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Bisexual Politics Theories, Queries, and Visions

Naomi Tucker
Editor



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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Naomi Tucker is a bilingual, bicoastal, bisexual activist, writer, public speaker, and workshop leader. She has been instrumental in organizing bisexual groups and events since 1985, including BiFO-cal, BiPOL, BiNet USA, the Bay Area Bisexual Speakers' Bureau, the 1990 National Bisexual Conference, and the Jewish Bisexual Caucus. Naomi's published works appear in *Anything That Moves: Beyond the Myths of Bisexuality*; *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out*; *Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Community(ies)*; and *Bisexual Horizons: Politics, Histories, Lives*. She works in San Francisco as an elementary school teacher and counselor/advocate for battered women.

Traitors to the Cause? Understanding the Lesbian/Gay "Bisexuality Debates"

Elizabeth Armstrong

No bi woman I know has escaped the pain of being ostracized by some elements of the lesbian community. (bisexual woman)

I was in love with a woman. I was a lesbian. But reality broke through soon enough. There was the fact that I wasn't a "real" dyke, defined by Kate Clinton as "penis-pure and proud." Again, after the honeymoon of acceptance, everyone was waiting for me to renounce my feelings for men. (bisexual woman)

I bitterly resented the double standard which dictated that dykes should embrace a Virginia Woolf, an Eleanor Roosevelt, a Muriel Rukeyser as long-lost lesbian sisters given their sometime love for women, but would cast me into the outer darkness because of my refusal to pledge eternal allegiance to the cunt. (lesbian who got involved with a man)

No one in the gay bar would ever guess I had a girlfriend and the same went for my straight friends. Why did I keep my two worlds apart? For safety. In gay circles, it was a major faux pas to sleep with a "fish," while in the hetero world in which I was raised, to be a fag was an unpardonable offense. (bisexual man)

Claiming that lesbians sleep with men and calling themselves "bi-dykes" oppresses lesbians as surely as straight male por-

nography. . . . Armed with heterosexual privilege and statistical distortions, bi's try to redefine "lesbian" in their own image. Bi's are getting a lot of support for this—from straights who always believed that lesbians fuck men and from gay men who are more comfortable with women who fuck men. If it only weren't for those damned uncooperative lesbians. (lesbian)¹

Bisexuality in lesbian and gay communities is currently a subject of heated debate, as the quotations above indicate. Bisexuals are pushing for inclusion and recognition in lesbian and gay communities, wanting their emerging identities as bisexual people and their sexual relationships with both genders to be fully acknowledged and respected. Lesbians and gays, however, are often reticent to embrace bisexuals as members of their communities. For in spite of the claims of self-identified bisexuals, lesbians and gays often do not believe that bisexuality is an authentic sexual identity. They view bisexuality as a transitional stage on the route to coming out as lesbian or gay, or to realizing that one is actually straight. Claiming to be bisexual when one is really lesbian or gay is seen as denial, while claiming to be bisexual when one is really straight is seen as kinky, and potentially exploitative of people who are lesbian or gay. Often when lesbians and gays acknowledge that some people do manage to sustain a bisexual identity, they do not think these people should be a part of the lesbian/gay community. Many feel that bisexuals maintain access to heterosexual privilege through their opposite-gender sexual relationships, and are likely to take advantage of it. They feel that bisexuals are less committed than gay men or lesbians to their same-gender partners and to the larger community.

While gays and lesbians share the above feelings, lesbians seem to hold these views more strongly and are more likely to express them. In a 1991 forum in *The San Francisco Bay Times* on bisexuality in the gay/lesbian community, all the letters were from women. The editor of the paper, Kim Corsaro (1991b, p. 6), noted this:

One particularly striking feature stands out about all of the letters that we have received this month: every single one of them has been from a woman (or women). Never before in the

entire history of this paper has any issue which affects the entire community been addressed solely by one gender of our readership. It's not that gay men are immune to disliking bisexuals or don't care about the issue. I think it just simply isn't threatening to them in the same way.

This gender imbalance is represented in the quotations at the beginning of this paper, displaying the difference in intensity and amount of discussion of the issue of bisexuality in lesbian and gay communities. The difference in intensity in bisexual men's and bisexual women's experiences of rejection from gay and lesbian communities is also apparent in the qualitative difference between being "cast into the outer darkness" and committing a "major faux pas."

