

**JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT  
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN**

**ABTEILUNG FÜR KULTUR**

**Working Paper No. 79/1995**

**ISSN 0948-9436**

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**Sexuality in the Fictions  
of Theory**

**Lecture presented at the Amerika Haus,  
Berlin 1995**

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Santa Cruz, CA, U. S. A.**

**ISSN 0948-9436**

## Sexuality in the Fictions of Theory

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Teresa de Lauretis

For many years now I've been doing the kind of writing that in the US is called theory—feminist theory, film theory, gender theory, psychoanalytic theory, and so on. More recently I've been interested in questions of sexuality and its representation in film and literature, in critical texts or works of theory, and what I call public fantasies. My last book, published last year with the title *The Practice of Love*, is concerned with sexuality and the theory of fantasy; in this area psychoanalysis is of course fundamental, and especially Freud, whose work I've been reading for some 25 years and find more and more complex, rich, ambiguous, and fascinating as time goes by. What I propose in the book is, in effect, a theory of desire, which I call perverse desire; I develop it through a somewhat eccentric reading of Freud and through the analysis of lesbian and feminist texts. The book is being translated into German and will be published next year, so I will tell you something about it, by way of a preview.

But first [1] I want to say how it is that, for a book about a **theory** of desire, I've chosen the title *The Practice of Love*. Then [2] I will reflect more generally on the relations of theory and practice, or perhaps it is better to say theories and practices—of sexuality, of psychoanalysis, and of textual analysis. I will suggest that, in all these cases, [3] a theory is a passionate fiction, not a hypothesis to be proven or disproven, and not a statement of the true order of things; rather, a theory is a contingent, if historically and culturally grounded

fiction, and an intersubjective fiction—what Freud called a construction in analysis [*"Konstruktionen in der Analyse"* (1937)]; and therefore a theory is also inseparable from a practice of reading and a practice of writing.

1. Why do I call my book *The Practice of Love* when I say that it is **a theory of desire**? In answering this question, I will have to say something about sexuality and fantasy.

Those of you who know the cinema may recognize in my title that of a film by Valie Export, *Die Praxis der Liebe* (1984). That title phrase haunted me ever since I saw the film—the title more than the film—and thus the words "the practice of love" not only preceded but in a sense overdetermined my thinking about lesbian sexuality and desire. So I asked Valie Export's permission to use her title, and she very graciously gave it.

*My Practice of Love* is an eccentric reading of Freud, through the work of Jean Laplanche and the Lacanian and feminist revisions, in conjunction with lesbian literary and filmic texts. My project was to reread Freudian psychoanalysis in order to rethink lesbian sexuality both within and against its epistemological and conceptual framework. For, unlike a great number of feminist critics, who reject Freud as the enemy of women, I think that his theory, or his passionate fiction, in spite of its heterosexual presumption, is singularly important for understanding or thinking sexuality in a different way. To that end, I analyzed two major strands of the psychoanalytic discourse on female homosexuality: first, the classic studies of Freud, Jeanne Lampl-de Groot, Helene Deutsch, and Ernest Jones in the 1920s and 30s; and second, the recent development (since the late 1970s) of a feminist theory of female sexuality that returns to Freud via Lacan. I read these psychoanalytic texts on female homosexuality in conjunction with lesbian literary and filmic

texts: the classic novel of female inversion, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (published and banned in England in 1928) and several works of poetry, film, drama of the 1980s by Adrienne Rich, Cherríe Moraga, Sheila McLaughlin, and others. I should say right away that my interest in psychoanalysis is not therapeutic but theoretical and epistemological: what drives my project is the desire to tamper with the present conditions of knowledge. But why, again, if my project is a theory of desire, do I call the book *The Practice of Love*?

Lesbianism is both a sexual practice and a particular structuration of desire. Since the fantasies that ground it and the signs that signify or represent it may differ both culturally and individually, perhaps the single defining condition of lesbian sexuality and desire is that their subject and their object are both female-embodied. Of course, various other affective or social ties may be involved in a lesbian relationship—ties that may also exist in other relations between and among women, from friendship to rivalry, political sisterhood to class or racial antagonism, ambivalence to love, and so on. But the term **lesbian** refers specifically to a sexual relation, for better or for worse, and however broadly one may wish to define **sexual**. I use this term (sexual) to include centrally, beyond any performed or fantasized physical sexual act, whatever it may be, the conscious presence of desire in one woman for another. It is that desire, rather than woman-identification or even the sexual act itself (which can obviously occur between women for reasons unrelated to desire), that specifies lesbian sexuality.

