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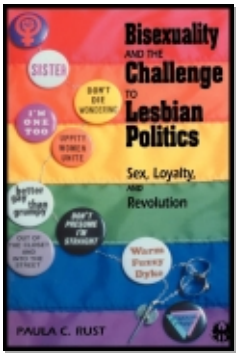
6. The Pink and Blue Herring: The Issue is Lesbianism, Not Bisexuality



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The Pink and Blue Herring:[1] The Issue Is Lesbianism, Not Bisexuality

Why is the topic of bisexuality so controversial among lesbians? Why does it arouse such passion in us, sparking heated debates in our newspapers and magazines? Why do most of us prefer to keep our distance from bisexual women, avoiding romance and even friendship with them? Although we often couch our arguments in political or intellectual terms, the emotional force behind them suggests that bisexuality touches a nerve in us. In fact, the question of bisexuality strikes to the core of our being because it is intimately related to the question of who we are as lesbians. As individuals and as a historically evolving community, we have struggled to form an identity. We have struggled to distinguish ourselves from heterosexuals in order to assert our existence in a society that assumes heterosexuality, and at the same time we have struggled to define ourselves positively in terms of what we have in common as lesbians. But these two processes—the process of distinguishing ourselves from heterosexuals and the process of defining ourselves as lesbians—lead to different conceptions of who we are. Disputes occur over how we should classify that which is lesbian by one definition, but not

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by another. Sometimes we refer to it as heterosexuality, sometimes we refer to it as lesbianism, and sometimes we refer to it as bisexuality. It exists at the edges of lesbianism, and it blurs those edges. It prevents us from defining clear boundaries as a community. To develop a sense of who we are as lesbians, we have had to overlook these boundary disputes. Bisexuality forces us to reexamine our own boundaries. It calls into question the clarity of our sense of ourselves as lesbians and reveals the disagreements we have with each other over the question of who we are as a community. It opens old wounds that are still painful. We have spent years defending our existence in a heterosexist society, and our identities as lesbians are hard won; any threat to these identities touches a sensitive nerve indeed, and bisexuality is a threat.

In this chapter, I will examine the development of our concept of ourselves as lesbians, including the disagreements we had—and still have—with each other along the way. I will then show how our current beliefs and feelings about bisexuality as described in chapters 4 and 5 stem from these disagreements, and have more to do with the schisms in our own conception of ourselves than they have to do with bisexuality.

Much of the debate over what constitutes lesbianism took place within the context of defining the political meaning of lesbianism, particularly in relation to feminism. A superficial overview of the history of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism locates the early 1970s as a pivotal point. The oft-told story goes like this:[2] In the early days of the second wave of the feminist movement, lesbians immediately recognized that feminist goals, for example, women's economic independence, mirrored their own needs as lesbians. Because of their particular interest in feminist goals, lesbians became some of the most active leaders in the feminist movement. But lesbianism was feminism's skeleton in the closet. Nonfeminists used the charge of lesbianism to intimidate feminists and would-be feminists. Heterosexuals in the women's liberation movement responded to these attacks defensively by declaring their heterosexuality, and lesbians remained hidden to avoid tainting the movement. Heterosexual feminists constructed lesbianism as a "lavender herring," i.e., a trivial issue that would distract feminists from the "real" issues. By constructing heterosexual women's issues as the proper focus of feminism, they constructed the heterosexual woman as the "real" woman and lesbians as a special interest group.

By the early 1970s, some lesbians were no longer content to remain

hidden and no longer willing to let their concerns as lesbians be dismissed or put on the back burner. Encouraged by the development of gay liberation and tired of being second-class citizens in both the feminist (as lesbians) and the gay (as women) movements, they began to come out within the feminist movement. Eventually, after finding that their needs were not met within the feminist movement, they formed a splinter movement that became lesbian feminism. But in the meantime, through the debate over lesbianism in the feminist movement, a new concept of the political relationship between feminism and lesbianism evolved. No longer the skeleton in the closet, lesbianism became the ultimate expression of feminism, and lesbians became the vanguard of the movement.

This brief overview or "origin story" (King 1986) sketches the outlines of the historical evolution of the relationship between feminism and lesbianism, but it glosses over the twists and turns we took along the way. The transition was neither easy nor universal; on the contrary, it was hotly debated and never resolved. The story also ignores the fact that the debate over lesbianism within the feminist movement took place in the context of a larger society. This larger society, as a result of the increasing visibility of racial and ethnic liberation movements, such as the Black[3] civil rights movement, was familiar with "ethnic" modes of political discourse that differed from "feminist" modes of political discourse. Lesbians, as heirs to both political traditions, used both languages of political protest and thereby produced a variety of sometimes conflicting political arguments based on different concepts of lesbianism.

To understand how our contemporary concepts of lesbianism were shaped by the debate over lesbianism in the feminist movement and by the competition between ethnic and feminist modes of argument, we have to look closely at the exact nature of the arguments that were made on all sides of the debate, identify the points of contention, and analyze the faultlines in lesbian ideology that were created by these disagreements—faultlines that are exposed today when we talk about bisexuality. Because my goal is to identify the contradictions within lesbian ideology that arose from its multiple ideological roots, the discussion to follow is organized in terms of the differences between various ideological arguments and not by the historical integrity of each ideological argument. Readers who are interested in historical treatments of the development of particular strains of feminist or lesbian ideology, such

as radical feminism, cultural feminism, lesbian separatism, and lesbian feminist reformism, are referred to many excellent works by other authors.[4]

The Personal and the Political: Constructing Lesbianism as a Feminist Issue

To legitimize lesbianism as an issue in the eyes of feminists, lesbians had to construct an argument whereby lesbianism would become an important feminist issue. To do so required constructing a connection between an issue that had heretofore been considered personal, or private—lesbianism—and an issue that feminists had already politicized—women's oppression.

The politicization of the personal was an established feminist strategy. In fact, the entire second wave of the feminist movement was built on the redefinition of "women's issues"—such as abortion, child care, and physical abuse, issues that were formerly considered private matters—as political issues. In this feminist tradition, the "politicization of the personal" means first recognizing that problems that appear to be individual problems are in reality part of a larger social pattern that systematically disadvantages women as a group. As part of a larger social pattern, these problems must be the consequences of social, not individual, forces. Furthermore, the pattern was created and is perpetuated by power differentials between women and men in society; that is, the social pattern, and therefore the personal problems of women, are political in origin. The solution, therefore, must be a political—not an individual—one, in which the problems are attacked at their root, i.e., the power differential between women and men. Thus, feminism reconstructs individual problems as social problems, argues that the personal is a reflection of the political, and then prescribes a political solution to problems that were formerly considered private matters.

To legitimate lesbianism as a feminist issue, therefore, lesbianism had to be reconstructed as a political issue. Different lesbian feminists accomplished this reconstruction in different ways. In their famous essay, "The Woman-Identified Woman," the Radicalesbians[5] argued that "lesbian" is a term that is used to keep women in line; it is thrown at

women who do not conform to the feminine gender role, and it is used to keep women from becoming too militantly feminist. Audre Lorde also described this tactic and urged Black women to recognize and resist it:

> let anyone, particularly a Black man, accuse a straight Black woman of being a Black Lesbian, and right away that sister becomes immobilized, as if that is the most horrible thing she could be, and must at all costs be proven false. That is homophobia. It is a waste of woman energy, and puts a terrible weapon into the hands of your enemies to be used against you to silence you. (Lorde 1988/1990:322–323)

In other words, homophobia is a tool that the oppressor can use to forestall feminist struggle. This argument constructs homophobia as a barrier to feminist progress, a point of weakness that the oppressor can use to perpetuate the oppression. Therefore, in order to advance the cause of feminism, it is necessary for feminists to defuse this weapon by confronting their own fear of lesbianism. Addressing the issue of lesbianism, and overcoming homophobia among feminists, then, becomes a necessary step in feminist progress or a means toward feminist goals.

The accusation of lesbianism also uses homophobia to control women in another way. Implicit in the accusation is the message that lesbians are not real women and that "the essence of being a 'woman' is to get fucked by men" (Radicalesbians 1970:51).[6] By accusing feminists of lesbianism, the patriarchy uses male-defined womanhood as the carrot to keep women submissive. By accepting this definition of womanhood and the homophobia implicit in it, feminists allow the patriarchy to subvert feminism. By rejecting homophobia and broadening the concept of womanhood to include lesbians, feminists could resist the patriarchy's attempts to retard feminist progress.

The Radicalesbians argued that overcoming homophobia is a means toward feminist goals in a more direct way as well. They argued that fear of lesbianism keeps women from forming intimate, supportive, and loving relationships with each other.[7] First, it scares women away from intimate relationships with each other because of the implicit lesbianism in those relationships. It prevents women from forming primary relationships with other women, and therefore from committing themselves primarily to women. Conversely, it ensures that women will remain primarily committed to men, and therefore under the control of men. Second, the lesbian label (hetero)sexualizes relations among women and causes women to perceive intimate relations between women according

to the heterosexual models they have been taught, e.g., to lay "a surrogate male role on the lesbian" and "make herself into an object" (Radicalesbians 1970:51). Thus, women are kept from forming real solidarity among themselves because they are only able to understand intimate relations in terms of heterosexual roles. But "[i]t is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution" (Radicalesbians 1970:55). Feminist struggle requires that women commit themselves primarily to women, not to men; to do so requires overcoming fear of lesbianism. Therefore, addressing the issue of lesbianism and overcoming fear of lesbianism is not only necessary to deprive the oppressor of one of his tools of oppression, but also to create the most important tool of liberation—solidarity among women.

Taking a slightly different approach, other feminists agreed that homophobia divided women, but they argued that it divided women not because it prevented women from forming intimate relations with each other, but because it divided heterosexual women from lesbian women. For example, Val Carpenter (1988) observed that anti-lesbianism kept heterosexual and lesbian women separated from each other by distrust and prejudice and encouraged them to undercut each other, thus allowing men to consolidate their power as men over both heterosexual women and lesbians. Audre Lorde characterized this as a "divide-and-conquer routine" (1988/1990:324), which wastes women's energy and prevents heterosexual women from benefiting from the insights of strong Black Lesbian feminists.

The above arguments assert that homophobia is a barrier to feminist progress and that, therefore, feminists must recognize lesbianism as a political issue and work to eliminate their own homophobia in order to achieve liberation for women. Addressing the issue of lesbianism is presented as a means toward a feminist end; once the barrier of homophobia is removed, feminists will be able to get on with the real business at hand, i.e., dismantling sexism.

A more radical approach to the problem of establishing lesbianism as a legitimate political issue of concern to feminists was to argue that lesbianism *itself* is political, and that lesbianism per se is a feminist political issue. Again, different theorists used different arguments to construct lesbianism as a political issue. The Furies, a lesbian-feminist

collective in Washington, D.C., and the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group began by politicizing heterosexuality, then constructing a relationship between heterosexuality and the politics of male supremacy, and finally arguing that lesbianism, as an alternative to heterosexuality, is a political response to male supremacy. For example, in the Introduction to their collection of essays written by members of The Furies or published in *The Furies* newspaper, Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch argued that heterosexuality is a political institution and an ideology that supports male supremacy (1975).[8] In an essay in the collection, Bunch further explained that heterosexuality is political because relationships between women and men involve power and dominance, i.e., they are political. Heterosexual relationships are the most individual form of male domination, in which a man dominates a woman. In an essay in the same collection, Rita Mae Brown helped construct the relationship between male domination in society and male domination within individual heterosexual relationships by arguing that the man in a heterosexual relationship "has the entire system of male privilege to back him up" (1972/1975:70–71). Or, as Jill Johnston put it in *Lesbian Nation,* "Sexual dependence on the man is inextricably entangled in the interdependence of man and woman at all levels of the social structures by which the woman is oppressed" (1973:165). In other words, male domination in heterosexual relationships is the expression of and is supported by male social domination.

Because heterosexuality is a tool of male domination, it is enforced by patriarchal society via socialization and social norms. Gerre Goodman et al. argued that gender role socialization fractures human integrity by transforming women and men into complimentary emotional cripples, and thereby compelling women and men to bond together to reestablish their integrity (1983). This socialization, or "heterosexual conditioning" as the staff of *Purple September* called it, is especially crippling to girls because it teaches them to deny their human identities and see themselves and their sexuality through male eyes so that they will provide a good match for males who have also been taught to see through male eyes (1975:81). Coletta Reid cited the myth of the vaginal orgasm as evidence that heterosexual meanings are culturally constructed to benefit men (1975), and Brown argued that a woman's entire identity in male supremacist heterosexual society is defined by her sexual function (1976a). Heterosexual socialization is backed up by norms that

proscribe non-heterosexual forms of sexuality (*Purple September* 1975), and by male behaviors, cultural myths, and economic realities that conspire to create the "lie of compulsory female heterosexuality" (Rich 1980/1983:199). Thus, heterosexuality is not a personal choice, but a politically prescribed outcome. This normative prescription, or heterosexism, is the mechanism by which heterosexuality is transformed into a coercive institution, i.e., the mechanism by which women are forced to make themselves available to serve men within individual heterosexual relationships (Goodman et al. 1983). Heterosexuality is therefore a political institution that not only perpetuates sexist gender roles, but guarantees that men's control over women will extend into the most personal aspects of women's lives and psyches.

Because heterosexuality is a political institution that supports male supremacy, lesbianism, as an alternative to and implicit critique of heterosexuality, is itself political. By rejecting heterosexual relationships and choosing to love women in a culture that despises women, the lesbian is in revolt against male supremacy. At the cultural level, the lesbian "threatens male supremacy at its core" (Bunch 1972/1975:29) by rejecting the cultural valuation of the male (Brown 1976a). At the structural level, by forming same-sex pairs the lesbian subverts the division of humanity into two emotionally crippled but complimentary female and male groups; i.e. she challenges gender roles (Goodman et al. 1983). She is "the person who is outside of the collaborating categories of male and female" (Wittig 1981/1991 cited by King 1986:82) and who refuses to collaborate in her own oppression (Rich 1980/1983). She "is a terrible threat to male supremacy" because she "is totally independent of men" (Shelley 1969/1970:345).

At the personal level, the lesbian "undermines the personal power that men exercise over women" (Bunch 1972/1975:33) and withdraws support for individual men (Brown 1972/1975) by refusing to participate in heterosexual relationships. Reid asserted that this deprives men of their personal servants (1975), and Brown suggested that men will change if they are deprived of the support of women. Carrying this thought to an extreme, Brown pointed out that "if all women were Lesbians male supremacy would have the impossible task of maintaining itself in a vacuum" (1976f:122). Marilyn Frye defined power in terms of differential access; power is the right of access by the powerful to the powerless. Therefore, lesbianism, insofar as it represents a denial of

men's right to sexual access to women on the part of individual women, reclaims women's power and challenges men's power over women (1977/1983a). Finally, at the psychological level, the lesbian challenges male-defined sexuality by demonstrating that sexuality need not involve a penis, and she challenges male-defined images of women by rejecting "male definitions of how she should feel, act, look, and live" (Bunch 1972/1975:29), including the definition of a woman as a person who is fucked by men. In multiple ways, therefore, the lesbian offers "the beginning of the end of collective and individual male supremacy" (Bunch 1972/1975:33).

This argument presents lesbianism as inherently subversive because lesbians' very existence challenges male supremacy. Lesbians, by virtue of being lesbians, are living feminism. Through their personal lives, lesbians present a political challenge to the enemy of feminism, male supremacy. Therefore, the lesbian lifestyle is a political act. As Reid stated so eloquently, "In the context of the institutional nature of enforced heterosexuality, lesbianism is an act of individual rebellion" (1975:103).[9] Feminists have an interest in fighting heterosexism not only because it is a barrier to feminist progress, but because lesbianism itself is feminist.

The argument that lesbianism is political because it implicitly challenges male supremacy constructs lesbianism as not merely a feminist issue, but a key feminist issue. If heterosexuality is the fundamental basis of male supremacy, then lesbianism is the cornerstone of women's liberation. In other words, lesbianism is necessary to feminism. This opinion was expressed by many lesbian feminist writers of the early 1970s. For example, Bunch commented that "Lesbianism is the key to liberation" (1972/1975:36), Johnston quipped in *Ms.* magazine, "Feminism at heart is a massive complaint. Lesbianism is the solution,"[10] and Ti-Grace Atkinson wrote, "Lesbianism is to feminism what the Communist Party was to the trade union movement. Tactically, any feminist should fight to the death for lesbianism because of its strategic importance" (Atkinson 1970/1974:134). Whereas a few short years earlier lesbianism had represented a threat to feminism, it now represented the hope for women's liberation.[11] As Katie King (1986) observed, lesbianism had become "feminism's magical sign."

Some lesbian feminists argued that lesbianism is a feminist lifestyle in practical, as well as theoretical, ways. Myron and Bunch (1975)

argued that lesbianism is feminist not merely because lesbians' existence poses an implicit challenge to the interrelated institutions of heterosexuality and male supremacy, but also because lesbians' personal lives are more likely to embody feminist ideals. For example, whereas heterosexual women are able to depend on the men to whom they are attached, lesbians must provide for themselves economically and psychologically. Lesbians represent "the ultimate in an independent life style" (Abbott and Love 1971:602) because the lesbian "is freed or has freed herself from the external and internal dominance of the male" and "has sought wholeness within herself, not requiring, in the old romantic sense, to be 'completed' by an opposite."[12] Freedom from dependence on men is a feminist goal; lesbians, by virtue of being lesbians, are already living lives in which they have attained this feminist goal. Moreover, this independence leads to "strength and spirit in individual women" (Myron and Bunch 1975:13), qualities that are desirable from a feminist perspective.

