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THE QUEER DISAPPEARANCE OF LESBIANS Sexuality in the Academy

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Synopsis—This article suggests that the developing field of lesbian and gay studies shows a likelihood to discriminate against the interests of lesbians and certainly against lesbian feminist theory through the incorporation of a 'queer' perspective. Recent writings in the field suggest that 'queer' theory and politics are and should be based on the celebration of certain specifically male gay cultural forms, particularly those of camp and drag. The importance of camp as well as a worrying tendency to want to protect the study of sexuality from the intrusion of feminist insights promises to create lesbian and gay studies which will disappear lesbians.

The appearance of queer theory and queer studies threatens to mean the disappearance of lesbians. The developing field of lesbian and gay studies is dominated now by the queer impulse. Lesbian feminism is conspicuous by its absence. Lesbian feminism starts from the understanding that the interests of lesbians and gay men are in many respects very different because lesbians are members of the political class of women. Lesbian liberation requires, according to this analysis, the destruction of men's power over women. In queer theory and queer studies, lesbians seem to appear only where they can assimilate seamlessly into gay male culture and politics. No difference is generally recognised in interests, culture, history between lesbians and gay men. The new field of the study of 'sexuality' seems similarly to be dominated by gay male sexual politics and interests. Both areas are remarkably free of feminist influence. As I discuss here, there is seldom any mention in queer theorising of sexuality of issues which are of concern to feminists and lesbian feminists, such as sexual violence and pornography or any politics of sexual desire or practice, and there is no recognition of the specificity of lesbian experience.

Within traditional Women's Studies, lesbian students and teachers have long been angry at the 'lesbian-free' nature of courses and textbooks. A good example is Rosemarie

Tong's Women's Studies reader *Feminist Thought* (1989). Although many of the feminist theorists covered in the book are lesbians, lesbian feminism is not one of the varieties of feminist thought included here. The index directs the reader to find lesbian feminist thought in three pages under the heading of 'Radical feminism and sexuality' (Tong, 1989). Lesbians might well have expected to find the new lesbian and gay studies more sympathetic to their interests, but that is only true in practice if they see themselves as a variety of gay men rather than as women. The new lesbian and gay studies is 'feminism-free.' By not recognising the different interests, history, culture, experience of lesbians, lesbian and gay studies homogenises the interests of women into those of men. It was precisely this disappearance of women's interests and experience in the malestream academic world which caused the development of Women's Studies in the first place. It cannot therefore be an unalloyed cause for celebration in the 1990s that lesbian and gay studies are becoming sufficiently well recognised to have a whole new journal *GLQ* and a first reader, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Abelove, Barale, & Halperin, 1993). Both are American in origin and content. Even a casual glance at these publications suggests that lesbians and feminists have considerable cause for concern.

It is not simply an abstract desire to right the injustice of lesbian disappearance which motivates my concern at the way that lesbian and gay studies are going. The work of this new field does and will increasingly influence the ideas and practices of lesbian and gay culture. Academia is not hermetically sealed but reflects and influences the world outside the academy. The disappearance of lesbians into an economically powerful commercial gay culture in the streets and the clubs will be exacerbated by what is happening in queer theory.

The editorial of the first issue of *GLQ* celebrates its commitment to 'queer' politics. The queer perspective is not a gender-neutral one. Many lesbians, perhaps the vast majority of lesbian feminists, feel nothing but hostility toward and alienation from the word queer and see queer politics as very specifically masculine. The editorial tells us that the journal will approach all topics through a queer lens. "We seek to publish a journal that will bring a queer perspective to bear on any and all topics touching on sex and sexuality" (Dinshaw & Halperin, *GLQ*, 1993; p. iii). We are told that the Q in the title of the journal *GLQ* has two meanings, quarterly and also "the fractious, the disruptive, the irritable, the impatient, the unapologetic, the bitchy, the camp, the queer" (p. iii). This definition of the word 'queer' should alert readers to its masculine bias. The adjectives accompanying it here refer to male gay culture. They arise from traditional notions of what is camp. Camp, as we shall see, lies at the very foundation of queer theory and politics and is inimical to women's and lesbian interests.

But before looking at the problems with camp in detail, it is worth considering another way in which this list of adjectives might not sit well with lesbian feminism. Although gay men's rebellion against oppression might well have been so mild that it could be expressed in terms like irritability, this has not been the way that lesbians have traditionally phrased their rebellion. Perhaps because lesbians have a great deal more to fight, that is, the whole system of male supremacy, rage has been a more prevalent emotion than irritability. The early womanifesto of lesbian feminism, the Woman-Identified-Woman paper, expressed it thus: "A Lesbian is the rage of all women con-

densed to the point of explosion" (Radicalesbians, 1988, p. 17). Irritable is how one might feel about not having garbage collected, not about ending the rape, murder, and torture of women, including lesbians.

Some queer studies writers are currently seeking to establish that 'camp' is a fundamental part of 'queer.' There is still a controversy about what constitutes camp, with gay male critics opposing their own notions to that expressed in the famous Susan Sontag piece and pointing out that her version is heterosexist (Miller, 1993; Sontag, 1986). Sontag saw camp as a sensibility and one that was not necessarily queer or gay. Moe Meyer, in the volume *the POLITICS and POETICS of CAMP*, which is said on the blurb inside the cover to contain essays by "some of the foremost critics working in queer theory" says that camp is "solely a queer discourse" and certainly not just a "sensibility" but "a suppressed and denied oppositional critique embodied in the signifying practices that processually constitute queer identities" (Meyer, 1994b; p. 1). Rather, the function of camp is the "production of queer social visibility" and the "total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity" (Meyer, 1994b; p. 5). So camp is defined here not just as one aspect of what it is to be queer, but as absolutely fundamental to queer identity.

