(Re)Claiming the Discourse of Desire: An Analysis of Women’s Erotic Texts

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ABSTRACT

Upon critiquing MacKinnon and Dworkin’s (Dworkin 1981; MacKinnon 1986, 1987; MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997) stance against “pornography,” discussing the theoretical and linguistic obstacles besetting women’s sexual expression, and reviewing research literature examining romance novels, I then explored erotic short-stories written by women—or women’s “erotica”—as surfaces for the (re)clamation of women’s desire. Drawing from my analyses of fourteen erotic tales from two separate collections, I concluded that the selected corpus of women’s erotica demonstrates the multiplicity of women’s sexual voices and combats the hegemony of a male-centered discourse of desire.

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MY DIATRIBE

Why is the image of a woman’s sexual appetite seen as oppressive rather than liberating? (Palac 1995:249).

I have been faced with a dilemma not uncommon to many self-proclaimed feminists. Well-known and highly vocal “feminists,” namely Catherine MacKinnon (1986, 1987, MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997) and Andrea Dworkin (1981, MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997), released their crusade in the early 1980s to eradicate “pornography” from society—claiming that this industry furthers the objectification and oppression of women. Citing the 1983 proposed anti-pornography ordinance of Minneapolis, Minnesota, MacKinnon and Dworkin (1997) define “pornography” as:

... The sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following:

(i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or
(ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or
(iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or
(iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or
(v) women are presented in postures of sexual submission; or
(vi) women’s body parts—including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, and buttocks—are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts; or
(vii) women are presented as whores by nature; or
(viii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or
(ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual (MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997:426).

I understand their argument, and I once vehemently adhered to it. However, with further reflection, I find myself torn. Yes, I understand that “pornography” could be
construed as objectifying and oppressing to women. Yet, I am concerned with the notion that all forms of “pornography” are inherently degrading and oppressive. Furthermore, I fear the possible “slippery slope” ramifications of legally defining what is and is not “pornography.” The legalese of the fore mentioned ordinance allows for a broad interpretation as to what will and will not be deemed “pornographic.” Thus, several questions arise: Who will have the power to define “pornography”? What procedures will be taken to reach a definitional decision? Will the criteria be analogous to Justice Stewart’s obscenity standard—simply, “I know it when I see it” (Jacobellis v. Ohio 378 U. S. 184 (1964))? Will “pornography” be differentiated from “erotica,” or will it all be banned? Would such a statute erode the First Amendment right to freedom of speech?¹

In addition to these concerns, I have other misgivings regarding this strong stance against “pornography” and its kin. As Milne (1987) states, “if we reject pornography and the violence which darkens the expression of male sexuality, there is danger of rejecting with it the chance for women to assert and explore their own sexual pleasure” (23). Thus, if every form of sexual expression is deemed “pornographic,” where does that leave women’s expression of desire? Are we to once again repress our sexual imaginations and hide them away in our hope chests, only to be released within the confines of matrimony? And, if we are given the privilege to express our sexuality, must it necessarily conform to

either the patriarchal constructions of female sexuality or to what the MacKinnon-
Dworkin agenda has deemed “woman-friendly” and “politically correct”?

Thus, I reject the MacKinnon-Dworkin program. In congruence with Camille
Paglia (1994), I believe that “an enlightened feminism of the twenty-first century will
embrace all sexuality and will turn away from the delusionalism, sanctimony, prudery,
and male-bashing of the MacKinnon-Dworkin brigade” (111). More specifically, I
adhere to the ideological notion that women’s sexual liberation is an integral step in
achieving social emancipation. I concur with fellow “pro-sex” feminist Ellen Willis
(1992)—that “the systematic social inhibition of female sexuality is a way of inhibiting
our self-assertion in other arenas…” (8). Thus, whether originating from the patriarcah
structure or from the MacKinnon-Dworkin critique of that structure, the imposition of
any social constraint upon women’s expression of their sexuality hinders their sexual
emancipation. Consequently, by potentially writing-off all pornographic/erotic
expression as oppressive and degrading, the MacKinnon-Dworkin so-called “feminist”
agenda is not fueling women’s liberation: it is once again silencing women’s sexual
voices.

(RE)CLAIMING THE DISCOURSE

Therefore, I believe women must (re)claim the discourse of their desire. As Carol
Queen (1997) of the “sex-positive” movement advocates, women must be allowed to
explore their erotic selves, to question current constructions of their sexuality, to combat
the “sexual silence” produced by lack of sexual awareness and of sexual voices—to (re)claim their desire.

I have chosen to denote “(re)claim” with the prefix “re” in parentheses for symbolic reasons. By stating that women are “reclaiming” the discourse of desire, it would imply that they once possessed the power to define their desire. Yet, in Western culture—strongly influenced by Judeo-Christian and Victorian values regarding women’s sexuality—historically there has been an exclusion of women’s subjectivity within the dominant discourse of desire (Francoeur and Francoeur 1976; Cott 1978; Connelly 1980; Hobson 1987; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Muscio 1998). Consequently, I cannot truly argue that women in Western culture are “re”-claiming their desire; it would be more accurate to assert that they are “claiming” it for the first time. However, a female desire has existed in the past and continues to exist—it has just been silenced by the dominant discourse of male-as-subject desire (Reynolds 1990; Muscio 1998; Steinem 1998). Therefore, I use “(re)claim” to symbolize the simultaneous claiming/reclaiming of the power to define our—women’s—sexual desire.

