

## Motivation Behind the Fear in Lucía Etxebarría's *En brazos de la mujer fetiche*

Elisabeth S. Gunn

*Morgan State University*

Lucía Etxebarría (b. 1966) is the most renowned or infamous authors of the so-called Generation X or Generation Kronen merging in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> This generation is commonly associated with alcohol, Prozac, and rock and roll. Etxebarría's works extend these associations to include fetishism. She has published seventeen works and has won a number of literary prizes, namely the Planeta Award in 2004.<sup>2</sup> Her work has been appraised as a purposefully plotted marketing ploy to sell books based on their sexual content while another argues that "the controversy surrounding Etxebarría's complex presence within the cultural establishment needs to be understood as a revealing moment in late-twentieth-century history of the intertwined links between the business of writing, the changes in the Spanish literary market, and the place of women authors within it" (Bermúdez 224-25). While Etxebarría's works and persona do serve as a site from which to map these issues, her work is a process of engaged political feminism, through media and gender play, to facilitate an exploration of identity construction and sexuality in post-modernity. She does this throughout the majority of her fictional works, namely novels. However, I will focus on one of her less widely acclaimed works, an essay titled *En brazos de la mujer fetiche* (2000), in which the author deliberately places her image on the book jacket as a fetish object.

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<sup>1</sup> This recent generation of Spanish authors gains this label from José Angel Mañas' film *Historias de Kronen* (*Kronen Histories*). A synopsis of the film: "Immersed in a world of sex, drugs and rock-and-roll, young men get together every night at a bar called Kronen, where they seek any kind of adventure and diversion from their empty lives."

[http://www.library.unr.edu/depts/basqlib/basquefilm/filmsearchtsw.asp?p\\_bibnum=b21102740](http://www.library.unr.edu/depts/basqlib/basquefilm/filmsearchtsw.asp?p_bibnum=b21102740)

<sup>2</sup> Etxebarría won the Planeta prize, in 2004, worth €601,000. She has also won other literary prizes including the Primavera prize and the Nadal prize.

Fetishism's broadest description<sup>3</sup> defines it as anything that has been infused with meaning beyond itself; more specifically, the fetish object is anything that repudiates absence. The fetishist sanctifies the lack of the original sign by displacing onto an object that which should have been, that fear and desire producing lack. Popular fetishism is based in the psychoanalytic readings of gender identity foundation: the male fetishizes heels and stockings because they replace that which never was: the female phallus. Appropriately, many critics have read a homoerotic desire into this perversion. The perverse, of course, is anything confusing the norm. Lucía Etxebarria views fetishism as a retaliatory mechanism meant to control and dominate that which threatens: woman (*Brazos* 29). Fear is commonly viewed as the motivation behind the fetishist. If fear of a devouring woman motivates male heterosexual fetishism, the fetishist attempts to control the female image, to control his fear of her lack, and to control his phallic identified desire by reducing her to images. He becomes the sexist par excellence precisely because he is the closet case in the game both Eve Sedgwick and Paul Morrison have named "find the faggot" (Morrison 2). He diverts his homosexuality by propping his masculinity on that defining feature, control. Fetishism is not a problem when supplementing; it is a problem when subjugating (*Brazos* 30, Morrison 58). Continuing further, fetishism seems to be motivated by an end plot, by the manic drive to converge, to be the hetero champion...as The Narrative clamors and as it defines itself upon this very possibility. In Foucauldian terms, the heterosexist love plot produces momentary manifestations of

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3 According to Kristeva, the unstable Symbolic is identified by substitutions, or fetishisms: "The thetic originates in the 'mirror stage' and is completed, through the phallic stage, by the reactivation of the Oedipus complex in puberty; no signifying practice can be without it. Though absolutely necessary, the thetic is not elusive: the semiotic, which also precedes it, constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice.... In our view, the analysis of texts shows the thetic liability is ultimately a problem with imaginary capitulation.... These problems and resistances obstruct the thetic phase of the signifying process. When they fail to prevent the constitution of the symbolic...they give rise to 'fantasies,' more importantly, they attempt to dissolve the first social censorship – the bar between signifier and signified" (Toril 113).

convergence such as marriage and child birth. However, to converge is not to suggest coincidence.