Camp appears, on examination, to be based largely on a male gay notion of the feminine. As his example of camp political tactics, Meyer uses the Black drag queen, Joan Jett Blakk, who ran as a mayoral candidate in Chicago in 1991. This man ran as a 'Queer Nation' candidate. He is referred to by female pronouns throughout this piece, which raises some difficulties in itself for women who wish to recognize themselves in the text. Meyer tells us that there were some objections from what he calls "assimilationist gays" who saw the drag queen political tactic as "flippant and demeaning." The implication is that men who objected did so for conservative motives, whereas in fact they might have been expressing profeminist sympathies. For women and lesbians who have rejected femininity, the celebration of it by a gay man is likely to be seen as insulting rather than as something with which to identify in 'queer' solidarity. Actually, women might well want more women in parliament rather

than men wearing the clothing that has been culturally assigned to women.

It appears that some gay theorists are determined to place a male gay version of the feminine at the heart of camp and the idea of camp at the heart of queer theory and practice. Surely it would be hard not to notice that a problem arises when seeking to include lesbians in notions of camp and queer which depend on 'performativity' of the feminine. Obviously, lesbians cannot be drag queens. Femininity is something women have thrust upon them, and suffer severe penalties for escaping, rather than a joyous opportunity to perform. If women do dress up as 'drag queens,' the parodic aspect would not be obvious to the man or woman in the street. The importance of camp to queer theory and politics demonstrates very clearly their masculine bias. Meyer quotes Anthony Giddens as defining dominance as the power to control the production of cultural meanings. Unfortunately, because Meyer, like many gay theorists, sees himself as representing an oppressed group, he cannot see that gay men are the dominant group who are disappearing lesbians in queer studies. Gay men have an influential role in defining what the feminine is in male supremacist culture through their involvement in the media and fashion industries. In this they are the oppressors rather than the oppressed. But to mention a power difference between men and women appears to be impolite in queer theory.

Lesbian feminists are likely to see gay men's use of 'femininity' as an anachronism in the present. Gay men's identification with effeminacy before the 1970s is an understandable effect of a system of oppression in which same sex love was identified with not being 'real' men. The adoption of an effeminate identity can be seen as an example of identification with the values of the oppressor. It was to be expected that as a result of gay liberation gay men would reject the old culture of oppression and launch out into some new vision of what it might mean to love men. But it seems that traditional gay male culture has triumphed over the revolutionary possibilities of the 1970s. In the 1980s, drag and camp have been rehabilitated from even the little criticism which some gay theorists were prepared to launch. The cele-

bration of camp and the 'queer' culture which seems to derive from it, is finding a new respectability even in the academy amongst gay theorists who might have been expected to see its problems.

But many of the lesbian theorists of the new queer studies are failing to see why camp is a problem too. Women are included in anthologies and journals devoted to lesbian and gay studies and queer theory. It seems that the editors often feel that the mere presence of women is enough and somehow disappears the problem of women's oppression. The *GLQ* editorial seeks to show that it respects diversity. The editors want to achieve the widest possible historical, geographical, and cultural scope, seeking resources before the 20th century and "non-anglophone cultures, and into the experiences of those whose race, ethnicity, age, social class, or sexual practice has detached them from dominant cultures." Women are not mentioned here, not even the anodine term 'gender,' which is frequently employed to remove the question of agency, or who benefits, from consideration of women's oppression. The editorial team is comprised of a majority of women, eight women to seven men. Perhaps the presence of women as editors is supposed to cover the woman question. It would be good if that were true, but feminist goals are not achieved simply by the presence of women. If the women editors do not see any separation of interests between lesbians and gay men, then feminism is not served. The importance of the freedom of women still requires mention in a list of 'differences.' The new journal even begins with two pieces by women, but if we look closely at the content, we can see why the inclusion of women does not necessarily mean the achievement of a feminist agenda.

The two important theorists of the new lesbian and gay studies whose work begins this journal are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. They are stars of lesbian and gay studies perhaps because they do not challenge the gay male agenda that dominates the field. Sedgwick writes on issues of interest to gay men, such as gay male anal eroticism. In writing about Henry James in *GLQ* she shows an ability to see the male model as representing homosexuality and what it is to be queer.

The thing I *least* want to be heard as offering here is a “theory of homosexuality.” . . . When I attempt to do some justice to the specificity, the richness, above all the explicitness of James’s particular erotics, it is not with an eye to making him an exemplar of “homosexuality” or even of one “kind” of “homosexuality,” though I certainly don’t want, either, to make him sound as if he *isn’t* gay. Nonetheless I do mean to nominate the James of the Prefaces as a kind of prototype of – not “homosexuality” – but *queerness*, or queer performativity. In this usage, “queer performativity” is the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma. (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 11)

Here a woman is using the example of a man to define that which is ‘queer.’ It is not surprising that lesbian feminists might feel a little excluded from this discussion. Sedgwick’s work is stimulating so long as the reader is not looking for feminist stimulation. What is striking about the contributions by men and women to this new field is that they are so ‘feminism-free.’ The reader can feel rather as though a women’s liberation movement and lesbian feminism never existed. No distinctions between the political interests of women and man are made, and there is no mention of lesbian specificity.