As Laplanche and Pontalis define it in their authoritative *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*,

sexuality does not mean only the activities and pleasure which depend on the functioning of the genital apparatus: it also embraces a whole range of excitations and activities which may be observed from infancy onwards and which procure a pleasure that cannot be adequately explained in terms of the satisfaction of a basic physiological need (respiration, hunger, excretory function, etc.).... As opposed to love, desire is directly dependent on a specific somatic foundation; in contrast to need, it subordinates satisfaction to conditions in the phantasy world which strictly determine object-choice and the orientation of activity. (*The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 418 and 421-22)

In other words, desire, not love or need, is specific to sexuality. But then, what of my title? What do lesbian sexuality and desire have to do with the practice of **love**?

The passage I just quoted states that desire is (unlike love) **directly dependent** on a somatic or instinctual foundation, but instinctual satisfaction is (unlike need) dependent on fantasy. It is fantasy that, in turn, **strictly determines** object-choice [*Objektwahl*] and orientation of activity, or instinctual aim. *Objekt*, in Freud's sense, is usually a person but could also be a part of the body or an extension of the person, as in fetishism. In my book I argue that the object to which the drive attaches itself, the so-called object of desire, **represents a fantasmatic object**, an intrapsychic image; in other words, desire is dependent on a fantasy scenario which is evoked by the object and from which the object acquires its fantasmatic value, acquires the ability to represent the fantasmatic object. With the word **love** (rather than sex) I want to stress this **fantasmatic** quality of sexuality and the dependence of lesbian

desire, specifically, on what is ultimately a **demand for love** inscribed in a fantasy of the female body, a fantasy of dispossession (analogous to what psychoanalysis calls castration, but not the same thing, as I will argue).

Where does such fantasy come from?

In Freudian psychoanalysis, fantasy—conscious and unconscious—is understood as a psychic process that structures subjectivity: the activity of fantasy is prompted by the loss of the first object of satisfaction (the mother's breast and body), and the contents of fantasy are initially shaped by parental fantasies, both conscious and unconscious. From then on, fantasy acts as a dynamic grid through which external reality is adapted or reworked in psychic reality.

It is the subject's life as a whole which is... shaped and ordered by [the structures of fantasy]. This should not be conceived of merely as a thematic [but rather as a dynamic process] in that the phantasy structures seek to express themselves, to find a way out into consciousness and action, and they are constantly drawing in new material. (*The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 317)

As the new material includes events and representations occurring in the external world, one could say that fantasy is the psychic mechanism that governs the translation of social representations into subjectivity and self-representation, and thus the adaptation or reworking of public fantasies in private fantasies. However, the parental fantasies and other sociocultural representations of the body as sexual are transmitted to the subject not only through language, but also and especially through practices familial and institutional which, Laplanche and Foucault concur, "implant" sexuality in the body as both source and effect of the subject's desire. The word **practice** in

my title is meant to emphasize the material, embodied component of desire as a psychic activity whose effects on the subject's bodily ego constitute a sort of habit or knowledge of the body, what the body "knows"—or better, has come to know—about its instinctual aims.

In one sense, then, the title *The Practice of Love* is intended to convey that lesbian desire is articulated from a fantasy of dispossession or lack of being through the personal practices that disavow it and resignify the demand for love. In another sense *The Practice of Love* means to suggest that both the sexual and the representational practices of lesbianism can effectively reorient the drives by providing new somatic and epistemological grounds to fantasy and desire. A further objective of my work, then, is to consider how practices may affect or inflect instinctual activity. In the term **practices** I include both personal as well as interpersonal or social practices—not only what Foucault has described as practices or "technologies" of the self, but also the practices issuing from institutions and discourses deployed in what he calls the "technology of sex," and whose effect is to produce the subject as a sexual subject according to culturally specified categories such as male or female, normal or deviant, healthy or pathological, heterosexual or homosexual, and so forth.

A psycho-analysis is an instance of practice that is at once individual and interpersonal; a practice of self, on the part of the analysand, but one whose connection with the socio-institutional technologies of sexuality, represented by the trained and licensed analyst, is rendered explicit by the essential function of transference [*Übertragung*]. In this regard, I analyze two case histories in which the analyst's theoretical beliefs and interpretive frames prompt or elicit corresponding fantasmatic productions in the patients: one is Helene Deutsch's paper "On Female Homosexuality" (1932)

and the other is Melanie Klein's analysis of "Little Dick" (1930). In both cases, the analyst's interpretation [*Deutung*]*—*which imposes on the patient the classic, Oedipal, interpretive frame*—*produces a result, makes something happen: it releases the patient from the affective block and initiates the resolution of the psychic conflict.

