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Disuelta, Sostenida, Creada: Cristina Peri Rossi's *Evohé* as Queer Feminism

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Deliberating the plentiful psychoanalytic readings of her erotic poetry collection, *Evohé* (1971), Cristina Peri Rossi avows: "El deseo no se puede nombrar (Lacan) y las palabras persiguen el deseo, como el cazador al bisonte que huye … Por eso, el arte es superior a la teoría, y la poesía, superior a la filosofía y al psicoanálisis" (10). A posture invoked by its Latin, onomatopoeic title—an ode to the extralinguistic, frenzied homages to Bacchus (Peri Rossi 9)—Peri Rossi's *Evohé* revels in the truths of the desires we cannot name, exploring those unintelligible screams that might precede our knowing. Many are the poets and critics who have claimed poetry to hold superiority over theory, like Peri Rossi proposes. Theodor Adorno, granting poetry's authority to conceptualize, asserts that "social concepts should not be applied to the works from without but rather drawn from an exacting examination of the works themselves" (39). Poetry's clarifying and generative impression on existence leads Octavio Paz to declare that poetry is "salvación, creación, poder y abandono," that "[l]a poesía revela este mundo [y] crea otro" (13). Feminists have thus posed poetry as vital to creating existences beyond patriarchy; echoing Peri Rossi's defense of poetry's foreknowledge, Audre Lorde defines it as "illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt" (36). If the subjective expression in poetry leads what we know—delineating, as John Stuart Mill would have it, "the deeper and more secret working of the human heart" (1214)—poetry becomes a truth against which to juxtapose our explanations for reality, i.e., against which to juxtapose our theories. In this essay, I exercise poetry's radical prescience, reading Cristina Peri Rossi's *Evohé* alongside feminist theory and queer theory to illuminate directions beyond an obstinate, contemporary quandary: the opposition between feminists and queers.

The question of eroticism—*Evohé*'s principal theme—underlies the fraught relationship between feminists and queers. In the twentieth century, many feminists and queers looked beyond the Classical conception of *eros* as a paradoxical essence of the human condition (Carson), probing the role of eroticism in feminist social movements. Sex—a lucid culmination of *eros*—became a contentious subject in this feminist theorizing, epitomized in the so-called feminist sex wars of the 70s and 80s (Comella 439). In this dispute, feminism's authority to theorize sexuality was debilitated by a growing, defiant impulse for a sexual liberation beyond the restrictions of feminist sexual ethics. Inaugurated in the 90s, queer theory challenged feminism's putative conservatism by posing sexual anti-foundationalism—towards anti-identitarian sexualities liberated of patriarchal and feminist ideological foundations—as the crux of a new sexuality theory. Tensions between feminists and queers have grown since this "cleaving of sexuality from gender" (McBean 133). Does queer theory prioritize eroticism—and its sexualities—over gender? Is feminism, as Gayle Rubin famously argued, "the theory of gender oppression" (169), and a theory of the oppression of "erotic minorities" (166) must exist apart? Is Judith Butler correct in suggesting that a feminism split from queer theory is concerned "with no aspects of sexuality" ("Against Proper Objects" 3)? These questions evoke the enduring political and theoretical divisions—fueled by misalignments over the eroticism question—between feminists and queers.

Peri Rossi's first collection of poems, *Evohé* is an elaborate expression of eroticism, a searching plunge into the politically yoked subject that erected this queer/feminist impasse. Examining Peri Rossi's poems alongside contemporaneous feminist theories and subsequent queer theories,[1] I contend that *Evohé* conjures preoccupations canonical feminists and queers have posed regarding gender and sexuality—especially in conceiving identity as extraindividual—and I thus assert the collection to be both feminist and queer. Yet, *Evohé* does not only evoke the feminist and the queer discreetly. I argue that *Evohé* resonates further with recent attempts to theorize a queer feminism—namely, for its depiction of an eroticism that dissolves identity whilst maintaining relationality—becoming a poetic truth that ameliorates what Lynne Huffer, a leading scholar of queer feminism, calls "the ethical dissonance

that has split queers from feminists" (518). I ultimately propose that *Evohé* complicates the theory-endorsed irreconcilability between feminists and queers, illuminating an oft-inconceivable queer feminist future.