Fetishism, then, looks for those coincidences which, as convergences, can only be forced. Fetishism knows from a previous time of this impossibility of convergence. Reportedly, the fetishist would rather the shoe than the woman. Or in Morrison's words: "the highest satisfaction is haunted by the possibility that it isn't" (61). Then fetishism is that which truncates the highest satisfaction from its beginning because it already knows of its inevitable lack. The inevitable lack is systematic non-incident, which would not be convergence at all. How to converge with something that is not there? By making it look like it is the only thing, by making it so pervasive it becomes invisible. In other words, a woman is not her stocking; her stocking is not the phallus: neither exists as such. In this way, certain fetishisms become the conscious places of coincidence, the playing out of deference, the pleasure of momentary delight. Cristina Piña, in *Women Who Write About Women (Who Write)*, suggests that the self-recognized alienated subject derives her pleasure by writing as another; however, she is also the subject that resists being written away:

Although the capacity to enjoy, obviously, is not privy to women, it's of interest to me to remember that Lacan was able to observe that *another pleasure* distinguishes women, one different although supplementary of the phallic pleasure; it has to do with a pleasure that, far from being delimited by language, is found outside of it. In this way, I believe the writings by these female authors, considered from the construction of female subjectivity, reveal a topology of markers configured by simulacrum, fragmenting, torsions, involved figures that

are aware, on one side, of the fractured identity, and on the other side, of the emergency of this *other pleasure* that resists representation. (110)

Her argument is revealing in that it shows how female subjectivity understands itself and derives pleasure from that understanding in a way exclusive to male subjectivity; however, it is always a dangerous move to consider any identity marker as essential to the subject, and if it even need be said, to any group. I do believe, though, that she is referring to the ways in which females must write their own subjectivity, their own pleasure into being, and that they derive a different sort of enjoyment from the process precisely because they are forced to be aware of the process. Further, female subjectivity, and more so lesbian subjectivity, has always known about this resistance, about the limits and limitlessness of subjectivity in a way that certainly male, and to a lesser extent, gay male subjectivity has not. Etxebarría continues with such themes of desire, reiteration, and representation. She maintains her engagement with questions of complete subjectivity, yet in the next text she directly probes the relationships between nostalgia, sexuality, and subjectivity. *En brazos de la mujer fetiche* allows for an interrogation into the way nostalgia works in relation to sexual subjectivity, and I argue that what Etxebarría finds in fetishism is intricately linked to the way in which lesbianisms knowingly reiterate themselves.

de Lauretis configures lesbian fetishism in a similar manner. According to her view of lesbian masculinity fetish, the masculine lesbian and the fetishism of her presentation compensate for the threat of loss not of the phallus – the masculine lesbian is not threatened by castration - but of female subjectivity. She holds that “lesbian desire is not the *identification* with another woman’s desire, but the *desire* for her desire as signified in her fetish and the fantasy scenario it evokes” (251). In other words, the lack of a phallus produces male generated fetishism; lesbian identified fetishism correlates more obviously to a prohibited subject-hood.

The language of masculine lesbian fetishism retells the desire for access to an imagined, lost wholeness. Applying this idea to fetishism in general, it is clear that fetishism is about this lack of wholeness, and it knows so, regardless of whether it tries to hide this knowledge.

All fetishism retells this precise desire for unity of subject-hood as exemplified by lesbian desire; however, in no instance is there a core or a wholeness to retell: this becomes the very site of contention and confusion for the heterosexist fetish. Elizabeth Wright makes a key distinction: “the capacity thus to *play* with illusion is what distinguishes this experience from the fixed delusion which may later turn a transitional object into that permanent security prop, the fetish” (84). The act of retelling the loss, of re-imagining a nonexistent unity becomes the fetish itself. This is evident in the XIX century psychological, realist novel. Etxebarria argues that fetishism emerges with Modernity’s beginnings. As things fall under classification, fetishism begins to explain and give rise to that which science cannot formulate: the object is no longer that which it is, but what it suggests, and the fetishist gaze – in regard to its diverting character, indirect, false and substitutive – results in the most *modern* way to explain reality. It is no longer real, everything is appearance, artificial and construction (*Brazos* 56-60).

Thus, these realist novels feverishly attempt to solidify the dominant layer of narrative – which is itself grossly false – by retelling and retelling, but fetishists, their objects, and their sub-narratives protrude and object. The retelling becomes the exemplary of the fetish object. In Morrison’s words, “no genre has ever been more invested in the creation of private subjects or in the accumulation of inner capital than the nineteenth-century novel of psychological depth” (36). And he later continues:

Why suffer through the tedium of yet another academic conference, that most archaic of all rituals, were it not for the hope that the speaker’s body, the grain of

her voice or the choreography of her gestures, will register differently, more perversely, than her words?. (37)

The retelling answers his rhetorical question. The narratives trying to smooth over that which always threatens to come through must narrative fetish as perverse, that which does not belong. But these narratives cannot contain that tension zipping, unzipping, and threatening beneath.