For women to (re)claim the discourse of their desire, we must have a language that will represent this desire. However, this poses a problem. The discourse of desire has been dominated by masculine definitions (Reynolds 1990; Muscio 1998; Steinem 1998). Consequently, there emerges a dilemma of whether or not woman can adequately define their own sexuality without adopting a male-centered language and subsequently male-defined tropes of female sexuality. Irigaray ([1977] 1990) and Cixous ([1975] 1990; 1984) argue that all language is “pervasively masculinist” (Butler 1990:9)—or
“phallocentric” (Irigaray [1977] 1990). Thus, expressing women’s sexuality within the “language of the father” (Cixous 1984) is fundamentally impossible. As Irigaray ([1977] 1990) elucidates,

...The rejection; the exclusion of a female imaginary undoubtedly places women in a position where she can experience herself only fragmentarily as waste or as excess in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology, this mirror entrusted by the (masculine) subject with the task of reflecting and redoubling himself (316).

Thus, according to Irigaray ([1977] 1990), language—the Symbolic—ultimately serves to reproduce the masculine subject: it is the “language of the father” (Cixous 1984)—the signifying economy of the phallus. Accordingly, “woman” is not truly constituted within this language; she is defined as a lack of subjectivity. Consequently, women’s desire cannot be articulated within the realm of the Symbolic (language).

Therefore, through the lens of Irigaray ([1977] 1990), an attempt to (re)claim the discourse of women’s desire within the Symbolic is ultimately futile. The “language of the father” (Cixous 1984) permeates the Symbolic. Thus, women’s appropriation of the Symbolic to represent female sexuality cannot and will not allow this reclamation. As Butler (1990) infers—but does not concur—from Irigaray’s speculations,

The possibility of another language or signifying economy is the only chance at escaping the “mark” of gender which, for the feminine, is nothing but the phallogocentric erasure of the female sex (26).

Thus, according to Irigaray ([1977] 1990), women’s desire cannot and will not become “subject” within the given discourse of the Symbolic. A “true” women’s desire can only be defined within a discourse that is completely divorced from the phallogocentric economy of the “language of the father” (Cixous 1984). Therefore, any
attempt to become the subjects of our (women’s) desire within the dominant discourse will be in vain.

However, in critiquing Irigaray’s ([1977] 1990) notions of a discourse of women’s desire sans phallus, Butler (1990), drawing from Foucault (1980), notes that

...Sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions. The emergence of a sexuality constructed (not determined) in these terms within lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual contexts is, therefore, not a sign of a masculine identification in some reductive sense. It is not the failed project of criticizing phallogocentrism or heterosexual hegemony.... If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is “before,” “outside,” or “beyond” power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself (30).

Thus, according to Butler (1990), the debate over whether or not a non-male/heterosexual-centered desire can truly be represented within the “language of the father” (Cixous 1984) is ineffectual. The discourse of desire is embedded within the power structures and cannot be divorced from it. Similarly, Rorty (1991) states,

There is a lot of feminist writing can be read as saying: We are not saying that the voice in which women will some day speak will be better at representing reality than present-day masculist discourse. We are not attempting the impossible task of developing a non-hegemonic discourse...we are just trying to help women out of the traps men have constructed for them...(237).

Consequently, in order to challenge these power structures, the voices of resistance must necessarily work within these power-laden discourses in order to articulate “subversive possibilities” (Butler 1990:30) of desire. Furthermore, as Butler (1990) argues,

...To operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement. In the place of a “male-identified” sexuality in which “male” serves as the cause and irreducible meaning of that sexuality, we might develop a
notion of sexuality constructed in terms of phallic relations of power that replay and redistribute the possibilities of that phallicism… (30).

Correspondingly, considering the possible offerings of Deweyan pragmatism to feministic endeavors, Rorty (1991) poses:

If you find yourself a slave, do not accept your masters’ descriptions of the real; do not work within the boundaries of their moral universe; instead, try to invent a reality of your own by selecting aspects of the world which lend themselves to the support of your judgment of the worth-while life (241).

SEARCHING FOR A SEXUAL LANGUAGE

Therefore, by (re)claiming the discourse of desire, women may seize the means for a sexual reconstruction of female sexuality. However, there is yet another obstacle to overcome: finding the words to describe women’s desire. As Galloway (1990) states,

Women have few sex-words because they have not been encouraged to spontaneously evolve such words. How would that have been possible when, for the bulk of western recorded history, female sexual desire has been seen as unclean, ungodly and unwholesome: literally, unspeakable (27).

Once again, the “language of the father” (Cixous 1984) works against women’s construction of their own desire. The patriarchal structure throughout Western history has served to repress women’s expression of their sexuality—regulating it by relegating it into the arena of the “unspeakable” for women (Galloway 1990; Reynolds 1990; Muscio 1998; Ensler 1998; Steinem 1998). Through constructing women’s sexuality in this way, the power relations of the phallogocentric economy have solidified its notions of “proper” female sexuality. However, women are (re)claiming their right to representation of their desire. Yet, due to its previous marginalized existence and subsequent construction as “unclean,” (Galloway 1990) the words are hard to find. Or, possibly the words are there,
but actually using them is still a challenge. Bright (1995) also addresses this dilemma of “finding the words”:

When feminists and writers first started discussing the future of women’s erotica, there was a call for a new woman-centered language, a modern vocabulary to discuss women’s sexual feelings… I find that the language is there—at the tip of our tongues. What is harder than imagining the words is saying them out loud (39).