Klein's "Little Dick" is a 4-year-old boy who can hardly speak and does not play; he has no interest in toys, seems indifferent to the presence or absence of his mother, and shows no affects or emotions of any kind. This is how Klein describes their first session:

I took a big train and put it beside a smaller one and called them "Daddy train" and "Dick-train." Thereupon he picked up the train I called "Dick" and made it roll to the window and said "Station." I explained: "The station is mummy; Dick is going into mummy."

Klein's verbalization of the Oedipus to her four-year-old patient ("Dick—little train, Daddy—big train, Dick is going into mummy") apparently allows or provokes the child to speak for the first time, to form an object-relation [*Objektbeziehung*], and to display anxiety*—*which is an improvement over his prior impassiveness. The analyst's prompting, as Shoshana Felman observes in her reading of Klein's case history, "does not function *constatively* (as a truth report, with respect to the reality of the situation) but *performatively* (as a speech act)" (114); that is to say, it provides, brings about or implants into "Little Dick" the psychosexual (Oedipal) structure by which the child will henceforth relate to other human beings.

In Deutsch's case, the patient is a married woman, mother of several children, who suffers from depression, anxiety and suicidal tendencies.

Although she was aware of her homosexual feelings, before the analysis she did not engage in sexual practices even when she fell in love with other homosexual women. She was afraid that in a lesbian relationship she would become subjugated to her partner. Deutsch interprets this as a fear of her aggressive and masochistic attachment to her mother, whose sadistic punishment of the girl's infantile masturbation was remembered by the patient during analysis. This memory and the fact that the analyst gave her consent or authorized her to seek sexual gratification made it possible for the patient as an adult woman to get rid of the guilt and fear that inhibited her sexually; she then transferred her sexual feelings from the analyst to other women and was able to be actively and happily homosexual. (This is indeed a rare example of successful psychoanalysis). Of course, Deutsch would have preferred the patient to become heterosexual; so she referred her to a male analyst, to continue the analysis with a "fatherly figure," but this did not work for the patient. Eventually, Deutsch concluded that her analysis had been successful. And so, most probably, did the patient.

It is this performative quality of "interpretation" that makes analytic practice an **effective** discourse, a representation of the sexual that has effects, that effects a structuring of sexuality in the subject; or, as I speculate of Deutsch's patient, that may contribute to a restructuring, a reconfiguration of the drives. Both analysts, Deutsch and Klein, deploy one and the same interpretive frame, the Oedipus complex, which is the enabling fantasy or the theoretical fiction of psychoanalysis; but the contingent sociosexual locations and personal histories of the respective patients cause the latter to rework or recast that fantasy and produce individual modifications, even, in the case of Deutsch's patient, in a direction the analyst has not intended. Similarly, I argue, public fantasies as represented in films, for example, or literature, or

other cultural narratives, may shape or inflect the subjectivity of the spectator, the reader, the subject in culture.

On the part of the analyst, a psycho-analysis is not dissimilar from a textual analysis, a kind of reading, in which the analyst's intersubjective involvement or participation is called by the name of counter-transference [*Gegenübertragung*]. This at least in theory; that is to say, this is what Freud suggests in his papers on technique, in particular the one titled "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" [*Die endliche und die unendliche Analyse*] (1937). In practice, few psychoanalysts are aware of their own fantasies and how these may affect the direction of the analysis.

## 2. Reflections on the relation of theory and practices:

a) A theory is a construction in analysis; it comes about from a practice of reading and a practice of writing.

b) Psycho-analysis is a practice of reading; and the writing of psychoanalysis, its theory and its case histories, produce the enabling fiction of the psyche as text.

Now, there is no doubt that Freud's theory of the psyche has influenced our Eurowestern ways of reading and seeing, as well as our practices of textual criticism and theory (especially in the US, where Freud is mostly read and taught in literature departments). Let me suggest that, vice versa, the practice and the theory of psychoanalysis as Freud imagined them are themselves shaped by literary forms and by the processes of textual analysis, both literary and visual.