The adherence of the female stars of lesbian and gay studies to a gay male agenda is even clearer in the second piece by Judith Butler. Butler explains that her approach is critically ‘queer.’ She celebrates ‘performativity,’ which turns out to mean traditional gay male cultural forms with lesbian roleplaying added in for balance. This performativity is politically progressive because it serves to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of gender. Performativity as resistance and hyperbolic display comprises: “crossdressing, drag balls, streetwalking, butch–femme spectacles, die-ins by ACT-UP, kiss-ins by Queer Nation, drag performance benefits for AIDS e.g. Liza Minelli does Judy” (Butler, 1993, p. 23). It should be clear from this list that the practices that are to be celebrated as political ways forward here are largely those of gay men. Butler does not simply fail to rec-

ognise that lesbians might have different interests, a culture and traditions of their own, but she selects, as the way forward, precisely those aspects of gay male culture that have been subjected to fairly rigorous criticism by lesbian feminist and some gay male theorists too. There may well be elements of traditional gay male cultural practice which, although they emerged and were shaped as a response to oppression, nonetheless might be worthy of celebration, but those that relate to and could be seen as perpetuating the oppression of women are not. Rigorous criticism of male gay culture is as necessary as the feminist criticism of other aspects of male supremacist culture.

Butler represents the enthusiasm for post-modern male masters in lesbian and gay studies. It is puzzling that a variety of postmodern thought which derives directly from the practices and pleasures of certain French male gay icons and lauds traditional practices of camp and drag is being adopted by some lesbians as if this could easily be suited to their experience. Suzanne Moore (1988) has characterised the obsession of male postmodernists with genderbending as ‘gender tourism,’ ‘whereby male theorists are able to take package trips into the world of femininity’ in her thought-provoking article “Getting a Bit of the Other – The Pimps of Postmodernism.’ These male theorists, such as Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard, Lyotard, essentialise a notion of the ‘feminine’ as a place of otherness and transformation which does, they admit, have little to do with real women. Women merely simulate the feminine, and men can do it too to their advantage.

This idea disappears women who end up as nothing but a simulation without disappearing the masculine. It makes women inauthentic, and women are told in compensation that they are clever to be playing the game of being feminine and they should continue if they want to join men in their escape.

This metaphor of becoming woman – the necessity of entering a feminine subjectivity in order to have access to the *jouissance* of the maternal body – is a way of ‘being’ sexuality that escapes sexual difference. . . . So even women have to ‘become woman’ in order to express desire

that is free of the constraints of gender. . . . Woman acts as the place and the boundary of this otherness, but in this process she will lose her identity as the boundary is permeated. (Moore, 1988; p. 179)

It should be clear that this is a philosophy of camp transformed into the dominant ideology of fashionable academia for men and women too. Just as women end up with nowhere to go as postmodern men appropriate the feminine, so lesbians find themselves with nowhere very comfortable to go as gay men make their own appropriation of the feminine the very touchstone of both lesbian and gay culture.

A good example of how lesbians are disappeared in practice is the 1994 gay Mardi Gras in Sydney. Drag, gay appropriation of the feminine, was the central motif of the parade. This left lesbians in a difficult position. What there they to wear? Interestingly, they did not seek to appropriate the masculine. Many tried to be feminine too. Men and women dressed as Playboy bunnies, for instance. For the men this might have seemed a transgressive incursion into the otherness of the sex industry. For the lesbians it could not be transgressive. The sexual objectification that Playboy bunnies represent so well is still the routine condition of women and is precisely what 25 years of feminist campaigning have sought to eliminate.

Despite the desperate contortions by which some lesbian postmodernists try to tell women that they too are being subversive by being 'feminine' and that they are really engaged in 'parody,' this somehow does not ring true.¹ It isn't likely that the heterosexuals watching the television coverage would see that the lesbians were being anything other than Playboy bunnies, in fact showing that that is what all women, even lesbians, would really like to be. To recognize that women assuming all the trappings of their oppression is really 'parody' might require the long years of training in cultural studies that most people simply don't have. Nor, I suspect, do armchair poststructuralists keep correcting the image they are receiving from the TV screen as they say to themselves 'This is just parody.' I suspect they 'see' just traditional Playboy bunnies too. The propaganda power

of the sex industry has constructed how we will view women so dressed.

The manufacture of femininity by gay men provides the same benefits that it provides to heterosexual men, which is the opportunity to take pleasure from good old-fashioned masculinity. Heterosexual men are able to experience all the sexual and other delights of being 'real' men by projecting femininity onto women. Without the feminine, which women are supposed to act out, men could not be men. The sexual excitements of masculinity, of aggression and objectification, of dominance, cannot exist in a vacuum. They require their opposite if they are to be experienced. Thus, femininity must be constructed if masculinity is to be found exciting by both its players and its admirers. Femininity cannot exist without masculinity and vice versa. Catharine MacKinnon is a feminist theorist of sexuality whose ideas are very unpopular in the field of lesbian and gay studies, but her analysis linking dominance/submission sexuality with the very construction of gender is helpful to an understanding of the eroticising of fetishised gender difference in gay male culture. By gender fetishism here, I mean sexual excitement produced by the trappings of exaggerated gender stereotypes. MacKinnon argues that, "Male and female are created through the erotization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other . . ." (1989; p. 114). Gay male crossdressers can be seen as constructing femininity for their own erotic purposes to fuel and maintain a sexuality of inequality. Feminists such as MacKinnon and myself see the construction of sexuality under male supremacy as arising from the eroticised subordination of women. The project of those feminists who wish to eliminate male violence is the dismantling of the sexuality of inequality and its replacement by a sexuality of equality if women are to be free. If this project were successful, then the excitements which presently fuel the fascination with 'gender' would evaporate.

