defines but because of its

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<sup>16</sup> The book contains an essay with the same title as the book. The essay is reprinted in Routledge’s *Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader* from 1993, and is my reference here.

indispensableness to those who define themselves as against it' (Sedgwick 1993, p55).

According to David M. Halperin, this has two related explanations: one in a deconstructive mode and one in a psychoanalytic mode. According to the first, 'homosexuality' stabilizes heterosexual identity discursively, according to the second 'the homosexual' is the imaginary 'other' whose difference serves as a dumping ground for the internal contradictions of heterosexuality (Halperin 1995). The major dilemma in the maintenance of identity categories is on the one hand the political efficacy of a strict distinction, versus the function the very distinction has in maintaining the subordination of the homosexual. One attempt to solve this is to introduce the 'queer identity', which is supposed to function as a replacement of the stable identity of homosexuals. This is what David M. Halperin has to say about queer identity:

'To shift the position of «the homosexual» from that of object to subject is therefore to make available to lesbians and gay men a new kind of sexual identity, one characterized by its lack of a clear definitional content. The homosexual subject can now claim an identity without an essence. To do so is to reverse the logic of the supplement and to make use of the vacancy left by the evacuation of the contradictory and incoherent definitional content of «the homosexual» in order to take up instead a position that is (and always has been) defined wholly relationally, by its distance to and difference from the normative. (Homo)sexual identity can now be constituted not substantively but oppositionally, not by *what* it is but by *where* it is and *how* it operates. Those who knowingly occupy such a marginal location, who assume a de-essentialized identity that is purely positional, are properly speaking not gay but queer' (Halperin 1995, p61-62).

A more practical interpretation of 'queer identity' is to be found in *The Passionate Camera. Photography and Bodies of Desire*, where the editor rejects the terms gay and lesbian because of their strong interrelation with two crucial binaries: the difference between men and women and the difference between homosexual and heterosexual. 'Queer' is on the other hand, a 'radical assault' on both of these naturalized dichotomies (Bright 1998, p3). To me, it is not that easy. A new name for identity does not necessarily make any difference to the reigning gender arrangements of this culture. 'Queer' is still one side of the binary opposition of queer and straight. And even if it is more inclusive for the queer part than the alternative homo-hetero binary that it seeks to

replace, we have to be sober in terms of how subversive it is to the existing dominant order. Subversiveness will be discussed on the basis of my empirical analysis in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity*.

'Sexuality' was first ascribed a practical aspect in this text: one can have sex with oneself or with others. Then, sexuality was also said to be culturally produced within relations of power and knowledge, where sexuality is conceived of as produced in the same movement as sex and gender. Sexuality is not only what we do with our bodies and with whom. It is also culture.

What about the psychological aspects, some will ask. And indeed, in my analysis I find it necessary to take the psyche into account, especially in the chapters 4 and 5, *When women take* and *Masculinity in erotic play between women*. In particular I require some ideas about the *symbolic* aspects of desire, as connected to human sexual psychology. I agree with Almaas and Benestad when they say:

'Far more emotions exist than words to describe them. Human sexuality consists of a network of emotions, a network unique for every individual, built of individual experiences and probably some innate qualities. We do not know exactly how this network is put together' (Almaas and Benestad 1997, p54, my translation).

No one can know exactly. It is too complicated, and besides, the individual psychology is not this project's main object. I am sure that within the discipline of psychology I could find theorizing that would be helpful in increasing my understanding of the emotional and psychological aspects of sex. However, it is the field of the psychic as connected to *symbolization* of the erotic that is especially thematized in the empirical analysis. What is particularly appealing to me as a means to grasp the symbolic theoretically, is when poststructural studies meet psychoanalysis. I have already referred to Judith Butler several times in this text. She bases her ideas about subjectivation upon the rewriting of psychoanalytical theory. It is her theorizing of the phallic representation of desire in our culture that I have found particularly useful in my empirical analysis. Another theoretician who is important for the analysis of this issue is the film and literature critic Teresa de Lauretis. Sociologists do not usually find psychoanalytical perspectives digestible. And there are good arguments for this.

## Psychoanalysis - ‘... perhaps now is the time...’

‘Since «desire» in whatever form is first and foremost a psychic reality, it would be foolish even to try to comprehend it without some knowledge of the troubled and troubling legacies of psychoanalysis’ (Segal 1994, p118).

As Segal states above, the legacies are ‘troubled and troubling’, especially in the case of female sexuality, not to mention female homosexuality. The latter is related to the former. According to psychoanalytic orthodox accounts of women’s desire, women are in a state of loss, lack and passivity. This is complimentary to the masculine and active desire, the desire that *is* desire. In this perspective the exchange of sexual desire between two women becomes quite a challenge to handle theoretically. At least one of them has to posit a male psychosocial sexuality, which means that the other desires a ‘man’ and we are left with heterosexual desire after all. This is discussed in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity*. Most feminists find psychoanalysis too misogynist to be relevant for their work, but some rework psychoanalytical theory for their own purposes. The Australian/American philosopher Elisabeth Grosz is one, even though she eventually found that the framework of concepts and ideas was too narrow. In order to illustrate tensions in the debate within feminist scholarship on this issue, I will use her discussion with the film critic Teresa de Lauretis, who still finds the reworking of psychoanalytical theory productive.

When in 1994 Teresa de Lauretis published the book *The Practice of Love. Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, it was reviewed in the American journal for feminist cultural studies *differences* by Elisabeth Grosz (Grosz 1994). In the same issue of the journal, de Lauretis was given the opportunity to reflect upon Grosz’s views and further elaborate on the topics that she had discussed in her book (de Lauretis 1994b). What de Lauretis does in *The Practice of Love* is to develop an understanding of lesbian desire from Freud and Freudian followers’ theory of perverse desire and fetishism. Grosz, who herself at that time in several publications had used psychoanalysis and especially Lacan’s contributions to get a grip on lesbian desire, is clear in her judgement. To her, the time has come to establish other foundations for the analysis of desire than those of psychoanalysis:

‘The Practice of Love is an attempt – perhaps the final one – (Grosz’s footnote: This will be my major argument in this paper –



that psychoanalysis is incapable of providing an account of female sexual desire and that this failure is constitutive) to bring psychoanalysis to account for its own most strategic and vulnerable blind spots, its points of greatest elision or repression: its by now well-recognized failure to account for, to explain, or to acknowledge the existence of an active and explicit sexual female desire, and, more particularly, the active and sexual female desire for other women that defines lesbianism' (Grosz 1994, p274-275).

Grosz is not only questioning psychoanalysis as provider of the theoretical apparatus for the understanding of lesbian desire and psychology. To say that the failure of psychoanalysis to grasp female desire is *constitutive* implies that there is no way of criticizing and reworking psychoanalysis that will improve its capacity. She also questions such a project for the following principal reasons:

'... it must also be recognized that by placing lesbian desire under the microscope of intellectual, scientific, or discursive investigation, it is thereby increasingly invested with a will to know that may be part of the very taming and normalization (even if not heterosexualization) of that desire. This depends to a large extent on the status and effects of the discourses one uses. Perhaps now is the time to rethink which discourses these should be' (Grosz 1994, p291).

Grosz does not question the quality of de Lauretis' work, but de Lauretis has 'pushed psychoanalysis to its limits of toleration' (Grosz 1994, p291). I think Elizabeth Grosz is right in several respects. The account de Lauretis gives is analytically logical within a body of psychoanalytical theory. At the same time, the approach and conclusions are paradoxical, drawn as they are by a lesbian feminist who, in an era of increased 'tolerance' for sexual differences, accounts for lesbian desire in terms of perversion and fetishism. This is hardly what one would expect. After all, these are terms charged with moralism and pathologism. When the analysis follows such a trajectory in a time like ours, perhaps the time has come to leave psychoanalysis all together?

For the analysis I need theoretical reflections on the capacity of the human body to become a sexually desiring subject, and in particular how this is connected to the field of the symbolic. This should preferably be reflections that take into account the possibility of an active lesbian desire. To deal with the conclusion first: two authors who work within the framework of psychoanalytical theory offer the major contributions

on this issue in this project. I investigated the applicability of theory that steers clear of binaries like masculine-feminine, active-passive, that reflects alternatives to the phallic signification of the erotic. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (eds.1995) have in the anthology *Sexy Bodies. The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* signaled the onset of a process of theorizing sexuality as ‘the *production* of sexuality, not their description’ (p.ix). Grosz and Probyn are aware that The Fathers also speak through their collection of texts; however, when ‘these master discourses are evoked it is in an oblique, refractory and wanton line that emerges’ (p.xii). Probyn sketches out how she understands the challenge:

‘While it is, as I mentioned earlier, beyond my interest to engage in a rigorous critique of the role of desire within psychoanalysis, what I will do is suggest ways in which desire may be put to work as method within queer theory. To replay that, let me state that desire is my point of departure and my guide. This in turn involves reconceptualizing desire as well as the idea of departure in theory. In a nutshell, as a problematic, desire compels me to work along the lines set up between and among longing, leaving, being, bodies, images, movement; in short, it causes me to take departure from any strict and stationary origin’ (Probyn 1995, p4-5).

I was not able to find a practical analytical approach based on this or similar theoretical ideas about desire. It appears to me that the groundbreaking task, to develop such theory *outside* a critical psychoanalytic framework is not yet refined and reworked into theory with a minimum of stringency required to stand out as an alternative for a sociologist doing empirical analysis in the field of sexuality.<sup>17</sup> It is very promising and necessary, though, that scholars like Grosz and Probyn make the efforts, and I will come back to a further discussion of their ideas in the epilogue.

I said that the reworking of psychoanalytical theory done by Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis is central in the empirical analysis. To be able to account for their theories, I should clarify some concepts that I have used. Some readers will be familiar with these concepts, but others might benefit from the clarification.

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<sup>17</sup> It was a relief when Elizabeth Grosz, after I had aired the same frustration about her ideas at a conference, said that not all theory is applicable. Which is right, of course, but no less frustrating.

## Central terms in psychoanalysis

I will not pretend that I know psychoanalytical theory, and certainly not that I can give a neutral presentation of central concepts in psychoanalysis. A collection of Sigmund Freud's texts, *On Sexuality. Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works* will be the main source (Freud 1977). Where that is not sufficient for my purpose, I will rely on Juliet Mitchell's (1975) reading of other Freud texts.

### Objects, aims and deviations

'Let us call the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds, the *sexual object*, and the act towards which the instinct tends, the *sexual aim*' (Freud 1977, p45-46).

Normal sexuality in Freud's writing is heterosexual in object choice, and the aim in normal adultery is intercourse. An individual can deviate with respect to the sexual object, as in homosexuality (what Freud also calls 'inversion'). Freud discusses inversion as either innate or acquired and suggests that it be neither. Psychoanalytic theory is later utilized to pathologize homosexuals, although Freud himself did not do so, at least not that only. On this issue and several others, it is possible to read Freud's work as suffering from inner inconsistency, which also offers the possibility to develop his ideas in other directions than those that became the psychoanalytical canon:

'psychoanalysis considers that a choice of an object independently of its sex – freedom to range equally over male and female objects – as it is found in childhood, in primitive states of society and early periods of history, is the original basis from which, as a result of restriction in one direction or the other, both the normal and the inverted develop. Thus from the point of view of psychoanalysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidating ... (Freud 1977, p57).

This is receptive to a notion of homosexuality as one direction that sexual interest can take, depending not only on psychosexual and sociosexual (family) factors, but also on cultural regulations and prohibitions.

### The sexual instinct, libido

The first striking difference between Sigmund Freud and his contemporary theorists, is that Freud does not consider sexuality to be an instinct emerging in puberty, but rather that sexual instincts and manifestations are already there from the beginning: 'As a matter of fact, the new born baby brings sexuality with it into the world' (Freud 1977, p175).

The sexual activity of the newborn is attached to self-preservation, implicit in sucking the breast of the mother. The sexual drive and the non-sexual drive of hunger are interwoven. The infant will feel a need for a repetition of this activity and the satisfaction entailed, also after the phase of breast-feeding, this activity now will be separated from self-preservation:

'The need for repeating the sexual satisfaction now becomes detached from the need for taking nourishment – a separation which becomes inevitable when teeth appear and food is no longer taken in by sucking, but is also chewed up' (Freud 1977, p98).

The sexual instinct (drive, force in the field of sexual excitement) is seen as 'the psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation, as contrasted to a «stimulus», which is set up by *single* excitations coming from *without*' (Freud 1977, p83).<sup>18</sup> The sexual instinct is perceived by Freud to be a term on the frontier between the mental and the physical. In the infant the sexual instinct is auto-erotic; that is, satisfaction is obtained from the subject's own body, no one constitutes a sexual object for the infant. Moreover, other parts of the body now become possible erotogenic zones for the child, that is; part of the skin or mucous membrane 'in which stimuli of a certain sort evoke a feeling of pleasure possessing a particular quality' (Freud 1977, p99). Freud displays uncertainty about the character of stimuli, but asserts that a rhythmic character must play a part.<sup>19</sup> The oral, anal, urethral and genital zones are central, but it is important to underline that to Freud,

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<sup>18</sup> In *The Practice of Love*, de Lauretis shows us that Freud did not preclude that instincts in part are the 'precipitates' of the effects of external stimulation (de Lauretis 1994a, p301), which underlines the connection between the physical, the psychic and the social in Freud's writing.

<sup>19</sup> 'It seems less certain whether the character of the pleasurable feeling evoked by the stimulus should be described as a »specific« one – a »specific« quality in which the sexual factor would precisely lie. Psychology is still so much in the dark in questions of pleasure and unpleasure that the most cautious assumption is the one most recommended' (Freud 1977, p100).

any zone and any activity can become erotogenic and a source of sexual satisfaction.<sup>20</sup> The sucking of the labial zone has to be replaced, however, by other muscular actions according to the position and nature of the other zones. According to the nature of the genitals, most children will take pleasure in masturbation at an early stage. The aptitude for what Freud labels ‘polymorphous perversity’ (p109), is innately present in children’s dispositions. It means that childhood represents a variety of impulses, ‘a disposition to perversion’ (p155), that first in the (normal) adult acquires a single aim, namely heterosexual intercourse. The process of becoming a ‘normal’ adult might of course go wrong, and the sexual instinct might collapse into one of the components from which it is constituted, resulting in deviation.

Freud defines libido, which is to the sexual instinct as hunger is to the nutritional instinct, as ‘a quantitatively variable force which could serve as a measure of processes and transformations occurring in the field of sexual excitation’ (Freud 1977, p138). Freud presupposes that there is energy underlying mental processes in general and that libido has a special origin in energy. Sexual libido has a qualitative character that can be distinguished from, for instance, hunger, due to a different origin in energy.

### Castration anxiety, Oedipus, Phallus

The Oedipal complex is central to Freud’s notion of sexuality. In solving it, the girl child has to change the direction of her sexual attention from her mother who, until that point in the girls’ development, has been ‘an object so intensely and exclusively loved’ (Freud 1977, p378), to a person of another anatomical sex; her father. This is part of the girl’s challenge in the mastering of the Oedipus complex, as it also is to dissolve the libidinal feelings for her father and the growing feelings of hostility toward her mother. The boy has to master his libidinal feelings for his mother and hostility toward his rival, his father.<sup>21</sup> Unsolved, the Oedipus complex is the main source for neurosis, not because of the

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<sup>20</sup> Some readers will question why I have not mentioned the connection between different erotogenic zones, and stages in the development of sexuality. The reason is as simple as it is complicated: Freud’s interest in chronology waned during his authorship, and since I do not find the theory about stages particularly relevant for my project, I leave it out (together with most of the debates over internal inconsistency).

<sup>21</sup> Freud did not develop the theory of the Oedipus complex in the Three Essays of 1905. He mentions it in footnotes added in 1920. He addressed it in a new text for the first time in 1910 (Freud 1977).

incestuous and homosexual aspects, but because of *repression* of these aspects. As Judith Butler (1997) rightly notices, the theory of the Oedipus complex presupposes the prevalence of heterosexual desire. It is not only about avoiding sexual relations between parents and children. It presupposes that every member in the family drama already knows the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and that it is already installed as a normative difference.

In her book *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1975), Juliet Mitchell gives an account for Freud's development of the castration complex and its fundamental connection to the Oedipus complex. These phenomena are obviously theoretical challenges on which Freud spent several decades. According to Mitchell, after having developed the concept of a super-ego,<sup>22</sup> Freud realized 'that the Oedipus complex was with good reason the cornerstone of psychoanalysis – its overcoming was the single most momentous sign of human culture' (Mitchell 1975, p73). However, it is not possible to realize the full meaning of the Oedipus complex without understanding the castration complex, which is the cause of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. The cause of the dissolution is the *danger of castration*, a danger that is actual or imagined. A *fear of the genitals* is already pre-Oedipally present through the narcissistic valuation of the genitals. For the boy the sight of the female genitals 'can bring into operation the idea of castration that was already feared' (Mitchell 1975, p88). But how can castration anxiety come into play in the girl who is already castrated?

Freud explains that by taking into consideration a full utilization of his notification of anxiety. The production of anxiety might have different reasons, the common feature being that of separation: birth, object-loss of the mother, the girl's loss of phallus.<sup>23</sup> These are possible complexes of anxieties that the girl will have to solve in the Oedipal complex, which for the boy is more directly connected to genital castration.

Mitchell sums this up:

'The boy and the girl who both thought all had a penis, who both were attached to the mother as the only important «other», must part ways, never to coincide again except in neurosis or psychosis,

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<sup>22</sup> The presence in the psyche of various regimes and authorities 'watching' the ego (or self), the ego being on the frontier between the conscious and the unconscious.

<sup>23</sup> 'The girl's loss of phallus' means the loss the girl experiences when she has to change her main erotogenic zone from clitoris to vagina.

except in perversions, and except in all those perpetual neurotic, psychotic and perverse moments that lie behind normality. In these moments there is unleashed an aspect of the psychological sex one might have been were it not for culture's interpretation of the different places to be assigned to the two sexes.

(...)

The (pre-Oedipal) father, if he enters at all, is a “troublesome rival”, no more. To the Oedipal boy he continues to be a rival, to the girl he must become the loved one. She makes the shift from mother-love to father-love only because she has to, and then with pain and protest. She has to because she is without the phallus. No phallus, no power – except those winning ways of getting one. Recognition of her «castration» is the female infant's entry into girl-hood, just as acceptance of the threat and deference to the father in exchange for later possibilities is the boy's debt to his future manhood' (Mitchell 1975, p95-96).

The girl will have to learn that she represents the 'passive' and feminine and the boy that he represents the 'active' and 'masculine'. In Freud's own words:

'Maleness combines (the factors of) subject, activity and possession of the penis; femaleness takes over (those of) object and passivity. The vagina is now valued as a place of shelter for the penis; it enters into the heritage of the womb' (Freud 1977, p312).

I will return to the feminist critique of Freud's narration about castration anxiety and the Oedipus complex.

### Sexual desire

The concept 'sexual desire' is not used much by Freud, and as far as I know never defined by him. I will draw on Teresa de Lauretis:

'Even as it is perceived as a quality of the self, the support of one's being, and although it can exist only through fantasy, desire is a tension toward the other(s), a drive toward something or someone outside the self. The signification and representation of that tension necessitates a signifier, «the sign which describes both the object and its absence» (in Laplanche and Pontali's words); it

is this sign that signifies,<sup>24</sup> for the subject, the object's existential otherness, difference, and distance from the self' (de Lauretis 1994a, p234).

In accordance with this, I understand desire as a phantasmatic (of the nature of a phantasm) movement towards something or someone that is possible to delimit from the self. It is signified by anything that can carry the meaning of this movement. Teresa de Lauretis says this about *lesbian* sexual desire:

'I may be guilty of literalism, but it seems to me that only when sexual pleasure is phantasmatically linked, for the subject, to another woman or another female body – whether in actual physical proximity, in memory, or in phantasy – can we speak of lesbian desire. This is the sense of my assertion that it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian: however similar, the bodies are two, not one and the same. The difference is what enables desire' (de Lauretis 1994a, fn17, p235).

This understanding of lesbian desire implies that there is *sexual* difference between women, not only difference in terms of income, class, ethnicity. It also implies that there is a difference between heterosexually and homosexually desiring women. This consideration of desire, along with the concepts from psychoanalysis discussed above, help equip us to follow up Judith Butler's idea about the lesbian phallus and Teresa de Lauretis' theorization of lesbian desire as fetishistic. These accounts represent major rewritings of Freud, and also of feminist critiques of classical psychoanalytical theory.

### **Judith Butler and the lesbian phallus**

Butler elaborates on an ambivalence in Freud's writing about erotogenic body parts. She seems to believe that was it not for Freud's androcentric orientation, he would have elaborated on it himself.<sup>25</sup> The question is:

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<sup>24</sup> 'Sign', 'signifier' and 'signify' are all concepts from semiotics, the philosophical theory of signs and symbols in language. A sign or a signifier is a symbol, sound or image (a word, for instance) that represents an underlying concept or meaning. 'To signify' is 'to be the sign of' (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, tenth edition).

<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler disagrees on several aspects of Freud's writing, eg., his tendency towards pathologizing, his notification of phallus privilege, his notion of masculinity and femininity as dispositions. As with Lacan, she criticizes his heterosexism and his



when, according to Freud, all body parts can be erotogenic and convey sexually stimulating signals to the mind, what kind of inconsequential jump or ‘metonymic slide’ as Butler calls it (1993a, p61), is it that he must make to install the phallus as the origin and source of erotogenicity? Butler uses Freud’s major text on narcissism to elaborate on this question, to which I will not refer directly, except in so far as Butler interprets it.

According to Butler, Freud establishes a ‘theoretical indissolubility’ (1993a, p58) of physical and imaginary pain. Hypochondria posits libido on an injured bodily part, and through this investment the body part will become conscious, delineated, knowable. Freud then states that ‘bodily pain is the precondition for bodily self-discovery’ (Butler 1993a, p58). He also claims that ‘the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego’ (p59), a projection derived from the sensations on the surface of the body. At the same time, the ego represents ‘the superficies of the mental apparatus’ (Freud cited in Butler 1993a, p258, fn4). This does *not* establish the body as imaginary, but it does underline ‘the indissolubility of the psychic and the physical body’ (p59). And Butler continues:

‘This ambiguity between a real and conjured pain, however, is sustained in the analogy with erotogenicity, which seems defined as the very vacillation between real and imagined body parts. If erotogenicity is produced through the conveying of a bodily activity through an idea, the idea and the conveying are phenomenologically coincident. As a result, it would not be possible to speak about a body part that precedes and gives rise to an idea, for it is the idea that emerges simultaneously with the phenomenologically accessible body, indeed, that guarantees its accessibility’ (Butler 1993a, p59).

Butler refers to Lacan who also reads Freud along similar lines. Lacan concludes that the ‘libidinal drive is centered on the function of the imaginary’ (Lacan cited by Butler 1993a, p59). Freud states already in his main essay on narcissism that the ‘the familiar prototype of an organ sensitive to pain is the genital organ ... in the state of excitation ... ’ (cited by Butler 1993a, p59). He here talks about *the* genital organ (that is one), but in his text it ‘appears to lose its proper place and proliferate in unexpected locations’ (p60), and gives rise to the definition of

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understanding of the symbolic as nearly immutable. In a talk in a conference in 1998, she makes clear that she is not a ‘Lacanian’ (Butler 1998, Left Conservatism II, [http://calliope.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_&event/v002/2.2butler.html](http://calliope.jhu.edu/journals/theory_&event/v002/2.2butler.html), 12.02.00).

erotogenicity that might be the activity of *any* given bodily area. According to Butler he then proceeds by saying that ‘certain other areas of the body – the erotogenic zones – may act as substitutes for the genitals and behave analogously to them’ (p60), and this is the cross-roads where he and Judith Butler part company. Butler follows the path hinted at by Freud himself, in a flexible notion of erotogenicity, while Freud proclaims the male genitals to be both the cumulative example *and* the prototype for secondary exemplifications, which to Butler is logically very problematic. She seems to find no other explanation for this than his wish to ‘understand these genitals as an originating idealization, that is, as the symbolically encoded phallus’ (p60). Butler instead elaborates on Freud’s statement: ‘We can decide to regard erotogenicity as a general characteristic of all organs, and may then speak of an increase or decrease of it in a particular part of the body’ (Freud cited in Butler 1993a, p61) and proceeds like this:

‘To be a property of all organs is to be a property necessary to *no* organ, a property defined by its very *plasticity, transferability, and expropriability*’ (p61).

The main symbol for active desire is transferable, anyone can have it or confirm that the other has it. This theoretical point will be central in the chapters 4 and 5, *Masculinity in erotic play between women* and *When women take*.

With her critique of Freud Judith Butler provides an idea about the plastic and exchangeable phallus. Her reading of Lacan is theoretically crucial for the discussion of lesbianism and the potential change in heteronormativity that is central in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity*.

Jacques Lacan has a distinction between ‘the imaginary’ and ‘the symbolic’. I interpret Butler’s understanding of the terms like this: the imaginary is the permanently unstable site where the subject perpetually negotiates the interior and exterior. The symbolic is ‘the normative dimension of the constitution of the sexed subject within language. It consists in a series of taboos, sanctions, injunctions, prohibitions, impossible idealization and threats’ (Butler 1993a, p106). Butler first describes how Lacan understands the establishing of the body as an imaginary relation between the child and the outer world. This happens in what he calls ‘the mirror stage’. The child before the mirror, produces an image of its body as a totality, as delineated from others, as having its

own morph.<sup>26</sup> This takes place as a psychic, phantasmatic event, meaning that to Lacan, the body is an imaginary formation. In the field of the symbolic, the body is named, which means to install gender and kinship. Being named is to be ‘inculcated into that law and to be formed, bodily, in accordance with that law’ (Butler 1993a, p72). Like Freud’s, Lacan’s ego is formed from the psyche through projecting the body. The ego is thus also imaginary. The imaginary perception of the body makes it possible to have a position in the world of objects. That is; ‘both objects and others come to appear only through the mediating grid of this projected imaginary morphology’ (p73). As with Freud and the erotogenic body parts, Lacan’s trajectory becomes problematic as soon as he introduces the phallus. The parts of the body before the mirror, previous to the emergence of the totalizing image, obviously do *not* have equal status, in spite of Lacan’s declarations. In Lacan’s writing, the phallus is of the symbolic order; the privileged signifier of symbolic order. The body parts establish the condition for knowledge, the phallus establishes the condition for signifiability in the symbolic field. Judith Butler objects to the installation of the phallus with this feature, and demonstrates how his reasoning is inconsistent. Central to her critique is the connection between the penis and the phallus, and how Lacan’s elevation of the phallus into the symbolic depends on the idealization of a body part, a rejection of its ‘substitutability, dependency, diminutive size, limited control, partiality’ (p81). Her argumentation is that the phallus is established in a dependency of denial of the connection between the two, and that the penis thereby is constitutive to the phallus. The phallus might then be understood as an effect of a signifying chain that is totally suppressed, made invisible, not questioned.

I want to elaborate on this, because it introduces the most difficult point in my discussion of what the effects would be if lesbian desire, and even female desire, achieved ontological status as something that *is* as such, and therefore has to be signified symbolically (in language, in the collective sexual fantasies, for instance). Where are we when the phallus, based on the difference between masculinity and femininity, has to signify all desire? Butler sees the similarity between Lacan and Freud:

‘Not unlike Freud’s efforts to put a stop to the proliferation of erotogenic body parts in his text, parts which were also sites of pain, Lacan stalls the sliding of the signifier into a proliferative catachresis<sup>27</sup> through a preemptive assertion of the phallus as

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Morph’ meaning shape, form, structure (Websters Dictionary)

<sup>27</sup> An extremely productive misuse or strained use of words

privileged signifier. To claim for the phallus the status of a privileged signifier performatively produces and effects this privilege. The announcement of that privileged signifier is its performance. That performative assertion produces and enacts the very process of privileged signification, one whose privilege is potentially contested by the very list of alternatives it discounts, and the negation of which constitutes and precipitates that phallus. Indeed, the phallus is not a body part (but the whole), is not an imaginary effect (but the origin of all imaginary effects). These negations are constitutive; they function as disavowals that precipitate - and are then erased by - the idealization of the phallus' (Butler 1993a, p83).

Judith Butler here reveals a fault in the logic of Lacan and Freud. Here theory of 'performativity', where performativity is 'the vehicle where ontological effects are established' (Butler in interview with Osborne and Segal, 1993), underlines *the process where 'a natural truth' is established*. The truth about the phallus is not *any* truth. We are talking about what is to signify as sexual desire and even about what is to signify at all. Freud and Lacan have a point if this is seen as a mere description of the erotic symbolic in Western culture in the twentieth century (as well as the twenty-first century). I have yet not seen one scientific contribution in the field of sexuality studies that objects to the fact that we are 'surrounded' in a physical, psychical and phantasmatic sense, by phallic symbolization of the erotic. Many women, homosexuals and even straight men hope and work for an ontological change here. As some people are doing, one could begin outside the linguistic frameworks of the phallic language. I have referred to Grosz and Probyn, and will, as mentioned, return to them in the epilogue. An alternative, that I take here, is to see the possibility in the 'puncturing' of the symbolic field. And Judith Butler again offers valuable philosophy.

The strict distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic has collapsed when the signifier of primacy in the symbolic, that which delimits and orders, is understood as a set of imaginary effects, the set 'which has become naturalized and reified as the law of signification' (Butler 1993a, p79). And this is an announcement about the possibilities for subversion. The symbolic is proven penetrable by the imaginary, which means that the symbolic, the law of normative heterosexuality can be rewritten. Butler has demonstrated how phallus is connected to penis, how phallic constituency is linked to this particular body part. She now proceeds by arguing that *other body parts might be granted the significance of the phallus*. 'The lesbian phallus' is connected to parts of

the body other than the penis (tongue, hand, knee, pelvic bone etc). The term 'phallus' is in this case of course problematic.

'When the phallus is lesbian, then it is and it is not a masculinist figure of power; the signifier is significantly split, for it both recalls and displaces the masculinism by which it is impelled. And insofar as it operates at the site of anatomy, the phallus (re)produces the spectre of the penis only to enact its vanishing, to reiterate and exploit its perpetual vanishing as the very occasion of the phallus. This opens up anatomy - and sexual difference itself - as a site of proliferative resignification' (Butler 1993a, p89).

Even if Butler seemingly here elevates other body parts into a function of privileged erotogenic significance, her major point is not to replace one body part with another. What Butler says we need instead of a new body part to signify erotogenicity is:

'a displacement of the hegemonic symbolic (heterosexist) sexual difference and the critical release of alternative imaginary schemas for constituting sites of erotogenic pleasure' (Butler 1993a, p91).

This means to have available other signifiers for the erotic, than the phallic representation. In consequence this is not unlike what Grosz and Probyn try to do (1995). However, Butler still works within the analytical concepts that are used in psychoanalytical theorizing. As argued previously, this seems to be what I can handle analytically. The other theoretician who rewrites psychoanalysis to incorporate lesbian desire, is Teresa de Lauretis. She launches 'lesbian fetish' to avoid the 'semantic complicity of phallus with penis' (de Lauretis 1994a, p231). This occasions a different problem, but nevertheless a problem. Laurel Meredith Erickson prefers de Lauretis' fetish to Butler's phallus because the fetish 'rejects the socio-symbolic function of the phallus as the paternal pointer to heterosexual reproduction' (Erickson 1998, p112). I would say that what she gains is a label that culturally pathologizes lesbian desire, and I will thus not choose between them. I prefer to discuss the problems connected to both terms, and also utilize the ideas from *both* scholars.

### **Teresa de Lauretis and the non-phallic fetish approach to lesbianism**

In her book about lesbian desire as perverse desire (1994a) Teresa de Lauretis gives an account of psychoanalytic theory on female

homosexuality, feminist critique included, and concludes that it has either been subsumed by models of female heterosexuality or male homosexuality. She asks for models that do not place lesbianism on a scale where women identify with each other (Irigaray, Kristeva), thereby *neither* accounting for the necessary differences between the (two) women, *nor* the sexual difference between heterosexual women and lesbians. She asks for models that better understand lesbianism, ‘not only as a specific form of female sexuality but also as a sociosymbolic form: that is to say, a form of psychosocial subjectivity that entails different production of reference and meaning’ (de Lauretis 1994a, p.xvii). Since de Lauretis works within the framework of psychoanalysis<sup>28</sup> she is compelled, like Butler, to start within its conceptual framework and use its tools. de Lauretis cannot (will not) reject the notion of castration. To reject castration and the fear of loss, is ‘to leave the lesbian subject without symbolic means to signify desire’ (de Lauretis 1994a, p203). Having nothing to lose, there is nothing to desire. To understand desire as originated or mediated by loss might of course be questioned. I have already discussed one alternative (Grosz and Probyn 1995), and will elaborate on it after the empirical analyses. de Lauretis rethinks the notion of castration and gives it new meaning, such that it may contain sexual difference between women. She does this by rewriting the theory of perversion. In her words perversion is ‘a sexuality of component instincts, which, unlike infantile polymorphous perversion, is inclusive of phallic and genital drives but, unlike “normal” sexuality, is not bound to a necessary phallic, genital, and heterosexual primacy’ (de Lauretis 1994a, p76). She reworks Freud’s idea of the fetish.

In clinical fetishism, the subject will see that the mother does not have a penis, but refuses to acknowledge the absence of one. The missing maternal penis is substituted by another object, which resembles it, but cannot serve the ‘normal’ sexual aim. The substitution might be a part of the body or something that is assigned to the person the fetish replaces, for example hair or a piece of clothing. This means that the mother has got a penis, but it is no longer the same as it was before. When the fetish takes its place as the *sole* sexual object and longing for it has become *the* sexual aim, variations of the sexual instinct has passed over into pathological aberrations. The boy’s disavowal is linked to his fear of castration. He cannot accept the possibility that this might become his faith too. Since the girl has accepted already that she has no penis, fetishism is not a possible sexual structure for women. Teresa de Lauretis, however, fundamentally rewrites Freud’s narrative. As the boy,

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<sup>28</sup> For her argumentation here, see de Lauretis 1994b

the girl observes that the mother does not have a penis. The boy refuses to acknowledge the absence. The girl accepts the absence, but disavows that a castration has taken place. In the girl's mind the mother has no penis, but it does not mean that she is castrated. The psychic process of disavowal, the negation of castration in women might, according to her, detach desire from the paternal phallus:<sup>29</sup>

‘... what the lesbian desires in a woman (“the penis somewhere else”) is indeed not a penis but a part or perhaps the whole female body, or something metonymically<sup>30</sup> related to it, such as physical, intellectual, or emotional attributes, stance, attitude, appearance, self-representation - and hence the importance of clothing, costume, performance, etc. in lesbian subcultures. She knows fully well she is not a man, she does not have the paternal penis (nor would her lover want it), but that does not preclude the signification of her desire: the fetish is at once what signifies her desire and what her lover desires in her. It is both an imaginary or fantasmatic “object”, a cathected signifier, whose erotic meaning derives from its placement in a subjective fantasy scenario; and a symbolic object, whose meaning derives from a sociohistorical context of cultural *and* subcultural discourses and representations. In short, then, the lesbian fetish is any object, any sign whatsoever, that marks the difference and the desire between the lovers ...’ (de Lauretis 1994a, p228).

de Lauretis underlines that ‘any sign whatsoever’ has to be socially coded in order to be a sign. Since we live in a culture where desire in a symbolic sense is phallic, ‘masculinity’ must have a special position as a sign of lesbian desire. She briefly discusses other signs, and I will come back to that. The importance of masculinity as a sign is focused in chapter 5 entitled *Masculinity in erotic play between women*. Teresa de Lauretis suggests that in perverse desire the fetish takes on the function of the phallus as the signifier of desire, but that the paternal function of the phallus is left behind and with that its role in the physical and socio-symbolic reproduction:

‘In other words the fetish releases *sexuality* from its embeddedness in *reproduction* and thus demonstrates that reproduction is not a

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<sup>29</sup> Here she relies on Bersani and Dutoit's elaboration of Freud, see for example de Lauretis 1994a, 222-229

<sup>30</sup> The use of the name of one object or concept for that of another to which is related, or of which it is a part; eg., ‘crown’ standing for ‘king’.

feature of sexuality as such, but rather an effect of the construction of sexuality in modern Western cultures' (de Lauretis 1994b, p309).

What the lesbian is afraid of losing, or has already lost and now desires is not the penis but the female body. The lesbian fetish, the 'any sign whatsoever' that can signify this wish for the female body, according to the thinking of Teresa de Lauretis, is not phallic. However, it is the phallus that gives the fetish (most often masculine signs, but also others) its erotic signification, because the fetish has its origin in the disavowal of castration. Castration has no symbolic meaning without the threat of the phallic. de Lauretis is clear that the fetish has the active, phallic and genital valences (1994a, p289). As we saw, Butler's 'lesbian phallus' both recalls and displaces masculinism. The lesbian fetish of Teresa de Lauretis does exactly the same. Lesbian desire is phallic and genital, but nonetheless non-paternal since this is *female* active desire. This desire is not a wish for a penis, but rather for the female body. I have in this text chosen to denote the lesbian signifier a 'non-paternal phallic' signifier. Another apt and paradoxical phrase could be 'desire that is non-phallic but mediated via the phallic'.

As I said, I do not really know psychoanalytical theory. However, in spite of this I want to rely on Butler and de Lauretis because they are among the few scholars who theorize the lesbian desire and the phallic symbolic, and do it in a way that can be linked to sociological analytical questions. As will become obvious later, I can avail myself of their perspectives when I ask the question why some lesbians say that they 'take' each other, or why some say that aftershave might be smart to wear when a woman wants to attract another woman.

The closing part of this chapter represents a unification of the three aspects of the term 'sexuality' that is accounted for already; practical, cultural and psycho-symbolical aspects. Again Teresa de Lauretis offers a useful term as I see it: sexual structuring.

### **Sexual structuring**

Teresa de Lauretis understands 'semiosis' as each instance of the unending process of mediations or negotiations between the self and the



world, of producing and interpreting signs (1994a).<sup>31</sup> She exploits semiotics to make stronger and more likely the fact that the process of continuously being and becoming a sexual subject, has a social and historical dimension. By doing this she can explain, as psychoanalysis cannot, why a person's practice changes. She can explain identity changes, how experiences in adult life also have their mental effects, and last but not least, how sexuality as a subjectivating process is linked to socio-historical changes. The following can illustrate this point:

'Or, looking at it another way, sexuality appears as a semiotic process in which the subject's desire is the result of a series of significate effects (conscious and unconscious interpretants,<sup>32</sup> so to speak) that are contingent upon a personal *and* a social history; where by history I mean the particular configurations of discourses, representations, and practices - familial and broadly institutional, cultural and subcultural, public and private - that the subject crosses and that in turn traverse the subject, according to the contingencies of each subject's singular existence in the world' (p303).

With reference to previous presentations of theoretical approaches to sexuality, this approach links psychoanalysis to a Foucauldian/poststructuralist/queer perspective through semiotics. What is achieved is a dynamic and flexible notion of sexual subjectivation that is founded in the subject's constant negotiations with the inner and outer world. I like it.

In the trajectory followed by this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical perspectives I need for the analysis. The ambition has been throughout the chapter, to connect these perspectives to the empirical analysis that follows in the chapters 4,5,6,7, and in the synthesizing eighth chapter about lesbian specificity. Briefly summarized, a practical understanding is needed because practice is what I talk with my informants about. Sexuality seen discursively is important because this is how I handle heterosexuality in the analysis; as a background of hegemonic discourse against which lesbian practice is discussed. Finally, the project is based on a perception of desire as something that needs to be mediated symbolically. I found no way around theoreticians that rewrite psychoanalysis. Together with 'sexuality', 'power' is the concept that profitably could have been elaborated on in this text. I mentioned in the

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<sup>31</sup> In Merriam -Webster's Collegiate Dictionary: 'a process in which something functions as sign to an organism'.

<sup>32</sup> Each moment, to the subject, of imperceptible passage from object (or event, in the outer world) to sign (mental or physical representation) to meaning effect (in the inner world).

introduction chapter the different ways in which power is understood in this study. Power is discussed theoretically in a Foucauldian sense as well as in a psychoanalytical sense in the present chapter, respectively in terms of discursive power and phallic power. However, I have chosen *not* to go into the rich field of psychological literature about power exchange in personal relations, or the correspondingly extensive body of 'classical' sociological theorizing of structural power. These streams of theory are often used in studies where the project-aim more directly than here is to improve the living conditions for homosexuals. Chapter 3 is a presentation of the empirical material and the research process, and how this is related to my theoretical and empirical ambitions.

## CHAPTER 3: REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGY, METHODS AND DESIRE

The question of validity and reliability is important in all research, not only within what one could call a positivist tradition where the terms were inaugurated. A most crucial aspect of quality is for the reader to know *what* the results are based upon. In a study like this, where the methods are of a qualitative character, my understanding would be that the visualization of the reasoning and choices made in the research process, as well as the analytical and theoretical argumentation, must be an important part of this 'what'. I will come back to my reason for this assertion. Hopefully the analytical and theoretical argumentation is convincing as presented in the analytical chapters and the previous chapter about the theoretical foundation of the project. Here I will emphasize the more processual aspect of the study. The description will emerge in a rather personal wrapping. As the Norwegian sociologist Anne-Jorunn Berg puts it; I have tried to do that 'without giving in to the temptation of glossing over what I felt was the banality of my own way of doing it' (Berg 1997, p5). And, I might add, without wallowing in the realm of the private.

### Introduction

At the very beginning of this project, I sat with a group of scholars who engaged in informal conversation about the connection between our research topics in the field of feminist study and our personal lives. One of the women said that since I was about to write about lesbians and sexuality, I would be writing about myself. I *think* I managed to stop myself from shooting back from the hip and stating that I found it frustrating that heterosexual feminists studying taken-for-granted-heterosexuality in, let us say the working life or in politics, usually do so without realizing that they are writing about their own sexuality too. They simply fail to make it visible. Or rather, they do not in particular reflect upon the connections between heterosexual desire and heteronormative social organization. Why is it that sexual harassment is the only topic in research about sexuality and organizations? Why is it that homosexuals are the only ones who are sexual, and heterosexuals just *are*? I was tempted, but I do not think I said all this, and of course, I have to accept that my interlocutor also had a point.

I have chosen in this project to raise questions that are closely related to my reflections about feminism and sexuality over the years, as well as to my own sexual practice. There is a difference between, on the one hand, investigating questions clearly rooted in one's own personal life and, on the other hand, handling analytical issues that are more distanced from one's own practice. It has scientific implications that I have come to understand as productive to reflect upon. I try to situate the analytical questions, the analytical perspectives, the theories, the results etc. In short I try to situate the knowledge that I produce in the name of science. This could profitably be an aspect of all research. I am not willing to say that this is only about my position as a lesbian interviewing other lesbians, or in the language of anthropologists; about me being an 'insider'. This is something every social scientist ought to take into consideration, regardless the character of the personal relation to the field. As the Norwegian anthropologist Gry Paulgaard puts it, the researcher should do it whether she does 'fieldwork at home or away' (Paulgaard 1997, p90, my translation).

One's own relation to the field of study is a large topic in itself, not least within the feminist theory of science. I have referred to some important contributors in *Chapter 1: Sexuality – a clarification of terms*. Scholars like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have inspired me to reflect upon the discourses I am part of and the problems of being caught in the language and discourses that are available. It is (nearly) impossible to produce knowledge without also at the same time reproducing existing orders. I put 'nearly' in brackets here. With reference to the works of, for example Foucault and Butler, I take the position that it is impossible to produce without reproducing. However, I also believe that the production of knowledge might have subversive effects, sometimes more important than the reproductive aspects. One example of this paradox in this project is that I confirm that we have individuals we can label 'lesbian', a derogatory term used to categorize for the purposes of social exclusion. At the same time I denaturalize the term by demonstrating its cultural inauguration, and I discuss the slippages in discourse, the breaks in hegemonic discourse and the potentially subversive effects. In effect, this is to understand 'resistance' as productive in a scientific and political sense. This paradoxical situation of questioning a discourse by the use of symbols and terms that the language of that very same discourse can offer, is accounted for in the above-mentioned chapter. When I again refer to it here, it is because this way of perceiving cultural phenomena also represents a fundamental epistemological aspect of the project; namely that research cannot be done from an 'outside'. The researcher will always be part of what she is studying. This is always so in terms of

the language with which we observe, think and communicate, and sometimes also more directly, as in this project where a lesbian investigates the experiences of lesbians. I consider this aspect of methodology (the ontological part<sup>33</sup>) to be addressed already. Here I intend to demonstrate the practical analytical work that also is accomplished, and how I reflect upon the research process. This illustrates that I understand myself as involved in the results I produce, not only in an ontological sense as a member of discourses I am investigating, but also in a more practical sense.

I owe this understanding of methodology mainly to debates within feminist theory. There are names more central than Foucault and Butler when it comes to the question of taking discursive analysis further in a practical sense. I used the phrase 'to situate knowledge' which is a reformulation Donna Haraway's term 'situated knowledge', inaugurated in a response to Sandra Harding on a conference in 1987.<sup>34</sup> The work of Haraway (biologist/philosopher) is influential within the strand of feminist epistemology associated with poststructuralism. In the introductory lines, one verb is already used frequently: 'to reflect'. I have so far used it in a non-technical sense, seemingly unconnected to the term 'reflexivity', which has now become an important concept within mainstream sociology. Anthony Giddens is often the reference here, even when in his work the term is primarily exploited as an analytical term in the analysis of modernity (1990). 'Reflexivity', 'situated knowledge' and other terms connected to the critique of positivism have been central in the debate about feminist epistemology in the last thirty years (Berg 1997). Whether or not it constitutes a strength of the project, I have a rather pragmatic attitude to the debate, in the sense that I do not present the development of terms and conflicts. It is research practice that is my main focus here. In this dissertation *I relate to methodological issues, as they are developing in the practical analytical work of social scientists*. Sometimes terms and practices have become so common over the years that I have seen no point in locating their origin. I simply know that they fit my way of thinking and my analytical practice. While this may not do justice to the development of methodology within feminist theory, it does represent one of several topics that might have been elaborated in this text.