Lesbians may feel more more threatened by bisexuality than gay men and more justified in expressing their anti-bi attitudes because of their commitment to lesbian *feminism*, which provides ideological support for these attitudes. According to lesbian feminism, the central dynamic of male dominance involves "compulsory heterosexuality," or the coerced sexual availability of women to men (Rich, 1980). In a lesbian-feminist framework, a woman's commitment to feminism can be measured by the strength of her commitment to women, which is sometimes evaluated by how thoroughly she manages to exclude men from her life. Clearly, bisexuals cannot measure up to this standard. Bisexual women are viewed as more problematic than straight feminists because bisexual women make deliberate decisions to include men in their lives, while heterosexual feminists can at least argue that they cannot help being straight. And, to top it off, bisexual women are more likely than straight women to seek access, through their connections with women, to the sanctuary of the lesbian community. So, lesbians often view bisexuality as antifeminist, politically incorrect, and threatening to feminism and the lesbian community.

Many bisexual people, particularly women, find rejection from lesbian/gay communities extremely painful. What makes rejection harder is that their identification with the lesbian/gay community often leads them to internalize negative attitudes about bisexuality, and to question whether they really do belong in the community. Bisexuals have been slow to gather the strength to challenge the

lesbian/gay community directly about the pain they have experienced. Gradually, during the 1980s, bisexuals began developing a collective understanding of the ways lesbian/gay attitudes about bisexuality are stereotyped and inaccurate. In spite of feelings of hurt and betrayal, many bisexuals are now committed to finding a place in the lesbian/gay community. Bi women also feel the need to push for inclusion in lesbian communities because of their desire to be part of the larger women's and feminist communities that overlap with lesbian communities.

Some bisexuals also recognize that lesbian and gay rejection of bisexuality does not come from a position of social power, but rather from fear and powerlessness. Realizing this, bisexual activists have chosen a strategy of attempting to alleviate the fears of gays and lesbians about the consequences of having bisexuals and bisexuality in their communities. Activists have developed written materials to dispel myths about bisexuality, particularly the beliefs that bisexuality does not really exist and that bisexuals are "traitors to the cause of lesbian/gay liberation."² But even if ambivalence and suspicion about bisexuality come from a position of disempowerment, they are still unacceptable prejudices. Bisexual activists point out the hypocrisy of rejecting people on the basis of loving the wrong gender in a community founded on the premise that people should be able to love whomever they choose. Using their own lives as examples, bisexual activists have attempted to convince gays and lesbians that the bisexual identity is a distinct, long-term sexual orientation, embraced by people with integrity committed to the lesbian/gay community. While bi activists acknowledge that not all bisexuals will treat gay men and lesbians with respect, or be loyal to gay and lesbian communities, they argue that bisexual people are no more or less likely to hurt individuals or betray the community than gay men or lesbians. Some bisexual activists also try to emphasize the alignment of bisexuals with gays and lesbians by emphasizing the vulnerability of bisexuals to homophobia and gay-bashing from straights, while acknowledging that bisexuals do have access to heterosexual privilege. But bi activists also point out that anybody, gay or straight, can choose to take advantage of heterosexual privilege, and that "passing" for straight is as painful and damaging for

a bisexual as it is for a lesbian or gay man (see Blasingame, this volume).

While alleviating the fears of gays and lesbians by education and example is important, it will not entirely eliminate biphobia, particularly among lesbians. As we saw above, a certain amount of biphobia is fed by a feminist politic based on a specific analysis of the dynamics of gender relations in society. While I find the use of feminism to justify the exclusion of bisexuals disturbing and inappropriate, bisexuality *does* have a different meaning for lesbians than it does for gay men. Perhaps with a deeper understanding of the connections between male dominance and sexuality, it is possible to develop a politic that is loyal to feminist insights about the role of male dominant sexuality in women's subordination, but that is also supportive of the inclusion of bisexuals and bisexuality in lesbian and gay communities.