I select Peri Rossi's *Evohé* for this theoretical work, in part, to vindicate the aesthetic merit of an understudied poetry collection. Banned shortly after its 1971 publication, *Evohé* incited a great scandal in Uruguay, soon to undergo a reactionary military dictatorship. Peri Rossi's subsequent self-exile to Spain in 1972 (Cuéllar Aragon 58) offered Peri Rossi's poems a less punitive national context, and their homoerotic content has endured. Despite this striking resiliency, however, literary critics have afforded *Evohé* far less attention than they have to Peri Rossi's prose. Leah Fonder-Solano argues that the neglect of *Evohé* reflects a larger trend in literary criticism on Peri Rossi's oeuvre: "While Peri Rossi's prose has enjoyed great popularity and received considerable acclaim, her poetry, which expresses a homoerotic, feminine subjectivity, has received far less critical attention" (76). Here, Fonder-Solano suggests that it is the homoerotic, feminine content of the poems that has stymied critical examination of Peri Rossi's poetry. With my close reading of *Evohé*, I help interrupt the half-century of heterosexist oversight of these irrepressible poems.

A Latin American woman's poetry collection is an especially opportune artifact through which to reassess the opposition between feminists and queers.[2] This is a division principally sewn by North American and European feminists and queers; bringing a Latin American woman's voice into the conversation, centering a discursively marginalized expression, thus yields potential for complicating the canonical partition. Latin American women, moreover, have a history of leading and reorienting feminist projects; in her brilliant survey of twentieth-century Pan-American feminism, Katherine Marino defends Latin American women as vanguards that "broaden our understanding of feminism in the past and point us to new possibilities in the future" (236). Drawing on Marino's demonstration of Latin American women's feminist import, as well as on the poetics—Lordean to Adornean—that frame poetry's veracity as a generator of new knowledge, I read Peri Rossi's erotic poetry collection to reimagine the canonical division between

feminists and queers. The selection of *Evohé* as the case study for this research therefore maintains, in addition to its aesthetic merit, the political prescience of Latin American women's feminist and queer dispositions.

The Feminist Dimension of *Evohé*

In *Evohé*, Peri Rossi creates an eroticism of subjectivity continuums, the blending and intermingling of two partners' consciousnesses becoming especially evident in the collection's recurring metaphor of religiosity. Emblematic of this vision for eroticism as a transcendence of discrete subjectivities, the poem "Vía crucis" creates an extended metaphor between erotic exchange and religious devotion: "Cuando entro / y estás poco iluminada / como una iglesia en penumbra" (59, lines 1-3), it begins. The simile in the third line dispels the belief suspended across the first two, in which the entrance seems to correspond to a church, the second-person singular in the second line reading as the church's personification; the gloomy church is, in the end, a comparison for a revered feminine object, now entered. The following twenty-four lines extend the religiosity metaphor—"Me pides limosna / Yo recuerdo las tareas de los santos" (lines 6-7)—but, keeping in mind the introductory three lines, the veneration and transformation associated with the poem's religiosity is not the fruit of religious devotion to a higher power, but rather the representation of the poet's erotic penetration of a feminine partner.

With this religiosity metaphor, the poem creates an eroticism conceptually situated beyond an exchange of visceral pleasures. The poet's erotic disposition to her partner, that is, entails existential reverence, likened to that which a pilgrim would experience while worshiping at a religious site. Revealing a transformation achieved through the erotic exchange, the latter half of the poem reads:

> al fin adentro
>
> empieza la peregrinación
>
> muy abajo estoy orando

miento tus dolores

el dolor que tuviste al ser parida

el dolor de tus diecisiete

el dolor de tu iniciación

muy por lo bajo murmuro entre las piernas

la más secreta de las oraciones

Tú me recompensas con una tibia lluvia de tus entrañas (lines 14-23)

In the fifteenth and sixteenth lines, the poem uses the metaphor of pilgrimage and prayer to characterize the erotic process, and, in the seventeenth, the content of the pilgrim's prayer becomes the partner's pain. Followed by anaphora in three lines of *el dolor*, the poem emphasizes the incidence of the partner's pain—from across the lifespan—in the poet's ritualistic practice. That is, in addition to the rewards of orgasm—"una tibia lluvia de tus entrañas" (line 23)—the conceptual consequence of the erotic exchange is the announcement of the partner's lifelong pain. In developing this extended metaphor of eroticism as religious pilgrimage—the partner's wounded existence becoming the content of erotic communication—the poem creates an eroticism of extrasexual magnitude, of revered, intersubjective communication between partners.