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<sup>33</sup> The other part is perceived as the more concrete 'techniques and rules for collection and ordering of data' (Berg 1997, p4).

<sup>34</sup> The paper was published in the journal *Feminist Studies* in 1988, and came later as a chapter in her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991).

The Swedish ethnologist Bo Nilsson (1999) uses ‘reflexivity’ as a point of departure for reflecting on hegemonic discourses that make certain social phenomena seem natural, as well as a way to scrutinize his own analytical practices. To Berg (1997) it is about a ‘careful examination of historical and cultural values in the research process’. She also suggests making the process of writing more visible and collective. I see this as a good guidance. It implies that the project is visualized as situated within certain discourses, and at the same time the reader is given the opportunity to take a look over the shoulder of the researcher to see what cards she is playing with, and why she plays like she does.

Reflexivity in this sense is important. Part of being reflexive in this project is also to underline that I understand the ultimate importance of social science to be social change: ‘the resistance’ (Foucault), ‘the subversive effects’ (Butler), ‘diffraction’ (Haraway). The potential resistance embedded in this project is touched upon in the section about project aim, elaborated on in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity*, and finally drawn into speculation in the epilogue.

As I said, the hegemonic discourses that I have found most important for this project are already accounted for. I will now account for the process in which I produce empirical results, which is essential for the evaluation of the validity and reliability of my analysis. The end of the chapter elaborates on this. The presentation is chronological, that is; the steps in the research process make up the skeleton of the chapter. Let me start with what here might be called ‘the beginning’: the application and the project aim.

### **An unfamiliar project aim**

From 1987 till 1994 I worked at the Centre for Rural Research in Trondheim. In this period I saw myself as a Marxist, structuralist feminist, doing research in the service of people in the rural areas. I appreciated working as a social scientist in a group where people were outspoken on values and politics. In the present project, however, I wanted to tell a different but culturally recognizable story about gender and sexuality, and I wanted no one to expect me to make general statements on behalf of an identified group that needed the implementation of new and more effective political measures. To write an application where the solid political purposes were missing, or at least played down in favor of a ‘contribution to the public debate’, was an altogether new experience. It *was* outlined with societal relevance. I

would not have received the grant if that were not the case. It was the *indirect* nature of the link to practical politics that was something new compared to my previous applied research. However, it was relatively simple for me to make that turn.

Since the 1970's I had been engaged in the women's movement. The debates and conflicts within the movement had not 'got to me' as they were beginning to do in the middle of the 1980's. The central topics for Kvinnefrontens' (the Women's Front) summer camp in 1985 were 'the subordination of women's sexuality and the sexual subordination of women'. We debated sexuality and power issues, especially as they appeared in pornography, prostitution and s&m, but also in sexual fantasies. For me this coincided with starting to have sexual relationships not only with men, but also with women. I experienced some crucial differences, but perhaps more important, some similarities that triggered my theoretical and political curiosity. Since then, the feminist debate on power/control and sexuality has been important in my own life, personally as well as politically and intellectually. Did I have to reconsider some positions? I participated in media-debates, set up conferences and demonstrations and even experienced the fractioning of the organization of which I was a member. I learned that sex between women was not free from control issues. Was sexual desire basically about difference? How are power issues and the question about losing and gaining control to be understood? The PhD project represents an opportunity to systematize some of the production of theory in the field of sexuality studies, and to contribute with my own interpretations and investigation as well. It implies most of all an opportunity to change and broaden my understanding of sexual desire and difference, and mediate to an audience my perspectives, since I believe that I have a contribution to make. This is to me politics in an indirect sense compared to previous research practices, and is how I have wanted to do politics this time.

One distinct political decision was however made in the application phase; I wanted to focus on women. In literature about sexuality there are considerably fewer references to women than to men, and this project may be understood as a contribution to the never-ending toil (to some of us) to make women more visible in all areas where they seem to be underrepresented. Besides, it is, by and large, women who throughout the world problematize sexuality and equality, and thus 'ask' for an

investigation. In the next section I will discuss the societal importance of the project.<sup>35</sup>

### **To contribute to the debate**

It is clear, then, that the aim of the project was more one of theory than of practical politics. However, it was and still is expected that an investigation of same-sex relationships can bring new elements to the debate about sexuality and equality. It was expected in the application that the project would be important in the following connections:

- Women in contemporary Western societies have to carry conviction both as equal with, and attractive to, men. Knowledge about how lesbians negotiate cultural sexual practices, submit to them, reinterpret and disentangle from them, might throw light on possible strategies also for heterosexual women.
- The analysis of the meaning of sexual difference between women might shake habitual ideas about differences between women and men in the realm of the erotic.
- The project discusses questions that also are on the agenda of the national and international gay and lesbian movement.

To the extent that I do and will continue to participate in the public debate, and to the extent that this text will be used by others, the project will represent an important source for comments on the issues listed, as well as related matters. As the theoretical aspects of the project developed I came to see the relevance of the project as a possibility for challenging more profoundly the categories within which we think and experience sexuality. One example is the questioning of the inside and the outside of heterosexual and homosexual discourses, which puts the distinction at stake. This is discussed as ‘ontological’, ‘subversive’ or ‘queer’ effects in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity*.

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<sup>35</sup> For the sake of order, I should mention that I am not going to focus on the absence of quantitative methods and legitimize the use of a more qualitative approach. I consider this as being thoroughly discussed already in several studies where interpretation and the offering of new perceptions of cultural phenomena are the main research activities.



## **An early start**

Early in 1998 I knew that I would get the grant from The Research Council of Norway. The project's formal commencement would not be until October, but I was impatient to start. I rented a conference room at a downtown hotel, while I still held a position as a senior consultant at The Centre for Women's Studies, Trondheim.<sup>36</sup> One afternoon in February 1998 I spent several hours with six women, among whom I knew three very well, and three not so well or not at all. The intention for convening this gathering was to air and possibly get a confirmation of the project idea: would the analytical focus make sense to other lesbians, would the issues I wanted to raise evoke response related to their own experiences? From my own log from the session one can read:

'I felt the need to bring the project back to the realm of reality. I wrote the application in the space of academia, inspired of my own experiences as a lesbian, the reading of lesbian pulp fiction written in English, and last but not least; non-fiction produced in urban USA and England. Would the topics I had intended to ask Norwegian lesbians about, evoke interest and the inclination to answer? And would they answer intimate questions?'

There is more than one lesbian reality. I consider that my own reality was reflected in the application, and I wanted to know if theirs was reflected as well. To find this out was one of the purposes for the meeting. To have an early test of different methods for the practical fieldwork was yet another intention. I had pointed out two methods in the application (qualitative interviews and observation), and had also some other possible alternatives in mind, all of which I was familiar with through my work at the Centre for Rural Research. This was the planned schedule for the session, which I followed:

1. Create a safe atmosphere – I welcome everybody, we all give our names, age, say where we come from, how long we have lived in town. I present the project and why they are here, why I need them in this phase of the project.
2. We go person-to-person around the table and answer the questions: what is important when you dress up for a night out, what was the attraction the first time you knew that you desired another woman, what was the attraction the last time you desired another woman?
3. Parallel activities: Individual interviews and individual writing. I conduct a couple of individual interviews about the following topics:

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<sup>36</sup> Thanks to the leader of the centre at the time, Kari Melby.

- tell me about a situation in which you experienced that power or power play was important, tell me about a relationship where the joy of sexuality has faded, tell me about the last time you argued with a lover. In the meantime, the rest of the participants are writing, reflecting on the topics: I hit on someone, someone hits on me, the last time I had sex with a partner.
4. We go around the table and they tell me what these hours have been like, the writing, talking in plenary, the one-to-one conversation. Do they have some advice?
  5. Make them help me to get informants by using their networks<sup>37</sup>

This turned out to be a successful meeting in all respects. The questions I asked made sense and the women had a lot to tell. There would probably be no need to worry whether the basic project issues were rooted in some sort of shared lesbian experiences in the realm of the sexual/erotic. And the closer the conversation was to a narration about actual incidents, as they remembered it and cared to tell, the better. One of the women was the lover of my best friend, and one was the new lover of another friend. That did not work. Their contributions were good when they talked about previous attractions. When they talked about recent episodes, they became vague. They would not expose our shared friends and kept their talk on a general level. This confirmed two points: 1) I wanted stories, not opinions or vague statements 2) the informants should be unknown to me.

There was not doubt about it, it was the interviews one on one I liked the best. The women seemed to be less inhibited, talking more freely. I felt easier when I pushed a matter further by asking for more details to the narration. Sexual attractions will sometimes sound culturally strange, un-normal, even sick. In a group it is less likely that people will take the risk and share a story that they might be judged by. This has, of course, some moral and ethical aspects. Do we as researchers create situations where people talk more openly than is ethically and morally justifiable (Fog 1992)? The discussion of that matter will be taken up later in this chapter, and connected to three of my interviews where I felt that I had to relate to it more directly. One of the women I interviewed that afternoon was more detailed in her descriptions than the others. I did not

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<sup>37</sup> When I use the word 'informant' as a general term for 'the person that I interviewed', it is because it is convenient. Later in this chapter the reader will find a section where I present different ways of understanding the interview material. The difference between the conception of the interviewee as an 'informant' versus a 'representative' is discussed there.

need to follow up with further questions to make her elaborate. She was the one, who said that I seemed to be a bit shy and uncertain as the interviewer at times. I understood what she meant by that, because with her I think I sometimes got more information than I was prepared to take at that point in the process. She also gave me a piece of advice: set apart enough time and try to relax. I see her comments as an important part of the preparations in front of the interviews that were to come. This did not hinder me from feeling very self-conscious in a first test interview, but at least I knew what was going on. I will return to that interview below.

The women wrote. Some of it might have been useful material for my purposes, some not. And that is one of the reasons that it felt secondary compared to a conversation: when one talks one always has the opportunity to change the course, make the person stick to the planned topic; one can follow up on side issues that the informant does not see as relevant. Through the dynamics of the conversation the interviewer can guide and encourage, and that suites me. I believe that my preference for interviews is also due to taste and dispositions. Some researchers prefer the face-to-face talk, some prefer to analyze written material. I am more the first kind of researcher. However, why not do both, since the advantages might be complementary and give a richer material? I did not drop the idea of making lesbians write. I took it to a second round later on, with a group of young lesbians. I will come to that.

The plenary sessions were relaxed, a mix of joyfulness and seriousness. The women had different backgrounds in all respects, childhood, education, present social status, sexual experiences etc. We had an open atmosphere between us, and everybody spoke. The great importance of the group conversations was the confirmation these women gave me regarding the project issues. It was nice to feel that I probably was on a good track! Nevertheless, I felt restricted by the responsibility for the dynamics in the group; I could not focus on whatever evoked my interest to pursue, everybody should have their share of the talking time, I had to secure that everyone's contribution was treated with equal amounts of interest. Most important, I had to see to it that I did not expose individuals more than they would be comfortable with in the group. I wanted stories that probably were too intimate for a group session. But again, I took this to a second round, as will be evident below. Dorte Marie Søndergaard (1996) makes use of the group interview in her Phd project, and it seems to be appropriate for her aims. When she finds it appropriate and I do not, I think it is due to differences in analytical questions and project aims. She investigates the process of gendering in a postmodern society, to provoke us to rethink what gender means. One

of the advantages with the group interview is, according to Søndergaard, that the group interview makes visible some of the processes, through which meaning is negotiated.<sup>38</sup> In my project by comparison, I am not as concerned about the negotiating process, as I am about the results and effects of certain negotiations. More specifically, I focus on the results and effects of the process where lesbians negotiate a hegemonic heterosexual discourse. I *could have* been investigating how the women position themselves towards each other's stories, to try to get a grip on how what one might call 'a hegemonic lesbian discourse' (as different from a hegemonic heterosexual discourse) takes form and shape. Or, perhaps rather how a hegemonic lesbian discourse might be verbalized into existence. I have not tried to do that in this project, and I think that is partly the explanation why the group interview worked analytically for Søndergaard and primarily as a 'reality-check' for me.

One important effect of the meeting at the downtown hotel in February 1998, that I cannot say was due to any method in particular, was that when I left the hotel I was already in progress with the analysis. Ten days later I wrote in the log: 'What differences are there, or are created? How are they to be interpreted? Do we have to interpret them as a re-creation of heterosexual signs?' Some months later, but still before the project formally started, the log says: 'Do lesbians exploit signs of masculinity? Is it actually something else? Is it on our own terms?' When I look at this today, I can see that I had started to reflect on analytical questions that were to become central in the project. Some would say that this is what one should expect when a candidate has thought it all through in an application phase. Others would say that I was very lucky. The Norwegian psychologist Steinar Kvale, known for his writing about qualitative interviews, says, provocatively, that the meaning of what is said in the interview ideally is already 'interpreted, verified and communicated at the moment the tape recorder is shut off' (Kvale 1992a, p64). I never lived up to Kvale's standards (not that I wanted to – the dialectic move between the interviews and the development of theory is too important for that). However; compared to some other doctoral candidates I had seen over the years, I nevertheless felt lucky after this early start in the field, and this is how I understand it in retrospect too.

Finally, one very important bonus was the effect of the meeting on my claims to scientific validity. I had set up the meeting to ensure that the

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<sup>38</sup> In a study of girls and computer technology, Kjersti Kvaløy refers to similar experiences (Kvaløy 1999)

project had a basis that not only reflected my own experiences and some abstract theories from abroad, but also that it would play into the experiences of other Norwegian lesbians as well. By that I do not mean that the project would reflect something that one could call 'truth' about the experiences of lesbians. From my side it was more about making research with analytical challenges that were recognizable from the perspective of other lesbians. The six women were excited about being together, telling and listening to stories. They responded to this specific project with enthusiasm. This will often be part of phases of initialization, and could be read as an effect of getting attention from a researcher from the university. That I do not view the situation this way is because I did not experience the event in that way. Every year of the project I would give a lecture during Gay Pride in town, and every time the audience was very attentive and active in the discussions. I felt that from the start the project was rooted in the earth, and that it stayed that way throughout the process. As we will see later, I link this directly to the question of validity.

In April 1998, still before the formal commencement of the project, I had an interview that I first considered a test case.

### **A test interview**

This time as well, the interview was with a lesbian that I knew from before. I was obviously not ready to take the consequences of what I had found out already. I rationalized this into view to myself by saying that this would be a test of the interview guide. I feel safe with this woman, she will be talking about things that I know something about, and it will be useful to get an indication about how people will relate to phenomena that I know as 'true' or 'false'. For example, I had seen her through the years in the gay and lesbian club; I had seen her approach women; I knew a couple of her ex-girlfriends, and knew her 'style' pretty well.

The interview went fine. My questions made sense to her, her answers made sense to me. I got some good sequencies on what I call the 'lonely-hunter-style' which she used at least once, as we will later see. But, it was again totally clear that I should stay away from interviewing women that I knew. I did not want to know the intimate details about her relationship with her partner, and this made me excessively hesitant. After having transcribed the interview I wrote in the log:

‘Wording the questions is a problem to me. I am unclear, hesitant. I leave it to her to interpret. For example: Actually I ask her about a particular incident between her and her partner. She tells me about how their relationship came into being’

This may also be interpreted as a personal problem for me, of course, caused not only by the fact that I know the interviewee. I was reminded the preparatory meeting and the woman who shared more with me than I had been prepared to handle. I became shy, uncertain and self-conscious. These two incidents were essential in making me aware that there were certain points from which I wanted to back off. There still remain many taboos surrounding sexuality in the Norwegian culture, and sexual pleasure is still about shame. As to my informant’s shamefulness I would simply find a way to handle it in the conversation; my own was something of which I had to think more about. I am convinced that the interviews became ‘thicker’ when this awareness became a position to question and listen from, instead of a transfer area I wanted to get out of as fast as possible.

I mentioned that I did not immediately bury the idea of group interviews and making people write, in spite of a limited interest in those methods after the early meeting in February. I gave the methods a second chance when I approached a group of young gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

### **Group-interviews, interviews with couples, observation**

The group met regularly once a week. I asked permission to go there and meet with them. Late in November 1998 I participated in the meeting and introduced my project. Twenty-one women took the sheet of paper where I suggested some issues for writing (pre-addressed and pre-stamped envelopes enclosed). I conducted a group interview with four young persons, and I talked with one of the leaders who promised to ask a young couple to participate individually in an interview.

The group interview represented a shortcut into some important contextual issues that many young queers have at heart: coming out to peers and family, being new in the group and in the subculture in general, the lack of space for identifying themselves as bisexual. It seemed to me that those were the kinds of issues they were concerned about and wanted to air, and I found the group too diverse regarding experiences to pose questions that was directly relevant for the analytical focus of this study. I did not manage to establish a group dynamic that

was appropriate for posing personal questions. Part of the explanation (in addition to everyone's shyness and my lack of qualifications) may have been the composition of the group; that there was a romance in the air and perhaps also some unsolved ex-partner questions. Later, when I came back to my office to transcribe the tape, there was nothing on the tape! I have learned to be superstitious, so this was all I needed to drop permanently the idea of more interviewing in groups.

Only two lesbians wrote to me out of the twenty-one who had received the questions. One was later interviewed individually. The other wrote in detail and poetically about her first experiences. Some days after the interview with one of the young women, she sent me an erotic short story she had written. I could have used these two texts as material, since they fitted into the picture of lesbian specificity that was eliciting. I did not use them, however, and did not try to make people write after that. I stand by my reflections in the previous section. In addition I had now learned that in this project, there would be far more work required in order to motivate an audience for writing. This was work I was not prepared to take up.

In the application I had said that as one method I would be using observation at places where lesbians hang out. This would involve observing how non-verbal communication in terms of modes of dressing, body language and initiating contact actually played out in practice (Henley 1986). It had been considered a supplement to the interviews. My reasons for not using this method is not linked to principal considerations about observation as a method in sociological research. Under other conditions it would have been relevant to do observations in pubs, at conferences, discotheques etc. My decision was made on the basis of likes and dislikes. Let me explain.

Before the project started for 'real', I went out one night to the local gay and lesbian club, trying to imagine how such a fieldwork situation would play out. I quickly realized that the situation would not suit me. Firstly, it seemed very complicated to inform people that they were participating in an investigation, which would have been the proper thing for me to do (not everyone would agree to the ethical necessity of this). Secondly, friends came up to talk to me. I was at that time participating in a project (run by the gay and lesbian organization) focused on making newcomers feel comfortable, and I observed some newcomers who probably felt rather lost. I felt a responsibility to talk to them. Others talked to me and were in a flirting mood. Passive observation turned into participation,

and it was obvious that personal challenges of this kind simply would not give me the reflective space I required for the project.

The American anthropologist Ralph Bolton considers participant observation, including having sex with people that are attractive to the investigator, as almost a necessity to anyone wanting to understand a gay subculture (Bolton 1995). To him, studying sexuality requires intimacy. I agree that it would probably be meaningless to investigate sexual dynamics between people without having interpersonal sexual experience of any kind, be it homo- or heterosexual. (Even if that would mean that you could pose intriguing questions that others probably would not think of). However, Bolton goes a bit too far for my taste. Having said that, I did know the Norwegian lesbian subculture from a participant's position at the time when I started this project, which is discussed already in connection with the inside-outside question. My interest in making on site observations did not arise from a wish to feel the erotic dynamic of the sub-culture(s) on my body and psyche, but to be systematic in observing, taking notes and reflecting. Since I did not go through with systematic observation of any sort as explained above, my nights on the town are to be understood as part of the background and context of the project. This is outlined in the beginning of this chapter. The sexual experiences I happen to have, will always be part of how I talk with my informants, how I relate to what they tell me, and is integrated to my analytical focus etc. Sometimes the connections are obvious to me, and sometimes not. I have not found it scientifically productive in this text to make visible and discuss possible connections between the analysis and my personal sexual experiences. On a general level I will say that I have tried to be conscious about my own experiences and interpretations of events. Not because they are particularly interesting, but because it could be helpful when I was trying the impossible: to transcend my own experience.

In the application I had also sketched out that I would be interviewing cohabiting couples combined with participant observation in their homes.<sup>39</sup> In the end, I focused on only three couples (that is: six out of twenty informants) and my observations occurred only during the hours it took to interview them individually. I am looking for the sexual dynamics in this project, and interviewing couples gave me the opportunity to have one incident presented as different experiences. In

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<sup>39</sup> One of the readers of a first draft to this chapter comments dryly that since this is a project that focuses on sexual practice, I should be particularly precise in that which I intended to observe and participate.



this material it is striking how the two women agree upon what is erotically working for them as a couple. The interview with the second partner serves as a confirmation of what the first found arousing and working for her. I think I like these interviews especially due to confirmation, which with more than three couples as well might have revealed points of contradiction. Or, most likely I would have found that it was important for the couples to express a sort of 'verified' version of how the erotic side of the relationship works.<sup>40</sup> For reasons that I do not recall exactly, I did not take very seriously my early suggestion of interviewing only couples when I started to let the snowball run. It may have been due to arguments conveyed by participants when I presented this project for the Network for Research on Homosexuality in Oslo, November 1998. Some said that the informants would not feel free to answer when they knew their partners also were supposed to be interviewed. It may have been because partners who have lived together for a while are known from sexological surveys to take less interest in sex. The most probable reason was that I did not try hard enough to find couples. If I were to do the interviewing one more time, I would perhaps have tried harder to include more couples among my informants. I am not sure, though, since the members of the Network had a point about the reticence in couples. At the same time it could well have cost me a lot of work to find couples and not losing the social variation within the group of informants.

I have interviewed seventeen women who label themselves 'lesbians', and three who do not. I do not problematize the self-labeling, as might be done. What is a lesbian? Is having sex with other women necessary to feel like one or to be seen as one? What is sex between women anyway? What kind of activity contributes the criterion? (Richardson 1992). That debate is a true side-track for me here. To be honest, it has never interested me, since it has always seemed to me that some women bed each other whether neither, one or both call themselves lesbian. It seems to be all about the sexual desire felt for each other regardless of labeling. By seeking self-identified lesbians, I would probably either get women with a reasonable amount of lesbian sexual practice, or women with a conscious desire for such experiences. That was what counted for me. I used snowballing.

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<sup>40</sup> This is a parallel to the reasoning behind not doing group interviews. A couple will, to a certain extent, function like a group and attempt to negotiate some of the differences into shared perspectives.

### **Recruiting informants by snowballing**

The most common way of getting participants in studies of gays and lesbians is using the mailing lists of identity-based organizations and press. As Nardi and Sherrod see it from a North American context, the risk is that one will then have a sample 'composed of white, educated, middle and upper-middle class, urban gay men and lesbians in their thirties and forties who are self-identified as gay and attending gay-identified organizations' (1994, p190). The risk is similar in Norway. When NOVA (Norwegian Social Research) undertook their study of the living conditions and life quality among lesbian women and gay men, they went through the standard channels to recruit participants. However, they also put a lot of effort into the distribution of questionnaires through various private networks. The result was a sample that 'compares favorably with previous ones' (Hegna et al 1999, p316).

The studies referred above are studies where generalization, in a very basic and quantitative interpretation of the term, is important. Large and representative samples are needed, and it would be difficult to reach enough people without using the organizations. Strategic samples are impossible because we do not know what the total population of gays and lesbians look like. Extended use of snowballing through private networks would probably be an almost impossible process to overview and evaluate. I wanted a more profound understanding of socio-erotic dynamics. The potential for representativity and generalization is nevertheless of interest, and I will return to that. I wanted to *talk* with women in a number of approximately twenty, a number I considered adequate and feasible to handle. I wanted persons from a variety of social circles. More specifically: I wanted to control the representation in terms of class and education, because I believed (and still do) that a variation in this respect would make it more likely that I got a sample with various erotic styles, especially regarding power issues.<sup>41</sup> The question of class and eroticism is a large topic in itself. Working class women are supposed to be less 'respectable' in a sexual sense than middle class and upper class (Skeggs 1997). I do not even touch upon this issue in the present work, however much I have felt tempted to do so. Class and other background variables are not central to my analysis of erotic dynamics. The concern for class and education was a means to improve the diversity of my material. I did not want to use open advertising or the organizations, and then find myself stuck with a sample of middle- class, well- educated lesbians like myself. I am

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<sup>41</sup> The word 'class' will not be defined other than that I use 'class' the way I used it as a Marxist in the 1970's based on Lenin's criteria.

convinced that this project would not have stimulated the contribution I wanted to make to the debate, if my data were based only on educated middle-class lesbians. A process of controlled snowballing seemed appropriate.

In this case there were several snowballs in play, and none of them ran very far. I use the test interview as a regular interview, since it has qualities similar to the others. As already mentioned, I knew this informant from before. In the course of the interview she mentioned a woman who was central in the lesbian subculture in the older days. I phoned one of my acquaintances to track this woman down and found that she was willing to participate. One of the women at the meeting in the pre-project phase put me in touch with a friend of hers, who seemed suitable. She turned out to be ready to contribute. Then, from a woman who I knew to be familiar with the s&m circles in Norway, I got the name of a contact. This contact wanted herself to contribute, and she also put me in touch with a friend of hers, plus a young couple who she believed might be in the process of becoming attracted to s&m dynamics. Five informants (one couple included) of diverse backgrounds were the result of my visit to the group of young persons mentioned earlier. One of them connected me with a bisexual ex-lover, who was not a member of the group. One of my own ex-lovers came to mind as being particularly interesting to interview, which of course was out of the question for reasons discussed above. I called her and discussed the matter, and she had a couple of friends she thought would probably interest me. And it turned out that indeed talking to them was productive. With the help of an acquaintance within the health profession, and, in turn, a friend of hers, I found a socially well-adjusted and well educated couple who had been living together for a considerable number of years. One woman I met incidentally at a seminar insisted, when I told her about my project, that it would be interesting for me to talk with an ex-lover of hers. And she was right. And last but not least, I interviewed one heterosexual woman (I met her at a pub and she agreed to meet me and be interviewed) and one former lesbian in the transition to becoming a heterosexual man. As already mentioned, diversity in class and education was a guideline during this process, and so was geography. That my informants live in different places in Norway has made it easier for me to secure their anonymity in writing this text.

The bisexual, heterosexual and transsexual are clearly enough *not* self-identified lesbians.<sup>42</sup> Primarily, the interviews with them work as a contrast to the rest of the material, especially when it comes to the wording of analytical questions. One example: the heterosexual informant said that it was totally out of the question for her simply to pleasure her husband sexually, without being aroused and getting something sexually out of it herself. Not even occasionally would that be her intention in a sexual encounter. This made me aware of the ‘service-orientation’ that could be read out of the stories coming from the seventeen self-identified lesbians, which is discussed in *Chapter 7: Usually I will start with her*. Her statements contributed to the formulation of what, in my opinion, is an interesting analytical issue.

I made a rough comparison of some variables; my sample compared with the one in the NOVA-study and with the total Norwegian female population sixteen years of age and above.<sup>43</sup> The information I have about my informants is not in all cases adjustable to the categories used in the above-mentioned studies, so the following is to be understood as my informal evaluation of numbers.

The oldest was born in 1946 and the youngest in 1979. My interview material has an overrepresentation of women in the twenties and a corresponding underrepresentation of women aged fifty or more, compared to the other samples. The percentage with higher education is lower than in the NOVA-sample, but higher than in the total population of Norwegian women over sixteen. A higher proportion of the women in the NOVA report have full time jobs, compared to my sample, and so is the share who are in a stable relationship of more than two years duration. Perhaps the age variable explains the differences in education, proportion of respondents in full time jobs and stable relationships; perhaps class has an impact.

Two informants live on social welfare, seven hold middle-class jobs (as, for example, teacher, middle-rank manager, nurse) and six have what I call working class jobs (as, for example, secretary, shop assistant,

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<sup>42</sup> The idea of conducting some contrasting interviews came from Tordis Borchgrevink in a meeting in Oslo on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998. She had agreed to meet with me in an early phase of the project, for which I am grateful.

<sup>43</sup> I do this primarily out of curiosity, but also because I do what Berg (1997) suggests that all social scientists are doing, namely struggling with ‘the ghost of positivism’. Statistics for the Norwegian female population are from Levekårsundersøkelsen 1995, as referred in the NOVA report, Chapter 2, Part 3 (Hegna et al 1999).

assembly line worker). The five students have diverse family backgrounds in terms of class. I do not have informants from an upper class, and the reason for that is a combination of different factors, which I present in order of declining importance:

- the participation of women from working class and middle class was my prime concern
- my own class prejudice
- when my snowball rolls a short distance, it will not reach the upper class

I have no suggestions as to what it would have meant in terms of variations within my sample. The relationship between class and sexual desire is a most interesting topic for a future project. However, I have not made it an issue here except in the way I have described already.

The interviews were two hours in length, except in one case where it is more accurate to say four hours. I added and removed questions from the interview guide at several occasions. When the informant was talkative beyond the average, I would pose the questions in a casual order, according to the development of the conversation. Some of the women had perspectives and experiences on matters of sexuality that made most of my questions look as if they were designed for someone else. In those cases I had to play it by ear. In one particular case, I let the interview turn into a kind of two-way communication in which I gave up my role as a researcher in favor of being an interlocutor in a conversation. I was unable to make the informant talk about experiences of sexual attraction. Her focus was the practical measures required to get someone to date, and she would constantly return to this issue. The other interviews are referred to in the analysis, either by direct quotation, or more indirectly.

### **The interview guide and the communication**

The interview guide is a list of issues, or vaguely formulated questions: do you remember your first time with a girl, another occasion that you can recall, boys versus girls, when you are intent upon sexual relations - what do you notice, rejections etc. The first version contained twenty issues. When three interviews were accomplished I had added several issues. I rewrote the guide, and this time it contained thirty-eight issues. I used that version in eight interviews. In the third version I added another twenty-five issues, and used that for the rest of the fieldwork. I did not pose all the questions in all the interviews; if so far the conversation had

made it obvious that she would not relate to what I had intended to ask her, the questions were left out. For example: one does not ask a woman who has never touched a man's body in a sexual encounter, what she experienced in terms of surprise/contrast when she had sex with a woman for the first time. (You could change the question, and ask her what she *imagined* would be the difference, as will be shown that I actually did). Or, some questions that are important for cohabitants will seem irrelevant to the one who has never lived together with a lover.

The issues that were continuously added are reflections of the richness of the narratives of my informants. One after the other they came up with new experiences and ways of reflecting upon them, and so as to be able to use later what I learned, I added these issues and insights to my list of topics to discuss. Perhaps I would want the next person to comment on such an experience and tell me her stories. Some questions were not on the list at all, but were nevertheless the ones that I posed most frequently: could you be more specific, details please, what did you do then, what did she do? Some informants did not easily share details, but were ready to do so in response to my firm but friendly pressure. On some occasions I would give up soliciting the details. I will discuss the ethical aspects of this later.

Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson make a distinction between 'conventionally inspired qualitative interview schedule' and 'a more indirect approach of eliciting narratives derived from the biographical-interpretive method' (Hollway and Jefferson 1997, p67). Based on experience from a study of anxiety and fear, they argue that the conventionally qualitative interview encourages the clever intellectualizing of emotional experiences. While, on the other hand, asking open questions, following up on details, in short: eliciting stories, implies a richer material for analysis. They have a psychoanalytically derived understanding of anxiety, and see the close similarity between the method of narration and the psychoanalytic method of free association. The trick is to get stories that are more structured according to unconscious logic, than to the conscious logic. Unlike Hollway and Jefferson, my aim is not to 'go behind the defenses to the anxieties they protect' (1997, p60). After all, I am a sociologist and not a psychologist. But, even a sociologist might prefer like a material consisting of stories rather than opinions. Let me give an example from the field. First, a sequence where I fail to get what I want out of the informant. We were talking about sexual exchange where the dialogue between having control versus giving up control is not just a vague feeling, but out in the open. Examples may be when the participants are engaged in a play

where one person wants to have sex and the other pretends not to, or when they set up a teacher-student scenario. My comments in retrospect are in italic.

KGR: Whether I have experienced that?

AB: Yes, will that often be part of sex with other people? *Why don't I say: 'have you ever experienced that'?*

KGR: I have not used it that often.

AB: Have you had it both with boys and girls? *Why don't I say: 'can you tell me about one time you were engaged in this sort of play'*

KGR: I have had it with boys and girls, but not *very* explicit. It was like; some.

AB: When you did it with boys, what role did you play? *What a lame question! I give her the opportunity to continue to talk without being specific.*

KGR: I had both roles.

AB: What did you like the best? *I give up! This is leading nowhere!*

KGR: Actually, I liked both (KGR p9)

After this sequence I am left without one single clue as to what kind of dynamics she has been engaged in, with whom and when. She emphasizes that power play was not very explicit or frequent, that it was with boys and girls, and in either case she would be switching positions. There are analytical questions that might have been relevant for this passage. For example: how are lesbians *presenting* themselves in terms of power exchange? I will take the discussion of how I am utilizing my interview material later. Just briefly now and related to the communication between her and me: since I was more concerned about her *experience*, I was not pleased with this sequence of replies. I was, and still am, more pleased with the next situation. Here I am with an informant who has never been in bed with a man. I want to know how she *imagines* differences between having sex with men compared to having sex with women. I have just one comment in italic here, because I think I am good enough, also in retrospect.

NK: 'I would have to guess only. I am not sure if I am qualified to answer at all. Perhaps you'll be more dominated in bed with a man, or something. I have possibly got it all wrong about heterosex, but it looks like it on TV.'

AB: 'That men dominate, you think it looks like that on TV?'

NK: 'Yes, that's what it looks like. Others would know more about this than me.'

AB: 'You say 'dominate', can you give me an example on what you mean by that?'

NK: 'No, actually not. I have only seen it on TV.'

AB: 'Yes, but you must have seen something that make you say that.' *I am a little too insistent here. 'you might have seen' would probably have been sufficient.*

NK: 'It seems like ..., but that is in the movies, and that might happen to be the way they make it, it is probably not actually like that ... I think that they are always on top and the woman is under, and it gets like all too passive. I'm sure it's not the way it happens in the Norwegian homes,<sup>44</sup> but it seems like it ... If I went to bed with a man, it would probably be like that, I reckon' (NK p9).

What I wanted to illustrate here is that I manage to elicit her imagination, the picture she has, as a woman without sexual experience with men, of sexual practices between men and women.<sup>45</sup> One other interesting thing here is her protective attitude towards Norwegian heterosexuals. She does not want to say anything critical about them, or insinuate that heterosexuals have bad sex. It is probably just the filmmaker. I am not sure exactly where and how she has got such a protective attitude, but I know that I have had the same concerns. I will return to that.

My approach is basically the 'conventionally inspired qualitative interview schedule', as Hollway and Jefferson put it. But, I also 'elicit narratives', and put a certain pressure on my informants to be specific and detailed when they seem to slip away on a wave of general statements.

## **Ethics**

The qualitative research interview gives the social researcher the benefits of the confident conversation. That is: the more the researcher is clever,

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<sup>44</sup> In this context 'in the Norwegian homes' (i de norske hjem) means in heterosexual Norway in general

<sup>45</sup> The last example represents an instance where the informant is encouraged to talk about what she has seen on TV, not about her own experiences. This is of course a situation where it is easier for me to put the mild pressure, and easier for her to yield. I could not find an example where the issue was more private, and at the same time short enough and relevant to illustrate my point. In more personal questions it has taken us more time to get there.



lucky and develops good chemistry, the more confident, open and honest the informant will be. That implies a moral responsibility for the researcher, the research ethics of which will have to be considered. Jette Fog emphasizes that the question of morals is not a special one in research. It is as in all other interpersonal connections embedded in the relationship between individuals. We recognize morality in basic manners, and this same knowledge is also made use of in research. The power we have as researchers gives us no other rights than we have in any other kinds of contact with other people (Fog 1992). I share her considerations.

Sometimes this is not experienced as a challenge in the project, even if the interviews are open, long and thorough. According to my judgement, the moral aspect is handled in a basically sound way through the efforts I have made to protect my informants from being identifiable in the texts I produce for an audience. However, I have had to go some extra rounds because of three of my interviews. One case was when I felt pity for my informant.

She was a petite woman. I am not big either, but I felt really huge in comparison. She was very excited about all the kinky sex she sometimes would have with strangers, balancing, as she then would have to do, between good sex and a health risk. It was hard for me to believe, despite all her enthusiasm, that this small and fragile (so it seemed to me) woman could endure such treatment for years to come. During the transcription of the interview it came to me that I had the responsibility to see to it that she got the help she needed to break her erotic pattern and live at a lower risk. It is not that I have a problem with making public what she told me about her life. I feel confident that her anonymity is protected, I am ready to defend my interpretations of the interview with her, and I am not concerned about publishing my suggestions. It is my responsibility as a fellow being that began bothering me. Should I try to rescue her from herself? I aired the question in a group of colleagues a couple of weeks after the interview. They suggested that I talked with other scholars in the field of sexuality, which I did not. I continued to think it over, and came to the conclusion that she would have to take care of herself: she had friends and family, and she was very happy about the way her sex-life worked (except that there was too little of it). She had not agreed to be interviewed only to find herself under the protective wings of a sociologist. She was interested in the project, she liked to talk about sexual issues, she liked to tell me about events in her life – I finally let go of the rescuing heroine in me. The other case is linked to the first. This was a woman who liked to

'top' other women, and her limit was cutting off parts of her partner's body. She had done that once, but was rather pleased when she found that it did not excite her. I began thinking that I perhaps should stop her from making women (want to) bleed from being cut during sex. However, due to similar reasons as in the first case, I dropped the idea. She was open, frank and enthusiastic about her sexual practice. As I see her, she is not one to hide her sexual preferences when she approaches a woman. I finally concluded that she was capable of taking responsibility for the sex she had with others.

The third and last case is somewhat different. It is about the woman who, for one period when she was young, would sell sexual services to other women. I decided that I wanted to analyze the interview as a significant story about female sexuality, and *not* as an exception from the rule that women do not usually buy sex from other women (or from men). This choice of analytical strategy is linked to the wish I have in this project to break up some naturalized ideas about sexual matters and hegemonic heterosexual discourse. The challenges regarding this particular interview were several. It is difficult to protect her right to anonymity. Some of her friends might be able to identify her, despite of all my efforts. One other matter that challenged me here, was that if a journalist found something to write about from this thesis, it would be about women buying sex from other women. What would happen if OP were recognized and did not share my analysis, not even on the basic points? What about her right to be anonymous and what about her dignity? I came to the conclusion that I had to talk with her about all these topics: anonymity, analysis and a possible attention from the media. She was positive to meeting me again, so I sent her the relevant pages of text and visited her some days after. To me this was a new experience, and I was very nervous. What if she denied having said the things I quoted? What if she was totally against my way of understanding her case? What if she wanted me not to refer to her at all? I did not need to be anxious. OP was very clear on what she wanted to be changed to get better protection regarding anonymity, and she even had a good suggestion how to do it. And she said that it seemed as though I had understood what she had meant to say. As you will see from *Chapter 6: Hire a woman! What woman would?* she disagreed with viewing the sex sales as an experiment connected to developing a lesbian identity. All in all, my first experience with having an informant read unfinished text, was a success story. At least so far.

Except for the informant that represents the case interview about commercial sex, I cannot see that I have had any particular problems

concerning the anonymity of the informants. I do not use their real names. I have changed their place of residence in some instances. Since the rural-urban dimension is not part of the analysis, I have found that this has been a contextually unproblematic change. As I have discounted the importance of age for the analysis, I have left people's ages somewhat imprecise, not exceedingly and not in all cases, but to a certain extent and in some instances. Anonymization is a relatively uncomplicated process here, because in the analysis of the interviews, the life context (childhood, work, education, social life, living conditions, etc) of the informant is toned down in favor of dynamics in actual events. 'Context' is primarily represented by different aspects of heterosexual discourse and not by the individual informant's socio-material environment. In all cases my evaluation is now that the reader will get too little information to suggest who the informant is.

### **Evaluation of the data collecting<sup>46</sup> process and the material**

I had the feeling that all my informants *talked*. That is not self-evident even in interviews where people have agreed to participate. It was a good atmosphere, as I understood it. Usually they would ask me if I were a lesbian. I believe that contributed to the openness and the rapport. I *liked* talking with every single informant. That helped here as in other kinds of conversations. So did probably the 'gate-openers', which had introduced me for my informants in the first place, in positive terms I suppose, since the informants all had agreed to participate. The tape recorder worked, I had adequate money for the travelling involved. With the exception of the challenges mentioned about interview dynamics and level of precision, and the moral aspects linked to three of the interviews, I cannot think of a problem worth mentioning from this phase of the project.

I transcribed the interviews myself, with one exception. With twenty interviews this was a manageable task. A total of 366 pages (eighteen pages on average per interview) were also simple to handle during the analytical work that followed. It was relatively easy to remember what each of them had said, easy to search for passages and find them in the transcriptions. I went through the material an innumerable times, making notes on the particular topics that were to become my analytical focus. I

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<sup>46</sup> I would rather not use the word 'collecting', because it sounds as though there were some information out there and my task was to go out and get it. That is not how I see the matter. I created the material together with the informant. However, I have not found an alternative formulation that I like better.

will have to say that the fieldwork went smoothly and that I am pleased with the result in terms of data material on which this study is based. The material could have been richer on certain issues, as in the prostitution case. There were moments when I thought that I ought to have a second round, if not with all, then at least with some of the informants. I actually visited two informants a second time, one to try to secure her anonymity more effectively as we saw in the previous paragraph, and also to have my analysis confirmed. In the other case I just wanted to go deeper into an issue with one central informant. Both these visits paid off in terms of bringing me further along the writing process.

### **The interviews read as lived experience and as text**

In the analysis I treat the interviews as my informants' version of 'the truth' about their experiences. I accept their version of the truth, and write my own story based on theirs. I interpret what they are telling me by using analytical perspectives and analytical questions that have been developed in the academic, political and personal situation that is part of my own story.

In contemporary literature, one often gets the impression that there is a deep ditch between, on the one side, the poststructuralist social scientist perceiving her interview material as text, and on the other side, the more classic social scientist perceiving her material as containing the informant's 'reality' or real experiences. The words used to name this binary vary considerably. Steinar Kvale operates with a distinction between the interviewee as a representative and as an informant, where respectively the consequences and the information are interesting (Kvale 1992b, p158). Or, the author could focus on 'the construction of memories' versus 'how things "really" were' (Flemmen 1999, p9, my translation). Harriet Bjerrum-Nielsen (2000) discusses or uses binaries as 'language' versus 'experience', 'text' versus 'context', and 'discursive' versus 'material'. 'Text-context' is also the historian Ingar Kaldal's (2000) main terms when he discusses how to understand what old people tell him about the past. Dagfinn Slettan (1994), also a historian, discusses several distinctions. (Actually, the terms are developed as characterizing different aspects and levels of the discussion, but to demonstrate this would be beyond the scope of my task). In addition to 'text-context' he addresses 'life narrative-life story' (p21), 'inside of culture-outside of culture' (p36), 'subjective-objective', 'what is told about the past - what actually happened', 'the narrative event - the

concrete event', and more (p93). My own position in this project is not definitely on the one or the other, and I will explain what I mean.

As I said in an earlier footnote, when I use the label 'informant' for my interviewees, it is out of convenience, and also out of habit. It does not reflect that I am solely interested in the 'facts' about other people's lives. As a rule, the 'truth' is one version given by a particular voice, in a particular situation and at a particular time. Some elements in the story are possible to double-check, like birthplace, year of birth, marriages, etc, however, in this project such information is of little importance. Slettan objects to distinguishing between a subjective and an objective (personal versus social) part of a memory, and refers to Tonkin (1992) in saying that it is as if you were trying to tear apart the two sides of a piece of paper (Slettan 1994, p67). In the memory the limit between subjective and objective dissolves (p66). In my analysis of the interviews, I do not question whether the informant really was part of a certain situation, I do not question the objective aspect of the interview. The narration is her own, it is part of the presentation of herself in front of me at that time; it is subjective. The information about concrete episodes and events cannot be separated from her situated presentation of self. Slettan says:

'The narrative event refers to an actual event, but is in itself a construction produced with the help of memory. This construction changes with the passage of time as we reflect on the event' (Slettan 1994, p93, my translation).

What this means for my analytical work is that I understand the interviews as a report from a reality, namely the reality they describe. This is at the same time the reality they are recreating in the interview relationship with the interviewer. I make my own story about the reality on the basis of such stories. My interpretations and the theoretical perspectives within which my interpretations are framed, my 'truth', are not necessarily shared by the informant herself. It is like trying to tell the truth, but all the time also saying that there is no such thing as the truth, it is rather my way of producing it. And I do it in two steps; first referring to 'true' stories from others and then making my own 'true' story out of them. What probably is the real truth after all, is that my text represents an opportunity for others to reflect about the culture of sexuality of which they are members, as well as their own practices within this culture.

Until now, this has been a rather chronological presentation of the process. The issues I am about to address are issues that concern the process as a whole, especially as they are even more linked in particular to the quality of the analysis. We saw NK's concern about offending heterosexuals; 'I have possibly got it all wrong about heterosex' and I mentioned that this was also an issue for me. The following paragraph has a double mission. I discuss the representation of heterosexual discourse, but since I do it in the context of the analytical issues, this is also an account for the formation of the substance of the project: the issues under debate.