In addition to independence, freedom from men and relationships with women provide the lesbian with the opportunity for greater self-knowledge, the opportunity to shed male definitions of womanhood, and the opportunity to learn to love and value herself through learning to love and value another woman. This is how Jessica Wood experienced her lesbian desire; inside her, struggling to emerge, was not a "woman attracted to women" but a "completely woman-defined-woman" (1981:53). The Radicalesbians wrote that "Only women can give each other a new sense of self" because this new sense of self has "to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men" (1970:54). Recognizing the connection that the Radicalesbian argument constructed between the individual and the collective woman, Brown explained how relationships with women can lead an individual woman to greater self-knowledge: "A woman can best find out who she is with other women, not with just one other woman but with other women, who are also struggling to free themselves from an alien and destructive culture" (1976d:76). Similarly, Goodman et al. explained how loving other women can lead individual women toward greater love for themselves as women:

> To completely love ourselves, it may not be necessary to love other women. However the conditioning that we are weak, incomplete—needing a man for strength, fulfillment, and protection—tells us that

> we cannot love women, even ourselves, that we must serve men; it also tells us to include ourselves under a category meaning inferior and not worthy of commitment. Loving another woman, because it contradicts this conditioning, inevitably leads to greater self-love. (1983:32–33)

Self-knowledge is a feminist ideal because to build a strong feminist movement, women must first discover who they are as women, apart from the male-defined images of themselves they have been taught in a male supremacist culture. They must also learn to value themselves as women, shedding the devaluation and negative valuations imposed on women by a male supremacist culture. Lesbians, by virtue of their relationships with women, have greater opportunities for developing feminist self-knowledge and self-love than heterosexual women do.

Another feminist ideal is the egalitarian relationship. Heterosexual relationships, by virtue of the differential power of women and men and the gender roles imposed by society, are necessarily unequal. Heterosexual women must confront the sexism of their male partners and the sexist expectations other people place on heterosexual relationships on a daily basis. In contrast, a lesbian relationship is a relationship between two social equals that has the potential to be egalitarian, and therefore feminist. As Sasha Gregory Lewis (1979) argued, lesbians were never included in the heterosexual gender role system and therefore are free from its rules and roles. A woman in a relationship with another woman avoids having to deal with sexism in the most personal area of her life. Therefore, lesbians are free to live feminist lives without the burden of a constant struggle. Lois Hart described her personal experience of this freedom: [13]

> in living with another woman, and in developing a relationship with another woman . . . I don't have to deal with a lot of my own feelings of oppression as when I'm with a man. I don't have to deal with that part of me that's been trained to respond to men in certain ways and to have certain emotional reactions towards men. It's very clear to me, when I'm with another woman, that I am responsible for myself . . . I see that as a political thing. [14]

The argument that lesbians' lifestyles are more likely to embody feminist ideals utilizes a strategy for the politicization of lesbianism that is different from the strategy underlying the argument that lesbianism is inherently subversive. Instead of politicizing heterosexuality and then linking heterosexuality to the political institution of male supremacy in

order to conclude that lesbianism, as an alternative to heterosexuality, is politically feminist, the argument that lesbian lifestyles embody feminist ideals draws the connection between lesbianism and feminism first at the personal level, and then shifts this connection to the political level. The quote from Hart illustrates this strategy. Hart asserted that when she is in a lesbian relationship, she experiences a freedom from sexism; this personal relationship is therefore feminist. Because the personal is a reflection of the political, the relationship itself, embodying the connection between lesbianism and feminism, is political. As Hollibaugh and Moraga wrote in the early 1980s, lesbianism "came to be seen as the practice of feminism" (1981/1983:395).

In a letter to *The Ladder* in 1969, Martha Shelley added a subtle but critical twist to the argument that the lesbian lifestyle is feminist. She encouraged lesbians to be proud of themselves because "We are a body of women independent of [men's] domination, willing to compete with them on an equal basis—not willing to reduce ourselves to the lowest common denominator so that every living male can feel himself superior to us."[15] Writing during a historical period during which most lesbians accepted the "experts' " opinion that homosexuality was a form of perversion, Shelley's intent was undoubtedly to counteract lesbians' negative self-images by pointing out the positive aspects of lesbianism. However, by urging lesbians to be proud of their lack of subordination to men, Shelley implicitly suggested that lesbians could somehow take credit for the fact that their lives conformed to feminist ideals. In other words, she suggested that lesbians not only lived feminist lives but that they *were* feminists, and that they had become feminist not by default but through their own volition. This might have been one of the first written implications that lesbianism is a matter of choice, an idea that became the subject of explicit controversy among lesbians and feminists a few years later. It was also the beginning of the idea that the lesbian lifestyle is not only *consistent* with feminism's vision for all women, but that the lesbian lifestyle is in fact an *expression* of feminism.[16]

Once lesbianism per se had been reconstructed as political and feminist, lesbian feminists could begin to argue that lesbians, as individuals and as a collective, have something to offer heterosexual feminists. Many claimed that lesbians have a special vantage point or analysis of heterosexuality as an institution, which they possess by virtue of their perspective as outsiders to the institution. In good feminist fashion,

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Coletta Reid drew on her own personal experience to explain that lesbianism reveals the workings of heterosexuality: "I had heard the term 'heterosexual privilege' before, but I never really understood how it worked. Now I knew. . . . As I tried to live as an open lesbian I began to see the privileges I had taken for granted when married" (1975:95–96). In other words, as a lesbian, Reid could see the forces that coerce women to participate in the heterosexual institution.

Marilyn Frye made the same point in a more philosophical fashion. Frye metaphorically described the male supremacist world as a Reality play. In this play, men are the actors toward whom the audience's attention is properly drawn, and whose actions define Reality. Women are stagehands who are necessary to the performance but whose movements must be ignored to maintain the illusion of Reality. In this phallocratic Reality lesbians do not exist, but we can begin to understand lesbians by imagining them as seers who look beyond male-defined Reality and perceive the women instead. The individual lesbian might not pose a threat to Reality, but as a seeing woman she signals the possibility of seeing, and therefore authoring reality, to other women. As a seer of women, she also signals the possibility of women being seen. The danger to male supremacist society lies in the potential contagion of this perception "to the point where the agreement in perception which keeps Reality afloat begins to disintegrate" (1983c:171). The lesbian is, therefore, a threat to male supremacist Reality.[17]

The message to heterosexual women in these arguments is that they are blinded by their own involvement in heterosexuality, and that they must rely on the superior insight of lesbians to achieve a greater understanding of their own oppression as women. Heterosexual women cannot liberate themselves; their hope for liberation lies in trusting the vision of lesbians.

In addition to a special vision, lesbians have greater opportunities and resources to offer in the struggle for women's liberation than heterosexual women do. Because lesbians are free of personal obligations to men, they are free to devote their time and energy to the advancement of women's liberation (e.g., Packwood 1981). Because they are not servants to men and do not derive benefits from the heterosexist patriarchal system, they are in a position of independent political strength from which they can attack the patriarchy (e.g., Abbott and Love 1972). Because they have no vested interest in male-dominated culture, they are

free to develop a different culture; lesbian musicians, healers, etc., have been the source of much women's culture (Goodman et al. 1983). Lesbians are also best situated to develop revolutionary feminist consciousness. The creation of feminist consciousness depends on women sharing their experiences as women and discovering themselves as women apart from male definitions. Because their closest relations are with women, lesbians are in the best position to escape male-defined reality and create the women-only spaces necessary to develop a revolutionary feminist consciousness (Radicalesbians 1970).

Because lesbians are best situated to discover that which is truly womanly apart from male definitions, lesbians are the most womanly of women. In other words, lesbians are not only the best feminists; they are the best *women*. Who could be more womanly than a woman's woman, whose life is centered around women? Among the groups that ascribed to this belief was The Caucus, a group of reformist lesbian feminist members of DOB-New York, whose members felt that "homosexual women, as women with the ability to be totally intimate with other women, had quintessentially female sensibilities" (Marotta 1981:265). Johnston put it a bit more crudely, "You are who you sleep with. Thus the lesbian rightfully says she is the woman par excellence" (1973:175). The proof that lesbians are the most womanly of women, argued Johnston (1973) and Brown, is the fact that lesbians are the most oppressed of women. Lesbians experience the "ultimate sexist oppression" (Brown 1976f:128). In other words, lesbian oppression is not distinct from women's oppression. On the contrary, it is an extreme form of the same oppression, or, as Gay Liberation Front Women put it, "the core oppression of women is the lesbian's oppression" (1971/1972:202). Because heterosexual women are male-identified and male-defined—i.e., less womanly—they receive benefits for participating in male supremacy that mitigate their oppression as women. Lesbians, on the other hand, suffer the most brutal manifestations of male supremacism because they reject male definitions of womanhood—i.e., because they are the most womanly of women. Heterosexual women have much to learn from lesbians; not only about feminism and women's oppression, but about being women. The concepts of the lesbian as the quintessential woman and of lesbian liberation as the ultimate feminist liberation represented a radical shift from the concept of lesbianism as a "lavender herring" that would distract feminists from the needs of "real," i.e., heterosexual, women.

The arguments that lesbians have greater vision, resources, opportunities, and superior womanhood constructed lesbians as the most suitable and likely leaders of the feminist movement. This fundamental lesbian feminist principle was clearly articulated as early as 1970 by the Radicalesbians, whose essay "The Woman-identified Woman" characterized lesbians as the vanguard of the feminist movement.[18] Ti-Grace Atkinson arrived at the same conclusion by conceptualizing lesbians as the "buffer" zone between women and men in patriarchal society. As long as lesbians remain unpoliticized, patriarchal society can use them as an object lesson to keep heterosexual women in line. But by the same token, lesbians are the potential source of the leaders of women; politicized lesbianism threatens to turn the "buffer" zone that protects heterosexual patriarchs into the "shock troops" that lead the attack on heterosexual patriarchy (Atkinson 1972/1973:13). Brown, who saw sexism as underlying all other forms of oppression, saw lesbians not only as the vanguard of the feminist movement, but as the vanguard of a larger revolutionary Movement that would end oppression based on race and class, as well as oppression based on gender and sexuality (Marotta 1981).

The conclusion that lesbians are the vanguard of the feminist movement represented the completion of the transformation of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism. Lesbianism had been politicized and then catapulted to the front of the feminist agenda. No longer the skeleton in the feminist closet, lesbianism had been reconstructed as a key feminist issue. Lesbianism represented the heart of feminism and the hope for women's liberation. Lesbians were no longer the untouchables of the feminist movement and the heterosexual woman was no longer defined as the "real" woman who was the true constituent of the feminist movement; lesbians had been reconstructed as the political elite, the most feminist of feminists, and the most womanly of women.[19]

If lesbians are the feminist elite, what of heterosexual women? Arguments that were originally intended to establish lesbianism as a feminist issue and to counter accusations that lesbians are detrimental to feminism had led lesbian feminists to the conclusion that lesbians play a critically important role in the feminist movement. What then, could be said of the quality of heterosexual women's feminism? At the very least, many lesbian feminists believed that heterosexual feminists face contradictions or conflicts between their personal and political commitments, and that these conflicts prevent them from achieving the full

understanding of sexism that lesbians can achieve. Val Carpenter, for example, felt that heterosexual feminists have something to contribute to the analysis of sexism even though "Their position is complex, sometimes contradictory and occasionally uncomfortable" and their investment in men blinds them to the dynamics of male domination (1988:171). Heterosexual women experience conflicting interests on both personal and political levels. On the personal level, they have to struggle with sexism on a daily basis in their relationships with men, yet they receive benefits from their individual relationships with men. On the political level, as heterosexuals they participate in the very institution that perpetuates the sexism they are committed to fighting as feminists.

Because of the inherent conflicts between heterosexuality and feminism, many lesbian feminists—for example, Johnston (1973), and Bunch (1972/1975) and Reid (1975) of The Furies collective—argued that heterosexual women are less likely to be revolutionary feminists than lesbians are. Because of their ties to men, heterosexual women receive privileges that give them a stake in the heterosexual system. Heterosexual women therefore seek to minimize their oppression within that system by seeking greater privileges from it, rather than seeking to overturn the system itself. Lesbians, who receive no benefits from the heterosexual system, are less likely to be co-opted into adopting reformist feminist politics.

But Johnston and many members of The Furies collective went even farther in their arguments, asserting that heterosexual women are not merely less radical as feminists, but that they are in fact unhelpful or even detrimental to the feminist movement. Brown argued that heterosexual women pour their energy into changing their individual men and have little energy left over to fight larger battles. Bunch argued that heterosexual women will inevitably betray their lesbian sisters, because "the very essence, definition, and nature of heterosexuality is men first," and therefore "only women who cut their ties to male privilege can be trusted to remain serious in the struggle against male dominance" (1972/1975:36). Brown explained this point more clearly: "How can a woman tied to men through heterosexuality keep from betraying her sisters. When push comes to shove, she will choose her man over other women; heterosexuality demands that she make that choice" (1972/1975:72). As Johnston put it, "If you're not part of the solution you're part of the problem" (1973:181).

Barbara Solomon argued that the reformist politics of heterosexual feminists are not only nonrevolutionary, but counterrevolutionary; she felt that the privileges heterosexual women receive and fight for within heterosexual patriarchy are gained at the expense of other women. Heterosexual women live the perpetuation of patriarchy; they are, therefore, responsible for the perpetuation of patriarchy and the oppression of other women (1972/1975).[20] Heterosexual women make the job of fighting for women's liberation more difficult because, by giving in to oppression, the heterosexual woman "exposes her sisters who are fighting that oppression," thus increasing the burden on them (Brown 1972/1975:70). Furthermore, Solomon felt that heterosexual women directly obstruct feminist progress by draining women's energy to fill needs created by their relationships with men, energy that would otherwise be available for feminist purposes. Heterosexuality, therefore, is a form of stealing; heterosexual women not only give their energy toward the perpetuation of heterosexual patriarchy, but they drain energy from the revolutionary struggles of lesbians. Solomon, voicing an opinion she shared with other members of The Furies collective, concluded that heterosexuality and feminism are antithetical; "any woman relating to a man cannot be a feminist" (1972/1975:46).

If a lesbian lifestyle is consistent with feminist politics and a heterosexual lifestyle is inconsistent with feminist politics, then it follows that to be a good feminist a woman must be a lesbian. Atkinson said so, very clearly. She pointed out that when one is engaged in a struggle in which one truly believes, one commits one's whole self to the struggle. One's personal life and one's political life both become part of the struggle, and they are consistent with each other because one will want to live a personal life that furthers one's political goals. Therefore, the committed feminist will live a lesbian life. Asking her reader, "Can you imagine a Frenchman serving in the French army from 9 to 5, then trotting 'home' to Germany for supper and overnight?" (1970/1974:132), she accused heterosexual women of collaborating with the enemy in the battle of the sexes. In war, she argued, there is no "private life" within which you may participate in social relations that undermine your political struggle; if you want such a private life, then you are not committed to the struggle. Anything less than full commitment is treason.

Brown agreed that a good feminist must be a lesbian. Choosing to concentrate on love instead of war, she asked: "If you cannot find it in yourself to love another woman, and that includes physical love, then

how can you truly say you care about women's liberation? If you don't feel other women are worthy of your total commitment—love, energy, sex, all of it—then aren't you saying that women aren't worth fighting for? If you reserve those 'special' commitments for men then you are telling other women they aren't worth those commitments, they aren't important" (1972/1975:70). Brown argued that the giving of love is an expression of regard; the value you attach to others is indicated by whom you choose to love, and you will love those whom you value. Women who behave heterosexually demonstrate that they value men more highly than women, a sentiment that is contrary to the feminist principle that women are at least as important as men. But according to Brown, not loving men is insufficient to qualify one as a feminist. Women who do not love women—presumably regardless of whether they love men—demonstrate that they do not value women and that they do not value them*selves:* "If we can't find another woman worthy of our deepest emotions then can we find ourselves worthy of our own emotion [. . . ?]" (1976e:92). Therefore feminists, who by definition value women in general and themselves in particular at least as much as they value men, will love women; i.e., they *will be* lesbians. Solomon agreed with Brown, "Women who give love and energy to men rather than women obviously think men are better than women" (1972/1975:46). Bunch argued the same point from a slightly different angle by pointing out that women deserve to have the love of women that men traditionally receive; by not loving each other women deny themselves that deserved pleasure (1972/1975). Johnston went one step further to argue that love between women is more than an expression and recognition of women's value; it is also an expression of commitment to the women so valued. She referred to "sex with another woman as the basic affirmation of a powerful sisterhood" and to lesbian feminism, which she called "Gay/Feminism," as "the proper sexual-political stance for the revolutionary woman" (1973:149, 165).

These arguments constructed one's lifestyle as an expression and reflection of one's politics; consequently, one's politics could be inferred from one's lifestyle. Janet Dixon, writing about her experiences as a lesbian separatist in the early 1970s, spelled out the new prescriptive[21] relationship between the personal and the political: "We demanded proof of intent, and that could only be achieved through living a separatist lifestyle" (1988:77). Atkinson, Johnston, and the three Furies mem-

bers quoted above all specifically included sexual love in their arguments, clearly arguing that sexual love of women is an integral expression of feminism and that lesbianism is therefore proof of a true commitment to feminism. Herein arises a moral imperative to would-be feminists, "Thou shalt be a lesbian." In other words, all feminists must be lesbians; any woman who is not a lesbian cannot be a feminist.

If one must be a lesbian to be a feminist, is the converse also true? In other words, are all lesbians necessarily feminists? In the 1970s, Dixon would have answered "yes" without reservation or qualification. She wrote, "To us, lesbianism and feminism were synonymous, either one without the other was untenable. A non-feminist lesbian was just a failed heterosexual. A non-lesbian feminist was just a male apologist" (1988:77).[22]

Other lesbian feminists were more hesitant to conflate the two terms. Solomon stated explicitly that all lesbians are not feminists, "Implicit in the Lesbian lifestyle is a Feminist political principle. That does not mean that all Lesbians are Feminists" (1972/1975:42). Similarly, Adrienne Rich wrote that there is a "*nascent* feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality" but that for lesbian existence to reach its full political potential it must deepen into "conscious woman-identification—lesbian/feminism," thereby distinguishing between lesbianism and lesbian feminism (Rich 1980/1983:201). Bunch agreed that Lesbianism is the necessary starting point for feminism, but that it is not sufficient: "Of course, not all Lesbians are consciously woman-identified, not are all committed to finding common solutions to the oppression they suffer as women and Lesbians. Being a Lesbian is part of challenging male supremacy, but not the end" (1972/1975:31), and Brown quipped, "Becoming a Lesbian does not make you instantly pure, perpetually happy and devotedly revolutionary" (1972/1975:75).

