MRS. AMERICA AT THE CONGRESS OF DREAMS:

writing identity and desire between Dennis Cooper & Erica Jong

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This past year I was invited to Dorothy Allison's birthday party. Allison is the red-haired, fiery author of *Trash*, a collection of stories with a Southern lesbian gothic theme and an S/M twist. My first thought was, of course, "What should I wear?" I figured black would be a safe bet, but when I looked in my closet all I could come up with was a black linen dress, tasteful enough for work or a funeral—but for Dorothy's birthday? I wore it anyway, hoping I'd somehow blend in. To say the least, I was wrong. Surrounded by fifty large women in bustiers and pierced body parts, I looked down at my basic black dress and sensible one-inch pumps and I thought, "I look like Nancy Reagan." So, I sat on the floor watching Dorothy unwrap various implements and sex toys, impatiently waiting for her to get to my present, a burst of rhinestones in the shape of a sword, and the young man next to me said, "I think you're the only straight person here." Well, I launched into him in a huff—*what do you mean by straight person I was in a lesbian relationship for 15 years I'd hardly call me a straight person you take these famous historical women they have sex with a woman for two hours and everybody wants to proclaim them as lesbian heroes grrr rrr rrrrrr.*

This does bring up the issue of "Where do I fit in?" I am a happily married woman—but I'm married to gay novelist Kevin Killian, which isn't exactly the same as being married to a regular straight man. (This is better.) While I had occasional skirmishes with men in my youth, until my mid-twenties I led a lesbian lifestyle, more specifically a hippie lesbian lifestyle in Indiana: sprouts, homemade bread, cats, dreams of living in the country in a fringed suede jacket—you name it. Then I found myself leading a straight life, in San Francisco of all places. Having made this switch it's impossible for me to really feel like a straight woman. But, then, maybe regular straight women don't feel like straight women either. Maybe nobody really feels like a straight woman. While most of the subject matter of my fiction evolves around straight interpersonal stuff, I always feel like an outsider, like I'm in drag. I wrote about this in a recent story—my protagonist, Mina Harker, is having dinner with a man she calls Rendezvous:

... He's sitting across from me in the Mexican restaurant, antlers and stuffed birds hang with Christmas glitter above our chatting heads. Why just push my chile relleno across the plate, why not push him a bit: "Do you know why I wanted to know you, it's because I dreamt about you, I had these *very intense* dreams about you." Rendezvous says he's flattered to be part of my unconscious, rather than the typical line women use on him: "you've got such big blue eyes." Blue eyes seem to trail me *there is something very private about them* ever since my Puerto Rican husband all the men I've slept with have had them ... *dreamlike, the sea, the sky; needles* ... to be more precise I've had four in a row, a statistic that says more about the demographics of San Francisco intelligentsia than my desire *they call her the Aryan mistress—naked together their skin is so white you need sunglasses just to look at it.* I continue, "Rendezvous, you don't seem like the kind of guy who'd be lacking in interested women." "Oh, quite the opposite." The opposite of what? I

can tell from his tone he isn't talking *drought* but he isn't bragging either—as always Rendezvous is understated. Across the room, Latin men with stringed instruments begin a serenade. How could this be happening that I, The Immemorial Mina Harker, could be having dinner with a textbook heterosexual, a man in a million, sexually secure, in charge, unlike the geeks *maudits* I've known who squirm and fret every time they look at a mirror *where are the interesting little wormholes for me to poke my fingers into?* After a few more sips of margarita he comments, "There's something very male about you." He says this casually, as if observing my shoe size. Fidgeting there in my black lace bra and panties I feel like one of those cross-dressing married men Dear Abby's always featuring, who get run over by a car and at the hospital their secret is found out. *Get this guy in the Fredericks of Hollywood!* I wipe the cheese from my chin, "Male about me?" This is where I tell him that getting to know a person feels like crucifixion. He puts down his fork peers sincerely through his glasses and replies, "No one's ever put it to me quite like that before."

To prepare for this talk, I spent the past couple of weeks alternately reading Dennis Cooper's new novel *Frisk* and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*. I know I fit in somewhere between the post-punk homo-nihilism of Cooper and the airy raciness of Jong, but I can't quite figure out where. I first read *Fear of Flying* in the early 70s. Back then, I, like everyone else present here, was much younger. I read it at a time when I was trying to lead a lower-class version of Jong's plot—instead of racing across Europe I was hitchhiking from Bloomington to Sarasota and back. I thought it was a fantastic book, I thought Erica Jong was describing my soul. This time around, I found it so irritating I wanted to rip it to shreds with my bare teeth. But why?

I think most of my problems stem from Jong's relationship to spectators, both the characters who observe her double in the book, and the reader. Early in the book, the protagonist, Isadora, visits a German library and discovers that sections from books dealing with Hitler's regime have been covered over with "oak-tags," whatever they are. This leads to her vision of the writer's purpose:

> I thought of how long it had taken me to stop writing clever columns about ruined castles, and neat little sonnets about sunsets and birds and fountains. Even without fascism, I was dishonest. Even without fascism, I censored myself. I refused to let myself write about what really moved me: my violent feelings about Germany, the unhappiness in my marriage, my sexual fantasies, my childhood, my negative feelings about my parents. Even without fascism, honesty was damned hard to come by.

Honesty, of course, is more slippery than Jong's naive Hollywood fantasy of the writer whose goal is to Tell the Truth.