### **Never forget that there is more than one discourse of heterosexuality**

I had decided that a comparative perspective was part of my analytical approach, and of course this implied that I needed units to compare. Lesbian practice was already given. (Not that I knew exactly what 'practice' was supposed to mean, although I will discuss this under the next heading 'An issue becomes an issue'). That the other unit would be 'heterosexuality', with the weight on heterosexual desire and power issues/control issues was also consciously assumed by this point in time. But, *how to picture heterosexuality as part of a comparative analysis became the single most challenging issue in this study*. This particular methodological question was a continuous headache during the process of analyzing the data. Central to the portrayal of heterosexual discourse is how it has been perceived in feminist scholarship and political debate over the last three or four decades. This means that a lot of heterosexual people will not recognize the picture I draw of heterosexual negotiations of power when they relate it to their own lives. I do understand feminist critique of heterosexual power issues as a discourse that produces what it names (see references to Foucault and Butler in the previous chapter). I have not made it part of my project here to deconstruct feminist discourse and the erotic. This would be, however, an interesting idea for a future project.

I never developed a uniform presentation of heterosexual discourse. I came to picture it in varying ways, ways that I found proper dependent on the character of the analytical questions at hand. I will again underline, however, that in every instance my literature of reference is feminist theory and empirical studies; in short, feminist critique. I will illustrate what I mean.

### An issue becomes an issue

The work with the transcription of the interviews was the most important period in terms of forming analytical questions. When I listened to the dialogue between the informants and myself for a second time, I noticed that certain things they told me, and words they would use, started to form my focal points. That some of them used the word 'to take' to describe what they did to their female lovers, became the first analytical issue. The interviewer, being a member of a Norwegian culture dominated by heterosexual discourses and at the same time having a feminist consciousness, was brought up short when she noticed that women would use this term in an interview. Many of us have one speech register we use with our partners during sex, and another when we talk with a researcher and a stranger. Immediately after having finished the transcribing, I started to work on a paper on sexually 'taking'. And in the first round of comments from colleagues, I understood that I had to be careful with my characterization of heterosexual 'taking'.

As a member of this culture I had observed that the word was not used in the public debate or between people talking about sex. The problem was that I could not find the word used other than in pornography and in dictionaries. The consequence was that my presentation of 'heterosexual taking' is that the woman is 'the taken' and that it is an act wherein the man is gratified. This in sharp contrast to my material where it is about the gratification of 'the taken' part. The advice from my colleagues (as I heard it) was to write more about the possible variations in heterosexual 'taking', and to ensure that I did not express anything like an opinion that lesbian sex is better than heterosex. I have chosen *not* to follow the first part of this advice. It is not within the scope of this project to investigate how heterosexuals relate to the verb 'take'. I could have had a sample of heterosexual women, which of course may be relevant even when the focus is on same sex relations as here. I have chosen not to interview heterosexuals, and have four reasons for my decision. First, the fieldwork and the material would have become more complex, and I had decided already it was complex enough. Second, were I to have had two small samples, there would be analytical problems regarding comparison, and especially generalization. Third, culturally speaking, the discourse on heterosexuality is loud and extensive already. Fourth, I am really not convinced that heterosexual informants would have used the term at all. Anne Britt Flemmen made a similar choice in her study of women's fear of sexualized violence. Her attention is exclusively on how women experience men's behavior. She puts it more bluntly; 'Men's thoughts, reasons and intentions in the concrete situations do not interest me in this work' (Flemmen 1999, p4, my translation). I decided that the

heterosexual representation would have to be a kind of backdrop, a provider of analytical points about eroticism in Western culture.

The second part of the advice, the point about not picturing lesbian sex as better than heterosex, is not simple either. One of my commentators said that it was easy for her to read caring and equality as being a central part of lesbian discourse. I re-read the text, and I could not find what she found in the text. To emphasize the equality aspect of lesbian discourse is not central in my reflections about lesbian desire when looking at this project in general. I am more focused on difference. She is right though, that I find (as several surveys have demonstrated already) that certain social aspects of lesbian dialogue are more marked by mutuality than is heterosexual dialogue as pictured here. One can say that lesbians are more successful regarding equality issues in sex and partnership, and this is not such a big surprise when one recalls the results from gender studies in general. However, *theoretically* I have made a point that heterosexuality is inside homosexuality and vice versa. I recognize the power aspect in all eroticity and investigate how power and control issues are reworked when the situation is composed of two women. It has been a bit surprising to me that no Norwegian scholars have criticized the fact that I take as a presupposition, power as part of the erotic, even between two women.<sup>47</sup>

The analysis of the lesbian exploitation of the word to 'take' sexually, and the discussions in connection with the first draft of a paper<sup>48</sup> inspired me to follow up with an analysis of what I call sexual 'service orientation'. One thing is that some would use the word 'take' when actually, what they were doing was 'giving'. A second focus took form and shape when I realized the pragmatism several of the informants expressed regarding the production of orgasms. I decided to compare a kind of laid-back 'first-me-and-then-you' attitude among my informants with the heterosexual discourse and feminist critique (advice) in the field of orgasm. What some researchers call the 'coitus imperative' is part of the analysis, and some heterosexually practicing will probably not recognize such an imperative. Again, the picture might have been quite different had I asked practicing heterosexuals, and again, that was not my point.

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<sup>47</sup> At a conference presentation of the 'take'-case, an American lesbian activist was rather upset that I claimed that lesbians would use this word. She was convinced that US lesbians never would.

<sup>48</sup> A paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Tromsø, 20-26 June 1999. Later published (Bolsø 2001).



In retrospect, the next analytical chapter to be written also seems to follow logically. I was very much aware that I had one case where a woman had sold sexual services to other women. At first I did not know whether I should treat that as an exception and make no other analytical point. However, after the chapter about sexual service orientation in general, I wanted to open up for another kind of analysis. Here my material is analyzed on the basis of a feminist critique of commercial sex. Or; heterosexuality is represented by classical feminist analysis of prostitution. Are the traditional power structures of heterosexual prostitution reproduced in my case of woman-to-woman paid exchange? Are there differences?

After the first draft of the chapter about commercial sex, I went to the USA and concentrated on the further development of the theoretical foundation of the project. Teresa de Lauretis' thoughts about lesbians, masculinity and erotic significance in *The Practice of Love* (1994a), caught my attention. What about my informant who loved being labeled 'macho-babe', and the one with jeans and boots sitting in the bar, watching women? Could they be read in light of masculinity as a mediator of eroticity? The next analytical topic would be lesbian desire and signs of masculinity. Heterosexuality is in that chapter represented by its main erotic signifier: the phallus. With the risk of repeating myself: this does not imply a statement saying that all heterosexual conduct puts the erect penis centerstage.

In sum: my picturing of heterosexual discourse is not very positive from the point of view of a woman. In many cases, and for this we should be happy, this picture does not fit with the experiences of living heterosexuals. British feminist scholarship contains a continuous debate between heterosexual feminists about the possibilities of finding other representations of heterosex that is liberating for women. Wendy Hollway is one of them. In her article *Feminist Discourses and Women's Heterosexual Desire*, I believe she gives me a good reason why it is difficult to find representations that are not negatively evaluated from a feminist perspective (1995). Her point is that female pleasurable and liberating heterosex has to be mediated through discourse. The problem is, however; there is no such discourse available. We have all the terms, symbols, notions and institutions we need to mediate women's sexual subordination, men's abusive behavior, women's discontent about men as lovers, etc. Hollway puts it like this:

'...the lack of emancipatory discourse of women's heterosex means that it is very difficult to communicate the experience of pleasurable, egalitarian heterosex, both at the level of simply talking about it, and also at a theoretical level of conceptualizing women's heterosexual desire as consistent with a feminist politics' (Hollway 1995, p87).

Hollway believes that it will be possible to develop such a discourse. The faith in this is embedded in the contradictions between discourses, and the room this creates for individuals, in spite of heteronormativity, to practice heterosex in ways that 'can escape the oppressiveness of dominant forms of heterosexual relating' (p101). As I said at the beginning; it is necessary to reflect on discourses, terms, binaries, and symbols by which we think analytically as social scientists. I need heterosexuality as a backdrop to my empirical analysis, and have chosen to stick to available discourses that do not seem to contain much pleasure for heterosexual women. It is my hope though, and this is also reflected in the aims of the project, that this text viewed as a whole, will contribute to the same progressive aims as those of Hollway. 'Slippages' in discourse are constantly demonstrated in the analysis, and are interpreted as future opportunities; however, I must admit predominantly in a theoretical sense. The difference between slippage in discourse and social change is discussed in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity*.

This means that I perceive heterosexual discourse as being no more unified than I consider lesbian discourse to be. In both cases, though, it is possible to develop a notion of hegemonic discourse. I have done that with heterosexuality, I am *not* doing that in the case of lesbianism, because to do so would require another approach to the question of generalization. This text is about the different aspects of lesbian discourse that I read from (or into) the interviews with the help of analytical questions. I do develop a notion of lesbian specificity in the end. However, the meaning of the term 'lesbian specificity' as it is used here, is to be understood as different from a possible notion of 'lesbian hegemonic discourse'. The reason is that I establish a notion of lesbian specificity based on *different* types of generalization potentials in each chapter. A lesbian hegemonic discourse would have to be developed as one discourse that is more dominant compared to other lesbian discourses. That is another project.

## **Potentials for generalization**

With some modification I agree with Harriet Bjerrum-Nielsen in her firm assertion that social science is meaningless without generalizing statements (Bjerrum-Nielsen 2000, p26). *Some* projects may be of great importance without such claims. In cases of testing new methods, trying different analytical perspectives etc., an explorative approach to generalization might be fruitful. However, I believe she is quite right when she says that it is impossible to imagine development of theory without generalizing and universalizing statements. What she asks for is that the author takes on the authority of interpretation and takes the responsibility for making such statements.<sup>49</sup> There is in this study a diverse potential for generalization, due to the variation in analytical approaches, analytical questions, the relation to previous studies and my own data material.

This text has four main analytical chapters, and one chapter called *Lesbian specificity* that is a summary of sorts. Each chapter has its own internal analytical logic. They are dedicated to different discursive aspects, but in this connection the most important is that they contribute in significantly different modes to the theoretical and empirical totality. I could have taken this discussion as a joint summing up presentation, but have decided that it is better to make it after each empirical analysis. The reader will then be familiar with the particularity of the analysis, and be able to make a more informed evaluation of my way of reasoning.

As will be demonstrated in the empirical analysis, the use of fiction and pornography is important in the discussion about generalization. As in my interviews, I exploit fiction and pornography in different ways in the analysis. On the basis of the chapters where these sources contribute the most to the results I will briefly demonstrate and discuss how fiction and pornography play a role.

## **Fiction and pornography**

Erotica/pornography is used in two purposes on the question of ‘taking’. Firstly, it is used as one of three sources from which I extract a culturally

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<sup>49</sup> Her contribution could be read as a positioning against some types of empirical studies based on poststructural strategies. I cannot support her offensive against ‘the endless rows of small, near-sighted investigations, that do not theorize the major social patterns of power..’ (Bjerrum-Nielsen 2000, p26, my translation). It seems to me as if Bjerrum-Nielsen here is rejecting experimental writing that, in my opinion, continuously is needed within the social sciences.

dominant understanding of the word. Secondly, I use lesbian pornography in contrast to heterosexual pornography to underline some analytical points already made likely on the basis of analysis of the interviews. The purpose is to strengthen the argumentation arising directly from my interview material. On the question of timing of an orgasm, I again use lesbian romantic fiction and pornography to strengthen my argumentation on analytical points already made on the basis of the interview material. In this chapter, one might say that the protagonists in fiction to a certain degree play the part of interviewees, since I use the literature for the purpose of generalizing from researched data. In both the 'take'- and 'orgasm'-cases, fiction adds an emotional dimension to the illustration of the findings. Lesbian romantic writing and lesbian pornography operate on the level of detail, where my interviews do not. To understand the protagonists in literature as informants can, of course not, bear an examination from the perspective of the science of literature.

I have accounted for the research process in a rather detailed manner, and not in the purpose of telling a story. It is connected to the quality of this investigation. Have I produced results about the analytical questions I have posed? Is there a correspondence between the aims of the project, analytical questions and methods? Is there, to use the words of Dorte Marie Søndergaard, 'an internal consistency between the levels of methodology' (Søndergaard 1996, p61)? The materials I have used for my analysis – are they reliable sources? We are talking reliability and validity, and I will examine those issues in that order.

### **Reliability**

Dorte Marie Søndergaard (1996) makes a distinction in qualitative research between studies based on a paradigmatic versus a narrative epistemology. The former focuses on classifying phenomena in categories or concepts on different levels. In her opinion this kind of qualitative research resembles *quantitative* research because both create order by the means of categorization. My project has more of a narrative character than a paradigmatic one, since categorizing is of little importance here. According to Soendergaard, the question of research reliability would then not be relevant (fn 17, p84). I will discuss the question briefly.

When we ask for the reliability of an investigation, we ask 'whether the repeated investigations of the same phenomenon by the same method

will yield the same answer' (Kvale 1992c, p211); or according to Søndergaard's formulation: 'Is the instrument measuring what it is supposed to measure, is it a reliable instrument' (Søndergaard 1996, p84, my translation). The problem is that in the case of, for instance, the qualitative interview, 'the method' or 'the instrument' cannot possibly be the same from one situation to the other. This is due to the interpersonal character of the interview. There is a unique dynamic to every human relation. The possibility exists that two persons asking an informant the same questions, would get two significantly different sets of data. Moreover, the same interviewer and interviewee could hardly reproduce a previous dynamic at another point of time. What this implies is not that the question of reliability of interview-based research is irrelevant. We will just have to pose the question differently. We will have to take into consideration as many differences between interview situations that are possible to think of, and investigate how these differences may explain differences between interview materials. That would have to be a very complicated reliability analysis, requiring social-psychological skills. I will not discourage social scientists from doing this, but I am not convinced about its profitability in terms of increased understanding. My suggestion is instead to give the information you believe is relevant about your actual interview situations. Thereby giving your audiences the opportunity to reflect upon the production of the material you exploit in your research, and on which you base your analysis. The conclusion is after this: the question of reliability is relevant to ask, very complicated to answer, and the achievements questionable. A better alternative is to put considerable efforts into the presentation of how the data was produced.

### **Validity: correspondence, coherence and the pragmatic**

It is also not self-evident that the question of validity is asked in a qualitative oriented research project. The question is often linked to the positivist claim that there is a true reality that science should be able to represent. In other words, science is valid when there is a *correspondence* between reality and some sort of a linguistic representation. This is still 'comme il faut' within the natural sciences and some strands of social science. More common within the humanities and the social sciences is to claim validity based on the *coherence* regarding the 'unity, consistency and internal logic of a statement' (Kvale 1992c, p207). Or also common, and especially within social science, validity is based on a *pragmatic* criterion connected to practical consequences.

In this project I use all three approaches. I claim to represent a major practice, general among lesbians within the Western societies in *Chapter 7: Usually, I will start with her*. I think I must say that in that chapter I present the view that my findings here are representative for lesbians in a statistical sense, even though I do so without the deployment of statistics.<sup>50</sup> It might seem like a considerable dilemma, but I do not see it to be such. Representativity (or *correspondence*) is based on *argumentation*, as in the other chapters containing empirical analysis. As I hopefully show in the empirical analysis, I present various interpretations of my interviews, argue for some in particular, and use the works of other scholars (some places even statistics) to strengthen my reasoning and convince the reader. This is what Kvale calls 'checking the credibility' (Kvale 1992c, p210), that is very much part of a positivist view of validation, based on the correspondence criteria. Here 'checking credibility' is also linked to validation based on *coherence*. Is the argumentation good enough, is the reasoning coherent, how is this juxtaposed to the works of other scholars?

The empirical chapters are different regarding *what* I analyze and *why*. About 'the what': In one chapter I analyze social facts (how do you do it?) and in others: what is the meaning of this act? About 'the why': in one chapter I make likely a general finding, in one chapter my purpose is to demonstrate a way of deconstructing hegemonic discourse or confirming a theory about society. A diversity of 'whats' and 'whys' will imply that various methods may be relevant, which is demonstrated in this thesis. The consequence for the validity question is that it must not be posed in the same manner in every case. The example below is about a chapter where validity is based on *pragmatic* criteria.

In *Chapter 5: Masculinity in erotic play* it is the symbolic erotic signification of masculinity (the phallus) that is discussed. The analytical point I make is about the presence and the function of heterosexuality as reworked inside homosexuality. The question of validation should be posed in relation to theory. Does my empirical material fit the theory about 'inside' and 'outside' discourse? What about Butler's notion of the lesbian phallus, could there be an interpretation of my material that

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<sup>50</sup> To make one thing clear: I am not against statistical methods. I cannot imagine social science without statistics playing an important role. I will not elaborate on the questions of situatedness, reflexivity, ethics, and politics of the production of tables and figures, but simply state that an objective representation of reality is not what we are talking about.

makes sense related to it? Does my analysis in this chapter confirm the theoretical foundation of the project? How might theory be further developed - is there a place beyond the Laetian lesbian fetish? The *pragmatism* in this is embedded in the usefulness of analytical results with regards to theoretical perspectives.

In this chapter I have tried to clarify the premises for the investigation to the extent that I am able to see them myself. I want to make one last point before I close this chapter. It is about dialogue; after this text leaves my hands I will constantly have to debate my interpretations with qualified 'others'. 'Qualified others' are in this case colleagues, informants, media, and lay persons who have opinions and experiences they want to share. This does not imply rewriting the analysis so as to reach a lowest common denominator, where all parties involved agree more or less. I can still, as a researcher, produce controversial ideas about culture and society. However, I must do so in a dialogue that will continue also after the production process. This dialogue has started already and has been a part of the validation process all the way since the meeting with six lesbians in February 1998. I have discussed drafts with colleagues, students, journalists, gays and lesbians, friends, family and in some of the cases also with informants. This will continue as long as the text has something to give.<sup>51</sup>

### **An introduction to the empirical analysis**

In this last section of chapter 3 about methodology, I will first single out some elements of the theoretical considerations done in *Chapter 2: Sexuality - where inner and outer worlds meet*. I do that to make more explicitly and visibly the link between theory and the empirical analysis that is to follow in the next chapter.

I have argued that normative heterosexuality is inescapable for all members of the culture. Individuals assume membership of one of two sexes, and the law of normative heterosexuality is embedded in the process of making sexed subjects; to fail means to be abjected and culturally un-readable, culturally unintelligible. The construction of the sexed subject operates through the reiteration of norms. Every reiteration brings with it the possibility of failure, hence sex and sexuality are both

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<sup>51</sup> An example of how scientifically productive such a dialogue may be is the publication of Solheim's opposition to Soendergaard's doctoral thesis. The publication is referred to in this text, and used also by other researchers (Solheim and Søndergaard 1996).

produced and possibly destabilized in this operation. This entails that heteronormativity is hegemonic, however, it does not completely dictate the sexual structuring of all individuals. There are possibilities of transgression and ambivalence; there is a vacillation in the lives of people between positions that are putatively inside or outside heterosexual discourse. These theoretical arguments give rise to the analytical perspective that is my point of departure in the empirical investigation that follows.

In the introductory chapter I say that I want to contribute to the debate about sexuality and power by studying how lesbians handle power issues in the erotic field.<sup>52</sup> More specifically I study a lesbian negotiation of power issues that are known from feminist critique of heterosexual discourse. I also say that the analysis is drawn together by the help of the term 'lesbian specificity'. One important motive for the introduction of the specificity-term is to use it in a discussion of what can be learned from the analysis, what can be learned from lesbian discourse, what are the effects of the investigation. The analysis of lesbian negotiations and effects of lesbian specificity is to be understood as a description of the thread that goes through the thesis. However, when I formulate my analytical approach I use a notion of 'lesbian specificity' as a *starting point*, not as an analytical endpoint only. This is of course a bit confusing since it then seems that the thesis actually had as its red thread the search for lesbian specificity. This dilemma may possibly arise from my *main analytical approach*, decided early on, and inspired by Judith Butler:

'Is it not possible that lesbian sexuality is a process that reinscribes the power domains that it resists, that it is constituted in part from the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace, and that its specificity is to be established, not *outside* or *beyond* that reinscription or reiteration, but in the very modality and effects of that reinscription?' (Butler 1993b, p310).

To me, this implies that the analysis presupposes that it is meaningful to talk about a specificity of lesbian eroticity, and to look for it. I was immediately captivated by this way of formulating an analytical approach. It seems so useful and relevant, and at the same time so simple and elegant. The problem now is that I wanted the project first of all to be a comment to a general debate about sexuality and power, and less to

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<sup>52</sup> Similar to Marianne Brantsæter's project, where she studied expectations regarding 'femaleness' by focusing on the experiences of lesbians in working life (Brantsæter 1990).



be a project that tries to find the specificity of lesbianism. I see no way out of this dilemma without changing aims or analytical approach, and I do not want to do either.

The analysis will be after this, to study lesbian sexual practices from a perspective where a hegemonic, normative heterosexuality is recognized, but at the same time not perceived as fully determining woman-to-woman sexual practices. A possible lesbian specificity will be explored by wresting new interpretations from a lesbian reworking of heterosexual discourse. And as already mentioned several times; aspects of heterosexual discourse as read from a feminist perspective.

*Reinscription* (not to mention *reiteration*) sounds alarmingly close to *imitation*, and seems too static a term lacking the analytical potential that is needed to grasp change, specificity, new meanings and interpretations.<sup>53</sup> Let us see, however, through the empirical analysis, whether or not ‘reinscription’ and ‘reiteration’ also means *rewriting* with a potential for social change.

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<sup>53</sup> Similar objections to her own term *heterosexual matrix* (*Gender Trouble*, originally published 1990), is given by Judith Butler in an interview with Osborne and Segal in 1993. Here she explains why she refrains from using the concept in *Bodies That Matter* (1993a), and instead turns to *heterosexual hegemony*.

## CHAPTER 4: WHEN WOMEN TAKE

In interviews with Norwegian lesbians about their sexual practices, I noted that some of my informants would use the term ‘to take’ to describe what they do when they have sex with another woman. To many feminists, myself included, the term ‘to take someone sexually’ is associated with some undesirable power structures of heterosexuality, where the man has the power ‘to take’ the woman, penetrate her and have his climax, not necessarily bothering much about her pleasure. Why would lesbians, some of them outspoken feminists, use this term in connection with woman-to-woman sexual activity? What is going on technically when a woman ‘takes’ another woman, and what are reasonable interpretations of the use of the term? Is this an example of homosexual imitation of heterosexuality, making sexual practice between women a faulty copy of ‘real’ sex? Or does it just appear to be an imitation; lesbian sexual encounters being something totally different from heterosexual conduct?

First I will argue for the existence of a ‘mainstream’ (and heterosexual) interpretation of the sexual meaning of the verb ‘taking’. The main part of the chapter will be the analysis and discussion of an empirical material consisting of interviews with Norwegian lesbians who use the term. The analysis to follow does not claim that ‘taking’ is typical for a ‘lesbian sexual subculture’ nor that my informant’s ‘taking’ reflects how the term is understood and used in general among Norwegian lesbians. On the contrary, I agree with Robin M. Queen and do *not* assume that a ‘lesbian speech community’ with ‘specific sets of linguistic features’ can be identified (Queen 1997). I consider sexuality as a site where individuals create meaning out of their practices, and do so in cultural contexts where meaning also is prescribed. As for the verb ‘to take’, I argue that while it has a dominant heterosexual meaning, it is also possible to create other meanings. And what are these meanings in the present case?

### **To take someone sexually – some possible interpretations**

My project is situated within a Norwegian cultural context; the informants are Norwegians and they speak the Norwegian language. The discussion about possible interpretation of the verb ‘to take’ (å ta) someone in a sexual sense, is based on information about this language and culture. This means that the interpretations represented here will not

automatically be valid for an English speaking culture. I would expect there to be significant similarities, but that would have to be investigated separately. It is not obvious that 'to take' would be the chosen term within an English speaking context; 'having', 'fucking' and 'doing' a partner are alternatives to consider.<sup>54</sup>

It is not the lexical meaning of a word that is intriguing, but the use of words in language (Erson 1990). Despite that, it is usually interesting to see what the 'certified' interpretation is, through looking the term up in reputable dictionaries. Norway has two official languages; *bokmål* (labeled in different ways in English as bookish language, standard Norwegian, Dano-Norwegian) and *nynorsk* (new Norwegian, modern Norwegian). Related to my perspective the respective dictionaries account for this verb in similar ways.<sup>55</sup> In the dictionary for bokmål, the sexual meaning of the verb *take* is given the following definition: take control, gain by force, conquer. The example given is: «he took her, see rape» (Bokmålsordboka 1986). In the dictionary for nynorsk the sexual meaning is acknowledged in the following definitions: call somebody, choose, fetch, capture, get power over, manage, win, conquer, demand, use, enjoy. And we find the following specification in the area of sexuality: «he took her several times», explained as *having intercourse with* (Nynorskordboka 1991). Central to the meaning given in both dictionaries is that this is a male-female activity and that the male part is active in sexually taking. Whether the woman is active or not is left unsaid. Those interpretations indicate that the sexual meaning of the word implies subordination of the female.

As I said, dictionary definitions do not say much about how words are used in current communication in the «real world». Indeed, a word may be used quite differently, have additional meanings and in any case be in a state of lexical transition. In this case, however, I will argue that the dictionaries are rather in line with the common understanding of what 'taking' is in a sexual sense of the word. In terms of public policy, Norway is a society where equality between women and men is a basic

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<sup>54</sup> Words mentioned by Tamsin Wilton, University of West of England, who was a very helpful referee when an article about this issue was getting ready to be published (Bolsø 2001).

<sup>55</sup> In Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (1996) the sexual significance of the verb *to take* is «to have sexual intercourse with» and in the On-line copy of Encyclopaedia Britannica (08.04.99) it means, «to copulate with».

presupposition in many, perhaps most, areas of discussion.<sup>56</sup> In mainstream literature and public debate in Norway, whether hetero- or homosexual, to use the sexual denotation of ‘to take’ would be considered quite out of line, being a bit vulgar and provocative. Unsurprisingly, I am left with pornography (in addition to the dictionaries) when it comes to the concrete use of the verb in a Norwegian context.

In a reading of two arbitrary issues of well-known Norwegian magazines whose target audience is men, *Aktuell Rapport* (Topical Report) and *Gullrapport* (Gold Report), I find the word ‘take’ used five times. An interview contains two occurrences (*Aktuell Rapport* 10/95, p50, 51), where it clearly means men’s penile penetration of a woman, and it is taken for granted that the reader will know that. No details are presented. The other three examples where somebody is ‘taken’ are to be found in readers’ letters. The authors of these give detailed descriptions of the penile penetration of women (*Aktuell Rapport* 10/95 p68, *Gullrapport* 5/95, p39, p41). In each story we are invited to identify with the man’s orgasm. In these examples, the woman either does not reach orgasm or does so solely from penetration.

*Cupido* is another Norwegian erotic/pornographic magazine, and aspires to meet both men’s and women’s erotic interests. With its combination of scientific and pornographic/erotic material, it has a certain appeal to readers with higher education. In the latest to appear while this chapter was being written, the verb ‘to take’ is used seven times (*Cupido* 4/99 ps46, 49, 50 (two times), 71, 74, 81). In six instances it is used to mean men’s penile penetration of women, and, as in the ‘for-men-mostly’ magazines, the women climax from being penetrated or the focus is merely upon the man’s orgasm. The sole variation on this pattern is represented by a very young man, lying on his back saying; «Take me, Susanne». This story is different from the others because of the tenderness between the parties and the detailed presentation of the girl’s orgasm, which is achieved by a combination of simultaneously being touched and penetrated (*Cupido* 4/99, p71).

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<sup>56</sup> I do not say that Norway is better off than other countries when it comes to discrimination or male violence against women. However, such discrimination runs counter to state policy, and a policy for equality between the sexes is implemented in important areas of the society, such as education, job security, child care, and regional politics. And this is probably more the case in the Nordic countries than in other parts of the Western world (von der Fehr, Jonasdottir, and Rosenbeck 1998).

These magazines portray the women involved as wanting very much to be taken. This is not necessarily a contradiction to the interpretation in the dictionaries, where male power is an overt aspect. Neither the dictionaries nor the present paper deal with questions about women's likes or dislikes in relation to male dominance in heterosexual conduct, the question of women's sexual submissiveness would be a complex field of its own (Benjamin 1988, 1997, Califia and Sweeney 1996, Nestle 1987, 1992, Snitow et al 1984). In pornography it is simple: here women find sexual pleasure in male power (Hardy 1998).

There are good reasons to argue that there is a symbolic meaning associated with the loss of control in being penetrated, and a corresponding gain of control by the penetrator. Rape is the most obvious example, but this symbolism seems equally to apply in non-abusive situations. For example, the Norwegian anthropologist Annik Prieur found, among gay men and male transvestites in New Mexico, a distinct difference in prestige held by the men who would never let themselves be penetrated and, on the other hand, the ones who would (Prieur 1994). Another Norwegian sociologist might also be interpreted in such a way, as she theorizes over women's 'open bodies' as symbolically open to invasion (Solheim 1998). The evidently powerful 'connection between being penetrated and being feminized' is also the starting-point when the American literature critic Ann Cvetkovich tries to redefine penetration through a 'notion of active receptivity' (Cvetkovich 1995, p129). The reader may find the discussion of the 'untouchable butch' interesting in this connection (Kennedy and Davis 1993), and also the research on penetration in gay male subcultures (Ying Ho and Tat Tsang, 2000).<sup>57</sup> Such debates will influence how the term 'to take someone sexually' is understood by members of European and American cultures, not to say other cultures we know of.

From the Norwegian dictionaries and popular pornography, which are the sources where I have found it, the concept 'taking' refers solely to *men's penile penetration of women, and if one of the involved persons is presented in a subordinate position, it will be a woman, whether she likes it or not*. The interview material is, of course, comparable to neither Norwegian dictionaries nor pornography. The dictionaries, the

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<sup>57</sup> Some feminists draw the conclusion that women should refrain from heterosexual penetration because it is doomed to be oppressive to women. These have proved to be very productive political standpoints, but I cannot see that it offers much to the analysis of desire, since the dilemmas related to power and *pleasure* are left unrecognized. See Carol Smart's discussion of the positions of feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Sheila Jeffreys (Smart 1996).

pornography, and the wider Norwegian culture as I understand it, represent the term in a mainstream heterosexual sense, while narratives given by my lesbian interviewees will represent a lesbian use. In the pornography case the verb is used mostly in talking *during* sex, and in the other instances it is the language *about* sex which is investigated. Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom make a similar distinction between *language about desire* and *desire in language* (Harvey and Shalom 1997). This means that there is a difference in analytical levels, thus a methodological problem. It would have helped to make heterosexuals talk about what they do sexually with each other, and see whether the verb 'to take' turns up and with what meaning attached. In this project I want, however, to focus on women and power issues, and in a more general sense study women's negotiation of power issues that have been part of feminist critique. To try to get a grip on what the women are doing, how they do it, and extract new understandings is the main aim. A project will always have its limitations, and this is a project where I have chosen to make no claims regarding an understanding of variations in representations of heterosexuality. This is already accounted for in the methodology chapter. I will now let the informants talk.

### **Lesbians who take and who are taken**

This section will incorporate excerpts from the interviews where the informants use the term 'to take'. I must emphasize that I do not intend to discuss my informants' possible intentions in the sexual encounters in question. That is, I do not discuss *what* the agents possibly have set out to fulfill in the sexual meeting recorded. There are several possibilities, some shortterm and some more longterm. The focus will be on what they do when they are 'taking', related to how the term is constructed in a heterosexual discourse as outlined above.

AR turned forty some years ago. As a young girl she became part of a working class milieu of lesbians. She did not join the feminist or lesbian political movement. She was familiar with the 'old' meeting-places, and does not feel comfortable with the new arenas. This is what she says:

'I have heard girls say that it is important to come simultaneously, but that is spoiling sex for me. I would then have to concentrate on taking the other person and at the same time that person is supposed to take me. But of course, if we use 69 it happens that we come simultaneously, but it is seldom, I would say' (AR p11)

‘I don’t masturbate together with anybody, no way. I have heard about people who do, but I can’t see the point. I have heard friends masturbating lying side by side. What is the point? Why couldn’t they just take each other?’ (AR p12)

It becomes clear throughout the interview that AR’s preferred pattern of lovemaking, in a technical sense, is orally or digitally making her partners come. That, to her, is ‘taking’. As illustrated in the extract, taking is equivalent, technically, to ‘giving’ another person an orgasm. And, according to AR, to take and be taken can happen simultaneously. But, as she considers this a bit too much to handle, one thing at the time would be best.

GI is in her mid twenties, and an active participant in groups of young gays and lesbians. GI is a student, now living with her third co-habitant, J.

‘AB: Can you tell me about the last time when you had sex with J?’

GI: Yes, I can. Or rather; the last time she had sex with me, because she has her period. It was yesterday, or no, it was the day before that. I had gone to bed and was reading. She came in too, lay down and just started to kiss me. Then she went down on me and wanted me.

AB: And you let her?

GI: Yes, I did.

AB: And then ... ?

GI: Well, I wanted her too, but I fully understand that she won’t when she has her period. A painful stomach bothers her when she has her period. She wouldn’t get as much out of it when she hurts someplace. And that is fully understandable. But I’m not that keen on being taken when I am not allowed to take her. Just taking her can almost satisfy me.

A: By *taking* you mean...

GI: (interrupting) Well, having sex with her, then. ‘ (GI p9)

In this sequence GI is taken when her partner gives her an orgasm orally. She wants to take her partner too, without being specific about what that would actually mean. She is in any case not allowed because of her partner’s period. GI as the taken one, reaches orgasm, while J who is the taker does not. But as we see in the end: ‘take’ does not have the single meaning of *give orgasm to*. To take can be understood as having *sex with somebody* or, as we see at the beginning; to *have sex with somebody who does not necessarily have sex with you*. This seems to be problematic. GI

does not want to be selfish. She wants to receive by being taken by J, but also to give by taking J.

ARR is a working class woman in her mid-thirties. She firstly came to terms with her desire to be subordinate in sexual encounters, and accepted some years later that she preferred female partners. ARR never learned the heterosexual codes of flirtation, dating and the establishing of relationships. She says that she feels totally unfamiliar with this subtle level of communication also in a homosexual context and that the openly negotiated agreements made in the s&m-milieu suit her perfectly. The following sequence is part of a long story (3 pages, mainly ARR talking). ARR reports from an s&m-party she attended. At one stage in the course of events a heterosexual woman is 'forced' to masturbate her with her hands and, as this lady knows where to touch, ARR has a vigorous orgasm. This happens in one of the small adjacent rooms. As part of the agreement her master leads her down the stairs and into the main room, ARR hooded and with her hands tied behind her back.

'ARR: I was totally helpless, it was all exciting. Then (we went) upon the stage where this lady took me again. She wanted to be forced to do it in public' (AAR p22).

The un-known lady knows how to touch and gives ARR orgasms by using her hands. Here, 'taking' is touching with hands. The taken party reach orgasm, the taker does not *as a taker* at the actual point in the story.

SJA is a middle-class woman in her mid-thirties and she loves to dominate women sexually (and on request, also men) and has several women with whom she regularly has sexual contact. Here, she is over to have supper with one of her 'regulars' and sets up a scene on that occasion. This is how she describes the closing of the session:

'I then lowered her onto the floor, changed the cd-record, took off my clothes, removed the gag, because she had a rubber-ball in her mouth, I sat down astride her face and she started to lick. You'll get a sexual kick when a subservient «takes you» (SJA indicated quotation marks). After several orgasms for her and me, ok, we could have supper' (SJA p17).

SJA prefers to use quotation marks here. Something is obviously not quite right about using the word 'take' for this situation. Compared to my interpretation from a heterosexual context at least three aspects are 'wrong'. Firstly, she as the dominant one is taken. Secondly, the one who is taken is clearly also an active part in this, due to her direction of



the scene and her orgasms to follow. Thirdly, no one is being penetrated by this taking.

## Discussion

It is fairly clear that the dictionaries presuppose an active male part and a passive female part in the action of taking. Other interpretations are possible, even if it is difficult to call up an image of an actively participating woman according to the dictionary definitions. On the other hand, the authors refrain from saying anything explicit about the woman's possible passivity. Most heterosexual women report that they enjoy being taken in terms of enjoying penetration as part of a sexual encounter (Hite 1980). One could say that merely enjoying penetration implies being active, due to the bodily responses caused by this pleasure. This will be the case for homosexual as well for heterosexual women. What makes it further unproductive to advocate the binary opposition between active (the taker) and passive (the taken) in my interview material, is that the one who is taken reaches orgasm by it and that this is the purpose of the act. *To come* in the sexual sense of the word implies being physically and emotionally active (Masters and Johnson 1966).

There is another classic dichotomy in the realm of sexual activity that is completely blurred in the examples from my interviews. This is the dichotomy of taking versus giving. The 'passive and taken' is also active in receiving, and the taker is at the same time a giver. This is a well known perception of the role of the butch in the butch-femme dynamic, as we know from historical material (Kennedy and Davis 1993, Lützen 1987). Joan Nestle is famous for her historical documentation of butch-femme subcultures, not only by writing essays and articles. Her erotic writing gives nerve through time and space to the butch-femme attraction, as it does to the variations in this exchange.<sup>58</sup> In the short story *The gift of Taking* she portrays her joy in being taken by another woman. Joan is digitally penetrated and brought to orgasm by the other woman whose climax will come later as a result of oral stimulation. In this short story, the distinction between giving and taking is erotically significant at the same time as it is dissolved. In the narratives of my informants, taking is giving in the sense that the taker pleasures the taken with an orgasm.

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<sup>58</sup> In the short story *A change of Life*, a femme becomes a butch (at least for this one relation) (Nestle 1987, p132). This is not typical for the literature about butches and femmes. Typically, the roles are represented as more permanent.

The one who is giving is also the one to be in control of the other one's orgasmic pleasure, that is; the giver has (taken) the power to give. One could perhaps say that what we are talking about is productive control. I have chosen *not* to relate this to the sociological or the even richer social anthropological literature about 'the gift', and the power on the behalf of the giving part. Within sociology and social anthropology the focus is on visible gifts, and the meaning attached is linked to the cultural and social, distinctly different from a situation of intimacy and eroticity. A materialized gift presupposes a giver and a receiver in a physical sense. Giving the gift of sexual pleasure sometimes means first of all that the giver is giving herself or himself a gift because it entails such an arousal in the body of the giver. In other words, this is not a clear-cut act, even in a physical sense. The Norwegian social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad suggests that 'giving' in some instances has the character of 'sharing' (1997). This might have been a starting-point. One other reason for not relating to the literature about 'the gift' is that in the case of a concrete gift, 'taking' is not an option at all because taking a gift makes the gift no longer a gift. The focus for analysis is thereby gone. The dynamics in giving and receiving concrete, visible gifts seem to be qualitatively different from the dynamics of sexual service and erotic exchange. For these reasons and others, it is not necessarily fruitful to link my discussion to this strand of scientific literature.

I will argue that my informants' use of the word 'to take' is also connected to its erotic connotations. The cultural connotations of taking are phallic. They indicate that sexual desire craves to be satisfied and possesses the power to achieve satisfaction. By using it as my informants do in a conversation *about* sex, desire becomes undeniable and intensity is given to the narrative. And more than that, desire itself enters the scene. This is not an imitation in accordance with a mainstream heterosexual use of the term. Contemporary Norwegian heterosexuals would probably have used the word differently and with other variations, if they used it at all in a context of a dominant heterosexual discourse marked by a political concern for equality. This would need to be investigated separately. What is happening is that the lesbian use of 'take' operates to transfer sexual significance through language and in the process ascribes new interpretations. The power aspect here lies not in controlling the other person primarily to satisfy ones own needs, but in controlling the situation with the purpose of sealing the partner's pleasure or, more concretely, to pleasure her with an orgasm. Connotations of power from a heterosexual context are retained; however, the sociality is different; power has taken a new form.

A distinction can be made here between a level of doing and a level of significance. On the level of doing, my informants break away from what one could expect them to do according to heterosexual discourse. The simplest suggestion is penetration with fingers or a dildo. On the level of significance, an aspect of control is written into the story through *the taker's* control of the partner's orgasm. It is also written in through the symbolic marker of eroticity that in our culture is phallic, and in this case connected to the distinction between *having* control and *giving in to* the control that someone else is executing. One can say that power relations are reinscribed. By this I mean that, when my informants use a traditional heterosexual concept, heterosexuality is inscribed (some would say imported, imitated). But this is not simply inscription. The concept, with primary connotations of the conqueror's gratification, is given a different interpretation; the sexual gratification of 'the taken'. This is absolutely not to say that heterosexual practicing women and men never practice penetrative activity with the gratification of the female partner in focus. As I have said already, to investigate this has not been my project. My analysis indicates both a reinscription of the heterosexual hegemonic meaning of 'to take' and also the reworking of its meaning. The concrete activity that the term is meant to cover in the interviews is somewhat different from what I had expected. Perhaps if I had read the language of lesbian erotic fiction more critically, I would not have been surprised at all? What differences will we find between heterosexual versus lesbian pornography and erotic writing regarding the use of the term? I took a minor and rather arbitrary 'dive' into lesbian pornography and erotic writing, by choosing from my own shelves texts that I thought might contain the word. I came up with two stories from the magazine *On Our Backs*, Helen Sandler's *Big Deal* and Regine Sands' *Travels with Diana Hunter*.

In Toni Amato's short-story published in the American magazine *On Our Backs*, to take is to penetrate with a dildo, and the climax is a penetration 'for real' (Amato 2000, p42), which is anal penetration. The penetrator is the narrator. The short-story has s&m ingredients, and exploits in every way possible the heterosexual power-potential which the verb 'to take' happens to have. The dildo is a 'he' (p39), and the penetrator herself wants to be 'that girl's back door man' (p42). It is a pretty rough encounter, and there is never any doubt that the taken is going to get what she needs but has never previously experienced. The taken girl climaxes from anal penetration, no other stimulation is needed at that point. This is technically the same activity as in one of the stories from heterosexual porn previously referred to (Gullrapport p41). In another short-story in the same issue of *On Our Backs*, taking is

penetration. However, it involves also other types of sexual stimulation, oral as well as digital. Here the penetrated girl is the narrator, and the technical aspects of bringing her to her orgasm are described in detail (Nealon 2000). In neither of the stories does the penetrator reach orgasm.

In Helen Sandler's *Big Deal* (1999), recommended by the publisher to be sold only to adults, 'fucking' is used innumerable times. According to my count, 'taking' in terms of 'taking someone' is used four times; twice about (gay) men penetrating a (lesbian) woman (p37, 40); and twice when a woman penetrates another woman (p149, 209). I believe that it was not Sandler's intention to make a linguistic distinction here, but in the case of the men taking the woman, the men's orgasms are central and the woman does not climax. In the cases of woman to woman taking, both women in one case, and the taken in the other case reach orgasm.

In the reunion<sup>59</sup> between Christina and Diana after ten years separation, in the erotic novel *Travels with Diana Hunter*, both women are taken by the other, in succession (Sands 1991). On the three first pages of this fourteen-page encounter, 'take' is introduced as something mutual ('to take her, to be taken by her', p162) and also as being a kind of sex that is savage and rough. They do not care if their skin gets raw from the rocks beneath them and whether they leave marks on each other's body: 'This was not the time to care about such things. This was a time to take, to have' (p163). They want penetration: 'Soon they would be inside of one another's rapacious bodies, soon. (...) They were approaching the fine line between wanting to be inside of one another and needing to be. Inside, deep inside' (p164). Some pages later Christina says; 'Let me soothe you, lover, and get you ready to be taken' (p168). And then Diana is on her knees, with her head resting on her folded arms 'poised for the woman to take her' (p171), which Christina does with her free hand. In this novel the term works to eroticize the text, to make us understand the desperate and consuming desire involved, an aim that is no different from the heterosexual porn previously referred to. When it comes to concrete action, taking means penetration, which is also not surprising. One at a time, they reach orgasm by simultaneously being penetrated and orally stimulated.

One similarity between those examples and the references to heterosexual porn, is the penetration involved. But, lesbian penetration is

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<sup>59</sup> What Andrea Lewis, according to the back cover, calls 'the fourteen-page orgasmic finale', that alone is worth the purchase price.

executed with the help of non-orgasmic<sup>60</sup> body parts or objects, and the penetrator does not climax, or at least not only the penetrator. One other difference is the *centrality* of the orgasm of the taken in the examples from lesbian writing.<sup>61</sup>

The main difference between my interviews and the erotica of either kind is that the orgasms provided by or for my informants are not necessarily accompanied by penetration in the act of the 'taking'. This might be due to genre requirements in erotic writing; it seems that there must be some penetration going on to arouse the reader, heterosexual or not. This again bears witness to the phallocentrism of pornography and erotic writing in our culture (Hardy 1998, Jeffreys 1990, Nagle 1997b). The main similarity between lesbian porn/fiction and my interviews is the orgasm that is given to a woman when she is being taken.

In the introduction to this chapter I asked why, how and what: why are some lesbians using the term 'to take', how do they take and what does it mean if it is not a plain imitation of heterosex? It is demonstrated, both in my material and in lesbian porn, that a heterosexual connoted term (here: 'to take') gives intensity to a narrative about lesbian sexual practice. That is; phallic power is part of the presentation. However, it is also shown that these lesbians do not just imitate in terms of using the word as it is used in a hegemonic heterosexual discourse. They exploit its erotic potential in a practice that has a sociality of its own. Analytically I make a distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and here one might say that heterosexual discourse (the practice and meaning of the verb 'to take') is also located inside lesbian discourse. With Judith Butler, I call that 'reinscription' and 'reworking' of heterosexual discourse.

A comment is now appropriate as to how I have treated the question of generalization in this chapter. As already mentioned, this is a challenge that is met in a variety of ways in the four empirical chapters. Actually, it is more correct to say five, since I discuss the 'summary' term 'lesbian specificity' with regards to generalization also.

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<sup>60</sup> The term 'non-orgasmic' is derived from Cvetkovich 1995, p134.

