

Queer Theory

Readers in Cultural Criticism

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The Body
Posthumanism
Theorizing Ireland
Postmodern Debates
Queer Theory

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Readers in Cultural Criticism

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From Here to Queer: 'Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace

Suzanna Danuta Walters

QUEER DEFINED (NOT!)

'Queer' is, in true postmodern fashion, a rather amorphous term and still emergent enough as to be vague and ill defined. Perhaps it makes sense to open, then, with my laundry list of the queer contemporary, a list admittedly more aware of the female manifestations of this 'queerness' and in no particular order:

Eve Sedgwick	Teresa de Lauretis	ball culture
Judith Butler	Queer Nation	kiss-ins
Madonna	lipstick lesbians	lesbian strippers
conferences at Santa Cruz, Rutgers, Iowa, etc.	drag	butch/femme
'in your face activism'	piercing	Michelangelo
Camille Paglia	Ru Paul	Signorile
go-go girls	tattoos	Sue-Ellen Case
men in skirts	passing	dildos
Riot Grrrls	queer zines	sadomasochism
Foucault	outing	backrooms
<i>On Our Backs</i>	cross-dressing	(for lesbians)
Susie Bright	male lesbians	Sandra Bernhard
	Annie Sprinkle	camp
	lesbians who sleep with men	bisexuality
		genderfuck

These signifiers (and others, of course) constitute what many have called the 'new queer sensibility'. There is no doubt that a new tide of gay visibility is sweeping the country - from *Time* magazine cover stories on the new chic lesbians, to k.d. lang's *Vanity Fair* dress up with supermodel Cindy Crawford, to gays in the military, drag queens on *Donahue*, outing, and our

structured culture, these (largely hetero) gram pieces immersed with unique developments, both intellectual and political, within various gay communities. So these shifting signifiers of 'queer' are never simply our own products, located solely in some subcultural neoworld (if they ever were - remember disco?), but instead they move uneasily in and out of the 'mainstream' as it recodes and cannibalizes these new images, icons, activisms. . . .

HOMO POLITICUS, HOMO ACADEMICUS

The growth of queer theory and queer politics must be placed in a social and political context. The most important pieces of this are, of course, the AIDS crisis, the rise of postmodern/poststructural theory, the politics of academia, the sex debates,¹ and recent critiques of feminism. I want to go through each of these briefly to contextualize both the development of the term *queer* and my own criticisms of it as well.

As many writers have noted, the AIDS crisis not only prompted a renewed and reinvigorated gay and lesbian movement, but radically opened up (or re-created) new ways of doing politics. Although this was surely not the first time gay men and women had worked together, AIDS activism brought us together in a time of crisis both from the disease itself and from the increasing attacks on gay and lesbian life from the religious Right and the Republican administrations. It encouraged a rethinking of gay politics in the light of this crisis but also in the light of the way in which gay men and women have learned more about each other and their various communities. So, we would want to recognize the specificity of queer politics as emerging with the crisis of AIDS and the development of groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation: 'Many of these new gay militants reject the liberal value of privacy and the appeal to tolerance which dominate the agendas of more mainstream gay organizations. Instead, they emphasize publicity and self-assertion; confrontation and direct action top their list of tactical options; the rhetoric of difference replaces the more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity with other groups' (Duggan, 1992: 15). In addition, *queer* has developed as a way to broaden the definitions, so that the movement can be more inclusive (e.g., bisexual, transgendered, etc.): 'Queer culture . . . in its openness and its non-specificity, potentially suggests the truly polymorphous nature of our difference, of difference within the gay and lesbian community. The minute you say "queer" you are necessarily calling into question exactly what you mean when you say it. There is always an implicit question about what constitutes "queerness" that attends the minute you say the word. So, it seems to me that queer includes within it a necessarily

possibly
cultural

that rubric' (Harper, White and Cerullo, 1993: 30).

This has prompted no small amount of debate, as one might imagine. On what basis are these different 'identities' (practices?) joined together under the heading *queer*? Are queer politics simply a politics of the non-normative, as this writer seems to suggest? 'An emergent lesbian politics acknowledged the relative autonomy of gender and sexuality, sexism and heterosexism. It suggested that lesbians shared with gay men a sense of "queerness," a nonnormative sexuality which transcends the binary distinction homosexual/heterosexual to include all who feel disenfranchised by dominant sexual norms - lesbians and gay men, as well as bisexuals and transsexuals' (Stein, 1992: 50). Given this logic, could not the category *queer* include paedophiles, incest perpetrators, hetero S/Mers, dissatisfied straights, and so forth? In other words, if all that we share is a non-normative sexuality and a disenfranchisement, then why not be totally inclusive? This reduces queer politics to a banal (and potentially dangerous) politics of simple opposition, potentially affiliating groups, identities, and practices that are explicitly and implicitly in opposition to each other. To link politically and theoretically around a 'difference' from normative heterosexuality imposes a (false) unity around disparate practices and communities. Politically, of course, these different groups/practices do not necessarily share a progressive political agenda on sexuality; non-normativity is hardly a banner around which to rally. However, for many writers and activists alike (inspired, perhaps, by Michel Foucault's work), regulation itself is the problem; the creation of norms is the fundamental act of repression. With this logic, any unifying of the non-normative raises the political stakes around regulation and thus opens the door to liberatory moves.