Let me give you an example of Erica Telling the Truth: The setting is a psychoanalytic convention in Vienna when Isadora and the recently-met Adrian are seducing one another:

> Meanwhile, he's got my ass and is cupping it with both hands. He's put my book on the fender of a Volkswagon and he's grabbed my ass instead. Isn't that why I write? To be loved? I don't know anymore. I don't even know my own name.
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> "I've never met an ass to rival yours," he says. And that remark makes me feel better than if I'd just won the National Book Award. The National Ass Award—that's what I want. The Transatlantic Ass Award of 1971.
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> "I feel like Mrs. America at the Congress of Dreams," I say.
>
> "You *are* Mrs. America at the Congress of Dreams," he says, "and I want to love you as hard as I possibly can and then leave you."
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> ...The rest of the evening was a dream of reflections and champagne glasses and drunken psychiatric jargon. ... I had another champagne and made the rounds with Adrian. He was introducing me to all the London analysts and babbling about my unwritten article. Would they consent to be interviewed? Could he interest them in my journalistic endeavor? The whole time he had his arm around my waist and sometimes his hand on my ass. We were nothing if not indiscreet. Everybody saw. His analyst. My ex-analysts. His son's analyst. His daughter's analyst. My husband's ex-analyst. My husband.

And by extension, of course, the reader is also the captive audience of this exhibitionism. In her vague description of these "wild" proceedings, Jong clearly is more interested in who's watching her protagonist than in what she's doing. Jong's main problem in telling her tale of explicit sexual adventure is all the repressive female cultural shit she has to overcome to write it; she never can get beyond this overwhelming sense that she's doing something daring. It's not that Jong doesn't show spasms of talent—but if

she could only drop this image of Isadora as sexual-superwoman-with-the-most-fantastic-ass-ever-born, living out the fantasies of her repressed baby-toting sisters, whom shocked bystanding women glare at and men lasciviously leer at—if she could go beyond who's looking and get down to the specifics of her experience, there might have been some hope for this hopelessly bad novel. Maybe she *could* have gotten at the Truth, no matter how naively.

I'm not particularly interested in positive images of women, I'm interested in *complex* images of women. Complexity is something that comes in the later stages of a marginalized group's art. And recently, in lesbian writing, some exciting takes on sexuality have appeared in the work of such writers as Dorothy Allison and Jane DeLynn. Privately, I like to ram feminism—it's disappointed me, the same way the 60s disappointed me. But after years of steeping myself in feminist theory, I'd be kidding myself if I didn't admit that every word I put down on the page is infused with feminism. Feminism, and my lesbian past, have forever denaturalized my relation to heterosexuality, both in bed and across my pages. Feminism is sort of like your mother: you can't get rid of it, but how do you get beyond its limitations? Rather than measuring everything against the norm, the way Jong does, what I find in the work of radical gay male writers (e.g., Cooper, Robert Glück, Killian) is that there's no validation or even necessarily explanation applied to sex and its representation. The tone is more simply, this is an experience. The work of these writers has inspired me to explore my own sexuality as I find it, rather than writing about it in the prescribed fashion. It strikes me as odd that this *is* a radical perspective. In choosing to write in a fashion outside the norm, the writer is then freed to explore experience, to deal with formal concerns, allowing some depth and complexity to seep in. I've always been drawn to the marginal: the women who've inspired me most have been Sylvia Plath, Diane Arbus, and Flannery O'Connor. I hope I have learned something from the brutal mythos of Plath, the relentless eye of Arbus, the harsh mysticism of O'Connor. But this focus on misfits and freaks, no matter how beautifully done, has been a very painful place to be inspired from. In consciously placing itself outside the norm, radical gay fiction has given me positive images of marginality.

In addition, this writing has taught me new ways of looking at subject-object relations. As we all are aware by now, in the traditional heterosexual literary paradigm, men are the subject and women are the object. Lots has been written in recent years about the woman writer's transformation from object to speaking subject. What I find interesting about gay men's sex writing is that in it men are both subject *and* object, and as a woman writing about heterosexual relations, this model of portraying men as objects has been invaluable. But sometimes this mixing of straight/gay, female/male perspectives gets confusing, until my writing feels like an amorphous gender-bending soup. I end with a passage from a recent Mina letter that deals with my sense of taking on, not so much female drag, as gay male drag:

Bill, ... you should have been at the *OutWrite* party last March—the gala event was held in a vacant mansion—a gilt elevator rattled and art nouveau banisters snaked to the second floor. As I tunneled aimlessly through the maze of empty rooms the festivities took on the aura of *Mysteries of Udolpho*: anybody with this much money who would choose red flocked wallpaper had to be demonic. In the grand ballroom an apparition, the seamstress son of a Wisconsin welder, with this glorious creation flouncing from his waist: more than a skirt ... a tutu ... ruffle upon ruffle of stiff sequined netting in violet, red, gold and green ... the top layer an inspiration of camouflage-patterned cotton, colliding blobs of khaki and brown—scary when neofascist youths parade it on Haight Street—but on a tutu it gives the effect of lush tropical plumage peeking through the bush. I ran up to the dressmaker and gushed, "Do you make those for women too?" He undid the drawstring, stepped out of it and handed it over! I slipped the tutu over my party dress then rolled the waistband, drawing up the hemline from midcalves to knees in honor of the occasion. The dressmaker threw his arms in the air and exclaimed, "There, you're officially a fairy!" And I was—in every sense of the word—transcending gender, transcending species *Tinkerbell à la mode.*

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