Women’s sexual voices in the Western world have long been silenced. Consequently, speaking the “sexual language” can be point of distress, shame, and frustration. Likewise, when this “sexual language” has been male-defined and the words are laden with male-meanings, using these words to connote women’s desire is especially problematic. As Patthey-Chavez and Youmans (1992) acknowledge, “appropriating discourse patterns for one’s own use means wrestling with the sediment of meanings imparted by former uses” (502).

Thus, women (re)claiming the discourse of desire must deal with the baggage that is attached to language from past use of the words. As evinced in analyses of romance literature (Patthey-Chavez and Youmans 1992; Patthey-Chavez, Clare, and Youmans 1996) and also in my forthcoming observations, often times the typical “sexual language” is rejected almost in its entirety, with sexualized body parts and interactions being displayed in metaphorical descriptions. Other times, overt terms that can be mistaken for nothing else but the readily available “sexual language” are used. However, be it subtly displayed through metaphorical phrasings or summed up in to-the-point terms, finding the “sexual language” to speak female desire may be seen as empowering to women. As Gloria Steinem (1998) mused in her foreword to Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues,*
Then after you say the word [“vagina”] the hundredth time or the thousandth time, it occurs to you that it’s your word, your body, your most essential place. You suddenly realize that all the shame and embarrassment you’ve previously felt saying the word has been a form of silencing your desire, eroding your ambition (xxii).

Thus, by finally saying and using the words, we as women are (re)claiming the power to define who we are, what our sexuality is to us; we are taking our sexuality back. Yes, it may be uncomfortable at first to say the words. But, as Eve Ensler (1998) elucidates, “saying these words feels naughty, dangerous, too direct, too specific, wrong, intense, in charge, alive [emphasis added]” (101). And, as will be illustrated in my forthcoming analyses, the selected authors have found a “sexual language”—producing “intense, in charge, and alive” (Ensler 1998:xxii) discourses of desire. The erotic scenes sometimes emerge as flowing, metaphorical—near poetry. At other times, they nearly explode on the page in bursts of sheer carnality. The multiplicity of women’s sexualities is evidenced by the variegated use of the “sexual language.” As Cixous ([1975] 1990) reflects, “women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible” (310). And, be they explicit or implicit, the words are by women and for women—the discourse is being (re)claimed.

VEILED DESIRE

Romance fiction is porn in precisely the same sense as Penthouse and Mayfair, except that it is written from the woman’s point of view…In reading [romantic fiction], women are reproducing their oppression (Assiter 1988:105).

The romance novel as a surface for (re)claiming the discourse of women’s desire has received a significant amount of attention within academia. Some regard the explicit sexual elements of the romance novel as relatively inconsequential to the success of this
genre—noting that “sex within the romance novel serves the plot without dominating it; the emotional focus of the romance is love, commitment, domesticity and nurturing” (Ellis & Symons 1990:544). Others see the implicit erotic elements of romance novels as more than merely “serving” the plot—deeming this particular genre of women’s erotic fiction as "a form of 'soft core' pornography that women find socially acceptable and nonthreatening" (Coles & Shamp 1984:187). Still others claim romance novels reproduce and reinforce the same male-defined and male-centered constructions of female sexuality (Assiter 1988; Radway 1984). As Assiter (1988) argues,

Though romances are written from the woman’s point of view, they depict women as wanting nothing so much as to have their man desire them, to have him adore them, and for them to satisfy his wants and needs. In all of these respects, the heroine is just like the women in the pages of Penthouse or Playboy (105).

Thus, romance novels are contested ground in regards to their potential for female sexual agency. Are these texts (re)claiming the discourse of women’s desire by challenging the patriarchal constructions of female sexuality, or are they once again reinforcing the hegemony of a male-defined female sexuality?

Patthey-Chavez and Youmans (1992) and Patthey-Chavez et al. (1996) struggle with this question in their analyses of romance novels as erotic texts. Patthey-Chavez and Youmans (1992) explored the social construction of “sexual realities” in heterosexual women and men’s erotic texts, choosing romance novels as representative of typically women’s texts and periodicals—Penthouse, and Playboy—and serial-type novels—Blue Moon-Victorian and Masquerade Books—as representative of typically male erotic texts.
Patthey-Chavez and Youmans (1992) found that the romance novel typically contained constructions of elaborate fantasy worlds with well-developed characters and plot and that the sexual encounters emerged as poeticized, metaphorical descriptions of sexual appendages. In contrast, they found the men’s erotic texts to be “frankly sex-centered”—deeming the periodicals as being largely devoted to pictorial features and the serial novels’ plots as “skeletal, mostly serving to move the story from one sexual situation into the next” and the characterization as “relatively superficial” (Patthey-Chavez and Youmans 1992:504-505). They also found that the romance novels tended to depict “prototypical” portrayals of female sexuality—intercourse, simultaneous orgasm, and little to no sexual experimentation—buried in pages and pages of other text. Contrarily, the men’s erotic texts “seem[ed] to be obsessed with the messiness of sex,” their sex acts had an “immediate, graphic quality” and the “sexual variety” of group sex, anal sex, multiple positions in a single encounter, and voyeurism permeated the texts (Patthey-Chavez and Youmans 1992:506-507). Lastly, while the proportion of print dedicated to sex scenes in women’s texts ranged from 3% to 9%, the men’s texts’ dedication to sexual encounters ranged from 27% to 100%.