"Invitación," which speaks of an ancient language unearthed through interaction between women, similarly gestures towards an eroticism founded in a subjectivity continuum:

Una mujer me baila en los oídos

palabras de la infancia

. . . . . .

y si dice humo

si dice pez que cogimos con la mano,

si ella dice mi padre y mi madre y mis hermanos, (lines 1-2 and lines 6-8)

Here, the poet contemplates a linguistic infantilization, characterizing the content of the desired partner's linguistic output. In a conditional frame imagined by the poet, the desired partner exudes a linguistic devolution into loose nouns as well an evolutionary devolution into a rudimentary, corporal fishing practice; in a seductive auditory dance, the partner draws the poet back to a simplified linguistic and corporal existence.

The woman's voicing of simplicities yields a concrete consequence in the poet's consciousness in the subsequent section of the poem:

> siento resbalar desde lo antiguo
>
> una cosa indefinible
>
> melaza de palabras
>
> puesto que ella, hablando,
>
> me ha conquistado
>
> . . . . . .
>
> murmurándome cosas antiguas
>
> cosas que he olvidado
>
> cosas que no existieron nunca
>
> pero ahora, al pronunciarlas,
>
> son un hecho, (lines 9-13 and lines 19-23)

Line nine explains the conditional consequence of the partner's repetitive, simplistic speech acts. The conditional import of the poet's listening is a slipping—the verb *resbalar* rendering the intractability of the process—an unintelligible semantic amalgamation entering the poet's consciousness. As the poem progresses, then, the other woman's linguistic output upon the poet moves from words and concepts—*mis hermanos*, *pez que cogimos de la mano*—to an undefinable semantic mass—*melaza de palabras*. In lines nineteen to twenty-three, the poet begins to decipher what the woman has spoken: with the anaphoric *cosas que*, the poem emphatically resists intelligible designation for what the erotic exchange

creates, but the poet identifies it vaguely and contradictorily as something forgotten, never having existed, yet now fact.

The poem relates a process of unlearning—compelled by the desired woman's voice—into an abundant space in which buried facts are voiced, made, and reclaimed. Understood alongside "Vía crucis," this poem reinforces that lesbian desire and eroticism surpass visceral, sexual pleasures, becoming a generative episteme through which one becomes familiarized with a nonlinear, omnitemporal dimension of women's consciousness. Erotic lesbian exchange becomes a way of deciphering and untangling the *melaza de palabras* that lies dormant in women, a means to remember the forgotten and unveil and create the truths that transverse women's existences.

Peri Rossi's imbrication of lesbian eroticism with a higher, feminine consciousness synergizes with feminist theories on the question.[3] Adrienne Rich, in her foundational essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), theorizes the *lesbian continuum*: "a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desires genital sexual experience with another woman" (648). In Rich's view, the lesbian continuum is the experience of deeply felt connection between women far beyond sexual pleasure. While not using the exact language of a *continuum*, Hèléne Cixous and Luce Irigaray similarly conceive a shared experience between women across time, space, and bodies. Cixous writes: "In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against *separation*" (882; emphasis added); "In woman," Cixous asserts, "personal history blends together with the history of all women" (882). As Cixious conceives a common history that surpasses patriarchal separation, Irigaray poses erotic feminine experience as a means to transcend unethical partitions: "They never taught us nor allowed us to say our multiplicity. That would have been improper speech. … You/I then become two to please them" (73). For Irigaray, an unruly multiplicity of merged, feminine subjectivities lies beyond prescription: "This 'all' can't be schematized or mastered. It's the total movement of our body. No surface holds: no figures, lines, and points; no ground subsists. But there is no abyss. For us, depth does not mean a chasm. … Our depth is the

density of our body, in touch 'all over" (75). Rich, Cixous, and Irigaray theorize a capacity for women to go beyond themselves as individual women, defying patriarchal separation and entering a continuum of feminine consciousness.