The version of the feminine that is created through drag enables its devotees to worship and gain sexual excitement from its opposite. It is masculinity that needs to be examined when we seek to understand drag and camp. As Marjorie Garber explains, transvestism is

exciting precisely because of the penis concealed under the uniform of the subordinate group, women (Garber, 1993). Gay male femininity protects and celebrates that very masculinity that feminism seeks to dismantle. Drag and all the playing with gender that are being employed and defended as the very fount of gay culture represent the gay male equivalent to the heterosexual male project of leaching all possible satisfactions, particularly of a sexual nature, from the gender system which arises from and serves to fuel male supremacy. Effeminacy is necessary so that masculinity, the power of the male ruling class, can remain the source of the sexual excitement of eroticised dominance and submission even in a culture in which women are not available. The manufacture of femininity demonstrates male power.

the Politics and Poetics of Camp does include some contributions from lesbians who are critical of camp. Kate Davy points out the purely masculine nature of drag:

. . . . female impersonation, while it certainly says something about women, is primarily about men, addressed to men, and for men Both female and male impersonation foreground the male voice and, either way, woman are erased. (Davy, 1994; p. 133)

Davy explains, with reference to the theatre, that lesbians cannot simply be fitted into camp by performing in gender roles. In a very interesting article she compares the way that female impersonation, as in the plays of Charles Ludlum, can move into mainstream culture in a way that male impersonation cannot. She suggests that the lesbian theatre group WOW took up male impersonation in order to enter the mainstream, to escape the poverty and limitations of marginality, but there is "something magical and compelling about a crossdressed male" and not a crossdressed female (Davy, 1994). One explanation that she, like Marjorie Garber, advances is that what matters about male crossdressers is that there is a male underneath. The crossdressing emphasises and creates excitement out of masculinity. But the acceptability of male crossdressing, from performances by army theatre troupes in the Second World War to drag performances now to male-

stream audiences must depend upon the investment of men in general, heterosexual and gay, in female vestments. Drag is an established form in mainstream culture. Male impersonation is not. It could be that the excitement created by Sydney's gay Mardi Gras derives precisely from the excitement that the idea of crossdressing affords a majority of men. As Wayne Dynes comments, "Undeniably, camp is subversive, but not too much so, for it depends for its survival on the patronage of high society, the entertainment world, advertising and the media" (Davy, 1994; p. 141).

Interestingly, Davy, like the other lesbian theorists who seek to remain within the pale of queer studies, is not critical of camp itself, simply of the idea that lesbians can fit into it, and sees the theatrical portrayal of butch/femme roleplaying as subversive, but not any part of camp. Postmodern theory has legitimised the 1980s revival of lesbian roleplaying, which provided mild sadomasochistic satisfactions to fashionable lesbians who found that the pursuit of equality damaged their orgasmic potential.² This sexual practice has been represented in the academy as the lesbian version of drag and the way that lesbians can fit into camp. It is revealed also in Butler's list of forms of performativity. Any serious examination of the politics of female and male impersonation, however, shows such differences that these practices cannot be neatly rolled together as varieties of queer performativity.

Feminist analysis of gender suggests that masculinity and femininity are not just harmless variations in human behaviour that can be swapped at will. This genderswapping ideal contains the same faulty analysis that underlies the androgynous ideal. Well-meaning antisexist men tend to say that they are developing the feminine sides of themselves and expect approval from feminists for this odd project. But, as the French feminist theorist Christine Delphy has pointed out, masculinity and femininity do not represent timeless universal human values that simply need to be in balance in individuals (Delphy, 1993). They represent, in fact, the values of a male supremacist hierarchy. Emerging from hierarchy they cannot be expected to survive the creation of a nonhierarchical society. That which is seen as archetypal 'feminine'

behaviour, much of what is reproduced in drag and camp, is in fact the learned behaviour of the oppressed, learnt to avoid punishment. It is behaviour which shows awareness of low status and suitable respect for the powerful male class. 'Feminine' body language, use of space, of eyes, touch, voice, represent lack of power.³ Examples include keeping knees together, eyes down, qualities of attention which are the opposite of the behaviours allowed to those with power. In a posthierarchical world it is hard to imagine that these certainly nonuniversal qualities would survive. It is the task of feminism for women and for the men who support the feminist project to imagine and create in the present, ways of behaving which represent the nonhierarchical values we aspire to.

Feminist analysis does not see gender as just something which can be subversively swapped and played with but as emerging from the real material oppression of women. 'Playing' with gender is a problem precisely because it keeps gender 'in play' and contributes to maintaining the political classes of male supremacy in place. Indeed feminists who are conscientious objectors to the idea of gender, who refuse to take sides, who refuse to empower the whole system by their participation, who have lived and continue to live beyond gender, are derided as utopian and essentialist by those committed to the supposedly revolutionary or simply pleasurable possibilities of playing with it. Although the theorists of genderbending defend it by emphasising its socially transformative potential, the ideology which underlies it is deeply pessimistic, one in which only accommodation to male supremacist duality is seen as possible or desirable.