If, as bisexual writer Elisabeth Däumer writes, these new moves liberate 'the queer in all of us' (1992: 92), then what happens to any conception of oppositional identity? Does this move of inclusivity (and the challenge to notions of authentic identity that it entails) run the risk of setting up another (albeit grander) opposition? And does it end up in a sort of meaningless pluralism motivated only by a vague sense of dissent, as Lisa Duggan suggests: 'The notion of a "queer community" ... is often used to construct a collectivity no longer defined solely by the gender of its members' sexual partners. This new community is unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender' (1992: 20).

The eighties and early nineties have also witnessed the rise of post-modernism and poststructuralism in social theory: the demise of the 'grand narratives', a new suspicion of 'identity politics' as constructing a potential hegemony around the identity 'gay' or 'lesbian' as if that necessarily supposed a unified and coherent subjectivity: gay person. Identity is critiqued here as supposing a unity, squeezing out difference, perpetuating

instigating) essentialism. So postmodern theory challenges the idea of gay identity as expressing 'true' - not constructed - gay sexuality.

Many feminists have produced trenchant critiques of postmodernism, and even more find themselves (ourselves) in an admittedly ambiguous relation to the challenges offered by postmodern theorizing. While this is not the place to delve into *that* whole debate, suffice it to say that many feminists have been wary of the quick dismissal of 'the subject' and political agency just when it seemed that women were getting around to acquiring some. The critique of identity so central to postmodern theorizing seems to many to place feminist activism in a political straitjacket, unable to move (because moving requires reliance on identity concepts that are themselves suspect), yet needing desperately to organize women precisely around those newly suspect categories.

Postmodern theory, in addition, has been marked by its fetish of the margins. If postmodern theory finds resistance in the interstices of the body politic, in the marginal spaces, then queer theory takes up on that, dispersing resistance away from the locatable and specific body of the lesbian or the gay man and onto this more amorphous site of the 'queer body' (which may or may not be gay). Postmodern theory often tends toward a fetish of inconsistency, contradictions, and the ever-present 'difference'. This can degenerate into an assertion of the hipness or sexiness of contradiction. But progressives have long argued that *some* contradictions are not only *not* sexy but are actually reactionary and that there is indeed a relationship between how one lives one's life and the politics one espouses, so that living in a segregated neighbourhood or replicating the sexual division of labour in the home would not be 'sexy' contradictions for avowed antiracists and feminists but would instead be suspect to challenge. So this emphasis on the delight in inconsistency for its own sake seems to me foolhardy at best.

Queer theory in the academy is curiously placed. Clearly, most queer theory takes place in the context of women's studies and/or lesbian and gay studies, even as it attempts to move outside those parameters. And most queer theorists, I have no doubt, themselves embrace (albeit uneasily) the identity 'gay'. Nevertheless, there is a disturbing trend in which queer theory has become disassociated from gay identity. Indeed, this disassociation is often celebrated as the necessary adjunct to the disassociation of gender and sexuality. One of the interesting aspects of this phenomenon of queer theory in the academy is that you do not have to be gay to do it; in fact it is much better if you are not. *Queer* (as opposed to *gay* or *lesbian*) lets you off the identity hook the way that gender studies has *vis-a-vis* women's studies, while cashing in on the trendiness of postmodernism. What are the implications of a queer theory disassociated from a gay and lesbian identity? This is not easy to answer, and I do not want to be claiming a sort of essentialist

Clearly, non-gay scholars must teach gay 'subjects', as male professors must teach about women and whites must teach about people of colour. But the thorny issues of authenticity, experience, and co-optation are not resolved by an assertion that no identity is real. Are we really to evacuate the centrality of experience for vacuousness of positionality (positionality as indicating the always provisional and temporal nature of political location and action)? While compelling and suggestive, I fear that the concept of positionality tends toward a voluntarism that ignores the multiple, felt, structural determinations on people's everyday existence. If you are 'gay loving' (as Sedgwick often refers to it), is that synonymous with being gay? Does that difference not matter any more? Are gay and lesbian studies simply to become another academic commodity that anyone can buy in on, given the proper allegiances and fashion statements?