Complementing—and anticipating—these feminist theorists, Peri Rossi's poems, by way of lesbian eroticism, defy the patriarchal separation between women's individual subjectivities. Just as Irigaray poses the "depth" of woman's multiplicity as antipatriarchal unity, Peri Rossi's poem on the *peregrinación* glimpses the erotic process between women as a means to revere another woman's pain through her lifespan; as the poet enters her partner, she overcomes the patriarchal separations Irigaray abhors. The poem on generative unlearning coincides with Cixous and Rich's claim that women's personal history and experience blend with a history, a knowing, that all women share. Peri Rossi's poems depict the way lesbian eroticism—and its affordance of reverence to other women, of an understanding of their pain, of its creation of shared knowledge—creates the subjective sensitivities to which these feminists aspire. *Evohé* possesses a strong feminist dimension, providing poetic projections to complement, and perhaps surpass, feminist theories on women's multiplicity, on a feminine continuum.

The Queer Dimension of *Evohé*

In *Evohé,* Peri Rossi employs sexless language to describe physical bodies in erotic exchange. We know they are women because they are called *mujeres*, but genitals or other secondary sexual characteristics are not mentioned; in turn, less gendered parts of the human body are emphasized: *las piernas*, *el vientre, los cabellos, el pubis*, *los ojos*, *la mano*, *la boca*, and *los hombros*. A notable exception to this is the reference in three instances to *los senos.* While we may quickly interpret these *senos,* especially within lesbian poems, as female breasts, a poetic inspection of the word demands a consideration of its diverse meanings; it can refer to female breasts or the womb, but it can also refer to any concavity or internal part of a thing, the latter definition feeling especially pertinent given the surplus of poems that pose erotic penetration as a means not to enter genitalia, but rather to enter another's entire existence. The use of

senos, a term enigmatically sexed, is the only example of potentially sex-specific language in these erotic lesbian poems.

The expression of lesbian eroticism in *Evohé* without an emphasis on physical sexual characteristics queerly subverts the compulsory nexus between genitals and sexuality, a conventional model often challenged by queer theory because it binds biological compositions to sexual identities. This dimension of *Evohé* reads as even queerer when we remember that queers often uphold this institutionalized model that demands sexual identity be led by preferences for sexual characterstics.[4] Judith Butler, whilst refuting that physical sexual characteristics must lead our sexualities, recognizes that "within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender" ("Performative Acts" 524), and it is thus not possible to know sexuality—culturally bound to sex—entirely apart from gender and sex. Lesbians, gay men, and other queer people are vulnerable, then, to this compulsory sex-gender-sexuality model, though their queer existence challenges compulsory heterosexuality. As C. L. Cole and Shannon L. C. Cate point out: "The fact is, more often than not, supposed lesbians or gay men are in fact attracted to specific genders within the broad, clinical category of 'female' or 'male'" (282). *Evohé* thus reads as radically queer for its poetic creation of a lesbian eroticism that does not reify the hegemonic, essentializing connection between genitals and sexual identity that often informs queer people's sexualities.

Peri Rossi wields metaphor to allude, furthermore, to lesbian eroticism as a process that dissolves identity. We witness a moving expression of this in the following poem:

> Me miras por la redondez de tus senos
>
> y yo pienso cuánto tiempo has estado así,
>
> mirándome atentamente desde esos dos ojos rojos
>
> auscultando mi posible cara
>
> esta mancha
>
> en que se ha convertido mi rostro. (73, lines 1-6)

Conventional modes of intersubjectivity are entirely absent from this poem. The first line imagines the partner's *senos* as the medium of visual input and recognition. Throughout the poem, the face—a most fundamental representation of identity—disintegrates, becoming a *mancha*. To understand the face's blur, the partner does not look, but auscultates; the unclear face—drastically altered—requires meticulous examination to be accessed. The qualification of the face with *posible* renders both the inaccessibility and the futurity of the poet's obscured identity. A poem that similarly poses identity as muddled by eroticism remarks: "[...] cuando quiera, te desnudo, / Quedarás laxa y tersa, tenue e ingrávida. / Te desvanecerás como humo" (78, lines 4-6). The adjectives afforded to the erotic partner's future state, rendered in the fifth line after she is stripped and the erotic interaction has begun, describe the changing composition of the body, its perceived appearance and consistency; in the final line, the changes in the partner's body culimate in an absolute dissolution, moving from weightlessness to total evaporation. With these allegories, *Evohé* beautifully represents queer sexuality as a dissolution, as the fading of identities.