It is hardly necessary to remark on the constant references to literary works in Freud's; this is self evident. His analogies for the mental apparatus

have also been noted: at first, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* [*Die Traumdeutung* (1900)], he imagined the mind as a multi-layered visual instrument like the photographic camera or the system of lenses in a telescope (SE 5: 536-537), and later as a sort of palimpsest or psychographic apparatus, a *Wunderblock* ("A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" (1924)).<sup>1</sup> What has also been established, since the structuralist work of Roman Jakobson in linguistics and poetics, is the formal similarity between the expressive mechanisms of the dreamwork and the primary figures of poetic language—the intimate nexus of condensation, displacement, conditions of representability, and secondary revision [*Verdichtung, Verschiebung, Darstellbarkeit, sekundäre Bearbeitung*] with metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, etc.—the tropes or figures that constitute the rhetorical work of any practice of verbal and visual language, from common speech to advertising, scientific discourse, film, and so on.

But what has not been sufficiently emphasized is the effect of literary forms, with their narrative and figural dispositions, on Freud's imagination of a new entity, the psyche, that is at once a theoretical object and a form of reality—what he called *psychic reality*. I suggest that the influence of literary form, as much as the scientific language of his training and certainly more than philosophical discourse, to which he was not partial, is responsible for Freud's conception of psychoanalysis as a practice of reading, of the psyche as text (in the sense given this term by Roland Barthes), and—let me add—of subjectivity as a kind of writing of self, or better, a writing where self-identity and meaning are constantly deferred. Two examples will suffice. First: describing his plans for *Die Traumdeutung* in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud wrote:

The whole thing is planned on the model of an imaginary walk. First comes the dark wood of the authorities (who cannot see the trees), where there is no clear view and it is easy to go astray. Then there is a cavernous defile through which I lead my readers—my specimen dream with its peculiarities, its details, its indiscretions and its bad jokes—and then, all at once, the high ground and the open prospect and the question: "Which way do you want to go?" (Letter to Fliess dated August 6, 1899, quoted in [editor's] footnote, "The Interpretation of Dreams" [SE 4: 122])

The model after which Freud imagines the form and content of his book is, of course, not just "an imaginary walk," or any imaginary walk: first comes the dark wood; then the descent into the hell of self-analysis and the unconscious erupting in the dream of Irma's injection, with its embarrassing personal details, its indiscretions and bad jokes; and finally (as it were, through the anus of Lucifer) the attainment of an "open prospect" in view of the starry sky. These points or stages of a journey map Freud's not innocent walk onto the geometry of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. In August 1899, before his theory of the psychic apparatus has assumed its final, printed and public existence, it is the journey of self discovery and the teleological, forward-moving, narrative form of Dante's poem that Freud takes as model.

When, in the 1930s, Djuna Barnes writes her own dark passage through *Nightwood*—that celebrated text of literary modernism and now, also, of literary lesbianism—the form and content of her book, the imaging and the imagination of the journey, have been irrevocably altered. It is not only that so-called historical events have changed the objective world, as dangerously for Freud as for Barnes, making "the high ground" invisible and

barely conceivable, and instigating instead both Freud's and Barnes's respective ruminations on the death drive. It is also that a discursive event—that epic poem of modernity that is *The Interpretation of Dreams*—has reinscribed the topos of the journey within an altogether different dark wood, replacing the teleological/theological narrative with one in which the dark wood will never be left behind for the high ground: the journey is henceforth interminable, reversible, discontinuous, and intertextual.

The second example, also from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is obviously Oedipus. Again, what Freud takes from Sophocles is not just the content of the drama, the originary trauma of sexuality—a trauma that both marks and precedes the birth of the hero, the birth of each subject. What Freud takes from Sophocles is also the particular movement of the drama, both analeptic and proleptic, from present to past to present, as it is inscribed in the form of the classic tragedy. It is that mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution of traumatic meaning to earlier events, which Freud will call *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action or afterwardness), that characterizes the structure of fantasy and with it Freud's new, modernist understanding of sexuality.<sup>2</sup> No longer the direct result of a single, biological causality or reproductive instinct, sexuality in Freud is a function of fantasy, memory and representation. These overdetermine the vicissitudes of the drives [*Triebchicksale*] and make of sexuality a process, a structuring of the subject, an activity of production.

