



BISEXUAL POLITICS: A SUPERIOR FORM OF FEMINISM?

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Synopsis — In this article, I shall examine the ideas and practices of the bisexual movement that has developed in the Western world in the last decade. I shall offer a lesbian feminist critique. Bisexual theorists and activists have formulated critiques of lesbian feminism at their conferences and in anthologies of their writings. Lesbian feminists have been described as “gender fascists,” as monosexists, and as bi-phobic for their failure to embrace bisexuals in theory or in person, but little has been published from a lesbian feminist perspective on these developments. I argue that bisexual politics, rather than forming a superior form of feminism, tends toward a belief in the naturalness of desire, a revaluing of the heterosexual imperative that women should love men, and an undermining of the power and resistance involved in the lesbian feminist decision to choose for women and not men. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Over the last 10 years, a “bisexual movement” has developed with conferences and anthologies full of ideas on bisexual theory and practice from the United States and the United Kingdom (Firstein, 1996; Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991; Rose & Stevens, 1996; Tucker, 1995; Weise, 1992). The writings of male and female bisexual activists claim that their politics are progressive, and even that bisexual feminism is superior to lesbian or heterosexual feminism. Bisexual feminists tend to claim the identity “queer” and to complain of the “biphobia” of “monosexist” feminists (monosexists restrict their relationships to just one sex or the other). This movement remains largely unexamined by lesbian feminist theorists. The time is ripe for a lesbian feminist analysis of the phenomenon of bisexual politics. In this article, I shall seek to begin an exploration of the origins and ideas of the movement, the variety of practices involved, and to gauge its implications for lesbian feminism through a critical lesbian feminist examination of the principal anthologies produced from within the bisexual movement in the United States and United Kingdom in the 1990s.

ORIGINS OF THE BISEXUAL MOVEMENT

The origins of the bisexual movement lie in the male-dominated sexual freedom movement in

California in the 1970s (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1995). These male sexual freedom bisexuals adopted a bisexual identity which distinguishes them from those very numerous men in heterosexual relationships who engage in sexual behaviour with men on the side in quite similar ways but do not adopt a bisexual identity. The prevalence of bisexual behaviour by men who identify as heterosexual has been revealed by researchers concerned about HIV/AIDS and the promotion of safe-sex behaviour at *beats* (Australian for cruising grounds or “cottages,” public places in which sex takes place amongst anonymous men) (Davis, Dowsett, & Klemmer, 1996). This behaviour is replete with difficulties for the women that such men are involved with. A recent Australian book, *She's My Wife. He's Just Sex*, makes it clear that thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of men who do not identify as bisexual or gay and are in married or de facto relationships with women, use beats or prostituted men and boys without telling their wives (Joseph, 1997). Some of the wives of these men are in support groups where they express considerable anger and pain at their husbands' behaviour. There are no similar groups to support the male partners of women engaging in bisexual behaviour, and this should alert us to the different power dynamics at work in male and female bisexual behaviour.

Men who engage in this form of bisexual behaviour reject the identity bisexual because they cling to traditional masculinity, which is exemplified in heterosexuality. Thus Jeffrey, in the Australian study, explains: "I suppose my image is important to me—I wouldn't want anyone thinking I was bi or a homo" (Joseph, 1997, p. 26). Men like Jeffrey, though they may represent the commonest form of bisexual behaviour, do not have bisexual politics.

The men who dominate the contemporary bisexual movement seem to engage in very similar behaviour to those described above, that is, they have wives or de facto partnerships with women and engage in sexual acts with unknown men at beats, parties, and clubs or by using prostituted men and boys. The most important difference is that men who identify as bisexual expect the acceptance of their female partners. They adopt an ideology of nonmonogamy, or polyamory, as this is known in the bisexual movement, to deflect criticism of their continuing search for sexual excitement with men. The ideological commitment to nonmonogamy might appear, from a feminist perspective, to be necessary in order for the men involved to gain the compliance of their wives, retain their free labour in the home, and thus all the privileges of masculine heterosexual status, whilst being able to access men for sexual excitement.

Activists of bisexual politics explain that though the bisexual "movement" modelled on the lesbian and gay movement around the ideas of "coming out" and demanding visibility, did not get underway until the 1980s, its roots lie in the sexual freedom movement in the United States, particularly in the Sexual Freedom League in San Francisco in the 1970s (Tucker, 1995, p. 49). The sexual freedom movement has been criticised by feminists for being about the rights and freedoms of men to get whatever they wanted sexually and to use women to that end (Jeffreys, 1990). A study of bisexuality by three male U.S. sexologists, *Dual Attraction*, is based upon the organisations set up by men and women involved in the sexual freedom movement in San Francisco (Weinberg et al., 1995). These 1970s bisexuals saw themselves as sexual revolutionaries and were much involved in swinging, sex clubs, and sadomasochism, and strongly committed to nonmonogamy. The study concludes that the bisexual behaviour of the respondents is sim-

ply an "add on" to their primary heterosexuality. Nearly all were in primary heterosexual relationships.