Through further analysis, Patthey-Chavez et al. (1996) deemed the romance novel genre as “contested ground,” at times allowing a “counter-hegemonic [but clandestine]” desire with female-centered descriptions of sexual encounters and depictions of female sexual agency to emerge but simultaneously facilitating the “hegemonic channeling of that desire into the safety of accepted/acceptable patterns of female sexual agency and female sexual experience” (100). Accordingly, Patthey et al. (1996) conclude:
Thus, so far it is only possible to assume and celebrate sexual pleasure under the cover of *innocence*, in a *clandestine* space that shores up the heterosexual order even as one of its cornerstones—the obliterating of subjective power and agency for females—is contested and rewritten (102).

**WOMEN’S “EROTICA”**

Hence, although the romance novel as an erotic genre facilitates women’s (re)clamation of the discourse of desire, it is still heavily influenced by the male-centered dominant discourses regarding female sexuality (Patthey-Chavez and Youmans 1992, Patthey-Chavez et al. 1996). Thus, the following question arises: Are there other erotic genres that may better facilitate women’s (re)clamation of the discourse of desire?

Therefore, I turn to women’s written “erotica” as a subsequent attempt to (re)claim the discourse of female desire. While the term “erotica” has been used to signify several erotic genres, for the purposes of this paper, “erotica” connotes the burgeoning short-story genre primarily dedicated to erotic themes. While there are several volumes of erotica on the market, I chose to analyze erotic stories from two different collections: *Erotic Interludes* ([1986] 1995), edited by Lonnie Barbach, and *The Best American Erotica 1997* (1997), edited by Susie Bright.

Anticipating that the differing collections would provide a greater variety for comparative analysis, I chose to compare erotica from these separate compilations. Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collection contains erotic tales authored by several different women, whereas Bright’s (1997) collection contains works by both men and women. 2 I would deem Bright’s collection as somewhat “harder” in comparison to Barbach’s

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2 Due to my focus on women’s (re)clamation of the discourse of desire, I examined only the women’s writings from Bright’s (1997) collection.
selections. As to be evinced in my analyses, the women of Barbach’s collection have a
greater tendency to merge poetics and sex into a symbiotic erotic creation. In contrast,
the author’s in Bright’s collections tend to focus more explicitly upon “the sex”—going
for the more “hard-core.” These divergences between the compilations could possibly be
due to the 11-year difference in publication, or perhaps the varied tastes of the editors
could account for these departures. I will address these considerations throughout my
analyses. Regardless, this variegated assortment of erotica provides the evidence that the
female desire cannot be boxed into a catchall construction; when (re)claimed by women,
the discourse of desire emerges as a rich multiplicity of erotic descriptions.

Drawing from Patthey-Chavez and Youmans (1992) and Patthey-Chavez et al.’s
(1996) findings, the following questions sensitized my analyses:

1) What are the plots of the story? Do they mirror romantic genres? Differ?

2) What are the sexual encounters like in these stories? Prototypical heterosexual?
   Same-sexed? Sexual experimentation?

3) Where does “love” fit in? Is it necessary for the women in these stories to be “in love”
   before they will engage in erotic encounters?

4) What words are being used to describe the male/female genitalia? Do these
descriptions emerge in metaphor, or are they more explicit? Is there a
   commonality in themes within the metaphorical descriptions?

5) How is the woman’s orgasm being described, or is it? Common themes?

FEMMCHISMO FEEDING

I call the primary signal of the burgeoning women’s erotica movement
‘femmchismo’…the aggressive, seductive, and very hungry sexual ego of a woman…an
erotic arrogance; for women, it’s clear this is a long overdue form of conceit…it’s about
Thus, if as Bright (1995) claims, “women are hungry—no, ravenous—for sexual knowledge and erotic inspiration” (37), let the feast begin.…

Once upon a Time…

Patthey-Chavez, Clare, and Youmans (1996) note that the romance novel’s plot typically moves through a “lush fantasy world where sex is a passionate part of complicated and dramatic relationships” (81). Likewise, the plot is frequently the stereotypical “damsel in distress” scenario—a hero rescues her, then they fall in love and live happily ever after. Furthermore, the novel contains pages and pages of text for plot development—with the “sex scenes” occupying a relatively small portion of the whole story line (Patthey-Chavez et al. 1996).

The erotica I analyzed differs greatly from the prototypical romance novel. Due to the nature of the short-story genre, there is no room for extravagant plot development. As such, the explicit sexual encounter tends to monopolize the story—the opposite of the romance novel. However, the erotic short story is never completely devoid of plot. On the contrary, the plot and character variety is astounding. Bright’s (1997) collection offers a creative assortment of story lines:

“My Professor”—A co-ed seduces her female college roommate, pleasures herself while reading her “Lit” homework in the library, then ravages her male professor during a office visit to discuss her sexually-saturated interpretation of “Kubla Khan.”