Peri Rossi's representation of eroticism not as the enactment of identity, but rather as the suspension and the destruction of identity speaks to a foundational tenant of queer theory: gender (and its sexualities) as anti-identitarian performance. In the canonical *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argues that liberated futures depend on the obstruction of identities informed by the cultural gender binary and the biological sex binary. For Butler, predetermined sex, gender, and sexuality identities are referential, negotiated categories of confinement: "Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived" (180). Liberated futures depend on the subversion, and thus the dissolution, of referential identities through the repetition of queer gender performances.

Evohé's queer suggestion that erotic performance blurs and evaporates identifiable faces—a depiction of eroticism as dissolution—prevails across Peri Rossi's oeuvre. As Amy Kaminsky argues, in Peri Rossi's novel *Solitario de amor* (1988) the heterosexual male narrator and protagonist "evokes a nonphallic eroticism" (156); he longs, despite his heterosexuality, "not to penetrate and possess, but rather to merge with

and dissolve into the woman he desires" (Kaminsky 156). We see this same queer sexuality—which interrupts the notion that erotic engagement reinforces, rather than undermines, discrete identities—in the anti-identitarian dissolutions championed in the lesbian eroticism of *Evohé.*

The moral undertone of this "nonphallic eroticism" may jar some queers, for whom sexual moralizing has often equated oppression; I ultimately defend these nuanced poems, though, as subversions of essentialized moralities. The "mergings and dissolutions with the woman lover" that Kaminsky conceives in *Solitario de amor* and that I read in *Evohé* have, according to Peri Rossi critic Rosemary Geisforfer Fiel, "been viewed by some lesbians as constituting restrictive forms of desire, 'laws of the mother,' or versions of bambi or vanilla sex" (57). A reflection on the frequent, morally vexed expressions of queer sexuality in *Evohé*, however, interrupts a perfunctory interpretation of it as a depiction of morally restricted desire. Consider the following lines from the following poem in which Peri Rossi poses her feminine partner as an object to employ:

Yo las ordeno mi mujer

la palabra

Les pongo término y plazo mi mujer

la palabra

Les pongo fecha y número mi mujer

la palabra

. . . . . .

con la lengua las separo mi mujer

la palabra (68, lines 26-31 and lines 43-44)

In Krzystof Kulawik's analysis of *Evohé,* he argues that "la simbólica yuxtaposición de 'palabra' y 'mujer', del acto poético con el acto amoroso, constituye el soporte temático y estructural de la colección" (129). The

above poem reminds us how this symbolic juxtaposition, with its likening of the sexual objectification of women to the verbal objectification of words, may queerly upset a limiting feminist sexual ethics. Feminist theorist and lesbian ethicist Sarah Hoagland, for example, theorizes and condemns the sexual objectification of feminine persons by masculine subjects—a category that can include lesbians—with the term *heterosexualism*: "It is an entire way of living which involves a delicate, though at times indelicate, balance between masculine predation upon and masculine protection of a feminine object of masculine attention" (522). Peri Rossi's *Evohé*, then, may vex feminist ethicists due to its portrayal of a queer sexuality that promotes both "gentle mergings" and sexual objectification. However, the moral deviances in the collection prevent an interpretation of a utopian, moral feminist eroticism that would be incompatible with much queer theory.

Beyond its feminist expression of a feminine continuum, then, we can also identify a formidable queer dimension in *Evohé*. Of course, as poems that explore lesbian eroticism, they challenge compulsory heterosexuality, which situates lesbian existence "on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent," if not rendering it completely "invisible" (Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality" 632). Beyond this defiance of compulsory heterosexuality, though, I find Peri Rossi's erotic lesbian poems queer for their revelation of a queer eroticism rooted not in secondary sexual characteristics, but rather in unsexed *manos* and *piernas*; for their creation of a queer eroticism that deconstructs identity, rather than reifies it; and for their intermittent subversion of feminist sexual ethics.