<sup>61</sup> An obvious and rather importunate difference in general between heterosexual and lesbian erotic fiction, not only in the case of 'taking', is that the lesbians seem to produce orgasms more faithful to the sexological and anatomical ('scientific') knowledge about successful techniques for making women come. I guess that is a sidetrack here, more appropriate for the debate of the educational aspects of pornographic and erotic writing.

On the basis of interviews and pornography I have highlighted a lesbian practice of the verb 'to take'. My interpretation is that the erotic meaning of the verb in a heterosexual discourse is exploited by the women having sex with other women, and at the same time the actual sexual behavior is somewhat different from what one would have expected, given the dominant heterosexual meaning of the word. Symbolic power is retained, the social practice is noticeably different from heterosexual discourse as pictured in dictionaries and pornography. I do not say that there are not other linguistic practices regarding the word, or that this is *the* lesbian practice, or that this is the Norwegian lesbian manner or a cross-cultural manner. The potential for generalization is here embedded in the treatment of heterosexual and lesbian discourse as interwoven. It is in the analytical perspective and in the empirical demonstration of the heterosexual *inside* the homosexual we should search for the general result. I see this analytical case as an example of something general; in some instances, heterosexual power domains are explicitly traceable within a lesbian negotiation and reworking. As in this case, this is most obvious in a symbolic sense, since the social aspect of power in the lesbian case seems to differ considerably.

Let us return to the idea of seeing the power domains of a normative heterosexuality as reinscribed, and lesbian specificity as established in the modalities and effects of reinscription, that was referred to in the end of the previous chapter as my analytical approach. This chapter contains my interpretation of the mode of one such reinscription, namely in the case of the heterosexually connoted term 'to take someone'. I will continue to analyze lesbian negotiations of power by the help of this analytical approach in chapter 5, dealing with masculinity, and more specifically the erotic meaning of masculinity. As in the case of taking, I go on to seek out erotic significance of masculinity in a lesbian context. Is masculinity traceable, and how is it negotiated?

## CHAPTER 5: MASCULINITY IN EROTIC PLAY

«I want to go to bed with you. And you know it». «I want that to. Right now. What about a motel?» «Yes». «I'll drive, you look»... «Why did it take so long to think of this?» «Because we are both used to having this initiative taken for us. I've never even been physically aggressive before two nights ago. At least we learn fast» (Katherine V. Forrest 1993, p113).

In the beginning of the 1970's I became a young woman who 'did it' with young men. Many years later, I found that I also liked 'to do it' with women. There were to me some striking differences between having sex with men and women, and some of them have nourished my interest for the function of masculinity in the erotic exchange between women. One difference was that with a woman I could not always trust that we would have sex when I wanted to. With young men, I typically was the one to say yes or no to sex initiated by others. With women, I more actively had to initiate, sometimes to persuade, to conquer, often not even knowing whether she was used to engaging in sex with other women. It was a considerable change in position and a challenge, and I must admit that my sympathy with rejected men increased tremendously. In retrospect I believe that what happened was that I had to learn one other approach to flirting and initiating sex, an approach that are more typical of boys than of girls. I had to start taking on the kind of responsibility that more men than women do in negotiating the possibility of sexual exchange. To say that I was adding a masculine edge to my femininity sounds apt to describe what I found was needed (the term 'masculine edge to femininity' is borrowed from Blackman and Perry 1990, p76). As time went by, I came to appreciate women who socially, publicly, explicitly signaled a sexual interest in women, and in my interviews I often heard traces of the same story. Thus, in this chapter I ask, does it make sense to treat those traces as significant? What are the manifestations and how can we theoretically understand the presence of masculinity as an erotic sign between lesbians? Or, to put the analytical approach in tandem with that in the previous chapter: masculine sexual behavior is associated with men. How do lesbians rework signs of masculinity in the realm of the erotic?

This is previously thematized in the literature about the traditional lesbian butch-femme constellation. The butch will signal sexual competence and control, wear men's clothes and have a masculine body language. The femme contribute to the sexual exchange by appreciating

that the butch take sexual responsibility, and by dressing and carrying herself in such a way that perhaps only a butch can sense her as a woman who takes sexual interest in other women and not in men. The butch-femme couple is the lesbian relation that from the outside looks most similar to the heterosexual couple. Butches were sometimes aggressive, and did not talk much about emotions. They fought sometimes to protect other women and their love relations with other women. Most often the literature about butches and femmes is about subcultures in the USA from the 1930's until the late 1960's or early 1970's (Kennedy and Davis 1993, Nestle 1987, 1992, Feinberg 1993).<sup>62</sup> These women exploited to their own advantage, gendered and erotic positions as they were read and lived in that particular context and at that particular time in history. Here I want to investigate the significance of masculinity in erotic exchange between Norwegian lesbians by the end of the 1990's, more precisely, I want to find out *if* signs of masculinity are important, and *how*. There are several empirical and theoretical approaches to the question about masculinity in erotic exchange between women.

### **Theoretical and analytical approaches**

The theoretical perspectives that are exploited in the theses I am presenting are accounted for in *Chapter 1: Sexuality - where inner and outer worlds meet*. I will just briefly point to those central elements from the theoretical toolbox that are of special relevance in the present chapter. First, however, I will refer to three other possible ways of approaching my empirical questions.

*One* is what I will call androgyny and equality research. Lesbians are here conceived of as having more freedom than heterosexual women, in relation to exposing the masculine sides of their personalities. Or we might find that the nexus of cause and effect is the opposite way around; that is, exposing masculinity contributes to their lesbianism. No matter which way round this is viewed, lesbians are read as more masculine than heterosexual women. Since they are not less feminine, the conclusion often is that there are proportionally more androgynous women among lesbians. Related to this is the research that shows that lesbian couples, more than gay male and heterosexual couples, search for and achieve equality in the division of duties and pleasures in the relationship. This research is for example accounted for in books written

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<sup>62</sup> Bera Ulstein Moseng wrote (1992) her master's thesis in sociology about butch-femme couples in Oslo in the 1950's and 60's. The thesis is subject to proviso, and I have not been granted access to it.



by the American psychotherapist Beverly Burch (1993, 1997). A Norwegian standard reference is Anbjørg Ohnstad's master's thesis from 1984. Such studies are interesting and much needed, and are referred to at several points in my work. The studies of more or less masculine and feminine, more and less equality do not, in my opinion, offer a promising theoretical starting point for an empirical investigation of erotic play between women. In my case, this has little to offer when the erotic significance of masculinity is in focus.

*Another* theoretical perspective, entailing another empirical approach, is to understand signs of masculinity as a mimesis of heterosexuality. This would be to perceive heterosexuality as the real and original. Women, who, with an erotic purpose towards other women, make use of signs of masculinity, could in this perspective only be pathetic, ridiculous and laughable, in every manner an incomplete and inadequate copy of a man. In my opinion, this ignores the manifold nature of human sexual expressions and the documentation of it through history. Let us take as an example Marlene Dietrich kissing another woman in the movie *Morocco*.<sup>63</sup> I do not think there are many who will state that Marlene Dietrich is pathetic or comic in this movie. She is by most people, regardless of individual sexual structuring, the seductress. The cigarette and the tuxedo were not common for women at the time, and Dietrich performed these signs of manliness in such a way that most viewers understand that this is a woman who still wants to be understood as a woman. The same goes for Joan Nestle when after many years as a femme she meets a woman who needs her to be butch for her. Nestle complies:

'My own body wants to be known only in the giving. I want to come on top of her, moving my hips on her body, moving, moving until I grow large and wet and then explode on her, my wetness pouring out on her thighs, her belly, her cunt hair. I keep my pants on, go barechested. I know I am trying to feel like something other than the woman I usually am.(...) Let me be butch for you; I have been femme for so long. I know what your body is calling for. I know when I turn to you before the sun has broken through the morning sky I will find you wet and open, as if you had been waiting for a lover in a dream. And so it is. (...) I will be deep inside of you before the sun hits the building tops, and by the time it is glinting off the water towers, I will have brought you to your

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<sup>63</sup> Josef von Sternberg, USA, 1930

pleasure. Then I will give you back your sleep again' (Nestle 1987, p132).

To take the responsibility as a butch is here presented as something Nestle seriously proceeds to take up in the state of sexual desire and need. Few would deny the connection between this terminology and erotic terminology that plays into cultural differences between women and men. On the other hand, the dynamic is recognized as their own by the two women. Nestle can feel a longing in her own body to 'be known only in the giving', and she very strongly believes that she knows what her partner's body 'is calling for'. The dynamic is portrayed in an internal way, and seems to convey individual desire and pleasure. Neither Dietrich nor Nestle wants to be seen as men.<sup>64</sup> It seems unreasonable for these reasons to read the above as copying.

*A possible third theoretical approach* is related to a historical dimension. In the quotation from Nestle we can see several touches of manliness ('manliness' in the sense of attributes that are associated with men more than with women). She keeps her pants on when the other is undressed, she wants to 'come on top' and to be 'deep inside' and she controls the sleep of her female partner. One possibility is to analyze differences in expressions of masculinity in the material I have from Norway by the end of the 1990's, with what we find in the descriptive literature that presents the butch-femme dynamic within lesbian subcultures in USA 1930-1970. This might of course also be done as a comparative project in a Norwegian context. In which ways have signs of eroticism changed, and how is it linked to the relations between men and women in society? It would have been a project that probably could have provided new aspects not only on the development of lesbian subcultures through changing times, but also on historically corresponding heterosexual gender. This challenge goes to the historians, since I in my project want to focus on the *meaning* of masculine-connoted expressions in eroticism between women in a contemporary context. If I find that I can say that masculine erotic signaling is important, how will I express its meaning? The theoretical perspectives that resonate most with my previous knowledge connect interpretation of culture with interpretation of psychic processes.

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<sup>64</sup> In her last book to date, Nestle is more open to a perception that some of the previous butches actually wanted to be men (1998). That Nestle herself did not recognize or publicly admit this earlier, is explained by the fear of having both her writing and the butch women dismissed (p112). As I interpret it, this was a concession to lesbian political correctness and dominant lesbian discourse she felt compelled to give at the time.

### **Heteronormativity and phallus as the major signifier**

As shown in chapter 1 where I clarify my understanding of ‘sexuality’, I understand the phallus as being the main signifier of sexual desire, in public as well as in private fantasies, in the part of the world I come from. Several decades of critique of phallocentrism have not changed this as far as I can see. Competing symbolization is yet not defined and refined enough, such that I could use it, which is also the main reason why Freud is given a place in this text. Phallocentrism is essential in a symbolic sense to my conception of the term ‘heteronormativity’. The dominant position of heterosexual discourses makes it impossible to escape from the influence of phallic signification (even when that is understood as partly possible *also*). This will cause the presence of phallic symbolism in lesbian sexual exchange, as already indicated in the previous chapter about ‘to take’. In the present chapter, this point is taken a bit further. Here it implies investigating the position of the major symbol of heterosexual desire, which is the phallus as I understand it, and its representation through signs of masculinity.

I have referred to Teresa de Lauretis and deployed masculinity as one among several possible lesbian fetishes. I have also argued that one might see the phallus as it is accounted for in psychoanalysis, as transferable, plastic and possible to possess by women (cf Judith Butler). In other words, phallus is not for men only. This fact contributes to an understanding of lesbian sexuality as phallic, however, yet phallic in a way that is detached from paternal law (de Lauretis’ ‘non-paternal phallus’).

I have been ambivalent about whether to write this chapter or not. I hear the critical voices of those who mean that lesbian sexuality has little or nothing to do with penises or phalluses, that it is about loving women and appreciating the female body. I also hear those who say that the phallus is a term from psychoanalysis, and that a sociologist is not trained to handle its meaning and representations, which obviously is right. There are some very strong voices, not at least within heterosexual, feminist academia, that state that the phallus is largely irrelevant to their own heterosexual practices. It would be twice as meaningless to use the phallus as part of an approach for the study of lesbian sexuality. Yet, I have found no way around it, since signs of masculinity speaks so loud in my material, and no scholarship has offered me analytical tools that

represent a relevant and usable alternative. However, I will come back to alternative symbolization in the epilogue.

The most central term in the empirical analysis is 'masculinity'. I could also have used the term 'manliness'. I do not understand these concepts as natural features, stable and unchanging. I perceive 'masculinity' as culturally, bodily and psychologically negotiated in the process of becoming readable men and women within the contexts where individuals are located and act. According to Heidi Eng (2000) the term 'masculinity' is too often used to describe the continuous process of becoming a man. Since men are not men in one specific manner, one has developed the plural form 'masculinities' as an analytical term, which does not solve the problem. There is a rich body of academic literature discussing 'masculinity' and 'masculinities'.<sup>65</sup> Signs of masculinity will here mean body language, clothing and behavior we usually connect with boys and men in general. Of course this is an oversimplification, and more important, it is in terms of definition, it plays into an understanding of masculinity as something men do. Paradoxically then, I investigate how women put masculinity into play. I do not look for theoretical or empirical solutions to this dilemma in my project. According to Eng (2000), Jeff Hearn suggests giving up the term in favor of a more descriptive language. I choose the pragmatic solution indicated above, and the main reason is that I in my analysis need 'masculinity' for its symbolic erotic value. I will elaborate on this choice below.

Norway is a country where girls have had a tremendously increased access to previous male expressions and professions. Nevertheless in most cases we can be quite certain who are anatomical men and women by traditional standards, by the way people dress, cut their hair, put on their make-up, talk, move, etc. (There are crucial exceptions, of course). It does not mean that all women look alike or that all men look alike. It does mean, however, that for most women and men it is important to make an appearance as a 'reasonable example of the kind' (Haavind 1998, p253). This also means that codes might be broken, and lesbians have some sexually significant practices and appreciations in this respect. I will let one of my informants try to explain what she means by a notion of lesbian masculinity that is attractive to her. Language is a trap here. She does not like to use the words masculine and feminine, but it is hard to find other words.

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<sup>65</sup> Eng (2000) refers for instance to scholars like Bob Conell, Jeff Hearn and Patricia Martin in her focus on how masculinity may be seen as available positions also for women.

GG: 'You'll have to talk about masculine and feminine, but you must do it in another way. These words might carry a different charge than in everyday life.

AB: 'Everyday life, do you mean in a heterosexual ...

GG: (interrupts) 'yes, world, in language and stuff. These words might carry a different charge among lesbians. When you say masculine, you don't mean *masculine*, you mean more tough. Lesbian radiance.

AB: 'What you say about lesbian radiance ...

GG: (interrupts) 'You want me to describe what that is?'

AB: 'Yes'

GG: It is, like, 'it', in a way. I have never become interested in a hetero-girl, because they don't have that radiance. That you are a girl, and are interested in other girls' (GG p14).

GG is talking about something that is masculine but not *masculine*, and that to her is erotic. I am going to use my material to investigate what this might be about, and I organize the empirical analysis around four issues: dressing up to look attractive for other women, sexual aggressiveness, what is recognized as being erotic about other women, and finally; how does it sound when this masculinity that is not *masculine* is not an issue in a conscious sense.

### **Dressing up for the night out**

JC (24 years of age) is walking down the street on a summer day, dressed as she usually prefers to be dressed, in jeans and a tight t-shirt. She carries a backpack and her hair is cut very short. She meets two boys, slightly younger than herself.:

'They said as I was passing them: «Macho-Babe». I thought that was a nifty<sup>66</sup> term. I liked to be called that. That was a gigantic compliment to me' (JC p12).

We do not know how the comment was meant from the boys' position, and we do not know how it would have worked in relation to a young girl wanting to be sexual attractive to young men. But JC likes being labeled with a term that combines the extremely masculine with the extremely feminine. This was not a confirmation from the gay and

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<sup>66</sup> 'stilig' in Norwegian

lesbian community. It was in a public area, and most likely came from heterosexual young men. It was act of categorizing from outside the 'scene' where she goes to meet women for a possible relationship. I asked her how she would dress if the intention were to get sexual attention from other women. She says that she would have worn what she usually wears, which we just saw activated the label 'Macho-Babe' from young men casually passing her on the street. In addition she would have put on some make up (discretely) and a good perfume.

Another informant, CC, is in her middle thirties. A turbulent and unfulfilling relationship is finally over; it is spring, Saturday night and she wants to use her newly achieved freedom to get some pleasure out of life:

CC: *'That was when CC went out to pick up someone!<sup>67</sup> And it was in a very «jeans-and-boots-kind-of-way». It was wonderful. I was in my apartment, drinking one beer after the other, feeling that life was enjoyable. I didn't call one single soul, I wanted to be all by myself. I was not going to go home alone, that was my single goal. I won't hide the fact that sex was on my mind. I didn't do much, I danced and flirted a lot. (...) It was wonderful to sit in the bar together with the other 'hustlers'.<sup>68</sup> I felt it was great'* (CC p8).

To me CC evokes the association of the stereotypical lonely hunter. In jeans and boots, alone with her beer, having only one mission to accomplish, one sole goal; to get a woman into her bed. She does not commit socially to anyone. She wants to feel free to sit in the bar, in control. CC feels good. This is overwhelmingly wonderful. She enjoys a feeling of freedom she has not felt in a while. Indeed, this is also a celebration of perhaps getting sex without romance and further commitment. This issue is focused in chapter 6 about prostitution that follows next. CC is lucky and finds a woman to spend the night with, and perhaps she would not have told the story if it had a different outcome. The lonely, slightly intoxicated hunter, sitting in the bar, apparently in control, but actually having very little, may very fast become pathetic. Both CC and I knew that. A lonely-hunter-story had to be successful.

Some might object that CC does what also a heterosexual woman can do in Norway at the end of the twentieth century, on a Saturday evening in

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<sup>67</sup> In Norwegian: 'Da dro CC på sjekkern'.

<sup>68</sup> In Norwegian: 'sammen med de andre sjekkerne'

May. This is both true and not true. Both the lesbian on the gay scene and the heterosexual woman on a straight scene would be vulnerable, facing the possibility of failure. However, the heterosexual woman would have to take into consideration an issue that the lesbian simply could ignore.

It is stated in court, time and time again, that single women who go to a bar to pick up a man for the night are the authors of their own fate. It is like asking for harassment and even rape. Not only adult women, but also very young women are supposed to know that it can be very dangerous to signal sexual interest in a public place. That CC chooses a traditional masculine strategy and does it as a lesbian in a disco for gays and lesbians, is crucial in terms of how to interpret her story. Dress codes within the lesbian s&m scene can illustrate the fact that erotic strategy must be read in context. Here a woman who is bare-breasted or only partially clothed from the waist up, is most likely a 'top' (Blackman and Perry 1990). That is; a woman in control. That would probably not have been the case for a bare-breasted woman in a heterosexual bar.

In my analytic perspective, CC puts into play the lesbian phallus. She utilizes masculinity for erotic purposes (Butler) or more Lauretisian: she exploits the position masculinity has as a fetish for many lesbians. The continuation of the story is that CC leaves her barstool, dances and flirts without inhibition until a somewhat younger woman ('with the kind of shameless arrogance I seem to like' (CC p9) comes up to her with serious plans for the night. In bed, it is the younger woman who really takes control, which might be seen as another story ('butch in the streets, femme in the sheets'), but may also be understood in the light of Butler's theory about phallus and transferability.

Blackman and Perry (1990) discuss what they call Lesbian Fashion in an article in *Feminist Review*. It is an interesting read for those who more broadly take an interest in this issue. However, the authors make some observations of importance to my argument here. They contrast Lesbian Fashion of the 1990's with what they call 'revolutionary lesbian style in the 1970's', which, according to them, was 'flat shoes, baggy trousers, unshaven legs and faces bare of makeup' that would 'reject those aspects of woman's fashion that signal the oppressive hierarchy of heterosexuality' (Blackman and Perry 1990, p68). Lesbians of the 1990's tend to take different routes:

'Using the feminine to attract women rather than men, these lesbians flirt with the symbols of heterosexuality, constantly

changing their meaning within the context of a lesbian subculture' (Blackman and Perry 1990, p69).

'...to subvert her heterosexual femininity she may be cool with men, she may have a severely short haircut and wear aftershave' (p76).

'I like that hard edge with my femininity. I will wear aftershave because it gives that subtle indicator of my lesbianism. I also like the clean-cut tailored look, which has the atmosphere of men's clothes' (p76).

This is very similar to how I understand JC's perception of her own strategy for getting the sexual attention of other women. She is a 'babe', a female, but there is more; she is a 'macho-babe'. Basically, this is about identifying as a woman, and at the same time creating a visible sexual difference, or, as some would prefer to say, an erotic difference between oneself and other women. The difference has to be recognizable as erotic in a cultural context, to imply the erotic dynamic that these women are in for. Flirting with symbols of heterosexuality, a woman wearing aftershave, adding a hard edge to femininity, are notions used in the excerpts from Blackman and Perry's article, while from my interviews it is boots, beer, and macho. I interpret this as an exploitation of the erotic significance of masculinity. As will be demonstrated and discussed later, it works (cf 'What do I notice' later in this chapter). Let me first investigate another traditionally male-connoted feature, namely active persuasion and aggressiveness in (the making of) sexual conquest. I have given the next paragraph the heading 'sexual aggressiveness', and want to underline that unwanted sexual attention is not an issue here. What I discuss is the aggressiveness that may be a part of the erotic dynamic between adult, consenting and equal partners. In the first case to be presented, the arousal of one, becomes the turn on for the other.

### **Sexual aggressiveness**

KPK is in a long-term relationship with GG, and they agree that GG is more frequently ready for sex than KPK is. As KPK puts it: 'She could have sex every day, and gladly several times a day, but for me it is very much by fits and starts' (KPK p7). As a result, KPK is the one who rejects GG's initiatives. However, sometimes, as they both proudly tells me, GG is the one who rejects KPK. This is a turn on for KPK, who is inclined to think: "So, now, you don't want to? I'll make you want"



More like that. Not always, but sometimes. And I usually get it the way I want to' (KPK p7). It is part of the dynamics between the two that GG will respond to this with sexual arousal.

AB: 'Have you ever rejected her'?

GG: 'Yes! (with obvious pride, my comment) But that is something that arouses her, that I reject her. And then, I'll be game, because that arouses me. I'm turned on by seeing her getting turned on' (GG p12).

And from that point, GG wants KPK to say controlling things to her, take her to wherever in the apartment KPK has decided the sexual encounter is to take place, and also dominate her in other ways, until it is time for GG herself to take more active control. KPK's sexual arousal and a following sexual aggressiveness from her, is for them the first phase in a mutual sexual exchange.

GI and J are a couple, in their early twenties. While KPK and GG very explicitly say that they are fascinated by s&m, this was not an issue in the interviews with GI and J. And yet, sexual aggressiveness is sometimes an element in the initiating of a sexual encounter between them. Here is an excerpt from my conversation with GI, where she is mentioning aggressive aspects of sexuality and also the effect on herself.

AB: If you want to do something extra to make her want you, what will you usually do?

GI: I think I'd just show her. It would be more kind of assault and the like. Usually, if I want her to want me, it is because I want her. You'll really go in for it, more intensely.

AB: By action?

GI: Yes, by action. Yes.

AB: Is that a turn on for her?

GI: It seems like it. And I am also like that: if she explicitly shows me that she is turned on, that will turn me on too.

AB: That is the best thing to do for her...

GI: (interrupting) Yes, that is to show me that she wants me. Simple as that.

AB: And how does she do that the best, shows you?

GI: That she is very direct. I like to hear it. She can just say that 'I want you', or 'I'm horny' and simply do a shove-you-down-onto-the-bed-kind-of-thing (GI p12).

In both these cases the aggressiveness and the arousal of the one is used to initiate a sexual encounter, that during the course of the event is a positive mutual exchange. I do not say that this is always the case, that sexual abuse never is part of lesbian relations. It obviously sometimes is (Scherzer 1998). However, my point here is that sexual aggressiveness most often is perceived as part of men's sexual configuration rather than that of women. In my interpretation of the cases just referred, sexual aggressiveness is utilized as an ignition mechanism, and an opener for sexual exchange between women. Yet, not necessarily a continuous part of the dynamic of the encounter, as it proceeds.

I have shown that 'a touch of masculinity' is part of some of my informants' preparations for a night out. When I listen to what my informants notice about the women they meet and get attracted to, it is not strange at all; for all of them it is about women's bodies, and for most of them it is about women's bodies that carry signs of toughness, self-esteem, boyishness etc. I do not have material that is broadly representative of Norwegian lesbians. Others would have to quantify this as typical or not in a more general sense. I will again underline that in my analytical perspective this is not about who is more or less masculine or feminine, or who on a scale from 1 to 10 is more butch or more femme. It is about a 'masculine edge' to femininity, a toughness to the female body, that is picked up as being attractive for lesbians. Or to put it another way: a masculine touch that the one can see in the other and vice versa.

### **What do I notice?**

Recall CC sitting in the bar, in the 'jeans-and-boots-kind-of-way'. When she later in the interview is asked what she noticed about one woman she immediately found attractive in another kind of situation, she answers: 'It was the type - she was elegant. ...ordinary clothes, blouse, open, thin blouse, a nice feminine pair of trousers, but very boyish...I don't want macho, but elegance' (CC p12). And this from GG:

‘ She looked strong. And she had a well-trained body...long, blonde hair, but it was not like (she mimes with a thin, high voice) *long, blond hair*, ...tough, however feminine' (GG p3).

GG's partner KPK, usually feels attracted to more feminine girls. But, not typically feminine:

‘I much more like the mix of tough and nice, like, masculine-feminine mix. Girls that I would fall for are more feminine than me, but not to an extent that it gets too apparent. But they are different from me’ (KPK p4).

BA likes women’s bodies, they are the most beautiful. And she likes women with plenty of backbone, but they must at the same time show emotions, not be the rock-hard type. BA refers to a woman we both know of, and she says that this woman is attractive to her. I ask BA how she sees this woman as different from herself. I get this answer:

‘She is stronger in what she means about herself, where she stands. And she has been open for a long time, and it is easier to be in the community. I am more insecure, and I’m sure she has had several partners, at least I think so. She has been together with X, that’s for sure, and now she is dating someone else’ (BA p5).

BA herself, has cut her previously long, blond and curly hair short, and her friends from her hometown say that she looks more masculine than before. GI feels attracted to women with big thighs and asses. She was young when that first happened and the other woman was her teacher. I asked GI what it was that she wanted to do to her teacher. GI says:

‘It was, like, being naked together with her. Do you understand? I remember I dreamt about it once, too. It had much to do with her curves, her breasts, thighs, ass, belly, and things like that. I don’t know, I just wanted to wallow in it. Do you understand? It was not sexual, actually, even though it was that’ (GI p5).

However, it was the same GI who, waiting for the green light, spotted the young woman on the opposite side of the street, also waiting for the walk sign. GI fell in love there, with this boyish (GI’s term) young woman, with short hair, dungaree-shorts and a tank-top, who ‘looked purposeful. She knew where she was heading’. She went across the street on the green light, ‘while I kept standing there, trembling’ (GI p3). GI’s partner is fascinated, as GI is, with women’s bodies, thighs, asses and breasts. When I asked her to tell me about the last time she knew that she was sizing up a woman, she said it was the day before, a female police officer on the street:

‘I don’t need to look much at her face when it is police women. Then I will look at the curves in uniform’ (J p13).

I could provide more examples from the interview material, but I am sure this is enough to illustrate my initial point, that many lesbians seem to feel attracted to femaleness that has a touch of masculinity. From a somewhat different realm, this is also a central point in Tone Kvenild's analysis of lesbians as receptors of film. Heroines most often have something tough to them (1997). As a contrast I will demonstrate what it sounds like when the sense of masculine signs is rejected, at least on a verbal level.

### **When masculinity does not communicate**

WR and NK are a conscious equality-oriented couple who have lived together for quite some years. Masculinity apparently has not much appeal. In separate interviews, they were both openly against erotic play around a masculine-feminine distinction in terms of the butch-femme dyad. They were both against the use of dildos for penetration, NK because it does not look like fun, WR because then:

‘you might as well have dated a man. To me, to use a phallic symbol in a lesbian relationship is far out. I won't have it. I can't even imagine it. Regarding butch-femme, if you take that relation, when I see a butch-femme couple, to me they are very special. Even if I think it is ok to draw on masculine sides of myself, regarding how I dress, how I move ... To make a role-play around it, no, that's far out' (WR p14).

WR states that neither she nor her partner is distinctively feminine, but on the other hand they are not distinctively masculine either: ‘I'm some place in the middle, I guess'. This is to see masculinity as something of which you can possess different quantities, not as something that women might have that *works* for them or does something with them and for them in terms of sexual desire. Or, at least, this is not what she is expressing here. The couple are consistently maintained that they never played with roles:

‘We don't have it. I've never heard that she wants that, either. In bed I want to be myself' (NK p10).

WR tells me what she usually would do, if she wanted to get NK into bed for sex.

‘I would have turned off the TV. Then I would have suggested that we go to bed early and I would have said: «I want to have sex with you. I want that very much, do you?» And if she said that she wouldn’t consider this, I would get very disappointed’ (WR p15).

End of story, according to WR. She would be disappointed, but probably not push the matter any further by resorting to sexual aggressiveness, talking, or touching to try to get what she wanted. And that makes sense: WR wanted no signs of the phallus to bring erotic significance into her lesbian relationship. And that was how she differentiated from the other informants referred to earlier in this paragraph, who were aware of and appreciated, what I would call, the masculine or phallic aspect of their sexual attraction to other women.

The starting-point for my analysis was an interest in the meaning of masculine-connoted signs for some contemporary Norwegian lesbians. I asked *if* and *how* masculinity can be seen as being important in a sexual exchange between women. I have found that masculine signs are significant, indeed. Some lesbians both recognize and appreciate masculine, phallic aspects of lesbian desire and practices of desire. I have argued that this is *not* an aspect or consequence of a sexual dynamic between two androgynous personalities. My interpretation is based on the erotic significance of masculinity in the dominant heterosexual culture. As I previously have argued theoretically, no one is unaffected by this in the process of becoming a sexual person. Here I have demonstrated that lesbians relate to the phallic erotic by putting it into play for their own purposes. The ‘reworking’ is here linked, not to the inversion of taking to giving as in the ‘take’-chapter, but to the *flexibility* in the use of masculine signals. Masculinity can be operative on both sides of the exchange; it is transferable.

## **Discussion**

In one respect, the question of generalization is here handled in the same manner as in the previous chapter: the potential for generalization is embedded in the way one analyzes the interwovenness of heterosexual and lesbian discourse. I have demonstrated how the major signifier for desire in our culture, masculinity (or the phallus, if you like) is exploited in the erotic exchange between women. A symbolic aspect of heterosexual discourse, what is recognizable as sexually potent, is pointed to as operative in lesbian discourse as well. However, there is an extra layer to the general statement: the question of the eroticism of

masculinity has been important in the lesbian subcultures we know of in the Western world over the past century. Eroticism is most easily mediated through masculinity, through the phallic. My analysis is different from most, as I see it as erotically significant and at the same time transferable, flexible and exchangeable. Yet, the phenomenon in itself is not new.

The documentation of masculinity (and femininity) as being central to the practices and debates within lesbian subcultures is overwhelming. As already mentioned with reference to Burch and Ohnstad, it is often treated as an identity question; are you a butch or a femme? On a scale from 1 to 10 how masculine are you? On a scale from 1 to 10 how androgynous are you? Why are we talking about this anyway? (for further illustration see among others, Loulan 1990, Weston 1996). I have here analyzed masculinity with reference to its *erotic significance*, which was also an important aspect of the butch-femme cultures between the 1930's and 1970's. I will elaborate a bit on this historical connection, even if this was dismissed as an analytical approach in the outset of this chapter.

That which communicates socially as phallic erotic signals, is culturally dependent and historically changeable (Rosenberg 2000). From Nestle, Davis and Kennedy, Feinberg, and Lord among others, we have information about the USA from the 1930's up until the 1970's. There, at that time, one could distinguish between the butches and the femmes with the naked eye, as was also probably the case in Norway at the same period. Among my informants there are no longer such distinctive ways of dressing and behaving, and the terms 'butch' and 'femme' are not even known in most instances. Those signs and signals that we have seen as communicators between some Norwegian women at the end of the 1990's may be the athletic body, a tank top, boots, short hair, knowing where you are heading,<sup>69</sup> being sexually experienced - some are similar, some are new. It is an important point here that lesbian erotic play is related to a broader heterosexually gendered historical context. It is my opinion that culturally hegemonic heterosexual gender relations will be recognizable within lesbian subcultures, and that lesbians relate to and rework:

- what heterosexual gender 'looks like' (fashion, body norms),

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<sup>69</sup> I do not mean that women in general do not know where they are heading. It is when this is interpreted by my informant as a difference between herself and the other that it starts to work for her in an erotic sense in this particular situation.

- how heterosexual gender is lived and negotiated (related to for instance the labor market, welfare state issues, the debates about equality between women and men),
- how the erotic is reflected in public fantasies about ‘she’ and ‘he’

One well-documented and particularly descriptive example on how this exchange between hetero and homo works, is the fact that the butch-femme couple disappeared from the lesbian scene with the feminist movement in the 1970’s. Again, the documentation is in North American and also British literature, but there is no reason to believe that Norwegian lesbian history is different in this respect. We have disappointingly little documentation though. The butch-femme couple could not survive the feminist critique of heterosexual sex-roles. Also, sexual practices that involved penetration of some sort became politically incorrect in certain lesbian circles, as penetration was seen as part of the power that men executed over women (Stein 1993, 1997). I have argued that the lesbian use of masculinity is transferable and exchangeable, it floats between the partners. With hindsight, the 1970’s seem to have been a period of lesbian history where this was an even more crucial question than now, and the pain and personal costs are well documented in the works already mentioned. One read that is particularly informative on this issue is Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993).

The exchangeability of phallic symbolic power in *heterosexual* encounters has to be investigated in particular. I would expect that an investigation among heterosexual informants in the ‘general’ population would show that there is an extra agenda; the man and the woman will still need to see each other within available discourses of masculinities and femininities. Sexual identity is at stake in this case (which is not the same as to say that it is impossible to more or less break out of these discourses). However, it is also well known that some lesbians object to giving over phallic power to their lovers. This is not merely a phenomenon from past times. This will be discussed to some extent in the next chapter.

The analytical approach has worked satisfactorily for this empirical analysis and also in the previous chapter about ‘to take’; Lesbians rework heterosexuality in a symbolic sense; heterosexuality is inside homosexuality. In the next chapter, chapter 6 about prostitution, I also use this approach; however, less explicitly. Among other things, since commercial sex between women is a rare phenomenon compared to

transactions in which men are buyers, it occasions some reflections about the discursive fields to which female customers are opposed.



## CHAPTER 6: HIRE A WOMAN! WHAT WOMAN WOULD?

When the protagonist in Robbi Sommers' short-story 'Marie' finds the personal ad; *Escorts. Women for Women. Discrete*, she is hesitant:

'Hire a woman? I laughed at the absurdity. Hire a woman? What woman would! And yet, I couldn't seem to pull my focus from those five unembellished words. What harm in calling the number, just to see, just to have a feel for how these things work? Not that I would ever consider, not that I would have an interest ...'  
(Sommers 1997, p20)

One of my informants, OP, told me that sometimes, many years ago, she and a girlfriend would meet women at a cafe downtown and go with them to these women's homes and have sex with them. For this they sometimes received gifts or money. Some years later she had a relationship with a woman who paid her so well that she needed no other job than being with her. The Norwegian literature about the sex industry has almost nothing about women as customers, let alone women servicing other women. OP and her 'customers' are obviously not a common representation of female sexual practice. They might be seen as the exception that proves the rule: usually, women do not buy sex. At the same time, OP's story represents a promising analytical potential for discussing power and sexuality. That was the reason that this chapter came to be written at all.

The chapter is thematically divided into two parts:

- Discursive fields within a heterosexual culture that makes the female customer fairly impossible or invisible. Why did OP's story surprise me? I discuss three separate but overlapping discursive fields; 'the customer', 'sex and romance', 'decent women'
- Features of lesbian commercial exchange. A classical feminist evaluation of commercial sex directs the focal points for the analysis, and power differences and psychic health will be discussed. Some of us are used to looking for power imbalance in commercial heterosex, and easily find it. What happens with the power imbalance when only women are involved? Does the sociality revolve around the same issues? How are these issues reworked?

Commercial sex is represented by just one case in my interview material. I base the analysis on additional sources to a large extent; narratives that

are already published about the issue, a Swedish discussion list for lesbians,<sup>70</sup> and previous research.

### **Why is commercial sex between women hard to conceive of?**

Or; why did OP's story surprise me? It might of course be that I had not been culturally observant enough, but I believe it is far more relevant to search in the variety of discourses and linguistic binaries that operate in the understanding of men and women regarding sexuality in our culture. Let us start with the historically visible male customer.

#### Research and public debate: the customer is a man

On the streets, in the hotels and brothels, in film, literature and in the public debate, *men are the customers of the industry*. Women are not present other than as providers of sexual services.<sup>71</sup> Female clients on the more or less open and known sex market are rare. A comprehensive and voluminous Swedish study of prostitution from 1981 does not elaborate on the question since 'it has very limited scope in Sweden' (Borg et al 1981, p52, my translation). This is supposedly also the reason why the major study on Norwegian prostitution is about male-female and male-male transactions. The female prostitutes in the study confirm that female customers are infrequent and the male prostitutes do not once mention female customers (Høigård and Finstad 1986).<sup>72</sup> There is one example where a lesbian couple mentions that a rich lesbian 'lavished' 100,000 Nkr on them during a short but apparently wild stay in Copenhagen (p138). Female clients are not mentioned in a major Finnish

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<sup>70</sup> The participants on this list have in every instance given their permission for me to use their statements.

<sup>71</sup> John Irving is an author who often challenges taboos in the area of sexuality. In an interview about his book *A Widow for One Year* from 1998 he says that there is a huge gender bias in how it is conceived to have a 'sexual past'. It enhances a man's image, but a woman should rather keep quiet about it (John Irving with Harvey Ginsberg on the publisher's web-side, November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999). In Irving's book a woman's visit to a prostitute is described through Ruth Cole, who is obsessed of writing about it in a novel. A woman is visiting a prostitute together with her young, male lover. The purpose is not to be gratified in the encounter herself, but to arouse the young man sufficiently so that he will sleep with her afterwards, of which he has been reluctant. That is; in this case the woman is only a client indirectly through a man's desire. Later in the interview he says that he does not disapprove of prostitutes or *the men* who go to them (my Italics).

<sup>72</sup> The chapter about boys as prostitutes, which was part of the Norwegian original edition from 1986, is not in the English edition from 1992.

study (Järvinen 1993). There are no female customers in a Norwegian study of customers in prostitution (Prieur and Taksdal 1989). This is a feature of Scandinavian studies as well as studies from other regions.

Male lovers who are kept by women on a long-term basis have traditionally never understood themselves to be prostitutes, according to the Norwegian historian Nils Johan Ringdal. That would have been a threat to their masculine ego. Historically, only men with male clients have identified as being 'whores' (1997, p462). Probably this implies that the women's status as 'customers' is equally rejected. This has changed. There is a small group of Western women who have become used to detached and rational sex, and that makes it easier to buy the service, still, according to Ringdal.

'Female demands for casual sex with men is almost exclusively a phenomenon among women in leading positions in the corporate sector, politics and management, and is to be found only among women who also in other significant respects have taken over what has been the more traditional man's role' (Ringdal 1997, p463, my translation).

Ringdal states that a lesbian demand for sexual services is seen as so politically incorrect, that the mediation has to be extremely discrete. Referring to the unions of prostitutes, he says that for this aspect of the trade, it is impossible to catch, analyze or give numbers concerning such a demand (p463). He does not thematize why it would be more incorrect among lesbians than among the heterosexual women in leading positions mentioned above. That it probably is politically problematic in lesbian subcultures is confirmed by a debate on a Swedish lesbian discussion list on the Internet. Andrea was very lonely. She was so lonely that she would have become a customer in commercial sex, had prostitution not been degrading for the prostitute. She is very ashamed that she even thought of it:

'I was more naive back then, you know. But, even to think about it makes me feel ashamed. I feel that I have dirtied myself. I did not have that thought very often, twice at most, and it was only the thought, but I still feel somewhat ashamed about it. It is indeed strange ... You do understand that it was a woman that I wanted to pay for ... I just say ... what the hell' (Andrea, Lesbiske Listan, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2001 my translation from Swedish).

Chantal understands Andrea and writes the same day:

‘One’s own human worth is degraded just by thinking about it. If one has seen the conditions prostitutes are offered, one will probably not want to be enrolled in that world or economically contribute to its maintenance’ (Chantal, *Lesbiske Listan*, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2001, my translation from Swedish).

These are the only two out of a large number of active participants on the list who have something they want to say in this discussion. If there are other political positions among the participants, they do not air them. Another important aspect of Andrea and Chantal’s contributions is that they, even when they find prostitution degrading and shameful, also perceive it as tempting (Andrea), or that quick sex without emotional commitment ought to be an opportunity for women as well as it is for men (Chantal, as will be shown later). I will return to this point at the end of the chapter.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women opposed prostitution because it was immoral and a threat to the family. The feminist campaigns in Europe and USA attacked double standard and male vice (Agerholdt 1937, Vogt 1991, Walkowitz 1996). The feminist critique from the 1970’s and still valid in mainstream feminism, focuses on power relations between men and women in the arena of sexuality. Here prostitution means women servicing men, with women in the position of (powerless) dependency and their sexual needs unrecognized. Women are exploited as objects for men’s sexual gratification, a gratification gained without any considerations towards the physical and emotional needs on behalf of women. Or as the Norwegian researchers Prieur and Taksdal put it: ‘Prostitution is one of several expressions, where many men’s problems in terms of empathy and mutuality is exposed’ (1989, p256, my translation). The classic feminist critique of prostitution understands the heterosexual sex trade as a reflection of the gendered power relations in society (Finstad and Høigård 1983, Jeffreys 1990). In a study of Finnish prostitution Margaretha Järvinen gives a more detailed account for different approaches under the label ‘A Feminist View’ (Järvinen 1993, p22). Several recent studies do not draw the same political conclusions, especially regarding women as victims. Social interactionist and constructionist perspectives within feminist studies advocate variation, prostitution as work and therefore worker’s rights, the shady landscape between paid and unpaid sexual service, the sociality and historical constructedness of concepts such as prostitute, whore and hooker, and the question of identity and professionalism. We

are asked to rethink prostitution. New perspectives notwithstanding, some things have not changed. The customers are men, the sex workers are women, some of them have bad living conditions and they are all constantly protecting themselves against becoming emotionally wounded, especially when it comes to their own sexual feelings (Jennes 1993, Järvinen 1993, McKeganey and Barnard 1996, Scambler and Scambler 1997, Skilbrei 1998). I will return to this in the analysis of my case interview.

In contrast to a picture of men who are able to seek sexual satisfaction in a transaction without emotional love, even when it is recognized that the prostitute in many cases has a poor life, we find *the romance-seeking women*. Men as customers in prostitution fit neatly into a distinction between *technical sexuality* and *sexuality with loving emotions*, where the women are associated with the latter. This is a most productive distinction in comedy production (key-words: the man who always wants sex, the unfaithful man and the angry wife, the man who wants to bed the blonde even if she has no brains). It serves as an often-used distinction in research.

#### Sex as technique versus sex as love and romance

A couple of years ago, I could read in my local newspaper reports from the summer holiday of two separate couples, one heterosexual and one lesbian. Both couples had recently come home from a trip to the southern parts of Europe. The heterosexual couple had been a bit unlucky, because he had met two buddies on the flight to Greece from Norway. He and his buddies started to drink and celebrate and their party lasted the whole week. It had been raining and she had been in their hotel room most of the time. She was even without a sheet on her bed at one occasion, because he was attending a Toga-party with his friends. The lesbian couple however, had been enjoying their Greek island and each other to the core for two weeks. They loved to lie pitching in the water's edge together and to walk on the beach looking for small stones with the shape of a heart (Adresseavisen, July 12, 1999). If the journalist had interviewed other couples or asked other questions, she would perhaps have got another story to tell about men, women and vacation, or at least she could have brought some nuance to the picture. When I nevertheless find this feature interesting (and amusing) it is because it reflects some standard research findings about gender, relating, and romance.

Women's sexual interest is perceived as being more deeply rooted in love and romance than men's. The difference between women and men

regarding the capability for having sex without emotional involvement, is repeatedly demonstrated in surveys (Blumstein and Schwarz 1983, Hite 1980, Kinsey 1948, Træen 1995, Townsend 1998). The British sociologist Anthony Giddens observes major changes especially in women's orientation towards sex and love during the recent decades, due to increased equality between the sexes. He draws the picture of a possible 'pure relationship', where romantic love and the demand of both men *and* women for a fulfilling sexual relationship is integrated. This is now to a large extent achieved outside marriage, and without the marriage as a stabilizing institution for maintenance of the relation. He is uncertain where this will lead, and says that 'nobody knows if sexual relationships will become a wasteland of impermanent liaisons, marked by emotional antipathy as much as by love, and scarred by violence' (Giddens 1992, p196). I agree that there has been an increase in women's expectations for a fulfilling sexual life during the last 30 years, and that this will have an impact on how, when and where young women settle in long-term relationships. However, the changes (or the 'transformation' as Giddens calls it) should not be overstated.