The values of the sexual freedom movement are very evident in the ideas and practices described in anthologies of writings by bisexuals in the late 1980s and 1990s. These include male privilege, the expected support of women partners who will accept that they should not be jealous, the importance of being able to separate sex from loving emotion and the centrality of sadomasochism to bisexual practice. But in the 1980s, bisexuality emerged as the favoured politics of sexuality for some new constituencies of women and men.

Varieties of bisexual politics

Bisexuality, as understood by those involved in the bisexual movement, covers a wide variety of behaviour. I will consider here what women who identify as bisexual describe as their bisexual behaviour and practice. Some of those involved identify as bisexual because they sometimes have sexual dreams or fantasies about the same sex, though they never act upon them. Others identify as bisexual because they sometimes whip someone of the same sex in a sadomasochistic (SM) venue. Others treat their relationships and connectedness to women in very similar ways to lesbian feminists. They intend always to love women and never to engage sexually with men for the rest of their lives, but still call themselves bisexual. The bisexuality of bisexual activist women can include everything from experiencing a vague and unconsummated sexual interest in women to almost lifelong commitment to women. As I examine these varieties of bisexual behaviour I shall seek to show how they are distinguished from the politics and practice of lesbian feminism.

Bisexuality as sexual adventurousness. Many bisexual activists seem to see their bisexuality as part of their general sexual adventurousness. Anthologies on bisexuality almost always include pieces by bisexuals who say that they engage in bisexuality through prostitution, since they have women lovers and male customers, or in sadomasochism, or swinging. Carol Queen, for instance, identifies bisexuality as part of "sexual diversity" and as being associated with a "sex-positive" perspective

(Queen, 1991). For her, a sex-positive perspective is one which is positive toward sadomasochism and prostitution. Some bisexual people, she says, may manage their “fluidity of attraction” “through gender play and other sorts of role play, polyamorous relationship strategies, and even participation in the sex industry” (Queen, 1991, p. 114). Some sadomasochists consider themselves to be bisexual because they engage in a practice in which the gender of the partner is unimportant, parts of the body are interchangeable, and the creation of an unequal power dynamic is much more important than the person upon whom an act is being performed. Thus, one bisexual sadomasochist explains that SM activities are “gender-free”:

If you are tied face down so that you can't even see the person who is whipping you, communicating only by body-language . . . it makes little difference whether that person is a woman or a man; what counts is the emotional and sensual rapport between the bottom and the top. (Mathur, 1996, p. 209)

Here “bisexuality” consists solely of sexual acts. This is significantly different from the lesbianism of lesbian feminism, which is not seen simply or even necessarily as sexual acts and encompasses a love and valuing of women, a community of friendships and support, the creation of a history and culture and a form of political resistance to male dominance (Faderman, 1981; Lesbian History Group, 1989). The notions of love and human relationship involved in much bisexual practice are extremely impoverished.

Bisexuality as an add on to heterosexuality. One grouping of women who define themselves as bisexual can be identified as those who have primary relationships with men and relate to women on the side. They reject the label heterosexual as inhibiting. One such woman expressed considerable hostility towards lesbians who would not identify with her because of her apparent heterosexuality. “I have met with SO much hostility because I dared to identify openly as bi when I am married to a man . . .” (Ault, 1996, p. 323). This woman, like many others, chose the label “queer” as befitting her situation, “when I heard about the movement to label us all ‘queers’ and forget the distinc-

tions between the various degrees of gayness, I was immediately in favor of it” (Ault, 1996, p. 323). This use of the term *queer* suggests one reason why that term has been rejected by many lesbian feminists who consider that there is a significant distinction between their practice and politics and that of the married woman speaking above, and wish to celebrate that. Lesbian feminists have criticised queer politics for other ways in which it has “disappeared” lesbians too. They have pointed out that queer politics undermines the 25-year struggle by lesbian feminists to make lesbians visible within mixed lesbian and gay politics, marks a renewed male gay hegemony, and forces lesbians into alliance with those whose political agendas, in celebrating gender fetishism and hierarchy, such as pedophilia, transgenderism, and sadomasochism, are quite opposite to those of lesbian feminism (Harne & Miller, 1996; Jeffreys, 1994; Parnaby, 1993).

One woman explained that women at the married women’s workshop at a UK bisexual conference agreed that

. . . same sex relationships did not affect marriage vows in the same way that different-sex ones did, that to “go with” another man was adultery and could seriously affect the marriage . . . whereas heterosexual husbands regarded another woman as different, even welcome. (Cade, 1996, pp. 116–117)

This writer has “several people that I play SM scenes with” and “shares” female lovers with her husband in a shared house. A “Euroqueer” describes this variety of bisexuality in operation in Brussels:

The bi-scene here features a few mixed sex (girl/boy) couples who hang out in the lesbian bars. The boy sits at the bar and watches his girlfriend pick up another woman, get her drunk, and take her home for what turns out to be a threesome with him. (“Euroqueer,” 1996, p. 287)