Brown explained that some lesbians lack feminist consciousness because they protect themselves from the pain of heterosexism by viewing themselves as imitation men. These women, who are generally found working with gay men in Gay Liberation rather than with feminists in the feminist and lesbian feminist movements, are male-identified instead of woman-identified. They have accepted the patriarchy's valuation of the male and chosen to identify with the powerful male rather than challenge society's valuation of him. Lesbians who buy into romantic

notions of monogamous love or who participate in either butch or femme roles are also examples of lesbians who are not feminists, according to Johnston (1973). Even lesbians who have feminist consciousness are at risk of losing it without vigilance. Goodman et al. argued that lesbians could not rest on their feminist laurels: "It is crucial for a feminist who becomes a lesbian to keep her political analysis in mind and not to imagine her oppression as a woman has ended just because she now has a woman lover" (1983:81). Lesbian sexuality is not a magical antidote to oppression, nor to the oppressive ways of relating that women have been taught through heterosexual conditioning (Hollibaugh and Moraga 1981/1983).

These arguments distinguish the lesbian who is not a feminist from the lesbian who is a feminist by constructing the latter as a distinct type of lesbian. The Furies—represented here by Brown, Bunch, and Solomon—called her a "woman-identified woman." Johnston called her "the woman in relation to herself."[23] Whatever she is called, she is the woman who is not only a lesbian, but who has succeeded in her lesbianism to overcome male-identification and heterosexual styles of relating.

But then Brown and Bunch added a twist to their argument. Having created the Woman-Identified Woman by distinguishing her from the Lesbian, both authors proceeded to collapse the distinction between these two constructs by redefining the Lesbian in terms of Woman-Identification. Both argued that the definition of the Lesbian as a woman who has sex with other women is a male definition of Lesbianism that reflects the patriarchal practice of defining women in sexualized terms. For example, Brown wrote, "Men, because they can only think of women in sexual terms, define Lesbian as sex between women. However, Lesbians know that it is far more than that, it is a different way of life. It is a life determined by a woman for her own benefit and the benefit of other women. It is a life that draws its strength, support and direction from women. About two years ago this concept was given the name woman-identified woman" (1972/1975:69). Bunch also argued that the deemphasis of sexuality is an integral part of the process of politicizing lesbianism. Because sexuality is considered a private matter, moving lesbianism into the political realm required the deemphasis of its sexual aspect.

Thus, Brown and Bunch distinguished the original concept of the

Lesbian as a sexual type from the concept of the woman-identified woman, and then dismissed it as a male fiction and entirely replaced it with the concept of the woman-identified woman. The Lesbian as a woman who has sex with other women no longer exists, and those who would argue that she does are antifeminists guilty of buying into male sexual definitions of women. The woman who has sex with other women but who is not woman-identified might be a gay woman, but she is no longer a Lesbian. This conceptual reshuffling leads to the conclusion that feminism is indeed a necessary condition for lesbianism. In other words, notwithstanding their initial resistance to the conflation of lesbianism and feminism, both Brown and Bunch ultimately constructed all lesbians as feminists by definition, thereby arriving at the same conclusion that Dixon and her separatist friends had reached via a less circular argument.

The construction of a relationship between lesbianism and feminism was now complete. Not only had lesbianism been established as a feminist issue, but lesbianism and feminism had become inextricably intertwined political issues. Lesbianism, once considered a menace to the feminist movement, was now considered an expression of feminist commitment and a requisite for feminists. Conversely, all Lesbians were now feminists by definition. For all practical purposes and in the minds of many lesbian feminists, lesbianism and feminism were not only mutually necessary, but synonymous.

The lesbian feminist reconstruction of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism did not meet with universal acceptance. On the contrary, it sparked intense debate. Heterosexual feminists objected to the construction of any relationship between lesbianism and feminism, particularly a relationship in which lesbianism became a prerequisite for feminism. Some lesbians, including less radical lesbian feminists, questioned the reconceptualizations of lesbianism that had been necessary to establish lesbianism as a feminist issue and construct a relationship between lesbianism and feminism. A particularly controversial issue was the role of lesbian sexuality in the definition of lesbianism. A second controversial issue was the nature of gender and the interests of lesbians and feminists vis-à-vis gender. But perhaps the most problematic controversy arose because the route taken by lesbian feminist discourse in the 1970s conflicted with a more established political tradition, the ethnic political tradition that had become increasingly prominent in main-

stream politics since the popularization of the Black civil rights movement of the 1950s. The concepts of lesbianism created within lesbian feminist discourse could not be used to make claims for lesbian rights outside the feminist context because they were inconsistent with the modes of argument available in mainstream politics, modes that had developed to express the demands of racial and ethnic minorities.

The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the debate that followed the lesbian feminist construction of a relationship between lesbianism and feminism, followed by a detailed look at the specific controversies over sexuality, gender, and ethnicity that arose in this debate, and concluding with a discussion of the ways in which these controversies resurfaced in the 1980s and 1990s in the debate about bisexuality.

Debate over the Relationship between Lesbianism and Feminism

Not surprisingly, the assertion that lesbians are better feminists than heterosexual women—not to mention the assertions that all feminists should become lesbians or that lesbianism and feminism are synonymous—met with considerable protest on the part of heterosexual feminists and some lesbian feminists. The dialogue that followed the articulation of the lesbian feminist position of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group is documented in a book called *Love Your Enemy?* This book begins with the Leeds paper "Political lesbianism: The case against heterosexuality." The paper is organized in a Q & A format in which group members respond to some of the questions they had been asked by other feminists. Following this essay are dozens of letters responding to it and to each other,[24] and finally, an afterword from the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group. The criticisms are similar to those made against the lesbian feminist ideologies of the Radicalesbians, The Furies, and other groups. *Love Your Enemy?* is one of the most detailed written accounts of the debates that surrounded the construction of a relationship between lesbianism and feminism.

One criticism raised against the Leeds "Political lesbianism" paper was that it was reductionist; it reduced the problem of male supremacy

to the act of heterosexual intercourse, and it reduced feminist strategy to the withdrawal of sexual services from men. As Alexandra Stone, a member of Onlywomen Press, which published *Love Your Enemy?*, put it, "not fucking is not the end of heterosexuality as institution and compulsory lifestyle, [nor] our oppression as women" (1981:61). Sophie Laws charged the Leeds feminists with taking the easy way out by reducing oppression and liberation to sexuality, asserting that it was easier for them "to make heterosexual feminists feel guilty than it is either to confront the structures of the patriarchy which go beyond immediate personal relationships or to examine in depth the reasons why heterosexual relationships have the hold over women that they do" (1981:12).[25] In other words, the Leeds feminists—not heterosexual feminists—were the ones who were avoiding the real issue.

The paper was also criticized for dictating women's politics and behaviors. Frankie Rickford reminded readers that feminism is built on the principle that "every woman's experience is real, and valid" (1981:11) and pointed out the irony of a group of feminists telling other women what's good for them. Similarly, Ann Pettitt felt that a central feminist demand is the "right to a self defined sexuality" (1981:14) and argued that by prescribing lesbianism, the Leeds feminists were trying to deny women this right. Penny Cloutte wrote that she did not appreciate the growing perception of feminism as "some sort of established church" with rules that had to be followed (1981:15). She was struggling to get away from such rules in her life, and argued that feminism should serve women, not vice versa. Diane Grimsditch also objected to the idea of a feminist orthodoxy and resented being made to feel "that I'm not a proper feminist and don't deserve liberating because I'm not behaving properly" (1981:19), i.e., because she is not a lesbian.

Other critics did not object per se to the idea of a feminist standard of sexual behavior, but focused their attention on the particular rules of behavior with which they disagreed. For example, Justine Jones agreed that feminists should cease having sex with men, but she found the idea that feminists should practice lesbianism incredible. In a paper she gave at the Leeds Conference on Sexual Violence Against Women, she said, "Yes, I think we have to get out of men's beds as part of achieving this [self-defined sexuality and the end to male supremacy]—but no, I'm not advocating going to bed with a woman 'for political reasons', or 'to further the revolution'—would any woman do so anyway? Saying lesbi-

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anism can be and is a political as well as a personal choice doesn't imply that, does it?" (1981:22). Janet Wright agreed that having sex with women should not be a requirement for feminists, because nonsexual relationships among women were just as important and valid as sexual relationships among women (1981). Similarly, Grimsditch objected to the implication that lesbian sex was proof of woman loving; she explained that she did not sleep with women, not because she did not value women, but because she valued women too much to "trust herself" with them.

Pauline Maniscalco disagreed with the idea that heterosexual behavior is contrary to feminism (1981). She argued that men had played a share in the development of her feminism, albeit in a negative way, and that she took pleasure in educating men. She saw her feminism as a process, not a state of being; her relationships with men were part of that process. In other words, her relationships with men were part of her feminism, not antithetical to it. Gregory agreed that heterosexuality did not preclude feminism, saying "I don't want any woman to feel she is unable to be a serious feminist. I don't want any woman to feel she cannot make meaningful changes in her life unless and until she stops having sexual (physical-emotional) relations with all men" (1981:40–41). Gilly Heron echoed this sentiment, writing "a lot of heterosexual feminists have spent—and are spending—a lot of energy trying to work out their situation. . . . Is this not taking one's feminism 'seriously', given that one is open to change?" (1981:17).

Although Maniscalco, Gregory, and Heron argued that heterosexual behavior does not preclude feminism and intended to assert that heterosexual women could be as feminist as lesbians could be, the arguments they used to support their claims implicitly accepted the feminist superiority of lesbianism. For example, Heron gave herself away when she wrote "given that one is open to change." In other words, heterosexual women can be feminists but they must live with the contradictions between their heterosexuality and their feminism, and continue to work on these contradictions in order to retain the right to call themselves feminist. If feminism is a process, then the implicit end of that process is still lesbianism, whether every individual woman attains that end or not. This argument establishes a "feminist continuum" on which all women, regardless of whether they are heterosexual or lesbian, can be feminists; it's just that some women—namely, lesbians—are "more feminist" than others.

Finally, the Leeds feminists and other lesbian feminists who put forth similar arguments were criticized for "man hating," for equating man hating with woman loving, and for defining lesbianism in terms of the former instead of the latter. Grimsditch wrote, "I still believe that loving women isn't the same as hating men" and explained that she loved women "because they are women, not because they are not men." As a feminist who loved women but did not sleep with them, Grimsditch did not want to "be a lesbian by default." Frances M. Beal pointed out that lesbian feminists' anti-male sentiments reflected a lack of sensitivity to Black women's issues: "Black people are engaged in a life-and-death struggle and the main emphasis of black women must be to combat the capitalist, racist exploitation of black people" (1970:394). The problem, Beal argued, lies in the System, not in individual men seeking pleasure from women's bodies.

In response to these protests, lesbian feminists clarified and refined their arguments. The Leeds feminists objected to the characterization of their argument as "reductionist," explaining that the "withdrawal of sexual services from men" was not the "sum total" of their political strategy; it was necessary, but not sufficient (1981:67). Moreover, they claimed that they had not meant to prescribe lesbian sexuality for all feminists; they did believe that all feminists should be lesbians, but explained that they meant *political lesbians:* "We do think that all feminists can and should be political lesbians. Our definition of a political lesbian is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women" (1979/1981:5). "Political lesbians" were therefore defined not by sexual relations with women—which many did not have and did not want—but by their feminist political convictions and their lack of relations with men.[26] With the advent of the "political lesbian," lesbianism came to be defined not in terms of sexual activity but in terms of nonsexual forms of commitment to women. Presence or absence of sexual activity with women merely distinguished two types of lesbians, the political lesbian and the "real lesbian," from each other. Thus, the Leeds feminists joined Brown, Bunch, and others in desexualizing the lesbian per se.

The Leeds feminists responded to the criticism that they were missing the real issue because it was easier to attack heterosexual women than to attack the patriarchy by explaining that they had meant to criticize heterosexuality as an institution, not heterosexual women. They wrote, "Some lesbians and some heterosexual feminists saw the paper as

an attack on heterosexual women: in fact, we were criticizing heterosexuality as the accepted form of sexuality under male supremacy, and saying that it is used to oppress us" (1981:66). To conciliate heterosexual women, they reconsidered the word "collaborators," which they had used to describe heterosexual women in the "Political lesbianism" paper: "We now think that 'collaborators' is the wrong word to describe women who sleep with men, since this implies a conscious act of betrayal. Even if applied solely to heterosexual feminists, rather than to heterosexual women in general, it is inaccurate: most feminists do not see men as the enemy, or heterosexuality as crucial to male supremacy" (1981:66). Thus, the Leeds feminists exchanged criticism of heterosexual women for paternalistic patience with women who were not to blame for heterosexual behavior that arose out of false consciousness. Anna Wilson, a member of the Onlywomen Press, was not willing to compromise even that much, "if you want to go on being heterosexual, that's ok. but i want you to think about the fact that you're doing it because you want to. you are responsible for being heterosexual" (1981:61).

The Furies and the staff of *Purple September,* whose arguments were very similar to The Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group's arguments, made similar clarifications. In the introduction to a collection of Furies writings, Myron and Bunch wrote defensively:

> Some feminists say that lesbians are "divisive to the women's movement" by demanding that every woman be a lesbian. We are less concerned with whether each woman personally becomes a lesbian than with the destruction of heterosexuality as a crucial part of male supremacy. Lesbians have been the quickest to see the challenge to heterosexuality as necessary to feminists' survival. However straight feminists are not precluded from examining and fighting against heterosexuality as an ideology and institution that oppresses us all. (1975:12)

The staff of *Purple September* agreed,

> from a feminist viewpoint it is indeed irrelevant whether feminists are straight or gay, but that is not the end of the story. Feminism does require that feminists critically assess the normative status of heterosexuality whether or not they abide by that norm in their personal lives. (*Purple September* 1975:82).

In other words, there is no necessary connection between one's personal sexuality and one's feminism; heterosexual women can also be feminists, that is, they can also challenge heterosexuality. "The real difference is

between woman-identified women—those who are serious about feminist struggle and loving women—and women who are still allied mainly with men; and there are heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual women on both sides" (Goodman et al. 1983:90). Of course, lesbians are still more likely to be feminists, because heterosexual women are less likely to challenge heterosexuality and lack the vantage point lesbians possess (e.g., Carpenter 1988; Goodman et al. 1983).

Lesbian feminists also defended themselves against the characterization of their position as "anti-male," and the charge that they equated man hating with woman loving. The Leeds feminists, for example, accepted the charge that their initial statements in the "Political lesbianism" paper had overemphasized man hating at the expense of woman loving. They explained that they had originally "defined a Political Lesbian as a woman-identified-woman who did not fuck men" but that they had "re-examined the phrase" and realized that it really meant "women who, by withdrawing their energy and support from men, have put women first. In doing so, they have found that it is incompatible with sleeping with men" (1979/1981:5). Thus, by shifting their emphasis, the Leeds feminists dodged charges of man hating while maintaining the connection between woman loving and sexual separatism. Goodman et al. took a different approach toward the same goal. They explained that separatism is necessary as an intermediate step for oppressed groups to gain strength, but that the "ultimate goal of this separation, however, is solidarity: all people living and loving together in mutual respect" (1983:76). Goodman et al. also argued that separation from individual men was not a reflection of man hating. On the contrary, separatism was a necessary technique that would lead women to perceive the systemic nature of their oppression and "recognize how they have been hurt without blaming it on each individual member of the oppressor class" (1983:76). In other words, separatism from men was not evidence of man hating; in fact, it was quite the opposite, i.e., a technique for overcoming the tendency to blame individual men for women's oppression.

These revisions and refinements of the lesbian feminist viewpoint brought the relationship between lesbianism and feminism full circle. Before the advent of lesbian feminism, lesbianism was dismissed as irrelevant to feminism at best and harmful at worst. To establish lesbianism as a feminist issue, lesbian feminists first politicized lesbianism as

a feminist lifestyle and as a political challenge to the institution of heterosexuality. Having established the politics of lesbianism, lesbian feminists then divorced the political from the personal so that the institution of heterosexuality could be attacked without attacking the women within it, and the institution of male supremacy could be attacked without attacking the individual men who benefited from it. Because of the divorce between feminism and heterosexuality and the depersonalization of the attack on male supremacy, women within the heterosexual institution who had ties to individual men could now join in the attack, because the politics became available to every woman regardless of her personal sexual lifestyle. Personal sexuality was once again irrelevant, but the brief marriage between lesbianism and feminism had given birth to a new feminist politics. Heterosexual women were invited back into the feminist fold, but in their absence feminism had been redefined as a movement to challenge the norm of heterosexuality and they were allowed back in only insofar as they agreed to examine their own complicity in this norm.

Furthermore, the invitation to heterosexual women was tinged with the expectation that once they challenged the institution of heterosexuality, they would become lesbians. Brown, for example, wrote, "The inevitability of lesbianism is obvious to anyone who follows the logic of feminism," (1976g:184), and Faderman quoted a woman who observed, "once you're a feminist it's almost impossible to have any kind of whole relationship with a man. . . . That's the only way I can see myself going really, from a strong person, to a feminist to a lesbian. It's just a very logical progression" (1981:391).[27] Frye observed that "women with newly raised consciousnesses tend to leave marriages and families. . . . Many awakening women become celibate or lesbian" (1977/1983a:102). Goodman et al. chastised lesbian feminists for failing to support women who are involved in heterosexual relationships, admonishing them that they do not have the right to assume that all opposite-sex relationships are oppressive and encouraging women to support each other despite their sexual differences. But two pages later, the same authors encouraged lesbians to help heterosexual women overcome the barriers that keep them from loving women. Their tone was decidedly patronizing, "It is also important for lesbian feminists to remember that non-lesbian women are rigidly heterosexual only because of heterosexist training, and to find ways of showing them that this is the case. . . .

Lesbians oughtn't to try to force other women into it; just keep pointing out the blocks which keep them from realizing it" (1983:87).