The straight white married man at my university who says he 'does' queer theory in his English classes is in a *structurally* different place than I am. Does this perhaps have some relevance? Should he not speak to this in some way? It is not to say that I (as a lesbian) can speak the 'truth' of lesbian life more than he can; it is to say that this difference needs to be acknowledged and reckoned with in the course of academic life. This means not only being explicit about the different risks implied in our positions but also acknowledging the different ways we know and present this knowledge and the effects that may have on our students. I know it is hopelessly retro to speak of structure these days, to insist that material conditions actually do impose real, felt and experienced limits on our lives in radically different ways. My straight colleague may or may not be well intentioned. But, while this does matter, it is not at all clear that his good intentions alter his power to speak and my relative powerlessness.

I suspect that these concerns about the politics of experience get lost in the radical disassociation of identity from embodied practices. This is not to say that oppression is the mark of truth or authenticity but that, given the hierarchies of power in academia, we cannot afford to lose sight of 'from where we speak'. The deconstruction of identity politics (the recognition that identity categories can be regulatory regimes) may have some merit, but it can also, in the world of academia as well as in other social spaces, become the vehicle for co-optation: the radical queer theorist as married heterosexual. It becomes a convenient way to avoid those questions of privilege. What are the implications involved in claiming 'queerness' when one is not gay or lesbian? And, would we tolerate this passing (indeed, it is even being celebrated!) in another context, say the context of race or ethnicity? If it is clearly co-optive and colonizing for the white person to claim blackness if she or he 'feels' black (or even feels aligned politically with the struggles against racism), then why is it so strangely legitimate for a heterosexual to

definitions of heterosexuality? The white academic says she is working on antiracism and on issues of race and ethnicity; the straight (most often white) academic says she (or he, more often) is queer. There is a huge jump being made from studying/teaching gay and lesbian work to pronouncing oneself queer. That jump is, I believe, both intellectually and politically dangerous. Straight faculty can and must analyse and teach about the logics of compulsory heterosexuality, but they must explicitly recognize that, for example, they are more likely to be taken seriously and deemed legitimate because of that very system they are critiquing. In addition, they must acknowledge that the 'will to know' is different; 'knowing' lesbian and gay studies can never be simply or only an academic commodity for the gay or lesbian faculty member or student. It is not just a trope.

Queer theory, particularly in its more academic manifestations, is often posed as a response to a certain kind of feminist and lesbian theorizing that is now deemed hopelessly retro, boring, realist, modernist, about shoring up identity rather than its reconstruction. I will discuss this further below, but there has been a kind of reigning dogma in progressive and postmodern academic circles these days that constructs an 'old-time' feminism in order to point out how the sex debates, postmodernism, and queer theory have nicely superseded this outmoded, reformist, prudish, banal feminism of old. Is it possible that queer theory's unspoken Other is feminism, or even lesbianism, or lesbian-feminism?

Queer theory's relation to the politics and theorizing of racialized identities is no less fraught than its relation to feminism and feminist identities. It seems to me - in the little that has been published explicitly addressing this relationship (and this itself is a problem, because although there is a growing body of critique from white feminists, I have found little specifically addressing questions of race and queerness *per se*) - that lesbian and gay writers of colour are expressing both optimism with the new queer designations as well as trepidation. The optimism is located in the queer dethroning of gender and the (possible) opening up of queerness to articulations of 'otherness' beyond the gender divide. In other words, if queer can be seen to challenge successfully gender hegemony, then it can make both theoretical and political space for more substantive notions of multiplicity and inter-sectionalality. However, queer can 'de-race' the homosexual of colour in much the same way 'old-time' gay studies often has, effectively erasing the specificity of 'raced' gay existence under a queer rubric in which whiteness is not problematized. Sagri Dhairyam, in 'Racing the Lesbian, Dodging White Critics', critiques the implicit whiteness of queerness while still attempting to instantiate the category 'queer women of colour'. "Queer theory" comes increasingly to be reckoned with as critical discourse, but concomitantly writes a queer whiteness over raced queerness; it domesticates race in its

somewhat different point; she feels more affinity with *queer* as a term of more working-class and 'deviant' etymology than what she sees as the historically white and middle-class origins of the designations *lesbian* and *gay*. Cherrie Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh have made a similar argument in their use of the phrase *queer lesbian*, stressing their embrace of the term for its difference from middle-class lesbian feminist identities (1983). Yet Anzaldúa also accuses white academics of co-opting the term *queer* and using it to construct 'a false unifying umbrella which all "queers" of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under' (1991: 250).