This bisexual practice entails the sexual exploitation of lesbians for the titillation of heterosexual couples and might account for some considerable distrust of bisexuals on the part of lesbians who do not wish to provide such an amusement. The attention to love and relationship, to loving and valuing women that

characterises lesbian feminism is quite startlingly absent. Lani Kaahumanu is one of the editors of the foundational American anthology *Bi Any Other Name*. Her bisexuality, like that of the majority of those identifying as bisexual whilst actually living with or married to men, contains but little woman-loving. She explains that when she came out as a lesbian in 1972, she could not find the right woman so she eventually accepted that she was mostly heterosexual:

[I] accepted myself as the 70-percent straight person I probably really am. I have had to constantly fight to have the 30-percent lesbian side not be ridiculed or misunderstood. . . . During the eighties I finally began to meet open, unafraid bisexuals. (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991, p. xv)

Her understanding of desire is entirely unpoliticised. She “grew up in the sexual revolution” and was “attracted to energy.” This meant she could fall for a man on a dance floor and entertain his girlfriend in bed in the morning. Her bisexuality originated in this state of thoughtless, supposedly “natural” puppyhood. She does not recognise the male power and sexual exploitation that feminist theorists have identified as organising the supposed paradise of the sexual revolution.

Imaginary bisexuality. In this category are women who identify as bisexual though they have had no sexual or romantic relationships with women and do not particularly intend to. Two women in *Bi Any Other Name* fall into this category. One explains that she is “a 23-year-old married Jewish woman. I have never slept with a woman, nor do I expect to. Yet, I am a bisexual” (Reichler, 1991, p. 77) Another explains that though she is married and monogamous, she is possessed of a bisexuality which “influences my perception and my decisions. More than having sexual relations with both genders, bisexuality is a mind frame, a reference point from which to view the world . . .” (Yoshizaki, 1991, p. 25) Such a bisexual “mind frame,” which consists of sitting at home with a man and dreaming about what it might mean to love women, though it might form the first stage of a leap into a world of woman-loving, is of a rather different order from the lesbian perspective acquired from experience.

Bisexuality as a way not to identify as lesbian or gay. Some of the writings of bisexual activists do seem to support the notion that they identify as bisexual on the way to identifying as lesbian or gay, though bisexual activists tend to angrily reject the suggestion that their bisexuality is just a phase. Several of the contributors to the anthologies I mention here add in a postscript that they now identify as lesbian, for instance (Drake, 1996). The social sanctions and loss of privilege involved in identifying as lesbian are significant and likely to encourage women to defer or avoid such a definition. One study of bisexual male behaviour which found that there were significant differences between bisexual and homosexual men in the roles they played in anal intercourse might further support such a notion (Stokes, Kittiwut, Venable, & McKirnan, 1996, p. 155). The bisexual and homosexual men were equally likely to have had insertive anal intercourse, whilst only 33% of the bisexual men were likely to have engaged in receptive anal intercourse, relative to 67% of homosexual men. Such findings suggest that the bisexual men were those determined to maintain a traditional masculine identity, which meant that they could not be penetrated.

Fashionable bisexuality. Sue Wilkinson has addressed the contemporary phenomenon of the fashionability of bisexuality. She explains that lesbians are under pressure in popular lesbian and straight culture to have sex with men and that sex with women is being marketed to heterosexual women as an exciting add-on to their relationships with men. The pressures are strong and lead to the “comprehensive depoliticisation of sex and the concomitant erasure of more than two decades of radical feminist theory” (Wilkinson, 1996, p. 294). The fashionability of bisexuality has even extended to the lesbian and gay communities in recent years, to the extent that some trendy lesbians and gay men, committed to queer politics and sexual freedom, have taken to having highly publicised sex with each other. They maintain that their heterosexual behaviour does not impinge upon their lesbian and gay identities (see Field, 1996). They could be seen as succumbing to the pressure of compulsory heterosexuality, especially when the bisexual behaviour is reluctant or about disgust, as in “Jack and Jill Jerk Off” parties in the United States. At these

parties, gay men engage sexually, in public and in black leather, with lesbians. Bill Strubbe (1997) calls his report on this scene “Getting a Grip on the Ick Factor” and explains that many gay men are revolted by the very idea of women’s genitals. He seeks to get over this revulsion and put his finger in the vagina of a “sex-slave” being led around by a lesbian: “That familiar revulsion, followed by the sense that I am doing the most perverted thing in my life: a fag peering up a cunt” (Strubbe, 1997, p. 47). In this bisexual scenario, disgust at women’s genitals is the entertainment. It may be fashionable but it does not seem to be in the interests of women’s freedom. In fact, Strubbe explains, such parties have trouble attracting women at all.

Feminist bisexuality. Many of the women who identify as feminist bisexuals explain that they were previously lesbian feminists but then realised they were attracted to men. They set up support groups for lesbians becoming bisexual and brought with them into the bisexual movement feminist ideas, such as the importance of confronting compulsory heterosexuality. Ruth Gibian talks of the elation of becoming a lesbian, but then, “I fell in love with a man” (Gibian, 1992, p. 4). Women such as Ruth, though now with men, want to maintain their friendships and community with lesbians and certainly have feminist politics. They express considerable hurt that the fact that they live with and love men often does affect the nature of their welcome in the lesbian feminist community.