The novel as an artistic, social, and political production may be reaching its culmination, but its popularity has and continues to reside in this very retelling. The “good” novel will suggest what you realize you are thinking as it suggests it to you. You will realize that which you already know: the rereading and retelling its and your incongruencies. In Etxebarría’s terms: the political tries to give answers (although it hardly ever does) and the novel only asks questions. In this way an art directed toward a determinate class of people does not exist, and if it existed, it would not be more interesting for life (*Eva* 102).

The novel, not unlike other forms of recounting – the fetishist recounting – is a nostalgic desire for the whole, and certain forms of its representation are more keenly aware of this, thus making the reader engage with the limits of his own subjectivity. Subject constitution is about privilege and fear of having that privileged revoked if any non-normative desire slips through. By reducing subjects to fetish objects (as happens frequently in the XIX Spanish novel), the recounting funnels its attention toward an object that highlights that which it seeks to control (gender/sexuality), hoping to divert focus from that which is always threatening (gender/homosexuality).

Whereas Etxebarría holds that the female becomes comprehensible and controllable via fetish in the new bourgeois market (Brazos 70), I hold that this emerging society should be

characterized as controlled or defined by what it fetishizes. This is not to negate, of course, that real females are hurt by the way the capitalist market fetishizes them. Unlike Freud, for whom the real means heterosexual realization; unlike Marx, for whom the fetish is the substitute for something real, something that manipulates human want (Wright 84); and unlike Lacan, for whom, the real is the phallus, I believe the real is nothing (perhaps nothing with any tangible longevity). It has to be nothing for fetishism to compensate for its preempted absence. Or if it has to be something, it is momentarily something, it is coincidence: it is what allows one to conceive of homosexuality, or more precisely, queerness. As Morrison argues, the hetero narrative banks on the homo never coming into narrative, but the latter refutes that pessimism and takes pleasure in the refusal (61). Or in the wake of AIDS, he explains, “in other words, it’s back: the marriage plot and its attendant ideology, the erotics of scarcity, the poetics of monogamy, the prudent administration and distribution of desire” (63). Etxebarria provides a humorous example of turning the table on this. She has a series of interviews or surveys the visitor to her personal web page may take, including, “Are You an Animal,” “Are You a Feminist,” and “Are you an Artist?” One of the questions in this last survey reads: “Are you a homosexual?” The answers include: “A) Yes B) Of Course C) Take it for Granted” (Lucía).

In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Kaja Silverman makes a similar move by maintaining that female subjectivity is at the site of male lack, and conceives of male subjectivity as a denial of castration, a denial of fragmentation, a refusal at the limits of subjectivity (46). As de Lauretis furthers: “what is wrong with psychoanalytic theory may also be an insufficient degree of castration, and hence it’s holding on for dear life to the paternal phallus” (226). In economic or political entrepreneurialship, queer or otherwise, the female subject formation relates to agency and lack in a way that males’ are not forced to do. The former’s narrative,

infused with lesbianism, is not simply about the present or the future. It is concerned with the past, dreadfully contaminated by what has and has not been. After all, how can one see the future?

Lee Edelman holds: “we have seen the future and it’s every bit as lethal as the past; and thus what is queerest about us, queerest within, and queerest despite us, is our willingness to insist intransitively: to insist that the future stops here” (30). As he argues, the future depends on the past, on a continued symbolic re-inscription of what must come from what has been. Futurity as it stands precludes a limitlessness to subjectivity for those who seemingly converge with its narrative; however, queer identity, specifically lesbian subject formation, offers a site of resistance (in and of itself already a sub-narrative, though crucially self-aware) in that it already knows the falsehood of the future because it consciously has experienced lack in the past, and is always doing so in the present.

Again, lesbian subject configuration offers a way of comprehending this process. Her argument framed by lesbianism, De Lauretis theorizes Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*:

the dissemination of lack and loss across the textual body in Wittig corroborates my own that the originally lost object, the one that was never anywhere, can be conjured up and recathected only in the signifying or the representing of desire itself. (252-3)

As noted, fetishism retells that which it wants to control, that for which it wishes to compensate, and that which it desires. As de Lauretis offers, only in the retelling of desire does desire gain representation. As Butler has shown, language mediates the relationship between body and speech, between material and discourse (7). The heterosexist language fetishizes attributes and qualities of convergence, forcing a belief of wholeness and the inevitability of

sameness. Every diamond ring and car commercial tries to prove its possibility. Thus, when prompted to declare her sexual orientation, Etxebaría accurately self identifies as a “frustrated hetero” (Eva 94).