In addition, I would also suspect that the inattention to material social relations (commodification, the fluctuations of international capital, shifting forms of familial life, rise in anti-gay activism, regressive social legislation, increasing disenfranchisement of people of colour, etc.) and the academicism of much of queer writing would be problems for a lesbian/gay praxis that is both class and race conscious. Marlon Riggs hinted at this when he deconstructed his own situation as 'black queer diva': 'Le Butch-Girl wonders, for instance, if her/his permission to say gender-fuck is contingent upon knowing and articulating Fanon, Foucault, Gates, Gilroy, hooks, Hall, West, and the rest as well' (1992: 102). To what extent does queerness embrace Ru Paul and *The Crying Game*'s Jaye Davidson as queer icons but effectively ignore the specific realities of lesbians and gays of colour?

THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING LESBIAN (OR, WHERE THE BOYS ARE)

My main critique of the new popularity of 'queer' (theory and, less so, politics) is that it often (and once again) erases lesbian specificity and the enormous difference that gender makes, evacuates the importance of feminism, and rewrites the history of lesbian feminism and feminism generally. Now this is not to say that strongly identified lesbians have not embraced queer theory and politics, or that those who do so are somehow acting in bad faith or are 'antifeminist'. Indeed, what makes queer theory so exciting in part is the way in which so many different kinds of theorists have been attracted to its promise. Many lesbians (including myself) have been attracted to queer theory out of frustration with a feminism that, they believe, either subsumes lesbianism under the generic category 'woman' or poses gender as the transcendent category of difference, thus making cross-gender gay alliances problematic. To a certain extent, I, too, share this excitement and embrace the queer move that can complicate an often too-easy feminist take on sexual identity that links lesbianism (in the worst-case scenario) to an almost primordial and timeless mother-bond or a hazy

engagement with queer theory is in unintentional revisionist history of feminism and gender-based theory that paints an unfair picture of feminism as rigid, homophobic, and sexist. As Biddy Martin notes, 'The work of complicating our theories has too often proceeded, however, by way of polemical and ultimately reductionist accounts of the varieties of feminist approaches to just one feminism, guilty of the humanist trap of making a self-same, universal category of "women" - defined as other than men - the subject of feminism. At its worst, feminism has been seen as more punitively policing than mainstream culture' (1994: 105).

The story, alluded to above, goes something like this: once upon a time there was this group of really boring ugly women who never had sex, walked a lot in the woods, read bad poetry about goddesses, wore flannel shirts, and hated men (even their gay brothers). They called themselves lesbians. Then, thankfully, along came these guys named Foucault, Derrida and Lacan dressed in girls' clothes, riding some very large white horses. They told these silly women that they were politically correct, rigid, frigid, sex-hating prudes who just did not GET IT - it was all a game anyway, all about words and images, all about mimicry and imitation, all a cacophony of signs leading back to nowhere. To have a politics around gender was silly, they were told, because gender was just a performance anyway, a costume one put on and, in drag performance, wore backward. And everyone knew boys were better at dressing up.

So, queerness is theorized as somehow beyond gender, a vision of a sort of transcendent, polymorphous perversity deconstructing as it slips from one desiring/desired object to the other. But this forgets the very real and felt experience of gender that women, particularly, live with quite explicitly. Indeed, one could argue that this is really the dividing line around different notions of queer; to what extent do theorists argue *queer* as a term beyond (or through) gender? 'Where de Lauretis retains the categories "gay" and "lesbian" and some notion of gender division as parts of her discussion of what "queerness" is (or might be), Judith Butler and Sue-Ellen Case have argued that queerness is something that is ultimately beyond gender - it is an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm usually articulated as an extension of this gender binarism' (Doty, 1993: xv). But, again, this seems to assume that feminists (or gays and lesbians) have somehow created these binarisms.

Unlike the terms *gay* and *lesbian*, *queer* is not gender specific, and this of course has been one of its selling points, as it purports to speak to the diversity of the gay and lesbian community and to dethrone gender as the significant marker of sexual identity and sexual expression. Phillip Brian

in 1992, argues that it is precisely this attention to the diversity of gay and lesbian culture that marks off *queer* from *lesbian* and *gay*: 'What I mean is that the dichotomous formulation of gay and lesbian, that we've been taught since the 1970s to use in politically correct contexts, is useful and has been a very effective educational tool, but has at the same time suggested in its dichotomy that there's only one relevant type of difference within our culture, i.e., gender difference' (Harper, White and Cerullo, 1993: 29-30).

