

"My Mother Liked to Fuck" ***Reading Joan Nestle's Queer Desire For Maternal Desire***

Joan Nestle's (1987) writings enact reflexive and performative occasions of femme lesbian subjectivity which not not shirk their alliance with maternal genealogies. They offer moments of daughterly insight, memory, love and fascination defying binaries of hetero/lesbian, sexual/maternal identifications and desires that continue to pervade dominant knowledges and popular cultures. Although Nestle is not a lesbian mother she goes far toward opening up dialogues challenging normative boundaries between lesbians, mothers, and lovers such that mutually exclusive oppositions give way to ethical impulses for connections and mutual recognitions. By remembering and rewriting her relation to her mother for signs of desire, for glimpses of taboos, transgressive passions and defiant pleasures, Nestle propels rethinking about the erotic complexities and historical specificities of maternal sexuality. Such a process of reading and writing does not fixate on an idealizing image, a nostalgic fantasy or a normalizing category, but attends to the contextual surround of embodied maternal experiences and the layered actions and relations they constitute. What is offered is not a narrative that seeks to valorize a specific version of maternal desire, but an invitation to engage with the words, silences and actions of a mother's life as a responsive and open-ended conversation. Nestle's desire for her mother's desire does not aim at ensuring the coherence of maternal sexual identity, be it lesbian or straight, nor does it seek a maternal origin to secure the foundations of her own lesbian femmeness, rather, it seeks out subversive interactions through which mothers and daughters exchange the imaginative and political force of each other desires.

Nestle's texts retrace her mother's life and writings for signs of a subjugated history of maternal sexuality beyond the purview of middle-class nuclear family ideologies. From her position as a working-class Jewish lesbian, coming out in

New York City during the 1950s, Joan Nestle explores how her life is marked by her mother's class, cultural and erotic marginality and agency. Insisting that her cultural bearings are located within the recent past and present of her urban landscape, Nestle writes:

I am of the people who have no mythologies, no goddesses powerful and hidden, to call on. I am of the people who have no memories of other hidden lands beneath their feet other than the cement slabs of city streets.... I do not know the name of my grandmother, so I am forced to go deep, diving through my own accumulated years to seize upon newly ancient fragments. (1987:13)

Nestle's recollection of fragments of her mother's life is driven by her "desire to give back to working women their own history" not as a static truth or representation but as a process of dialogue across subjective and generational differences that configure histories of resistance.

Restricted Country combines autobiographical, historical, erotic and fictional stories through which Nestle narrates her desiring lesbian self. What I want to focus on are the ways she signifies, analyses and connects herself through her mother Regina's life as a process of reading and writing. Regina's posthumous gift to her daughter are her writings - "she left me only a sheaf of writings, scrawled letters and poems written on the back of yellow ledger sheets" - which become incorporated into Joan Nestle's project of inscribing their voices and histories together as distinct yet intertwined. The essay "Two Women: Regina Nestle, 1910-1978, and Her Daughter, Joan," sketches shared desires and identifications, as well as conflicts and contradictions between a heterosexual mother and a lesbian daughter. Nestle enacts her respect for her mother by directly quoting large pieces of her mother's written texts, providing discursive space for her mother's words and stories. At the same time Nestle openly acknowledges her investments as a lesbian daughter attempting to read, look and listen to her mother through the subjective inclinations of her own memory and desires, interpreting her mother as an intriguing and complex subject of sexuality. Nestle writes: "I watched it all, and her belief in a woman's undeniable right to enjoy sex, to actively seek it, became a part of me" (1987: 121). Against the grain of negative moralistic judgments directed at her mother's erotic audacity, Nestle writes retrospectively of Regina's legacy of sexual power and courage to defy normative prescriptions. She reads her mother as a figure of sexual transgression and resistance against the familial and gender ideologies of her time (Martindale, 1997: 88).¹ Reclaiming her knowledge and admiration of her mother's undomesticated desires as a locus of her own resistance to dominant sexual codes, Nestle establishes an open-ended exchange between the differential terms of sexual subversiveness adopted by her mother and herself. Entitling an essay "My Mother Liked To Fuck," Nestle displays an unabashed recognition of Regina's physical desires, using it to launch a critical questioning of her maternal influences and the personal and

political actions they inspire: "What do I do with this legacy—a mother who wills me her views on fucking, her despair, her outrage?" (Nestle, 1987: 91). A question she answers by learning productive lessons from her mother's life and writing which she passes on to others a basis for collective meanings which challenge the pathologizing assumptions of institutional knowledges:

Why have I had to write about my mother's life, Regina's life? The rules she broke, the knowledge she had of her difference, the things she told me that mothers were not supposed to tell their daughters - as if she knew I needed this to survive in my life of sexual difference - all this is one reason. And I want to give her a final gift, one she wanted desperately, that her writing move beyond the bed and the chair. Finally, I want to take back something that was denied me by the medical and psychological world that told me Lesbianism was sickness, that my feelings about my mother were distorted, infantile, mannish. (Nestle, 1987: 79)

Writing becomes an activity of transmission and translation between mother, daughter and readers. Joan Nestle seeks to publish and circulate her mother's stories as a "final gift," relaying and expanding upon the values and meanings of her mother's life against the coercive silence and privatization that marked her mother's "restricted country."

The quotes lifted from her mother's notes and diaries narrate events from various points of her life including memories of her youth which reveal a strong and impatient sexual awareness: "*I recognized that I was someone, someone to be reckoned with. I sensed the sexual order of life. I wanted to be quickly and passionately involved.*" Regina recounts complex experiences of sexual adventure, rape, loss, and a tenacity to continue to embrace her sexuality against adversity. She discusses her marriage and motherhood as a part of her life which does not resolve or placate her unruly desires, revealing her attempts and failures to accommodate normative familial expectations. While she is pregnant with Joan her husband unexpectedly dies, leaving Regina to raise two children on her own, a turn of events in her life which forces her to renegotiate her identities and desires. Regina writes about the ways this changed her relation to family, sexuality and work, and she develops a critical reading of her social position and an analysis of the power relations in which she is embedded. In Regina's words:

The desertion by the families brought to me the realization that all were frightened people. I got along, and the coin of life was money. I accepted their law and rejected them. I picked up the challenge. The people I had contact with were mostly my own tribe, Jews and I saw them battling the world to make it. (Nestle, 1987: 80)

Locating herself within the context such battles, she speaks lucidly about

how she orients herself as a working woman in the garment industry — "*season after season, I was part of the cycle, saw the struggle, became part of it, dipped in to the excitement of money, power, physical attraction, adornment, flattery, sensuality*" (Nestle, 1987: 81). Regina remarks upon "*a hell of a lot of grit*" within her social world, confronting the problems and limits of her working and sexual life without backing down or withdrawing herself from the fray. It is Regina's perseverance and shrewd interpretation of her own experiences that becomes the locus of Joan Nestle's tribute, refusing to gloss over the difficulties of her mother's circumstances.

Nestle describes her relations with her mother as dynamic social and imaginative events which defy normative and teleological assumptions, staying close to the flux of lived historical and affective experiences. An important aspect of Nestle's experiences as a child is her mother's sexual presence as a force of transference. Nestle recounts her mother's seductive qualities as a woman interested in pursuing desires beyond her children in ways that provide a fluid space of fantasy and attraction:

The Bronx, 1948: My mother, strong and beautiful, stands in front of the foyer mirror, straightening the veil of a dark smart hat, in a checkered dress, perfumed. I sit on the floor, looking up, knowing already in my little girl's head that this is a woman who is glorying not in being a mother and also knowing that she is preparing for love-making.

What is remarkable about such passages is not only Nestle's appreciation of the complexities of her mother's sensuality, but also her enjoyment of it as a transitional space facilitating her own bodily pleasures and erotic self-consciousness. In contrast to dominant ideologies of the era in which she grew up which emphasize the destructive potentials of maternal separation which become reiterated in Regina's self-castigations—"I was a mother, a sick mother ... not the right outlook for a mother" (Nestle, 1987: 91).