Some found lesbian feminism unsatisfactory. Ellen Terris in “My Life as a Lesbian-identified Bisexual Fag Hag,” explains that she was a “hard-core lesbian separatist” for a year, and then “tapered off to mellow lesbian-feminist” (Terris, 1991, p. 57). She gave that up when she found the sex was not hot enough. She “got laid . . . occasionally,” but the sex was not what she wanted:

. . . the politically correct lesbian sexuality seemed to be monogamy, or serial monogamy with a curious vacuum in the sweaty-passion department. No hot fucking, no “dirty” patriarchal stuff; no roles, no butch or femme; and definitely none of that stuff with the sinister acronyms like (gasp! horrors!) S&M— apparently, no sense of humour either—allowed. (Terris, 1991, p. 57)

Terris was and remains a fan of gay male sexual practice. Lesbian feminism did not measure up and indeed involved political critiques of many of the practices her gay role models engaged in. Thus she concluded that she “felt like a faggot trapped in the body of a lesbian” (Terris, 1991, p. 58).

A more surprising constituency of bisexual feminists is composed of those who have experienced relationships with men at some time in the past and are now committed to women. They often express a commitment to women for life and are unable to imagine ever again relating to men. When lesbian feminists like myself came out in very similar circumstances in the 1970s and 1980s, we came out as lesbians. We too loved women, and committed ourselves to women, recognising that we had chosen to be lesbians (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981). These bisexual lesbians, as they sometimes label themselves, believe that they need to acknowledge that they have been able to experience love or sexual attraction to men. Stacey Young, in *Bi Any Other Name*, explains how this works:

A friend of mine, Leslie, identifies as a lesbian because she prefers women. . . . But now, she wants a way to feel comfortable owning and acknowledging all her past sexual experiences and emotions with men. “I really *was* attracted to men and enjoyed sex with them.” (Young, 1992, p. 64)

Beth Elliott explains that “Many of us are living what are basically lesbian lives, but don’t want to feel restricted by adopting a ‘lesbian’ label” (Elliott, 1992, p. 237). The determination to be counted as “bisexual” may appear to be in contradiction to the actual practice of such women. Thus, as Elliott describes, “One woman, in a discussion at the first National Bisexual Conference, practically apologized for being so woman-orientated that she wondered if she technically might not really be bi since she had yet to be involved with a man” (Elliott, 1992, p. 237).

Many of the ex-lesbians who now identify as bisexual as well as those who love women but at one time engaged in sexual practice with men, speak of the necessity of recognising and claiming their “own sexual and emotional truth” (Goswami, 1991, p. 62). This suggests an underlying essentialist assumption in the new

bisexuality. In this version of bisexuality women who are engaged in relationships with women and identifying as lesbian can experience sexual interest in a man and throw their lesbian politics to the wind because their body has told them a "truth." Other women who have chosen to love women forever are identifying as bisexual because they once "knew" a man. Sexual desire, in itself arguably a political construction (Jeffreys, 1990), and even if only fleeting, is treated with the respect due a Sibylline prophecy, as indicating the real truth and direction of a person's life. The sexual desire itself is represented as uncontrollable and incomprehensible. Thus Stacey Young explains that when, after being involved with women, she felt sexually attracted towards a man it happened quite mysteriously. She says that "much to my surprise . . . I fell in love with a man . . ." (Young, 1992, p. 81). Cupid's arrow is here as irresistible as in all the masculine romantic tradition. The characters of this bisexual story are the victims of fate. They are thus strongly distinguished from lesbian feminists who cherish the positive choice of lesbianism, the experience of constructing their own rebellious destiny as woman-identified-women in a woman-hating culture.

Bisexuals who have been lesbians and have received the support of that community understandably grieve for what they have lost. Dajenya in *Bi Any Other Name* expressed feelingly ". . . the enormous pain a woman feels when she is ostracized and isolated from the only community she identifies with and loves. It is not a question of being excluded from a few parties and lesbian events" (Dajenya, 1991, p. 250). Some bisexual feminist writings show a considerable naivete about why they might be mistrusted in the lesbian community. Amanda Yoshizaki, for instance, despite having previously been in the lesbian community as a lesbian, decided not only to have a relationship with a man but to marry him. Feminists, not just lesbian feminists, have created swingeing critiques of marriage as an institution of male dominance (Pateman, 1988). For lesbians and gay men it is likely to look like an institution of heterosexual privilege. Yet Yoshizaki sees no deep reason to question marriage:

Despite anthropological or financial reasons, we finally married because it was psychologically important to us. Perhaps this is our per-

sonal shortcoming, but we felt that marriage was the next step in our development as a couple. (Yoshizaki, 1992, p. 155)

She is surprised and hurt at the lack of enthusiasm shown by lesbians towards her marriage "when I come out in the lesbian community as having married a man, I am often viewed as a traitor at best and leper at worst" (Yoshizaki, 1992, p. 156).