Research on the sexual practice and expectations of young persons in Western cultures, confirms that sexual relating between men and women is 'business as usual' in some important senses of the term. This is obvious in Bente Træen's study of Norwegian adolescents, where young men are more willing to go for a quick thrill without further emotional involvement than are young women (Træen 1995). Lynn Segal (1994) and Stevi Jackson (1999) refer to similar studies from other countries. In the anthology *Romance Revisited* it is thoroughly demonstrated and discussed in nineteen contributions how, for feminists and others, romance still exists, even if in contemporary culture, 'its 'scripts' are being radically challenged, fractured and transformed' (Pearce and Stacy 1995, p10). In her discussion of the topic in the same book, Stevi Jackson argues that some of the recent studies that claim that the changes are profound over-estimate the changes. Including the work of Anthony Giddens, she states that they are predicting the future on the basis of current trends regarding *sexual morality*. According to her, more sex without emotional involvement does not automatically mean that romance has lost its grip on our culture, and that the grip still is gendered. She finds no evidence that women's romantic ambitions have declined, or that they are met to a larger extent: 'Given the lack of evidence that women's demands are currently being met, claims that a more egalitarian form of love is emerging seems absurdly over-optimistic and willfully neglectful of the continued patriarchal structuring of heterosexuality (Jackson 1995, p59). In their article *Can*

*men love?* based on interviews with long-term heterosexual couples, Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden demonstrate the complicated gendered emotionality surrounding different attitudes to the romantic (Duncombe and Marsden 1995).

The negotiation of the discourse of romantic sex and love has a particular agenda among sex workers. In the two main Norwegian studies, most of the sex workers define themselves as heterosexual, but there are also lesbians. The heterosexual women are very clear that there is no romance in the transaction that takes place between them and the customer. They have also exposed men, and consider themselves to be less naive than other women when it comes to what one can expect from men. On the other hand, and paradoxically, it is very important for them to protect themselves against the feeling of serving a customer when they are having sex with male lovers and husbands (Høigård and Finstad 1992, Skilbrei 1998). One measure could be to work less and avoid penetration in periods when they are having male partners outside prostitution. Skilbrei goes on:

‘The girls distinguish between clients and lovers by introducing bodily limits. The client may not kiss them or brush their hair because they conceive this to be too romantic. They also avoid the clients’ touching of their genitalia, for among other reasons, preventing their own sexual arousal. A majority of the women I interviewed said that they must never like to have sex with customers, and that they do not want to like it either. Alex once executed “French” on a customer she liked and that made her sick. Suzy said: “Some are just too decent to go here, and so I loose my professional attitude, which is not proper”. By blocking out enjoyment when they are having sex with customers, they make impersonal something they otherwise see as very close and intimate. Together with boyfriends it might be difficult to turn off this impersonality’ (Skilbrei 1998, p68, my translation).

Like most people, these prostitutes want to experience the romantic aspect of sex. Perhaps it is easier to change attitude from customer to lover if you are a lesbian having male clients and a female lover? This is what Høigård and Finstad suggest (1992), and this may be the reason why lesbians do not take on female customers (Høigård and Finstad 1992, Skilbrei by e-mail, October 15, 1999). I note that neither heterosexual nor lesbian prostitutes expect men to defend the distinction between sex and romance. It is quite the opposite; they will know men as pitiful creatures that are willing to pay for an illusion. At the same time,

heterosexual prostitutes want everlasting romantic relations with men. It is obvious that this dilemma must be hard to handle, and as will later be shown, some of them search for love within the commercial sex market.

The main point here is not whether women are more romantic than men are in being sexual intimate. What I want to highlight is the fact that the public debate goes steadily on, and from time to time at an extremely high temperature. Men's supposedly technical approach versus women's supposedly more romantic approach to sex and relating is still a hot issue and more importantly: the binary comparison still sets the agenda for public debate, in research and for negotiations within heterosexual couples. Some examples: inequality and power differences are often central in Nordic research on heterosexual couples (Moxnes 1981, Haavind 1982, Nordisk Ministerråd 1990, Holmberg 1993). Usually, Nordic feminist studies do not draw the direct line between power issues of daily life and sexual expectations, as sexologists sometimes do (Dallos and Dallos 1997). In the public debate, however, the fulcrum is often equality, inequality and differences between men and women when it comes to sex and romantic love. It is obviously a central issue in the books written by young women in Sweden and Norway, *Fittstim* and *Råtekst* respectively - putting feminism on the public agenda once again (Solheim and Vaagland 1999, Skugge et al 1999). As a comment, two Norwegian men wrote a boys' guide, where it is confirmed that men most of the time simply are thinking of football, booze and pussy, and that this is quite natural (Bjelke and Friis 1999).

There is no room for money transfer in the discourse of heterosexual romantic love.<sup>73</sup> The integration of sex and love is dependent on the

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<sup>73</sup> Sex might be considered as work in at least two ways. First, work as the energy involved by individuals to keep up sexual interest and live up to their ideas about what sex might and should be. That would be my understanding of the concept as Jean Duncombe and Dennise Marsden use it in the article *Whose orgasm is this anyway?* (Duncombe and Marsden 1996). Here they use the term to contain the work heterosexual longterm couples do 'to bring their sexual feelings more into line with how they suspect sex "ought to be" experienced' (p 220), 'to try to attain or simulate – for themselves and/or their partners- a sexual fulfillment they would not feel "spontaneously"' (p 221), 'to simulate desire and suppress distaste' (p 224). Second, sex work can mean the energy put into one specific sexual encounter to achieve sexual gratification for one person or more involved. (This is not to claim that everyone who performs sex work is a sex worker, as little as someone who cooks is a cook). In the second meaning of the word, sex work can be paid or unpaid work. The term 'payment' can carry a meaning beyond being supported by money or gifts. The reward might be the feeling of loving somebody and being loved, a baby, social



relation to a significant other person who is object for one's loving emotions as well as one's sexual desire. A friend or a casual sex-worker cannot replace him or her. The integration of sex and love is fundamentally a relational matter; there are some things that most people in the Western world would say are not available in exchange for money, and this integrated phenomenon is indeed one of them. It is too simple to say that women in general are most central to the maintenance of the discourse of heterosexual romantic love, even if they more explicitly than men socially 'confess' to it. Men and women carry the burden as a joint project, but from different positions (Jackson 1999). Resting in the shades of romantic love, are the several possibilities of failing. As a woman you make a big mistake if you get the reputation of being 'loose'. A young man will not marry a loose woman. Well, Richard Greer married Julia Roberts in the American movie *Pretty Woman*. But, Julia was *different*. She was a hooker at the time he met her, but she was intelligent, had academic ambitions, was the one who tried to keep up the standards in the apartment she shared with another hooker, she knew more than him about the technical details of Richard's car etc. They did not meet as client and customer. Richard was lost, and asked Julia for directions. Most important; when Richard in the final scene rides in on his white horse to pick her up and bring her with him, she has quit street life, and is on her way to college. Jorun Solheim asks whether sexual accessibility is what modernity ultimately implies for women (Solheim 1998). That is a good question. However, women probably still have a purification process to deal with to get ready for marriage. At least Julia Roberts did.

The distinction between decent and loose plays an important role in the fascination many people had for this film, where Julia luckily is saved from indecency and the poor life she otherwise could expect in the future. I claim that there is still a distinction between decent and loose women, even if the morality of sex has changed profoundly in recent decades. Of course, hookers are loose women. However, a woman paying for sex work executed on her body by another woman, risks being interpreted as loose too. At least, she fails regarding the script of romantic love.

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security and domestic peace, a reduction of the fear of being frigid or impotent, avoidance of the accusation for being uptight etc. This makes it difficult to draw the line between prostitution and sex as it some times is performed, for example in marriage (Delphy and Leonard 1992), among young and unmarried people (Rasmussen 1984) and also as we will see; in my material (in the chapter *Usually, I will start with her*).

### Decent versus loose women

One might object to this, arguing that by the turn of the millennium we no longer seriously could talk about decent or loose women.<sup>74</sup> It is obvious that the concrete meaning of the terms are changing. There is no longer, in the West, specified guidelines for how young women should dress, behave and all together perform their gender, or that they are not free to have casual sex. Nowadays it is subtler, but women in Norway still know when they do sex wrong, or they will have a vague feeling that something is not right. The latter is what Anne Britt Flemmen calls experiences with 'spaces in between' (Flemmen 1999). The final place for judgment is the courtroom, where her short skirt, her tipsiness and inviting attitude, contribute to minimum penalty for what also the jury understands was not consensual sex. August 21, 1999, one could read in *Adresseavisen* that four Scandinavian boys (aged 16-18) had been levied mild penalties (fines) for gross indecency against a sixteen-year-old Swedish girl. The abuse was committed in Greece, and the Norwegian boys involved had a Norwegian speaking lawyer in addition to the Greek one. The Norwegian lawyer declared to the newspaper that 'I suppose the judge has emphasized that the boys on trial were ordinary, decent and with sensible plans for the future. A suspended sentence would have been very destructive to them'. Furthermore, he explained the position of the Greek lawyer: 'He underlined that the Swedish girl herself initiated what happened in the hotel room. In so far as this was an abuse, it happened because the boys did not catch signals from the girl, indicating that they were going too far' (my translation). The message is clear; as a woman one might get abused, and in the beginning one played along, and one should know that it is difficult to enforce one's stop signal. The court will understand that boys and men often have difficulties in reading signals. This girl has learned the hard way that she should administer her sexual initiatives more carefully.

Most women learn the lesson outside the courtroom, in their everyday arenas. 'As many women have discovered, the balance is subtle; not too prudish, but not too vulgar either' (Frøberg and Sørensen 1992, p30, my translation). Frøberg and Sørensen did their study at different working places. Karin Widerberg, discusses the challenges for women when they want to combine academic ambitions with sexual activity, and at the same time having to handle the balance between too much and too little. Widerberg describes how the binary whore versus Madonna is put into

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<sup>74</sup> Other binaries with a similar meaning are whore versus Madonna and bad girls versus good girls.

play in her own strivings. She says; 'The difference between me, and the boys, later the men, is that I to a less extent - than I conceive as true of men - allow myself to follow my desires. The picture of the whore is far too threatening for that' (Widerberg 1995, p68, my translation). The picture of the whore is also central in Anne Rasmussen's work, where young women have to handle 'the reputation' (Rasmussen 1984). Bente Træen uses the term 'social stigmatization' as a risk for girls but not for boys (Træen 1995, p95). Harriet Bjerrum-Nielsen confirms that young Norwegian women (interviews executed in Oslo, 1991/92), still have a reputation to protect. The young girls are aware of, and annoyed at, the different standards by which the above-average-sexually-active young men and women are estimated (Bjerrum-Nielsen, informal conversation, October 1999). This is also confirmed in the books written by young Scandinavian women, mentioned above (Solheim and Vaagland 1999, Skugge et al 1999), and is also central in literature from other Western countries (Holland et al 1996).

The risk of being understood as a loose girl is a hindrance for demanding that the boy use a condom during casual sex. A nice girl would not bring condoms to a party (Langeggen 1996). Actually, in some groups of adolescents, nice girls and nice boys do not have sex the first night if they have serious intentions. According to Langeggen's study from meeting places in Oslo, first-night sex between a young man and a young woman might destroy the possibilities of establishing a lasting relationship. With reference to Broch-Due and Ødegård (1994) and Sørensen (1992), Langeggen reflects upon the importance of the whore-Madonna dichotomy. She argues that neither the young woman nor the young man wants to start a relationship with a semi-intimate encounter, both parts understanding the affair as being 'cheap'. The responsibility for avoiding this lies especially with the women (Langeggen 1996).<sup>75</sup> Heterosexual practice between young people the first night they meet seems to have the potential for producing a 'loose' woman. In Skilbrei's study of prostitution in massage studios, some prostitutes started regular relationships with clients (1998). These tended not to work, according to the informants, because of the circumstances under which the participants met. The decent-loose binary is still alive and kicking.

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<sup>75</sup> One might expect that in an arrangement where two women meet, there would be not only one but also *two* persons seeing this as her special responsibility. That is not the case in my material. The women I interviewed were not concerned about avoiding sex the first night. The question of chastity probably carries a different charge in lesbian relations compared to heterosexual relations.

I have tried to illustrate why woman-to-woman sex sales are difficult to conceive of in our culture, and also that the woman-to-woman sex sale implies a break with certain discourses in the field of sexuality. The woman who sells sex is obviously a loose woman. But is she a loose woman when she sells sex to another woman? The woman who buys services from another woman is hardly understood as being decent. She actively seeks sexual gratification through paid service, and a decent woman would not dismiss the romantic aspect of sex. Is the decent-loose distinction only working in a heterosexual context? And here I have come to the main point to be made in this section: we operate with a distinction between decent and loose, but within that perspective there is no room for the relation where one woman is selling sexual services to the other. In the commercial heterosexual sex market, the client is not 'loose'. He might be a lecher and he might be understood as unfaithful to another woman, but a fallen man he is not. The ultimate indecent woman is a whore. One can say that a woman buying sex will be culturally understood as a whore as much as a customer, and the client-whore distinction also breaks down, since we could say that here we have two whores.

However, the sexually technically oriented person, who pays for sexual gratification, is sometimes a woman. Very briefly and under the heading 'Female customers in the market designed for men', I will illustrate the struggle some women have, related to the customer-discourse and discourses of romance. The analytical focus will however, be to investigate the question of power in lesbian prostitution, and relate this a feminist critique. How are the classical power issues negotiated in lesbian prostitution? This is the general issue in the last part of the chapter.

From Nils Johan Ringdal's (1997) world history of prostitution, we saw that if one is a woman who wishes to buy another woman's sexual services, one would probably be very discrete. Now, what can one do? It is always possible to start with the most visible part of the sex market, the market designed for heterosexual men. The discussion is based on material from a North American context, but there is no reason to believe that the European market for sex sales is different for lesbian customers.

### **Female customers in the market designed for men**

Veronica Monét emphasizes the emotional dilemma in the narration from her visit to a brothel in Nevada, as a customer.<sup>76</sup> Monét was herself working in the sex industry in San Francisco at the time. After having paid \$400 for herself and her husband, and after being thoroughly sexually gratified following one hour with a prostitute who ‘like me and all the other whores I know, is very good at what she does’, she states:

‘Yes, working in the sex industry is different from being a customer. I couldn’t believe how involved in the fantasy I became as a customer. I felt affection for the woman I spent an hour with, even though I knew it was just business for her. I felt that I was special, and I had a hard time accepting that we were just another appointment to her’ (Monét 1997, p169).

Jane Goldman, a lesbian also visiting a brothel in Nevada, shares the same difficulty about accepting to be ‘another appointment’. She and her friend Sue, a butch-looking lesbian, try as much as three different brothels. In the end of their ‘tour’ Jane returns to the first brothel where she some days earlier she had paid for Renee’s sexual services. Once more Jane buys time with Renee.

‘Renee and I went to her room. Embarrassing as it was, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to talk. She stripped – out of habit, I guess – and I found out all about her, about her kids, her ex-husband, her work. I suppose I wanted to establish some kind of relationship, to retroactively make sense of the sex we had had. Looks like I may be a lesbian after all’ (Goldman 1998, p27).<sup>77</sup>

Both Jane Goldman and Veronica Monét were apparently capable of co-creating a fantasy according to which they could act, or more specifically, manage to climax, in the brothels of Nevada. However, it was not simple. They had to defeat an inclination to connect sex and romance. It is also clear that neither of them believe that they are special or that this means something sexually for the sex-worker. Perhaps the fantasies and scripts of the heterosexual prostitution market are more accessible to women than to men. It is women’s supposed femaleness

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<sup>76</sup> In some counties of Nevada prostitution is legal.

<sup>77</sup> To Goldman a lesbian is a woman who wants to have a kind of relationship with the woman she is having sex with. Probably she is here referring to a political correctness that is part of many lesbian subcultures. Or is she referring to the romantic discourse and woman’s inclination to romance as well?

that is repeated, and it is not very venturesome to suggest that it is more likely women than men who reveal the game.

Vicky Funari illustrates this when she describes her first encounter with a peepshow stage:<sup>78</sup>

‘The sign outside advertises “naked, naughty, nasty, live girls” at 25 cents for each half-minute. Some months ago I put a quarter in a slot, visiting a friend who works here. The first time I looked into the stage, I had to laugh. It’s an absurd vision: contemporary women, some clearly marked with the tattoos and piercings of radical urban feminism, here moving with indifference through predetermined “sexual” maneuvers. Their shaven heads/purple streaks/crew cuts are hidden by obligatory long hair, Cher/Dolly Parton/Cleopatra-style. Their feet, which outside carry these bodies through art making, law school, mothering, and other hard labors, here balance on spike heels for four-hour to six-hour shifts. Behind their heavy makeup their eyes are dull with boredom. It’s unmistakable: these ladies punch a time clock’ (Funary 1997, p20)

Funary elaborates her feminist ideas about predetermination and the ‘plugging (of) her body into a predetermined slot’ (p25), as do one other sex worker, Eva Pendleton:

‘Much of what sex workers do can be described in terms of mimetic play, an overt assumption of the feminine role in order to exploit it. When sex workers perform femininity, we purposefully engage in an endless repetition of heteronormative gender codes for economic gain.’ (Pendleton 1997, p79).

These examples and considerations make it unlikely that a woman would search for sexual gratification in the traditional heterosexual market for commercial sex.<sup>79</sup> If a lesbian or a bi-sexual woman nevertheless should try to buy sex from another woman, she would probably experience it hard to get on the traditional heterosexual sex market.<sup>80</sup> Neither the

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<sup>78</sup> A peepshow is often organized as follows: The customer (most likely a man) enters a booth, places money in a machine, a window covering lifts and makes the customer able to see (and probably masturbate to the sight of) one or several women dancing. There is no physical contact between the dancers and the customers.

<sup>79</sup> Pornography is an exception (Lumby 1997).

<sup>80</sup> The only events that are advertised in public would probably be parties and other events thrown by organizers in s&m milieus, and the very few establishments designed for women. Of the latter I know only one worldwide.

heterosexual prostitutes nor the lesbian prostitutes seem to want her as a customer.<sup>81</sup> Among the prostitutes in the central areas of Norway's capitol, Oslo, there are women who identify as lesbians, as it is in other parts of the world (see for instance Feinberg, 1993). In the major study of prostitution in Oslo, 8 out of 26 interviewed are lesbians. The rate is assumed to be lower in general, according to the authors due to the weaknesses in the method of snowballing (Høigård and Finstad 1992, p73). None of the eight lesbians in that study ever take on women as customers. This is part of a whole set of defense mechanisms, as we have already seen. In the anthology *Whores and Other Feminists* edited by Jill Nagel (1997), referred to above, Veronica Monét tells her story about the obstacles when she went together with her husband from San Francisco up to Nevada to visit a brothel she had heard about in her adolescence. Her birthday wish was to experience the brothel as a customer. She complains about the reception she received as a woman. Firstly, women were not allowed in alone, but had to be in company of a male. Secondly, she was not allowed to go into the bar to 'pick from the lineup'. Thirdly, some of the prostitutes were very hostile toward her. (Monét 1997, p168). The hostility towards female customers is also reflected in Vicky Funari's contribution in the same anthology (Funari 1997, p28), and Stacy Reed has yet another demonstration of the rejection of women without male accompaniment, which she finds undemocratic (Reed 1997).<sup>82</sup>

We can see how romantic expectations, revelation of the heterosexual script and the expectation from the market that the customer is a man, are major stumbling blocks for women. After this, it is not surprising that in the one case in my material where a lesbian is selling sexual services to other women, the arrangements are made outside the conventional sex market.

### **One woman selling sexual services**

In the interview with OP she mentioned an episode where an upper-class woman surprised her with her sexual requests. In that connection OP also mentioned that other women with good manners had been generous. Later in the interview we were talking about being sexually dominated.

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<sup>81</sup> Except some of 'the feminist whores' who see themselves as sex educators also for women (Queen C. 1997)

<sup>82</sup> In an informal discussion on e-mail October 15, 1999, May-Len Skilbrei stated that there were no reasons to believe that there was any overlapping in Oslo between the market for heterosexual prostitution and transactions between women.

Again she reflected on a relationship in which she had been paid for sex. OP obviously considered these as relations along the road, not qualitatively different from the others, or perhaps to some degree, but; the money involved was not the most important feature at the time. Now, let us listen to OP.

For about one year in 1968-1969 OP and a friend used to connect with upper-class women in a coffee shop down town. OP was nineteen years old and new in the lesbian community. After having eaten and drunk at the ladies' expense, they went to these women's homes in the best part of town to have sex. Occasionally she was given money or presents.

AB: 'How was that sex to you?'

OP: 'It didn't give me anything, but I felt that I was hell of a girl. I was so self-confident, that it could make you sick'

AB: 'You just pleased these ladies?'

OP: 'Yes'

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OP: 'The ladies would be drinking wine. I suppose they had to, to feel the courage. However, we (OP and her friend, my comment) were reckless'.

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AB: 'The women paid the bill at the coffee shop, you said. Did they put money in your pockets as well?'

OP: 'That would happen now and then, and they bought us stuff'.

AB: 'Did you see the same persons more than once?'

OP: 'Yes, that would happen. Then I got a girlfriend on a more regular basis. And that was the end of it' (OP 4).

At my request she gives an example. It was one of the first times, and she was very nervous.

OP: 'I was nervous. It was one of the first times. Alone (without her friend, my comment), I was not that uppish. There was a lot of talking and she drank. And I talked wildly, because actually I didn't want this. You know, curtains down and so on. And we went to bed. She wanted me to have oral sex with her. A stranger, it was not exactly what... not to strangers. But I wanted to try, so we went to take a shower. I thought it might be easier after a shower, and there we had a very pleasant time. She wanted a lot of things. She wanted me to talk dirty to her. Fantasies. What I did to other people. Of all I told her, I hadn't done half of it. ( ... ) She came and I did not. She didn't touch me. I didn't want that' (OP 5)



This first experiences in sex trade is presented as kicks she had as a young lesbian, socially shared with a friend, both new to the lesbian community. Eventually OP established more permanent relations with women, and quit trading sex. In a second period, however, she dated a woman who held an advantageous position in terms of social status. She earned a considerable amount of money and gave OP material benefits such as money, the right to use her car and house. OP defined it as a relationship, as she was telling me about it as an example of a relation where she was not admitted to be dominant in bed. The other woman wanted to be the boss on all scores. OP had to be ‘totally girl, you know. I was supposed to just be lying on my back’ (OP p8). The other woman was on top, climaxing by rubbing her body against OP’s. OP would usually not enjoy this, and took pleasure in it only a couple of times. OP dated the woman for half a year and they socialized with OP’s friends. Her friends knew that OP was paid, actually very well paid, and they had great fun about it. OP had no other regular work at the time. OP makes it clear that this was an unequal relation. However, she perceives the woman with the money, the nice car and big house to have been the exploited party in the relationship:

“It was not nice. She was terribly exploited, and she knew it. I don’t think it caused any harm. She was supposed to move to another town in a couple of months, the time was limited and expiring” (OP 8)

OP’s proceedings can be analyzed with the analytical tools provided by Margaretha Järvinen to analyze heterosexual prostitution. With reference to several other studies in the field of sex trade, Järvinen does not operate with a strict difference between prostitution and non-prostitution. Sexual transaction, she declares, ‘is hazy and is dependent on the criteria used in the definitional process’ (Järvinen 1993, p24). She outlines five criteria for the classification: commerciality, promiscuity, non-selectivity, temporariness and emotional indifference, of which commerciality is the basic criterion. OP does not have a high score on the commerciality criteria. She was not always paid in the first period. In the second period she is well paid, however, she had other job alternatives. This indicates a limited economic dependency on the trade. She was promiscuous in the first period, but not when she was living together with the rich woman. OP was selective, and temporality varied from high in the first period till low in the second. She was not emotionally indifferent in either of the relations. She remembers the women she pleased as nice women, and she felt sympathy for them

because of the loneliness she saw. She even had some sexually enjoyable moments. Järvinen discusses professionalism of the individual prostitutes. I shall not go far into the discussion, but sum up that OP was a semi-professional sex worker, not self-identified as such, and operating outside the market for heterosexual sex trade. I will do an analysis of OP's story, and first a comment to my way of understanding the interview with OP.

In the methodology chapter I said that I took my informants' stories at face value and made my own story out of them. The story I want to write here is a suggestion about the power relations *as OP experienced them*. That is, I want to contribute with my 'true' story about power relations in lesbian commercial sex, based partly on OP's story. Another approach could have been to do a discourse analysis of identity, as Davina Swan and Carol Linehan do in their article *Positioning as a means of understanding the narrative construction of self: a story of lesbian escorting* (2000). They deconstruct an interview in a magazine where a lesbian escort, Rachel, talks about her work as an escort and about her sexual identity. The authors demonstrate how Rachel constructs herself by positioning herself in relation to dominant narratives (talked of also as 'discourses'). According to the authors, Rachel creates 'a unique and coherent self' by using 'a narrative self construction', based on available discourses (p403). The analysis is interesting, even if I do not always agree with their interpretations (I cannot see that romantic discourse means much to Rachel in her positioning, when Swan and Linehan treat Rachel's positioning to this particular narrative as a pillar in their analysis). Such an approach could have been used in the case of OP's story also. I could for instance have chosen narratives or discourses 'about being kind', 'about being a bad girl', 'about being butch', and there is also a class perspective in OP's story that I could call 'people with money as they are seen from a position where there is much less'. OP relates to feminism, and that would also be a discourse to consider in telling the story about how OP constructs herself through narration. I do refer to those discourses in my analysis of the interview with OP, but I do not use the reference as a means to draw a picture of OP's construction of herself and her identity. I have chosen another analytical strategy. One reason is that identity is not my focus in this thesis. Another is that it seems a bit too ambitious to deconstruct an interview and construct the 'self' of another person.

The analysis will show that there are significant differences, due to the *homosexuality* of the actual encounters described. I will elaborate on this.

### **What is special when the seller and the buyer both are women?**

Two women engaged in sex marks the encounter as a homosexual encounter. Homosexuality is still recognized as a subordinate sexuality, and secrecy surrounds it.

#### The Closet

'The closet' is important in both periods of sex sale that OP describes. None of the women OP was servicing were known in their surroundings as women wanting sex with other women. Actually, they were all extremely afraid that it should be known. It would have been a threat to their social positions and job security. This is of course a card in every sex worker's hand: the clients do not want to be exposed to significant others and are thereby vulnerable. In this case, the participation in the sex market would be exposed, but also the homosexual desire. 'The closet' makes the female client extraordinary vulnerable. Homosexual subculture is a direct offspring of 'the closet'. OP enjoyed the benefit of being a member of a lesbian group of friends, who socialized a lot. The client in OP's second period of sex sales had access to the same social circles as OP, which means that the gay character of the relationship implied that parts of her social life were subcultural and closeted also. She was even dependent upon OP for a social life. OP very quickly became a publicly open lesbian. Here OP had an advantage compared to her client.

#### Untouchability

OP did not let the upper-class clients touch her, or at least touch her genitalia, and she did not like the sexual habit of the last client, who would rub herself off on OP's body. When the client wanted to use a dildo on OP, she did not want it and managed to prevent it from happening. OP says about herself that she is rather dominant in bed, that in bed she always has been more dominant than her partners, except in the paid affair with the one woman she had in the second period of sex sales. I could argue that OP has some features of an 'untouchable butch' (stone butch), known from lesbian fiction and lesbian studies (Feinberg 1993, Kennedy and Davis 1993, Nestle 1987, 1992). OP signals the taste for the sexual dynamics of the dyad butch-femme, without identifying with the concepts. She describes herself as boyish as a young girl, and that her lovers always would be more feminine. She willingly uses the

dildo on others, but never let it happen the other way round. She tries to stick up for her partners (but feels that it is only in bed that she manages to dominate). And she is also very clear about the satisfaction she feels by contributing to her partner's pleasure, even without climaxing herself. As a stone butch or untouchable butch, her own sexual gratification would primarily depend on her capability to pleasure a femme. Or as Kennedy and Davis put it: 'A stone butch does all the "doin" and does not ever allow her lover to reciprocate in kind. To be untouchable meant to gain pleasure solely from giving pleasure' (1993, p192). This might make service more easy to perform and the step from unpaid to paid service shorter than if reciprocity were important. It is very easy to turn this argument the other way round. The husband-like butch, who profits from masculine power, find herself 'caught in a logic of inversion whereby that "providingness" turns to self-sacrifice, which implicates her in the most ancient trap of feminine self-abnegation' (Butler 1993b, p315). I will not argue that OP fits with the descriptions of a stone butch lesbian, but genital untouchability is anyway read as 'protection' within a feminist critique of prostitution.

### Service-orientation

What I am trying to make logical is that 'service-orientation' puts one in a good disposition for getting paid; the more specifically (as with the stone-but) a lesbian's sexuality is connected to the wish of gratifying another woman, the more easy it would also be to receive money for the service. And since this is part of the way she herself is sexually gratified, it is hard to see that she will be exploited in this structure of sexual exchange. And the less vulnerable she would be, the less wounded she would become. And why does this sound horrifying in the case of women servicing men?<sup>83</sup> The explanation will as far as I am concerned go like this: for a hundred years feminists have opposed the view that the main purpose of women's sexuality should be to please men. The idea is still alive for instance in pornography and other parts of the mainstream sex industry, and feminists of all kinds still fight it.<sup>84</sup> Most feminists will not approve when a woman says that her main pleasure is to gratify her husband; what about her *own* gratification, *her* orgasms? To me this plays slightly differently within a lesbian context. It is usually hard for

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<sup>83</sup> I am fully aware that some will find it horrifying also in the case of women servicing women, and that some would not in either situation.

<sup>84</sup> There are some self-defined feminists in the industry, whose ambition it is to create pornography that does not reflect 'this sexuality shame-based society and its negative attitude towards women' (Nagle 1997 b, p156)

homosexuals to acknowledge and accept their homosexual desire and longing. 'The closet' and 'the coming out process' are still important social structures in the lives of homosexuals. When a woman says that she loves to pleasure other women, that she finds it pleasurable herself, I will tend to accept it; she has fought to make a break with the mainstream practices, and found a sexual practice that gives her pleasure. It implies a consciousness about sexual pleasures that makes it easier to accept that a woman 'really wants' to pleasure another woman and can enjoy her 'doing', than it would be in a heterosexual transaction in which a woman serves a man. OP says: 'I don't always need to come myself, as long as my partner comes. It's not always orgasm that is the big thing for me, because we like to play. But I make sure that my partner comes, because that is so good for me' (OP p9). In the event of servicing women, one could even think of it as a kind of 'gentleman's behaviour', since more women than men report to have orgasm problems (Almås and Benestad 1997). A butch who talks from a *feminist* standpoint about pleasuring women for money is the one who tried to start a business in San Francisco:

'The issue that motivated me into action in my twenty-third year was the lack of fuel for the fire of women's sexual imagination. As a butch lesbian who sexually desires femme women, I saw a great deal more sexual entertainment (both from within and outside the lesbian world) geared to my tastes than to those of women who desire butch sexual energy. I believe that the nurturance of sexual pleasure provides a necessary respite from other exhausting tasks of advancing the lot of humanity. The sad yet pervasive notion that the feminine should always be at the sexual service of the masculine and never the opposite disturbed me to the very core of my feminist sensibilities. The answer was not to eliminate the feminine as cultural sexual icon – that would be an exercise in futility. The only viable solution I could find was to offer myself as a sexual object and become a butch gigolette' (Zoticus 1997, p170).

OP does not formulate such superstructural ideology, and I do not know what she would say if she was asked about it. Her service-orientation towards female partners in general could probably function positively for OP, in the sense that it helped her handle the transactions in the first period. Not in the second period, though, since OP here was pacified.

### Exploring sexual identity

OP was a newcomer on the lesbian scene when she dated the upper-class women, and one could ask if she were trying to find out about her own sexual identity. Another of my informants used a period of extensive sexual service towards her girlfriend to develop security in a lesbian identity. This is also what Rachel's says about her motives for starting escorting; she was curious what sex would be with a woman (Swan and Linehan 2000, p413).<sup>85</sup> Was OP studying sexuality, studying identity by experiencing? That might be, but it does not explain why she took the money. Could she not avoid that, as with Rachel who took the money when the woman said 'I'd pay someone else' (p413)? Maybe the money is the sophisticated women's way to say that they are not up to it for love or with longterm ambitions, since money is an important cultural marker between technical sex and romantic love? Maybe they felt that OP and her friend were vulnerable? These are questions, not answers. It is interesting though, to compare these cases with the lesbian prostitutes in Høigård and Finstad's study (1992) (and Skilbrei, informal discussion, e-mail October 18, 1999). Here the lesbian sexworkers are very clear that to take on female clients would destroy what they had left of their positive feelings for sexuality. OP does not comment upon this, but she seems to operate with a rather blurred division between paid and unpaid sex. It may be that the question of developing a lesbian identity, or at least being with women sexually, was so important those years, that it overshadowed the commercial aspects of the actual relations.<sup>86</sup> It is also possible that OP's clients had their identity project at the time. If this was the situation, it might have balanced the relation in terms of power. The two parts would both have been vulnerable in the transaction, and they would have shared the reason for being so.

### Sexual techniques

The last point to be made with regards to specificities that may be in play when two women engage in the commercial exchange of sexual services,

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<sup>85</sup> In Swan and Linehan's words: 'The event is portrayed as the consummation of sexual passion (...) Rachel evaluates her experience in a familiar move of generalization by comparing the prototypical female lover and prototypical male lover. The female lover is positioned as more superior (more gentle)' (2000, p414).

<sup>86</sup> In the conversation I had with OP about this text one year later (cf the methodology chapter), she said that it was not very likely that the search for a lesbian identity had anything to do with it. She had already identified herself as a lesbian, and she felt comfortable and happy about it. It was more that the women saw her as a fine girl, she experienced being wanted and that she could be good at something. And it was very exciting, like jumping with an elastic band, a kick.

is a question connected with sexual technique. In an article with the pre-text 'Jane Goldman visits a Nevada brothel to see whether lesbians would want to', Jane Goldman shares her experiences as a customer (1998, p24). Several dilemmas occur, and here is one:

'Here was the dilemma: With woman-to-woman sex, you can't just stick it in and get off while your partner lays there and pretends to participate. When you have got one woman who's being paid to give pleasure and another who's paid to get it, the one who's giving it can't take a passive position. And sure, I like giving pleasure to someone else, but that's not exactly feasible with somebody who turns 10 tricks a shift' (Goldman 1998, p26).

What Goldman probably says here is that as a female customer one does not have the option of putting a penis inside a woman's vagina, pumping and then reaching orgasm.<sup>87</sup> The prostitute would in most cases have to be more active than simply to offer her vagina, if the sexologists are to be trusted on the question of how most women reach orgasm. (Some women are capable of climaxing against an uninvolved and perhaps unmoving body. In OP's case this was her partner's practice in the second period of commercial sex). From the description of one of her first meetings with an upper-class woman it seems as though OP had to do the work, and I believe that would be the more typical. She had to produce the fantasy, possess the technical skills required and she took no service in return. The point is that with most female customers the mere *availability* of a woman's body is not enough. In most cases the female client will have to ask for skills and physical work to be executed. I do not mean that male customers never ask for skills and physical work. What I mean is that in heterosexual prostitution the woman's available (unmoving) body is more of an option in the act of satisfying the customer, than in the case of lesbian prostitution. Moreover, a lesbian who possesses such skills has more status than a woman who is available for men in heterosexual prostitution. OP confirmed this point when I talked with her the second time. She said that she had been thinking since I was there for the interview, and that she had talked with the friend that she had been with in the first period of sex sales. They had talked and recalled that they looked down on a third friend who also would take on *male* clients. That definitely gave her the low rank, while they themselves were reckless, handsome, capable and wanted. OP would use the term 'damned fine girls' ('helsikes fine jenter') to describe

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<sup>87</sup> That Goldman is underestimating the diversity of activities prostitutes are involved in when they execute their services for male clients, is another story.

herself and her friend, and I believe that means the same in English as in Norwegian; you've got it.

In this section<sup>88</sup> about the consequences of the *homosexuality* of the transaction, I have already discussed aspects of power. The question about economic dependency is central in the feminist literature about prostitution and power.

### **Economy**

OP was socially in a less beneficial position than the women she served. Most likely, this was the case already from childhood, but quite obviously at the time OP met these women. OP was an unskilled worker, lousy paid in unstable jobs. She was younger than those who paid. This difference in social position is well known from research, especially regarding prostitution *off* the streets, which also is the category here (Järvinen 1993, Faugier and Sargeant 1997, Prieur and Taksdal 1989). Women with high social status pay for the sexual service from a woman of far less status. On the basis of the way OP talks about these affairs, she was not dependent upon the money and gifts she got from her women. She quit the trade when she started to date a woman more regularly (unpaid). In the period with the woman who soon would move, OP had another job at hand. This was at the beginning of the 1970's and the labor market was good. OP preferred over conventional unskilled work to pleasure the woman, live in a big house and have a nice car at her disposal. This was one option among others, and OP found it to be the best option at the time. She was not economically dependent on this particular activity. Skilbrei points to the same finding in a study of prostitution in studios.<sup>89</sup> The women see prostitution as a good alternative to low paid unskilled work (1998).

However, OP does not leave commercial sex because other sources of income have become more important. First she quit because she had a relationship, then she quit because her client left town. Could this mean that a love affair was what OP actually wanted in the paid relations? Heterosexual semi-professionals in Järvinen's study slept with the men because they 'wanted to', because he was 'the love of my life.... at that

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<sup>88</sup> Consisting of the paragraphs; The Closet, Untouchability, Service-orientation, Exploring sexual identity, Sexual techniques.

<sup>89</sup> A studio is a place where the customers can receive massage and sexual services. The studios usually have a reception where the customer waits, and he is usually expected to take a shower before he gets his treatment (Skilbrei 1998).



time', because they 'wanted to themselves', because 'the guys interested them' (Järvinen 1993, p147). This is commonly understood as a very vulnerable position to be in for a woman who is selling her sexual services, potentially emotionally damaging.

### **Damages**

I do not know, but it could be that the thought of a permanent relationship with a client was not alien to OP either. That she quit the traffic from the coffee shop when she became involved with a girlfriend, might be a sign of some kind of emotional involvement. On the other hand, OP seems to know very distinctly that the sex she had in these relations was not particularly enjoyable for her, and that the women were married in the first period, and that she would leave in the last period. At least the way OP talks about it now, many years later, indicates an emotional distance in these relations. So, if she wanted a relationship within the trade, she was not conscious about it, or she does not want to present herself as being so vulnerable. The heterosexual amateurs and semi-professionals in Järvinen's study say that they search for and find the wanted relationship within the trade. That OP does not, could be seen as a psychological advantage for OP compared to women in semi-professional heterosexual prostitution. On the other hand, it implies that OP divides her bodily activities off from her emotions, which is usually perceived as a harmful effect of prostitution.

OP does not evaluate this as harmful. Taken at face value, OP's narration implies that she played around, had fun and got paid for it as well. In the second conversation she calls it a 'kick'. In the first period of sex sales she felt confident, great, women wanted her; OP might even be understood as a conqueror of women. Reflecting upon the upper-class and married women she was pleasuring, OP says that some were bisexuals wanting someone to talk with as well as the sex, and some were closeted lesbians having married fortunes they could not afford to divorce. Several of the women were very lonely. OP feels ashamed that she had such a big ego at the time, but she comforts herself remembering that she at least felt sympathy for them. The woman she dated for half a year is described as a very kind person, and OP feels a bit ashamed that she exploited her, however, it did not matter that much, since the woman soon would be leaving in any case. OP's doubts are not what it did to her own feelings and her relation to her own body. That is often the report from heterosexual prostitution. Her possible regrets are connected to the loneliness in the other women, loneliness she has exploited. It may be, of

course, that OP is not able to take in and reflect upon the damages the trade had for her own psychological health. OP was in therapy for some years, which was a positive experience according to her. She never thought of prostitution as an issue for the sessions.

OP was not genitally touched in the first period of commercial exchange. In the second period in the relation that lasted half a year, she avoided being penetrated by a dildo, which she did not want. OP controlled to a large extent what was for sale by distinguishing between 'allowed' and 'not allowed'. Compared to literature on heterosexual prostitution, OP was here using a common means of defense. A parallel to this is a distinction the Norwegian Department of Social Affairs makes with regards to child sexual abuse. Penetration of body-orifices is considered the most serious (Poulsen 1992, p17).<sup>90</sup> According to the Norwegian social anthropologist Jorun Solheim, the symbolic meaning of the female body is that it is 'an open body', unlike men's bodies that are closed, containing itself. This is thematized to a large extent with reference to the female body, overflowing its banks as milk, children and blood. She continues:

'The *sexual* openness of a woman's body and the heterosexual coitus as such seems not to have gained the same attention as a symbolic structure of meaning, as *gestalt*. The pathologies of rape, abuse and incest have here been focused. However, that we might say that men through common, ordinary intercourse, the heterosexual sex-act, "invades" women's bodies from outside, and that women "enclose" men and bring them *inside themselves*, is to a little extent scrutinized as a symbolic paradigm of meaning. It is my assessment that this body-configuration probably more than anything else, is settling the question of bodily limits as an absolute contrast between sexes,<sup>91</sup> as a relation between the "open" and the "closed"' (Solheim 1998, p74, my translation).

If we ascribe this meaning to the bodies of men and women in our culture, a sexual act between two women would be a meeting between two 'open' bodies. The possibility of being 'opened up, penetrated, filled up with manliness<sup>92</sup> as one's absolute opposite' (Solheim 1998, p74)

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<sup>90</sup> See the discussion about power and penetration in the chapter *When women take*.

<sup>91</sup> The Norwegian 'kjønn' here translated to 'sex' and *not* 'gender' since it is likely that she deals with the anatomical differences in the paragraph quoted.

<sup>92</sup> Solheim's term in Norwegian: 'mannlighet'.

might be perceived as non-existent according to this argumentation.<sup>93</sup> This might be part of the explanation why sex workers servicing men refuse penetration in some cases as an emotional defense mechanism. It might also serve as an argument for OP's permanently limited vulnerability. The consequences of this line of argument for the analysis of women receiving sexual service from men will not be discussed in this thesis. One could speculate though, whether symbolic aspects of penetration are part of the explanation why (according to Ringdal 1997) men who serve women do not call themselves whores, while the ones who serve men do.

One of the most profiled feminist sex workers in the USA, Carol Queen, claims to have met more sex workers than most anti-sex work activists and sex researchers. She says that one factor distinguishes those who live well and with no loss of self-esteem due to sex work, from those for whom this is damaging; the main protection is being a 'sex informed' and 'sex positive' feminist (Queen C. 1997, p129). If you are not, you should probably find the fastest route out of the industry. OP seems to be sex-informed (she knows what she likes, she has a lot of experience with different kinds of sexual practices), sex positive (she does not condemn any kind of practice, except that she does not want to be penetrated with a dildo) and would probably not protest if she were labeled 'feminist' (she is very critical to what she understands as male sexual practices in bed). This could, according to Queen, have had a positive impact in terms of psychic health. I do not, however, have proper interview material to elaborate further on that argument.

Before I discuss my results further, I will make a summary of the analysis so far.

### **A summary about female homosexual sex sales**

I base this chapter on a very limited empirical material, which nevertheless is what I have been able to find; a few narratives from the industry that are already published, one of my own interviews and contributions on a lesbian discussion list on the Internet. The material seen in the light of theory and other empirical investigations could be summarized as follows:

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<sup>93</sup> I can agree with this to a certain extent. However, I will also claim that two women have more of an opportunity to let go both ways if they want to, since most women have hands. Cf. also the theoretical considerations regarding the exchangeability and flexibility of the 'lesbian phallus'.

- The market for heterosexual transactions is not the place for women who want sexual services from other women. There are reasons to believe that there is very limited overlap between the markets for heterosexual and lesbian sex sales, if they overlap at all.
- ‘The closet’ might have an impact on the power structure in favor of the prostitute if the prostitute is an open lesbian and the client is closeted.
- According to the research about the butch-femme sexual dynamics, some lesbians place their main or even sole focus on pleasuring their partners. I have argued that in a homophobic society, it is ideologically easier to accept that these lesbians ‘really’ will take great pleasure in ‘doing the doing’. The step from unpaid to paid service might be short in some cases. The (untouchable) butch sex-worker can be understood as a sex worker who takes sexual pleasure in her work.
- The available body-orifice (the open body) is of limited interest in lesbian commercial sexual exchange, since women do not usually climax from penetrating another person with hands or an item. This could imply a reduction of the risk for psychological damage, if we transfer the results from research about sexual abuse to prostitution. And if we take literally the ideas about the symbolism connected to bodily penetration in our culture, it would mean decreased vulnerability for the woman who offered her services to other women. The female client’s lack of ability to penetrate with an orgasmic object would probably mean a power-advantage for the prostitute.
- Connected to the previous point, equality in physical strength makes woman-to-woman prostitution less risky in terms of physical abuse. And compared to men, women are known potentially to be less sexually violent, statistically speaking.
- The promiscuous lesbian, who is known for her skills in pleasuring another woman, is not seen as a ‘loose’ and available woman. In the lesbian subculture this rather tends to connote positively. This would imply a less stigmatized social position for the female sex-worker who is in the service of women compared to sexworkers in the service of men.

What does this mean in terms of reworking heterosexual power domains? What happened to power when there are two women instead of one woman and one man? The power imbalance is there; the client is, in OP’s case, upper-class and the client has in any case the money. The

balance between emotional involvement and the lack of romance in paid affairs, has to be handled. It is my view that the lesbianism that marks the trade 'smooths' the edges of the client's control to a considerable extent. The female customers I have found reported, struggle with their emotional involvement. In OP's case they were closeted and afraid that their homosexual needs should be exposed. There was apparently a very low risk that the relationships would be violent. The prostitute's body is not at the client's disposal. The client asks for skills, which probably gives some kind of status to the skilled. The lesbian sex sales seem not to find a place within the traditional heterosexual market. That the dynamics are different could be part of the explanation. And one could certainly ask; *if you were a lesbian*, which one would you rather be? The heterosexually married woman, with a husband she cannot afford to divorce, with sexual needs she has to pay for; the lesbian with a high social position, who cannot afford to be honest about her sexuality? Or does it sound more appealing to be the young lesbian cruising the field together with a friend, meeting women, risking emotional wounds, but having a large group of friends to share it all with?