The drive, Freud's most original concept, is a liminal figure, like the Sphinx: "The concept of instinct [*Trieb*]," he writes, lies "on the frontier between the mental and the physical" (*SE* 7: 168). Like the Sphinx, sitting on the divide between animal and human, partaking of both, the drives inhabit a borderland between the somatic and the capacity for representation. That

borderland is the psyche, a site where the materiality of the body is represented—written and rewritten—in figures and tropes, the fantasms of language; an immaterial site, and yet one that presides over the repeated materializations of the symptom, the bodying forth of mnemonic traces in hallucinations, the ("regressive") perceptions of visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory sensations in dreams.

The psyche, then, just as Barthes says of the text, "is experienced only in an activity of production"; it, too, Freud shows, "only exists in the movement of a discourse" ("From Work to Text," p. 157). And that discourse is psychoanalysis. A psycho-analysis is a reading of that text, the psyche, with its polysemy or "stereographic plurality" of meaning, in Barthes's words, its overdeterminations, in Freud's. However, this polysemy of the text makes the experience of reading "not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing" (Barthes, p. 159). Reading is a passage through a dark wood—to return once more to that useful trope—a wood that is populated with the ghosts and the voices of other texts. Both psychoanalysis and textual analysis are intertextual, intersubjective, a passage, an overcrossing. And both are interminable, for every text, like every dream one analyzes, has its navel, the point at which it makes "contact with the unknown" ("The Interpretation of Dreams," *SE* 4: 111).<sup>3</sup>

It is because the psyche is a text that Freud can say, "The asymptotic termination of the treatment is substantially a matter of indifference to me" (Freud, letter to Fliess, April 16, 1900, quoted in *SE* 23: 215). One would think that such a statement appears in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937), reflecting the late Freud's pessimistic view of the therapeutic effectivity of psychoanalysis, his loss of confidence in the complete success or even the possibility of a cure. But the statement actually appears in a letter to

Fliess written in 1900, the year of publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when Freud was just embarking enthusiastically in his project and had not yet surmised the existence of a death drive [*Todestriebe*] or its role in undermining the ego and sustaining the resistance to its therapeutic alteration, the resistance to the cure.

But why Freud's scepticism? He believed that "the interminable nature of the treatment . . . is dependent on the transference" and, in a successful transference, it depends on the patient's desire both to be well and to continue to be ill. Whence the indefinite deferral of the cure or what he called "the asymptotic termination of the treatment" (quoted in Editor's Note to "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," *SE* 23: 215). But if the treatment is always meant to terminate, yet it does not, except by the analyst's or patient's contingent decision; or if the cure is about to be attained, and yet it never is, is this not because the transference (and we could add, the countertransference) also exists within the psyche and its activity of production—a retroactive, deferred, continuous, interminable production of self and meaning? Is it not because transference and countertransference only exist "in the movement of a discourse"?

I will not claim disingenuously that the formal analogy I draw between the psyche and the text as Barthes defines it is purely coincidental, for the text of Barthes resonates intertextually with Freud's as Freud's does with Sophocles's or Dante's. This intertextuality is what makes textual analysis interminable, even as it enables it; and the indefinite deferral of the text's meaning for the reader, the asymptotic termination of textual analysis, is also "a matter of indifference." The point of reading, after Freud, is not to attain a cure, a final closure of meaning, a theological epiphany, or a definitive interpretation, but to engage in an intersubjective, intertextual, ongoing series

of what can best be named, in his words, "constructions in analysis" (*SE* 23: 255-269 ).<sup>4</sup>

### 3. A theory is a passionate fiction

Theory, Freud intimated, is a "construction in analysis." I suggest that what it constructs is a passionate fiction, a countertransference fantasy, a wish-fulfilment: remember Freud's construction of latent homosexuality in the "Wolf Man"'s primal scene?<sup>5</sup> Or his construction of Dora as wanting a kiss from him? And the unnamed patient of "Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" who, Freud thinks, really wants her father? That was Freud's passionate fiction and is the enabling fiction of psychoanalysis: the scenario of a cross-gender, positive Oedipus complex in which, just as the boy child desires his young mother, so does the adult man, becoming father, desire his young daughter's desire for himself.

Another example: faced with a homosexual patient, Helene Deutsch is proud that her analytic mothering cures the young woman and enables her to live out her homosexuality as, in her words, a "vivid, radiant person." Although Deutsch might have preferred a heterosexual resolution of the case, she can nevertheless gain satisfaction from the clinical confirmation that the mother is the figure of women's primary attachment, and hence the evidence of the crucial role of **women analysts**, the vindication of their rightful place in the psychoanalytic institution—not a small satisfaction in 1932, and indeed a wish fulfilled.