Theorists consistently link fetishism and sadomasochistic practices. After all, the former defines the latter: role play compensates for that which is not real, for that which never was, for that lack that only gains representation through mutually instantaneous desire. Halperin has argued for an ascesis, a consistent self-fashioning or “becoming” that involves mind and body. In this process, he draws on Foucauldian analysis of power relations by implicating sadomasochism as a site of sexual resistance and multiplicity of identity:

S/M represented to Foucault “a process of invention,” insofar as it detaches sexual pleasure from sexuality (in an S/M scene, the precise gender and sexual orientation of one’s sexual partner may lose some of their importance as prerequisites of sexual excitement) and insofar as it frees bodily pleasure from organ specificity, from exclusive localization in the genitals. S/M thereby makes possible a new relation between the body and pleasure, and one effect of continued S/M practice is to alter one’s relation to one’s body. (87)

His fundamental wording here is “the precise gender and sexual orientation of one’s sexual partner *may* lose some of their importance.” Queer politicking is in part about the ultimate erasure of gender markings. Furthermore, gender may lose some of its importance, but certainly not all of it, certainly not even momentarily. After all, a female will still be a female despite the plurality of pleasure points, and regardless of how many roles get enacted, she will still hold the female role within the symbolic. S/M does little, I believe, to challenge; rather, it places importance precisely on reenactment of gender based roles in which the submissive is

related to weakness (the “weaker sex”), and the dominant role remains that of dominance (masculinity). Also, Halperin’s “ascesis” slips away from alterity as a consistent site of being, and he limits his argument to “becoming gay” (79). While Halperin’s proposal is seemingly intended toward an “ethics,” his call for unanimity risks the potential toward sameness. In the “end” (in the present?), what would a sexual game look like without gender? Which does not mean absence of difference, rather, it means precisely only difference remains. Is it impossible to perform without performing gender?

According to Butler, subjects incessantly iterate and reiterate each other into being: one is constituted by this chain, by difference. Therefore, no original event or selfhood exists; rather, one performs selfhood, time and time again differently (190). Homosexuality and gender contention is that which is systematically denied by the symbolic. She argues: “Importantly, however, there is no power, construed as subject, that acts, but only to repeat an earlier phrase, a reiterated acting that *is* power in its persistence and instability” (225). Gender dissolution will have to proceed from gender constitution. But that which so consistently needs reiterating, gender identity, is that which is most threatened. Rather than a site of resistance then, S/M aggressively reconstitutes conventional gendered performance.

In her analysis of gay and lesbian pornography, Ann Russo argues similarly that as queer politics has looked for site of resistance and sexual expression in places from which it was once barred, rather than questioning the fundamental system it pretends to debunk, it merely reconstitutes it: “the line between the use and abuse of humiliation is not clear in these stories [gay and lesbian S/M porn], nor is the demarcation of control necessarily stable” (114). To this I add that since the step has been taken, it is time to reevaluate its significance as a sustaining critique and point of contention to the symbolic. Or in Russo’s words:

The question remains whether the pleasure of sexual sadomasochism is ultimately linked to liberatory and radical politics. While the stories may feel personally liberating and they may provide sexual pleasure to individual writers and readers, the stories do not exist in isolation from the broader culture and society. (115)

Russo's feminist intervention into queer aesthetic practices reveals, in the case of sadomasochism, the latter may be fashioned not by radical queer politics, but by conventional gendered roles, by sexism.

It could be argued that sadomasochist practices, as fetishism, reenacts that original lack, the impossibility of full identity constitution; however, while this may in part be the case, "full identity constitution" has generally been directed by the symbolic, by the heterosexist plot. Sadomasochism at once shows full identity constitution's impossibility, but it plays at reinscribing gendered roles. If it is play, it is a dangerous game, one by which queer politics should not be deceived. Sadomasochism allows for gender, and if the female cannot walk away from her societal role even when the game is being played, then it stands contrary to queerness.