The answer from most people would probably be that they do not want to be either. They do not want to buy sexual service, nor do they want to sell it. The reasons are manifold for wanting to be in neither position. One might be linked to the discourse of prostitution. Selling and buying sexual pleasure is not understood as proper social activity in Western societies in general, even when it is legalized. It is easier when the transaction is understood independent of a notion of sexual pleasure. By the end of the 1800's – beginning of the 1900's, hundred thousands of women got the diagnosis of 'Hysteria'. When European and North American male physicians produced a hysterical sudden outburst in their female patients, they did not understand this as the production of an orgasm, which is what we today would call it. This was conceived of as medical treatment, and the women paid for it.

### **Orgasm as therapy in the treatment of 'Hysteria'**

The technology historian Rachel P. Maines has written a most pleasurable book about vibrators in the treatment of 'Hysteria'. This 'disease' is in certain periods of history a very common ailment among women (Maines 1999), something that had been known from the time of Hippocrates (460-377 BC). However, the frequency of its diagnostic use culminated at the nineteenth century. Middle and upper class women were especially inclined to have the symptoms. Ancient, Renaissance

and modern medical authorities before Sigmund Freud described these symptoms ‘as those of chronic arousal: anxiety, sleeplessness, irritability, nervousness, erotic fantasy, sensations of heaviness in the abdomen, lower pelvic edema, and vaginal lubrication’ (Maines 1999, p8). Around the turn of the century lots of serious, well established, male physicians in Europe and USA were treating their female patients with the production of an orgasm, not known as such, but as ‘hysterical paroxysm’.<sup>94</sup> Since as much as ¾ of all women were supposed to suffer from this disease and other similar ailments (neurasthenia, chlorosis), treatment was economically important for the medical profession. The physicians are not known to have taken pleasure in the treatment, and would try to hire midwives and other assistants to do the practical work required. The electric vibrator first emerged as an electromechanical instrument to lift some of the burden from the physicians. The instrument was used in the treatment of several diseases, but the physicians particularly found the treatment of ‘Hysteria’ very time consuming. The use of new technology reduced the average treatment time from about one hour to ten minutes. According to Maines, the women who got this kind of therapy was lucky compared to those who got other kinds of treatment:

‘Furthermore, orgasmic treatment could have done few patients any harm, whether they were sick or well, thus contrasting favorably with such “heroic” nineteenth-century therapies as clitoridectomy to prevent masturbation. It is certainly not necessary to perceive the recipients of orgasmic therapy as victims: some of them almost certainly must have known what was really going on’ (Maines 1999, p5).

Karin Johannisson’s account for treatment of ‘Hysteria’ pictures it as ‘often notably aggressive’ (Johannisson 1996, p151, my translation). However, there were physicians who preferred what she calls ‘the soft way’: different kinds of abdominal massage. This entails a high degree of intimacy between the male physician and the female patient, and becomes an object of debate within the medical profession at the time. According to the Norwegian historian Jan Grande, physicians were aware that some of the techniques for treatment entailed sexual pleasure for the female patients. Some stated that the women came for repeated treatment for ‘their own perverse pleasure’, and that the treatment was ‘more pleasurable than useful’ (Grande 2001, p20, my translation).

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<sup>94</sup> According to Webster’s dictionary, ‘paroxysm’ means any sudden, violent outburst.

In the US popular culture of the 1920', the vibrator began to be presented as a device to increase sexual pleasure. The 'decades of innocence' were over. When the vibrators appeared again in advertising in the 1960's everyone would know that this was a sex toy.<sup>95</sup>

These public physicians produced orgasms in thousands of women and took money for it. Their work is strikingly similar to that of prostitutes, whose main task is to produce male orgasms. The difference is of course that the male physicians never were understood as exploited, degraded and socially deviant. The activities of the Western physicians were camouflaged by two socio-cultural phenomena: the disease paradigm constructed around female sexuality and the 'comforting belief that only penetration was sexually stimulating to women' (Maines 1999, p113). Female sex-workers servicing men are culturally understood as being quite differently positioned in the hegemonic discourses of sex, sexuality and deviance. The point I will draw from this example, is that large groups of women seemed to be perfectly capable of sexually climaxing under the hands of a skilled person, even when sexuality and romance were detached and the skilled person was paid. That it was not seen as sexual activity probably helped.

### **Concluding remarks**

The market I have been dealing with here is small, and as Nils Johan Ringdal formulates it, it seems to be very 'discrete' (Ringdal 1997, p463). Probably the clients are not only lesbians but also women who live with or prefer men in romantic relationships. Will we see an increase in this activity in the future? According to Ringdal, it is among the women in advanced positions in the society that we find those women who buy sex from *men*. Perhaps that is the case in woman-to-woman-prostitution also (in the first period of sex sales, OP's 'clients' were housewives, married to husbands who made decent money, in the second period her client was pretty well off on her own). And perhaps increased differences between women due to education and occupation, provide conditions for a market for commercial sexual exchange between

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<sup>95</sup> Maines observes that when such devices appear nowadays, they are not the 'true' vibrators. No, they are phallus-shaped vibrating dildos, suggesting that they are just substitutes for a penis. She comments dryly: 'For most women, however, these under-powered battery-operated toys are more visually than physiologically stimulating; it is the AC-powered vibrator with at least one working surface at a right angle to the handle that is best designed for application to the clitoral area' (p122).

women. This does, however, presuppose that more women than for the time being, let go of the romantic ambitions in sex and in addition give it this particular social shaping. Perhaps after a while we will have variations in woman-to-woman prostitution, in line with what we see in the heterosexual market. Or; perhaps women at large will operate more decently than men do as customers, and that women who serve other women will be protected from damages to a larger extent than within the heterosexual market, if this is to become a business of any considerable size. Some will probably say that we will soon enough be able to do research on such questions.

At the beginning of this chapter I referred to an exchange of opinions on a Swedish lesbian discussion list on the Internet. Andrea and Chantal were both disgusted by the thought of buying sexual services from women. At the same time Andrea had felt tempted to buy sexual services from another woman, and Chantal felt that paid sexual service should be an option for women as well as for men (who always have had it). Chantal also says that prostitution often is considered 'disgusting and dirty, while its ultimate force is pure and beautiful' (Lesbiska Listan, April 2, 2001, my translation from Swedish). My interpretation of the statements of Andrea and Chantal is that there is both temptation and sense of justice behind a future lesbian market for commercial sex. However, their political reflections indicate that the time for such a market is not yet near.<sup>96</sup>

I had two errands in this chapter. One was to deconstruct the discursive fields that make the female customer impossible or invisible. Paid sexual service from woman to woman is disruptive to main discourses in the realm of the sexual. The other errand was to analyze lesbian prostitution related to power negotiations. I do not have an extended empirical material. My conclusions refer to the material I actually got and this material related to feminist critique. I will not speculate that it is valid for lesbian prostitution in general. It can of course take forms I have no information about. The most general aspect of these results as I perceive them is to see this as *an example* where power problems within heterosexual discourse are *modified* because of the lesbianism of the relationship. That does not mean that my advice in situations of power

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<sup>96</sup> That Andrea and Chantal are the only two participants in the debate might signal that this issue is awkward to discuss and that it is still a taboo among lesbians. It certainly does not mean that there are not different opinions about it. The list contains lively debates with many participants on issues like pornography and prostitution in general ('general' here meaning 'heterosexual').



problems is to replace each man with a woman. Far from it; it only means that in the case of a socio-technical sexual arrangement, as prostitution is, I dare suggest that women in general are more considerate than men, given the gendered features of sexual culture we are part of. This is elaborated further as part of lesbian specificity, in chapter 8.

The next chapter is also about an issue that in some sense can be perceived as a socio-technical sexual arrangement: the production of an orgasm. This time: unpaid for.

## CHAPTER 7: ‘USUALLY, I WILL START WITH HER’ – EQUALITY ISSUES IN THE PRODUCTION OF AN ORGASM

‘After a while Lane said, “Let’s find music to make love to. All I want now is to make love to you”. “With me, not to me”. Her head on Lane’s shoulder, penetrated by the warmth of her arms, Diana said blissfully, “You make love with the person, not to them, when it’s equal. Am I ever going to get you trained?”’ (Forrest 1993, p159).

Diana is trying to make Lane understand that there is a crucial difference between making love ‘to’ and ‘with’, and that the latter is more equal. The Norwegian language does not contain this particular linguistic distinction.<sup>97</sup> However, some of my informants said that they sometimes have sex with women who do not have sex with them.<sup>98</sup> This seems to convey a similar distinction in meaning. ‘Making love (with)’ and ‘Having sex with’ indicates mutuality and a two-ways encounter. Both parts are involved in lovemaking, it is a joint project. Compared to this the alternative sounds like sex is executed by one to pleasure the other. Diana in Katherine Forrests’ popular novel sets a standard of equality, and one-sidedness is not correct. Are my informants not living up to a lesbian standard of equality? Are they into one-sided sexual service? What is the dominant heterosexual discourse on this issue? Is mutuality the ideal? What is the dominant practice? What are the feminists saying? Let me narrow this down to a possible analytical focus.

As we will see later, ‘I have sex with someone who does not have sex with me’, means in my interviews that ‘I’ provides her partner with an orgasm. The woman who is not having sex, climaxes, which sounds paradoxical for a person who is not having sex. This has directed my attention toward *the power to pleasure* a partner with an orgasm. Or also; *the power to make a partner pleasure* you with one. The topic of this chapter is thus *the sociality of the production of orgasm*. I addressed this issue within the frameworks of prostitution in the previous chapter. Here it will be in unpaid relations.

Some would object to my choice of focus and argue that orgasms are all right, but highly overrated as a sexual expression, outcome or measure.

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<sup>97</sup> As far as my information goes, English does not either. Richard Daly who ‘washed’ this manuscript, comments that it sounds ‘created politically by Forrest’.

<sup>98</sup> In Norwegian: ‘Jeg hadde sex med henne, hun hadde ikke sex med meg’

Sex, they would say, is about more than orgasms. It is about feeling connected, loved, etc. Others would argue that it is an important issue for women, but sometimes over-emphasized as an empowering achievement. Lynn Segal is one among the latter:

‘ ... having orgasms – however plentiful – does not mean that we have learned to love ourselves, does not give us power over our partners, does not give us power in the world. Indeed, it has little to do with either love or power. Orgasms are the one thing, perhaps the only thing, that even the most fearful, the most alienated, the most distressed, desolate, enslaved and wretched person (or beast), may manage to obtain’ (Segal 1994, p44).

I cannot but agree with all the above; the cultural position of orgasm as a *measure of success*, or perhaps even as an obsession, should obviously be further deconstructed. For such analysis, see for example Annie Potts’ article ‘Coming, Coming, Gone’ (2000). I agree with Anthony Giddens who states that to measure sexual pleasure by orgasmic response is ‘a dubious index, as many have said, but surely not devoid of value when placed against the sexual deprivations suffered by women in the past ...’ (Giddens 1992, p142). The sensational aspects of orgasm combined with the gender aspect of its cultural history, makes orgasm as social practice worth scrutiny. Some points from the socio-cultural history of orgasm in females should be mentioned. Women’s orgasmic potential has not always been recognized (see Chalker 2000, Hawkes 1996, Segal 1994, Wolf 1998). Modern sexology has made clear that orgasms are also for women. Since Alfred Kinsey (1948), Masters and Johnson (1966), and Shere Hite (1980, first published 1976) it has also been a ‘truth’ that stimulation of the clitoris and the clitoral area is the main source of orgasm for most women.<sup>99</sup> Anne Koedt’s essay ‘The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm’, was of vital importance to the feminist debate (1996, first published 1968). Koedt expostulates with Freud, the ‘Father of the Vaginal orgasm’, and assesses that the recognition of clitoral orgasms is a threat to the heterosexual institution. This was probably to overrate the significance of orgasm (cf Segal above), but Koedt’s contribution to feminist consciousness-raising in the realm of sexuality was nevertheless indubitable. However, in spite of the painstaking work of sexologists and

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<sup>99</sup> The significance of clitoris was known before that. According to Naomi Wolf (1998) a Venetian scientist identified clitoris as the seat of female sexual pleasure in 1559. I am sure that even before that, lay men and women have been well aware of this in their own sexual practice. It just did not reach it into the written. See also Rebecca Chalker’s book *The Clitoral Truth* (2000).

feminists in the last half of the twentieth century, the female orgasm is not as self-evident as one should wish in a culture marked by an ideal of equality. This is obvious from question columns in popular media, and from medical, sexological and feminist discourse (Almås and Benestad 1997, Chalker 2000, Dallos and Dallos 1997, McPhillips, Braun and Gavey 2001, Thompson 1990, Skugge et al 1999, Solheim and Vaagland 1999).<sup>100</sup>

Seen as a whole, and put simply, my analytical approach in this thesis seen as a whole is to examine lesbianism as a reworking of heterosexuality. Power issues in heterosexual discourse as they are pointed to within feminism, are my backdrop. Contemporary Norwegian heterosexual discourse regarding orgasm has at least the following two elements: the woman as well as the man should expect orgasm, and the men's are commonly understood as 'simpler'.

The feminist critique of heterosexual discourse in this area is not as easy to grasp as it has been in the three previous chapters. That might be because we here approach more closely the practices of heterosexuals than in the previous chapters, and that heterosexual practices are distinctively diverse regarding orgasms. A considerable amount of men are not 'simple', as is shown for instance in the debate about Viagra. On the other hand, some women are more 'simple' than others. About 30% will achieve orgasm in coitus without clitoral stimulation (Kinsey 1948, Masters and Johnson 1966, Hite 1980). This number might even have increased in recent years.<sup>101</sup> And in general, heterosexual couples find techniques that are productive in an orgasmic sense for both participants. These considerations in mind, my impression is that the feminist critique revolves around three issues:

- men in general should be more considerate, think less of themselves and focus more on the needs of their female partners.
- women in general should get to know their own bodies better, find out what really pleases them and ask for it instead of giving over responsibility to her partner.

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<sup>100</sup> In this text I assume that an orgasm is an orgasm; that we are talking about the same thing. It is more complicated than that. Most people will know when they are experiencing one, however, some are not sure and some may fake them and lie about them to please their partners (or a researcher). These will be possible sources of error in every study of human sexuality, where the physicality of orgasm is not measured, and even then.

<sup>101</sup> I have not been able to find new and comparable statistics from Norway.

- coitus should not have the sole position as ‘real sex’.

The targets for the critique are individual men and women who should change their habits, institutions that have the responsibility for teaching young persons about sex (family, educational and health system), and also institutions that are considered to have a negative influence (porn and prostitution industries).

It is difficult to see a direct way of using my interviews to investigate a lesbian reworking of the feminist issues raised above. Regarding the first point, I can hardly find any representations in my material that make it seem productive to use an approach where one partner is understood as ‘the man’. Regarding the second and the third, I did not talk with my informants about anatomical and sexual knowledge connected to orgasm, and I did not talk with them about coitus and the meaning of coitus. To be honest, I did not think of sexual knowledge and coitus as part of feminist critique and possible issues for analysis at the time when I did the interviewing. But, I talked with the women about orgasms, and I have chosen to be more explorative in the search through of my material than in the other analytical chapters. There are passages in the conversations I had, where I find the question of equality relevant to ask in connection with the orgasm. It would have narrowed my perspective too much, though, if I had let the analysis be too closely linked to the aspects of feminist critique mentioned above. The analytical question will therefore be of a general character; this will be an analysis of the parts of the interviews that in a *general sense* directed my thoughts towards equality issues in the production of orgasms. By the end of the chapter I will nevertheless come back to the feminist critique that is specified above, and discuss what I have found. This will then be taken further in the next chapter, chapter 8 that is a summary but also a synthesis of the analytical chapters. And also; the aim of the project is to contribute to a debate about sexuality and equality issues within a heterosexual context. The project should therefore relate to the questions that are on the agenda.

The core of the analysis will be the question of giving and receiving sexual attention from a partner, where orgasm is one result. I will start this explorative analysis with a discussion of the formulation ‘I had sex with her, she did not have sex with me’, and continue under the headline: ‘If she’s aroused, then she’ll get’. The third focus will be on a practice of ‘taking turns’. Power and possible subordination will be discussed for each issue addressed, and will also be focused in a particular section. Practices concerning power aspects of penetration will be the outset for

addressing the coitus imperative. I will use my interview material as a prime basis for the analysis. However, lesbian romantic and erotic fiction will also be exploited, and I will give an argumentation for that later.

### **I had sex with her – she did not have sex with me**

‘Having sex *with*’ indicates mutuality and sharing. What my informants say seems to be a contradiction in terms. What is actually going on when a woman is having sex with her female partner, and the partner is not having sex with her? Is this an example of women’s inclination to service other people, and in this case service other women sexually? Is this non-consent sex, or is there at least a subservient part?

ATI has had two separate relationships in which she seems to have been in a *permanent* position of being the one to gratify her partner without reciprocity. This is ATI about her first girlfriend:

ATI: ‘In retrospect I would say that she treated me more coldly than I did her. She enjoyed me being together with her and enjoyed that ... I suppose she didn’t have much sex with me. I was the one having sex with her’.

AB: ‘You pleased her, or ...’

ATI: ‘Yes. Yes. But I felt great about it. I didn’t need the ... that ... At that point I was so exhausted and gave so much that ...’  
(ATI p6).

She considers this to be a relationship where she primarily gives when having sex. Her partner will take pleasure in it, and their sexual meetings are orgasmic to the partner but not to ATI. ATI’s dividend is feeling great and needing no more. Besides, she is exhausted. ATI unties the expected mutuality attributed to the phrase *having sex with*. Concretely in this case the phrase means that one participant executes all the work necessary to contribute to the sexual pleasure of her partner. I label this ‘one-sidedness’ when orgasm is the measure, as it is here. This was for ATI a relation where she was dominated in every other part of the relationship. Who was the dominant one in bed is not obvious, and will be discussed.

ATI turned 50 some years ago and has reflected thoroughly upon her previous attractions to women who eventually laid claim to her. It is not my goal to understand her attractions or her process of changing her practice in this respect, but the sexual aspects of her experiences

interested me. The second relationship that was one-sided in terms of orgasmic pleasure was again to a woman that she felt controlled her.<sup>102</sup>

ATI: 'She controlled me totally. People can't understand that. They see me as a very strong person. I was absolutely obsessed by her. She did not touch me. She did not relate to me at all. She bewitched me. I went home during working-hours to have sex with her' (ATI p16, 17).

By the end of the interview I ask ATI whether she has ever felt 'cheap' together with another woman. She talks about this for a while before she returns to the relation with the woman mentioned above:

ATI: '... No, really, I can't say that. Well, the one I lived together with, one could say that I prostituted myself in a way because she did not have sex with me. But I didn't actually think of it along such lines. You wouldn't endure it if you got nothing back. It would not be fair to her to say that she didn't give me anything. She gave me something ... I did not feel cheap afterwards. Some call it prostitution when you don't get anything back, but you do get something, in a way. I was very fond of her' (ATI p21).

I am not able to distinguish the way ATI speaks here from the way some heterosexual women speak when they are in relationships where the great passion or orgasm is for him and not for her. Sex is pleasurable for other reasons. This experience with sex is documented in the Hite-report (1980, see for instance p147), and also part of how women talk about sex in popular culture. Women find pleasure in sex for different reasons, and I will not question that. The above is problematic only when orgasm is seen as the bonus for both participants, which is my perspective here. What ATI expresses here is thus problematic.

When ATI talks about making love to women, she becomes very excited and talks of it as if it were an art. Her joy was not connected to a relationship with a particular woman. To ATI the sexual female body as such seems to be a challenge and a thrill. I will illustrate this with a couple of excerpts from the interview with her. ATI wants to talk during sex.

'I talk a lot, tell them that they have a beautiful body, I do, and I have never got negative responses to that... I do it automatically

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<sup>102</sup> ATI uses the term 'psychopath'.

because I enjoy this so much I have to tell them how beautiful, gorgeous and delightful they are. I don't talk all the time. I don't. But I do talk'. (ATI p19)

In a passage of the interview when we are talking about domination, she returns to this joy. Today she would run away from women who were trying to dominate her, and I ask her whether she is talking about domination in bed or in daily life:

AB: 'To be dominated', you say, do you mean in bed or in daily life?'

ATI: 'In daily life. Dominating me in bed; it would certainly take a lot to manage that. I would rather say that it is quite the opposite. I do *enjoy* women, I enjoy women's bodies...It is has just been growing year by year and it is absolutely fantastic' (ATI p18).

ATI presents herself as a woman taking intense pleasure in the female body, and she apparently actively expresses this to her female lovers. A lot of heterosexual women do enjoy *men's* bodies. I seldom see a heterosexual woman talk this devotedly about being in a position of pleasuring a man though, perhaps not since I read Anis Niin. It might be that in contemporary Norway feminist discourse 'forbids' it: modern women are equal in sex, only prostitutes can take pleasure in servicing men. It might also be due to language. The female body and the male body have different positions in language. ATI says that it would be hard to dominate her in bed. Would a woman who talks, adores, enjoys, like ATI does, tend to have a dominant position? Is it objectifying, the language that is available for talking about (and to) the female body? Will most heterosexual men and women feel uncomfortable if the same language were used by a woman to a man during sex? Would language strip him of his manliness and her for her femaleness? How much can a woman admire, adore, enjoy and talk, and make the man an object of active attention? I really do not have the answer. In the previous chapter I referred to Wendy Hollway (1995) who inquires a liberating heterosexual discourse for women. I suggest that one aspect of that liberating discourse will be an eroticizing language that is empowering (also) for women who are with men. My analytical point is that I believe ATI's excitement did something to the power structure when she served the other woman. She was not only servicing her, she was also objectifying her, and by that she could be understood as having control. On the other hand, ATI said that it was possible to dominate her in daily life. It seems possible for ATI to have controlled the pleasure of the other in bed, and have enjoyed it, and at the same time have felt



dominated in other realms of life. This is hard to accept, I believe, within a feminist contemporary understanding of equality and sexuality. There is something so traditionally feminine and trapped about ATI's service orientation, and at the same time the sexual pleasure on her own behalf is so clearly and explicitly formulated.<sup>103</sup>

ATI started to relate sexually to other women in her late thirties. She is very happy for the capability that she possesses in terms of pleasuring other women sexually. Major parts of the interview are ATI talking about her fascination over her access to another woman's body and the exciting possibilities. However, ATI has not become stuck in the position of being the one who is 'doing the doing'. She met C and liked it a lot when it went both ways and she got attention in return:

ATI: 'I was shaky, I was jelly, I was absolutely ... '

AB: 'She took the lead?'

ATI: 'Yes, entirely. This was her having sex with me. It was a pretty unfamiliar feeling to me. I was not used to it, so I became shy.'

AB: 'She served you?'<sup>104</sup>

ATI: 'Yes, entirely. She was incredibly vehement, a passionate lady. It was the maximum ... It was intense. I have never had ... I remember that I had three or four orgasms ... She was tender, she was determined.'

AB: 'Were you allowed to touch her?'

ATI: 'Oh, yes. Yes. I felt that she trained me a bit' (ATI p12).

In this relation they alternately took the position of *having sex with the other*. They took turns being the one to be gratified. And still, the moments of the most ultimate pleasure for ATI was connected to 'doing the doing'. C wanted ATI to fist her,<sup>105</sup> which ATI was happy to do. ATI experienced that she herself was able to reach orgasm without being

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<sup>103</sup> ATI did not express any need whatsoever for having a masochist position. I perceive masochism and sadism as sexualities that must be understood within a different analytical framework than the one I use in this thesis.

<sup>104</sup> In Norwegian: Hun vartet deg opp?

<sup>105</sup> Fisting (fist-fucking, handballing) is the term for inserting the whole hand or fist into the vagina or anus. For many associated with gay male practice, but known through history as an occult discipline of all sexualities (Schramm-Evans 1995). Schramm-Evans has obviously other sources of information than the authors referred to in Halperin's book about Foucault, where fist-fucking is considered the only sexual practice invented in the twentieth century (Halperin 1995, p92). I think I put my money on Schramm-Evans here.

directly genitally stimulated, while fisting her partner. For most people this would have been an exotic way of climaxing, and it certainly was special to ATI too. She says that it represented ‘chemical releases that were absolutely complete’ (ATI p12). In my understanding of ATI as a lover, this is one more expression of the genuine pleasure ATI takes in pleasuring women. ATI seems passionate and consumed in sex, whether she is giving or receiving. I cannot conceive of ATI’s service-orientation as one where she represses her own needs for the needs of the other.

J is the second informant who used the term ‘I with her, but not she with me’. J had not had boyfriends before she was with her first lover, a more experienced girl. They were both young, but J was the younger. Everything was new to her and she wanted to take it slowly.

‘It started with me having sex with her, but she did not have sex with me in the beginning ... I think it was partly because I wanted to become more self-confident. I was quite sure that I was lesbian, nevertheless, you may want to prove it to yourself, and I wanted to become more confident’ (J p4).

J technically supports her partner with an orgasm, using her hands, tongue and other parts of her body. J characterizes it as a dynamic in which she is the one giving and her partner is receiving. In the beginning this was the way she wanted it. I asked her why it took a month before she decided to change the arrangement:

‘ ... I actually felt comfortable in the situation of giving, I felt comfortable. I think that’s the reason why, and that I took pleasure in giving. Of course, she wanted terribly to give to me too, but ... I have thought of this a lot. I am honest towards myself. I was not in a hurry’ (J p6).

J pleased her partner and says that she gained confidence in a lesbian identity in return. It could also be that J here disguises an actual wish to reject having sex; she is servicing sex because she is a good girl.<sup>106</sup> A few factors make this unlikely. Talking about rejection in general, she says that she is not afraid of taking sexual initiatives and being rejected, because she herself feels free to reject her partners. She knows by herself that it is not a big deal when she rejects:

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<sup>106</sup> ‘Good girl’ here as different from a ‘bad girl’, cf the prostitution chapter. For the good girl the emotional and romantic aspects are more important. Sex is not necessarily for her, and she will go a long way to make her partner happy.

‘I know how it is from my perspective. It’s nothing more to it. It’s not like I don’t want because I don’t want anything to do with you, it’s more about myself’ (J p11).

J’s partner seems to have been the more impatient of the two. While J takes her time and is in no hurry to be touched, her partner ‘terribly’ wants to give to her. Unlike the untouchable stone-butche (who, according to the femmes Kennedy and Davis (1993) interviewed, is a myth) J is temporarily untouchable. She finally let her first girlfriend make love to her. I ask her whether she liked it. She responds: ‘Oh, yes, I liked it, it was nothing to complain about’ (J p6). This is obviously an understatement and she laughs before she adds that it was better than she ever could have imagined. J is now in a relationship where sex is very important, but she still believes that she could be turned on by her first lover.

AB: ‘Do you think that you still could want her sexually?’

J: ‘No, not now. I don’t know. I have to be honest, so I need to think. That question was a bit smart. I think I might.’

AB: ‘In a given situation?’

J: ‘Yes, in a given situation. I know what I’d get and I still find her attractive and like her as a person, but I’m not walking around thinking of her. And I don’t think of her when I have sex with my partner. I am really absorbed in my present partner’ (J p9).

This can be read as a confirmation of the appropriateness of J’s strategy; waiting until she felt ready for being made love to. She liked it when it first happened, she liked the sexual exchange with this woman during their relationship and J is still familiar with the thought of having sex with her. Instead of being afraid of rejecting her partner and thus participating in activities she actually was not ready for, the one-sidedness in the initial phase of J’s first relationship seems to have worked as a proper strategy for J.

I want to point to two aspects of the analysis of ‘I had sex with her, she did not have sex with me’.<sup>107</sup> One is that the woman who most clearly is

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<sup>107</sup> Three of my informants used the term. The third one is OP who used it with a similar meaning attached. ‘If I have sex with someone I never give in, but if someone has sex with me and it slips away, I will tell her this is futile’ (OP p12). By this, OP means that she will never give up an attempt to bring her partner to orgasm, but knows on the other hand exactly when her partner will not be able to make her come.

aroused and even climaxes is presented as not having sex. It is the provider who is having sex, not the one who climaxes. This is a break with a common understanding of sexual service. In situations where one person is served by another, as for example in prostitution and in abusive sexual acts, the prostitute, the child, the forced person is not commonly perceived as being in a situation of 'having sex'. They will be seen as the provider who's sexual desire is not involved.<sup>108</sup> This has been an important position to take within feminist critique of prostitution and sexual abuse.<sup>109</sup> In my analytical case the providers understand themselves as 'having sex' and I find it hard to question that they take pleasure in it. It seems to me so obvious that they do enjoy it. And this brings me to the second point I want to make: I miss a notion of providing pleasure as a one-sided project, that can also meet the scrutiny from a feminist perspective; a provider position that is not implicitly subordinate. Language fail here, though, since it is difficult to speak of a sexual service that is compatible with feminism and the ideal of equality in sexual relations.

In the narratives about having and not having sex, the term is used to describe situations in a certain period in the lives of ATI and J. My material indicates however, that some think of service as a more permanent policy.

### **If she's aroused, then she'll get it**

Some informants have a very explicit understanding of sex as something that could be done to one participant at the time. AR does not hesitate to give her partners what she thinks they want, even if she is not aroused or feels able to receive directly herself:

AR: 'No, I never reject anybody. If I can't sleep with them, I can at least take them. That's the way I think.'

AB: 'You gratify them, then?'

AR: 'Yes.'

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<sup>108</sup> I will not take the discussion about the effects of abuse on the victim's structure of desire, and the feeling of shame when abusive situations are arousing for the victim. It does not mean that I consider it not important.

<sup>109</sup> One example is when Norwegian authorities, media as well as the judicial system use the term *samleie* (intercourse) to describe what happens when an abuser penetrates a child. The staff at the center against incest in Trondheim criticizes this for indicating consent, thereby being conceptually misleading (Senter mot Incest, Sør-Trøndelag 1998).

AB: 'Even if you don't get anything yourself?'

AR: 'Yes, I don't bother. If I have my period or something like that. When I notice that they are horny, it's enough for me. So, I'm not the one to reject anybody. Mind you, I'm talking about the ones I'm dating' (AR 12).

When AR has a relationship, she will always meet her partner's desire positively, even if she is not aroused herself or has her period. In her first and second sexual relation with women, she was not allowed to touch her partner's genitalia. The second woman was her partner for four years. AR was on one occasion unfaithful to her, having sex with a heterosexual female friend during a sports tournament. This was the first time AR experienced sex where she was permitted to actively bring another woman to orgasm, and she found it very joyous. After that event she broke up with her partner, and decided never to date an untouchable woman again. If she wants to get aroused and there are no special reasons why she should not, she will see to it:

'If you are not horny, you can do things, use oil and...and you'll get horny. If the other person lusts after you, and you have no particular reason not to want to get horny, sort of. There are always possibilities' (AR p12).

AR does not reject partners in permanent relationships. However, she is not only pleasuring them, she is also taking care of herself through her own arousal. By that means she gets her pleasure. Is this only an adjustment to another person's wants? Would she rather have refused to participate in this sexual activity? That may be the case. At one occasion a one-night-stand penetrated her in a way that did not suit her. AR did not stop her partner because she did not dare to, and she felt cowardly in the situation. Had she continued to date this woman, AR is quite sure that she would have been able to let her know. And may be AR would, but it may also be that to AR, rejection is a more difficult part of the game. A sign of this is that AR finds it hard to deal with the feeling of being rejected:

AR: 'You are lying there, necking, you have become a bit horny and think that the other one is a bit horny too, and you breathe into her ear and she breathes into your ear, and then you take the initiative, and suddenly it doesn't suit her right now! That's when you are pretty tight. I'll have to get up for a walk. I'll have problems then, I'll get very angry and moody, because I think she can let me know before she starts. Because, starting to touch each

other in a certain manner, is kind of an opening to something, and then you take the initiative, and then you are turned down ... it's obvious that it's very... it's a trip down. I don't understand things like that. If it was me, I would have said that 'it isn't convenient today' or something. And then we can rather cuddle and kiss a bit, knowing that nothing more will come of it.'

:

AB: 'She allowed it to go too far before she stopped it?'

AR: 'Yes, it happened a couple of times. And I feel that as a kind of power demonstration or something...I'd never make a scene, I'd let her fall asleep, and then I'd get up' (AR p11-12).

It might be that both rejecting and being rejected are a bit problematic for AR. She has strong opinions concerning rejection and the proper time for it, and she will do much before she rejects her partner. AR has her compensating strategy in terms of turning herself on. She is not presenting herself as a sacrificing woman. She tends to answer positively to her partner's sexual initiatives and needs, and she seems to be well aware of her own degree of arousal and what she wants.

NK has lived together with her partner for ten years, and has the same matter-of-fact attitude towards one-sidedness. I interviewed both of them and they give the same impression of a relatively harmonic relationship where things are sorted out in an open discussion. They are well educated, have stable jobs and income, are equality-oriented and find their relationship satisfactory. They do sometimes reject sexual initiatives, but according to NK, this is not a habit.

AB: 'Which of you two is the one to initiate sex more often?'

NK: 'I think that's pretty equal. We have evening rituals where we talk in bed before we go to sleep. Sexual desire can arise out of that ... I feel that it's often equal. Sometimes it happens that one of us is more aroused than the other one, and you'll just have to set about.'

AB: 'If she's aroused and you are not...?'

NK: 'Then she'll get it' (NK p7).

As we can see, even a couple that stresses equality, offers sexual service from time to time. So also with BA and her partner. BA is in her twenties, living together with her lover. Both have previously had several male sexual partners, and for both, this is the first relationship with another woman.

AB: 'Can you say something about the difference for you between having sex with a boy and another girl?'

BA: 'If I can use the word «softer». I don't know, but my experience is that she understands me much better than a guy, because they tend to paddle their own canoe and that's it, and if they had a great time they are very pleased. The way we (BA and her female lover) have it we're almost more concerned about the other one than ourselves. Not so concentrated upon ourselves, more interplay, softer' (BA p11)

BA emphasizes the softness and the communication, but also that the focus is upon the other person, perhaps primarily.

JC is in her late twenties. She met a girl on the Internet who came to visit her one weekend. They had sex and when I talked with JC this was still the one and only lesbian sexual encounter for her. JC considers this her sexual debut. I will refer a major part of the interview that dealt with this encounter.

AB: 'You are saying that the weekend was short and poignant. Was it also sexual?'

JC: 'Yes, absolutely. I would never have believed that I would dare, at least not sober. However, you knew that this was what you wanted and we spent Friday and Saturday together without touching until Saturday evening, and sex wasn't until Sunday morning. You can say that it was not the first thing.'

AB: 'Did you like it?'

JC: 'Yes, definitely. That made me realize what I want. Absolutely. The fantasy had been there, but you know, to make it come true....'

:

AB: 'Could you tell in more detail about what happened, what you did and what she did?'

JC: 'It started on Saturday evening. I was the one who initiated it. ... I said to her on Saturday evening that I wanted to kiss her, and she let me. So, we cuddled and stroked in bed on Saturday evening. We slept late on Sunday morning and we resumed the cuddling. I remember stroking her belly. And I did not mean to let it take that course. It was not quite the intention. However, it was obvious that she had reactions I hadn't imagined that she would get, and ... ' (stops)

AB: 'Did she start touching you, may be?'

JC: 'No, actually I was the one who continued. She said: «Jesus, you make me crazy». I understood that she needed more, or wanted more or would be game for more, I don't know quite what to call it. ... I knew I could continue. And I don't think I should give you further details. I should leave something to your fantasy' (laughter)

AB: 'I'm not supposed to be sitting here fantasizing' (more laughter)

:

AB: 'Did you both come?'

JC: 'No, only she. Simply because I didn't admit her...I never gave her the chance. I didn't need it. Pleasuring her gratified me. That was what I wanted.'

AB: 'And you succeeded?'

JC: 'Yes.'

AB: 'Not bad.'

JC: 'No.'

(laughter)' (JC p5-6)

I want to pay attention to three points in the rather long excerpt from the interview with JC, firstly that pleasuring the other girl was far the most important feature. JC took her time. We do not know whether the girl said 'Jesus, you make me crazy' primarily because she was so turned on by JC or because of JC's hesitancy, which she may have found frustrating and annoying. Perhaps it was both. In any case, it seems like JC had her focus on her lover, and not on herself. She did not allow reciprocity, she says that she did not need or want it. Secondly, JC is astonished over her own courage, surprised over her partner's reactions to stimulation, and I am not sure that she always knows quite what to do. That is, to JC this represented excitement in more than one respect. She was not only with her first female lover, she also got reactions from her partner that she had not expected. She tried to cope with it as the events developed. Thirdly, making love to another girl was crucial with regards to the recognition of her own lesbian identity. It was a fantasy come true, and it confirmed that she wanted to have sex with other women and not with men. This is a parallel to J, who, as we have seen already, got a stronger feeling of being a lesbian by pleasuring her lover for a period.

JC is pleasuring her first lover as, in an orgasmic sense, one-sided service. She is focused, she is excited and she is living a fantasy she has had for a while. It is difficult to read any kind of subordination out of this situation that I have chosen to call sexual service. One could perhaps say that the other woman is exploiting JC's curiosity, but we could as



well turn it the other way and say that JC was taking advantage of the other woman's sexual arousal.

In this paragraph we have met yet another three women who give sexual pleasure in terms of orgasm to other women. For J and ATI it was a first step towards a sexual practice where they also receive. NK and AR are also 'receivers'. In the case of JC I cannot say, since the event she told me about was the first and only lesbian encounter at the time of the interview. I got an indication, though, that JC at least *imagined* mutuality. The day after the interview she sent me an erotic short story she had written. The young protagonist of the story is seduced by another girl, and rapidly brought to orgasm. In the end the protagonist regrets the state of affairs, and complains that she never got to 'taste' the other. The girl who has just seduced her replies that she will take a rain check. JC by this seem to imagine what I have come to understand as a very common practice between women who makes love to/with each other. In the next paragraph I will take a look at mutual one-sidedness, that is; you-do-this to-me-and-then-I-shall-do-that-to-you.

### **One at a time**

GOE and her partner are equality oriented with regards to everyday life and its emotional and practical challenges. And since they are experimenting with expressions of domination and submission in their sex-life, they talk about equality matters a lot. However, as far as I can tell from interviews with both of them, they are not engaged in sexual activity where only one of them reaches orgasm. They were not asked directly, but as we shall see, GOE has a rather sophisticated way to avoid sexual activity when she herself is not motivated. She is not servicing anyone. Her rejection implies that her partner would have to start working, to make GOE interested.

GOE: '...when we have gone to bed and she wants sex, and I'll notice that and pretend like I haven't noticed. And she'll understand that and become annoyed, and usually we talk about it. And then I'll say, «well, you can start with me, then!» And then she'll be too tired for *that*, and then it'll be OK' (GOE p7).

If her partner were asked, she would perhaps say that she still would be frustrated. They agree that she wants sex considerably more often than GOE, and this is also an issue they pay much attention. However, let me follow up on GOE's version of 'one-at-a-time':

‘When we have sex, usually I’ll start with her. ...That’s sort of typical, and then we shift and it’s my turn’ (GOE p8)

Her partner will normally want more than one orgasm in a sexual encounter and they do not shift until her partner is ready, or as GOE put it, not until her partner is:

‘ ... totally finished and wants no more’ (GOE p8).

The ideal of the simultaneous orgasm during intercourse is still around as a measure of success, according to counseling literature (Almås and Benestad 1997). GOE and her partner has dismissed the idea all together. Of all the descriptions I got of sexual encounters I received, GN and AR were the only ones who ever explicitly mentioned that the simultaneous orgasm might be a goal.

GN: ‘We did research on that, how do we fix it, how do we do it. We are not all alike. Some comes easier than others do. So, we had to find out; who is .....I come easily... I had to learn to keep it back’ (GN p8).

GN and her partner at that time tried to be creative also in extending the number of ways to make each other come. The efforts they made to reach orgasm simultaneously are presented as something they would do occasionally to increase the excitement. Perhaps the idea about simultaneity came from heterosexual discourse, where some still see the ultimate orgasm as the one where the man and the woman reaches climax at the same moment during coitus. However, in this case a lack of success does not seem to cause a feeling of failure.

AR is another informant who talked about simultaneity. I have cited her in the analysis of the term ‘to take’ where she says that she is not able to concentrate on her own orgasm and her partner’s at the same time. Simultaneity happens occasionally when she and her lover use the 69-position, and such occurrences are coincidental. In her book *Making Out. The Book of Lesbian Sex and Sexuality* (‘the first ever fully illustrated guide to lesbian sexuality’, cited from the cover) Zoe Schramm-Evans has thought of the problem of simultaneity and concentration. In one passage from the book she gives some advisory remarks about the giving and receiving cunnilingus at the same time, what we could call ‘69’. She seems to agree with AR.

‘Try imitating each other’s actions until you get the feeling that you are actually licking yourself – it can be mind-blowing, particularly if you enjoy coming at the same time (although it can be difficult to concentrate on your partner when you are experiencing bliss!’ (Schramm-Evans 1995, p130).

The Swedish author Louise Boije af Gennäs has a scene in her novel ‘Stjärnor utan svindel’ where two women experience this mind-blowing bliss (1996, p240-242). Boije af Gennäs is no less sacral in her description of the unifying element in orgasmic simultaneity, than are authors who describe heterosexual intercourse and the simultaneous climax. The idea of simultaneity is absolutely around in the lesbian circuits. Could it be, perhaps, that as in the heterosexual discourse, it is in pulp fiction where this notion is most prevalent?

As I have already made clear, I am not trying to deconstruct the orgasm in this chapter. When I read lesbian pulp fiction I do not examine the ways the author speaks orgasm into existence and the meaning she ascribes to the orgasm. I am interested in what practices the author lets her characters play out regarding orgasmic service, reciprocity and simultaneity. The books will usually have a romantic script similar to heterosexual pulp fiction: girl meets girl, they fall in love, there are many obstacles so the reader becomes concerned whether it will be a happy ending or not, which of course it will be in the end. As in heterosexual romantic erotic pulp fiction, the characters are very much in love, very happy or unhappy, and the sexual desire is strong and constant. What I do here is to read out the social, organizational aspect of the orgasmic processes as they are described in an arbitrary selection of books. As motivated and argued in chapter 3 about methods and methodology, I use the pulp fiction to extend my own interview material. I find extended sexual service and the production of orgasms as a one-after-the-other arrangement among my informants. How do the protagonists in lesbian pulp fiction relate to these issues?

### **Orgasm in lesbian pulp fiction**

I will start with Lane in Helen Sandler’s lesbian erotic novel *Big Deal*. She is penetrating her lover Carol with a dildo. Lane directs the encounter and decides what is to happen.

‘At that moment Lane felt her strength and love pumping through her. Her job now was to fuck Carol without getting so excited

herself that they became distracted from what was important: that Carol should come while Lane filled her. Carol was already so aroused that Lane knew she needed her clit to be touched. «You can touch yourself soon, but not yet», she told her' (Sandler 1999, p8).

This passage illustrates that Lane requires total concentration to make her lover come. She cannot let herself, or Carol, be distracted by her own arousal. Lane conceives of this as a 'job'. It is not that Lane will do all the work. Carol will do her part in due course. Lane is important in different respects; technical skills and self-control is obvious, but also her capability of eroticizing a situation. It is important for the dynamics between them that Lane demonstrates her control. That Lane does not allow Carol to touch herself, that Carol will have to wait, thereby postponing Carol's orgasm makes Carol even more aroused and eager to climax. It is not shown in the excerpt above, but after Carol's coming it is Lane's turn.

When Valerie and Jackie finally reach bed after 100 pages of lust and obstacles, their sexual encounter is feverish and after a rather short while they climax in the same moment. Valerie is quite clear that this is not the preferable way to make love to the woman she has been waiting for. She says after a while 'I think I've recovered enough now to give you the attention you deserve' (Herring 1998, p64). Rosemary and Kate in a novel written by Lynn Denison are a bit more prosaic, but then, they are not meant for each other either. Here Rosemary has just provided Kate with an orgasm, and Kate is grateful:

'You are very talented', she said when she'd caught her breath. Rosemary chuckled. 'You are not so bad yourself'. She took Kate's hand and drew her to her feet. 'Let's get more comfortable, and you can return the favor' (Denison 1999, p25).

The main romance here is the one between Kate and a girlfriend from childhood. When Kate finally comes together with Ashley, her childhood girlfriend and meant-to-be-partner, it is still a one-after-the other-procedure, this time however with considerably more romantic wrapping. I will also have to correct the self-righteous Diana quoted in the very beginning of this chapter. She is complaining over Lane who, according to her, has a much too one-sided attitude towards sex. Diana is however herself absorbed in one-after-the-other-sex throughout this book (Forrest 1993).

In *Legacy of Love* (Martin 1997) we meet Sage Bristo, a rich New York businesswoman who has moved to a small town in Michigan. After two years she has a reputation for being a ladykiller and a wonderful lover. She can get every woman she wants, except the only one who really counts; Deanne Demore. They are partners at the card-table, but that is all. When Deanne finally gives in, Sage turns out to be untouchable. Deanne is not allowed to 'complete their lovemaking' (p181). That is, Deanne is not allowed to return the orgasmic pleasure by direct genital stimulation. Sage Bristo has gained the reputation of being a wonderful lover even if she brings her lovers to orgasm as an absolutely one-sided activity. In our culture there is little room for an understanding of men as wonderful lovers if they do not potently climax. Far from being inadequate for her female lovers because she does not climax herself, Sage is by the other lesbians in the community seen as a very potent woman. Deanne, who after all is the woman who is meant for Sage, will eventually manage to turn the situation and make Sage receive as well as give. This is of course preferable within an equality discourse. Reciprocity in terms of giving and receiving is important, but simultaneity is again not a question.