Postmodern lesbian and gay theory is committed to the idea that gender is infinitely flexible. Transsexualism should provide an indigestible problem because there is nothing flexible about surgical mutilation. But the new lesbian and gay studies does not show any ambivalence toward transsexualism. In the introduction to *GLQ* the editors state the target audience. It will cover material of relevance to "lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people" (*GLQ*, Dinshaw & Halperin, 1993; p. iii). This ragbag approach to 'sexual minorities,' which fails to recognise the different political constructions and con-

tradictory agendas involved, is typical of queer politics, and it excludes feminist analysis. Feminist analysis has pointed out that the phenomenon of transsexualism derives from the cruelty of male supremacy's determination to divide human beings arbitrarily into two political classes with accompanying rigid rules of conduct and appearance in order to organise and maintain male dominance. Such analysis has shown that the medical profession invents transsexualism for its own profit and to maintain the gendered categories necessary to the political control of women (Raymond, 1994). Feminists seek to create a world in which brutal physical mutilation of human beings for profit and to fit into political categories of control is unthinkable. The editorial of *GLQ* clearly gives credibility to the idea that people can be 'transgendered,' a notion created by the medical profession and in direct opposition to feminist and, one might have thought, poststructuralist understandings of gender as a political construction. It could be that the postmodern tendency to regard the body as a text and not to take seriously what happens to the material body allows the cruelty of surgical mutilation to be taken so lightly. Susan Bordo, who is an incisive critic of postmodern thought while still purporting to consider it useful, comments:

I view current postmodern tendencies thoroughly to "textualize" the body—exemplified in Judith Butler's analysis of drag as parody as giving a kind of free, creative rein to *meaning* at the expense of attention to the body's material locatedness in history, practice, culture. (Bordo, 1993; p. 38)

Somer Brodribb has pointed out in her feminist critique of postmodern theory that the fundamental separation of mind and body that underlies it is a masculine problem; "Postmodernism is an addition to the masculinist repertoire of psychotic mind/body splitting and the peculiar arrangement of reality as Idea . . ." (Brodribb, 1992; p. xvix). A body of theory which believes that 'gender' can float around with no relation to bodies, particularly the body of woman, can apparently see the cutting up of bodies, too, as simply an interesting idea.

Another aspect of the new lesbian and gay studies that does not bode well for the interests of lesbians and feminists is the determination to establish that the study of sexuality is a field of inquiry quite separate from and impervious to feminist theory. There is a movement afoot to afford intellectual protection to a broad spectrum of men's sexual interests, particularly those of gay men. The 1993 reader in lesbian and gay studies makes this clear. As the first collection of its kind, it is and will be important in affecting the shape lesbian and gay studies is to take. It contains writings that the editors see as the most significant contributions to the field. This gives weight to their choice to place first, in the opening section on philosophy, Gayle Rubin's piece entitled 'Thinking Sex,' which was originally a paper contributed to the Barnard conference in 1982 and anthologised in *Pleasure and Danger* (Vance, 1984).⁴

Rubin seeks to put feminism in its place and to establish the illegitimacy of feminist analysis for many areas of sexual behaviour. Her project suits the male interests represented in the new queer studies very well. In the early 1970s, gay liberation theorists, both lesbian and gay, explained and criticised many aspects of male gay behaviour from a feminist perspective. They showed how goal-oriented, phallic sexuality supported male supremacy and how drag and other forms of objectification and fetishism were connected with the oppression of women. There was an understanding at that time in gay politics that the suppression of male homosexuality served male supremacy by maintaining the nuclear family in which women's unpaid labour is extracted. A holistic analysis was sought which tied together feminist, socialist, antiracist, and gay politics. What took place in the 1980s was an undoing of the analysis to separate out 'sexuality' from analysis of 'gender' or the oppression of women. Rubin's article has been crucial to this process.

In 'Thinking Sex' she explains that she has rejected the analysis of her earlier groundbreaking article "The Traffic in Women" in which she showed how sex and gender were interlinked. Now, she says, she recognises that there are only some areas of sexuality that are appropriate objects for feminist analysis. She does not specify what exactly feminists are allowed to look at here, but it is

clear that there is a great deal they are required politely to avoid.

Feminist conceptual tools were developed to detect and analyze gender-based hierarchies. To the extent that these overlap with erotic stratifications, feminist theory has some explanatory power. But as issues become less those of gender and more those of sexuality, feminist analysis becomes irrelevant and often misleading. Feminist thought simply lacks angles of vision which can encompass the social organization of sexuality. The criteria of relevance in feminist thought do not allow it to see or assess critical power relations in the area of sexuality. (Rubin, 1993; p. 34)

It is clear what feminists are not supposed to concern themselves with, that is, the sexual minorities. These, such as the transvestites, transsexuals, sadomasochists, and those interested in what Rubin calls 'crossgenerational sex,' are oppressed in a separate system from that of gender. This is convenient because these are practices of which feminists have long had a developed critique.

Rubin's sexual freedom analysis is very old-fashioned. Sexual liberals have long sought to warn feminists not to interfere in sexuality. I detail in my book *The Spinster and Her Enemies* (Jeffreys, 1985) how early 20th century sex reformers attacked prewar British feminists, who had had well-developed campaigns and analysis against male sexual violence, as prudes and puritans, ignorant about sex. Alex Craig explains that the feminist movement had 'undesirable results' in the area of sex. This was because:

In the first place, the women who gained most in political, economic and social influence were generally celibates. Their influence on the national life tended towards puritanism, drabness and a safety first attitude to sociological problems. (Craig, 1934; p. 16)

Gayle Rubin is a contemporary representative of a tradition of sexual liberalism in which feminists have always been told to mind their own business.

Rubin does see some relevance for a gender analysis. She considers that women have

been unfairly excluded from certain of men's sexual privileges. She sees the exclusion of women from being producers and consumers in the sex industry as an example of gender inequity. Rubin also sees women as having been unfairly excluded from some sexual practices, perhaps the 'crossgenerational sex' she defends in this article. So gender is relevant only where Rubin sees women as having been unfairly denied the right that men have to sexually abuse women and children but not when it might mean a feminist analysis of the very existence of these practices.