Joan Nestle elaborates alternative stories of emotional and imaginative connections forged through the open articulations of her mother's desires. But while she highlights her positive impressions of her mother's sexuality, Nestle does not idealize the emotional and social toll of the circumstances of her choices. The material pressure and psychic pain of sustaining desires in the face of social disapproval complicates Nestle's reading of her mother:

My mother's legacy to me was the story of her desire. She has left sexual trails for me, private messages, how she saw her breasts, how her body swelled with want. She has also left the record of her anger, her fury at herself and others for forgetting the connection between generosity and lust ... My mother accepted the fact that desire had made her homeless. (Nestle, 1987: 87-88)

The stakes of Regina's refusal to conform to conjugal monogamous standards of sexuality are very high, and are shown to be inextricable from her ongoing struggles to find stable employment, overcome poverty and care for the material needs of her children.

Nestle vividly portrays her relation to her mother as a working woman whose sexuality is interwoven into her daily struggles to support her family. Evoking the movements and signifiers connoting her mother's independent working and sexual life Nestle recalls "the remembered click of her work heels in the hallway telling me she was returning, and my happiness at that sound, must stand against eternity" (Nestle, 1987: 14). Nestle calls attention to the ways her mother's working life as clerk, and her erotic involvements outside the home are a continual source of intrigue and fascination. Regina's challenge to the domestic feminine ideals of her time are embodied in the ways she simultaneously negotiates her economic survival and her sexual desire. Not only does she have sex with her bosses and "turned tricks to pay her rent," out of necessity and strategic use of her sexual power, but she does not hide her enjoyment and pleasure of these relations. For undertaking such blatant transgressions of maternal norms, Regina becomes repudiated by "respectable" Jewish wives and mothers who had previously accepted her as one of them while she was married, and Nestle is very sensitive to the ways her mother is exiled from middle-class Jewish communities writing that "we were Jewish, but we were different" (Nestle, 1987: 33). But because Regina boldly accepts her differences along with the risks and losses she suffers from them, she is not portrayed as a passive victim of exclusion but as actively refusing to sacrifice her desire for the sake of conformity. Nestle does not abstract her mother's sexuality from the contradictory social relations of her experiences as a poor Jewish single mother, but reads them with understanding and respect. While recognizing the ways her mother was exploited and sometimes abused by the men she was involved with, Joan interprets Regina as an agent of her desire and knowledge. She calls attention to the ways her mother worked to fulfill her economic autonomy, sexual pleasures, and maternal responsibilities at the expense of social recognition and belonging: "While she was scorned as a social equal, she was feared as a woman who knew too much. My mother's life was marked by knowledge women were not supposed to have" (Nestle, 1987: 85). Nestle's writings accord her mother status as an active self without denying the difficulties and limitations of her life as a woman struggling against social relations of inequality and moral hierarchies.

Nestle affirms her love of her mother's independence as a working, sexual woman but she also analyzes the pressures that accrue with her attempts to live in defiance of patriarchal familial norms, revealing the painful psychic and material effects of Regina's attempts to challenge the ideological authority of marital propriety and maternal goodness. While Nestle honors her mother's sexual rebelliousness, she also reveals the high degree of economic instability and social conflict experienced by Regina in a society that values and rewards

accommodation to sexual domestication. Nestle admits that under such conditions her mother's desires at times became a threat to her:

I wanted to flee this women whose passions overflowed, making whatever security we had achieved so impermanent. Her sexual longings, her uncontrollable gambling her continuous need for money to stave off the eviction notices, the loans come due, the liens on her salary, seemed to endanger my life. (Nestle, 1987: 79)

Nestle indicates her ambivalence toward her mother's excesses, she both admired and feared them, recognizing in retrospect that the institutional powers of heterosexuality and class delimit her mother's choices and their effects on her children. Because she is able to historicize and reflect upon the social predicaments of her mother's actions, she avoids psychologizing her need for separation. Describing the social conditions exacerbating her conflicts with her mother, Nestle is able to explore the tensions and differences played out on both sides as a struggle that does not end in rejection but rather a mutual declaration of their respective needs lived outside the confines of rigid mother-daughter identities and responsibilities:

"I am not a mother," she would say. "I am Regina, a woman." Always that would be her cry, and when she came to me for the mother I did not have, or because her lovers brutalized her, or when she lost a job, I wanted to cry, "But Mother, I am not a daughter, just a woman. Please leave me alone." (Nestle, 1987: 95)

Written as a discordant yet loving exchange between mother and daughter with both claiming desires for autonomy as women without implying disconnection, Nestle's narratives offer alternatives to identitarian and polarized ways of thinking. Undermining conventional plots in which rebellious daughters seek to break ties with their clinging mothers as the only trajectory for achieving sexual independence, Nestle depicts mobile intersubjective relations including dissension, support and acceptance of differences: "We faced each other as two women for whom sex was important, and after initial skirmishes, she accepted my world of adventure as I did hers" (Nestle, 1987: 121).

Even while she is critical of the unequal terms of her mother's relations with men, her writings testify to how much she learns from her mother's willful embodiments of sexual desires and pleasures. Nestle continues to care for and dialogue with her mother as she narrates her own identity as a lesbian. Disrupting unified and reproductive models of a unified gender identity passed from mother to daughter, Nestle shows how her identifications with Regina do not follow a predictable course, but constitute points of convergence and points of departure through which Nestle defines her lesbian specificity. The heterogeneous ways in which gender and sexuality are played out between mother and

daughter allows for incongruities between them without suggesting sharp divisions. Nestle allies her self with her mother as women who cross moral boundaries—"mother and daughter were each pursuing illicit loves" (Nestle, 1987: 89)—without assimilating their desires or overlooking the diverse social contexts of their experiences. Regina's heterosexuality and Joan's lesbian sexuality are approached as historically signifying acts of resistance which need to be interpreted in relation to the dominant cultural codes, material conditions and political possibilities surrounding them. Whereas her mother's sexual transgressions lack the support and care of community relations, revealed in her ongoing isolation and loneliness, Nestle's sexual narratives are embedded in multiple social and political communities of sexually marginalized "queers." Nestle's personal and political consciousness of herself as a sexual subject is elaborated through the collective discourses of resistance constituting her femme lesbian self along with others. Unlike her mother, Nestle is able to articulate the meanings and values of her sexuality collectively as part of local cultural practices as well as broader political movements. Even when her lesbian desire becomes muted or hidden when she passes as a straight woman in her involvements in civil rights and socialist activism, her reflexivity as a sexual self remains an important dimension of her political consciousness. The significance of her sexuality is imbricated in all of Nestle's political engagements, becoming transformed by them in ways that enable her to move beyond, without sublating or denying, the singularities of her bodily experiences. But while such politically complex inscriptions of her sexual self contrast sharply with the individualizing predicaments of her mother's sexual resistance, Joan Nestle remains interested in forging personal and historical links with Regina's struggles as an undomesticated sexual woman. This marks a very important basis for dialogue between mother and daughter which avoids imposing judgments while opening up critical thinking about the historical and political conditions of sexual change and community. She writes that "now it is time to stop judging and begin asking questions, to begin listening. Listening not only to words which may be the wrong ones for the 1980s, but also to gestures, sadnesses in the eyes, gleams of victories, movements of hands, stories told with self-dismissal yet stubbornness" (Nestle, 1987: 108).

Following her attentive readings of her mother's sexuality in the details of her body, clothes, voice, silences and gestures, Nestle shows how she comes to understand her own lesbian sexuality through a similar process of signifying desire. Writing about her experiences of butch-femme lesbian cultures, she claims that "we used our bodies, our actions, our costumes, the close proximity of our lives to tell our stories" (Nestle, 1987: 68). Against lesbian-feminist revisionism which judges butch-femme sexuality according to an abstract concept of gender duality and sexual power, several essays in *Restricted Country* reclaim the "complex sexual and emotional exchanges" (Nestle, 1987: 103) of Nestle's femme interactions with butch lesbians. Continuous with her respect for the subjective nuances of her mother's sexuality against forces of moral

repudiation, she refuses to rely on moralistic hierarchies of feminist evaluation, focusing on readings which decipher the class and cultural inflections of erotic performativity:

Because I quickly got the message in my first lesbian feminist CR group that such topics as butch-femme relationships and the use of dildoes were lower class, I was force to understand that sexual style is a rich mixture of class, history and personal integrity. My butch-femme sensibility also incorporated the wisdom of freaks. (Nestle, 1987: 108)

Nestle complicates butch-femme relations by reading them as intimate and collective languages of sexual resistance such that "all these gestures were a style of self-presentation that made erotic competence a political statement in the 1950s" (Nestle, 1987: 104). Providing semiotically, socially and psychologically intricate analysis of erotic relations between women negotiating their desires at a time of violent state regulations of sexual minorities, Nestle calls attention to the inventiveness of de/recodifying desires within butch-femme lesbian cultures. Enacting a close and personal readings of collectively shared languages, Nestle constructs narratives of her lesbian self, while at the same time conversing and aligning herself with others. In Kathleen Martindale's words:

In producing an analysis of the processes by which a lesbian subjectivity can be deciphered, Nestle also writes a history of her own formation and reformation as a lesbian subject. Not coincidentally, following that path helps her not only to reconnect dykes and whores but to find yet another way of linking herself with her mother and of honoring their disreputable and heroic ways of surviving as working-women and lesbians. (Martindale, 1997: 99)

By rewriting histories of resistance as socially refracted processes of sexual stylization which allow for contradictory subject positions, giving rise to multiple inscriptions and readings, Nestle is able to align the practices of working women like her mother with those of lesbians and prostitutes without obscuring their historical and subjective differences. Kathleen Martindale suggests that "in writing a chapter on the joint history of lesbian's and prostitutes, Nestle works the contradictions between oppression and resistance, rather than attempting to marginalize the indiscreet" (1997: 99). Nestle's writings attempt to "honor both histories—that of the woman whore and the woman queer" (Nestle, 1987: 158). As such her writings insist upon contextual readings of sexuality that allows for considerations of the ways queer sexualities overlap with women's histories of sexual regulation without collapsing or prioritizing one over the other. She problematizes feminist orthodoxies with-

out forgoing the tools of a feminist analysis capable of thinking through gender as a permeable site of identification and power. This enables her to juxtapose diverse histories of sexuality within and between subjects without relying on binary categories. Nestle listens her heterosexual mother's stories of feminine seduction alongside those of butch lesbians recounting their rebellious erotic masculinities without regarding them as antithetical. She writes that "as we strive to uncover matriarchal myths, we must also keep in our minds the big-daddy tanks of our jails into which Lesbians who looked like men were thrown" (Nestle, 1987: 118). Challenging narrow maternal feminist frameworks by attending to intersecting and conflictual sexual histories, Nestle articulates spaces in-between feminist and queer theories and politics, positioning herself historically and subjectively in ways that challenge mutually exclusive notions of identity. She asks "is it turning forty that makes me see layers of identities? I see the queer fifties, the Lesbian sixties, the feminist seventies, and it becomes clear to me that memory is something that goes beyond sequential incidents" (Nestle, 1987: 119).

By reading maternal desires in relation to queer identities and affiliations in ways that attend to histories of injustice alongside intimate joys of sexual indiscretions, Nestle challenges oppositional abstractions that have come to mark maternalist and pro-sex discourses. Memory is enacted in Nestle's text as an embodied changing process that refuses illusions of romantic union with the maternal body while embracing intersubjective differences and tensions as a basis for dialogue. Her writings unravel perceptions and fantasies mediated by daily poverty, police brutality, and sexual compromises, giving rise to an erotic memory that is lived and written in the flesh of a femme lesbian daughter caught between powers of sexism, anti-semitism, homophobia and classism. Nestle articulates a memory of resistance, of an embodied struggle to reinscribe the complexities of a mother's life that evokes and implicates a daughter's sexual curiosities, and propels a political will to transform her erotic relations with others without forgetting her mother's story in the process.

¹Kathleen Martindale writes that "In the 1990s, critics and theorists speak a lot less frequently of resistance and more of transgression and subversion. This code-switching marks a discursive and political shift from socialist to anarchist language, frames of reference, and hoped-for outcomes of aesthetic activism. Nestle, a writer who straddles the divide, joyfully transgresses and subverts but always in the interests of producing resistance" (1997: 88).

References

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