Today, the fantasy of a maternal power potentially accruing to all women is outspoken in feminist psychoanalytic theory. And again, this is a passionate and enabling fiction: the theory that a "homosexual factor" or a "homosexual-maternal" component is constitutive of all female sexuality,

owing to the girl child's pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother, constructs a feminine subject of desire that was unthinkable in classical psychoanalysis and is impossible in normative heterosexuality. The problem with this feminist theory, however, is that it both appropriates and denies the sexual difference of lesbians, the specificity of lesbian desire and its effects on one's body, one's subjectivity, even one's political subjecthood. Let me elaborate briefly.

With few exceptions, feminist psychology and psychoanalytic theory have reclaimed the mother as the primary, if not the only, formative influence in female psychosexual development, and have postulated that a "homosexual factor" or a latent homosexuality is part and parcel of female sexuality from birth on. The girl's first love for the mother is subsequently renounced under the social and/or instinctual pressures of heterosexuality, this feminist theory maintains; but it remains active, whether conscious or not, throughout the course of a woman's life, causing a strong tendency toward bisexuality and a labile, fluid, or oscillating pattern of identifications and object-choices that make a feminine sexual identity inherently unstable, fundamentally compromised, even unachievable.

In postulating a latent or potential homosexuality of all women, however, this feminist theory has been careful not to qualify it as lesbian: indeed, the phrase "homosexual-maternal" equivocates on the "same-sex relation" of mother and daughter, because, on the one hand, it intimates **homosexuality**, with emphasis on the sexual, even genital, connotations of the word; but, on the other hand, it may be taken on a purely descriptive or constative level, since **homosexual** also means "of the same sex," and hence the term refers to the "fact" that a daughter has the same sex or the same body as her mother. (This, incidentally, is not at all a "fact," because the body of

desire is a fantasmatic body and not an anatomical one). Then there are those cases in which this "same-sex relation" between women is qualified as lesbian, as in the phrase "the lesbian continuum" (made famous by the work of Adrienne Rich); but here the lesbian qualifier is most often de-sexualized, if not de-eroticized, and metaphorized to mean a continuity of woman-identified women—who **may** sleep with each other **or not**, but that, in this feminist theory, **makes no difference**. This is the problem; for I think the difference is there.

In other words, conceptually, the homosexual-maternal metaphor is a trope, a fiction, that projects onto female **sexuality** certain features of an idealized female **sociality**—sisterly or woman-identified mutual support, anti-hierarchical and egalitarian relationships, an ethic of compassion and connection, an ease with intra-gender affectionate behavior and emotional sharing, a propensity for mutual identification, and so forth. This is one of the reasons, I believe, why some lesbians in the United States have abandoned or outright refused the feminist "homosexual-maternal" imaginary, even as others have literalized the maternal metaphor with the help of sperm banks and international adoption. In its place, contemporary transgender studies and what is called "queer theory" have offered an alternative fantasy, a non-maternal but equally redemptive and voluntaristic fiction in which sexualities and genders are indefinitely recombinable and refashioned through technology or performance.

But the seductiveness of the homosexual-maternal metaphor—the seduction it both implies and performs—derives from the erotic charge of a desire for women which is specifically lesbian; which, unlike masculine heterosexual desire, affirms and enhances the female-sexed subject and represents her possibility of access to a sexuality autonomous from the male.

The problem is that, by charting the road of access through the maternal, and thus displacing the difficult question of women's heterosexual desire, the homosexual metaphor erases the particular relation between women that is lesbianism, a relation that is both sexual and sociosymbolic, and that entails not only a different configuration of desire but also a different production of reference and meaning, though not always and not necessarily in the terms of feminism.