GENDER AND HETEROSEXUALITY

Phallocentrism: The Connecting Link Between Gender and Sexuality

Catherine MacKinnon (1982, p. 2) sees sexuality as the primary location of male power over women, and therefore sees sexuality as creating gender:

the molding, direction, and expression of sexuality organizes society into two sexes—women and men—which division underlies the totality of social relations. Sexuality is that social process which creates, organizes, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society.

Compulsory heterosexuality is an implied consequence. To MacKinnon, what makes a woman a woman is the way she exists sexually in relation to another group of social beings, men:

Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which

means sexual availability on male terms. What defines woman as such is what turns men on. (MacKinnon, 1982, pp. 17-19)

Gender domination and sexual hierarchies overlap in a phallogentric view of sexuality. As a society, we tend to see sexuality as residing in the male, particularly in his penis.³ Consequently, masculinity gets defined as the ownership of an active, penis-centered sexuality, while femininity gets defined as a passive, (also penis-centered) sexuality, owned by men, and only "activated" in the presence of a male penis. In this view, men generate desire, while women respond to men's desire. Sexuality becomes implicated in the perpetuation of male domination and gender categories themselves through our phallogentric notion of sexuality, which defines men and women as having different and interdependent sexual natures.

Phallogentric Heterosexuality and Gender Identities

Phallogentrism links gender and sexuality, with compulsory heterosexuality as the consequence. Heterosexuality is used to solidify men's and women's gender identities, and homosexuality is seen as attacking and undermining their gender identities. As one would expect, the way heterosexuality operates to solidify women's gender identities is quite different from how it operates to solidify men's gender identities.

For men, compulsory heterosexuality involves the requirement or expectation that in order to be a man they must have an insatiable, penis-centered, heterosexual sexuality. They must show continual proof of their heterosexual virility and conquests to other men (and women) to win and maintain access to the status of manhood and the privileges and power of masculinity. Compulsory heterosexuality puts a burden on men, which all men (gay, straight, or bi) must bear, but which different men respond to in various ways. Male sexual lore tends to focus around worries about sexual performance (i.e., impotence, premature ejaculation, and sexual stamina) and penis size. The bragging (and often lying) that men do about their sexual prowess expresses men's fears of being found wanting.

For men, it is crucial that women both be sexually available and sexually affirming. Men feel dependent on women because they

believe women hold the power to destroy the feelings of virility upon which their fragile sense of masculinity rests. Women can expose their impotence or inadequate sexual performances. Even though women rarely do this, and in fact generally conspire to bolster men's fragile masculinity, men resent that the "objects" upon which they are supposed to prove their virility have the latent power to destroy their masculinity.

Compulsory heterosexuality for women complements men's compulsory heterosexuality. Women's compulsory heterosexuality involves the forced sexual availability of women to men (Rich, 1980). Women develop a reactive, responsive sexuality instead of an active, agentic, desiring sexuality. Even sexual pleasure itself is experienced vicariously, as Shere Hite (1976) illustrates in her examples of women who prefer men's orgasms to their own.

Because of the way women's sexuality is defined, it is less important, at least in terms of actual sexual practices, to women's gender identity than it is in the formation of men's gender identity. Ethel Spector Person (1980, p. 629) found that while "sexuality consolidates and confirms gender in men, it is a variable feature in women." Women's gender identity does not rely as heavily on sexual performance or sexual conquest. Women do not "perform" sexually: they are the site of men's performances. They do not make conquests; they are the prey. This relieves the pressure on women a little; women's gender identity is less fragile than men's in some ways because it does not require reaffirmation by sexual performance.

Gendered Homophobia

Due to the different ways that heterosexuality bolsters men's versus women's gender identities, phallogentrism and gendered compulsory heterosexuality lead to gendered homophobia. Straight men and women are threatened differently by lesbians than by gay men.⁴

One manifestation of homophobia specifically directed against lesbianism is lesbian invisibility. Straight people perpetually ask what it is that women *do* together; how can sex occur without a penis in the room? The horribly homophobic notion that "lesbians just need a good fuck" to "cure" them stems from the obviously

phallogentric belief that all "good" or "real" sex involves a penis. Straight people are likely to dismiss even the most overt signs of lesbianism because of their inability to see women's sexuality other than as responsive to men. Lesbian invisibility is paradoxical, as on one hand it means that lesbians are often not as vulnerable to physical violence and homophobia as gay men, but on the other hand it means that lesbians find it harder to be taken seriously as self-defining sexual beings, and harder to achieve positive identity-affirming visibility. Society is not particularly threatened by the explicitly sexual aspect of lesbianism, because people just do not see it.