The point that gender is not the only significant marker of difference is an important one and one that deserves development and reiteration.⁶ This point, of course, has been forcefully made in regard to both race and class. But in a culture in which male is the default gender, in which *homosexual* (a term that also does not specify gender) is all too often imaged as male, and *gay* as both, to see queer as somehow gender *neutral* is ludicrous and willfully naive. Feminism has taught us that the idea of gender neutrality is not only fictitious but a move of gender domination. I applaud queer theory's expansion of the concept of difference but am concerned that, too often, gender is not *complicated* but merely ignored, dismissed, or 'transcended'. In contradistinction, I would argue that the critique of gender theory from the perspective of women of colour has done precisely what the queer critique of gender is only partially and incompletely able to do. In other words, gender in black feminist writing is not 'transcended' or somehow deemed an 'enemy' concept. Rather, the concept of gender - and feminist theory more generally - is complicated, expanded, deepened both to challenge its 'privileged' status and to render it susceptible to theories of intersectionality and multiplicity. The queer critique of the feminist mantra of the separation of sex and gender (sex being the biological 'raw material' and gender the socially constructed edifice that creates masculinity and femininity) is helpful in complicating what has become a somewhat rote recitation of social constructionist argument, an argument that too often leaves the body and its various constructions unexamined. But in the light of recently resurgent theories of biological determinism (see particularly the firestorm of controversy generated by the determinist tract *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray, 1994), the insistence on a righteous social constructionism (women are made, not born; we are not simply an expression of our biological make-up, etc.) might be important strategically and politically. Too often in these queer challenges to this dichotomy, sex becomes the grand force of excess that can offer more possibilities for liberatory culture, and gender the constraint on that which would (naturally?) flow freely and polymorphously if left to its own devices. Biody Martin has made the argument that, for Sedgwick and others, race and gender often assume a fixity, a stability, a ground, whereas sexuality (typically thematized as male) becomes the 'means of crossing' and the figure of mobility. In the process of

female body appears to become its own trap, and the operations of masculinity disappear from view' (Martin, 1994: 104, 109-10).

But it is also not clear to me that this vision of a genderless non-normativity is a worthwhile goal. Is a degendered idea of sexual identity/sexual desire what we strive for? Is this just a postmodern version of a liberal pluralist 'if it feels good, do it' ethos? Also, the images/signifiers for this transcendence (of gender) are suspiciously male (why can't a woman be more like a fag?). If the phallus has been replaced by the dildo as the prime signifier of sexual transgression, of queerness, how far have we really come, so to speak? Queer discourse sets up a universal (male) subject, or at least a universal gay male subject, as its implicit referent. (It is interesting to note in this regard that the 1993 summer special 'Queer Issue' of the *Village Voice* was called 'Faith Hope & Sodomy'.) We cannot deny the centrality of gay maleness to this reconstruction of queer as radical practice. For example, Sue-Ellen Case discusses her engagement with the word *queer* by saying that 'I became queer through my readerly identification with a male homosexual author' (1991: 1). This is not to say that it is not perfectly fine to 'identify' with gay men, but what this passage illustrates is a trend toward a giddy merger with gay men that is left relatively unproblemalized. No one goes further with this identification than Sedgwick. I am reluctant to focus on her in this way, yet she herself has so foregrounded her own personal predilections that she seems rather fair game.⁷ In a piece called 'A Poem Is Being Written', Sedgwick bemoans her 'failure ... to make the obvious swerve that would have connected my homosexual desire and identification with my need and love, as a woman, of women' (1993: 209). Indeed, she goes on to note that her 'identification as a gay person is a firmly male one, identification "as" a gay man' (209). In many ways, this does not even have the naive honesty of the fag hag who simply grooves on the panache of gay men. Sedgwick, the postmodern intellectual subject, must not only identify or sympathize or politically ally, she must be. And lesbianism here, in this 'tortured' self-study, simply becomes the unfortunate absence, not really the stuff of identities and identifications, merely the detritus of the grand narratives of male homosociality and homosexuality.

Although lesbians are occasionally mentioned (usually when speaking of S/M), gay men most assuredly have become the model for lesbian radical sex (e.g., the celebration of pornography, the 'reappropriation' of the phallus in the fascination with the dildo, the 'daddy' fantasies, and reverence for public sex of Pat Califia, etc.).⁸ This has entailed a denigration of lesbian attempts to rethink sexuality within a feminist framework. Granted (and we do not need to go through this one more time), lesbian sexuality has suffered from both a discursive neglect and an idealization on the part of lesbians themselves. The image of hand-holding, eye-gazing, woody eroticism,

and stereotyping of all women's sexuality by male-dominant culture. Even in that haven of supposedly upright, separatist nonsex (Northampton, Massachusetts, in the late 1970s and early 1980s), I seem to remember we were all doing the nasty fairly well, and, for all the talk of the 'lesbian sex police', no girl ever banged down my door and stymied my sexual expression. The straight gaybashers, however, did. We should never forget this difference as we glibly use words like *police*.