Feminist theory threw old-fashioned sexual liberalism into disrepute by showing how it protected men's privileges and prevented women from protecting themselves from sexual violence and exploitation. Feminist analyses of rape, sexual abuse of children, prostitution, sexual harassment, and sexuality and its role in the social control of women in general depended upon vigorously deracinating the whole male philosophy of sexual liberalism. Rubin does not mention sexual violence in 'Thinking Sex' but defends traditional sexual liberalism against the impertinence of feminism. The creation of a feminism-free theory of sexuality may be convenient for the new lesbian and gay studies because it enables gay men to consider that their practices, history, experience are somehow immune to feminist analysis. It does, however, make it difficult for lesbians who recognise that their interests as women are different from those of men in the area of sexuality to be involved in this evolving field.

It seems that the determination to separate off 'sex' from 'gender' is quite fundamental to lesbian and gay studies. Judith Butler, too, is very critical of the determination of feminist theorists of sexuality, such as MacKinnon, to look at the construction of sexuality as a whole from a feminist perspective. MacKinnon, like many other radical feminist theorists, does approach sexuality holistically and fails to leave feminism-free enclaves. She writes:

To be clear: what is sexual is what gives a man an erection. Whatever it takes to make a penis stiffen with the experience of its potency is what sexuality means culturally . . . Hierarchy, a constant creation of person/thing, top/bottom, dominance/

subordination relations does . . . All this suggests that what is called sexuality is the dynamic of control by which male dominance—in forms that range from intimate to institutional, from a look to a rape—erotizes and thus defines man and woman, gender identity and sexual pleasure. It is also that which maintains and defines male supremacy as a political system. (MacKinnon, 1989; p. 137)

MacKinnon does not exempt gay men from her analysis. Butler responds:

In theories such as Catharine MacKinnon's, sexual relations of subordination are understood to establish differential gender categories, such that "men" are those defined in a sexually dominating social position, and "women" are those defined in subordination. Her highly deterministic account leaves no room for relations of sexuality to be theorized apart from the rigid framework of gender difference or for kinds of sexual regulation that do not take gender as their primary objects (i.e. the prohibition of sodomy, public sex, consensual homosexuality). (Butler, 1993; p. 27)

Butler shows the importance of Rubin's article by specifically enlisting her "influential distinction between sexuality and gender" and "Sedgwick's reformulation of that position" as "important theoretical opposition to MacKinnon's deterministic form of structuralism" (Butler, 1993; p. 27).

Feminism is not ignored in the 1993 *Reader*, but given its place as a minor theme within lesbian and gay studies. Four strong feminist pieces are included by Monique Wittig, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Marilyn Frye. But the place of feminism is asserted in the foundational piece by Rubin. The philosophy of lesbian and gay studies as illustrated in this volume and in journals which give attention to this field is a context deeply hostile to feminism. The feminist pieces here float in a vacuum, as examples of an interesting but slightly quirky minority perspective.

The *Reader* does contain one very instructive piece, by Esther Newton, which suggests the serious contradictions which can exist be-

tween lesbian and gay interests. It would not be wise to assume that the interests of lesbians and gay men would necessarily coincide, considering that their political situations in respect of male supremacy are so different. As Marilyn Frye has pointed out, but not in this volume, gay men can be seen as the conformists to male supremacy because they choose to love those whom everyone is mandated to love under this political system, that is, men (Frye, 1983). Lesbians, on the other hand, choose to love those who are despised, that is, women. The significant implications this might have for lesbian and gay politics are seldom even mentioned in lesbian and gay theory. One is certainly the loyalty which it is possible for some gay men to have to the values of male supremacy and all of the privileges which it ensures to them as men.

Newton's article is about the way in which gay men can claim men's traditional right to control public space and keep women out (Newton, 1993). Newton analyses the experience of lesbians in Cherry Grove, a traditionally male gay resort in the United States which lesbians have been asserting more and more right to use in recent years. She explains that until recently the gay men there had enforced an 'agreement' with the few lesbians who wanted to use the resort. This stipulated that gay men would cease to cause inconvenience to the lesbians by engaging in sexual activity on the beach so long as the lesbians agreed to give over to the men all rights to a public area which in fact formed an important bridge between one part of the island and another. Recently lesbians had been challenging this clearly unequal arrangement and demanding their right to use all public spaces. This interesting example of a clash between men's control of public space and women's right to enter it, demonstrates an area of gay male practice where a feminist analysis is vital rather than, as Rubin might feel, inappropriate. If lesbian interests are going to be represented in lesbian and gay studies, the tensions between the contradictory interests of men and women, particularly in the area of sexuality, must be a subject of ongoing analysis.

The relatively new academic field of 'sexuality' seems to be dominated by the theorists of lesbian and gay studies and demonstrates the same sorts of problems. At first sight this

might seem surprising because it is precisely in the area of sexuality that feminist theorists, both heterosexual and lesbian, have made such important and exciting interventions in the last 25 years. Feminist theorists have written copiously about sexual violence in all its forms from sexual abuse of children through to the use of women in prostitution, about the history of sexuality and sexology and its construction of compulsory heterosexuality, and most importantly about the institution of heterosexuality, its functions and the way that it is maintained. These feminist insights were scarcely represented at a conference on sexuality held at the prestigious Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra in 1993. Matters of concern to feminists, and particularly heterosexual feminists, were conspicuous by their absence. The organisers had chosen to focus their invitations to 3-month research fellowships on certain carefully chosen American stars of the new lesbian and gay studies. The women stars were those whose research interests would not lead to the discomfiture of gay male theorists. Carol Vance and Cindy Patton spoke interestingly but about matters mainly of concern to gay men, making no distinctions between the interests or experience of lesbians and gay men. Gayle Rubin spoke about her research over many years into the gay male leather community and sadomachism in the United States, how the cult developed, its symbols and meeting places. She showed slides of leather clubs inside and out, of slings and tins of the lubricant used in fistfucking (Jeffreys, personal observation, 1993).