What is experienced as threatening is women's refusal to be sexually available to men on men's terms. Whenever any woman resists male power, regardless of her sexual interest in women, she is likely to be labeled a lesbian. The term lesbian is used as a stigmatizing label by men (and sometimes other women) to keep women in line; that is, to keep them sexually available to and affirming of men.

Understanding homophobia against lesbians through the lens of phallogentrism helps make sense of one of the perennial mysteries of homophobia in our society: the prevalence of "lesbianism" in straight male pornography. Showing women having sex with each other is absolutely central to straight pornography, and not seen as threatening. These women are not "coded" by the viewers as lesbian because the reason they are naked on the page is for male viewing pleasure. In the text, the women always reassure the viewers that while they enjoy their scenes with women, they prefer sex with men. The male viewers are intended to experience the lesbian scenes as evidence of the woman's "kinkiness" and her willingness to do anything. The women are supposedly preparing each other to be "fucked" by a man, *not* having a sexual experience that is complete and fulfilling in its own right.

It is taboo for two men to touch each other in straight pornography because of the fundamentally different way homophobia against gay men works in our society. Homophobia directed toward gay men tends to focus on sexual practices. In a phallogentric society, gay sex is undeniably sexual and highly visible as such. Even the slightest physical contact among men is often viewed as evidence of homosexuality (except for physical contact in highly ritu-

alized, super-masculine, heterosexual settings, such as athletics. The reaction of straights to male homosexuality has much to do with the importance penetration has acquired in our phallogentric society. "Real" sex does not happen without penetration (and people think lesbians do not practice penetration). Homophobic jokes about gay men and gay men's sexual practices invariably focus on anal sex, although straight people engage in anal sex as well. Straights often have a visceral revulsion to gay male sexual practices, completely different than their response to lesbian sexual practices.

The stereotype of the effeminate gay man is a form of homophobia that is a direct consequence of male compulsory heterosexuality. Logically, if heterosexual conquests are what makes a man masculine, then failing to engage in these, and, in addition, becoming the object of other men's sexual conquests would be feminizing and emasculating. For men to allow themselves to be penetrated means emasculation, the voluntary acquisition of the low-status position of women, which threatens the whole conceptual scheme. To protect this scheme, the label gay, like the label lesbian, is used to frighten heterosexual men into more conscientious adherence to the "rules" of compulsory heterosexuality.

GENDER AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Men and women who resist compulsory heterosexuality in our society do so in the context of a sexual system that is deeply implicated in the maintenance of male dominance, as discussed above. This cannot help but shape the meanings that become embedded in gay and lesbian identities and communities. Gay and lesbian identities tend to solidify around what is most threatening to dominant society, often in a direct, confrontational, reactive way.

Exclusive Lesbian Identity and Inclusive Gay Identity

As I have argued above, what is most threatening to straight society about lesbianism is the possibility that women will no longer be sexually available to men. Building a lesbian identity

around women's exclusive sexual interest in women challenges the notion that women need men to be sexual and challenges men's claim to ownership of women's sexuality. Asserting that lesbianism is not just about "liking women too" allows for a clear distinction between self-identified lesbians and the exoticized "lesbians" of straight male pornography. Drawing the boundaries clearly, and allowing no compromise, makes it more difficult for men to coopt and re-appropriate women's sexuality as "kinky," and "exotic," but still for men's pleasure. Lesbians often deliberately cultivate aesthetics that are not attractive to straight men, thereby communicating their unavailability and disinterest:

I actively try to retain some item of apparel (like the motorcycle jacket) or retain some key piece of my appearance (like the short hair or weapons) that tells the straight boys the tits are not for them. (Anonymous, 1989, p. 42)

Contemporary politicized lesbian identity is forged not only out of a recognition of the preferred gender of one's sexual partners, but out of a commitment to gender exclusivity in one's partners. This insistence on exclusivity intensifies the meaning of the choice of sexual partners because of the clear message to men: "This is not for you." Lesbians are asserting ownership of their own sexuality, and promoting women's sexual agency.