Gender play remains problematic, as does the abolition of gender. If gender is that which needs to be reiterated and reconstituted to ensure the symbolic, to ensure a futurity infused with the past, how to conceive of sites of resistance to gender that are markers of the very thing it seeks to dissolve? Again, I turn to lesbian subjectivity as a reminder of the lack of integration and the necessity of recognizing it as such. For what the lesbian knows, others have access to public forums of denial (male privilege, marriage, etc.). We must do away with that which is not present to begin with (there is not to begin with either), or recognize it as such. If gender were inherently thus, we would not see such play at its consistent re-justification. Lesbians fetishize

subjectivity because of their fundamental lack of representation, its fundamental non-existence as a unified social identity.

The absence of the original allows for representation and for the representation of desire. The retelling is this fetishism, this desire: it manifests itself within each text, within each narrative, and more importantly, as narrative. Consequently, when Etxebarria offers us a book entitled *In the Arms of the Fetish Woman*, she is taking pleasure in making herself and the telling of the fetishism the fetish object, knowingly. After all, the book's cover shows two women: one dressed in red leather in the forefront, and the other naked and bound in the background. A collection of S/M toys hang on the wall to the right. And a mirror hangs on the ceiling to reveal the scene to itself. I refer back to my previous discussion of the harms of reenacting hazardously biased gendered roles. I believe Etxebarria does so consciously, and I am certainly not advocating an abolition of this expression; moreover, I hold that the text in question is critically self-aware; nevertheless, dressing women up for a game of S/M will sell books...and when the public sees it and does not read it – or reads it and fails to capture its maneuvers – it is another conventional re-inscription. The back cover reveals Etxebarria and her collaborator, Soñia Núñez Puente, sitting side by side, showing mostly leg. Are they in one of their living rooms? The covers complement each other, both distinctively and pleasantly agitating. The front is clearly the fetish scene; yet the back suggests that it, too, is that scene. They are presenting to their readers what everyone already knows: the disturbingly (non) docile poses on the back threatens that which the front cover hardly does, that which is systematically denied by the symbolic. How quickly they could turn the scene into a stage of non-normativity. Rather, it already is. It hints, threatens. Could they be lesbians? Could I be in the arms of one of them? Could my subjectivity be defined by theirs? Did they know this first? Etxebarria's closing essay, which

carries the book's title, reads something like this: "In this way, the women that have passed through these pages were not women as such, rather exorcisms. They are images of an epoch of misogyny that defended from the modern sub-terrains. They are strategies of artistic and literary defense. They are not mirrors in which we can look at ourselves, nor characters with which we can identify. They are portraits exposed by the dominant gaze, the masculine, that pretends to make us see as real that which does not exist except in the fabricated, illusory world" (*Brazos* 402).

Thus, Etxebarria seeks to reveal those illusory concepts of "real," of fulfilled subjectivity via submission to the dominant gaze. Furthermore, I believe she does so by offering a text markedly aware of its own game. This does not mean, of course, that it is not given over to a market value; rather it is precisely aware of its ideological and market value. It toys with each in order to toy with the already fragile symbolic.

The authors, their subject matter, and the book itself tells of their own fetishist state. The text situates the reader in the arms of the fetish woman, meaning in the authors' perception of fetishism throughout XIX century Spanish novel, meaning the authors' theoretical approach to fetishism, and meaning, perhaps, the text as the woman as fetish. Is she, or female subjectivity, not what at least half of what gender definition means?

By positioning the reader in such a way, the text seeks to foreground gender construction by revealing it as fetish, and in recounting concrete examples of fetishism in specific Iberian novels, *In the Arms of the Fetish Woman*, does a self-referential retelling of fetishism as fetish object itself. And the exemplary model of auto-reflexive subjectivity is that of female constitution, and more so that of lesbian constitution. The language of lesbian subjectivity, then, is used here as a rhetorical figure for agency: it shows what other manifestations of subjectivity

try to elude. As Judith Butler has demonstrated, this precise agency allows for that which cannot be foreseen, the very insubordination that may reveal the symbolic discontinuous. In this way, agency threatens sovereignty (7). Etxebarria's text seems to be suggesting the ways in which language's incongruencies through the symbolic reveal desire. If language is the system in which there is no outside, then that very desire is bound in language, bound in retelling. And if subjectivity is bound to fetishly recount its own loss, perhaps this is what fetishism can do for gender, for queerness: take pleasure in the desire for its coincidence. Etxebarria's work and public persona play with sexual misconduct, lesbianisms, and the fetish object signifiers in the dance of subjectivity and deferral in late twentieth century Spain.

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