“Virtue Is Its Own Reward”—A woman bartender deflowers a younger man and then moves on to his older brother—auto-erotic moments with condom-covered carrots filling the down-times.

“The Case of the Demon Lover”—A sexually frustrated female cop hunts for a serial rapist deemed the “demon lover” because his victims appear “possessed” with desire—herself becoming a willing victim at the story’s end.
“Behind the Mask”—A pair of women that “get off” on role-playing “maid and mistress,” with the “maid” later switching to a dominatrix role while tying up a man.

“What?”—A woman becomes involved with a transsexual woman-now-a-man.

“Real Blood”—A woman, whom “violence, especially deadly violence” excites, slits a man’s throat while she is “fucking” him.

“The Butch’s New Clothes”—A “femme” lesbian partner of a “butch” woman avenges an infidelity by stealing her butch’s dildo—returning it after she “humiliates” the butch by dressing her up in “femmy” lingerie, handcuffs her to the bed, shaves her legs, underarms, and pubic region, and “fucks” her with the stolen plastic phallus.

Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collection is no less variegated:

“The Private Life of Mrs. Herman”—On the morn of an anticipated extra-marital affair, a woman rejuvenates her marital sex life by engaging in an exhibitionist display for her husband of autoerotic stimulation on the kitchen table, thus “ruining his breakfast.”

“An American in Paris”—A timid woman explores her first erotic encounter with another woman.

“The House of the Twin Jewels”—An alien woman warrior frequents a brothel where male sex slaves are there to fulfill her every desire.

“Leaving Sasha; or, The Bed Makes the Man”—A woman hops from lover to lover—engaging in a role-playing “jungle” scenario of group sex with a “great white hunter” and a “humble servant” girl.

“The Scavenger Hunt”—A “femme” lesbian teases, torments, and shackles a “butch” she picks up at the bar.

“Blood Oranges”—A man and woman perform an erotic/spiritual ritual consisting of writing names of deities on each other’s bodies using her menstrual blood.

“Humming”—A married woman pursues an extra-marital affair with another woman in a public Buddhist meditation room.

Thus, evinced through this corpus of women’s erotica, it is evident that the discourse of women’s desire cannot be simply plotted and boxed as is often done in romance novels. On the contrary, the plots are varied, creative, and engaging.

Variety is the Spice of Life

Paludan (1994) advised that to avoid rejection by readers, a romance novelist should not have a protagonist that is promiscuous or unfaithful, and as Patthey-Chavez et al. (1996) note, “homoerotic experiences are apparently so taboo, they remain unmentionable” (81). Thus, once again, in the romance genre, women’s desire is strictly scripted with little room for variation of partnerships. However, this is apparently not the case in the selected corpus of women’s erotica. On the contrary, promiscuity among the women protagonists is not unlikely whatsoever. Of the seven stories selected from Bright’s (1997) collection, all but two—“What?” and “The Case of the Demon Lover”—contain women protagonists that have multiple sex partners. In Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collection, only three of the eight women protagonists have multiple sex partners—“The House of the Twin Jewels,” “Leaving Sasha…,” and “The Japanese Play.”

Likewise, in “The House of the Twin Jewels” and “Leaving Sasha…,” the women are having sex with multiple men and women as a means to erase the memory of someone they love. As the protagonists confessed:

“House of the Twin Jewels”—I found cocks bigger than yours to fill me, and when none fit as well, tried to erase the memory or your thrusting in the yielding wet flesh of women…wanting only the one, I drowned myself in many (96).
“Leaving Sasha…”—Because if this third time [leaving] was to really be the last time, I needed something very strong, some kind of super knockout drug for the heart, something to distract the desire, the sadness, the lost, lonely, ice-cream panic. And that something had to be sex (123).

Thus, in these two cases, the promiscuity appears as not fulfilling for the women. Likewise, at the stories’ end, both these women return to the man that they love.

The stories in Barbach’s ([1086] 1995) collection tended to involve more women in committed relationships. In contrast, the women in Bright’s (1997) collection tended to be more promiscuous. This difference may be in part due to the differing editors and the readers to whom are being marketed, or perhaps a result of the time-span between publication. Bright’s collection, in my interpretation, is more “pornographic” (for lack of a better word) in comparison to Barbach’s collection. Likewise, Barbach voices a concern with meshing emotion and intimacy with sex, noting that the “emotional relationships” with their partners played a significant role in women’s creation of the erotic (Barbach [1986] 1990:2). Thus, Barbach may possibly favor erotic stories that involve intimacy and emotional commitments in comparison to Bright. However, it is important not to interpret commitments as a hegemonic control of women’s desire—sexual freedom does not necessarily mean “free love.” Thus, the variety in incidence of promiscuity is yet another affirmation of the multiplicity that emerges once women (re)claim the discourse of desire.