Ironically, lesbian feminists' apparent concession to heterosexual feminism created a new opportunity for lesbian feminists to criticize heterosexual women. Once lesbian feminists conceded that heterosexual women could be feminist, they could criticize heterosexual feminists for any shortcoming in the quality of their feminism, including their continued heterosexuality itself. Although the invitation to heterosexual feminists was extended at the request of heterosexual feminists who hoped to free themselves from the lesbian feminist moral imperative to become lesbian, the effect was to place heterosexual feminists even more firmly under the jurisdiction of lesbian feminist ideology.[28]

While lesbian feminists and heterosexual feminists were debating the relevance of lesbian sex and heterosex to feminism, many nonlesbian women accepted the invitation to become lesbian feminists in the political sense. In keeping with the arguments of the Leeds feminists, these women were defined by their political convictions and their lack of relations with men, not by sexual relations with women. But once women began declaring themselves as political lesbians, some real lesbians began to resent what they perceived as a transgression.[29] Political lesbians, even those who did go so far as to have sexual relations with women, knew little of the day-to-day hardships of real lesbians, and real lesbians felt used by women who wanted to "try" lesbianism as if it were a new flavor or a way to earn their feminist credentials. Joy Pitman was angered because she felt that political lesbianism denied the hardships experienced by real lesbians like herself who had come out without the support of a Women's Movement (1981),[30] and Brown had some harsh words for the woman "who was going to liberate herself on my body" (1976e:90). Similarly, Alice et al. resented "nouveau" lesbians who "used lesbians in order to assuage their guilt and experiment with a 'lesbian experience' " and who would return to men and male privilege when lesbianism was no longer politically fashionable (1973/1991a:36). An anonymous member of the Birmingham Revolutionary Feminist Group, who initially chose to become a lesbian for feminist reasons, recalled that "lesbians moving within more conventional gay circles" were suspicious that women like herself were not "real" lesbians (1981:33). In hindsight, she agreed with them, acknowledging that lesbianism cannot be based on political convictions alone because it must

involve female eroticism. As she developed this eroticism herself, she found herself sharing real lesbians' suspicions of political lesbians.

Political lesbianism was also criticized, ironically, for being male-identified. From her new standpoint as a "real" lesbian, the anonymous Birmingham feminist just cited rejected political lesbianism because it is defined in terms of (a lack of) women's relations with men, as opposed to lesbianism, which is defined in terms of relations with women. The concept of political lesbianism, she wrote, "ignores the importance of women's sexual relations with other women whilst making the question of whether women have sexual relations with men central to the whole definition of political lesbianism" (1981:34). Gregory took this point further, arguing that defining oneself as a lesbian out of hatred for men instead of love for women not only is an inappropriate expression of feminism, but is not feminist at all. Whereas lesbianism defined in terms of a positive attraction to women is "part of the process of getting rid of the man in our head," lesbianism defined in terms of rejection and hatred of men "makes [the man in our head] ever more powerful" (1981:43).

These reactions must have been confusing to well-meaning political lesbians who thought they were demonstrating their commitment to feminism and support for lesbians by identifying themselves as political lesbians. First they had been told that they should accept lesbianism as the expression of feminism; then they were told that they were oppressing lesbians by attempting to express their feminism through lesbianism. The conflicting viewpoints arising from the lesbian feminist elaboration of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism must have been confusing to other feminists as well. Feminists in general had been chastised for considering lesbianism "just a personal issue," only to be told later that whether one had sex with another woman was actually irrelevant not only to feminism but to lesbianism itself. Heterosexual feminists were told that they could not be feminists because they were heterosexual and therefore collaborators with the oppressive heteropatriarchal structure, but then they were invited back into the feminist fold and criticized for failing to challenge heterosexuality as an institution. The result of the lesbian feminist debate over the relationship between lesbianism and feminism was a confusing set of messages that reflect the controversies surrounding this relationship and, at a deeper level, the internal contradictions in lesbian feminist ideology.

Controversy over the Relationship of Lesbian Sex to Lesbianism

From the foregoing, it is clear that one controversy generated by the lesbian feminist construction and reconstruction of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism is the issue of the relationship of lesbian sexual behavior to lesbianism. This issue merits further attention here because of its centrality in the construction of bisexuality as an issue. To recap, in order to politicize lesbianism, lesbian feminists had expanded the definition of lesbianism well beyond the traditionally private realm of the sexual. Then, to appease heterosexual feminists and effect a reconciliation between lesbian and heterosexual feminists, some lesbian feminists created the "political lesbian" and trivialized the sexual aspect of lesbianism in order to attack male supremacist heterosexuality without attacking heterosexual women.

But the desexualization[31] of lesbianism was not merely a consequence of the politicization of lesbianism and the elaboration of the relationship between feminism and lesbianism; it was also a controversial process of reconstruction in its own right. For example, some lesbian feminists saw the desexualization of lesbianism as a direct challenge to patriarchy, because it represented a rejection of sexualized definitions of womanhood. At the (First) Congress to Unite Women in 1969, lesbian audience members accused panelists of ignoring the lesbian issue. Panel members responded by accusing lesbian audience members of reducing women to their sexuality, arguing that the sexualization of women is one aspect of women's oppression and that lesbians were buying into that oppression by giving importance to women's sexuality. Roxanne Dunbar tried to steer the discussion away from lesbianism by commenting from the panel, "Sexuality is not the key issue. What I want to do is get women out of bed." In "Say it isn't so," Brown countered with the accusation that Dunbar was doing exactly what she accused lesbian audience members of doing, that is, reducing women to their sexuality by perceiving women-identified women as lesbians, defined solely in terms of sexuality (1976b:50). Brown argued that it was heterosexual women who wanted to suppress the issue of lesbianism, not lesbians, who were buying into male definitions of women in terms of their "sexual activity and function." In other words, the redefinition of lesbianism in nonsexual terms not only de-privatized

and politicized lesbianism, but challenged male-dominated views of women.

The desexualization of lesbianism was also fostered because it facilitated historians' attempts to construct a lesbian history. As lesbians began to develop a culture and communities of their own, they also began to desire a history of their own. Modeling themselves after the Black civil rights movement and other racial/ethnic movements—a process that will be explored in detail later in this chapter—they searched for the shared history that would give them a sense of shared origins and shared fate. Early collections of lesbian and gay writings mythologized Sappho, reconstructed ancient Greece as the golden era of male homosexuality, and pointed with pride to historical figures whose personal papers revealed passions for same-sex lovers. But a lesbian history was difficult to construct because the concept of the lesbian as a type of person is a recent invention and because the repression of women's sexuality had ensured little record of women's sexual activities in the past. Lesbian history could not, therefore, be constructed on the basis of sexual behavior.[32] The desexualization of lesbianism conveniently opened the door for the construction of a lesbian history.

In turn, the construction of a lesbian history in the absence of historical information about sexuality helped construct contemporary lesbianism in desexualized terms. For example, Blanche Wiesen Cook suggested that all independent women who choose to nurture and support other women are lesbians.[33] Using this definition, any strong woman-identified historical figure could be claimed as an ancestor of the modern lesbian, despite a lack of information about her sexual behavior.[34] For example, Brown saw herself as belonging to a long history of women who had become "women-identified" after they "questioned the system and found it destructive to themselves" (1976e:79). Carpenter referred to the leading figures in the Girls' Work Movement as "spinsters," and commented that the suppression of women's sexuality meant that "there was no public discussion of lesbianism and rarely any acknowledgment that these 'splendid,' 'dedicated' and strong examples of 'magnificent womanhood' were in fact lesbians" (1988:171–172). Carpenter, who presented no evidence of these women's sexual habits, was either using a definition of lesbianism similar to Cook's, or she was assuming that these strong, unmarried women did in fact engage in lesbian sex of which, of course, there is no record.[35]

Faderman was also not hampered in her construction of nineteenth-century romantic friends as the ancestors of modern lesbians by the lack of evidence about their sexual behaviors. In fact, she gratuitously granted that romantic friends probably were not sexually involved, "While romantic friends had considerable latitude in their show of physical affection toward each other, it is probable that, in an era when women were not supposed to be sexual, the sexual possibilities of their relationship were seldom entertained" (1981:414). She then analogized romantic friends with modern lesbians by asserting the asexuality of modern lesbians, "Contemporary women can have no such innocence. But the sexual aspects of their lesbian-feminist relationships generally have less significance than the emotional sustenance and the freedom they have to define themselves" (1981:414).[36] She strengthened the analogy by arguing that nineteenth-century romantic friendships became threatening to men for the same reason modern lesbian relationships are threatening; that is, not because of their sexual aspect but because of their political implications for the overthrow of patriarchy. In other words, the emphasis on the modern lesbian's politics at the expense of her sexuality provides her with access to a history and ancestry.

The rise of cultural feminism also facilitated the desexualization of lesbianism in the 1970s. Building on radical feminists' calls for women-only space, cultural feminists claimed that in this separatist space women would build an alternative world that would be very different from the world built by men. As cultural feminists elaborated their arguments about the world women would build, they lost sight of the radical feminist tenet that the differences between women and men are culturally created. Radical feminists had originally envisioned women-only space as an opportunity for women to examine the effects of socially imposed gender on their lives. Cultural feminists began to see women-only space as an opportunity for the natural essence of woman to emerge, and they believed that this essence was fundamentally different from the essence of man.[37] They argued "that women are essentially more pure, more temperate, and more moral than men, and that women's mission is to battle male lustfulness and corruption" (Adam 1987:146).[38] In the absence of men and the competitive, death-loving culture men had created, women would naturally create a nurturant, life-centered society.

The desexualized political lesbian was welcomed enthusiastically by cultural feminists. As a political woman committed to the class struggle of women, she was a champion of cultural feminism. Because her closest relationships were with women, she was as removed from the male death-culture as any woman could be. Surrounded by women, she lived in a world that approximated the woman-designed world envisioned by cultural feminists in which woman's essence would emerge. As "primitive" peoples are often stereotyped by "sophisticated" Euro-Americans as "closer to nature," the political lesbian was considered by cultural feminists to be closer to the true woman. Given the political lesbian's proximity to essential womanhood, her desexualization was comforting to cultural feminists for two reasons. First, it purified her of embarrassing sexual habits that would tarnish her womanly image—not necessarily because lesbian sexual habits would have been any more embarrassing than heterosexual habits, but because sexuality itself was vulgar and unwomanly. Second, it universalized her. By definition, womanly essence must exist in every woman. As long as the lesbian was defined by her sexuality, she could not represent the essence of all women because she could not represent the essence of heterosexual women. But stripped of her sexuality, the lesbian could become the essential woman. Because of her political nature, her sexual purity, and her universality, the political lesbian became cultural feminism's prototypical woman.

By essentializing womanhood, cultural feminists had taken a sharp right turn from the road that they had initially shared with radical feminists. Radical feminists accused cultural feminists of reactionism because the asexual womanly essence they glorified and strove to "recapture" bore a striking resemblance to nineteenth-century Victorian images of women that radical feminists had been struggling to destroy. As Echols put it, "Cultural feminist sexual politics really offer us nothing more than women's traditional sexual values disguised as radical feminist sexual values" (1984:64). Echols also played apologist for cultural feminists by explaining that any oppressed group finds it "tempting to seek solace in the reclaiming of that identity which the larger culture has systematically denigrated" (1984:50),[39] an option that is especially appealing when radical cultural change seems unlikely.

In addition to desexualizing lesbianism and essentializing womanhood, cultural feminism also revitalized the antipornography movement,

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critiqued the "sexual revolution" as a social movement that liberated men at the expense of women, and promoted other sex-negative views within the feminist movement. This provided another point for criticism, as other feminists charged cultural feminists with demonizing sexuality in order to suppress it rather than exploring it at the risk of discovering their own politically incorrect sexual desires (e.g., Echols 1984). Critics also questioned the motivation behind the refocusing of feminist attention on issues like pornography instead of issues concerning women's economic and political oppression and charged that the feminist movement had been co-opted into adopting a conservative political agenda (Adam 1987). Lesbians who had recently reclaimed their sexuality and developed a sense of pride protested the renewed deemphasis of their sexual experiences and feelings. In short, critics argued that in an effort to avoid complicity with male definitions of women solely in terms of their sex, cultural feminists had gone too far and ended up buying into the traditional denial of female sexuality in general and the trivialization of lesbian sexuality in particular.

The lesbian sex-positive movement of the 1980s arose from these protests.[40] Lesbian pornography magazines like *On Our Backs,* whose name carries an implicit protest against the asexual politics of *Off Our Backs,* arose to celebrate the joys of lesbian sexuality. Sexperts like Susie Bright taught women how to enjoy sex—including how to ejaculate. Gayle Rubin and the Samois collective proclaimed the pleasures—and political correctness—of sadomasochism. The "sex positivists" or "sex radicals" encouraged women to celebrate and explore their sexuality uninhibited by concerns about the political correctness of any form of sexual expression, including concerns about the appropriateness of the genders of their partners. Echoing the sentiments of earlier heterosexual feminists who defended themselves against the deification of lesbianism by claiming that they *liked* sex with men, Hollibaugh and Moraga argued that "There *is* heterosexuality outside of heterosexism" (1981/1983:395). In other words, women's sexual desires are real and arguments about the political implications of various forms of sexuality or the ways in which sexuality is socially controlled and perverted to serve the ends of the patriarchy do not help us understand these desires. The sex positivists reclaimed sexuality as a good in its own right, not merely a means to be used for political purposes by both sides in the war between patriarchy and feminism.

On the surface, the Sex Wars of the 1980s were debates over issues such as the correct feminist stance on pornography and whether sadomasochism challenged or re-inscribed patriarchal sex roles. But underneath these debates, the real issue in the 1980s Sex Wars was the question of feminist attitudes toward sexuality itself. Should sexuality be rejected as the traditional source of women's oppression, or should it be embraced, enjoyed, and reclaimed by women who had rediscovered the sexual desires that patriarchy had attempted to suppress and vilify? Is sexuality a source of pleasure, or a source of danger?[41]

Despite the heated controversy over the role that sexuality *should* play in feminist theory and lesbian lives, many lesbians maintained all along that sexuality *is* an integral part of lesbianism by definition. Lesbianism means sexual lesbianism, and any attempts at redefining lesbianism are bound to fail for practical reasons. For example, a member of the Birmingham Revolutionary Feminist Group wrote, "lesbianism, whether we like it or not, has always been used by both the Women's Movement and our enemies to describe a relationship between women which includes a sexual commitment. The term is therefore not synonymous with women-identified women" (1981:34). In fact, she pointed out, it is the "centrality of sexuality to our feminist struggle" that initially motivated lesbian feminists to assert the centrality of lesbianism to feminist struggle (1981:34). Similarly, Pitman objected to the concept of a political lesbian for the simple reason that it was contrary to the traditional definition of a lesbian as a woman who is sexually attracted to other women: "To use the term 'lesbian' in this way (as in Political Lesbian) is to rob it of any meaning as a description of sexual orientation/preference/practice" (1981:44).

The argument that nonsexual definitions of lesbianism would not replace sexual definitions of lesbianism because the latter were already well established proved to be true. In 1983, Goodman et al. stated that lesbian relationships remained the cornerstone of lesbian identity for many lesbians. Notwithstanding the political nature of lesbianism, they asserted that the heart of lesbianism still consisted of lesbian relationships among women:

> The cornerstone of a lesbian identity for many lesbians is a relationship with a lover. . . . To say this does not deny the significance of the political analysis lesbians have developed, or the political nature of society's reactions to lesbianism, or the validity of women who come

> to a lesbian identity out of political conscience—but it identifies the foundation of the entire lesbian culture: our right to love. (1983:69)

In other words, regardless of the outcome of the lesbian Sex Wars and the feminist debates and regardless of the political meanings erected around sexuality, most individual lesbians still perceive their sexuality as the basis for their personal lesbian identities. Lesbians still believe that lesbianism is about lesbian sexuality.

Controversy over the Nature of Gender

The critical difference between the early radical feminists and the cultural feminists of the 1970s was their understanding of gender.[42] Whereas the radical feminists saw gender as a social construct imposed via socialization and social structure, cultural feminists saw gender as essential. Whereas radical feminists struggled to free themselves from socially imposed gender, cultural feminists strove to discover and embrace their womanly essence. Each type of feminist envisioned a utopia of the future, but their visions of the role of gender in this utopia were very different. Because lesbianism—whether defined in terms of sexual relations with women, political commitments to women, or the absence of relations to men—is defined in terms of gender, these two visions therefore have very different implications for the future of lesbianism and the organization of sexuality in general.

If gender is socially imposed, then the liberated human being is androgynous and women are oppressed by a feminine role that is something less than human. The Radicalesbians were among the groups that ascribed to this perspective. They argued that "sex roles dehumanize women" (1970:50) by defining women in relation to men, and that a lesbian is a woman who "acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being" (1970:49). One cannot be both a "woman" and a whole person because to be feminine is to be only part of a person. But neither are men whole; men are also emotionally crippled by a gender that alienates them from "their own bodies and emotions in order to perform their economic/political/military functions effectively" (1970:50). The goal of feminism, therefore, is the elimination of gender, i.e., the removal of restrictions on humanness. When, at the end of "Woman-identified Woman," the Radicalesbians referred to "the cultural revolution," they did not mean a cultural revolution in

which women's life-loving essence would triumph over men's death-loving essence; they meant a revolution in which gender would be eliminated and all people would "achieve maximum autonomy in human expression" (1970:55).

If gender is oppressive to both women and men, and the goal of feminism is the elimination of gender, then feminism will liberate men as well as women. In other words, feminism is really "human liberation." As Lois Hart said on "Womankind," "basically, what we're talking about is completely rejecting imposed definitions upon our humanity. I mean, we believe we're endless and infinite, in some kind of sense, and that we have the right to be ourselves, whatever that might be. It's human liberation, and it's for men and women" (Marotta 1981:232–233).

If the goal of feminism is the elimination of gender, then in the utopia that feminism will eventually create neither heterosexuality nor lesbianism, both of which are defined in terms of gender, will exist. Some lesbian feminists, including Shelley and Brown,[43] recognized this implication. Goodman et al., in fact, posited the elimination of heterosexuality and lesbianism per se as the ultimate goal of lesbian liberation, "Being gay and feminist, while it does mean supporting our right to be sexual with others of the same gender, also means commitment, struggle, and having a vision of what the world would be like if we were all free to act on our own feelings of love for one another" (1983:84). But most lesbian feminists who recognized that the elimination of gender would eliminate heterosexuality and lesbianism as forms of sexuality quickly asserted that utopia has not yet been reached and that in the current imperfect world, gender still matters. For example, Liz Wilkie wrote, "The idealist says that in a perfect world you should relate freely to all individuals, while the realist says that NOW we can't do that and relating to men is upholding the sexist status quo" (1981:30). Loretta Ulmschneider used the concept of bisexuality to make the same point: "One goal of our revolution is to have a society where no particular expression of sexuality is enforced. BUT, the revolution has not happened yet. This is not utopia. Women who practice bisexuality today are simply leading highly privileged lives that do not challenge male power and that, in fact, undermine the feminist struggle" (1973/1975:88). In other words, the elimination of gender might be the ultimate goal, but we do not yet live in a genderless world and if we pretend to live in that world before it exists, we will in fact prevent its actual achievement. Thus, lesbian

feminists are justified in refusing to relate to men even as they argue that the ultimate goal is the elimination of gender.