The Queer Feminist Dimension of *Evohé*

Drawing on Lorde's definition of poetry as "illumination" and Adorno's claim that new social concepts can be extracted from great poetry, I conceive an innovative imbrication in *Evohé*, a gesture towards an eroticism not discreetly queer and feminist but, rather, queer feminist. We witness this poetic nuance in the language through which Peri Rossi explores identity as extraindividual and dissolvable through eroticism. In feminist terms, I have argued that *Evohé* relates an erotic capacity to internalize a feminine partner's lifelong pain and exchange subjective sensitivities; this reflects feminist theory that suggests women can and

should go beyond their individualized subjectivities and enter a continuum of nonlinear, shared consciousness. In queer terms, I have interpreted this same challenge to individual subjectivities—of blurred faces and partners faded to smoke—with Butler's queer conception of gender and sexuality not as fixed identities, but rather as performances that complicate and undo predetermined identities. I argue, further, that *Evohé* not only speaks to feminists and queers independently; in creating a dissolving, yet relational eroticism, I extract from *Evohé* an intermingling of the two.

Peri Rossi illustrates this relational dissolution in the following poem, in which she evokes both the interdependence and the death drive of her eroticism:

> Me miró y supe que me hacía falta.
>
> Tanto tiempo me hacía falta.
>
> para escribir
>
> para comer
>
> para ir al cine
>
> para escuchar música cualquiera
>
> para dormir
>
> . . . . . .
>
> naturalmente, para hacer poesía
>
> . . . . . .
>
> para morirme unos cuantos días más
>
> y quizás,—si nos llevamos bien—
>
> para morirme hasta unos años. (25-26, lines 1-7, line 13 and lines 22-24)

This poem explores an amply felt, fatal linkage. This is not an eroticism of purely visceral pleasure; it extends to all aspects of life, suggesting that without this other, a presumable romantic partner, the poet would be

unable to eat or to sleep, i.e., unable to survive. The anaphora of *para* with numerous verbs of mundane actions intensifies this sense of dependency on another to exist in the world. The culmination of this highly interdependent erotic relationship is death—dissolution—indicated in the final three lines of the poem. The conditional clause in the second to last line—"si nos llevamos bien"—demonstrates that the poet conceives dissolution as the apex of a triumphant erotic relationship. However, if we comprehend the poem as a unit, the eroticism depicted goes beyond a plummet into a realm of antisocial sexual pleasure; it is a sexuality that vindicates a relational, interdependent existence whilst vying for dissolution. The dissolution cannot be separated from interdependence, from relationality.

Lynne Huffer, a pioneering exponent of queer feminism, poses a sophisticated vindication of relationality for our consideration here. In Huffer's view, the neglect of relationality in queer theory stems from the queer animus towards moral or ethical thinking: "… while feminists developed a robust field of ethical thinking … queer theorists have been more reticent to engage with ethics" (518). An emblematic reflection of this reticence to ethics appeared in Gayle Rubin's call for extrafeminist sexuality theories, in part, because of a feminist conservatism: "A good deal of current feminist literature attributes oppression of women to graphic representations of sex, prostitution, sex education, sadomasochism, male homosexuality, and transsexualism. ... [T]his so-called feminist discourse recreates a very conservative sexual morality" (166). As Rubin's argument reveals, this conservative sexual morality in much feminist literature—among the conservative morality of the overarching culture—vilifies erotic minorities, and much queer theory has thus expressed outright antagonism and irreconcilability with theories based in morality and, by proxy, ethics.

The queer theory camp that most clearly advocates for the total absence of morality in sexuality theory is antisocial queer theory, a strand inaugurated largely by Leo Bersani's article "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987). In the essay, Bersani argues that "the social structures from which it is often said that the eroticizing of mastery and subordination derive are perhaps themselves derivations (and sublimations) of the indissociable nature of sexual pleasure and the exercise of loss and power" (216).

Bersani refutes "our culture's lies about sexuality"—lies that frame sexuality as morally salvageable and not indissociable from structures of domination and subordination—arguing in turn that "the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared—differently—by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried" and thus "it should be celebrated for its very potential for death" (222). Antisocial queer theory, as represented in Bersani's argument, displaces morality entirely from the question, creating a nonrelational—i.e., antisocial and antiethical—sexuality paradigm in its place.