In contrast to romance novels, homoerotic experiences abound in both Bright (1997) and Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collections. In this corpus of women’s erotica, female-with-female homoerotic experiences are most common. However, the nature of
the interactions differed between the collections. In Bright’s collection, three stories involved female-with-female homoerotic experiences—“My Professor,” “Behind the Mask,” and “The Butch’s New Clothes.” “Behind the Mask” and “The Butch’s New Clothes” both involved some dominant-submissive role-playing between the women involved in the stories. For example, in “Behind the Mask,” the two women have a ritual where the “maid” licks the “mistress’” boots in the train station:

…All the time wondering how soon someone might come along and find us at our shameful game, so I work even faster, grabbing my mistress’s leg just above the heel so that I can lick the bottom of her boots clean, as both she and I love…and as I think of how useful and obedient I am, how I would do anything for my mistress, even take her dirty boot proudly into my mouth, I feel my cunt contracting, its slimy juices squirting out of me as I come and come and come….(135).

Similarly, but more blatantly, a dominance-submission scenario is played out in “The Butch’s New Clothes”:

She reached once more into the drawer and removed two spring-operated clamps. With two quick snaps, she affixed them to Alex’s nipples, causing her to scream out in a mix of pleasure and pain…she smacked Alex’s face with her dick until Alex looked up at her. “Suck it!” she ordered. When Alex didn’t respond, Sara forced the head of the cock between her lips…she gagged as she attempted to take it in (223).

In contrast to these sado-masochistic depictions of homoerotic experiences, the female-with-female experiences in Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collection tended to be sensually displayed. For example, the following excerpts create a very different picture of female-with-female sexual experiences:

“An American in Paris”—I know how to smell, to taste, to touch, to breathe her in, to make her cross the boundaries of self, to enter me through every pore and sense and mouth and opening long before her fingers enter…”yes, this,” she says, “tenderness, this is the way, like this, like this.”…I am wet with love, she takes me in the same act by which she gives herself to me, rocked out together on strange seas of forgiveness and redemption, forehead to forehead, mouth to mouth in this act of mutual surrender, later we call it intimacy. Tonight, falling into the self of the other, we say: let it be love (77).
“Leaving Sasha,…”—And she caressed my body with hers, her warm skin melting me like butter on steaming rolls. I felt a terrific surge of sensual strangeness, my limbs locked around this tiny, lovely replica of my own female form…our lips touched, two soft, cool feminine mouths, two gentle, inquisitive tongues…she sucked me with her tiny mouth, her ladyfingers touching me as I came to her, laughing like bubbles rising in champagne, rising above all that ever tied me down (131).

Thus, the female-with-female homoerotic experience when (re)claimed emerges in diverse forms—ranging from sado-masochistic power plays to sensual and intimate exchanges.

In this corpus of women’s erotic texts, a male-with-male homoerotic experience only occurred once—in “The House of the Twin Jewels.” In the scene, the female protagonist returns to the brothel to buy her favorite sex slave for the evening:

I watched your mouth swallowing one wet pink cock, your ass the other. I could see your face behind the thrusting buttocks of the one who filled your throat. Perceiving me, you froze for a second, until the one fucking you slapped your ass sharp and loud, urging you on. Your cock, dangling half hard between your legs, stiffened then and began to rise…I wanted to know if it was my eyes or his hand which brought you erect. Magnetized, I stayed to witness the climax of your performance…watched the white sperm shoot from your cock, spurting through the spread legs of your captor into the waiting mouth of an eager participant who joined in from the audience. I turned and left then, full of nausea and desire (96).

I find it interesting that the woman protagonist is simultaneously nauseated and aroused while watching her lover engaged in a homosexual group-sex show. Also, the voyeuristic fantasy that is typically reserved for the male-viewer is reversed here, allowing the female to (re)claim the fantasy as subject/viewer and thus providing a point of resistance to the construction of what is “proper” female desire. Furthermore, a woman being aroused by watching men having sex with each other is not a commonly
seen erotic scenario. Thus, once again, women’s (re)claimed discourse of desire is pushing the boundaries of the traditional construction of female sexuality.

Sexual experimentation and variation also abound in these erotic tales. Within this corpus, varied sexual scenarios are evinced: group sex (“The House of the Twin Jewels,” “Leaving Sasha…,” and “A Japanese Play”), voyeuristic encounters (“Behind the Mask,” “The Private Life of Mrs. Herman,” “The House of the Twin Jewels,” “Leaving Sasha…,” “The Scavenger Hunt,” and “A Japanese Play”), sex in public places (“Behind the Mask,” “My Professor,” “The Case of the Demon Lover,” “Real Blood,” and “Humming”), diverse sexual positions—not missionary (all stories), anal penetration (“Virtue Is Its Own Reward,” “The Case of the Demon Lover,” and “The House of the Twin Jewels”), and role-playing (“Behind the Mask,” “The Butch’s New Clothes,” “Leaving Sasha…,” and “The Scavenger Hunt”) were all commonly represented in the erotic texts. Thus, in contrast to the romance novel, the (re)clamations of the discourse of women’s desire in these erotic texts are plentiful and counterhegemonic to the “prototypical” constructions of female sexuality (Patthey-Chavez and Youmans 1992; Patthey-Chavez et al. 1996).

What’s Love Got to Do With It?

As noted by Ellis & Symons (1990), Patthey-Chavez & Youmans (1992), and Patthey-Chavez et al. (1996), “love” typically plays an integral part in the romance text. However, in this corpus of women’s erotica, “love” seemed to take a backseat to the depiction of erotic encounters. In the Bright (1997) collection, “love” between characters
was only mentioned once: in “What?”, the female protagonist says, “So, yes, he fell in love with me. He loved fucking me so much he would put up with almost anything” (152). Thus, the transsexual she is involved with “loves” her. The protagonist, however, never explicitly states she loves him. Yet, later her internal dialogue discloses, “I am yours...I belong to you utterly, do with me what you will” (156).

