

Lesbera

Daphne Marlatt

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L'érotisme a toujours été codé par des normes patriarcales et hétérosexuelles, dans des usages de flèche et de douleur de la part de l'objet du désir. Mais l'érotisme signifie le débordement des limites, surtout le dépassement des barrières entre le même et l'autre. Dans le désir d'une femme pour une autre femme se trouve le potentiel d'une autre forme de subjectivité, une identité femme qui se libère des définitions patriarcales.

To speak or write rationally of the erotic, to *discuss* it at all is only to touch its shadow.¹ Because the erotic as I actually experience it, as I imagine any of you do, is raw power, a current surging through my body surging beyond the limits of self-containment, beyond the limits of syntax and logic and of the daily order that keeps me organizing time into small manageable chunks tailored to the work at hand.

Erotic energy in free play doesn't have much to do with a careful, even parsimonious, parcelling out. It doesn't have much to do with measure or even measuring up, to any standard set by some authority over there.

The erotic has everything to do with immediacy and presence, though it is not self-contained. Like water or fire, it seeks to go beyond limits, above all beyond the limits of self as distinct from other. The surging through my arteries and meridians surges and spills toward yours, a surging between us we feel electrical – the 'turn-on' – we feel magnetic – 'drawn to' – we feel flashy as lightning, erased and lost and at the same time enlarged, more than 'life-size' in its presence. We feel in flight and risky with relief from the temporal, we could hazard aerial acrobatics ground deep in each other's groins, we will birth ourselves appositional and strange, the mouth that groans a shout, the vulva

that pushes out to touch/be touched, legs that gape wide to embrace the subterranean rush of coming. But we can't speak in the midst of the erotic, and when we write of it later it is an afterimage, an altered imprint of that bodily burning.

And yet, when we write, there is something in the erotics of language that sets up a different kind of surging, different yet similar. It surges beyond the limits of orderly syntax and established meaning. When we get right down to it, the erotic is anti-authority, always has been. If you look up the figure of Eros, who gives us the word, you find capriciousness, mischief, anarchy on the wing. The trouble with the classical tradition as we have inherited it in English (and in French, for that matter) is that the erotic is heterosexually-based. It is the realm of a trouble-making sprite we remember today in our images of Cupid with his bow and oh so phallic arrow. Arrow and the object of desire. The object's pain at the unlooked-for arrow, the mist of deception, the being at the mercy of the comings and goings of Eros: all these associations derive from the patriarchal Greeks. Where does that leave women's desire and especially women's desire for women? What images do we have for a woman-based erotic?

The lesbian subject: the woman-mouth that pushes out to assert its touch, its reach for the other's hidden mouth shouting through all its aroused lips, *lesbian*. A mutual recognition, anarchic and wild these images we have that run against the social grain of straight culture: l'Amazone, dyke, witch, that woman-man the virago, women who have too much – power, strength, knowledge, sense of ourselves, of our own desire.

Paula Gunn Allen has written of a different tradition, the Native Indian one where, amongst the Lakota, the *koskalaka*, the woman who is a 'young man' and doesn't want to marry, at least not marry a man, is seen in a spiritual context as having medicine power. Chrystos has spoken of how, among the Menominee, lesbians are referred to as Two-Spirit People. Getting in touch with our desire as lesbians can be a source of power, as Audrey Lorde has pointed out in a different context. The lesbian erotic as power, not something split off, denigrated, mutant. In this sense the power of the erotic is something we come

into as we gain our full identity as women unconfined by the crippling definitions of Western patriarchy.

Notes

1. This was delivered as a talk for a panel on 'Clit Lit' at the Words Without Borders Literary Festival of Gay Games III, Celebration 90, held in Vancouver in August of 1990.