#### 4. My own theory as passionate fiction

It was in trying to understand something of that particular relation between women, lesbianism, that I set out on a journey of reading, of writing, and of intertextual analysis, guided by fantasy and looking for the figures of my desire. What I construct in *The Practice of Love* is not a universal, aetiological, or developmental theory of lesbian sexuality, but a passionate fiction which, if you recall Dante's metaphor of the dark wood re-used by Freud and Djuna Barnes, in a way represents another kind of passage through the dark wood—in this case, my own. If I call my work a theory and not a poem, it is because, like Freud's but unlike Barnes's, my fiction does aspire to formal validity as a model of desire. By model I mean a schematic representation (such as a graph or verbal description) of the articulation of the component parts or movements of a mechanism, a psychic mechanism in this case. Think of Freud's two models of the psychic apparatus, or of the Oedipus complex as the model of the psychic processes that regulate adult sexuality, namely, identification and object-choice. I propose instead that disavowal [*Verleugnung*], i.e. the splitting of the ego [*Ich-Spaltung*] and not the Oedipus, is the mechanism that accounts for a perverse or fetishistic lesbian desire—perverse not in the sense of pathological or immoral, but

perverse precisely in the sense that it is not Oedipal, or rather, that it has moved beyond the terms of the Oedipus, mother and father; put another way, the perverse or fetishistic model articulates desire without recourse to the permutations of the two sets of binary terms of the Oedipus complex, mother/father and desire/ identification.

Let me elaborate on what I mean by perverse desire. Freud's writing on sexuality from the *Three Essays* [*Drie Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*] of 1905 to the posthumous works on fetishism is marked by a consistent ambiguity, which makes it possible to read two theories of sexuality in his work: one is explicit and affirmative, a positive theory of "normal" sexuality that goes from the infantile stage of polymorphous perversity to a successfully Oedipalized, normal, heterosexual adulthood. The other theory, I contend, is implicit and negative, appearing as the nether side or clinical underground of the first: here, as I read it, sexuality consists of two modalities, perversion and neurosis, depending on the presence and degree of repression. In this theory, what is called "normal" sexuality is not an innate disposition or configuration of the sexual instinct, but rather the result of particular negotiations that a subject manages to achieve between the internal pressures of the drives, the various component instincts or partial drives, and the external, parental and societal pressures.

My argument follows from Freud's radical insight that the relation between the drive [*Trieb*] and its object is not natural, preordained by "biology," fixed, or even stable. The sexual drive, he wrote, is "in the first instance independent of its object" ("Three Essays," *SE* 7: 147-48). And again:

The object of an instinct is . . . what is most variable about an instinct and is not originally connected with it, but becomes

assigned to it only in consequence of being peculiarly fitted to make satisfaction possible. ("Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," *SE* 14: 122)<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, perversion is not a distortion of "nature," a deviation from a biologically determined law that assigns one and only one type of object to the sexual drive, but is rather an inherent way of being of the drive itself, which continuously seeks out the objects best fitted to its aim of pleasure and satisfaction. Thus, if the drive is independent of its object, and the object is variable and chosen for its ability to satisfy, then the concept of perversion loses its meaning of deviation from nature (and hence loses the common connotation of pathology) and takes on the meaning of deviation from a socially constituted norm. This norm is precisely "normal" sexuality, which psychoanalysis itself, ironically, proves to be nothing more than a projection, a presumed default, an imaginary mode of being of sexuality that is in fact contradicted by psychoanalysis's own clinical evidence.

Perversion, on the other hand, is the very mode of being of **sexuality** as such, while the projected norm, in so-called normal sexuality, is a requirement of social **reproduction**, both reproduction of the species and reproduction of the social system. Now, the conflation, the imbrication, of sexuality with reproduction in Western history has been shown by Foucault to come about through what he called "the technology of sex" and has been analyzed by feminist theory in the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. And it is, obviously, still a widely held or hegemonic notion. But my point is that the specific character of **sexuality** (as distinct from **reproduction**), and the empirically manifested form of sexuality, as far as psychoanalysis knows it, is perversion, with its negative or repressed form, neurosis.

In this especially my work diverges from other feminist and lesbian studies: they are opposed to theorizing lesbian sexuality in psychoanalytic terms, and especially contest the notions of castration and the Oedipus complex. My theory, on the contrary, relies on the Freudian concepts of fantasy, the unconscious, and deferred action [*Nachträglichkeit*], and on the psychic mechanism of disavowal [*Verleugnung*] as it operates in fetishism; thus it retains as central the psychic structure of castration, which prompts the defense of disavowal and the splitting of the ego. This is what my transferential and countertransferential reading encounters in the lesbian texts I analyze as a fantasy of bodily dispossession (symbolically equivalent to what psychoanalysis calls castration). My work also differs in proposing a model of desire that does not forego or bypass the Oedipus complex but passes through it, although it goes beyond it and its way resolves it.