By contrast, in Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collection, “love” appears to play a more integral part in the erotic tales. In “The Private Life of Mrs. Herman,” the wife—upon reawakening her husband’s desire after a frustrating hiatus—emotes:

And he loved her. That was clear. He loved her...the passion exploded in her heart first and overwhelmed her with hot tears of love and joy...the waves of energy rippled through them again and again, fusing them together into one blazing light of love and sex (27-29).

Thus, in this particular erotic tale, the fusion of love and desire is extremely important to the text. Of the remaining erotic texts in Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collection, love or strong emotional commitments also play integral roles in the women’s discourse of desire. Therefore, it appears that love can be used to eroticize the discourse of women’s desire. However, it is not a necessary requirement. As Bright (1995) quips, The language that new women pornographers seek is not about love, at least not the Valentine card love that women have long believed was the greatest literary expectation of our passion. Women are approaching a new lover’s language today, a roar that comes straight out of our undulating bellies (41).

What Shall I Call Thee?

Patthey-Chavez and Youmans (1992) note that while romance fiction tended to represent the sex organs metaphorically, the male erotic texts used more “literal, ‘locker-room’” vernacular (509). In my selected corpus of erotic texts, the chosen argot for male
and female genitalia spans both metaphorical and explicit representations. I was somewhat surprised to see the word *cunt* used so prolifically, both in Bright (1997) and Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collections—due to its typical association with a very male-oriented and derogatory connotation (Muscio 1998). However, it seems to be the word of choice to refer to the female genitalia. Perhaps, as Muscio (1998) declares,  

> While one word maketh not a woman-centered language, “cunt” is certainly a mighty potent and versatile contribution. Not to mention how deliciously satisfying it is to totally snag a reviled word and elevate it to a status which all women should rightfully experience in this society. When viewed as a positive force in the language of women—as well as a reference to the power of the anatomical jewel which unites us all—the negative power of “cunt” falls in upon itself, and we are suddenly equipped with a word that describes all women…(6).

Explicit terms such as *pussy, slit, mound, bush, clit, snatch*, and *fur* were also often used to describe female genitalia. However, metaphorical references for women’s genitalia also prevailed within these texts. Various themes reoccurred throughout these tales, such as flower metaphors (*swollen bud, passion flower, like rose petals*), mouth metaphors (*my other mouth, sex lips*), cave metaphors (*cave of myself, caverns of my womb*), and sea/water metaphors (*hot wetness of desire, wet salt heat of our beginnings, dampened secrets, wet treasures, salty wetness, rich odor of deep-sea secrets*). Thus, a poeticized discourse of women’s desire may still prevail in these erotic texts. However, the taboo of traditionally male-centered sex-words has also apparently been lifted.

In contrast, male genitalia were rarely described in metaphorical terms. In fact, only one story—“Blood Oranges”—developed an elaborate serpent representation of the male sex organ:
His sex began to rise, coiling toward my body...like a cobra from its dark basket...the tip of the great snake...rose and danced toward me...I wanted the snake in my mouth...[I] wrote the last secret name of the manwoman God...on the swelling serpent’s head, its mouth opening deeper, showing the serpent’s teeth...the great Snake God slipped into me...(165).

At other times, the male genitalia were referred to as prick, shaft, sword, spear, pole, tool, member, bulge, and in one case as the hefty happy shlong. However, the most frequently used term was cock. Thus, once again, while (re)claiming the discourse of their desire, these women often appropriated the typical jargon of male-centered erotic discourses. The use of more elaborate metaphorical descriptions for women’s genitalia might be attributed to their being more in-tune with their own bodies and sexual experiences. Yet, whether poeticized or bluntly stated, the variation in expression once again affirms the multiplicity of female desire.

The Big O

Commenting on women’s erotica, Susie Bright (1995) acknowledges the following:

I used to have one impeccable standard for what made an erotic story female-centered: the woman comes. This single concept is so rare in traditional erotica that it overwhelms every other feminine consideration. Of course we’ve all read stories where a woman is overwhelmed with the size of her lover’s penis, she screams his name and clutches his breast—but how many times do you actually get a her-point-of-view orgasm? We read about how he sees her responding to him, but we don’t see inside her explosion (38).

By (re)claiming the discourse of desire, women erotica writers are finally given the opportunity to describe the women’s erotic excitation and climax. In the stories from Bright’s (1997) collection, the female orgasm was typically only slightly elaborated
through description and sometimes summed up by merely saying, “I came.” When it was described, the focus was more upon a physical response:

“The Case of the Demon Lover”—Contact sent a charge through her. Spontaneously the vagina spasmed, flooding her with slick, steaming liquid…(123).

“Behind the Mask”—I feel my cunt contracting, its slimy juices squirting out of me as I come and come and come…(135).

“What?”—I came, my cunt tightening and loosening repeatedly around his knuckles…(155).

“The Butch’s New Clothes”—Alex answered her by coming in a long, shuddering orgasm. Her whole body tensed, and Sara felt the walls of her pussy clawing at the cock inside her…(225).