Indeed, Vera Whisman criticizes those feminists who 'policed' other lesbians with charges of male identification and says that 'such charges of male-identification were rooted not only in anti-sex attitudes ... but also in essentialist understandings of womanhood' (1993: 55). Do we really want to relinquish a critique of male identification? After all, the feminist insight that a central impediment to women's liberation (yes, liberation) is an identification with and dependence on males and male approval, desire, status, and so on is so obvious as to be banal. Charges of male identification may have been spuriously made at times, but the *analysis* of male identification is central and important.

The construction of an old, bad, exclusive, policing lesbian feminism is necessary for the 'bad girl' (dildo in tow) to emerge as the knight in leather armour, ready to make the world safe for sexual democracy, as Terralee Bensing argues: 'Any threat to the "unity" of the ideal feminist community (as well as to the more "general" lesbian community) is branded "outlaw" activity and purged from the networks of inclusion. In this case, pro-sex lesbian pornographers function as the expurgated excess against which the illusion of community unity is maintained (in reified form). Lesbian feminism has a history of exclusion as much as anything else' (1992: 71).

In her history of this exclusion, Bensing cites the political event known as the 'lavender menace' (the action to challenge the purge of lesbians in the National Organization for Women) to 'indicate how it stunted the historical "writing" of lesbian sexual identity and subsequent practice for years. The result of this group's strategic maneuver was a discursive/historical representation of the specificities of lesbian sexuality which was subsumed under the reified sign of Woman' (1992: 73). Gee, and I thought homophobia and antifeminism were the problem!

In an article on the 'decentering of lesbian feminism', Stein traces the history of the lesbian movement, from its early attempts to shift away from the medical models of sexual deviance to the construction of the 'woman-identified woman' and the development of a lesbian subculture and 'women's culture' in general. She takes us to the period of rupture - the 1980s - where 'a series of structural and ideological shifts conspired to decenter the lesbian-feminist model of identity. First, the predominantly white and middle-class women who comprised the base of the movement

families of various stripes - often even heterosexual ones. Second, a growing revolt emerged from within: women of color, working-class women, and sexual minorities, three separate but overlapping groups, asserted their claims on lesbian identity politics' (Stein, 1992: 47).

But, in an otherwise astute and fair chronology, Stein engages in the kind of reductionist reading that has marred other similar narratives. In discussing the challenges of the 'sex debates' and the AIDS crisis as reintroducing sexuality and desire into lesbian discourse and identity, she engages in a simplistic substitution: 'As the withered body of the person with AIDS replaced the once-pervasive image of the all-powerful male oppressor, the sense of male threat which underlay lesbian-feminist politics diminished further' (Stein, 1992: 49). But, of course, 'male threat' (or even patriarchy) has hardly withered, although it has certainly changed. Curiously absent from this history is the rise of the religious Right, which brought with it an unprecedented backlash against feminism, women's rights, and poor people - along with its attacks on gays and lesbians. It is not that the image of the AIDS sufferer (and we will leave aside *that* iconography for the moment) has replaced the image of male oppressor; indeed, the images (and policies) of Reagan, Bush, Quayle, Helms, Robertson, Falwell, Terry (and now the new terror - Newt Gingrich), and others are vivid and imposing.

Even further, not only are those repressed and repressive lesbians responsible for putting a major damper on our nascent sexuality, but feminism itself is responsible for that horror of all horrors: THE BINARY. Bensing indicts 'the binaries generated within feminist movement: feminism/patriarchy, inside/outside, and porn/erotica' (1992: 88). Certain strands of feminism might indeed have perpetuated some of these oppositions (and is feminism *NOT* opposed to patriarchy?), but, alas, they long pre-date second-wave feminism. Seventies feminism here becomes the ogre that haunts queer kids of today. 'By the seventies feminism had sanitized lesbianism. Lesbophobia forced lesbians to cling to feminism in an attempt to retain respectability. However, in the eighties, discussions of sadomasochism permanently altered the relationship of many lesbians to feminism' (Morgan, 1993: 39). I would have hoped most politically astute lesbians (and gay men, for that matter) were/are feminists; this should be a theory we embrace (not 'cling to') and, of course, transform and challenge in that embrace.