I am aware that my use of the terms *fetish* and *castration* can be misread by an impatient reader, to whom I may seem to ignore the feminist argument that the account Freud gives of sexuality is from the perspective of a male body-ego. But I do not ignore that argument, which I have myself made on many occasions; indeed I start from it. In my model, what psychoanalysis calls castration is redefined in relation to a female body, or in Freud's term, a body-ego<sup>7</sup>. Since castration or the threat of bodily dispossession is experienced fantasmatically, intrapsychically, in relation to a body-ego that is female-sexed, then castration cannot be felt by the subject as the possible loss of a penis, which was never a part of that body. If fantasies are the "operative link" between the drives and the body-ego, they are, as Susan Isaacs put it, "primarily about bodily aims, pains and pleasures"; the fantasy of castration is a threat to one's body-ego, the possible loss of one's body-ego, and the threat to be disavowed is the threat of non-being. On the

level of unconscious fantasy, castration is a narcissistic wound to the subject's body-image that doubles the loss of the mother's body and threatens the subject with a loss of being, with non-existence. On the symbolic level, however, the cultural (paternal) prohibition of access to the female body (not only to the mother's body: incest, but also to one's own body: masturbation, and to other women's bodies: perversion)—this cultural prohibition rewrites or explains that sense of loss as a "natural" inferiority of women, a biological sexual difference—the lack of a penis, and thus an irremediable deficiency.

The sense of lack or dispossession that is acknowledged by many women, that prompts their identification with the father and is therefore construed as penis envy or masculinity complex, is the symbolic translation (into the expressive forms available in our cultures—from common language to theory to psychoanalytic dialogue, and so on) of what has been at first perceived as a threat to one's being, one's body-ego; but that perception remains unconscious, unutterable except through the means of representation characteristic of primary processes, through symptomatic expression, or through what I call the signification of the fetish—a sign or signifier that represents at once the absence of the object and the wish for it.

In sum—I'm about to conclude—there are two related theoretical objectives in this book. One is the reevaluation of the concept of perversion in Freud, as distinct from the pathological, and its resignification in what I call perverse desire, a type of desire fetishistic in a general sense and specifically homosexual or lesbian. The other is the effort to theorize what Foucault calls the "implantation of perversion" in the subject, to analyze the mechanisms social and psychic by which the subject is produced at once as a social and a sexual subject; and it is so produced through her solicitation by and active participation in various discourses, representations, and practices of sex. So

one is not born a woman (to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir), one is not born heterosexual or lesbian or whatever, but sexuality and desire are shaped and overdetermined by a host of sexual-representational practices, parental fantasies and cultural fictions—and these include what I have called the fictions of theory.

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<sup>1</sup> Freud's representation of the psyche as writing, as a play of *différance*, is compellingly argued by Derrida (1967).

<sup>2</sup> *Deferred action* [*Nachträglichkeit*] is first defined in "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1895): "a memory arousing an affect which it did not arouse as an experience, because in the meantime the change [brought about] in puberty had made possible a different understanding of what was remembered" (*SE* 1: 356); it is again brought up, unchanged, in the "Wolf Man" case history (*SE* 17: 45) to aid in the construction of the primal scene and subsequently articulates the very structure of castration.

<sup>3</sup> "The dream's navel [is] the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium" (*SE* 5: 525).

<sup>4</sup> What is usually thought of as Freud's "discovery" of the unconscious, Shoshana Felman remarks, is actually a theoretical construction: the unconscious is not discovered but constructed. What he discovered was "a

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new way of reading": reading the hysterical discourse of his patients and his own unconscious through that discourse. The (psycho)analytic reading is "of such a nature that it cannot be direct, intuitive; it is constitutively mediated by a hypothesis; it necessitates a theory. But the reading is not theory: it is practice, a practical procedure" (pp. 23-24).

<sup>5</sup> On the countertransferential and intersubjective character of Freud's theoretical construction of the primal scene in this case history, see Davis.

<sup>6</sup> The *Standard Edition* translates both *Trieb* and *Instinkt* with the same word, *instinct*. Whenever the word *instinct(s)* appears in this text, it should be understood as *Trieb(e)*.

<sup>7</sup> "A person's own body, and above all its surface, is a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring.... The way in which we gain new knowledge of our organs during painful illnesses is perhaps a model of the way by which in general we arrive at the idea of our body.... The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface." And in a footnote added to the English translation, which does not appear in the German editions, Freud writes: "The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides... representing the superficies of the mental apparatus" ("The Ego and the Id," *SE* 19: 25-26).

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