Huffer's call to reconcile queer theory and feminist theory rests in a conceptual differentiation between morality and (relational) ethics in sexuality questions; this is a theoretical task, she argues, many feminists and queers have neglected. Huffer contends that queer theory "interrupt[s] morality in its violent production and repression of sexually deviant subjects by articulating either a new or a negative ethics – [but] it has done so at the expense of a robust historical thinking about how subjects actually live and negotiate their relation to moralities" (519). Foucault, whose position against morality informs much of the negative ethics in queer theory, in fact, defended the place of ethical sensitivities in the modern world; according to Huffer, Foucaldian ethics are "a historical interrogation of the *relation* between subjectivity and truth, and to view that interrogation as simultaneously pursuing the question of a manner of living while jamming the machinery of moral-subject-production" (520; emphasis added). The self-shattering of the moral subject, as promoted in much queer theory, interrupts the production and reproduction of oppressed queer subjects. This process, however, is historically, and relationally, negotiated: this is the consideration missing in much queer theory that feminist ethics can contribute.

In *Evohé*, queer eroticism evokes the self-shattered, yet relationally sensitive subject Huffer defends; the eroticism—imbued with impressive nuance and contradiction—does not imply a queer antisocial death drive, that is, though eroticism is depicted as dissolution. We witness this intricacy in the poems themselves, e.g., in Peri Rossi's allusion to an interdependent eroticism, beyond visceral sexual pleasures, that culminates in death. Considering my feminist analysis and queer analysis of *Evohé* together, within the same reading, further prevents an

interpretation of queer antisocial sexuality or utopian feminist ethics, which feminists and queers, respectively, would find problematic. The necessary relationality in my feminist interpretation—of a feminine continuum of interdependent histories and subjectivities—is incompatible with Bersani's antisocial queer theory of a sexual death drive ubiquitously associated with power and powerlessness. While there are certain themes in *Evohé* that reflect Bersani's theory of "mastery and subordination" (216), the eroticism depicted in the poems entails a nuance that destabilizes a brute sexualization of "mastery." Consider the final lines of the poem on *las palabras*, which I have previously referenced to demonstrate the theme of sexual objectification:

> y una vez que les he hecho el amor, acariciado bien
>
> atemperado disuelto escogido bañado tamizado sostenido
>
> mi mujer ellas se ponen de pie, encendidas,
>
> las palabras magníficas, soñadoras, creadas. (69, lines 45-48)

While making love, to both the word and to the woman, the counterpart dissolves. In the previous stanzas of the poem, this sexual objectification reads more cruelly: "Yo las ordeno mi mujer / la palabra / Les pongo término y plazo mi mujer / la palabra" (lines 26-29). There is a palpable change in sentiment that the poet experiences through the lines; the poem evokes, at first, a negative ethics of sexuality as antisocial destruction and, in the final lines, it conceives sexuality as a mode of magnificent, relational creation. Remarkably, this poem wields the same metaphor—women as words for use—to evoke an antisocial sexuality of destruction and a relational sexuality of creation. The triumph of the latter, I believe, rests in the depiction, in the final lines, of relationality as the magnificent culmination of sexuality. The negativity of the Bersanian objectification in the former stanzas strikes a chord, indeed, but in these poems of great contradiction and nuance, Peri Rossi draws our attention to an eroticism with its climax in a dissolution with relational sensitivities. If queers are concerned with jamming "the machinery of moral-subject-production," Peri Rossi's poems remind us that this intervention does not necessitate an antisocial abandonment of relational existence nor an evasion of an

eroticism concerned with "the question of a manner of living" (Huffer 520). *Evohé's* poems on pilgrimages that sensitize a poet to her partner's lifelong pain; on infantilizations of words that unbury shared feminine languages and histories; on sexless sensual bodies; and on deviations, mergings, and dissolutions create a politically enigmatic eroticism that defies conceptual restriction as queer or feminist, yielding an artifact that, I believe, is resolutely queer feminist.

A closing reflection on the semantic and discursive richness of *dissolution* will crystallize the queer-feminist illumination I have extracted from *Evohé*. Much queer theory advocates for dissolution as an immoral descent into a self-shattering existence of antisocial pleasures, while much feminist theory advocates for dissolution as an ethical ascent into a relational continuum of feminine consciousness. The innovative, political brilliance of *Evohé* rests in its fusion of these two forms of dissolution—the immoral and the ethical—within a composite lyric expression. Peri Rossi's *Evohé* envisions an erotic dissolution of the moral individual, but the dissolved individual does not fall into an antisocial abyss, remaining sensitive to the pain, awareness, dreams, and creations of others. *Evohé*'s eroticism of relational dissolutions—beyond morality but within ethics—is just what queer feminists are after.