When asked at the end of the conference why this particular selection of speakers had been made, the organisers stated that they were chosen for their distinction in theorising sexuality. It is surprising then that Catharine MacKinnon was not chosen, for her distinction is beyond dispute. But her work is not of comfort to gay male interests. It is becoming more and more clear that women, heterosexual or lesbian, wishing to have their distinction recognised in the study of sexuality need to assimilate into gay male interests, culture, history, or simply to research or write, uncritically, on gay male experience. The study of sexuality as well as lesbian and gay studies will become simply a celebration of gay male

cultural forms if feminists and lesbian feminists decide not to confront such a development with energy. The dominance of gay male theory in studying sexuality is aided by some belief in the heterosexual community that gay men will have a radical—and perhaps because of their oppression—a necessarily progressive analysis of sexuality, and by a tradition of ignoring lesbians and lesbian feminism.

The celebration of gay male culture by both women and men in the academy is paralleled by precisely similar developments in popular lesbian culture which threaten the existence of lesbian pride and the lesbian specific culture that a generation of lesbians has been dedicated to constructing over the last 25 years. I have written elsewhere of the pressures upon lesbians outside the academy to assimilate into traditional gay male culture (Jeffreys, 1993). This is taking place in particular in relation to sexual practice. Some lesbian sex therapists bewail lesbian failure to live up to gay men sexually. Lesbian commentators write with approval of the way that gay men's pornography is being used as the model of a new, commercially profitable lesbian sexuality aimed at the consumption of other women and products in a lesbian sex industry. The failure of lesbian confidence is evident in such practices as lesbian-to-constructed-gay male transsexualism. This failure of confidence comes at a time when feminism is under massive attack and makes it difficult for lesbians, whether in clubs or conferences, to assert a lesbian specific identity and interests.

The very word 'queer,' whether applied to queer theory within the academy or to queer politics outside, is discriminatory. The experience of lesbians has been that generic words for male and female homosexuality quickly come to mean only men. This happened to both 'homosexual' and 'gay.' Lesbians struggled long and hard to assert the existence and difference of lesbians. Naming was crucial to this. Without a name of our own, lesbians could not have organised. Amazingly, the supposedly all-inclusive quality of the word Queer is being put forward as one of its advantages rather than its clearest disadvantage. Thus, Simon Watney explains "The great convenience of the term 'queer' today lies in its gender and race neutrality" (Wat-

ney, 1992; p. 21). Lesbian and gay are said to be old-fashioned and clumsy terms, but already it is clear in the writings even of the most convinced converts to 'queer' politics that the word is not inclusive. Cherry Smyth, a British advocate of the inclusivity of the word 'queer' finds herself forced to use qualifiers which suggest that the word is not inclusive in practice. In the midst of a pamphlet in which she promotes the inclusive nature of 'queer' she uses phrases such as "mixed queer" and "Black and White lesbian queer artist" (Smyth, 1992).

The word 'queer' is justified as politically progressive because it is inclusive not just of race and gender but of sexual minorities other than lesbians and gays, all those seen by Rubin as being outside the charmed circle of missionary position heterosexuality. These minorities include bisexuals and others who more clearly defy easy inclusion in traditional lesbian and gay politics, such as transsexuals, sadomasochists, paedophiles. This inclusiveness is seen as progressive in a time when the celebration of diversity is valued over any clarity as to political aims and ideals. Lesbian feminists have considerable difficulty in accepting that their form of resistance, their practice of womanloving, is just a sexual practice similar to paedophilia or transvestism.

The word queer presents difficulties beyond a mere consideration of who is to be included under its umbrella. The word is politically loaded. It is a politics of outsiderhood. The 'queer' are defined by their difference from traditional heterosexuality. The categories of 'queer' arise from the categorisations of 19th century sexologists who accepted the inevitability of majority heterosexuality. Queer politics accepts and celebrates the minority status of homosexuality. This is a politics which is in contradiction to lesbian feminism. Lesbian feminists do not see themselves as being part of a transhistorical minority of 1 in 10 or 1 in 20, but as the model for free womanhood. Rather than wanting acceptance as a minority which is defined in opposition to an accepted and inevitable heterosexual majority, lesbian feminist theorists seek to dismantle heterosexuality, and one strategy is the promotion of lesbianism as a choice for women.

The outsider politics that the word 'queer'

represents arises from an age in which particularly fierce attacks have been made on an emerging lesbian and gay pride, an era of backlash. Eve Sedgwick recognises a connection between queerness and 'shame.' She speaks of the importance of the ways that shame is incorporated into identity formation for certain people and suggests that these are the people who are drawn to queer politics. So queer is a category very closely associated with lesbian and gay politics but not exclusively so because some of the categories of people moved by 'shame' to associate with the word 'queer' will not be lesbian or gay at all.