Some bisexual feminists write of lesbianism as a kind of convalescent home to which they may repair to deal with feelings of low self-esteem, or heal from sexual abuse, before going out to face men again with more strength and knowledge. Sharon Gonsalves, for instance, rejected men as a "significant act of my healing" from incest and rape (Gonsalves, 1992, p. 115). But she returned to men in order to be "true to myself" and found that she was strengthened in being able to get what she wanted from men. Having a "background in the lesbian community" gave her the "strength and understanding to be able to make demands on male partners that as a heterosexual woman I didn't have" (Gonsalves, 1992, p. 122). Susanna Trnka explains that being bisexual enables her to have a better relationship with the man she lives with. "My bisexuality has brought into our relationship a sense of greater space between us" (Trnka, 1992, p. 104). This is rather different from the way in which lesbians make use of lesbian community, as destination rather than as a way station.

The politics of bisexuality

Though the bisexual practice of those writing in recent anthologies can differ considerably, the politics expressed are surprisingly similar. Bisexual activists tend to say that their practice is superior to that of lesbians and gays because they reject the dualism of hetero/homosexuality. Many say they are superior also in practicing polyamory and providing an example of the path into a better sexual future. They express considerable hostility towards lesbians and gays for being less than welcoming and engaging in "biphobia" towards them. Some of these claims are examined here.

Monosexism. Many bisexual activists, both women and men, proclaim that their sexuality

is more progressive and well adjusted than that of either lesbians and gay men or heterosexuals. This is because they are not limited by gender in their choice of partners. They break down the hetero/homo binary, which, they claim, is a male supremacist device to control and limit people's sexual expression, in their desires and their practice. Thus, one bisexual woman interviewed for a study of bisexual identity argued:

I wish monosexuals (lesbians and straights) were more tolerant of bisexuals. (I wonder how they would feel, knowing that in my mind these diverse groups can be lumped together as "monosexuals," that is, people who choose to limit their sexuality). (Ault, 1996, p. 325)

It is precisely the determination to choose partners "regardless of gender" that some lesbian feminists find very strange, since we specifically choose women for their "difference" from men. Women and men do, after all, occupy different power positions within male supremacist society, which are likely to influence how they have learned to behave and what rights and privileges they can expect. "Gender" encompasses the differences imposed by male dominance and female subordination. Lesbian feminists who prefer women are making a deliberate choice in which gender, understood as the political dynamics of male dominance, is central rather than irrelevant.

Bisexual activists who make arguments about transcending gender tend to be inspired by postmodernism. Feminist and lesbian feminist theorists have criticised the enthusiasm for postmodernism in some areas of feminist and lesbian and gay theory. They have pointed out that such theory is depoliticising through the dismissal of categories such as "woman" and "lesbian" and the stressing of the fluid and fantastic over the material, including the material inequalities between women and men (Bell & Klein, 1996; Jeffreys, 1993, 1994). Since fluidity and diversity are seen as fundamental to postmodern theory, so too are they to bisexuality, and bisexuality is so diverse and fluid in its practice that it can be seen to represent the ideal postmodern practice. Thus Donald E. Hall explains in *RePresenting Bisexualities* that "BISEXUALITY = POSTMODERNISM EMBODIED" (Hall, 1996, p. 9). This is because

the new bisexual studies in this collection are dedicated to "celebrating pluralities, reading multiplicities, engaging sexual diversities that queer the binary" (Hall, 1996, p. 10). The Australian McKenzie Wark also represents bisexual practice as a revolutionary polymorphous perversity and explains that the potential of bisexual politics lies in: "The proliferating flow of images, freed from the ability of any social apparatus to limit interpretation, makes possible an abstract, virtual field of possible desires" (Wark, 1997, p. 77). The happy clappy approach to doing what comes naturally serves to cover up a universe of complex politically constructed mechanisms for maintaining male power and female subordination. Hall enthuses that "Desire is [sooo] inherently disorderly" (Hall, 1996, p. 12). Well, not really. In radical feminist theory it is constructed and directed to maintain a political system of male dominant heterosexuality (MacKinnon, 1989).

Lesbians and gays accused of biphobia. Reluctance to accept the bisexual demand to be included in lesbian or gay communities, organisations, activities, social networks is defined by bisexual activists as "homosexism" or "biphobia." Jo Eadie, for instance, accuses lesbians and gays who do not accept bisexuals of being afraid of their own heterosexual potential.

It is clear enough that much lesbian and gay biphobia is a panicky enactment of their rejection of their own heterosexual desires. Since to be lesbian or gay is to be threatened and oppressed, it becomes very important to prop up your identity in the face of its denial by mainstream culture. (Eadie, 1996, p. 17)

The accusation of biphobia represents the political qualms that lesbians, gays, or even heterosexuals might have about bisexual politics and practice as ignorant prejudice or a psychological problem. Thus, bisexual activists are protected from taking political criticism seriously.

Anti-feminism. Many of those who identify with the position of bisexual feminism express considerable anger at lesbian feminists because they consider them to be unsympathetic to bisexuals. Bisexual activists accuse lesbian feminists of biological determinism, essential-

ism, or even “gender fascism.” Lesbian feminists “answered enforced heterosexuality with enforced homosexuality” (Sturgis, 1996, p. 43). Bisexual feminists, on the other hand, embraced men and saw relationships with them as vitally necessary:

. . . bisexual feminism demands that men be included in any feminist change project. . . it insists on including men in our lives in deeply personal ways—out of choice, not out of compulsion—it requires political engagement with men in the hope that change is possible. (Sturgis, 1996, p. 43)

It is an odd assumption that just because lesbians choose not to have men in their beds, or even in their emotional universe, that they do not engage with them politically. Lesbian feminists are likely to be actively involved in any number of political struggles against male violence or pornography, for instance, that confront male power. It is not clear why arguing with men about who takes out the garbage is a more effective form of political engagement than campaigning for safe houses or for legal reform.