Conclusion

"Je sais que la poésie est indispensable, mais je ne sais pas à quoi" ("I know poetry is indispensable, but I do not know what for"). So Jean Cocteau's timeless deliberation leads Cristina Perri Rossi's *Evohé*, his inquiry perched as an enticing epigraph to these searching lesbian poems. I hope my reading of *Evohé* serves as a partial response to Cocteau's question: I defend *Evohé* as indispensable poetry for its prescient insight and critical nuance; for its orientation towards illumination, disruption, and reconciliation; for its capacity both to corroborate and to challenge theory. Read alongside canonical feminist and queer theory, as well as more recent queer feminist theory, *Evohé*'s antagonistic veracities reveal it as "a rift, a peculiar lapse, in the prevailing mode," a feature Adrienne Rich considers central to poetry (*What is Found* 83). I propose that *Evohé* indeed disrupts the putative irreconcilability between queers and

feminists, creating a sexuality that speaks, at once, to feminist and queer concerns regarding identity and morality. Lynne Huffer suggests that queer theory and feminist theory may reunite via a relationality that interrupts the morality-identity bind; I conceive this aspiration in Peri Rossi's collection in its steady articulation of a relational dissolution for eroticism. Nonetheless, *Evohé* is a work of poetry and not of theory; the poems are not a flawless model for queer feminism, and to some queers and feminists certain themes and forms may prove alienating. Peri Rossi's gripping poetry, however, does provide an indispensable lapse—to fuse Cocteau's and Rich's words: *Evohé* compels us—as queers, as feminists, as queer feminists—to reassess what we know, the impasses we theorize, in light of the extratheoretical veracities poetry illuminates. In these terms, Peri Rossi's poems invite us to imagine an ethos of relational erotic existences that dissolve, sustain, and create genders and sexualities anew, to imagine a reparative path towards a queer feminist horizon, foreseen so vividly in *Evohé* over fifty years ago in Montevideo.

Notes

1. The "many queers and feminists" mentioned here refer, principally, to participants in the canonical discourse on sexuality in the twentieth century in North America and Europe. This, of course, does not mean feminists and queers in Latin America and other parts of the world at this historical moment ignored sexuality (see, for example, Sternbach et al. 266). However, in this investigation I intend to juxtapose Peri Rossi against canonical feminist and queer thinkers in the West, in part, to complicate the oft-presumed notion that feminist and queer theorists of the developed world possessed uniquely revolutionary consciousness on questions of gender and sexuality.

2. Referring to Peri Rossi as a "Latin American woman" may seem questionable, as Peri Rossi has lived in Barcelona since 1972. However, I justify conceiving her as Latin American in the context of this analysis because Peri Rossi wrote and published *Evohé* in 1971, in Montevideo, before her move to Spain.

3. This is not the only theme in *Evohé* that complements feminist theories. For example, Peri Rossi's frequently suggests that prescriptive language is incapable of veraciously describing her lesbian eroticism: "Por la calle, venían tantas mujeres, / que no pude pronunciarlas a todas, en cambio, / las amé una por una" (42). Many feminist theorists also criticize prescriptive—i.e., masculine—language as an obstacle for women to overcome (Cixous 880, Irigaray 76). Radical feminist Marilyn Frye went so far as arguing that, in the "phallocratic scheme of things" (156), what counts semantically as having sex depends on penetration and ejaculation, thus rendering lesbians "logically impossible" (158). In her poems, Peri Rossi often struggles with the language problematics these feminists theorized.

4. One could easily counterargue that this less graphic corporal language reflects the sexual conservatism of the context in which Peri Rossi wrote *Evohé* and does not express an especially queer message; it was indeed an environment conservatism enough to ban the text shortly after its publication. As I have mentioned in my introduction, however, this analysis assumes poetry's capacity to reflect feelings and projections that we may not have consciously in mind. For this reason, the role of cultural conservativism—of which Peri Rossi was certainly cognizant—is not of principal interest.

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