Other feminists, notably cultural feminists, ridiculed the idea of "human liberation" as unsophisticated and naive. Liza Cowan, for example, explained that when she first became a feminist, she idealistically believed that there was no basic difference between women and men—until she realized that the notion of humanism merely serves to keep men in control (1978/1991). Alice et al. agreed, "We no longer believe that we are all just 'people'—just 'human beings.' Either you are a man or a woman; either you have male privilege or you don't; either you get benefits from that privilege as a straight woman, or you don't" (1973/1991a:33). Alice et al. sympathized with other feminists' perception of separatism as reverse sexism and avoided arguing that men were essentially different from women, but they did feel that sexism had put women and men in such different positions that humanism was untenable:

> Unfortunately for all our hopes and good vibes, patriarchy has created (or is reflective of) some very real divisions that can't be smoothed over with the term *human being*. Men get privileges *off* sexism and women are oppressed by sexism. Men are in power in patriarchy. Women are kept powerless by those men. We are not prepared to take a position on whether men are a separate biological species or not. At this time that question is somewhat irrelevant. Their male culture has created for them a daily life experience that is so different from that of women, and so diametrically opposed to that of women, that they behave as if they're from another planet. (1973/1991:391)

Julia Penelope was less sympathetic toward humanist feminism. Accusing lesbian as well as heterosexual feminists of abandoning the dream of feminist revolution and watering down their demands to make them "less threatening to men and their women," she wrote that "What is now being called 'feminism' is indistinguishable from the 'human growth potential' movement, and women who call themselves 'feminists' speak psychobabble fluently, a dialect that enables them to avoid talking about real pains and real issues" (1984/1991:515). She derisively compared the new "feminism" to "garden-variety liberalism," reminded feminists that men benefit from the oppression of women, and argued against naming "society" as an entity that oppresses both women and men, thereby removing the blame from men themselves.

Radical feminists, cultural feminists, and other feminists do not disagree so much about the fact that gender plays a role in women's oppression in the current society, as they disagree about the role gender should play in the future and about the goals of feminism with regard to gender. Should feminists strive to eliminate gender, meanwhile recognizing the very real implications that gender has in the current society, or should feminists strive to glorify feminine gender and create a matriarchal world in which women's life-loving essence will prevail? In the former scenario, sexualities and politics based on gender—including lesbianism and feminism—would be eliminated along with gender. The success of lesbian feminism, therefore, would result in its own deconstruction. In the latter scenario, the utopia of the future would be a world in which lesbian feminism not only survives, but dominates. The controversy over the role of gender in feminism is alive and well among lesbians in the 1990s, and like the controversy over the relationship between lesbianism and lesbian sexuality, it underlies the contemporary controversy over the role of bisexuality, as I will soon show.

Competing Political Traditions: The Feminist Tradition and the Ethnic Tradition

The lesbian feminist reconstruction of lesbianism as a political issue took place in a feminist context for the benefit of a feminist audience. Lesbian feminists used the language of feminism to develop political arguments that were effective within feminist discourse. But outside the feminist context, the dominant language of political protest in the 1970s was the language of ethnic politics popularized by the activities of racial and ethnic minorities, in particular African-Americans. As members of the larger society and, in many cases, veterans of earlier civil rights movements and/or members of racial and ethnic minorities themselves, lesbians are heirs to the ethnic political tradition as well as the feminist political tradition. The ethnic political tradition uses concepts and modes of argument that differ from those used in the feminist political tradition. As I will explain below, the fundamental difference is that feminist arguments rely on the assumption of choice, whereas ethnic arguments rely on the assumption of essence. Because of this fundamental difference, the concepts and arguments developed by lesbians in the feminist tradition conflict with the concepts and arguments that emerged from

the ethnic political tradition. The conflict between feminist and ethnic modes of discourse produced another layer of controversy in the lesbian feminist debates over the nature and political implications of lesbianism. But before I can discuss the implications of this controversy for the issue of bisexuality, I must first examine the importance of choice in the feminist political tradition, the manner in which lesbian feminists constructed lesbianism as a choice, the importance of essence in the ethnic political tradition, and the construction of lesbians as an ethnic group.

The Importance of Lesbianism as a Choice in the Feminist Political Tradition

Many of the arguments radical lesbian feminists made in their efforts to establish a connection between lesbianism and feminism relied implicitly on the assumption that lesbianism is a possible choice for all women. From attempts to define lesbianism as a feminist issue by showing that homophobia impedes feminist progress to declarations that lesbians are the vanguard of feminism and that feminists should strive to be lesbians, the issue of choice is of critical importance to lesbian feminist ideology.

For example, the most basic argument linking lesbianism to feminism is the argument that lesbianism challenges male supremacy, and the concept of lesbianism as a choice underlies many lesbian feminists' arguments about why lesbianism is a threat. Reid, for example, argued that lesbianism deprives men of their personal servants, and Brown suggested that lesbianism is a feminist political tool because men would be forced to change if they were deprived of the services and support of women. But lesbianism could be such a tool only if women were able to choose lesbianism freely in response to men's patriarchal behavior, and men would only change their behavior if they believed that women were capable of responding to their behavior by withholding services (lesbianism) or granting services (heterosexuality). If, on the other hand, lesbian and straight women were essentially different from each other, there would be no threat and no motivation for men to change their behavior. The argument that lesbianism is a choice is, therefore, a critical component of the argument that lesbianism challenges the patriarchy.

Whereas heterosexual men are threatened by the possibility of losing their personal servants, heterosexual women are threatened because les-

bians represent the possibility that they themselves could become liberated. This threat, too, rests on the assumption that lesbianism can be chosen: "My co-workers at the newspaper were threatened by my becoming a lesbian. If I could do it, they could do it. They could stop cooperating in their oppression. They could choose to be lesbians, lesbians weren't born, they were made" (Reid 1975:97). This is threatening to heterosexual women because they are afraid to make this choice: "They are angry at us because we have a way out that they are afraid to take" (Shelley 1969/1970:347).

Besides threatening individual men with the loss of their personal servants and individual women with loss of their subject status, lesbianism threatens patriarchy as an institution with the loss of its entire subject class. Brown wrote, "if all women were Lesbians male supremacy would have the impossible task of maintaining itself in a vacuum." Similarly, Frye pointed out that the ability of a few lesbians to see through male Reality is, in itself, not threatening to patriarchy; the threat lies in the possibility that this vision will spread to other women. If enough women begin to see through Reality, the illusion of Reality will be destroyed. Such threats are only good insofar as all women have the potential to become lesbians. If they do not, then patriarchy need not fear the loss of its subject class and lesbianism presents no challenge to patriarchy at all. So the threat of lesbianism to patriarchy as an institution hinges on the assumption that it would be possible for all women to become lesbians. This is why, Brown argues, men "heap the worst abuse upon the Lesbian in order to keep women from becoming Lesbians" (1976f:122); men's hostility toward lesbians becomes proof of the argument that lesbianism is threatening to men because it can be chosen.

The argument that lesbianism "threatens male supremacy at its core" (Bunch 1972/1975:29) by rejecting the cultural valuation of the male also hinges on the assumption that lesbianism is a choice. If lesbianism could not be chosen, then it could not be understood as a rejection of patriarchal values, including the valuation of the male and the normalcy of heterosexuality. As Frye pointed out, "The choosing challenges the value placed on heterosexual normalcy" (1983b:150).

Atkinson argued that the patriarchy protects itself from the threat of lesbianism by portraying lesbians as women who *can* not, rather than women who *will* not, fulfill their "proper political function in society"

(1972/1973:12). In other words, patriarchy co-opts lesbians by constructing them as failed heterosexual women, thus preserving its subject class by essentializing the difference between lesbian and heterosexual women, reaffirming the superior value of heterosexuality, and denying female sexual agency. The implication of Atkinson's analysis is that lesbians who believe that they are essentially different from heterosexual women or that they did not choose their lesbianism are allowing themselves to be co-opted by the patriarchy. The threat lesbianism poses to patriarchy is therefore dependent not only on lesbianism *being* a choice, but on lesbians *believing* that lesbianism is a choice.

Finally, lesbian feminist arguments concluded in a moral imperative that feminists *should* be lesbians. The lesbian imperative, as do all the arguments that led to it, relies on the assumption that lesbianism is an option for all women. If women could not choose to be lesbians, then it would make no sense to demand that they become lesbians or to admonish them for not becoming lesbians.

The Construction of Lesbianism as a Choice in Lesbian Feminist Discourse

> *Any woman can be a lesbian.*
>
> — Alix Dobkin, *Lavender Jane Loves Women*

As Katie King observed, lesbian feminists developed a "highly elaborated rhetoric of choice around the idea and practice of lesbianism" (1986:82). Because of the critical importance of choice in the construction of lesbianism as feminist, many lesbian feminists wrote about the issue of choice, each constructing lesbianism as a choice in her own way. Most did so by arguing that all women could be or are lesbians; if all women were potential lesbians, then there would be no essential difference between lesbians and non-lesbians. Therefore, the difference would necessarily be the result of mutable individual factors which, as such, are alterable by choice. Some lesbian feminists accomplished the task of arguing that all women are potential lesbians by reconceptualizing *womanhood,* some accomplished it by reconceptualizing *lesbianism,* and still others accomplished it by reconceptualizing *choice.*

One of the most common arguments began with the assertion that every woman is inherently bisexual. Therefore, every woman has a

"lesbian aspect" which, most proponents of this view argued, had been suppressed by heterosexual training in a male supremacist culture. Becoming a lesbian is a process of rediscovering one's own suppressed lesbianism, a process that every woman can choose to undergo. For example, Loretta Ulmschneider wrote, "As lesbian/feminists we affirm the bisexuality of human nature. . . . Lesbians represent that part of every woman that male supremacy has destroyed or suppressed" (1973/1975:88).[44] Jill Johnston, referring to heterosexual women she observed while living in New York, wrote: "The lesbianism of all these women was inaccessible to them in direct proportion to the social definition of themselves exclusively in relation to the sexual needs of the man" (1973:151). In other words, male definitions of womanhood promote heterosexuality among women by cutting them off from their own lesbianism. Presumably, therefore, freeing oneself from male definitions should put a woman back in touch with her lesbianism. Faderman alluded to the same argument in *Surpassing the Love of Men,* when she predicted that the independent woman of the future would reject male definitions of womanhood and the myth that heterosexual marriage is necessary for fulfillment. Love between these liberated women would be more common because they would "have no need to repress natural feelings of affection toward other women" (1981:414). Similarly, Brown promised women that through lesbianism, they would discover their "woman-identified" selves, implying that all women had such selves (1972/1975).

The staff of *Purple September* took a different approach that involved a similar reconstruction of womanhood. Instead of arguing that lesbianism is a possibility for all women, they argued that heterosexuality is not inevitable for any woman. Pointing out that we live in a society that socializes women to be heterosexual, they asserted first of all that arguments that heterosexuality is either a personal choice or a matter of immutable personal preference are unconvincing. Secondly, axiomatically asserting that "if [heterosexuality] is a given in the life of one person, it has to be a given in the lives of all of us" (1975:82), they argued that heterosexual socialization would be unnecessary if heterosexuality were inevitable. Therefore, heterosexuality is inevitable for no one and, by implication, any woman can choose to be a lesbian.

Some writers argued that lesbianism is a choice by citing their own personal experience. For example, Barbara Solomon generalized her

own experience to all lesbians when she asserted that "Lesbians are not born. We have made a conscious choice to be Lesbians" (1972/1975:40). Faderman asserted that many "old gay" women had initially become lesbians for feminist reasons, but that these reasons had been obscured within a gay subculture that accepted the "experts' " opinion that lesbians are born, not made: "Once the connection between lesbianism and feminism was widely acknowledged, older lesbians, whose feminism had up until now been buried under the rubbish of society's views, were able to reexamine in daylight what it was in the first place that made them decide to commit themselves to making women prime in their lives" (1981:383). As evidence, she cited a writer in *The Ladder* who stated that she is " 'a lesbian by choice,' because that choice (which she said had little to do with a desire for a particular sexual act) permitted her freedom from socially imposed female roles" (1981:381).

The argument that lesbianism is an alternative lifestyle that offers freedom from male domination constructs lesbianism as a route toward personal liberation that might be chosen by any woman. In contrast to arguments that resolve the problem of choice by asserting that all women are potential lesbians, this argument establishes lesbianism as a choice by reconstructing lesbianism itself. Lesbianism is the result not of essential feelings of attraction to women, but of a feminist desire to avoid male supremacism; in other words, lesbianism is a personal reaction to patriarchy. This is true even if the individual lesbian does not realize that the true motivation for her lesbianism is a desire for liberation.[45] Many lesbian feminists held lesbianism out to women as a solution to the oppression they experienced in their intimate lives. For example, Shelley wrote that "[l]esbianism is one road to freedom—freedom from oppression by men" (1969/1970:343). Rita Mae Brown asked rhetorically why heterosexual women would want to take on the burden of double oppression that lesbianism brought, and answered her own question by claiming that "[l]esbianism also offers you the freedom to be yourself. It offers you potential equal relationships with your sisters. It offers escape from the silly, stupid, harmful games that men and women play" (1972/1975:72). In case any woman did not feel the need for personal liberation, Brown promised women that lesbianism would bring a feminist consciousness and an awareness of the need for personal liberation: "You will discover the thousand subtle ways that heterosexuality destroyed your true power; you will discover how male supremacy

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destroys all women and eventually the creators of it, men" (1972/1975:73). The reconstruction of lesbianism as a feminist alternative to oppressive heterosexual relationships gave new meaning to the idea that lesbianism is necessary for feminist liberation. Not only does lesbianism hold the hope for collective women's liberation, it is also the route to individual liberation.

The reconstruction of lesbianism as an alternative to personal male domination was one of a number of reconstructions of lesbianism that effectively transformed lesbianism into a choice available to all women. Other lesbian feminists, seeking a way to impress heterosexual feminists with the relevance of lesbianism to their lives, reconstructed lesbianism as the representation of all positive relationships among women. The most famous version of this reconceptualization is Rich's (1980/1983) "lesbian continuum," which includes all of women's relationships to each other, ranging from casual to intimate. The implication of this continuum is that the difference between sexual lesbianism and other relations among women is not a qualitative difference, but merely a difference in intensity. All women's relations with each other have a single underlying dimension, and the name Rich gave the continuum indicates that the underlying dimension is lesbianism itself. Sex with women is merely the most intimate and intense expression of the lesbianism that is a component of all women's relations with each other.

The idea of defining lesbianism in terms of all positive relationships between women did not originate with Rich's concept of a lesbian continuum. In 1976, Brown equated lesbianism with ties among women, and established a complete correspondence between lesbianism and ties among women: "Lesbianism is the issue that deals with women reacting positively to other women. All other issues deal with men and the society they have built to contain us" (1976e:91). If *all* other issues deal with men, then all issues not involving men must be lesbian issues; therefore, *all* forms of positive interaction among women must be lesbian interactions. Although Brown's purpose was to establish lesbianism as a central feminist issue and to argue that heterosexism is a barrier to feminist progress because it prevents women from developing primary loyalties to each other, her argument effectively defined all relations among women as lesbian relations.

The equation of lesbianism with positive ties among women establishes lesbianism as a possibility for all women in two ways. First, it

defines any woman who has a friendship with another woman as a lesbian. Since few women have no female friends, nearly all women are thereby defined as lesbians. Lesbianism is not only a possibility for all women, it is a possibility that has already been realized; all women are lesbians. Second, since all of women's relationships with each other are qualitatively similar to sexual lesbianism, any woman who has a friendship with another woman need only intensify that relationship to become a lesbian in the traditional sexual sense. There is no essential difference between sexual lesbians and other women; all women have the capacity for lesbianism as evidenced by their friendships with other women. As Brown stated clearly in *Plain Brown Rapper,* "Every woman can confront the issue of Lesbianism because she has the potential to be a Lesbian" (1976c:69).

The construction of lesbianism as a choice—either by redefining womanhood or by redefining lesbianism—was threatened by the existence of "born lesbians" whose own experiences belied the claim that lesbianism was a matter of choice. Born lesbians experienced their lesbianism as an essential aspect of themselves that distinguished them from heterosexual women. For them, coming out had been a personal process of discovery, not a political process of feminist transformation, and the lesbian feminist idea that lesbianism was a choice seemed foreign. "Born lesbians" resented "political lesbians" who not only claimed lesbian identities without living lesbian lives, but then had the audacity to tell born lesbians that their lesbianism had also been a political choice rather than an essential discovery.

Lesbian feminists who had a stake in the construction of lesbianism as a choice needed to inoculate lesbian feminism from the challenge posed by born lesbians. Atkinson and Frye did so by redefining choice. For Atkinson, the importance of choice lies in its capacity to produce an effective movement. Drawing on her war metaphor, she wrote, "It is the association by choice of individual members of any Oppressed group, the massing of power, which is essential to resistance. It is the commitment of individuals to common goals, and to death if necessary, that determines the strength of an army" (1972/1973:11–12). In this passage, Atkinson did not refer to *lesbianism* as a choice, but rather to *association* as a choice. In other words, she bypassed the question of whether one chooses to be a lesbian and focused instead on the question of whether lesbians choose to unite in struggle, a choice that could be

made by born lesbians as well as political lesbians. But having incorporated born lesbians into her argument, Atkinson proceeded in the next paragraph to define lesbianism as commitment to women: "It is this commitment, by choice, full-time of one woman to others of her class that is called lesbianism" (1972/1973:12). By using this reconstructed concept of lesbianism, Atkinson returned to the argument that lesbianism itself must be chosen if the struggle for women's liberation is to be successful.