As we saw above, what is most threatening to straights, particularly straight men, about male homosexuality is the threatened loss of masculinity and masculine privilege. Many straight men have a defensive hatred of homosexuality stemming from feelings of gender inadequacy. Gay men are quite conscious of the gender significance of homosexuality, and tend to use gender playfully, both in their campy appropriation of feminine styles and dress, and in their super-masculine styles that are perhaps even more threatening to straight men. Because all men are punished by straight men for exhibiting even the smallest sign of gayness, the gay community is fairly generous about allocating the benefits of membership:

Gay men aren't real concerned about excluding people from this elite [that] we consider ourselves to be. I've never heard of anyone's credential being challenged, like "I'm not going to

believe you're gay until I fuck you." We give everyone the benefit of the doubt. You wanna party with us? That's fine. You don't have to make it with other men if you don't want to. Your loss, if you don't, you know?⁵

Men have virtually nothing to gain from the larger society by identifying as gay, hence there is little reason to interrogate men's self-identification, even if they also have connections to women.

In sum, lesbian identity tends to be defined more around gender exclusivity than gay identity because gay men's and women's experiences of sexuality are quite different. Lesbians are less likely to have their sexuality taken seriously, and are not as visible as gay men. Lesbians will be subject to sexism regardless of their sexual identity, although the sexism may be intensified when combined with homophobia. Gay men are less likely to face the problem of being eroticized and exoticized by straight women. Gay men, while they retain a great deal of male privilege, lose gender-based privileges among men, as well as being subjected to homophobia.

Gay and lesbian feelings about bisexuality are consistent with these identity constructions. Lesbians have problems with bisexuality, particularly women's bisexuality, because to them it seems to undermine all the progress lesbians have made toward making it difficult for men to reclaim and eroticize women's sexuality.

For gay men, bisexuality is a problem of an entirely different order. Because gay identity is not as centrally organized around NOT being with women, when gay men are with women it poses less of an identity threat. Gay men are also less likely to be threatened by bisexuality among other gay men because their opposite-gender sexual activity does not seem to undermine or negate the meaning of their same-gender sexual activities in the same way. Because gay sex is so much more visible than lesbian sex, if both a self-identified gay man and a self-identified lesbian have sex with a member of the opposite gender, the general culture is more likely to point to his gay encounter and her straight encounter as most salient.

Lesbian and Gay Communities

I think bisexual women can bring up our worst fears and insecurities, and that relates directly to the powerlessness we often feel as women and as lesbians, individually and as a community. Several years ago I was in a relationship with a bisexual woman. I was not very accepting of her sexual identity; in fact, I was enormously threatened by it. If we stayed together for a long time, why wouldn't she consider herself a lesbian? Did that mean that I was somehow lacking? What if he had tons (or just an average amount) of money? She could bring him home to her parents, she could be secure in many ways she could never be with me . . . and so on. I don't think my response was very different from what many of us feel when we imagine relating to bisexual women in the lesbian community. . . . The fact is, a woman's power in this culture has historically been defined vis-à-vis her relationship to a man. That is only beginning to change, but in the meantime, lesbians (sans men) are way on the outside, economically and culturally. . . . Because of our separation from men, we simply don't have the same access to power and privilege that everyone else has. (Corsaro, 1991a)

In the previous section I uncovered the logic behind gay men's and lesbians' different reactions to bisexuality. Here, I delve more deeply into the fears lesbians express about bisexuality, particularly issues of powerlessness, as raised by Kim Corsaro in this passage.