Untouchability among lesbians seems to be a real problem for the one who is not allowed to touch. We remember AR who broke up with her untouchable lover after having had sex with a heterosexual woman whom she was allowed to touch. And we also remember J's first lover who so 'terribly' wanted to make love to J while J wanted to wait. One of OP's customers was untouchable. OP's was not happy about this: 'It did not give me anything to have someone on top that I was not allowed to touch. I like to touch people all over. I was allowed to touch her on her back. Wasn't I lucky!' (OP p12). In lesbian romantic fiction the female lovers of the untouchable women struggle to find a way around the resistance against touching. It would have been a break of the equality discourse of the genre if they did not succeed. Sage is already mentioned. Ellen in Nancy Little's *Thin Fire* (1993) and Victoria in Clair McNabs *Silent Heart* (1993) will also be tempted, persuaded and seduced into reciprocity. Sage, Ellen and Victoria have all been sexually abused. Love and ability to receive sexually, or more specifically admit their lovers to touch and make them come, is part of the healing process. That this is an issue of interest among lesbians was demonstrated when I gave a talk to 40-50 gay men and women, mostly women. The women in the audience kept returning to the reasons for wanting to be untouchable. Sexual abuse was mentioned in particular. It is interesting though, that the lesbian community seems to represent a sexual arena where a woman can be understood as being a competent lover even if she is untouchable

in a genital sense. In most heterosexual contexts she would be considered a failure. She does not live up to the standards of equality, however, and should, according to romantic fiction, let herself be made love to.

From my interviews I see two main forms of one-sidedness in the production of orgasms: on one hand, one woman provides the other's orgasm in a relatively permanent pattern, and the other, two women pleasure each other by turns. The latter form might be labeled one-sided mutuality. This is also how I will sum up what I find in contemporary lesbian romantic and erotic pulp fiction on this issue. It is my understanding that this feature of lesbian literature reflects that the procedure of 'one at a time' is not only general for my material on Norwegian lesbians, but is a prevailing practice between women in contemporary Western societies. I here use the protagonists and the authors as informants. The reasoning behind that is linked to genre breaks. Sex is important in lesbian pulp fiction as in heterosexual pulp fiction. The author makes a distinctive break with similar heterosexual literature regarding sexual practices leading to orgasm. The (lesbian) authors of this genre are often very concrete and detailed when they describe how female orgasms are produced. This is a feature of lesbian pulp fiction that I find different from heterosexual pulp fiction, where coitus in an unspecified way tends to bring both participants to climax in the same second. My suggestion is that the lesbian author is conscious about what she is doing. She wants the sex scenes to be detailed and recognizable for her lesbian readers. She can only occasionally let the sex scenes end in an idealized orgasmic union with religious overtones. It is not that the Norwegian lesbians whom I have interviewed have read this kind of literature. Few, if any of them at all, know these books or how they can get them, since there is close to nothing published in Norwegian.<sup>110</sup> I believe this is more the other way around: a dominant lesbian practice is reflected in pulp fiction. One could object that the genre 'lesbian romantic erotic' is dominated by middle-class women. Both the authors and the women they write about are middle-class. I have on the other hand seen no evidence in my material that makes it productive to draw a class distinction on this particular issue. I here claim generality on a level that in Dorte Marie Søndergaard's opinion, 'absolutely not represents a central focus for generalization' in research based on poststructural theory (Søndergaard 1996, p62, my translation). The level is the 'concrete level, close to the empirical' (p62).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> I associate Anne Holt's novel *Mea Culpa* with the genre (1997).

<sup>111</sup> In Danish: 'det konkrete empirinære niveau' (Søndergaard 1996, p62).

I said in the beginning of the chapter, that a more in-depth discussion of possible subordination attached to sexual service would be taken in a special section towards the end of this chapter. My question is: do I have women in my material who express reluctance against sexual one-sidedness? How do they handle it?

### **Providing without joy**

GN and PO have sometimes provided one-sided sexual service without being aroused themselves, and also without the matter-of-fact wish to pleasure the partner. GN and OP usually understands themselves to be more dominant than their partners in sexual encounters. Yet this does not seem to prevent unwanted one-sidedness in sex with other women. Both will sometimes be involved in sex that they do not want. Feeling dominant and yet subordinate sounds like a paradox.

GN was married to a man once, and in her marriage she sometimes felt that she had to be ready for her husband. She has also felt obliged to make love to her female partner, and not being aroused herself, she actually has not wanted it.

AB: 'Did you eventually feel aroused?'

GN: 'No. It has been difficult along the way, but afterwards I have been glad that I did it. Because I saw that it did her good and the strong need she had there and then. But it has been difficult along the way' (GN p15).

The problem for GN has several aspects. At the occasions when she does not want to engage in sex and her partner wants to, GN is usually tired, not mentally in the mood for having sex and her partner has perhaps been drinking. GN says that it feels as though her partner is saying; 'If you don't want to, you will do it anyway', and GN will decide to participate in what she calls 'a game'.<sup>112</sup> Sometimes she feels good by the control it gives her (she is calm while the other is needy), but if it always goes one way, and the emotional climate is not right, it will not work in the long run. She will then feel emotional distance, unwanted pressure and a growing distaste. GN says it is hard to know what comes first and what last. She has had relationships where she stopped 'offering

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<sup>112</sup> This may sound similar to an s&m play, but should not be seen as one since GN is uncomfortable with this situation (Califia and Sweeney 1996). For a critique of lesbian s&m related to feminism, see Linden et al 1982, Soble (ed) 1997.

service' because the deep feelings required of her had faded. GN says that 'something died, and I did not bother doing it anymore'.<sup>113</sup>

While GN is primarily concerned about her partner's strong need, OP emphasizes the problems related to rejection of sexual initiatives. OP does not like to be rejected herself and she will sometimes leave bed in a very bad mood. Especially if she is rejected because '... three hours earlier I said the wrong thing'.

AB: 'Have you ever rejected somebody?'

OP: 'Yes, and I don't like it much, because I can't stand to be rejected myself. I don't like to do it. It is not always I want to, or it doesn't suit me. You are not aroused at all. But sometimes I have done it, and I've got the feeling of being used, that I have to sleep with somebody. I don't want to, but I do it because of the other one.'

AB: 'How do you feel afterwards?'

OP: 'I don't like it afterwards. But it passes off'.

AB: 'Is this happening in long-term relationships?'

OP: 'Yes, in casual sex, both usually want it. That's the reason why the one go home with the other. However, it has happened that you go home with somebody because you think that something is going to happen, and then it turns out to be nothing. That's when I go home. And I'll be very grumpy' (OP p10).

As also shown in the case of AR, OP can become grumpy when she is turned down, and might at the same time have problems when it comes to rejecting someone herself. Half way through her first reply, OP shifts from talking about her dislike of rejecting somebody, to talk about her dislike of sleeping with somebody she actually does not want to sleep with. 'I don't like to do it' refers to her attitude towards rejecting somebody. The next sentence is about having sex when she does not want to: 'It is not always I want to, or it does not suit me. You are not aroused at all'. As we saw in the chapter about commercial sex, OP was trading sex for gifts and money, pleasuring upper-class women at the end of the 1960's. This was a time when she pleased women without necessarily being aroused herself. Later in the interview OP says that she

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<sup>113</sup> I do not have reference to a page in an interview transcription here. I went back to GN a second time, to discuss what more concretely the difficulty she refers to in the interview could consist of. I did not use a tape recorder, and this was more of a conversation than a research interview. I did however take two pages of handwritten notes.



has also tried to force another woman to have sex with her. She had been drinking too much, and did not stop her attempts until her partner started to cry. This happened in a long-term relationship. OP assures me that it has not happened more than once, but these narratives make it likely that rejection is difficult to handle, either way.

### **Possible exploitation and subordination**

One-sidedness in sexual servicing may develop in such a way that the provider does not feel like giving. I do not have the material or the competence to analyze the individual psychologies and power balances involved in the two cases of obvious reluctance I have in my material. OP and GN both report parents who failed as such, which may have contributed to an inclination to engage in activity where they emotionally are not fully present. One could say that by this behavior they are in a subordinate position, a subordinate position that again is blurred by the dominance they claim to have in bed and the very firm conditions they are launching in their present relationships. Today OP has a girlfriend with whom she has sex regularly. This girlfriend would rather have liked a more permanent relationship, but OP is not ready for this right now. OP finds that she has a good life as it is. GN is in a relationship with a woman who has a drinking problem. GN is quite clear about some indispensable conditions for a continued relationship, and both she and her partner knows that GN has other options, especially since GN is in a secure economic situation. OP will not take on more obligations while her present partner is pressing in that direction, and GN is well aware of the economic freedom she has on her own if her partner does not change her drinking habits. Both OP and GN clearly express what pleases them sexually and what does not. I cannot see that they have given in to a service-orientation that means no sexual gratification for themselves, at least not permanently.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that I would relate to feminist concerns in general. OP, GN and also ATI, who was in a relationship with permanent provisions from her side, are the ones who first of all raised my feminist concern about equality issues. At the same time, the three of them very clearly understand themselves as the more dominant part in sexual exchange with other women; that is, I am challenged by the data to discuss possible subordination for three women who usually conduct the sexual encounters they engage in, and who experience themselves as being dominant in bed. OP, GN and ATI all show signs of

traditional butchness, and I have chosen to analyze this question in the light of existing texts about the butch-femme dyad.

The butch did not fit the lesbian feminist discourse in the 1970's. They disappeared from the streets and did not join the feminist lesbian movement. However, in bed they were not easily captivated by a traditional feminist critique. The butches were focused on the gratification of their femme partners, who well knew what they wanted. The femme would often be frustrated when she was not allowed to pleasure or even touch her butch partner, but the butch was proud of her own capability to pleasure the femme (Kennedy and Davis 1993). The femmes not only knew their own needs, they also demanded and expected to have them met. Thus, sexual gratification or orgasm could not solely take the character of a gift given by the butch. One-sidedness nevertheless 'benefited' the more feminine part, in contrast to the heterosexual couples of the time in which the man benefited.

Kennedy and Davis (1993) also discuss the satisfaction that butches achieved through lovemaking. Kennedy and Davis seem to imply that orgasm, or rather, plain physical instead of mental satisfaction, was not on the butches agenda until the 1960' and 1970's, when butches became more experimental and the community norms began to change. Even when physical satisfaction for butches was a non-topic in the community, Joan Nestle was aware of butch physical pleasures. In her short story 'Margaret' we meet a young butch lover, who makes love in 'the old way':

'The first time we were ever together, on a warm summer night in Michigan surrounded by hundreds of new-time Lesbians, this young woman came on me in the old butch way- on top of me, moving on my leg. My body and her dreams driving out her roar of pleasure. Now a year later, my leg trembles under the power of her concentrated movement, and then her body becomes a single wave. She comes heaving against my leg, collapsing onto me. I hold her so dear, waiting for the pounding of her heart to quiet. I had thought this gift of a woman coming on top of me had fled the world, but Margaret, who wears feathers and dreams of goddesses, carries the old ways of women loving deep within her' (Nestle 1987, p156).

This is a description given by a woman who in the late 1950's and 60's had sex with butches that she mainly met in the bars of Buffalo, New York. This young butch might have been untouchable, reaching her

climax by rubbing herself off against her lover's leg. Nestle is calling it 'the old butch way'. Contemporary lesbians who are not socialized in a butch-femme context would probably perceive this as one way of reaching orgasm among others. The point I want to make is, however, that traditional butches, at least some of them, would climax without being touched and with their main focus on their femme lovers.

OP, GN and ATI are not untouchable and I do not know if they ever have reached orgasm 'the old butch way'. The features that remind me of butchness are, first, the dominance they are claiming to have in sexual encounters with other women; second, the attitude towards giving pleasure to their partners and, as I read them, finally, their subtle masculine signaling. Moreover, they are all nearly fifty years of age or older, and OP and GN were identified as lesbians in 'the old days' before feminism really challenged the lesbian community characteristics. If we can ascribe butchness on the basis of this, which I think we can, OP and GN would most likely also have been benefiting on the higher prestige connected to the butch role in lesbian communities compared to the role of the femme. To conclude this passage: OP, GN and ATI are or were perhaps 'too kind' and would sometimes reach their limits when it came to pleasuring other women. Their 'kindness' was exploited. However, they seem to be aware when the limits are reached, they know what they like and they know how to climax when that is important to them. Combined with the control they take over sexual encounters and their profits from butch power, I doubt the permanence of subordination on their behalf.

In general, one-sidedness, and most often mutual one-sidedness in the production of orgasms is the common lesbian practice. With reference to my interview material I cannot see that the risk of producing one subordinate part in any way is *characteristic* of sexual exchange between the women when it comes to the question of orgasm. Sometimes service is given to an extent in which the limits of the provider are reached and even passed. From my material it seems that the lesbians who are in the subordinate servicing 'risk-zone' at the same time profit from the power that masculine signaling can give. This reasoning might of course be naive.<sup>114</sup> My interview material may not contain a broad range of dynamics on this issue, and romantic erotic fiction certainly does not

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<sup>114</sup> Violence in lesbian relationships is documented in previous research; however, as far as I know not as sexual violence.

address it.<sup>115</sup> I have shown here that some lesbians are ‘too kind’ and are sexually exploited by other women. I do not want to excuse this. However, I have argued for a lesbian specificity of ‘exploitation’ that is connected to the use of masculine strategies, which give power to the provider.

The last issue addressed here is penetration, and here I will finally relate to the third point of the feminist critique that I mentioned at the beginning: the coital imperative.

### **Penetration**

To study the lesbian reworking of a heterosexual discourse that defines coitus as the most important sexual act (‘the coitus imperative’ McPhillips, Braun and Gavey 2001), is not as unreasonable as it might sound. It was probably not unusual between butches in the 1950’s and 1960’s that the older and more experienced taught the young and new how to handle a dildo. In Leslie Feinberg’s novel *Stone Butch Blues* there is a rather touching scene where the old butch Al is educating the then inexperienced and young Jess about how to penetrate a femme to make it good for the femme partner. Al’s femme, Jacqueline, is also contributing to the education (Feinberg 1993, p30-31). Penetration with dildos was an important part of the ‘doing’, and as a butch one should do it right. In an analysis of this practice it would probably be apt to approach the issue as a lesbian reworking of the coitus imperative. The scenes with Al and Jess, and later Jacqueline and Jess, indicate that they related directly to a hegemonic coital practice in the heterosexual sphere, but also that coitus was negotiated and practiced with certain specificities within a lesbian context. The dildo lost its hold within most lesbian circles in the 1970’s, and is now subculturally visible mainly on the lesbian s&m scene and in lesbian pornography, here representing phallic power on behalf of the one who is in control of the tool. As we will see, my informants relate to the use of the dildo in a variety of ways, and I will use these attitudes and practices to discuss the coitus imperative. To see lesbian negotiations of the coitus imperative, not as miming but as a reworking, can raise new questions about the culturality,

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<sup>115</sup> I can find the ‘butch subordination’ in s&m fiction, though. See for instance Kathleen E. Morris’ shortstory ‘Lesson’ (1996) and Karlyn Lotney’s shortstory ‘Clash of the Titans’ (1998). A script of subordination of the dominant is here exploited. It is important that this is wanted and enjoyed as a negotiated deal between the two women. Whereas in my cases it is not part of a s&m play and unwanted by the ‘dominant’ partner.

the politics and historicity of this particular sexual practice in a heterosexual context. I will return to this, but first demonstrate in a broader sense my material in this field, and start with ‘penetration’.

Penetration has a central position in lesbian sexual practice, and is executed with fingers, fists, or dildos or other tools – that is, with ‘non-orgasmic’ objects (Ann Cvetkovich 1995, previously referred to in the ‘take-chapter’). Among my informants there are two who will not let themselves be penetrated in any way, and I will come back to that. The rest of them appreciate penetration when their partners use their hands. Penetration goes both ways, with variations due to individual preferences (when, how deep, for how long, etc). In chapter 4 about ‘taking’ especially, and also in chapter 6 about prostitution, I thematized the symbolic meaning of penetration. It is my impression that the penetration I am talking about here, is mainly about penetration for *physical* pleasure. I cannot see that the eroticizing effect of the phallic that might be connected to penetration is central. My data is admittedly not ‘thick’ on this issue. I did not ask directly for narratives about penetration and its physical and fantasy-producing aspects, which I can only regret. I am convinced that some of this penetration has overtones linked to control on behalf of the penetrator, the one who demonstrates that she possesses the main signifier of desire. However, it is not verbalized in the interviews, and I believe that it is of minor importance.<sup>116</sup> I will equally argue that the power aspect is of major importance for the two informants who never accept penetration. One is an s&m top, and the other is in the transition from being socially understood as a lesbian to being understood as heterosexual man. As I understand them, neither of them can handle the loss of control, the feminization, that being penetrated represents in a symbolic sense.

For the rest, it is when the dildo is the subject of conversation that the symbolic comes into frame in my interviews. The dildo seems *not* to be central in the sex-life of any of the informants I have, neither symbolically nor physically. However, there are dildos in circulation in the lesbian subcultures represented in my data. My informants either own one themselves, or they have had partners who did.

GN understands herself as being dominant in bed, but she enjoys being penetrated when her partner uses her hands. Usually GN will use her

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<sup>116</sup> It is of course impossible to totally disconnect physically motivated penetration from the cultural and symbolic meaning attached to it. I construct this binary opposition as an analytical tool.

hands too, but has recently got a lover who is 'much more bisexual'. According to GN, her partner would, at the beginning of their relationship, 'miss the dick', and they purchased a dildo. They thought it less necessary as their relationship developed. BA has a female lover who is not a lesbian. She simply has not met the right guy yet. For them, penetration with hands goes both ways; the girlfriend however likes the dildo better. 'But', BA says, 'she is also the one who would rather have a man' (BA p8). CC was active in the gay and lesbian movement in the beginning of the 1980's, and sex toys were discussed within the movement. She was annoyed by all the political objections to sex toys. She took the position that some women, especially those with heterosexual experiences, want something penis-like. A dildo may be a good 'relief worker' (CC p6). In these women's understanding of the dildo, it represents an anatomical man. The dildo is literally a stand-in for the penis. Again this sounds as if it first of all is about physicality; the dildo represents the physical man. I think it is more here; the dildo also represents the symbolic meaning of masculinity and control, to the extent that the separation of the symbolic and physical aspects of penetration can be justified. It would probably have been productive here to record the narratives of the lovers of GN, BN and CC, to get their views on the issue. What does this penetration represent for them? I do not have their narratives.<sup>117</sup> My reasoning is connected to the fact that GN, BA and CC express resistance to being penetrated by a dildo. I see no evidence that this is because they would not enjoy the physical aspect of this. My position is that it is connected to a distaste for the masculinity associated with being penetrated with a penis-like item. There is a similarity between GN, BA and CC not wanting to be penetrated with a dildo, compared to the two informants who do not want to be penetrated at all; a distaste for being the object of the power that is symbolically executed in penetration (with a dildo). The difference is that hands do not carry a connotation of power for GN, BA and CC. The conclusion of this is that some women with female lovers express the need for the physical sexual pleasures of the penis and the phallic signification attached. Their female lovers are adequate with the help of a dildo. They replace the man in a symbolic as well as an anatomical sense.

For some informants, the presence of a man that the dildo may symbolize, is exactly what they do not want. We heard WR in chapter 5,

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<sup>117</sup> The only sort of indication is what I took from the interview with GN. I asked her about 'dirty talking'. GN says that she talks dirty to her latest partner (the one who needed a dildo). Her partner wants her to say things like 'You're so good' and 'I'm gonna fuck you' (p11), and GN is happy to comply.

the ‘masculinity-chapter’; she might as well have dated a man if the dildo was in play. ATI has tried it, but she did not feel comfortable. She felt clumsy, and it was not arousing to her:

‘It was the most ridiculous thing I have ever experienced....It doesn’t turn me on. And I barely see the difference between having sex with a man and having sex with a woman....To use sex remedies is unnatural to me, it is much more delightful to use my hands...To me, to use my hands and my mouth is so wonderful, that I can’t think of anything else. The other is pathetic by comparison’ (ATI p19-20).

It is what she can do with her own body parts that is wonderful to ATI. And, to use a dildo does not turn her on, which means that it does not have the eroticizing effect that it can have for others. The feeling of trying to be a man, but not being one or not wanting to be one, feels unnatural and pathetic. I do not know whether this is linked to a feeling of inadequacy. Could it be that ATI is so unhappy without a penis that she rejects the item that resembles it? I do not think so ( cf the reasoning about ATI and the pleasure she takes in making love to a woman). The feeling of inadequacy is more of a problem for AR. If her women partners needed a dildo, she would oblige them. But, she would see it as a defeat:

‘ ... dildos, I’ve never got into contact with that, but of course I know that some need them, and why not? I think it would have been a defeat for me. I don’t know. I have managed (with my own body) till now. And I have dated women who have been married. X was married before I met her, and she never thought about that (a dildo). I am strong, you know. I think that will do just as well as a dildo. I have been together with girls who normally would require a dildo, but they didn’t need that with me.’ (AR p14).

Penetration with a dildo is something some women might need for physical relief, as AR sees it. She does not need to use a dildo on her lovers, because she is strong. That is: what these women might need is *not* the dildo as a representation for a fantasy, but for proper penetration. She is able to penetrate women properly with her hands because of her strength. If a woman expressed a wish for a dildo, AR would probably feel that she was not strong enough or good enough as a female lover. This is to let the dildo go in to replace, not a penis/man, but a *hand*. AR here thematizes the physical aspect of what her lovers might want. She

does not question that for some, the dildo has fantasy aspects that could be as important.<sup>118</sup>

There is only one informant in my material who is clear about her positive evaluation of the signification of the dildo. IKL says that she and her partner are excited about playing with it.

IKL: 'I wanted to try a dildo, and we bought one and tried it. That was fun, we laughed, it was stimulating, different. Both of us had it on. It worked better on her when I had it, than on me. It was too long for me' (laughter)

AB: 'Did it do anything to the eroticity of the situation that she or you had it on, was it a turn on for you?'

IKL: 'Yes, I think so. It was exciting, and at the same time we got more of a play out of it. And we would laugh in between'.

Again, my interview is not adequate since I did not pay enough attention to the issue at that time. It seems though, that this is a playful experiment for both of them. The presence of the dildo adds excitement to the encounter. It is my qualified guess that this is not due to its materiality only, but has also something to do with what the dildo erotically represents in our culture. It carries phallic erotic meaning, but the dildo is also a fake penis. The latter opens up for a drag-like situation and some fun. To IKL and her partner this is also about physical pleasure, even if it is too long for her and physically more suitable for her partner.

All in all, among my informants, dildos are sometimes used, but not often. In my interviews, the dildo is closely associated with the physical and symbolic presence of a man. It is both rejected (we don't need a man here) and used for that reason (my partner is bisexual/used to be with men). The meaning of the dildo is consciously played with by one informant and her partner. Most penetration reported by my informants is executed with hands. I cannot say how much of this is motivated by physical pleasure alone, and to what degree penetration played the role of a signifier of desire. I suggest that penetration with hands can be executed without symbolic meaning distinctly attached to the act, but that this is less likely when penis-like dildos are involved. This picture

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<sup>118</sup> I do not discuss the erotic connotations that 'the hand' might have, which would be apt. Both in psychoanalytical theory and in pornography, the lesbian hand (fingers) might be seen as a signifier of desire. Hands are important also in my interviews, but the analysis of this will have to wait to another occasion.



might change with an analysis of ‘the hand’ in my interviews, that is; the hand understood as a signifier of desire.

I will address the subversive potential of lesbianism in *Chapter 8: Lesbian specificity*, but will nevertheless give a brief comment on it in connection with penetration. It is ‘common sense’ within the field of sexuality studies that penetration feminizes the penetrated. In my material physically pleasurable penetration is executed both *with and without* such meaning attached. The question is worth scrutiny: under what conditions within a heterosexual context can this distinction be made? (unlike Sheila Jeffreys and Andrea Dworkin I do not believe that all penetration of women by men is oppressive, cf the ‘take’-chapter). Another question is addressing the subversiveness of a women ‘taking on the phallus’ in the very literal way that seems to be assumed when a woman takes on a dildo. Colleen Lamos is very optimistic in her opinion about the potential of lesbian dildo use. Lamos argues that the dildo:

‘undermines the authority of the penis, demystifying the latter’s phallicism through its simulation of the penis’ (Lamos 1995, p102).

This is to attach great subversive importance to lesbian dildo use, one that I hardly can subscribe to without contextualizing.<sup>119</sup> Based on my investigation of the lesbian exchange, I would say that it is not often that this undermining takes place. Merely rejecting the dildo, as some of my informants chose to do, is of course interesting. It shows that elements of phallic sex can be recognized, considered and dismissed. One could ask, though, what the price is in terms of limiting the potential for sexual pleasure. To accept it only because the woman’s female partner is used to sex with a man, represents no reworking, but more a simple repetition and reiteration. As I understand my interviews, the subversiveness lies in the switching and in the play on the dildo’s economy, that is; when it is detached from the anatomical man and has become the lesbian phallus with its ‘plasticity, transferability, and expropriability’ (Butler 1993a, p61). Except for IKL it does not seem as though the potential of the dildo is utilized among my informants. This will be further discussed in the

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<sup>119</sup> Lamos’ research material is lesbian pornography and sex manuals. Her material is meant to arouse. The dildo’s potential is great in this respect, as this fake penis plays directly on a hegemonic sexual culture where the phallus still is the main signifier of sexual desire. My material is the stories of living women. I think the difference in the degree of optimism between Lamos and me mainly reflects a difference between fiction meant for erotic stimulation and narratives of ‘everyday sex’.

next chapter, where I come back to the theoretical consequences of women replacing men.

### **Final remarks**

I started out with an exploratory approach, and have related not only to the specific feminist critique of heterosexual discourse in the realm of orgasm. I have discussed power issues and made my summary about sexual service and reciprocity in more general terms, and in the last paragraphs explored penetration. I will now return to the three points of criticism toward heterosexual discourse, regarding women, men and orgasm, that I referred in the beginning: men should be more considerate, women should know their bodies better and not give the responsibility to their partners, coitus should have a less dominant position. How can lesbian practice be seen as reworking of these power issues?

The first criticism: men should be more considerate. As I said in the outset, I have found no reason to present one of the women involved in lesbian sex as more the man than the other. There are women who are experienced like men in a sexual sense, as we saw in chapter 6 about prostitution, where OP with one client was supposed to be on her back, 'totally girl'. I have demonstrated that some lesbians use a dildo to replace the man in a sexual sense. However, in this text I do not read masculinity as 'being a man'. I have found it far more proliferate to read it in terms of the potential to eroticize. If we nevertheless say that there are some lesbians who look and behave more like men than others, the equality debate is turned upside down related to the heterosexual concern: the masculine one is the one to risk subordination in a sexual sense. She, not the more feminine partner, has the higher risk of sliding into a servicing position regarding orgasms. I discussed this issue in a group of lesbian friends, and one of them said that feminine lesbians could be extraordinary egoistic in bed. And, she said, she should know since she was one herself! (For further reading about femme agency, see the anthology about femmes, edited by Harris and Crocker, 1997). I do not know how widespread this is in a heterosexual context (outside the s&m-scene), that the man should be in a (subordinate) servicing position and the orgasm first of all should be for the woman. I guess there are some, and it is tempting to say as I have said about my slightly masculine and servicing lesbians: most of them will probably handle it.

The second criticism: women should know their bodies better and not give the responsibility to their partners. Here one could say that lesbians have a natural advantage: the knowledge about the female body is lived experience on both side of the exchange. The production in a technical sense is apparently not an issue. We have seen some examples where it takes a while to learn how to make love to a woman, and also to learn how to receive from a woman, and the women seem to have taken it slowly when they considered they needed to learn. And they concentrate on the task of producing an orgasm. I suppose this illustrates what statistics from sexological surveys have been telling us: lesbians seem to be successful with orgasms in sexual encounters (Hite 1980, Kinsey 1948, Masters and Johnson 1966). This seems to be the case also between young persons in their first sexual meeting with another person (Thomposon 1990). Could this be because lesbians more than other women hold on to an androcentric view on sexuality: sexual arousal must in any case be released? The service orientation I have demonstrated here could be read as an indication of that, and after all, lesbianism is defined by sexual desire. Perhaps heterosexual women have other expectations and other goals than orgasm to achieve from sex? For instance, could femininity or the identity as a woman be at stake if she is not sexually responding positively, even when the response does not lead to her orgasm? And what about the importance of romance, being close to one another, feeling loved? Is having sex a way to obtain romance in heterosexual relations, while it is sought for by other means in lesbian relations? An argument in favor of this is that compared to gay male couples and heterosexual couples, lesbians are the ones who *less frequently* have sex (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). Is orgasm not *that* important after all for heterosexual women? Here are several questions that are beyond the scope of my project. I will sum up my discussion as follows: lesbians seem to be successful in producing orgasms when having sex. A double internal knowledge about the female body and seriousness in producing them might be part of the explanation.

The third issue: the coitus imperative of heterosexual discourse. Coitus has a remarkable significance. The sexual debut is defined as the first time of penile penetration. Coitus tends to be judged as real sex, other things we do are commonly spoken of as foreplay, introduction, warming up etc. before actually having sex. From feminists and from sexologists we hear that since coitus is not a common route for women to climax, the centrality of it should be toned down. My informants negotiate the coitus imperative actively. I have argued that penetration often can be seen as detached from its hegemonic symbolic meaning,

and that the conversation about the dildo poignantly puts the issue on the agenda. My perception of the lesbian negotiation of the dildo is that it is varied; some relate by rejecting, some by repeating, and some by playing on its economy, and probably all of it at the same time to a greater extent than I am able to picture here. I am discussing the position coitus has related to the female orgasm, and the conclusion I will draw on the issue is that in the lesbian reworking, the institution of coitus does not stand in the way of both partners achieved orgasm. In sex between women, the question of orgasm is separated from the coitus imperative and from penetration in general.

Biology and the possible reproductive effects cannot explain this. After all, in Western societies most sexual activity is not supposed to result in pregnancy. I understand this as a cultural phenomenon first of all. However, since a biological penis is usually present in heterosexual intercourse, and usually not in lesbian encounters, I think I should make a brief comment on biology.<sup>120</sup> In lesbian sex, penetration is executed with non-orgasmic objects. That penetration should be the most direct route to climax for the penetrator, as intercourse is for most men, is less likely to be the motivation for penetration in lesbian sex. I would believe that this aspect of biological difference between men and women makes it more likely that the counselors speak more directly to two women than to a man and a woman on this particular issue. McPhillips, Braun and Gavey (2001) ask: 'How imperative is the «coital imperative»?' Their answer is in short 'Very important'. However, they also find that there are tensions and fissures in the dominant heterosexual discourse, that might indicate changes. In her in-depth study of 400 teenage girls' sexual initiation experiences, Sharon Thompson finds that one small group of young women are well prepared for sexual encounters with young men. These are young women who have practiced masturbation and had conversations with friends and mothers about sexual desire and pleasure. This group, she says, will 'look for lovers with slower hands, more exploratory tongues, wiser cocks' (Thompson 1990, p357). The effects of biological difference on the coitus imperative cannot be understood unless we read them in the light of the cultural and sexed meaning of penetration. Perceived like this, there will probably be

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<sup>120</sup> Some claim status as 'woman' even when they possess a penis, and some claim status as man even without one (transsexuality). There are not many such cases, but it would of course evoke new perspectives on the debate about women, men and the coitus imperative. The 'from woman to man' transsexual in my interview material has no penis. He uses his tongue and his hands to bring women to orgasm. He and his female (heterosexual) partners will obviously have to deal with the coitus imperative in specific ways.

changes in the coitus imperative, like McPhillips, Braun, Gavey and Thompson indicate through their studies.

The results in this chapter will be taken further in a delimitation of 'lesbian specificity' in the next chapter. The aspect of service orientation and mutuality will be given special attention in the discussion of the sociality of lesbian sex. Regarding the more theoretical elements of 'specificity', I ask whether we, any longer, can speak about 'women' when they replace men in an anatomic and symbolic sense.

## CHAPTER 8: LESBIAN SPECIFICITY

‘Is it not possible that lesbian sexuality is a process that reinscribes the power domains that it resists, that it is constituted in part from the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace, and that its specificity is to be established, not *outside* or *beyond* that reinscription or reiteration, but in the very modality and effects of that reinscription?’ (Butler 1993b, p310).

I decided early in the project that this passage in Judith Butler’s article *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* (1993b) should be somewhat over-determining for my analytical approach. To analyze lesbian sexuality as a reworking of heterosexual power domains has been a guiding principle, but not a clear-cut analytical process. For instance in chapter 7 about orgasm, I found that a more explorative approach was apt. Three topics are the most crucial to Butler’s suggestion of searching: to search for (1) ‘lesbian specificity’ in the (2) ‘modalities and effects’ of (3) ‘reinscription or reiteration of power domains’. What I have done in the four analytical chapters is to examine lesbian desire as the *reworking of power elements* that are identified in feminist critique of heterosexuality (‘modalities’ of ‘reinscription or reiteration’). It will be the main aim of this chapter to try to *extract* the analysis in the previous chapters (delimit a ‘lesbian specificity’) and suggest some ‘effects’ on the hegemonic sexual culture.<sup>121</sup> I will elaborate on this.

I make a synthesis of the results of the investigation of lesbian sexual exchange by developing a notion of ‘lesbian specificity’. In the closing of each of the four foregoing chapters it is indicated how the results of the discussions will contribute to the content of this term. The notion of lesbian specificity is thus based on the main points from each of the previous analytical chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7. I said in the introductory chapter that the aim for the project is to contribute to a debate about power and sexual desire. The development of the term ‘lesbian specificity’, and first of all a discussion of *what it might mean* to the main culture, will be my contribution. What does it mean to recognize

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<sup>121</sup> One other aspect of ‘effect’ is connected to the construction of lesbian identity and lesbian subcultures, which means that ‘effects’ are not to be perceived as something that can be measured as a *result* of lesbian practice. Indeed, ‘effects’ are in this sense part of ‘becoming’ a lesbian. The reflections about these aspects of effects are not my focus here. It is the possible effects on mainstream sexual culture that is addressed.

the existence of something called 'lesbian specificity'? What effects could that have on the society? Will the presence of lesbian erotic practice in our culture and the visualization of it as in this text, mean anything at all to stimulate to changes in dominant and normative heterosexual practices and fantasies?

The reason for utilizing the term 'lesbian specificity' will probably need an explanation, since the associations might go to an understanding of homosexuality as unchangeable, inflexible and innate. I have opened up and deconstructed discursive fields and binaries, like 'masculinity', 'femininity', 'romance', 'sexual service' and 'homo-hetero' etc. Why would I close the very same fields by operating with a term like 'specificity'? Does that not imply that there is an essential difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality, between homosexual women and heterosexual women, and confirm the impression of permanence and stability? And besides, the empirical analysis has demonstrated a variety of ways in which lesbians negotiate power. Why is not 'variation' the key word for the synthesizing?

As I see it, to destabilize cultural phenomena that are taken for granted and considered to be pure nature, and make the ground shaky is a good thing. I do not believe that social science always has to cater to the concrete needs of policy-makers. Having said this, I want the results of the analysis to be structured in such a way that they can represent concrete input in a public debate. One motivation for this project is to make love between women a more visible part of the debates, research and practices of sexuality. I cannot see how we can do this without theorizing lesbian desire and practice as something that is possible to delimit, describe and name in a continuous process of deconstruction, construction and struggle over the politics of theory and practice.

The category 'homosexual' was inaugurated as a means of social expulsion. Yet another objection could be made: what mission can the term 'lesbian specificity' have if not just to oppress us further? Linda Alcoff suggests an answer to a similar dilemma regarding the phrase 'women of color'. Alcoff heard an attack on the phrase by a dark-skinned woman, who argued that the phrase reinforced skin-color as being of social significance. Alcoff agreed with her to a large extent, and was also critical:

'we must develop the means to address the wrongs done to us without reinvoking the basis of those wrongs. Likewise women who have been eternally construed must seek a means of

articulating a feminism that does not continue construing us in any set way. At the same time, I believe we must avoid buying into the neuter, universal, «generic human» thesis that covers the West's racism and androcentrism with a blindfold' (Alcoff 1988, p436).

There is a classic poststructural dilemma here: a name and position are construed in the same movement as life is given to oppression. How do we address the name and the positions without confirming the subordination? My ambition is to elaborate on the term 'lesbian specificity' while understanding the term as a position from where critique and resistance against heteronormativity may occur.<sup>122</sup> It simply means to enable the formulation of potentials for change. As I see it, I have to take the risk of essentialism, and Teresa de Lauretis claims that she takes that risk *seriously*.

### **The risk of essentialism**

In an article from 1989, Teresa de Lauretis tries to put straight those who accuse other feminist theoreticians of being essentialists. She is tired of the term that she and others initially used as a 'serious critical concept' (p3), but now 'time and time again repeated with its reductive ring, its self-righteous tone of superiority, its contempt for «them» – those guilty of it' (p3).<sup>123</sup> She presents a notion of 'essential difference' that to her, is what feminism is about:

' ... feminist theory is all about an essential difference, an irreducible difference, though not the difference between woman

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<sup>122</sup> I am not here only referring to critique and resistance in terms of formulated or organized political activity, but resistance also in terms of possible subversive effects of lesbian erotic practices upon dominant practices.

<sup>123</sup> The international, or perhaps more precisely the Anglo-American debate on essentialism and feminism, will sometimes seem strange in a Norwegian context. Some would even say that we have imported a conflict without roots in Norwegian feminist theorizing. I would say that the debate is inspired and informed by the international debate, but we obviously do have a national debate based on works executed by Norwegian/Nordic scholars (see for example Annfelt 2000, Bjerrum-Nielsen 2000, Eng and Markusen 2000, Prieur and Moseng 2000, Solheim and Søndergaard 1996). The fulcrum of the Norwegian debate is often the value of poststructural approaches to empirical research. The similarities and differences between the Norwegian and the international debate is outside the focus for my project, and I await the publications of a project that specifically examines the historical development of Norwegian feminist thinking (Beatrice Halsaa, forthcoming).



and man, nor a difference inherent in «woman's nature» (in woman as nature), but a difference in the feminist conception of woman, women, and the world' (de Lauretis 1989, p3).

She proceeds by emphasizing this essential difference between feminist and non-feminist thinking as being a difference in understanding of the subject in relation to institutions; difference in knowledges, discourses and practices of cultural forms; difference in historical consciousness etc. And she says:

'That difference is essential in that it is constitutive of feminist thinking and thus of feminism; it is what makes the thinking feminist, and what constitutes certain ways of thinking, certain practices of writing, reading, imaging, relating, acting, etc. into the historically diverse and culturally heterogeneous social movement which, qualifiers and distinctions notwithstanding (e.g. Delmar), we continue with good reasons to call feminism' (de Lauretis 1989, p4).

She considers it a good idea to examine the term 'essentialism' itself, and reflects upon different interpretations of the word 'essence', from which 'essentialism' is derived:

1. 'Absolute being, substance in the metaphysical sense; the reality underlying phenomena.
2. That which constitutes the being of a thing: that 'by which it is what it is'. In two different applications (distinguished by Locke as *nominal* essence and *real* essence respectively):
  - a) of a conceptual entity: The totality of the properties, constituent elements, etc., without which it would cease to be the same thing; the indispensable and necessary attributes of a thing as opposed to those which may have it or not ...
  - b) of a real entity: Objective character, intrinsic nature as a 'thing-in-itself'; that internal constitution, on which all the sensible properties depend' (de Lauretis 1989, p5).

Teresa de Lauretis asks which of these essences are ascribed in a negative way (imputed) to 'essentialists' by their critics and states that it is 1) and 2b). That is; the debate goes as if a disquieting portion of feminists are essentialist in a metaphysical or real sense. This, de Lauretis continues, may be the case for a 'few, truly fundamentalist

thinkers' (p5). She argues that most contemporary feminists are essentialists in the *nominal* sense of the word.<sup>124</sup>

She also states that the critique of feminist essentialism has ceased to serve the purpose of 'effective criticism in the ongoing elaboration of feminist theory ...' (de Lauretis 1989, p4). de Lauretis wants to shift the focus from 'feminist essentialism' as a category by which to classify feminists or feminisms, to the 'the historical specificity, the essential difference of feminist theory itself' (p6). This is not to say that there are no differences *within* feminism, or that the difference between a feminist conceptualization and a non-feminist conceptualization of woman, women and the world is carved in stone. There are internal struggles concerning theory, political aims and strategies, sexuality, etc. These struggles and these relations are part of what makes 'feminism' a still meaningful notion. I think it might be worth the effort to make a similar reasoning in the case of lesbianism.

I want to pay attention, *not* to the category 'lesbian' and what there is that could possibly characterize women who carry the proper signs of being one, *but* to the essential difference between lesbianism on the one hand, and socio-erotic arrangements that are part of hegemonic heterosexual discourse on the other. I do this, *not* because I find it productive to focus upon an inner truth of lesbianism, or because this is a difference carved in stone. I do so because I find it academically and politically productive to visualize a lesbian positioning within a culture that is heterosexually compulsory. This entails breaking away from the forms of essentialism that historically are part of research and debate about homosexuality; there are essential physical reasons for homosexuality (hormones, genes), there is an essential homosexual self (I am born like this, I have discovered my true self), essentialism in the sense that homo and hetero represents different worlds (to such an extent that homosexuals for instance cannot be priests in the Church of Norway).

There *is* no such thing as 'lesbian specificity'. The way we (have to) speak a phenomenon into existence creates what Dorte Marie Søndergaard calls 'discursive essentialism' (1999, p4). We have to make boundaries, she says, and by that we name a core and a periphery, and exclude meanings that also could have been articulated. Instead of attempting to canonize one's own essentialism, one could, as Søndergaard suggests, define the essential as 'constructed and situated

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<sup>124</sup> Similar argumentation is also to be found in Bjerrum-Nielsen, 2000.

statements undergoing constant change' (p4). I conceive of 'lesbian specificity' as essential in this sense. I search for it, and will find it in a lesbian reworking of hegemonic heterosexual discourse, which means that lesbian specificity is not constant; it undergoes transformation, it has a history. Lesbian specificity conceived in this way, as different from heterosexuality and at the same time interwoven, will potentially be disturbing to heteronormativity and even challenging to the position of heterosexuality as a norm. To speak into existence a lesbian specificity is thus potentially subversive because it means recognizing a lesbian existence, which sounds self-evident, but is not. I will return to that. To name and establish lesbianism by the notion of specificity, represents the summary and synthesis of my analysis, and the outset for a final discussion about social change and changes in the theoretical intake to sexuality.

In a comment to a draft of this chapter, a colleague asked me whether lesbian specificity should be understood as a discourse, a counter-discourse or a practice? If I must choose I would prefer that the term be understood as a practice, as it is developed in this text based on an analysis of practices. And if I should be even more specific, I would say practice in terms of an erotic dynamic. I know that I sometimes, and rather arbitrarily, connect it to discourse in my writing, but this is not elaborated on in this project. It would require an analysis of a variety of lesbian discourses, and a further discussion of the existence of a lesbian subcultural normativity and the debate over, for instance, the features of a Norwegian hegemonic lesbian discourse.

### **Lesbian specificity – modalities of reworking**

It is possible to divide the stories I have told into two kinds on the basis of their relation to the socio-erotic. I have decided to make a distinction where two of the analytical themes lean to the social side and two lean more to the erotic side, the latter understood as symbolic representations for the erotic. Such a distinction is not absolute in any sense, since the connection between the social and the erotic is in every case obvious. It might nevertheless prove to be a reasonable organizing of the text. I will start in the symbolic realm.

#### Representations of the erotic

Some of my informants use the term 'to take' to describe what they do sexually. I have argued that the erotic charge that the term carries within

a heterosexual context is retained, even when the concrete activity is not what one would expect. When my informants 'take' they rather 'give' since it is the partner's body that is focused upon and genitally stimulated, and the orgasm of the partner that is produced. This is interpreted as an example of reworking of heterosexual discourse: one verbal expression of power inequality within a hegemonic heterosexual discourse serves as a premise, however, is reshaped when used and practiced in a lesbian erotic exchange. This analytical case could have contributed to a notion of specificity also in its sociality. That the 'taking' is giving, might have been exploited as an argument in the discussion about the masculinity and sexual service.

The second analytical issue that I will put under this heading is the analysis of signs of masculinity in erotic play between women. In this chapter I argue that the hegemonic signifier of active sexual desire, masculinity (or phallus), is central also in the lesbian dynamics. I have utilized Teresa de Lauretis' rewriting of the theory of fetishism within psychoanalysis, to argue that this is desire mediated via phallus, but without the paternal power. An essential aspect of the lesbian play is the flexibility: the women can have the (non-paternal) phallus in terms of signs of masculinity, by turns (Butler, the lesbian phallus). In both those analytical cases (the 'take-' and the 'masculinity-case'), it is possible to understand hetero- and homosexuality as interwoven in the sense that lesbians rework heterosexual discourse. One other way of formulating this is to say that 'having the phallus' is fetishized, deprived from its paternal privileges, and exploited erotically by lesbians. I have underlined that signs of masculinity (using the term 'to take' may also be conceived as an appropriation of such a sign) do not constitute the only lesbian fetish. The female body itself can also be seen as a signifier of desire for a woman, what a woman desires in another woman. I perceive masculinity as the most prominent signifier in our culture. I will return to this in the epilogue, where the focus will be on symbolically thinking beyond the fetishist and phallic.

### Sociality

The third phenomenon for investigation is commercial sexual exchange between women, in the light of feminist research and critique of heterosexual prostitution. On a structural level it seems as though the institutions or the organizations for paid sexual service are unwilling or unable to absorb female customers. If developed, the market would be outside the heterosexual market. About the symbolic field, the conclusion is drawn above, that lesbians cannot escape (even if they

wanted to) the dominant phallic symbolization of sexual desire. The mediation of eroticism through the distinction between the masculine and the feminine is dominant. An objectivization of the feminine, of women, is fundamental to it. Can this also be part of the reason why women are not wanted or feel uncomfortable on the conventional sex market? When the most prominent sexual difference is played out as erotic, there is no room for the female *subject*. The hunter will also be the hooker, which will be too disturbing for all parts. I conclude the chapter by saying the female homosexuality that marks the transaction, takes the edges off the feminist critique. I cannot conceive of OP as deprived of sexual subjectivity, even when she sells sexual services to other women. That the female clients are sexual subjects should be less contested, since they pay for orgasmic service. In the case of women buying sexual services from other women one can therefore see two women who's sexual capacities are actively detached from the romantic discourse. This I see as promising when we examine the question of subversion of the hegemonic heterosexual discourse.