Frye, who believed that choice is important because it allows lesbians to appreciate the visionary advantages of their marginal position, provided a less circular argument. She explicitly stated that the choice to be made is not the choice to become a lesbian, but a choice about how to experience one's lesbianism: "Whether as individuals we feel ourselves to have been born lesbians or to be lesbians by decision, we claim as morally and politically conscious agents a positive choice to go with it; to claim our lesbianism, to take full advantage of its advantages" (1983b:149). Lesbians can choose whether to "deny, resist, tolerate, or embrace" their lesbianism, thereby choosing whether to avail themselves of the benefits of lesbianism. By redefining choice, Frye made room in her argument for women who experience their lesbianism as essential and thereby neutralized the threat these women pose to the very cornerstone of lesbian feminism. One could say that Frye co-opted born lesbians into the lesbian feminist argument.

Other authors solved the problem of born lesbians more directly, by simply dismissing their conscious experiences as evidence. Shelley, for example, said "I think you can see the lesbian in a political sense as unconsciousness propelled by whatever hidden motivations—say as a rebel against the accepted mores of society. This is a political decision, even if it happens on an unconscious level."[46] In other words, becoming a lesbian is a political decision even if the woman becoming lesbian does not experience it as such. Such a statement is unfalsifiable, and effectively inoculates lesbian feminism from any and all challenges on the basis of personal experience—an ironic outcome for a movement that began by politicizing the personal.

Each of the above arguments succeeded in constructing lesbianism as a choice. The fact that each argument did so on the basis of very different premises and arguments was immaterial because each succeeded in providing lesbian feminism with what it needed at the time.

But a problem arose nevertheless, because the concept of lesbianism as a choice, as critical as it was for feminist claims, provided a very poor basis for claims making within the political realm of the larger society. In this larger realm, the dominant language of political protest had been articulated by racial/ethnic protest groups and relied on the assumption of essence, not choice.

The Importance of Essence in the Ethnic Political Tradition and the Construction of Lesbians as an Ethnic Group

The ethnic political tradition involves a political language developed to articulate the concerns of racial and ethnic minorities, most notably African-Americans in the Black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This language was borrowed by lesbians, who constructed themselves as an ethnic group in order to use it. The process of constructing lesbians as an ethnic group produced concepts of lesbianism and political arguments that were very different from those produced in the effort to establish lesbianism as a feminist issue.

Groups defined by race or ethnicity possess qualities that groups based on association or choice do not, and these qualities are integral to the ethnic model of political movement. First, racial and ethnic groups possess a common history and culture. By virtue of the fact that racial/ethnic identity is to a large extent inherited, children are usually born into and raised by members of their own racial/ethnic group. They learn their ethnic culture as children, and that culture survives from generation to generation. The connection between the parents' culture and the children's culture is direct, creating a feeling of a continuous history and a cultural tradition to which one belongs from birth. Individuals who are raised by people of other race/ethnicity often feel as if they need to "get in touch with their own heritage" by learning about the culture they were "deprived" of as children. Despite the fact that they did not learn this culture as children, they feel a connection to it and experience their unfamiliarity with it as an alienation from their own past. It is, in effect, their birth right.

Second, members of racial and ethnic groups have ancestors in the strictest sense of the term. One can look back on these ancestors with pride by claiming their accomplishments and contributions to society as

the achievements of the ethnic group as a whole. One can look up to these ancestors—or to their contemporary equivalents—as role models for oneself. Racial and ethnic groups whose ancestors and contemporary figures are underrepresented in school curricula expend a great deal of energy encouraging schools to provide a multicultural education, so that their children will be exposed to individuals about whom they can feel a sense of ethnic pride and after whom they can model themselves.

Third, racial and ethnic groups have, at least apparently, clearly defined boundaries. Despite the socially constructed nature of racial and ethnic categories and the importance of identity, racial and ethnic physical characteristics are largely genetically determined. People in cultures with rigidly defined racial categories, such as the continental U.S., generally overlook the role of their own cultural categories in the interpretation of these racial and ethnic characteristics and believe that race and ethnicity are determined solely by the physical characteristics themselves. Therefore, race and ethnicity are widely perceived as essential, immutable, unambiguous, and out of one's own control. One is either a member of a particular racial or ethnic group or one is not, the fact of race and ethnicity is determined at the moment of conception, and one can neither choose one's race nor change races. Therefore, the boundaries of ethnic groups are clearly defined and fixed.

The ethnic model of political movement developed as a political strategy designed to serve the interests of racial and ethnic groups, i.e., groups with a shared history and culture, ancestors, and ostensibly clear and fixed boundaries defined by essential and immutable characteristics. It is a liberationist model that identifies an oppressor and an oppressed, whose group boundaries correspond closely to the boundaries between racial/ethnic groups. Although members of ethnic groups other than one's own can be perceived as allies or as "wise," they are rarely extended the same benefit of the doubt or expected to show ethnic allegiance until they have proven themselves trustworthy. Conversely, members of one's own ethnic group are expected to show allegiance and are subjected to criticism and charges of sedition if they do not. These distinctions between the oppressor and the oppressed would not be possible if the boundaries between ethnic groups were not apparently clearly defined and fixed.

Moreover, the oppressor has power and uses it to oppress the oppressed; therefore, the task of the oppressed is to empower itself. It can

do this by asking the oppressor for a piece of the pie (the civil rights approach), by making the pie larger or baking a pie of its own (the nationalist approach), by transforming the pie or offering an alternative (the radical approach), or by destroying the pie altogether and replacing it (the revolutionary approach). Each of these approaches relies on certain characteristics of ethnic groups. Civil rights claims, for example, are usually based on the argument that it is unfair to discriminate on the basis of immutable characteristics over which one has no control. Nationalism and other, less radical forms of cultural empowerment depend on the preexistence of a culture, history, and ancestral accomplishments to which members of the ethnic group can claim special rights and in which they can take pride. Radicalism and revolutionism are less specifically tailored to the special characteristics of ethnic groups; groups based on choice or political convictions can also advocate the transformation or overthrow of the current system. For example, radical and revolutionary approaches were used by the New Left and countercultural movements as well as by racial and ethnic movements. But ethnic groups have a special advantage in that their preexisting cultural heritage can provide the blueprint for the visionary goals of radical and revolutionary action, and the fact that the clarity and immutability of their boundaries assure a level of group cohesion that is not dependent on the existence of an enemy.

As Black activists carefully hammered out civil rights, nationalistic, radical, and revolutionary arguments and worked to publicize these arguments, the ideology and language of ethnic politics became increasingly familiar to African-Americans and non-African-Americans alike. The more familiar the language and the arguments of ethnic politics became, the more valuable they became as political currency and the more available they became for use by other groups. Any group that could adapt the language of ethnic politics to its own ends could tap into a well-developed social change ideology. As the Black movement gained national attention, carefully constructed arguments were reduced to slogans—phrases that function as political shorthand. Slogans quickly develop an emotional charge that precedes the carefully reasoned arguments behind them, and they can be borrowed easily; even if the detailed arguments behind the slogans would not hold up under close examination when applied to another group, that group can use the slogans to elicit the associated emotional responses without much fear of scrutiny

by theoretical purists. Many non-African-American ethnic groups, including white immigrants as well as other Peoples of Color, followed the lead taken by African-Americans and adapted the language of ethnic politics to their own needs.

When the second wave of the feminist movement began, ethnic political language was the primary language of protest available in the sociopolitical arena. But women were limited in their ability to avail themselves of ethnic political language because women as a group do not possess all of the qualities of an ethnic group. Women are not entirely unlike an ethnic group; femaleness is by and large a genetic characteristic and, as such, it is as essential and immutable as race and ethnicity. Women could, therefore, avail themselves of civil rights, radical, and revolutionary approaches to empowering themselves. For example, the National Organization for Women, formed in the fall of 1966, adopted a liberal civil rights approach, whereas feminists who received their political training in the New Left movement preferred a more radical approach involving the cultural transformation of society, and WITCH was sympathetic to revolutionary goals and tactics (Adam 1987; Marotta 1981).[47] However, women, unlike members of ethnic groups, do not share a historically integral culture. To the extent that women have a historically transmitted culture, it has permeable boundaries because it is intimately intertwined with men's culture, and, from a feminist point of view, it is not *women's* culture because it developed as a complement to men's culture. It was, for example, difficult to find feminist pride in the historical and mythical figures traditionally offered as representatives of women such as Betsy Ross and Mrs. Ward Cleaver.

To discover or create a women's culture, feminists used the strategy of the consciousness raising group.[48] Recognizing that their perceptions of their own experiences had been shaped by the patriarchal culture in which they had been raised, feminists reasoned that the only way they would be able to get in touch with who they were as women would be to communicate with each other at the most basic emotional level. In the absence of men, if they could help each other rediscover their own emotions—those experiences that exist prior to cultural interpretation—they might be able to discover who they were as women and build a women's culture atop this discovery.

Women in consciousness raising groups and other separatist spaces did succeed in producing a feminist women's culture. This new culture

includes feminist humor, women's music, a new genre of literature, and feminist social structures, such as feminist political organizations, battered women's shelters and other social services, bookstores, music festivals, and coffeehouses. As noted earlier in this chapter, the search for culture also involved a search for a herstory, particularly a herstory of notable women who could become the equivalent of ethnic ancestors. Women soon discovered historical figures of whom they could be proud. Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Blackwell, for example, became role models for women. Their contributions to society became contributions on behalf of women as a class, and women as a class began to take pride in the contributions that their newfound ancestors had made. A sense of historical continuity—of heritage—emerged as women's culture and history took shape.

As women's feminist culture developed, women became more like a traditional ethnic group, and the language of ethnic politics became increasingly available to them. Not surprisingly, this coincided with the rise of cultural feminism and the incorporation of the concept of an essential womanhood that had been contaminated by men's domination. The matriarchy of the future was to be based on the blueprint of past (mythical) matriarchies that had been destroyed by patriarchal Christians. The effort to create a feminist culture became an effort to reclaim a women's ethnic culture from the past.

But to develop the culture necessary to become an ethnic group women had had to develop their own political dialect. Because women had created their culture by looking at their personal lives, the feminist political language that developed was based on the premise that the personal is political. In this feminist dialect, the political is legitimized by reference to the personal, rather than by reference to the essential or the immutable. This added a new political language to the existing ethnic political language. Lesbians, when they began protesting, were therefore faced with two political languages. I have already shown how the use of feminist political language led to a variety of arguments and constructions of lesbianism based on the premise that lesbianism is chosen; ethnic political language demanded a very different approach.

Like feminists, lesbians had to reconstitute themselves as an ethnic group in order to utilize ethnic political language to articulate their demands for social change. This task was even more problematic for lesbians than it was for feminists. Like women in general, lesbians in

particular lacked a preexisting cultural heritage and ancestry. But unlike women, lesbians also lacked unambiguous group boundaries defined by apparently immutable and essential characteristics. Femaleness appears immutable and essential because it is genetically determined, but the causes of lesbianism are open to debate. Therefore, lesbianism might not be immutable and it might be subject to choice; if it is, then the boundaries of the lesbian group are ambiguous because women can enter and leave the group at will. This ambiguity is exacerbated by the relative invisibility of sexual orientation; whereas most women make their femaleness socially visible through widely recognized symbols of gender, lesbianism is usually invisible both because of the lack of widely recognized symbols and the desire of lesbians to conceal their sexual orientation from heterosexuals. The symbols that can be used to make lesbianism visible are generally known only to lesbians and "wise" heterosexuals; other heterosexuals who wish they could tell who is lesbian must content themselves with an illusion of knowledge based on stereotypy.

Therefore, to become an ethnic group, lesbians not only had to develop a culture, history, and ancestry, but they also had to construct lesbianism as an essential characteristic that is unambiguous, immutable, and involuntary. Lesbians received considerable help with the latter task from "experts" who proclaimed that sexual orientation is biologically determined. As discussed by Faderman, before the advent of lesbian feminism, gay women typically looked to the experts as sources of legitimate information about lesbianism. Faderman argued that preliberation gay women were so cowed by social stigma and internalized heterosexism that they accepted the experts' essentialist views even when these views conflicted with their own experience of having chosen lesbianism for feminist reasons. In this view, modern feminism was the savior that liberated gay women from the yoke of heterosexist expertise (1981). But, when we take into consideration the fact that the dominant model of political protest available to lesbians prior to gay liberation was the ethnic model, then we can see that gay women's acceptance of essentialist views of sexual orientation was, in fact, not merely a view imposed on them by heterosexist experts but a view that was consistent with their own interests.[49]

To create a lesbian culture, history, and ancestry, lesbians used the same methods used by feminists. In fact, to a large extent the develop-

ment of lesbian heritage and the development of women's heritage were one and the same effort. Cultural radical feminists, for example, the members of Redstockings and The Feminists, were interested in the cultural transformation of society to eliminate sexism; they were, therefore, willing to critique the culture of heterosexism and welcomed lesbians as cultural workers (Marotta 1981). Much of what is now referred to as "women's culture" is really lesbian culture; most so-called "women's music" is composed by and for lesbians; "women's coffeehouses" expect to attract a lesbian clientele; and most "women's festivals" are attended primarily by lesbians. These institutions are no less than partial manifestations of the "Amazon Nation," a visionary society that represents the culmination of both feminist and lesbian nationalism. The role of lesbians and lesbianism in "women's culture" prompted Adam to refer to lesbianism in the 1970s as a form of "feminist 'nationalism' " (Adam 1987:91).

In addition to feminist "women's culture," lesbians also created a history and ancestry that is uniquely lesbian. As Goodman et al. wrote, "Since mainstream society provides no context for lesbianism, we have created our own culture, and its birth has spanned many centuries. From Sappho and her colony on the isle of Lesbos in ancient Greece, through the witches in medieval Europe . . . to the communal lesbian households of today, we have come together to share support, comfort, delight, despair, rituals, music, and magic" (1983:71). The romantic friends described by Faderman and the spinsters described by Carpenter are the ancestors of the modern lesbian, not the modern feminist; they are the ancestors of feminists only insofar as lesbianism is available to heterosexual feminists as a magical sign (King 1986).

Contemporary lesbian culture also reflects specifically lesbian needs and creativity, not general feminist concerns. For example, the high rate of alcoholism among lesbians has contributed to the development of a unique sensitivity to the needs of women in recovery, and the small size of the community produces ingrown "family trees" and rules for relating to ex-lovers that differ dramatically from the norms governing heterosexual ex-relationships. Concerns about cultural sensitivity have generated a complex form of political correctness that predated the distorted image of political correctness produced in the late 1980s by the religious and political right for its own ends. The mark of a mature culture might be the ability to make fun of itself; contemporary lesbian culture is

complex enough to support not only a serial comic strip, Alison Bechdel's "Dykes to Watch Out For," but a growing number of lesbian comedians. Although in the 1980s and 1990s lesbians became more interested in traditional mainstream goals, such as economic success and motherhood, and less interested in the building of Lesbian Nation, the nationalist fervor of the 1970s produced a powerful cultural reality that became even stronger as lesbians gained economic power.

The construction of lesbians as an ethnic group made ethnic strategies of political argument available to lesbians. If lesbianism is immutable and essential, then it is as unfair to discriminate against lesbians as it is to discriminate against African-Americans or any other racial or ethnic group. If lesbians have a culture, a history, and an ancestry, then they can take pride in their heritage and the accomplishments of their ancestors. Using the cultural values and objects produced by this heritage, lesbians have built institutions, an economy, and indeed an entire subsociety complete enough to permit at least temporary escape from the oppressive heterosexism of mainstream society. Using this countercultural subsociety as a blueprint, radical and revolutionary lesbians can hope to transform or supersede society at large. All of the strategies of the ethnic political tradition—including civil rights, nationalist, radical, and revolutionary strategies—become available to lesbians as an ethnic minority.

Lesbians who participated in the construction of lesbians as an ethnic group were often quite aware of what they were doing and of the benefits to be had by using ethnic political strategies.[50] Many lesbian feminist activists drew explicit parallels between women, lesbians, and ethnic groups. Some drew these parallels based on simple similarity. For example, Martha Shelley argued that heterosexism is based on sexism and referred to sexism as "a form of racism where, because you are born with a particular color, shape, sex, nationality, or into a family with a particular religious orientation, you are automatically forced into a certain pattern."[51] In 1970, Brown also analogized gender and race in her response to Roxanne Dunbar's dismissal of the lesbian issue as a trivial personal issue of "sexuality," commenting in *Plain Brown Rapper* that "[women] are continually seen in sexual terms, we are defined by our genitals as brutally as a non-white is defined by pigment" (1976b:50). Florynce Kennedy, a feminist lawyer and civil rights activist, told DOB-New York that "being lesbian was like being black."[52]

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Because of the similarities between female, lesbian, and ethnic oppression, many lesbian activists argued that people who experience one form of oppression should have an enhanced understanding of other forms of oppression. For example, Brown reasoned that lesbians are uniquely antiracist and anti-classist because "[o]nce you feel your strength you cannot bear the thought of anyone else being beaten down. All other oppressions constructed by men become horrible to you, if they aren't already" (1972/1975:75). White women cannot become Black and upper-class women do not become working class, so they cannot understand race and class oppression first hand. But every woman can be a lesbian. Therefore, Brown reasoned that the experience of lesbianism could be the stepping stone toward an understanding of race and class oppressions for all women. (1976c).