However, tales such as “My Professor” and “What?” did provide some more experience-centered descriptions of this moment of climax…

“My Professor”—Burning bright, coming to the extinguishing, the measureless brief throbbing bliss of nothing…we come together: o, the ascent to the heavenly, the descent into hell…(42).

“What?”—Drink…melt me down, make me flow like a river into your hands, cup your palms to receive the holy wine, slake your lifelong thirst…sexual power flows from my cunt and into him and back again in an ever-widening circle, until we are both transformed into something far greater than we ever dreamed possible…(150-155).

These descriptions both employ a “transformation/transcendence” theme and also a “unison/blending” metaphor: the female orgasm is contextualized as an out-of-body experience, which fuses the participants into an erotic exaltation. This theme was frequently echoed in descriptions of the female orgasm in the stories selected from Barbach’s ([1986] 1995) collection:
“The Private Life of Mrs. Herman”—They were male and female energies fusing, suspended somewhere in eternity…there was nothing else in the world. Not him. Not her. Only this incredibly sweet orgasmic blending…they were both helpless as the waves of energy rippled through them again and again, fusing them together into one blazing light of love and sex, then tossing them into the infinite…this was all she ever needed to know about God…(28).

“Leaving Sasha…”—Making love that possessed us both, that whirled inside me like the tornado carrying Dorothy up to Oz. It twisted and howled through the shivering caverns of my womb, through the screams of my mouth…through all my openings, exploding like the end of the world, or a new beginning…(137).

“Humming”—We have become one being, our movement taking us in an ancient joyous pattern…carried out beyond the limits of our minds…and then we are free, floating outside our contours in emptiness. A stillness, a perfect stasis opens between us. Peace…(214-215).

Another recurring description of the female orgasm involved metaphors of “fire/explosion”:

“The Private Life of Mrs. Herman”—The spinning sensation rose up and flooded her whole body, pushing at the boundaries of who she thought she was…pressing, pressing, pressing…she let [energy] explode through every cell in her body, cleansing her with light and pulsating out into the room (21).

“The House of the Twin Jewels”—Our flesh melting dissolving into flame, flame bursting, exploding into light liquid light pouring from us into us…filling our souls with an incandescent blaze of brightness…(100).

“The Scavenger Hunt”—Wetness gushed from her convulsing cunt. Hidden secrets exploded. Trembling of release rippled through her throbbing body…she was nothing but throbbing, pounding, demanding cunt, ravenous cunt, screaming for more…(157).

Metaphors of “falling over/reaching an edge” were also often invoked when describing the female orgasm:

“The Butch’s New Clothes”—It pushed Sara over the edge…(225).

“The Private Life of Mrs. Herman”—Flung off a great cliff into ecstasy…(28).

“A Japanese Play”—Kymusha keeps taking me to the edge, then letting me back down until I feel wild…(238).
“The Scavenger Hunt”—Lydia relentlessly pushed her toward an abyss Randi had never known before. Eagerly, Randi slipped into it and fell, jerking and trembling, into the chasm, hurtling across time and space until the sky and ocean exploded into the universe...(152).

Thus, when we get “her-point-of-view” (Bright 1995) of the woman’s orgasm, it once again emerges in a multiplicity of descriptions—ranging from physically focused recounting of vaginal spasms, to metaphorical portraits of spiritual transcendence, to blissful plummeting. These descriptions draw the reader in—allowing the reader to identify with the experience. Thus, through (re)claiming the discourse of desire, these women have found a sexual language that brings their erotic experiences to life.

A HUNGER SATED

Thus, this erotic feast comes to an end. As can be seen, the “burgeoning movement of women’s erotica” (Bright 1995:38) offers a variegated assortment of choices—a literal smorgasbord of erotic delicacies. These women have (re)claimed the discourse of women’s desire, and, in so doing, have allowed the multiplicity of voices to be heard. They have found a sexual language—they are speaking the words of desire. They are not simply conforming to the dominant male-defined discourse of what female desire should be. Comparatively, these women erotica authors discard the “cover of innocence” and escape the “clandestine space” that constrains the romance novel genre (Patthey-Chavez et al. 1996:102). Through their projects, they have become sexual subjects constructing their own desire. As such, these erotic tales offer “subversive possibilities” (Butler 1990) for combating the hegemony of the dominant male-centered
discourse of desire. The women are no longer silenced—the discourse of women’s desire is being (re)claimed.

In conclusion, I believe the following quotation brings my paper full circle:

*Erotica* seeks to return women to their bodies by offering a looking glass and not a distorting mirror. Here women can speak for themselves and by doing so deliver a valuable counter-argument to the lies, secrets and silences that typically pass for a woman’s sex life. Re-defining the erotic in terms of female rather than male experience is crucial to the pornography debate, not only to introduce some truth telling but also to remind those who want to protect and sanctify, that censorship may replace one kind of gag with another. We don’t want men to package us, but we must have the freedom to describe ourselves (Winterson 1990:xx).

We women must have the power to create and define our own sexuality. The discourse of our desire is just beginning to be (re)claimed. By dismissing representations of female desire as “pornography,” the MacKinnon-Dworkin feminist agenda risks silencing women’s sexual voices. And, as has been shown, there is a multiplicity of sexual voices—screaming to be heard.

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