Many queer activists and theorists seem to believe the media fiction that feminism is either (a) dead because we lost or (b) dead because we won: '1988. So feminism is dead, or it has changed, or it is still meaningful to some of us but its political currency in the world is weak, its radical heart excised, its plodding middle-class moderation now an acceptable way of life. Feminism has been absorbed by the same generation that so proudly claims to reject it, and instead of women's liberation I hear, "Long live the Queer

rebel as much against their feminist predecessors as against male power' (1993: 48). In her review of the *differences* issue on queer theory, Hennessy challenges those writers who set up feminism as the enemy, 'substitut[ing] feminism (the Symbolic Mother) for patriarchy as the most notable oppressive force that lesbian politics and eroticism must contend with. For feminists this should seem a very disturbing perspective shift, especially when feminism, among young people in particular, is more than ever a bad word' (1993: 969).

This is not to deny the importance of the 'sex debates' and the new discussions around lesbian sexuality that, I agree, are long overdue. The open and volatile discussion of sexuality permanently altered feminist praxis and allowed for a complex debate around the politics of passion and desire that recognized that the simplistic rendering of women's sexuality was in need of major revision. And this is not to say that some lesbians, and some feminists, do not 'judge' and indeed condemn sexual practices that they have deemed antithetical to the project of constructing a postpatriarchal world. This censoring is to be heartily contested, as it has from numerous writers and activists. But I simply suggest that we apply our own theories consistently: the narrative of 'sexless uptight dykes of the 1970s' is, after all, a narrative, and as we have been so adept at deconstructing narrative for the relations of power that inhere in the telling of history, we should be equally able to 'read' this story with, well, a grain of salt at the very least.

Now gay male sex and its histories become the very model of radical chic: the backroom replaces the consciousness-raising session as site of transformation. Feminist critiques of objectification, concern with abuse of women, and desire to construct nonpatriarchal forms of intimacy become belittled and denigrated as so much prudery and 'political correctness', creating an ahistorical narrative that furthers the separation of feminism from queer politics and theory.

In an article on her adventures in the new lesbian backrooms of the Village, Donna Minkowitz sees sexual and political liberation in the construction of spaces for anonymous sex, never once questioning the male model or her own location. She clearly envies the gay men of the pre-AIDS days and bemoans her own teenage fate: 'I have a girlfriend, not a transgressive erotic world where I can do it with five strangers in an evening, or suck off girl upon girl in the darkness of the meat district' (1992: 34). But why is this practice deemed transgressive (and, consequently, a 'girlfriend' deemed dreadfully banal and prudish)? The model of liberatory sex being constructed here is one where 'sex ... is separate from the world outside - it doesn't violate vows of monogamy or enter the partners into a "relationship"' (34). This may or may not be a liberatory practice (or it may just be fun), but its transgressiveness is not self-evidently radical unless one sees

we have a real failure of imagination. Are lesbians unable to construct, envision, imagine, enact radical sexualities without relying so fundamentally on male paradigms? Must we look to the boys in the backroom as our Sapphic saviours? Why are 'gay male sluts' (as Minkowitz puts it) the model? And why this (theoretical) obsession with the question of whether to call oneself a lesbian? In an article for the gay and lesbian anthology *Inside/Out*, Butler (1991) spends several pages pondering this puzzle, an analogous puzzle to that posed recently by feminists about whether there really are 'women' and whether our use of that category reinscribes its ability to construct us in power relations. Sure, to a certain extent, all categories are, as Butler and others have put it, 'regulatory regimes', but so what? How can resisting these regimes be anything other than an intellectual exercise, a game that can be reduced to that old canard 'don't categorize me' (as liberals and college students would put it)? Is this just an empty gesture or, rather, a gesture full with self-importance, postmodern hubris, rebellious nose thumbing? It is not to say there isn't much truth to the claim that homosexual identity, like all categorical identities, is a 'fiction' to a certain extent, is a collection of regulations and positions that can, perhaps, constrain as much as enable, impose as much as liberate, police as much as free. But I think that, in fact, the queer framework remains within the binarism it so desperately wants to explode, in that the assumption is that gay identities necessarily - in a structural sense - act like all the other identities.¹⁰ All categories have rules, to be sure, but not all follow the same rules. The historical conditions of growing up 'gay' or 'lesbian' in a homophobic culture may, in fact, produce categories of identity that are more fluid, more flexible than the categories of other identities, such as heterosexuality. Why must we assume that all identities form around the same structural binarisms and with the same inherent rigidities? Is that not essentialist?