Yet many of the performative identity vernaculars that seem most recognizably "flushed" (to use James's word) with shame-consciousness and shame-creativity do cluster intimately around lesbian and gay worldly spaces: to name only a few, butch abjection, femmitude, leather, pride, SM, drag, musicality, fisting, attitude, zines, histrionicism, asceticism, Snap! culture, diva worship, florid religiosity, in a word, *flaming* . . . (Sedgwick, 1993; p. 13)

Sedgwick's understanding of the word 'shame' is based on psychoanalysis. But it may be helpful to our understanding of queer politics without that reference. It could be that gay pride suffered through the impact of the AIDS epidemic on gay men and the backlash which accompanied it. Queer politics celebrates and seeks to arouse in the non-queer a disgust which the politics of gay pride sought to overcome. As a London Queer Power leaflet put it:

Queer means to fuck with gender. There are straight queers, bi-queers, lez queers, fag queers, SM queers, fisting queers in every single street in this apathetic country of ours. (Smyth, 1992; p. 17)

This is a politics which does not resonate well with the feminist project of overcoming centuries of men's hatred of women and the disgust at women's bodies so integral to male supremacist western culture. Because women know well what shame is all about, one might have expected that they would arrive in

droves to associate with the word queer, but this is not the case. The politics of disgust create difficulties for feminist and lesbian feminist activism. How, for instance, will lesbians seeking custody of their children in court be aided by a celebratory association with fisting queers? Men's disgust at women leads to the slaying of women in considerable numbers so that for women to represent themselves as disgusting is not a very safe option.

No word which is supposed to cover lesbian and gay experience would be sufficient to allow for lesbian specificity, but the word 'queer' has inbuilt problems that even 'gay' does not. To associate with the word, to attend the proliferating 'queer' conferences and events, lesbians must associate themselves not just with a dominant male majority but with a particular politics. It is the politics of deviance, a politics which assumes lesbians and gays will always be a minority and naturalises heterosexuality. It utilises the categories and ideology of 1980s sexologists. The lesbian feminist understanding that 'any woman can be a lesbian' implies the rejection of minority status. It symbolises the progressive politics possible in a more hopeful time, one of opportunities for social change and for brave thinking that we can only hope may re-emerge in the future. "Queer" politics arises from a time of despair. It represents the 'Victorian values' of the gay community. In Thatcher's Britain, much was made of casting aside the dangerous values of the 1960s and returning to the 'Victorian' values of respect for the family, rejection of lesbians and gays, and unmarried mothers. The onslaught has escalated under John Major. 'Queer' politics, rather than being a challenge to this, is a complement, a politics trapped into opposition to a particular moral right moment, trapped in the values of the 1890s, the framework of sexology.

In seeking to understand why some lesbian theorists are prepared to support a developing queer theory which is discriminatory in so many ways, it is important to recognise the constraints that a desire to survive and make a living in the academy put on the ability to create original, woman and lesbian positive thinking. Gay men are already likely to be in the academy, and, as lesbian and gay studies have developed, they are the ones who have been in a position to set its parameters.

Women have had great difficulty even getting into the academy and are still under immense pressure to couch what they might want to say within the terms of some male thinker's wisdom even though he might fail to consider women or even be explicitly womanhating.

Somer Brodribb, in her mistressful critique of the current fashion for postmodern male masters in feminist theory, explains that:

. . . the objection to leaving male theory behind expresses a real fear of being silenced: unless you read/write/speak the boys, no one will listen to you. You will be outside the defined and policed arena of discourse. (Brodribb, 1992; p. xxvii)

Brodribb points out that "Women's memory, women's language, women's body and sexuality have been annulled in the patriarchal tradition which has feared the female sex" (Brodribb, 1992; p. xix). The result, which we can see very clearly in queer theory and the development of lesbian and gay studies to date, is that women are forced into the celebration of men and particularly of male sexuality. "What we are permitted, encouraged, coerced into, and rewarded for, is loving the male sex and male sex: the bad girls are the ones who don't, and who thereby risk men's rage and women's fear" (Brodribb, 1992; p. xix). Lesbian feminists are the bad girls who fail to love the male frame of mind that currently dominates lesbian and gay studies.

It is important that feminists do not just ignore lesbian and gay studies. Lesbian and gay studies has the potential to give strength and confidence to lesbian students as Women's Studies has for women students in general. The ideas created there will influence the way that lesbianism is thought and practised in the academy and out of it. It is too important to ignore. It should be shaped to recognise the experience of women. This will entail a serious challenge to the use of the term 'queer,' which disappears lesbians by subsuming them, at best, into a variety of gay men, and to the dominant politics of queer theory and practice, the politics of camp. It is interesting to me that to write this piece I found the ideas of radical feminist theorists, mostly heterosexual, particularly in relation to sexuality and the material reality of the body really useful, whilst within lesbian and

gay studies women's bodies, including the lesbian body, disappear so completely. It seems that lesbian theorists who enter 'queer' culture are under pressure to disown their own embodiment. The very considerable pressure exerted within lesbian and gay studies for lesbians to suppress any difference, either in bodies or in interests from gay men needs to be resisted if lesbians are to claim any space within this field.

ENDNOTES

1. See my discussion of the idea of parody in the chapter entitled "Return to Gender" in Jeffreys, Sheila (1993). *The Lesbian Heresy. A feminist perspective on the sexual revolution*.

2. See my chapter "Butch and Femme: Now and Then" in Lesbian History Group (Jeffreys, 1989).

3. For an analysis of the politics of body language see Henley, Nancy M. (1977), *Body Politics*.

4. A new anthology, Kaufman, Linda (Ed.) (1993) *American Feminist Thought*, also puts Rubin's piece first in the section entitled "Sexuality and Gender." It is surprising that a feminist anthology should be so keen to emphasise the *limitations* of feminist theory rather than its promise. But this does suggest the influence this determined separation of sexuality and gender is now gaining in apparently respectable feminist circles.

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