Amanda Udis-Kessler explains that this struggle around the garbage is revolutionary. This is because: “Unlike lesbian feminists, our attempts to transform rather than reproduce, structures of sexism have an immediate impact on men and can actually directly change their perspectives and behaviour” (Udis-Kessler, 1992, p. 184). This would help heterosexual feminists, she says, who would be inspired by the example of bisexual feminists struggling around the division of labour in their homes. This argument is not new. In the great debates between heterosexual and lesbian feminists of the late 70s and 80s in the UK, heterosexual feminists argued precisely the same thing, that they were at the coalface, changing men through their embattled intimacy with them (see some contributions to *Onlywomen Press*, 1981). It is hard to see why bisexual feminists would necessarily be more successful at the coalface than their more committedly heterosexual sisters. Udis-Kessler seeks to explain the bisexual advantage:

When considering our heterosexual relationships, we have our experiences with women available for comparison; we can determine

what the similarities and differences are and connect those to the subtle kinds of disempowerment present when we are with men. . . . (Udis-Kessler, 1992, p. 184)

When women recognise, as bisexual feminists do, that they can love women, it is hard to understand why they would choose to engage in relationships which subject them to “disempowerment.”

In the feminist anthology promoting bisexuality, *Closer to Home*, Beth Elliott explains that bisexual feminism is superior and likely to be the feminism of the future. It is sex-positive and includes men, “Bi-feminists are the women most likely to pioneer a new, inclusive feminist perspective beyond the dualism that lesbian feminism has not yet transcended” (Elliott, 1992, p. 240). Lesbian feminists are constantly reproached for refusing to love men, whilst enthusiasm for men makes bisexual feminists superior.

Polyamory

Nonmonogamy or polyamory, as the pursuit of more than one emotional and or sexual relationship at one time is called by those in the bisexual movement, is stressed by many activists as both a vital ingredient of bisexual politics and one which is revolutionary and transformative of mainstream fuddy duddy society.

The issue of nonmonogamy has been a contentious one within the lesbian feminist community and has been much debated and experimented with. Nonmonogamy between women, though it may have associated problems as well as joys and can be bedevilled by the power differences of race and class, is at least free of the faultline of gender. The power relationship between bisexual women, who are still attached to men, and lesbians, is fraught by the heterosexual privilege bisexual women retain and the very different positions of structural power in the world which the male and female lovers of such women occupy. This can lead to considerable hurt, which some bisexual women seem not to acknowledge. Eileen O’Connell, for instance, was involved with a lesbian and a man at the same time. The lesbian had to agree that Eileen would not be committed to her but she found it difficult to deal with Eileen’s relationship with a man.

Jason on the whole was quite reasonable about it, although I felt that it was partly because he found it erotic and a turn on. Then I really put the cat among the pigeons by unintentionally double-booking them. Unfortunately I was not there when they turned up on the doorstep together. You can imagine Cath's face. She apparently just turned and walked off. Cath made my name mud, and my sexuality. (O'Connell, 1996, p. 101)

It does seem likely that a great deal of lesbian and gay suspicion of bisexuals stems from precisely such a failure to acknowledge the hurt occasioned by the specific inequality of non-monogamous practice between a woman who chooses to love women and one who remains attached to the dominant sex.

Bisexual takeover of lesbian history and culture

An aspect of bisexual politics that may be of concern to lesbian scholars, and all those lesbians who take succour from lesbian history and culture, is the attempt by some bisexual activists and scholars to annexe precisely those figures and works that have been identified as part of lesbian history and literature. Bisexual writers claim figures in history, literature, and popular culture who have been unearthed by lesbian and gay scholars as having had relationships with the same sex, as their bisexual heroes and antecedents. They use the work of lesbian and gay scholars to do this. Marjorie Garber, who has written a 528-page book devoted precisely to the recovery of bisexual heroes from lesbian and gay culture, explains that this recovery of bisexuals is proceeding apace. The newsletter of the Boston Bisexual Women's Network, she records, "included a list of 'Famous Switch-Hitters,' which was "culled, interestingly, from a published book of *Lesbian Lists*" (Garber, 1996, p. 37). Garber argues that many supposedly lesbian and gay figures and texts deserve to be recovered for bisexual history and culture:

. . . gay and lesbian studies, in an important and path-breaking move to make visible and concrete the culturally repressed (or suppressed) homosexual content of many books, films, aesthetic styles, and individual life sto-

ries, has claimed figures like Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway, Cary Grant, the poet D.H. Lawrence's novella *The Fox*, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* . . . as gay figures and gay texts, even though many of them might be more appropriately described as bisexual. (Garber, 1996, p. 28)

According to Garber, the "perpetual favourite" that bisexual activists seek to reclaim from lesbian history is Virginia Woolf. Garber claims Woolf too, as well as other members of the Bloomsbury set.