And does this difference not make a difference in how we 'think' identity? When Butler says that she is 'not at ease with "lesbian theories, gay theories"', referring to the title of the anthology, because 'identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression' (1991: 13-14), does she not want to stress the difference between these two moments - the moment of oppression and the moment of liberation? Are those different uses of identity categories just the surface that belies the 'deep meaning' of identity as 'really' about 'oppressive structures'? Or can we see these different uses and meanings of identity as radically different, not just somehow superficially different? Indeed, does it not actually sound a bit strange to speak of heterosexual identity (or WASP identity, etc.) and should that not indicate something about the differences in these two usages/meanings? This is not

of 'strategic essentialism' as has been argued elsewhere, but rather to say let us think this concept *lesbian* through the historical developments of lesbian desires, bodies, passions, struggles, politics.

Butler goes on in the article to question not only identity as a lesbian but the process of 'coming out'; as it further implicates the 'subject' in the subjection of being named and known: 'Is the "subject" who is "out" free of its subjection and finally in the clear? Or could it be that the subjection that subjectivates the gay or lesbian subject in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once "outness" is claimed?' (1991: 15). She further asks, 'Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure?' (15). Hmm, that old devil moon is back again. Sexuality, she must be, how you say, an enigma, hidden, dark, unconscious for her to be... fun. Shhh, don't talk, don't know, don't even think you know, don't claim, don't reveal: desire needs dark curtains of mystery to be pleasurable.

Shane Phelan, writing in the *Signs* special issue on lesbianism, joins others in critiquing the prominence of the 'coming out' process for lesbian identity, asserting that the language of 'coming out' implies 'a process of discovery or admission rather than one of construction or choice' (1993: 773), thus producing an essentialist notion of a 'real' lesbian identity that exists beneath the layers of denial or hiding. But I am not sure coming out is as unitary and simple a process as these theorists make it out to be. Granted, for many it can be that sort of a revelatory move, revealing that which was 'really there' but hidden all along. But for others, coming out is, first, not a moment but rather a contradictory and complex process that involves (perhaps) self-revelation, construction, political strategy, choice, and so forth. Second, it seems ludicrous to pretend that internalized homophobia and the realities of heterosexism and heterosexual privilege are not operative in and around these 'coming out' processes. Phelan and others seem to write as if we 'come out' in a social and political vacuum. Phelan cites Barbara Ponse and Mark Blasius as arguing for a conception of coming out as a sort of 'becoming', learning the ways of being gay or lesbian (Phelan, 1993: 774). But, again, I do not see these as mutually exclusive. Of course 'coming out' implies a becoming, a construction of the self as gay, now not 'hidden' within the fiction of heterosexuality. But this 'becoming' is, for so many, also merged with a profound sense of 'revealing' a 'truth' that one had previously 'hidden'. That truth might indeed be a fiction (in that no identity is ever presocial, inhering in some untouched part of the soul or psyche or body), but it is a fiction that many live through, and in, quite deeply.

Steven Seidman also writes that he now feels more uneasy with the act of coming out and makes a similar leap that associates 'coming out' with a necessarily regulatory process:

announcing a respectable homosexuality, this puns on the illegality effect of pathologizing all those desires, behaviors, and lives that deviate from a normalized homosexuality - or heterosexuality. Such a relentless politics of identity - 'homos are really no different from straights' - reinforces an equally relentless normalization of conventional sexual and gender codes. In other words, coming out is effective only if the homo made public is announced to be like the straight in every way but sexual orientation. Thus all the ways that homos may be queer - for example, those who like to cross-dress, role play, have multiple sex partners, or engage in commercial, rough, or public sex - are pathologized by the strategy of coming out as a respectable homo. (1994: 170)

This constructs a totalizing narrative of coming out that defies logic. Why does Seidman assume that all who come out do so as 'respectable homos'? Surely, that is part of the discourse but obviously not the whole of it. What, about the very act of 'coming out', necessarily implies the pathologizing of certain practices? It certainly can (as can everything), but I see no necessary relation unless one views any declaration of identity (however prefaced by caveats) as an immediate smoke signal to the forces of domination that all is clear. And what of our responsibility to others? If one less young person feels alone and vulnerable, one less colleague isolated and marginalized, is that not something - at the very least - to consider?

But queer theory gets its most Felliniesque when it starts mulling over the (exciting) possibilities of the 'male lesbian'. Indeed, Jacquelyn Zita devotes an entire article to this subject. Zita proposes the male lesbian as radical gender bender, 'challenging the naturalness of "maleness" and "heterosexuality" by the bizarre-ness of his self-intending sex and gender attributions' (1992: 125). Once again, men in the front lines in the fight for equality and justice. Just like Tootsie!