One of the biggest fears that lesbians have about being involved with bisexual women is that bisexual women will leave them for men. Implicit seems to be the assumption that given a "choice," bisexual women would always prefer a man. Why do lesbians think that bisexual women will always pick a man? They think so largely because lesbians have experienced life without the privileges and protections afforded to women through connections with men, and see that for many women, aligning themselves with men is not simply a mobility strategy but a survival strategy. It is difficult for lesbians to believe that given the possibility of forging such alliances with men, women would choose not to do so. In our society, it is not just sex that is defined as belonging to men, but economic,

social, cultural, and political power as well. Lesbians may resent being put in a position of having to compete with men for the affection of women, viewing the competition as dreadfully unbalanced in a society where men monopolize many of the resources to which women need access in order to survive. In addition, thinking of what men have to offer their lovers tends to raise the fears that lesbians have about their cultural, political, and economic marginalization. These fears involve anxiety about the very survival of the community; and feelings that everyone else, including gay men and bisexuals, as well as straights, has access to benefits gleaned from connections with men. This feeling is supported by the comparisons lesbians make between their impoverished communities and the much more affluent and culturally powerful gay communities.

Sometimes lesbians fail to realize that while bisexual women raise these fears in lesbians, they are not the source of these fears. Bisexual women certainly are not the cause of the marginalization of lesbians, and do not inevitably end up with men. Bisexual women are not the only group of women who can "betray" lesbians by taking advantage of heterosexual privilege. For women, "heterosexual privilege" is the reward given for conforming to compulsory heterosexuality. All women, lesbian, bisexual, and straight, make choices between getting access to power vicariously through their alliances with men, and challenging male power through aligning with women. No woman will, or should be expected to, make perfect choices all the time. It is true, however, that lesbians are often more likely to be aware of the privileges that straight women unwittingly get through their connections with men, to reject those privileges, and to suffer the consequences. Lesbians, however, do not have a monopoly on the punishments meted out to those who resist compulsory heterosexuality. Heterosexual privileges are often withheld from straight and bisexual women, too, when they refuse to have sex with men on men's terms, when they refuse to make themselves "attractive," or when they refuse to marry.

Clearly, women's dependence on men for social and economic status has a significant impact on lesbian attitudes toward bisexuality. Because straight men have not depended (as heavily) on connections to women for their social and economic status, gay men do not suffer a loss of the same magnitude when they break off connec-

tions with women. While for women the goodies stemming from heterosexual privilege are heavily material, for men the rewards of heterosexual privilege fall in the realm of prestige, coming more from proof of his heterosexual virility than from the economic and social benefits of a connection with a particular woman. Even in marriage, the particular characteristics of the woman to whom a man is attached are not as important in defining his lifestyle as a man's characteristics are in defining a woman's lifestyle. Single men, including gay men, are often more financially secure than married men because they do not transfer income to women. Gay men do not have to worry about being able to provide for their lovers; two male incomes combined often provide for an affluent lifestyle. Correspondingly, in the gay world, little attention is paid to men's connections with women. The fears that lesbians have about being left for a member of the opposite gender are just not as relevant for gay men.

While lesbians' concerns about bisexuality are fed by women's feelings of societal powerlessness and insecurity, gay men's lack of concern about bisexuality may be fed by feelings of indifference and disdain for women. In the quotations at the beginning of this paper, Michael Brewer reports that gay men consider having sex with a woman to be a "major faux pas"; that is, something likely to be seen as "in bad taste." When he reveals that gay men sometimes refer to women as "fish," he shows that gay men's relative lack of concern with bisexuality can be a consequence of sexism. Gay men may not believe that women are valuable enough to threaten their relationships with men.

FEMINISM, SEXUALITY, AND BISEXUALITY

Understanding now that the reactions of lesbians and gay men to bisexuality are tied to the workings of male dominance in this society, here I argue that the feminist goal of severing the connection between male dominance and sexuality is better served by refusing to categorically exclude bisexuals from lesbian and feminist communities. While the lesbian response to bisexuality is generated through a reaction to oppression, this response is not neces-

sarily the best way to undermine the sources of the oppression. A more subtle politic may generate a more fundamental challenge.

Most feminists would agree that the goals of feminist sexual politics are to both prevent men's control of women's sexuality, and to develop women's sexual agency. Using the terms popularized by the anthology *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Vance, 1984), in this section I will refer to men's appropriation of women's sexuality as the problem of danger, and the development of women's sexual agency as the problem of pleasure. Feminists differ in how they prioritize these two goals and in the strategies proposed for achieving these goals. These differences have tremendous consequences for the political assessment of bisexuality.