The connections lesbian activists drew between heterosexism, sexism, and racism were not limited to simple analogies based on similarity. Many writers constructed causal relationships between the various oppressions. For example, Brown and Bunch argued that sexism was the primary form of oppression and that racism, classism, and all other forms of oppression developed subsequent to and atop the foundation provided by sexism.[53] Under the subheading "Sexism is the Root of All Oppression," Bunch wrote, "The first division of labor was based on sex .... Having secured the domination of women, men continued this pattern of suppressing people, now on the basis of tribe, race, and class" (1972/1975:32).[54] She further explained that although white and upper-class lesbians might appear to enjoy race and class privilege, they lose these privileges if they are discovered to be lesbians. Therefore, lesbians really have no race and class privileges, lesbians who attempt to hang onto their illusory race and class privileges or fail to fight racism and classism are merely dividing themselves from their sisters, and all lesbians have an interest in fighting every form of oppression. Brown added that race and class divisions are in the interest of male supremacy because they fragment the oppressed and prevent effective protest. Moreover, because sexism is the most basic oppression, the struggle against sexism—particularly the struggle against heterosexism, the "ultimate sexist oppression" (1976f:128)—is an attack on the roots of racism and classism. Of lesbian communities, Brown wrote "We know they are a tiny space of freedom we have created in the male world. We know they are the beginning of the end for male supremacy and its

hideous younger brothers, racial oppression and class oppression" (1976f:128).[55]

The argument that sexism is the most basic form of oppression contrasts sharply with socialist analyses that posit classism as the most basic form of oppression. Brown explicitly rejected the socialist analysis:

> The world has witnessed a number of class revolutions led by Marxist intellectuals. . . . In all those countries women still do not share political power commensurate with their number. . . . In Cuba for all its miracles, sexism is so fierce that homosexuals are 'rehabilitated.' To tell a woman, especially a working class Lesbian, to repeat the class struggle as defined by men . . . is to tell her to forget her own oppression . . . to . . . give herself over to politics as constructed by men. . . . Having seen what happens to women repeatedly in class revolutions it is clear that we must try another way. (1976f:126–127)

Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde disagreed with both positions. Both authors felt that attempts to identify a "primary" oppression were misguided and counterproductive because all forms of oppression share the same root. As Lorde wrote so eloquently, "there can be no hierarchies of oppression. I have learned that sexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over all others and thereby its right to dominance) and heterosexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others and thereby its right to dominance) both arise from the same source as racism—a belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby its right to dominance" (Lorde 1983:9). Moreover, different oppressions are interconnected, if only because the groups affected by various oppressions overlap. As Black feminist lesbians, both women pointed out that they are oppressed by racism, sexism, and heterosexism, and that these various forms of oppression are inseparable in their lives. "As a Black woman, a lesbian, a feminist and an activist, I have little difficulty seeing how the systems of oppression interconnect, if for no other reason than that their meshing so frequently affect my life" (Smith 1983:7). Individuals who belong to only one oppressed group often think of oppressions as additive, as if the oppression experienced by Black lesbians equals the oppression experienced by a white lesbian plus the oppression experienced by a Black heterosexual woman. Such conceptualizations of oppression implicity define majority status as neutral status, as if one could remove the color and find a white person underneath, or remove the lesbianism and find a heterosexual

underneath. The fallacy of this logic is evident to people who are members of multiple oppressed groups, for example lesbians of Color, who "have often been the most astute about the necessity for developing understandings of the connections between oppressions" and who recognize the significance of "those messy inconsistencies that occur whenever race, sex, class and sexual identity actually mix" (Smith 1983:7).

Because oppressions overlap, Smith reasoned that each oppressed group has an interest in combating other forms of oppression because some of its members experience those other forms of oppression. Contrary to the common perception among People of Color that "[h]omosexuality is a white problem or even a 'white disease'," Smith argued that homophobia is as much an issue for People of Color as racism is because "[h]omophobic people of color are oppressive not just to white people, but to members of their own groups—at least ten per cent of their own groups" (Smith 1983:8). Homophobic People of Color are, therefore, guilty of oppressing other People of Color; that is, of racism. Lorde agreed that homophobia and racism are indiscrete: "Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black" (Lorde 1983:9). In other words, homophobia is racist and racism is homophobic.

Arguments about the similarities and connections between racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism, especially within the context of claims that all oppressions are equivalent and none are "primary," implicitly construct lesbians as an ethnic group by equating them with groups defined by race or ethnicity. These arguments forego the question of whether lesbians are an ethnic group, assume an affirmative answer, and proceed to apply the language of ethnic politics to lesbians. As an ethnic group, lesbians became another in a series of groups that were able to avail themselves of the language of ethnic political protest.

Feminist Choice or Ethnic Essence: Internal Contradictions Are the Legacy of a Dual Heritage

The concepts of lesbianism and strategies for liberation that arose from the feminist and the ethnic political traditions undermined and conflicted with each other, complicating lesbians' efforts to constitute

themselves as a legitimate interest group. Within the feminist political tradition, political issues are legitimized by reference to the personal. The application of this strategy to lesbianism produced a lesbian feminist ideology that is heavily dependent on the construction of lesbianism as a choice. But within the ethnic political tradition, identity is treated as essential and the legitimacy of political claims depends on the assumption that minority identity is immutable, clearly defined, and historically integral. Claims to rights based on chosen identities fail in the ethnic political tradition. Therefore, lesbian feminists' efforts to legitimate lesbian claims in the eyes of feminists by constructing lesbianism as a choice simultaneously weakened lesbians' ability to make claims using the more familiar language of ethnic politics. The failure of choice in the ethnic political tradition is demonstrated by feminists' reactions prior to the elaboration of the politics of lesbianism as a choice. For example, in 1969, Roxanne Dunbar dismissed the issue of lesbianism by saying "I think homosexuality is a chosen oppression whereas being a woman is the root of oppression. I don't think it's that important" (Brown 1976b:50). Conversely, the construction of lesbianism as an ethnicity undermined lesbian feminists' efforts to legitimate lesbianism as a feminist political issue. For example, King reported that, to the extent that lesbianism was not seen as a matter of choice, feminists in the 1960s and 1970s considered it a civil rights issue, but not a feminist concern (1986).

If the contexts of ethnic and feminist discourse were distinct, the contradictory political strategies necessary in these contexts would not be problematic. But they are not distinct; Dunbar made the statement quoted above at the Congress to Unite Women. Feminist and ethnic discourses overlap and interconnect for the same reasons that sexism and racism overlap and interconnect. Were the two discourses not diametrically opposed, their mingling would have produced a workable synthetic ideology. But the two strategies are based on fundamentally different assumptions and their mingling has produced instead a collection of concepts and arguments full of internal contradictions that reflect the dual heritage of lesbian political philosophy.

These contradictions—like the controversies over the role of sexuality in the definition of lesbianism and the goals of the lesbian feminist movement with regard to gender—produced faultlines that rumbled under the surface of lesbian politics during the 1980s and 1990s. The issue of bisexuality exposes these faultlines, and the heated debates that

occur among lesbians over bisexuality have less to do with bisexuality than with the controversies and contradictions in lesbian political ideology.

Bisexuality: The Issue That Exposes Controversies and Contradictions in Lesbian Ideology

In the 1980s, ideological debates among lesbians abated as many of us turned our attention to personal career and family goals. But the controversies that fueled these debates in the 1970s were never settled, and the contradictions in lesbian ideology that reflect them were never resolved. These controversies and contradictions lie submerged and largely unexamined by women who have worked out their own individual ideological solutions so that they could go on with their personal lives.

The issue of bisexuality uncovers these controversies and contradictions. The recent resurgence of bisexual activism, including demands by bisexuals within the lesbian community that bear a striking resemblance to the demands lesbians brought to feminists in the 1970s, has forced lesbians to deal with the issue of bisexuality. As lesbians debate the place of bisexual women in the lesbian community, the role of bisexuality in their own lives, and the political implications of bisexuality, they are forced to confront old controversies and contradictions in their conceptions of themselves as lesbians and their political goals as an interest group. The passion that marks the lesbian debate about bisexuality is none other than the passion with which lesbians struggled to define themselves and their issues in the 1970s.

Contemporary lesbians inherited a multiplicity of crisscrossing and contradictory definitions of lesbianism from the 1970s debates. Each of the arguments used by lesbian feminists to construct lesbianism as a political issue was based on a particular definition of lesbianism, and spelled out the political implications of lesbianism as so defined. But by defining lesbianism and its political implications, each argument defined what is not lesbianism and gave non-lesbianism political implications as

well. That which is bisexual is not lesbian; otherwise bisexuality per se would not exist except as lesbianism. Therefore, if we disagree about what is lesbian, we disagree about what is bisexual, and if we disagree about the political implications of lesbianism, we disagree about the political implications of bisexuality.

To see how the controversy over bisexuality arises from the controversy over lesbianism, we have to analyze the arguments that were used to politicize lesbianism to discover the many different and conflicting consequences they had for the conceptualization and political meaning of bisexuality.[56] As we will see, the various definitions and images of bisexuality found among contemporary lesbians as described in chapters 4 and 5—including the belief that bisexuality does not exist as well as the belief that it does; the definition of bisexuality variously in terms of behaviors, attraction, identities, choices, and preferences; and images of bisexuals as healthy, confused, undecided, transitional, closeted lesbians, political cop-outs and political opportunists—are none other than the multiple and conflicting concepts and meanings that were implicitly ascribed to bisexuality during the struggle to construct lesbianism as a political issue.

A basic starting definition of lesbianism is, "a woman who loves other women emotionally and spiritually, and desires to express that love and commitment sexually" (Alice et al. 1973/1991a:31). This definition of "lesbian" was adequate to support the argument that feminists should overcome their own homophobia because homophobia was a barrier to feminist progress. But it quickly became inadequate when lesbians began arguing that lesbianism itself is political. Take, for example, the argument that heterosexuality is a male supremacist institution, and that lesbianism is a form of political protest because it represents a refusal to participate in heterosexual relationships. According to this line of reasoning, lesbianism is not defined in terms of emotional or sexual attractions and bonds between women but instead as a lifestyle involving an absence of relationships with men. Whether a woman chooses to become involved in relationships with women is secondary; lesbianism as a form of political protest is primarily defined in terms of the absence of heterosexual relationships.

If lesbianism is defined as a lifestyle characterized by refusal to become involved in heterosexual relationships, then bisexuality must involve willingness to become involved in heterosexual relationships—

otherwise it would be lesbianism. By this definition, a woman's feelings of actual sexual attraction are fairly irrelevant except insofar as they might make her more or less likely to refuse heterosexual relations. A woman who is attracted to men might still abstain from heterosexual relationships and if she did, she would be living a lesbian lifestyle as much as any other lesbian—that would make her a lesbian, not a bisexual. Bisexuality as a dual attraction to women and men is undefined; bisexuality is distinct from lesbianism only as it is defined as involving a willingness to become involved in heterosexual relations.

If lesbianism is a form of political protest because it represents a refusal to participate in the most intimate manifestation of male supremacy, then bisexuality is a form of cooperation with male supremacy because it represents a willingness to participate in the male supremacist institution of heterosexuality. Unlike the lesbian, the bisexual woman so defined has not rejected male supremacy's valuation of the male. Unlike the lesbian, the bisexual woman colludes in the separation of the human race into two emotionally crippled and complementary genders. Unlike the lesbian, who forces men to change by withdrawing her support from them, the bisexual woman makes her support available to individual men. By her willingness to participate in a male-dominated relationship, the bisexual woman supports the entire system of male domination instead of contributing to its breakdown. Finally, the bisexual woman fails to challenge the male definition of a woman as a person who is fucked by men. By being a person who can be fucked by men, she permits herself to be defined as a woman in male terms.

What about the woman who calls herself bisexual, but forswears heterosexual relations? Refusal to participate in heterosexual relationships has no value as a form of protest unless it is communicated to others, particularly men.[57] Therefore, the woman who calls herself bisexual is, for political purposes, bisexual. Men will perceive her as heterosexually available, and she will have no impact on male supremacist culture. By calling herself bisexual she presents herself as someone who is willing to participate in the institution of heterosexuality; her private refusal has no political consequence. Lesbianism is an act of rebellion; bisexuality—defined as a willingness to participate in heterosexual relations or as bisexual identity—is a form of complicity that is politically indistinguishable from heterosexuality.[58] Thus, the argument that lesbianism is form of protest against male supremacy because it is

an alternative to heterosexuality defines bisexuality as a willingness to engage in heterosexual relationships and gives to bisexuality the same political meaning it gives to heterosexuality.

Other arguments used to politicize lesbianism had different consequences for the definition and political meaning of bisexuality. For example, lesbianism was also constructed as feminist via the argument that the lesbian lifestyle embodied feminist ideals, such as economic and psychological independence from men, self-knowledge and self-esteem as a woman, and egalitarian relationships. Psychological and economic independence from men can be achieved by any woman who is not involved with a man, regardless of which sex or sexes attract her, regardless of whether she calls herself lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, and even regardless of whether she is willing to become involved with a man. In terms of opportunity for independence, any single or celibate woman is the equal of the lesbian and this is no less true for bisexual women than for women of any other sexual orientation.[59] As long as the bisexual woman does not actually become involved with a man, she is the political equivalent of the lesbian, even if she is willing to become involved with men and even if she announces this willingness by calling herself bisexual.

Knowledge and respect for oneself as a woman, on the other hand, are achieved only through relationships with other women and egalitarian relationships can only be had with other women. Lesbians have greater self-knowledge and self-esteem because they develop these qualities through their egalitarian relations with women. Any bisexual woman who became involved with another woman could also experience egalitarian relations and develop self-knowledge and self-esteem. In this respect, as long as a bisexual woman is involved with another woman, she is the political equivalent of the lesbian, even if she calls herself bisexual and feels attracted to men. Thus, bisexuality as defined in terms of identity or sexual attraction has the same feminist political potential as lesbianism does.

But what if the bisexual woman becomes involved with a man? That would be problematic because a heterosexual relationship would not only fail to provide her with the benefits of a lesbian relationship, but it would also compromise any benefits she might have received from her relations with women. For example, any knowledge of herself that she gained through relations with women was gained because relations with

women provided her with a context free from male definitions of women. By putting herself in a heterosexual context, she would expose herself once again to a male-dominated meaning system that would make it difficult to stay in touch with her newly discovered woman-defined self. If, therefore, the bisexual woman is defined as a woman who relates sexually to men as well as women, then the bisexual woman is less of a feminist than the lesbian is.

Once lesbianism had been constructed as political, lesbian feminists could argue that lesbians are feminists, and that lesbians have something to offer heterosexual women. Among the qualities lesbians have to offer are a special understanding of heterosexuality from their vantage point as outsiders to the institution, a greater opportunity to escape male-defined reality and develop feminist consciousness, more resources to devote to women because they do not spend their time and energy on men, and political independence because they have no vested interest in male-dominated culture. By this argument, a woman who is attracted to both women and men but who chooses to become involved only with women and to devote her time and energy to other women would be as politically acceptable as a lesbian who did the same. If she adopted a lesbian identity to symbolize her commitment to women, so much the better. She can participate fully in woman-only spaces and contribute equally to the development of feminist consciousness. Bisexuality as defined in terms of dual sexual attraction is not problematic.

On the other hand, bisexuality that involves any form of relating to men or any compromise of one's political commitment to women is the political equivalent of heterosexuality. A bisexual who relates to men enjoys heterosexual privilege and supports male supremacy by participating in a male-dominated institution. Her feminist vision is clouded by her stake in the patriarchal system, and, like any other heterosexual, she must follow the lead of lesbians and be grateful for their insight and efforts to liberate her. Ultimately, she will betray her lesbian sisters because heterosexuality demands that she do so; therefore, lesbians cannot count on her any more than they can count on their heterosexual followers. But the real problem is the bisexual who relates to both women and men. She not only withholds her own time and energy from other women; she also drains other women's time and energy to fill the needs created by her relationships with men and to support her interest in the patriarchy. In doing so, she hampers other women's efforts toward

feminist liberation. If the heterosexual woman is unhelpful, the bisexual woman—defined as a woman who relates to both women and men—is a hindrance and an adversary.[60]

If lesbians are better feminists than heterosexual women, lesbian feminists argued, it follows that feminists should become lesbians. The advent of the moral imperative to be lesbian signaled the birth of a new concept of lesbianism; lesbianism as a political statement. No longer an expression of sexual attraction to women, according to this argument, lesbianism—consisting of a lack of relationships with men, sexual relationships with women, and a political commitment to womankind—is an expression of commitment to feminism. A woman's sexual life no longer has anything to do with her sexual desires, and everything to do with her political commitments. Any woman who does not relate sexually to other women obviously does not consider women worthy of their most intimate love. Any woman who continues to call herself bisexual signals not her sexuality, but her lack of political commitment to women; what possible reason could a woman have for calling herself bisexual if not to retain her connection to men and heterosexual privilege? Either one expresses one's feminism by declaring oneself a lesbian and living a lesbian life, or one is not a feminist. There are no other options.

The criticism of lesbian feminism that arose in the wake of the advent of the lesbian moral imperative raised yet another set of political implications for bisexuality. The argument that a basic tenet of feminism is every woman's right to a self-defined sexuality effectively tossed all proscriptions against any form of sexual behavior or identity out the window. This argument led to the conclusion that a bisexual lifestyle or identity based on a recognition of one's bisexuality would be as consistent with feminism as a lesbian lifestyle or identity that was similarly based. What was not feminist was any woman's attempt to deny other women the right to bisexual behavior or identity.

But the argument that every woman has a right to define her own sexuality does not preclude the argument that one's sexuality has political meaning, political causes, or political implications. It merely reaffirms each woman's right to analyze the politics of her own sexuality as she sees them. Many who made this argument implicitly accepted the premise that lesbianism is more consistent with feminism than heterosexuality is, and expected that as women did examine the political implica-

tions of their sexuality, they would choose to move toward lesbianism. The feminist imperative therefore became not a behavioral prescription, but a demand that each feminist perform her own feminist analysis of her sexuality, whatever her sexuality might be and whatever changes in her sexual behavior or identity her analysis might precipitate. The arguments that these feminists applied to heterosexuals—that they should continuously examine the relationship between their politics and their sexuality—apply equally to bisexual women. Thus, bisexual identity and bisexual behavior are as politically respectable as any other sexual identity or behavior; as long as the bisexual is continually analyzing the political implications of her own bisexuality.

Other criticisms of the lesbian moral imperative were the higher value it placed on sexual than on nonsexual relations between women, the assertion that heterosexual behavior is antithetical to feminism, and the tendency to define lesbianism in terms of an absence of relations with men instead of positively in terms of relations with women. These arguments also lead to the conclusion that bisexuality per se is no more or less feminist than either lesbianism or heterosexuality. The former arguments posit that neither relations with women nor relations with men reflect a woman's political convictions; therefore, bisexual behavior has no necessary political implications and is no less feminist. The latter argument implies that lesbianism should be defined in terms of relations with women, regardless of the presence or absence of relations with men. By this positive definition of lesbianism, a woman who engages in relations with both women and men would be a lesbian. This definition of lesbianism effectively defines bisexuality out of existence by collapsing it into lesbianism and thereby giving it the same political implications as lesbianism.