Yet if any "lifestyle" should be said to typify the lives of the Bloomsberries, it is in fact bisexuality. Woolf and Sackville-West were married women who had sex with women. Harold Nicolson had affairs with men throughout his married life. (Garber, 1996, p. 105)

Garber's book is a collection of anecdotes, a list of famous persons and brief descriptions of their supposed bisexual adventures with no historical context or critical comment. If this list is disassembled it is possible to throw some doubt on the "bisexuality" of those included. It could be argued that Virginia Woolf, for example, valued women much more than the above description would imply. She did famously state, after all, that "Women alone stir my imagination" (Nicholson & Trautman, 1975–1980, vol. 4, p. 203). Garber glosses over the significance of the compulsory nature of marriage 100 years ago for members of the middle and upper classes. Whilst men like Oscar Wilde might be constrained to marry by societal expectations and the lack of a role model for a different and homosexual lifestyle, the necessity of marriage for women was even more coercive. Women needed to marry for their subsistence at a time when professional occupations were not open to women and inheritances went to men. Thus, Virginia Woolf has written most movingly about the necessity of a small private income and a "Room of One's Own" in order to write.

Garber pooh-poohs the importance of historical context and the need to be wary of applying modern notions of bisexual or lesbian or gay identity to historical figures.

I think we may delude ourselves a little about how truly "historicized" our notions

of cultural identity can ever be. The Alexander the Greats, Vita Sackville-Wests, and Eleanor Roosevelts we muse about are as much the constructions of modern biographers, filmmakers, and novelists as they are the “real,” “original,” and “historicized” persons who once bore those names. (Woolf in Nicholson & Trautman, 1975–1980, vol. 4, p. 52)

Thus, she concludes, anyone can claim any historical figure to support their cause, without worrying about the reasonableness or political implications of their case. Such casualness is a surprising contrast to the very careful work by lesbian feminist scholars over definitions and the appropriateness, for instance, of calling 19th century figures “lesbians” (Lesbian History Group, 1989).

The novels which Garber claims for bisexuality are surprising too. Garber identifies D. H. Lawrence’s *The Fox* as “One of the most frequently cited of all fictional narratives about bisexuality” (Garber, 1996, p. 467). The novella is about two women who live together. A man decides to separate the women by romancing one of them, with the power of a hunting fox. When she refuses to leave her woman friend for him, he arranges for a tree that is being felled to fall on his rival. Marriage takes place, but at the end of the novel March is remarkably ambivalent and lacking in enthusiasm for her imposed heterosexual future. There is no enthusiastic bisexuality in this novel and it might more easily be seen as representing a masculine determination to show that a man will always be able to conquer lesbianism or as an example of how hard it was for women to successfully live and love together in the period in which the story is set.

Friendly Young Ladies by Mary Renault is another novel with a similar plot: man splits up lesbian couple and wins the girl. Erin G. Carlston, in the cultural studies collection *RePresenting Bisexualities*, explains that the novel is a “theorization of bisexuality that challenges the dominant medical and literary discourses on homosexuality in its time” (Carlston, 1996, p. 165). This novel too can more reasonably be read as revealing the forces of compulsory heterosexuality and the difficulties of choosing to love women in 1940s Britain.

The definition of bisexuality which allows such historical and literary figures to be

claimed as bisexual is an impoverished and uncritical one. Evidence that a character interacted with the opposite sex, however reluctantly, is treated as evidence of bisexuality. When female characters who show enthusiasm for women and distaste for men, or have their girlfriends killed off by male suitors, are identified as bisexual it seems that a new version of the hetero-relational imperative is in operation. Janice Raymond invented the useful term *hetero-relations* to describe the “wide range of affective, social, political, and economic relations that are ordained between men and women by men” (Raymond, 1994, p. 7). The hetero-relational imperative enforces such relations, or exaggerates their importance in inappropriate contexts.

Bisexuality and lesbian feminist politics: The importance of choice

Most of the rhetoric of bisexual politics that reproaches lesbian feminism and sets up bisexuality as superior is based on either a profound ignorance or determined avoidance of the ideas and practice of lesbian feminism. Complex and sophisticated lesbian feminist theory is reduced in bisexual rhetoric to man-hating or gender fascism. In fact, it is the positive choice to love women rather than men that distinguishes lesbian feminism from bisexuality. Unlike a bisexual identity, a lesbian feminist identity is not based in “biology” or sexual “truth” or even on simply what women do or have done with their genitals. It encompasses a great deal more than sexual acts. As the lesbian feminist philosopher Claudia Card puts it:

Self-identification as lesbian . . . is not simply on the basis of significant lesbian experiences but usually indicates having made lesbian relationships central to one’s life, having chosen to organize one’s life around lesbian experience and possibilities, being committed to certain orientations of one’s attention, energy flow, resources, etc. (Card, 1995, p. 34)

Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger explain, in their ground-breaking anthology *Heterosexuality*:

Affirming our lesbianism is a liberatory feminist act. When we say we are lesbian, it is not (necessarily) because we never enjoyed

sex with men . . . not (necessarily) because we are never sexually attracted to men . . . not because we experience our sexuality as a “rigid,” “fixed,” “essential personal attribute.” . . . but because we are making a political statement. (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993, pp. 7–8)

When women choose to be lesbians this choice offers powerful advantages. “The power available to those who choose, who decide in favor of deviance from heterosexual norms, can be very great” (Frye, 1983, p. 150). One advantage is that it allows lesbians to integrate their emotional and sexual lives with their feminist politics, to have, as Claudia Card puts it “a certain integrity of emotional response with political belief” (Card, 1995, pp. 49–50). Lesbian feminists translate their commitment to women and feminism into loving relationships with those who are the centre of their political lives and the force of their revolution, women, instead of members of the dominant class, men.

The choice of woman loving allows lesbian feminists to envision and create an alternative world from the male supremacist hetero-relational one, based upon lesbian values, particularly an alternative lesbian sexuality (Hart, 1996). The choice that lesbian feminists make for women is a political act. Cheryl Clarke explains that lesbianism is “an act of resistance” (Clarke, 1981, p. 128). It is an act of resistance because heterosexuality as an institution founds and shapes male supremacy (Rich, 1984). Lesbian feminist theorists have analysed the ways in which heterosexuality constructs and organises the oppression of women. Heterosexual feminists are only just beginning to respond to the invitations by lesbians to take part in this theory making (see contributions to Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993; Richardson, 1996). Such critical analysis of heterosexuality is absent from the vast majority of bisexual theory.

The choice to love only women resists a fundamental principle enforced by male supremacy, as Marilyn Frye points out, that of man-loving. Gay men, heterosexual women, bisexual women, heterosexual men, all love men. They are conformists. Only lesbians are resisters and rebels who put women first and refuse to love men against all the pressures of the male-dominant, man-loving culture.

Not to love men is, in male-supremacist culture, possibly the single most execrable sin. . . . Not to love men is so vile in this scheme of values that it cannot be conceived as the merely negative thing it is, as a simple absence of interest, but must be seen as positive enmity. (Frye, 1983, p. 135)

In contrast bisexual women can be seen as remaining loyal to man loving and continuing to allow men access actually, or, in the case of those who relate only to women but choose to call themselves bisexuals because they have “known” a man, symbolically. The decision to express loyalty in the label or practice of bisexuality is understandable because of the punishments that accrue to those who are disloyal. As Frye comments: “conscious and deliberate exclusion of men by women, from anything, is blatant insubordination, and generates in women fear of punishment and reprisal (fear which is often well-justified)” (Frye, 1983, p. 103).

Rather than bisexual politics being new and progressive, elements of this politics may represent a threat to the gains of community and visibility that lesbians have won. Bisexual politics poses a challenge to the continued visibility of lesbian feminism. The constant reiteration of the possibility of lesbian choice is necessary in a male supremacist culture which will continually occlude that choice and represent lesbianism simply as a sexual titillation in men’s sex industry, as sexual excitement in the form of an add on to conventional heterosexuality, as just sexual practice, or as fashion. As Frye points out, the practice of lesbian feminism is already “almost unthinkable” (Frye, 1983, p. 145).

The choice to be a lesbian is already constrained, as other choices are for women, by structural inequality. Women with jobs that pay well, women who are childless, can make such a choice much more easily, for instance. The attack on the exclusivity and gender fascism of lesbian choice, however, the imperatives of queer politics to love men, may make it even more difficult for women to make a lesbian choice in the future. They may feel constrained to leave the way open for male access to their bodies and emotions as some of those in bisexual anthologies now do, despite their actual interest only in women. It has always required great courage to choose women and if a new bisexual imperative were to arise, as bi-

sexual politics attacks and disappears lesbian feminist ideas and practice, then the choice might become even more difficult. The Weinberg et al. study of bisexuality in San Francisco noticed that a change was already happening.

Older homosexuals are most likely to emphasize exclusivity of same-sex partners as the basis of a homosexual identity, since this is the identity they had to fight for. Younger homosexuals, however, can approach an already-won identity and experiment with it. Such experimentation includes bisexuality. (Weinberg et al., 1995, p. 299)

The identity of lesbian, as a woman who refuses male access and engages in an act of resistance to male power, has certainly not become a safe or certain one. Judging by the hostility expressed towards lesbian feminism's prioritising of women in the bisexual anthologies, it is still a stigmatised and risky identity. Thus the "no-saying" that lesbianism constitutes is as important today as ever it was.

Bisexual politics are distinguished from lesbian feminist politics by the lack of any feminist critique of the construction of love and desire and all their manifestations. The vast majority of bisexual politics treats sex acts as simply doing what comes naturally, and is motivated by a sexual freedom agenda of anything goes. Even bisexual feminist activists who have a critique of heterosexuality and seek to incorporate feminist ethics of love and sex into their relationships are distinguished from lesbian feminists by having chosen to love men. These are significant political differences. It is important that women who choose for women should be able to celebrate that choice and not feel under any more pressure than already exists under male supremacy to afford men access to their persons or their identities.

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