Some feminists, generally identified as radical feminists, following the reasoning of Catharine MacKinnon, place heavy emphasis on freeing women from sexual danger, viewing the complete and total sexual safety of all women as a necessary condition for women's sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is problematic until after the demise of patriarchy. In this view, lesbianism, bisexuality, and heterosexuality are (nearly) equally flawed options. MacKinnon (1982, p. 19) refuses to privilege lesbianism as a potential escape from the system: "If being *for* another is the whole of women's sexual construction, it can be no more escaped by separatism, men's temporary concrete absence, than eliminated or qualified by permissiveness." MacKinnon's view tends to be too pessimistic to feed liberatory politics on the day-to-day level. Understandably, her view has not been the primary one appropriated by lesbian feminist communities to make sense of their situation.

Adrienne Rich (1980) is much more optimistic about the possibilities of women's resistance to compulsory heterosexuality. Rich, and the lesbian feminism consistent with her perspective, sees lesbianism as the answer to both the problem of sexual danger and the problem of sexual pleasure. By separating from men, women remove themselves from the reach of sexual danger. Relationships with other women provide sexual pleasure. Like MacKinnon, Rich dismisses the possibility of a non-compulsory heterosexuality before the overthrow of patriarchy. In Rich's view, directing energy toward women and away from men is viewed as an assault on patriarchy. Lesbianism becomes a feminist political act. Heterosex-

uality becomes at best an inferior option, and at worst evidence of lack of commitment to feminism. Bisexuality is viewed as suspicious fence-sitting, demonstrating an unwillingness to relinquish heterosexual privilege to fully join the feminist struggle. Lesbian feminism both justifies pre-existing biphobia, and generates biphobia by providing a lens through which to understand experience.

Predictably, bisexuals and those supporting bisexuality have had problems with Rich's view. However, some of the harshest criticisms of Rich have come from lesbians, arguing that she sidesteps the whole issue of women's sexual desire, defining lesbianism and women's sexuality primarily in terms of politics. Cherríe Moraga argues that "Through this perspective, lesbianism has become an 'idea'—a political response to male sexual aggression, rather than a sexual response to a woman's desire for another woman" (1983, p. 129). She and Amber Hollibaugh feel that viewing lesbianism as a feminist political act allowed feminists to avoid discussing sexual desire. Hollibaugh and Moraga (1983, p. 401) feel uncomfortable in lesbian spaces that are simply places for women to get a reprieve from men and sexuality, and not places for women to be sexual with each other. They view lesbian feminist avoidance of desire as an acceptance of the dominant characterization of women's sexual nature as passive.

Out of their critiques of white lesbian feminism, Hollibaugh and Moraga developed the core of another feminist theory of sexuality, a theory that places more emphasis on women's sexual pleasure without ignoring the importance of freeing women from compulsory heterosexuality and sexual violence. In this perspective, women's sexual pleasure cannot wait. Rather, women's sexual agency is seen as tied up with women's agency in general. Our ability to fight against sexual violence is fed by our emerging clarity about who we are and what we want, sexually and in other ways. Developing sexual agency might be more unlikely in heterosexual relationships, but it is not impossible. Unlike Rich, Hollibaugh and Moraga feel that it is important and possible to distinguish between sexual practices and sexual systems. They can identify "heterosexuality outside of heterosexism" (p. 395), and attempt to understand heterosexuality at both of these levels. Sexual acts are better seen as influenced by and influencing politics, but not as political acts in

and of themselves. This goes for lesbian sexuality as well. Lesbianism is not a political act, nor is it necessarily purely liberatory. Hollibaugh and Moraga reject the belief in lesbian purity. They feel lesbian feminists are mistaken when they assume that physically and socially separating from men would enable lesbians to rid themselves of heterosexual notions of sexuality. This view leads lesbians to believe that they "could magically leap over heterosexual conditioning into mutually orgasmic, struggle-free, trouble-free sex" (Hollibaugh and Moraga, p. 395). When it does not work that way in the real lives and relationships of lesbians, the lesbian purity view can leave lesbians feeling guilty and inadequate. Cherríe Moraga makes the point that, like it or not, we cannot start developing greater sexual agency from some imaginary vision of what a perfect sexuality would be like, but rather we must start from what we know about sexuality and desire, regardless of its contaminated or imperfect origins:

But we can't ask a woman to forget everything she understands about sex in a heterosexual and culturally-specific context or tell her what she is allowed to think about it. Should she forget and not use what she knows sexually to untie the knot of her own desire, she may lose any chance of ever discovering her own sexual potential. (Moraga, 1983, p. 130)

When lesbianism stops being privileged as *the* answer, both politically and personally, and is seen more realistically as one, often very good, way of both increasing women's sexual agency and challenging male dominance in sexuality, then bisexuality suddenly seems less threatening to the feminist project. If lesbianism is not pure to start with, bringing in bisexuality is not going to contaminate it. Hollibaugh and Moraga's view is neither as totalizing and pessimistic as MacKinnon's, nor as naïve and utopian as Rich's. It is better suited to the political realities of a long-term struggle. Hollibaugh and Moraga's theory addresses the pleasure and danger aspects of sexuality better than the other approaches, while simultaneously providing a theory that supports the inclusion of bisexuality in lesbian communities.

Hollibaugh and Moraga's perspective has concrete implications for feminist sexual politics. First and foremost, it means acknowl-

edging and respecting women's sexual pleasures and desires. No desire should be policed simply because it makes others feel uncomfortable. Terms such as "politically incorrect," "false consciousness," and "internalized oppression" should not be used when talking about desire. Women's self-identifications must be respected. No one can claim to know what another woman "really" is. For bisexual women or lesbians who are involved with men, it is important to take seriously their personal assessment of the importance of their connections with men. Even in lesbian communities, women have still been defined on the basis of their relationships with men, in this case, whether they have them or not, regardless of their personal self-identifications.

Taking women's sexual desires seriously does not mean ceasing to make judgments. Rather, the basis of these judgments should be situational and not categorical. For example, instead of using "bisexuality" in straight male pornography to assess bisexuality in general, one could inquire more seriously into the conditions under which men are able to reappropriate and exoticize women's bisexuality and the conditions under which women are able to put forth their own active and desiring bisexuality.

The importance of the lesbian community for the development of women's sexual agency cannot be overestimated. The more viable lesbianism is as a sexual option for all women, the more likely that heterosexuality can be authentically seen and experienced as a choice, instead of as "compulsory." The ability to disengage socially and sexually from men allows women both a space somewhat safer from male violence, and a place to develop active, initiatory desire. This can be hard to do in a heterosexual context, as men are continually placing women in the role of the object of someone else's desire.

In spite of my efforts, many lesbians will not be convinced on theoretical grounds to include bisexuals in their communities. It is of course critical to take lesbian concerns seriously. I hope I have done so. There will need to be many more discussions between lesbian and bisexual women about these issues. This is simply another contribution to the discussion.

NOTES

1. The quotes are, in order: (1) Ann Schneider, "Guilt politics," (Hutchins and Ka'ahumanu, p. 276); (2) Elizabeth Reba Weise, "Bisexuality. The Rocky Horror Picture Show, and me," (*Ibid.*, p. 137); (3) Jan Clausen, "My Interesting Condition," (Clausen, 1990, p. 13); (4) Michael Brewer, "Two-Way Closet," (Hutchins and Ka'ahumanu, 1991, p. 140); and (5) excerpt from a letter by the Revolting Lesbians of San Francisco in a forum on "bisexuality in the gay/lesbian community" in *The San Francisco Bay Times*, vol. 12, no. 8, May 1991, p. 6.
2. This phrase is taken from an unpublished handout on the "myths and realities of bisexuality" distributed on the U.C. Berkeley campus in the spring of 1991, which was "excerpted and altered from Sharon Sumpter's and Amanda Udis-Kessler's pieces on the myths and realities of bisexuality."
3. When I discuss men and women in this section, I am outlining an ideal type an extreme case. I do not think all men or all women are like this, merely that these patterns have at least some impact on all of us.
4. There are also gender-neutral forms of homophobia directed against gay men and lesbians.
5. White gay man interviewed in San Francisco in the early 1980s, quotation excerpted from Murray, 1992, p. 117.