How does the analysis of prostitution fit into the perspective of reworking heterosexual discourse? About the power dynamics between the parts, I conclude that the edges of the power problems are smoothed down; that is, the reworking means delimiting the control the customer has. The problems, in terms of subordination of the provider, remain, but apparently are socially unfolded with a more 'democratic' result. On the structural level, woman-to-woman trade seems not to fit the modus operandi of the institutions that are designed for the service of male customers. The market is separate, and seems to work by other rules. It is my view that the female homosexual trade represents a discursive break with the heterosexual. Not only is there female sexual subjectivity on both sides of the transaction, but also there is the women's detachment from romantic discourse. All in all, the lesbian reworking of prostitution gives a more fair outcome in terms of control to the provider of services. It also represents a fundamental break with the sexual expectations to which women are supposed to confirm.

The analysis of the social aspects of the production of an orgasm is also illustrative of the point of 'democratization' of hegemonic discourse, as was the prostitution case. I use an explorative approach in this chapter. The conclusion is that the production of orgasms is taken seriously, and that they usually are produced, either one after the other, or as a one-sided arrangement with a certain permanence. The service orientation is conspicuous, and for the most part, service is provided as a mutually pleasurable project. This is similar to the 'take'-chapter, where the

‘taker’ was the provider of orgasms. Here the most masculine part is the provider in the cases where one-sidedness has more of a permanence to it. In the production of orgasm, a display of masculine control seems to increase the risk of becoming the subordinate, in terms of becoming the provider of sexual service.

It is as if the power issue that feminism links to heterosexuality is turned upside down. A closer investigation of the reworking of the particular power issues in the field of orgasm reveals a more varied picture. I have included three aspects of feminist critique within the topic: 1) men should in general be more considerate and think less of their own orgasm, 2) women have to learn to know their own bodies and not rely on their partners to produce orgasms for them, 3) it could be productive in terms of the female orgasm if heterosexuals focus less on coitus. Firstly, as mentioned already; masculinity (not men, for reasons argued earlier) tends to be too considerate. It seems to be the ‘most masculine’ women who tend to be *too* service-oriented. Secondly, there is knowledge about the female body on both sides of the exchange. This, taken together with regarding orgasm seriously, is considered to result in more orgasmic sex when women are with women than when women are with men. This is to dismiss, I would suggest, this particular feminist critique. (It does not mean that lesbians know enough about the sexual and erotic female body). Thirdly, lesbians relate actively to the coitus imperative, and the reworking takes a variety of forms; rejection, repetition, and a having fun with phallic economy. What is important in connection with the production of an orgasm, though, is that a focus on penetration does not hinder the female orgasm. Orgasms are produced unrelated to the coital imperative, and penetration in general. As with the prostitution case, I will conclude that the outcome of the power negotiations seems to be more fair in the lesbian case, than in the heterosexual case, if the feminist (and sexological) advises are representative of dominant heterosexual practice.

Summed up, the modalities for how lesbians in a western society rework heterosexual power domains would be:

1. What is understood as erotic, as desirable in lesbian exchange is often closely connected to the symbolic value of masculinity and the erotic charge of the difference between femininity and masculinity. This is not simply copying the heterosexual, but putting the main signifier of sexual desire into productive play between women.
2. The dynamic of lesbian erotic exchange is marked with a higher degree of commonsense social justice than is a dominant heterosexual

erotic exchange. The practical result of negotiations of erotic power issues is fairer.

3. A short description could be that lesbian erotic specificity is marked by a flexible power exchange.

Symbolically the power is here seen as asymmetric and transferable. However, in a social sense the result has a high degree of symmetry. A comment regarding generalization is needed. I base this apparently universal conclusion on an analysis of qualitative research interviews, usually not exploited for general conclusions. I said in chapters 4 and 5 that the analyses of 'to take' and 'masculinity' had their generalization potential in the confirmation of theory. The theoretical perspectives I have used in this text can be read from different angles in this respect. Neither Teresa de Lauretis nor Judith Butler vindicates universal status of their theories about the relation between lesbian desire and the phallus. On the other hand; they may easily be read as though they did. This is exactly how I want the first point in the conclusion to be read: as confirmation of general theory about sexual desire and difference; however, the theoretical perspectives must be read as a tool for reflection. Regarding the second point; I used my own interview material, other empirical investigations and lesbian erotic literature to draw a conclusion based on what could be called 'positivist standards': 'if you can demonstrate it in enough cases, it must be true'. And there is indeed a lot of evidence, especially in the orgasm case, that certain practices are widespread. That does not change my basic attitude to the production of scientific truth, that it is in the end a story told by the scientist, a suggestion as to how society can be seen and interpreted.

There are scientific arguments opposed to my conclusions, some of which I have discussed already. One argument of a feminist political character would be that it is counterproductive to focus, not to say draw conclusions about the positive effects of power difference in the erotics between women. One should see enough of it in mainstream culture. My argument for doing so is theoretically based in psychoanalytical theory reworked by de Lauretis and Butler. Jean Grimshaw has a more experience-based way of putting it: How would it be possible to expect and demand pleasure, to focus on the pleasure of the other, to give in to the eroticity of the other, to let one's senses be dominated, etc., if power were not important? (Grimshaw 1997). The main point should be, I think, that within a dominantly heterosexual culture, heterosexuality will set major premises for *how* most people read erotic power, execute and give in to it in encounters with others. I would suggest struggling with that premise instead of struggling over the issue of power-free sexuality,

as for instance some campaigners against pornography do.<sup>125</sup> Can the investigation of sexual desire between women perhaps accentuate such a shift in focus of the debate?

The more determined and masculine looking woman in a lesbian couple will repeatedly be asked: Are you the man in your relationship? The simple answer is of course to say that there is no man present. And this in turn prepares for the next question; “how do you do ‘it’ when there is no man present?” Most lesbians I know do not answer the latter question. Perhaps a productive answer to the first question is that in a lesbian relationship there is no woman and no man, and a productive answer to the second question is that here is no ‘it’. With the term ‘productive’ I mean productive in giving the one who poses the question new tools for understanding sexuality. New tools could be concepts allowing one to understand different sexualities as shaped and reshaped in a continuous interrelation. It could be to see homosexuality as that which can never be the same as heterosexuality, but on the other hand never can be separated either. New tools could be those that understand lesbian specificity as a phenomenon that has an impact on heterosexual practices. In short; to make visible and talk about a lesbian specificity might *alter how individuals of different desires think, talk and practice in the erotic field*. I will elaborate on this in the following section where the focus is on possible effects of lesbian specificity.

### **Lesbian specificity - effects**

‘Effects’ are here understood as *subversive* effects when facing heterosexual discourse. Is lesbian practice seeping into practices between women and men? Lesbians are reliable in production of orgasms for their female partners. Will that help heterosexual males? Lesbians apparently have a story to tell about equality issues. Is someone listening? Another aspect of the term ‘effect’ is what we might call the queer, subversive or ontological aspect. To be ascribed a specificity implies the possibility and ‘reality’ of a lesbian existence or a lesbian presence. On many historical occasions women’s desire for other women has not even been recognized as a site of prohibition, like, for instance, when the Norwegian parliament passed an act of criminalization of male homosexuality in 1902. Female homosexuality was not prohibited because the phenomenon was impossible (Friele 1997). *Is there an*

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<sup>125</sup> An approach Jeffrey Weeks probably would call a ‘radical pluralis approach’ (Weeks 1998, p315).



*ontological effect of visualizing the existence of lesbian desire through a socio-erotic specification?*<sup>126</sup> Can it change the way culture produces naturalized ideas about women, men, heterosexuality and homosexuality? Is masculinity, the main symbol for the active sexual desire, threatened? Does language prove its inadequacy?

Here again, I would like to organize the text with the help of a distinction that actually is inadequate; an understanding of political effect as something that quite directly changes social structures versus an understanding of political effect as something that represents new tools, positions and means for an understanding of the social.<sup>127</sup>

### Effects in terms of changing social structures

What do people care about the socio-eroticity of lesbianism? Does a different erotic sociality have some kind of direct impact on the main culture?

In the period when I was finishing this text, I was on the main Norwegian radio channel twice in the same week, and was interviewed by a newspaper journalist once. Some weeks later, I was directing a one day workshop for employees and clients for a unit within the Norwegian public health service, which I also had done some months earlier. In these events I thematized and set up heterosexuality for debate from a lesbian perspective. Lesbianism, as mediated in this study, obviously plays into a public concern about sexuality and equality, and there are indeed people out there who want to hear what I have to say from this position. That makes this project meaningful; that is what I wanted from the start. However, the kind of changes this will inspire, is hard to say.

The previous Norwegian government took the position that homosexual practices mean a lot. Social change implies, they say, that heterosexuals learn from homosexuals (St.meld. nr.25, 2000-2001). And that is good, because the heterosexual society has some important things to learn from homosexuals. One is to break away from traditional sex roles, another is to give priority to friendship as a form of social organization. Gays and

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<sup>126</sup> The term 'lesbian existence' is from Adrienne Rich's famous essay 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence': '*Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence' (Rich 1983, p192). If nothing else is said, I use lesbian 'specificity' and 'existence' synonymously.

<sup>127</sup> Adrienne Rich's distinction would be between being accepted as an alternative lifestyle versus constituting a resistance against compulsory heterosexuality (1983).

lesbians are also given credit for, due to the specific experience of homosexuality, a certain advantage in understanding other people's life crises (p6). In the light of an increasingly complex society, a society more open than ever for personal choices when it comes to sex roles, cohabitation and sexuality, it is suggested that 'homosexuals have been pioneers in establishing ways of living that are becoming more and more common also among heterosexual couples' (p10, my translation).<sup>128</sup>

The government demonstrates good-will here, but is probably a bit too optimistic. The report does not demonstrate how the structural changes came about. How did homosexual practices in a concrete sense make a difference? Was it the political efforts to achieve citizen rights, was it the mere existence of homosexuals and their increased visibility in the media? Perhaps overlapping phenomena worked together? What about the effects of feminism on the very same issues? These are the kinds of questions I am also facing in this project, when I want to comment on the impact of lesbian practice on the main culture. As will be obvious from the kind of empirical analysis that is accomplished here, nothing can actually be said on the basis of it. I can only speculate. What I will suggest, based on the contact I have had already with the press and possible audiences, is that on the concrete level the impact will be in line with the works of sexologists. The results from this study raise questions about what people do when they are sexually together. These will be questions about the anatomical technical aspects of sex (how are orgasms produced in women?), and also the social technology of sex (can 'sexual service' be compatible with feminism?). Hopefully, some will begin to critically examine their own practices and reflect upon changes where they consider these are needed.

One of the questions that has *not* been asked so far by any of the journalists, is about female sexuality and the detachment from romance. The reason might be that the question probably can be seen as less 'sexological' and more linked to the aspect of effects that will be addressed below; subversiveness to heteronormativity.

Detaching sex from romance is not a new idea. In the history of sexuality in Western culture we have seen several phases where sex is singled out

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<sup>128</sup> It is interesting that a status as deliverers of positive impulses on the matters of gender, sexuality and relationships is assigned to homosexuals. And it is something of an irony given that until 1972 homosexuality was illegal, until 1978, an illness, and that homosexuals are still not enjoying equal rights in the Church of Norway, doomed for failing on exactly the same matters of conformity.

and where also female sexuality is recognized. We have, however, until now not seen one phase in which women were in control of what the 'liberation' of women's sexuality actually might imply. Women were not in control of the 'sexual liberation' in the 1960's and 1970's (Hawkes 1996, Segal 1994). As I have shown, the 1980's and 1990's is not as woman-friendly in terms of fulfilling women's sexual expectations, as one might suggest on the basis of the Western equality discourse. I have already argued that the 'pure relationships' (Giddens 1992) so far make up no more than a surface trend. Will we ever get a liberal (or sex positive) sexual discourse where women's sexual needs seem to be met according to a feminist scrutiny? Some believe that this is possible

Wendy Hollway, Lynn Segal, Stevi Jackson are heterosexual and feminist social scientist working in the UK, and they have all been engaged in this discussion for many years. They seem to have few illusions about the imbalance of gendered power in heterosexuality, and have few illusions about where and what the 1970's, 80's and 90's have brought us in terms of sexual pleasure for women. They do not agree on all topics, but are nevertheless clear that it is possible to change the dominant discourse of sexuality in favor of women (Hollway 1995, Jackson 1996, 1999, Segal 1994). In Norway we have had no debate in the realm of sexuality where feminism set the agenda since we recaptured the right to orgasm and the knowledge about it in the 1970's.<sup>129</sup> It is too early to say what the impact will be of the writings and the activities in the wake of Fittstim and Råtekst, the books of young women taking up the heritage (Solheim and Vaagland 1999, Skugge et al 1999). So far, my position is that a considerable proportion of Norwegian society conflates changes in the morality of sexuality with an idea of sexual equality between boys and girls, men and women. As I see it, the changes in sexual morality might very well detach sex from romance, also for women. Contemporary sexology and social science do not convince me that this has happened yet. It is probably correct to say that women in this century more than in the previous centuries, enjoy sex. Yet, too frequently the change in morality that entails, for the girl, the right to say 'yes', means sexual disappointment or unfulfillment, and too often it ends disastrously in the courts. Or, more often, women experience what Flemmen calls 'experiences in between' (1999).

What more and what else do I want in terms of the female detachment of sex from romance, and what can studying lesbians contribute to

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<sup>129</sup> I do not count the pornography battle in the 1980's. Resistance against male fantasy was on the agenda, rather than female pleasure.

achieving this? Is the self-evidence of female orgasm in lesbian relations contributing to change? Are more extended sexual services changing anything? Can the term 'sexual service' ever be correct from a feminist perspective? What kind of feminism would that be? Does the existence of women in the sex market as clients for sexual services from other women contribute to a step in the right direction? These could be topics to discuss.

The goodwill in the report from the government mentioned above, goes like this: 'The basis for the government is respecting the homophile and accepting the homosexual life' (St.meld. 25, p13, my translation). A question of fundamental political and theoretical importance is whether this goodwill has an influence upon heteronormativity. Increased respect and acceptance is not necessarily the same as changing the norm; someone is still in the position of having the power to accept or reject someone else. Let me illustrate this point briefly with an example.

In the recent years we have in Norway seen girl-girl kissing in different kinds of media, ambiguously related to the hetero-homo distinction. I often hear this phenomenon presented as an instance that demonstrates postmodern tolerance and acceptance towards homosexuals. It might of course be interpreted in that manner. However, I have not yet seen one media-representation, without the firm statement from the women that they sexually prefer men (see for instance *Aftenposten*, October 5, 1999). This may be seen as an example of increased tolerance for the sight of a woman kissing another woman, and at the same time a signal of *rejection of the desire it might have represented*. The government is probably right that we have an increased level of respect and acceptance, but one could ask if the culturally conceived normality of heterosexuality is not still intact. I understand the subversion of heteronormativity is a different matter.

#### Effects in terms of subversion – lesbian desire as queer

The discussion I take in this paragraph is more theoretical than practical. What does it mean to say that to develop a notion of lesbian specificity has an ontological effect, a queer effect, a subversive effect? What I choose to do here is to focus on the ways lesbian specificity may be understood as being a practice that is between or beyond hegemonic discourses. I am addressing here an aspect of 'effect' that is of a different quality from being tolerated, respected and accepted of the larger society. To illustrate this difference I will cite two of the prominent

figures within the Norwegian gay and lesbian movement when the right for homosexuals to legally 'get married' was discussed.

'I support the right for homosexuals to get married, because I believe that homosexuals should have the same right as heterosexuals to do something as stupid as that' (Gerd Brantenberg, my translation).<sup>130</sup>

'The problem is that Løvetann<sup>131</sup> surpasses the authorities in reproducing existing ideology. There are no limits as to how normal, responsible and powerful we have become. And I used to believe that some of the point in being a homosexual was to undermine power, disquiet, challenge, break out in revolt (...) I for one feel more comfortable on the fringe, in the periphery and the perversion, and choose to fight for a space in the margin, in infectiousness, in the absent, in the thoughts of end, -as weed, as heretic' (Dag Strand Nieleesen quoted in Halvorsen 1999, p12, my translation).

Strand Nielsen absolutely does not want to be associated with the center of power, with normalcy and adjustment. Brantenberg acknowledges the absurdity of gay and lesbian marriage. These are political statements that relate to the hegemonic discourse by rejecting the legitimacy and normalcy it would mean. Strand Nielsen is explicit on this.

I do not know the opinions of my informants about identity politics and civil right issues. It simply was not part of the conversation, or also I have not searched my material for intakes to the matter. What follows is *not* about political attitudes and positions. It is about an aspect of what I call 'effects of lesbian specificity' that has the theoretical potential to alter some common understandings of sexuality. This aspect of the discussion could more apt be called *effects of the recognition of lesbian existence*, because it is more about the culture's recognition of 'something lesbian' than the specificity of this 'something'. I will do a twist in the analytical approach here, by not anchoring the discussion in a reworking of heterosexual discourse, but rather in ways of seeing lesbian practice as outside and beyond heterosexual discourse. This is pure

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<sup>130</sup> Brantenberg did not write this statement when the gay and lesbian movement debated the legal right to domestic partnership. She gave interviews and participated in meetings about the issue. Brantenberg gave me permission to refer to her position like the citation above. Permission given in a conversation, April, 2001.

<sup>131</sup> A Norwegian journal for gays and lesbians (Dandelion)

pragmatism from my side, since I do not believe that there is a practice or existence to be found outside of heterosexual discourse in an absolute sense. This will be further discussed in the epilogue. For now I exploit this as an analytical approach, pragmatic as it is. Now, what have I said about lesbian specificity? In the *context of an ontological discussion* I will point to the following:

1. it is to put masculinity into play between women
2. it is for a woman not (only) to desire men
3. it often means that a woman penetrates another woman
4. it often means sexual service from one woman to another
5. in some cases a woman replaces a man, symbolically as well as anatomically
6. it means to be a female subject of sexual desire
7. it means that sexual desire itself might be a directing force in a woman's life

I have not mentioned it earlier, but in this context I will list as an eighth point that lesbian sexual desire is not reproductive; sex is not about multiplying but rather, about pleasure only. The above-mentioned points represent a positioning outside important discourses in the field of sexuality. It is to be outside the romantic discourse where women in a heteronormative society are expected to represent the one who is into sex as a component part of her loving emotions. How could a woman who will receive sexual service from other women, and also give sexual service to other women, how could she be trustworthy as a representative for a romantic discourse related to sex? She will let sexual desire be determining for her choices at major crossroads. How could that fit with the expectations towards women first of all to be concerned about emotional aspects of relationships? This is not to say that lesbians are less romantic than heterosexual women in the sense that they are not looking for the 'one and only' or less often than heterosexual women making candle-lit dinners. The point I make is about the lesbian who practices as a sexual subject in a culture where women are made objects for men's active desire. This is to be between, beyond or to reject the discourses of masculinity and femininity. For women to do that is not new, of course. We often see it among all women, that the distinction between masculinity and femininity is dismissed, blurred and balanced in a variety of ways. This often implies to try to compensate in one direction what you have lost in the other. Lesbians challenge the binary at what is understood as the core of gender difference – sex in an anatomical and symbolic sense. A woman replaces a man in all respects (except for the reproduction capacity, which I do not consider being of

particular importance in respect to eroticism). How is it possible to compensate for this? And what does it do to the dichotomy homo-hetero when women replace men at all scores? And what does it do to this dichotomy that lesbians exploit the main erotic signifier of heterosexual desire? A most closely associated conclusion to draw is that lesbians are neither homosexual nor heterosexual.

It is tempting, as others have done before me, to say that lesbians are neither women nor men. They are women and not men in a juridical sense; they have vaginas in most cases and the 'F' in their passports. They are what Dorte Marie Søndergaard calls 'individuals with a female sign on their body' (1996, p426). If by the time of birth there was a reason for doubt, the health authorities would have made the decision about proper body engineering. If asked, my informants would identify as women, except for the transsexual. I will here go a bit further on the theory of sex as performativity, as outlined in chapter 3. With reference to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, I have argued that sex and sexuality are produced in the process of exploiting the phenomenon 'sexuality' as a means by which to control individuals. Sex and sexuality, read as sex according to the norms of *heterosexuality*, are the effect of power with the right to discipline people, and the efforts individuals make to be readable as men and women. This is not to deny that there are anatomical, genital differences, but it does question the power involved in producing this and making it an essential difference. Thus the categories 'man' and 'woman' are not seen as original or natural. It is the continuous reiteration that makes them appear as such; sex is performative, and as I read Butler (cf *Chapter 3: Sexuality – where inner and outer worlds meet*'), so is gender. There is no intrinsic truth about man and woman, masculinity and femininity that just makes its way and gets manifested as proper men and women. 'Heterosexuality is an impossible imitation of itself' (Butler 1993b, p314). There is no original for lesbians to imitate. Understood like this, the lesbian is not a funny imitation or a bad copy of something original and natural, but rather; the lesbian *exposes* a frantic repetition of sex and gender norms that might be called the 'heterosexual pathos'. Or as Butler puts it, heterosexuality is exposed as: 'incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization' (Butler 1993b, p314).

It is my point that lesbians cannot properly, convincingly do sex. 'Man' and 'woman' are culturally understood as natural categories embedded in

a heterosexual norm.<sup>132</sup> How can lesbians possibly be understood as natural women? How can one be without a man sexually, use masculine strategies for picking up women and have sex with them, perform sex in a way that never would entail the possibility of motherhood, be sexually serviced by women, penetrate women, even say that one has ‘taken’ another woman and perhaps paid for sex offered by a woman, and still be culturally understood as a woman? How can this society count on such womanhood for womanhood to prevail? Or as the French philosopher Monique Wittig argues:

‘ ... it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for ‘woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women’ (Wittig 1996, p148).

Lesbians cannot be trustworthy as belonging to the category ‘women’, unless the category is fundamentally changed. I cannot find any evidence that it has. If you are not tied up in a conviction that lesbians are sick, criminal or not human, you will have to say that they are as normal and natural as are other human beings. If that is the case, not being either a woman or a man as argued here regarding the lesbian, is normal and natural; it is normal and natural to be outside what defines the human. I understand this aspect of lesbian specificity as a positive politically subversive aspect that has the potential to alter categories and make new phenomena and creatures come into being (recognized). This I call an ontological aspect with the potential to make someone think and theorize sexuality and eroticism within other frameworks than the one marked by the self-evident naturalness of the eroticism of the sexual difference between women and men. Sexuality and eroticism is in any case imagined, repeated and practiced into existence – as in this text. What is required to make it seem as self-evident and natural as heterosexuality, that an eroticized sexual difference could be anywhere where humans are? The recognition of lesbian existence by its erotic specification has the potential to alter how we think and experience sex as a binary. To give the lesbian desire ontological status might penetrate the symbolic and augur future changes in the symbolic realm itself. This is obviously not a simple process. Judith Butler puts it like this:

‘ ... the entrance of homosexuality into the symbolic will alter very little if the symbolic itself is not radically altered in the course of

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<sup>132</sup> ‘...compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of »man» and »woman»..’ (Butler 1993b, p313)



that admission. Indeed, the legitimation of homosexuality will have to resist the force of normalization for a queer resignification of the symbolic to expand and alter the normativity of its terms' (Butler 1993a, p111).

We are talking about fundamental changes, and are very clearly not there yet. However, as contemporary members of this culture, we still have some choices. Sue-Ellen Case, professor in English from the US, says that there is a difference between 'playing *on*' the phallic economy and 'playing *to*' it (Case 1993, p300). The former could mean to exploit the erotic potential of the phallic culture we live in, and do it our own way. I have argued that this is part of lesbian specificity. The idea of 'sexual structuring' is outlined in *Chapter 3: Sexuality, where inner and outer worlds meet*. The term implies a potential for changes in identities and practices. In this case it would mean that to play *on* the phallic economy should be possible for anyone, regardless of object choice. It is not a natural law that the heterosexual 'man-woman-repetition' must go on for eternity.

I said that in 1902 when Norway enacted a law against male homosexuality, lesbianism was unthinkable. In Judith Butler's terms, lesbians were not even thinkable within the binary opposition of 'proper vs improper' women. Lesbians were so 'unnameable and unclassifiable' (Meijer and Prins 1998, p284), 'improper to the improper', that a paragraph against them could not be formulated. In this connection a question comes to mind: has something happened that ascribed ontological status to lesbians? *What happened that at least* made room for 'the lesbian' as an improper woman, a masculine woman, a loose woman, a sick woman, a criminal woman, a nymphomaniac, a threat? Can we even ask what happened that made 'the lesbian' proper, decent, healthy, law-obedient, naturally desiring and a pillar of society? Someone should write the Norwegian genealogy of 'the lesbian'.

I am still not sure that 'the lesbian' has ontological status as a woman, that she actually could be conceived of as a woman 'as such'. I want to end the discussion about lesbian specificity and possible potential for societal change, with a quotation from Joan Nestle.

### **‘After J. leaves, the sadness descends’**

After J. leaves, the sadness descends. I read the papers every day in this hiding-away place. I mourn for D., have nightmares of screaming at her, I wonder what worth I am to my students. Perhaps all the fucking, all the nuances are hopeless. Governments with their pale men in suits kill and flaunt and designate despair. Where could such a shifting exchange between two women, one twenty years older than the other, have meaning other than among the clouds of a village at the edge of sea?’ (Nestle 1998, p149).

In her writing Joan Nestle usually sees the subversive political potential in homosexual desire and practices. In the quote above however, she is more doubtful, wondering whether it perhaps was most important to the lovers involved. One should of course not be naive about social change and underestimate ‘the realities of oppression and the gains to be made by organized campaigns for rights and justice’, as Tamsin Spargo notes as something that queer theory sometimes is accused of (Spargo 1999, p66). On the other hand, texts about erotic practices, about the dynamics between lovers, might also be politics; people read texts, journalists, parents, artists, and teachers mediate the ideas. It is no coincidence that dictators burn books of all kinds. However, when the night is blue, the question about one’s own tiny contribution creeps in. With Nestle, as with me.

## **EPILOGUE**

If I were to investigate the practices of lesbian desire again, I might have tried harder to work outside of the conceptual framework within which the research about sexuality usually is carried out. I might have been more daring in challenging the binary between masculinity and femininity, a difference that is erotically signified by the phallus, and which needs major rethinking to be seen differently. I do not say that the project would have been better, it might even have turned out to be an impossible challenge for me to handle empirically. It might have resulted in an academic fantasy instead of something people can relate to in their own lives. However, before I terminate the project, I want to reconsider routes I did not take.

I want to reflect upon alternatives while possessing the theoretical and analytical experience the project provided, and not only as part of an ongoing research process. I have at several occasions during this project, had inspiring discussions about alternative symbology in the realm of the erotic. It has become too tempting to suggest a further debate with an outset in social science, also on this issue.

I first refer ideas that could have become alternative foundations in a symbolic sense, by using works of Judith Roof, Paula Bennett, Elspeth Probyn and Elizabeth Grosz. Thereafter, I discuss how these works might have become useful in my project, by using an analytical topic as an example, namely what two of my informants say about the female body.

### **The crocus and other flowers**

Judith Roof's starting-point for the suggestion of a representation of lesbian desire is a quotation from Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (Roof 1989). In this quotation the narrator makes three attempts to describe Clarissa Dalloway's feelings for women: as an 'illumination', 'a match burning in a crocus', and as 'an inner meaning almost expressed' (Woolf in Roof 1989, p100). Roof explains the first and the second (the illumination and the burning match) as representations of lesbian sexuality that reproduce heterosexuality (a masquerade of masculine behavior). The third, however, 'the almost expressed', demonstrates the 'failure of language' that makes lesbianism unaccountable, impossible to

represent (p100).<sup>133</sup> Roof does not suggest a solution to this dilemma. She states that authors who attempt to represent lesbian sexuality as ‘something outside’, still have to be ‘filtered through the ponderous machinery of symmetry’ (the complementariness of having or not having the phallus, my comment) (Roof 1998, p115). The only way to escape from the phallus is to play on it. In the breaks and paradoxes resulting from this play lies the opportunity. The opportunity for an alternative signification lies, that is, in what cannot be expressed. Paula Bennett criticizes Roof for refusing ‘to speak at all’ (Bennett 1993, p253).

As an alternative to the phallic language Bennett advocates the ‘Language of Flowers’. The ‘Language of Flowers’ is the name for the sexual imagery in women’s (and also some men’s) writing in the nineteenth century. It is a language of clitoral symbols, symbols of ‘small but precious objects’ (p237). Bennett does not perceive the ‘clitocentric’ representation of female sexuality as the only alternative to the phallogocentric. It is one among many. However, she is of the opinion that this representation should be of special importance. Of all human organs, the clitoris is ‘uniquely adapted to a sexual mission’, proportionally better supplied with nerve endings than any other organ, male or female (Bennett 1993, p238). Bennett argues that until Freud, clitoris was recognized as the prime seat of female erotic sensibility, but since then erased from literature and scholarship. Also feminists keep silent, which they cannot afford, she asserts, since clitoridectomy, whether it is performed on women’s bodies or in language, is the place ‘where theory and politics come together’ (p239). Not to theorize clitoris implies to accept symbolic castration of women, according to Bennett. She is therefore not pleased with Roof above, who ‘describes clitorally based sexuality’, but ‘never identifies it as such’ (p251). If Roof did not avoid to name the clitoris, she would be able to represent female sexuality as something other than the ‘mystified and mystifying «other-than-phallus»’ that cannot be named.

Bennett suggests talking about female sexuality in the language of the flowers, with the clitoris as the equivalent to the phallus. Elspeth Probyn, on the other hand, makes an attempt to theorize desire where desire has no object whatsoever. The question of a connection between a subject and an object of desire therefore needs no sign in Probyn’s thinking. In a contribution to the development of queer theory where horses are central,

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<sup>133</sup> Teresa de Lauretis understands the quotation from Woolf as a description of Clarissa’s lack of desire, it being of the hetero- *or* the homosexual kind, and *not* as Woolf’s lack of other-than-phallic terms for lesbian desire (1994a)

horses are thus not to be understood in terms of a phallic presence, but of motion, movement.

### **Women on women on horses**

In my text, desire is linked to an object that is desired for. Lesbian desire is a woman's desire for another woman. Here is both a subject that desires and an object of desire (who, at the same time can be a subject, I have argued). Elspeth Probyn wants to theorize desire as that which misses an object, as 'a point of departure and a guide', as a 'method within queer theory' (Probyn 1995, p4). To link desire to an object, to differentiate bodies on account of their locations, she says, 'tends to slow the body down' (p5). Probyn will hold in check 'the desire to fix desire' (p7), which she sees as symptomatic for the lack of precision of point of departure for queer theorizing. We excitedly leave our 'home discipline' (sociology for instance) to do interdisciplinary queer studies that is 'about' sexuality, without really considering how to get there. Her point is that it is desire that takes us there. We have to follow desire, which also changes desire as the object of study, since we now follow what we study, and are producing it at the same time. Desire is method, desire is motion, and desire is also images. But, not any kinds of images: queer images that render their relation to bodies strange and not 'quite graspable' (Probyn 1995, p9, quoting Foucault). These are images *not* like the fantasies that are produced when we see desire as lack.

From here Probyn asks her readers to follow *her* images, her desire, back to the first memories of desiring: 'an image of girlfriends and me melded together by hot horse flesh' (p10). She continues with other cultural manifestations of women on women and horses, and sums up that the images have no essence and no fixed reference, that they cannot be 'allowed to condense into categorized notions of being' (p11). However, they do throw us forward 'into other relations of becoming and belonging' (p12). Probyn asks:

'(...) how can we use desire so as to analyse it as a specific queer form of movement and mediation between individuals' (Probyn 1995, p14).

She will not look for this queerness as something that is possible to be founded or condensed in *a* lesbian body, *a* lesbian being, *a* lesbian experience or aesthetic:

‘Recognizing at any moment that the movement between us is queer cannot be reduced to two individual elements: me as lesbian and possibly you’ (Probyn 1995, p14).

She admits that the identification of and as a lesbian is important, but the movement does not stop there. Desire does not point us to a person but to the movement of different body parts, she continues. She refers to the performance artist Suzanne Westenhoefer to make her point about the movement of body parts. Westenhoefer has a desire for the international lesbian icon Martina Navratilova, the tennis-player. However, the desire is not for the individual Martina, but for the movement and image of different body parts. To watch Martina Navratilova play evokes in Westenhoefer the ‘overwhelming longing to lick the coursing vein that pops out on the inside of Martina’s forearm’ (Probyn 1995, p14). This image may connect with others: her butchness, her skill, her success, Probyn continues. These images conjoin to the body we call ‘Martina’. Probyn understands in fact individuals as being an ensemble of images, which means that images are having a ‘certain existence situated halfway between the thing and the representation’ (p14). (She here refers to Bergson and Deleuze). Desire can be seen as it spins lines between the thing and the representation, and desire is the force that connects or disconnects images and things.

Elspeth Probyn owes much to Elisabeth Grosz in her reasoning above. Grosz has given up on psychoanalysis’ interpretation of desire as lack and the phallic signification of desire (see for instance Grosz 1994, and Grosz 1995a esp. p173-187).

### **Producing sensations**

In her article *Animal Sex. Libido as desire and death* (1995) Grosz builds on the thinking of the French sociologist Roger Caillois and the American philosopher Alphonso Lingis. To Grosz, desire is turbulent and restless, and defies coding into ‘signs, signification, meanings’ (p286). It is often hard to tell what entices and allures. Desire does not have an object, ‘only a series of intensities’ (p287). The intensification induces excitation of bodily regions or zones. The connections between the sensitive body parts cannot be understood in terms of ‘domination, penetration, control or mastery’ (p288). It is *jealousy* that best describes the connection; jealousy from one body part to the other because of the intensity and excitations felt in one, however draining excitement from the surrounding regions. There are no privileged erotogenic zones which

'remembers' how good and stimulating it used to be; there are body surfaces coming together, producing, renewing, transforming libidinal zones. These are thoughts of desire that considers desire as something very alive, continuously in creation and present now; not as in psychoanalysis where most happened already in childhood. To be effective as sites of orgasmic intensity, these body surfaces must continually be 'invested through activity, use' (p289). It is by this given that Grosz objects to the limitation of desire to being that of genital and orgasmic pleasure. To her, desire is *not* rise and fall, waxing and waning, which is a central part of how I talk about sex with my informants in the present study. Desire culminates in 'the production of sensations never felt, alignments never thought, energies never tapped, regions never known' (p295).

How could Roof, Bennett, Probyn and Grosz have informed my work directly in an analytical sense? This is discussed in the next paragraph, where I take two quotations from my interviews as a starting point.

### **An alternative analysis**

I have chosen two quotations where another woman's body is in focus.

WR went to bed with another woman, both understanding themselves as heterosexual; 'We had sex. Digital sex, oral sex, the full package' (p4). WR was enthusiastic about the sexual experience. This was not specifically about her relation to the other woman, with whom she was not in love. She thought; 'This, WR, is right for you'.

GG has a similar experience. The first time she got engaged in a sexual relationship with a girl, GG already knew that she probably would prefer women. She felt: 'Wowh! This is absolutely right, but it is not the right person.' (p5). GG also says that she believes that she was attracted to her because she knew the other girl was lesbian.

The body is finally right; a *female* body is in an erotic sense right for WR and GG. When I ask my informants what it is about having sex with women that makes it different from having sex with men, they say that it is the curves, the roundness, and the softness of the female body compared to the harder bodies of men.

Now, if I were to analyze this the same way as I have approached my interviews previously in this text, I would have called this topic: 'the

female body'. I would have made a distinction between the social and the symbolic, as I did in the previous chapter. In a social sense, I would have at least three issues to discuss. First, who the woman is, is not important; it is the sex of the body that is important. This has to be an experience different from heterosexual women's experiences, since in the first meeting with a boy or a man, most women will not be surprised or in awe over the aptness of the male body as fit for having a sexual relationship with. Whether a male body is right or not is in most cases a question not asked. I would also have taken a discussion of lesbianism related to the romantic versus the technical aspects of sex. It seems as though this (that it is the body, not the person) can strengthen the point made in the previous chapter that lesbian desire is a directing force in the lives of lesbians. Secondly, the moment is magic for WR and GG; now is when they realize their lesbian desire. I would have discussed the Danish ethnologist Karen Lützen's term 'magic moment', as a name for the important moment in a woman's life that makes her 'open her eyes for other women' (1998, p166). And, what does it mean that GG says that the presence of the lesbian made a difference? Is there a lesbian body? The third issue I would have discussed connected to the quotations above is the possibility of becoming 'cheap'. Under what conditions is a 'cheap' lesbian produced? I am not sure what the conclusion would be of this analysis, or how in general it would fit with the rest of this text. This is more of a mental experiment, just to indicate what kind of issues I would have focused.

A similar analysis as in previous chapters of the symbolic aspect, would again have been based on Teresa de Lauretis' rewriting of psychoanalysis. What is it with the female body that makes it right for these women? This is not only a question about esthetics or art - the female body is by some seen as prettier or more exciting - this is a question about what there is that ascribes eroticity to the female body *for another woman*. WR and GG want to have female sexual partners. (I do not know the process of their sexual structuring). As most other contemporary Norwegians, they do not want *anyone*, but a person to fall in love with and share their days with. This particular preference of sexual object (women's preference for women) needs to be mediated symbolically, I have stated, or at least to be imagined by the desiring subject. How could WR and GG otherwise know that she desired another woman? As masculinity signified desire for women in *Chapter 5: Masculinity in erotic play between women*, the female body here takes the place of the signifier, the lesbian fetish.



Roof and Bennett could be used as alternatives to de Lauretis in terms of the symbolic, since they actually relate to signification of desire (which Probyn and Grosz attempt not to). Roof does not *really* try, but I can see that Bennett has a point with her flower language. It is really remarkable that clitoris, so important for female sexual pleasure, and so often represented in nineteenth century literature that it got its own language, is not part of the way contemporary feminists symbolize desire. My problem is that I cannot trace the clitoris, the buds or the flowers in the way my informants speak about the female body. It seems to be the image of a female body as such, not with reference to clitoris and represented by a bud, that signifies desire. And the distance between the signifier (the female body) and what it signifies (the desire for a woman) seems to be very short in this case: the sexual practice of WR's and GG's bodies together with other women's bodies evokes the general image of desire. These two quotations were the closest I could come to something in my material that I consider proper for a discussion of signification, except for the even more obvious masculinity, already discussed. This does not mean that I give up on Bennett. I will not preclude that another kind of empirical material may open up for her suggestion.

My research interviews are rather traditional in the sense that the informants responded to my questions and encouraging remarks. They are also concrete and practical since I was concerned about making them tell stories about actual events. I like my interviews, but they are not poetic. They are not rich on images, fantasies, or symbols. With a different academic background, let us say I was trained in the analysis of literature, I might have been able to read more out of it on a symbolic level. The one 'poetic' contribution to the material, the short story one of the informants sent me, does really not help on this matter. In a practical sense the story is about clitoral pleasures (oral sex), however, the symbolism in it is clear; it is revolving around the eroticity of the difference between masculinity and femininity (the muscular one versus the one with red toe-nails, the one who is watching versus the one who is being watched, the one who is taking the initiative versus the one who is blushing). So, if I were to do another fieldwork and Bennett's flowers still seemed appealing, I would have had to try harder to make it more poetic. (I am not sure what that would have meant). Flowers - appealing as they might be as a fantasy - I cannot see how they could have fertilized the analysis this time.

Teresa de Lauretis has considered the clitoris as signifier, and concludes that the clitoris and the symbolization of it through a flower language

can signify lesbian or female desire. Of course it can, she says, since the signifier of desire is contextual and 'contingent upon each singular sociohistorical subjectivity (de Lauretis 1994a, p234). That is the reason why she calls it a fetish. But, what she cannot do, is to theorize the clitoris, as such, 'as the primary or unique signifier of female desire' (p234). This would be to put the clitoris together with the penis in the psychoanalytic imaginary 'that we all find so inadequate' (p234). Her argument against it makes sense; both the penis and the clitoris are anatomical entities, thus their capacity to signify desire depends on their representation. In the poems Bennett refers to in her article, the clitoris is imaged erect ('the bud, or little seed, is a spear; it is sheathed; it possesses a hood; it trembles and pulses; (...) thrusting upward (...) potential for evil as well as for good', Bennett 1993, p246). Seen as an erect anatomical entity it cannot but be smaller than the penis; the little penis of the woman, according to Freud, who again is offending to women. And is it not phallocentrism that ascribes eroticism to the clitoris in Bennett's analysis, one could ask? de Lauretis wants neither the penis nor the clitoris to signify lesbian desire, and suggests, as already discussed in previous chapters, the fetish as a more general term. I must admit that I still find Teresa de Lauretis' reasoning most appealing; is any progress made if one erect body-part is replaced with another?

Probyn and Grosz refuse to signify desire, refuse to say that something rather stable and namable represents the object of desire. If I were to work along their lines of argumentation, I simply would not thematize masculinity, the female body or what there is that is attractive about another person. The other person as such is in fact not interesting, since it is the pleasure that it is possible to produce on the body surfaces involved that is interesting (Grosz), or what kind of queer configurations of conjoined images that are made (Probyn). It would be meaningless to use their ideas in the search for a signifier of desire.

I have to ask, however: how did the coursing vain of Martina Navratilova come to inspire the 'overwhelming longing' to lick it? Why the coursing vain, supplying Martina's muscular arm? What is it with Martina's arm that connects it to other images (butchness, skills, success) and to desire? What is this, which ascribes eroticism to the vain on Martina's forearm, which after all is just a vain on a forearm? I could go on, and it is embarrassing to realize how much I miss the (stable) symbol, (preferably something else than the phallus), to give erotic significance to all the longing and belonging so poetically described by Probyn. Probyn refuses to offer it, because she will not ascribe lack to desire. It is very tempting to say what Bennett just said about Roof:

Probyn refuses to speak! I will not say that, because I consider it important that some feminists try to go fundamentally new ways to avoid a phallic signification of desire.

But, this means that Grosz and Probyn probably is of more interest when body surfaces come together; they must be of use when a woman's body meets another woman's body in a concrete sense, as in the interviews above. Again, I have a big problem: there is nothing prosaic about desire in Probyn's and Grosz's texts. In the quotations above, GG and WR are 'having sex'; they do things that is able to name, like digital sex, oral sex, they are in love or not in love. That is, they use a language, also because the interviewer did, that is already well known for being used in a conversation about sex. My interviews were about power issues, difference in interests, tastes and distastes, former experiences, and social status. The informants told me stories about being able to capture heaven, but also about the handling of failure and disappointment. They were women who wanted to talk about what was good and what was not. In Probyn's and Grosz's writing there is no power aspect, no social difference between individuals. Here are body parts, body surfaces, motions, images, excitement, intensity, sensations. It seems that I cannot use the ideas of Probyn and Grosz that fascinate me so immensely, for other than *perhaps* one situation among the interviews. That is the situation where ATI meets C for the first time, described in chapter 7. ATI says that she had 'chemical releases that were absolutely complete', but I would need an interview that was 'thicker' in the description of this particular event to be able to go further analytically. Probyn and Grosz seem to be speaking of, if not once-in-a-lifetime experiences, so the very rare events when one's own body and images dissolves, and it does not matter any more where one body surface ends and the other starts. I guess it is kind of symptomatic for this that Grosz cannot give what she calls a 'real life illustration' (refiguring, p183), but cites instead from poetic writing.

I can use Probyn and Grosz, but not in analyzing, as in this project, rather prosaic research interviews. I can first of all use them as a means to put words to some rare sexual experiences where my history, my shame, my doubts, anything that can be a hindrance for joy, evaporated in the extraordinary intense meeting of bodies and minds. That is, I consider Probyn's and Grosz's language as being poetic and personal, perhaps even private. In order to be able to use it in a scientific sociological context, I would need to know more about the production of poetry and how I could make 'ordinary people' talk about 'ordinary sex' in poetic terms. This, I would think, is a challenge for social scientist in

the field of sexuality studies. Perhaps we should let scholars from other disciplines handle such a challenge. For, as Elizabeth Grosz puts it:

‘I am not suggesting that all feminists should turn to these rather obscure and abstract reflections on the broad conditions of being and its complications through becoming: clearly this is a project far removed from direct application and from concrete project aimed at transforming lives’ (Grosz 2001, p17).

It is indeed a project far removed from direct application. The question is: does Grosz represent an attempt to speak from a place beyond any discourse? If so, is this the direction where we should try to advance, even if we consider it impossible? It would be a variant of the revolutionary saying: it is impossible and we shall not give in. Or, is the best we can do to do like Roof: to deny the possibility of anything else than the phallic economy at all, and look for the opportunities in the paradoxes? Or, as Butler, usually more optimistic than Roof regarding the possibilities of making changes in the symbolic: we could work sexuality *against* identity, and even against gender, and let that ‘which cannot fully appear in any performance persist in its own disruptive promise’ (Butler 1993b, p318). Whatever the strategy will be, it is my hope that more social scientists will participate in the debate, till now dominated by philosophers and literature critics. The British sociologist Simon Hardy states that the erotic representation of gender is ‘contentious’ (Hardy 2000, p87). In a recent article, he strikes the right note when he asks whether women’s seeking for subject-status within pornography will ‘transform the nature of erotic meaning’ (Hardy 2001, p451). These are the kind of empirical questions where social science has a contribution to make.

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