In the face of objections to the lesbian moral imperative, lesbian feminists revised their definition of lesbianism once more. Because lesbianism was already divorced from sexual attraction to women, it was a relatively simple matter to divorce lesbianism from lesbian sex. Lesbian feminists appeased heterosexual women by agreeing that their heterosexual behavior and their lack of lesbian sexual behavior did not compromise their feminism. In fact, their lack of lesbian sexual behavior did not compromise their lesbianism; they could be political lesbians if only they would abstain from sex with men and declare a political commitment to women. The advent of the political lesbian reopened the feminist door

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to bisexual women, as it did to heterosexual women. Bisexual women, like heterosexual women, could be reinstated as feminists if only they would abstain from heterosexual relations. In this case, bisexual women had an advantage over heterosexual women because they did not have to become celibate to do so. But bisexuality per se still had no political meaning and, since "sexuality" was now defined in terms of politics and not sex, it therefore did not exist as a state of being distinct from lesbianism and heterosexuality. Either a woman abstained from heterosexual relations and earned her feminist credentials as a political lesbian, or she engaged in heterosexual relations and thereby demonstrated her lack of feminism; bisexuality, by any definition, was inconsequential.

Of course, once a woman extricated herself from heterosexuality and began to challenge the institution with a vision that was not clouded by an interest in it, she would begin to see the superiority of lesbianism. As she learned to value other women the way she previously valued men, she would become attracted to them and she would want to give them the love that she used to give men. As a woman who is able to understand the institution of heterosexuality from the vantage point of an outsider, and as a woman who has learned the value of women, the bisexual woman who undergoes feminist awakening should soon slip easily into a comfortable lesbianism. If she fails to do so, that is, if she continues to call herself bisexual or remains attracted to men as well as women—even if she abstains from heterosexual relations—she indicates that she values men at least as much as she values women. In doing so, she challenges the feminist valuation of women in the same way that lesbians themselves challenge the male supremacist valuation of men. She belies the lesbian feminist argument that in a sexist society lesbian relations are inherently superior to heterosexual relations, because she has had the opportunity to experience both and she does not agree. Her existence demonstrates that a woman might, with full knowledge of the joys of relating to women, continue to desire sexual relations with men. The implication that lesbian relations are not obviously superior to heterosexual relations cuts to the foundation of lesbian feminism, and is very threatening to it. The bisexual—defined as a woman who persists in being attracted to men after she should have realized the superiority of lesbianism—is therefore a greater political problem for lesbian feminism than the heterosexual woman whose continued heterosexual "desire" merely reflects her ignorance of the joys of relating to women.

The sex positivist movement that arose in reaction to the desexualization of the lesbian was better able to accommodate bisexuality. With its emphasis on pleasure and sexual exploration, it brought sexual desire back into sexuality and rejected any limits on sexual expression including limits on the genders of one's partners. To sex positivists, bisexuality as a sexual practice was as legitimate an area of sexual exploration as any other. Like any other form of sexuality, it should be celebrated and enjoyed.

The debate over the role of gender in feminism and lesbian/gay liberation is of even greater consequence in the controversy about bisexuality than the debate over the relationship between lesbianism and lesbian sex is. However controversial, lesbianism is definable without reference to sex, but it is not definable without reference to gender. In fact, the very feminists who are most eager to desexualize lesbianism—the cultural feminists—are the same feminists who emphasize the importance of gender. Therefore, the elimination of gender—a goal advocated by early gay liberationists and some feminists who hoped to create a world in which all people would be free to love whomever they chose without cultural, psychological, economic, or legal constraints—would effectively eliminate the lesbian as a social type because it would eliminate the basis for her definition. Such a possibility is very unsettling to lesbians who have struggled to create a lesbian identity in a hostile world, and who have considerable personal, social, and political investments in preserving that identity. It is particularly unsettling to cultural lesbian feminists whose world views are heavily based on a foundation of essential gender.

The issue of bisexuality is very closely related to the issue of the elimination of gender, a relationship that can be seen in the implications of the elimination of gender for bisexuality, which are two-fold. First, it implies that all people would be bisexual because no one would be constrained to choose a lover of a particular gender, and if a person did choose a lover of a particular gender that person would not be labeled lesbian/gay or heterosexual. For this reason, feminists and gay liberationists who strive to eliminate gender often conceptualize the ideal world of the future as a bisexual world. But by the same token, bisexuality would be as undefinable as lesbianism or heterosexuality in that world. Everyone would be bisexual, but no one would be bisexual, because if the concept of gender were truly eliminated the concept of

bisexuality would be either meaningless in its failure to distinguish between people, or wholly unthinkable.[61] Conversely, the preservation of gender has two implications for bisexuality. First, it mediates against the realization of bisexuality because it tends to reify two types of sexuality corresponding to the two genders. As long as gender remains the basis for sexual distinction, homosexuality and heterosexuality remain conceptually distinct, and this distinction exerts a constructive influence on reality. At the same time, however, it retains the basis on which bisexuality can conceivably be defined in a meaningful way.

Because the issue of bisexuality is so closely related to the issue of gender, bisexuality takes on the same diametrically opposed implications. Whereas feminists and gay liberationists who see the elimination of gender as a political goal tend to welcome the prospect of bisexuality and envision an ideal world in which everyone would be bisexual, lesbian feminists foresee their own annihilation in such a world and struggle to preserve gender and defend themselves against the existential threat of bisexuality. Paradoxically, lesbians who protect the concept of gender in order to protect lesbian identity simultaneously preserve the basis for the meaningful conceptualization of bisexual identity.

The lesbian feminist reconstruction of lesbianism as a choice created additional political implications for bisexuality. In particular, the argument that all women are inherently bisexual and therefore have a "lesbian aspect," which is suppressed by patriarchy and liberated by feminism, has obvious implications for the discussion of bisexuality. The argument implies that bisexuality not only exists, but that it is universal and essential. Lesbianism, like heterosexuality, is at best only a partial expression of women's full sexuality. The argument was intended to support the lesbian moral imperative by constructing all women as potential lesbians, and succeeded in doing so because arguments that heterosexuality was antifeminist were already in place. Without these arguments, the assertion that all women are inherently bisexual would lead to the conclusion that bisexuality is a more complete form of sexual expression than lesbianism and that the goal of women's liberation—which is, after all, the struggle to provide women with the freedom to be all they can be—should be to promote the expression of bisexuality, not lesbianism. If the basis of the arguments that heterosexuality is antithetical to feminism were to disappear—if, for example, patriarchy were eventually overthrown—then the concept of universal bisexuality would

come back to haunt lesbian feminists with its implication that bisexuality is the ultimate feminist form of sexuality. This argument, used as a means toward an end by lesbian feminists, provides a toehold bisexuals can use to insert claims about the legitimacy of bisexuality into lesbian feminist discourse and challenge the conclusion that lesbianism is the desired feminist outcome. It is, in effect, a time bomb planted by lesbian feminists themselves.

Attempts to construct lesbianism as a choice for all women by defining lesbianism in terms of all positive relationships between women also have different implications for bisexuality. Instead of defining bisexuality as universal, these arguments define bisexuality out of existence. In fact, they define heterosexuality out of existence in terms of political relevance. For example, Rich's lesbian continuum defines lesbianism as the common dimension underlying all of women's positive relationships with each other. If women have relations to men, they are irrelevant except insofar as they might weaken their ties to women; all women are more or less lesbians on the basis of the quality of their ties to women. Neither heterosexuality nor bisexuality is represented on this scale; it is a unidimensional scale ranging from less to more lesbian, not a bidimensional Kinsey-type scale ranging from heterosexuality through bisexuality to homosexuality. So-called "bisexuals," like so-called "heterosexuals," are really lesbians.[62]

If lesbianism is a choice for all women, then it is particularly important for bisexual women to choose lesbianism because in their case the fact of choice is indisputable. The patriarchy can attempt to co-opt lesbians into the heterosexist system by portraying "lesbians as women who *can* not, rather than women who *will* not,"[63] be heterosexual. But the woman who is bisexual and nevertheless chooses lesbianism cannot be constructed as a failed heterosexual; the fact of her rejection of heterosexuality is undeniable. Therefore, a bisexual woman who chooses to continue relating to men is a traitor because, having the opportunity to challenge heterosexism, she chooses instead to affirm it. In fact, she is the only true heterosexual, because only she can be said to have consciously chosen heterosexuality.

Like efforts within feminist discourse to construct lesbianism as a feminist issue and a choice, efforts within the ethnic tradition of political discourse to construct lesbianism as an ethnicity produced unintended implications for bisexuality. The greater impact of the ethnic argument

vis-à-vis bisexuality, however, was not to create implications for bisexuality, but to make lesbian ethnicity vulnerable to claims of bisexuality. The construction of lesbians as an ethnic group involved the construction of lesbianism as an essential, immutable, unambiguous, and involuntary characteristic upon which to build a lesbian community with clearly defined and fixed boundaries, and the creation of a lesbian culture and history. The construction of lesbianism as an essential characteristic made lesbian feminism vulnerable by creating the unfalsifiable possibility that there might also be a bisexual essence. Lesbian essence itself cannot be observed, so essence must be discovered through observable characteristics such as identity and behavior. If there is a bisexual essence, then many women who had been declared to be lesbians on the basis of their identity or behavior might *really* be bisexuals. Consistent with their belief in the essentiality of lesbianism, lesbians would be morally compelled to recognize the bisexuality of these women to be as legitimate as their own lesbianism; in other words, it would compel them to acknowledge the "loss" of a number of lesbians whose lesbian essence could no more be proved than their bisexual essence could be disproved.

Moreover, if lesbian essence is subject to such uncertainty, then lesbian essence is not as immutable and unambiguous as is necessary to clearly define the boundaries of the lesbian ethnic group. A woman who is attracted to women and has sex only with women might, for example, be a lesbian—or she might not, because she might also be attracted to men. Bisexuals demonstrate that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not mutually exclusive and immutable characteristics, and the boundaries of the lesbian community are therefore not clearly defined and fixed. Bisexuality represents the "grey area" of sexuality that challenges the clarity of the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Suddenly, no one's lesbianism is guaranteed, allies cannot be distinguished from enemies, and the distinction between lesbianism and heterosexuality that is so necessary to the definition of lesbians as an oppressed ethnic group becomes vague and shifting. If lesbians cannot be clearly distinguished from heterosexuals, then lesbians are not an ethnic group and cannot use ethnic strategies of liberation.[64]

The manner in which lesbian culture and history was constructed also created a site of vulnerability to bisexuality. By desexualizing the lesbian in order to claim independent women as lesbian ancestors in the

absence of information about their sexual behaviors, cultural feminists and historians effectively defined the bisexual out of existence not only in contemporary society but in history. Even women whose heterosexual behaviors are a matter of public record could be claimed as the ancestors of the modern lesbian because their heterosexual behavior was easily explained away as the result of the social constraints of the time period, or simply ignored as irrelevant to the definition of lesbianism. This practice effectively eliminated bisexuality from history as it constructed a lesbian history by claiming as lesbian ancestors women who would otherwise be described as bisexual. The process was not unlike the process in which heterosexist historians had "set history a little *too* straight" at the expense of lesbian and gay history. As bisexuals have become politically active in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some have chosen to participate in ethnic political discourse and construct themselves as an ethnic group. To do so, they are constructing a bisexual history; a project that necessarily depletes lesbian history and thereby threatens lesbian ethnicity. This and other efforts on the part of bisexuals, and the challenge they pose to lesbians, will be discussed in chapter 8.

Summary

The many different arguments that have been used to construct lesbians as a political interest group have simultaneously constructed bisexuality in a variety of ways, and ascribed to bisexuality a variety of different political meanings. Even if we were to agree on a particular definition of bisexuality, these different arguments would ascribe to that bisexuality different and conflicting implications.

If, for example, we choose to define bisexuality in terms of attraction to both women and men, most of the arguments used to politicize lesbianism lead to the conclusion that bisexuality is irrelevant, whereas others conclude that it is politically equivalent to lesbianism or, conversely, to heterosexuality. Specifically, the arguments that lesbianism is an implicit political protest against patriarchy, that relationships with women provide women with greater self-knowledge and self-esteem than relationships with men, that lesbians have superior insight and resources to offer the feminist struggle, and that all feminists should become

lesbians in either the sexual or the political sense, are unconcerned about the possibility that women might be attracted to both women and men. In most of these arguments, what matters is how women behave; their sexual attractions per se have no political implications, and bisexual attraction is therefore unproblematic.

But a few arguments do ascribe political implications to bisexual attraction. Those who argue that feminists should fight for the right of every woman to a self-defined sexuality consider bisexual attraction no more or less feminist than either lesbianism or heterosexuality; in fact, they label as nonfeminist those who consider bisexual attractions less feminist than lesbian ones. Sex positivists also consider bisexual attraction politically equivalent to lesbian attraction, but in their case it is because they reject feminism as a standard for the relative moral assessment of various forms of sexuality altogether. In contrast, those who expound on the glories of lesbianism and believe that women who declare themselves political lesbians or who taste lesbian pleasures will immediately see the superiority of lesbianism, find continued bisexual attractions more troubling than heterosexual attraction. Bisexual attraction is more troubling because it demonstrates that women who know the pleasures of lesbianism can still feel heterosexual desire, thus calling into question the obvious superiority of lesbianism. Finally, bisexual attraction is threatening to the notion of lesbian ethnicity because it destroys the clarity of the defining characteristic of that ethnicity.

If we choose to define bisexuality in terms of identity, such that any woman who calls herself a bisexual is defined to be a bisexual, lesbians' arguments lead to a new set of political implications for bisexuality. In contrast to bisexual attraction, bisexual identity is rendered irrelevant by very few of lesbians' arguments. Among these are the arguments that lesbians obtain feminist self-knowledge and self-esteem from their relationships with other women, and that lesbianism should be defined positively in terms of women's relationships with other women instead of negatively in terms of the absence of relationships with men. Bisexual identity would not prevent a woman from obtaining feminist benefits from her relations with women, and it would be irrelevant if lesbianism is defined in terms of relations with women; if she related to women, she would be a lesbian—her bisexual identity notwithstanding and completely irrelevant.

Most of lesbians' arguments ascribe very definite political implica-

tions to bisexual identity. If lesbianism is an implicit protest against patriarchy, then bisexual identity is politically indistinct from heterosexual identity because a woman who calls herself bisexual conveys that she is willing to engage in heterosexual relations. The protest of lesbianism lies in the refusal to participate in heterosexuality and therefore patriarchy, and this protest is only political if it is made public; the woman with a bisexual identity makes no such protest and is therefore politically identical to the heterosexual-identified woman. Similar implications follow from the argument that all feminists should at least be political lesbians if not sexual lesbians; political lesbianism is an identity as well as a promise to reject heterosexual relations, and women who call themselves bisexual are avoiding their moral obligation to feminism by not becoming political lesbians.

On the other hand, the argument that lesbians embody the feminist ideal of independence from men leads to the conclusion that the bisexual-identified woman can be the political equivalent of the lesbian-identified woman as long as she refrains from heterosexual relationships. If she did become heterosexually involved, her lifestyle would become less feminist, but this would be because of her heterosexual relationship not because of her bisexual identity. Her bisexual identity per se is not problematic. Similarly, those who argue that lesbians have greater insight and resources to offer the feminist movement would not consider bisexual identity per se a necessary impediment to one's value to the feminist movement. Of course, it would be preferable if one adopted a lesbian identity to symbolize her commitment to women, but that would be icing on the cake. Those who argue that feminists should fight for every woman's right to a self-defined sexuality would observe that bisexual-identified women are merely taking advantage of their feminist right, and the sex positivists would encourage bisexual-identified women to enjoy their self-defined sexualities.

The implications of bisexuality become even more complex when bisexuality is defined in terms of sexual behavior, potential behavior, or willingness to engage in certain sexual behaviors. Several of lesbians' arguments lead to the conclusion that the woman who engages in both lesbian and heterosexual behavior is the political equivalent of the heterosexual, or at best, that she is less feminist than the woman who engages in only lesbian behavior but perhaps slightly more feminist than the complete heterosexual. For example, the arguments that lesbianism

is an implicit protest against patriarchy, that the lesbian lifestyle embodies the feminist ideal of independence from men and provides self-knowledge and self-esteem, and that all feminists should at least be political lesbians if not sexual lesbians all characterize the behavioral bisexual as a feminist failure. The argument that lesbians have greater insight and resources to offer the feminist movement leads to the conclusion that bisexuals are, in fact, even more of a political liability than heterosexual women are because bisexuals do not merely give their energy to men instead of women; they take women's energy and give it to men. This is compounded by the fact that women who continue to relate to men forego the opportunity to demonstrate that lesbianism is a choice and thereby collude with heterosexist interpretations of lesbianism.

Bisexual behavior is also problematic for the notion of lesbian ethnicity because, just as bisexual attraction threatens the clarity of the defining characteristic of lesbian ethnicity, bisexual behavior provides visible evidence that the boundaries between lesbians (the oppressed group) and heterosexuals (the oppressor) are neither clear nor fixed. Allies cannot be clearly distinguished from enemies and allies sometimes become enemies and vice versa. Under such circumstances, the struggle for liberation is very difficult.

In contrast, a few of lesbians' arguments have positive implications for bisexuality defined in terms of behavior. The feminists who argue for every woman's right to a self-defined sexuality, the sex positivists, and those who argue that sexual relations with women are no more important than nonsexual ones or that heterosexual relations do not preclude feminism, have no difficulty accepting the woman who behaves bisexually as a feminist on a par with the lesbian.

Perhaps the most interesting implication for behavioral bisexuality follows from the argument that lesbianism should be defined in terms of relationships with women instead of in terms of the absence of relationships with men. Although this argument succeeds in defining lesbianism in positive terms, it simultaneously defines bisexuality out of existence by classifying any woman who engages in lesbian behavior as a lesbian, regardless of whether or not she also engages in heterosexual behavior. It is ironic that creating a positive definition of lesbianism necessarily defines bisexuality in the most negative terms possible—as nonexistent.

Other interesting implications follow from the argument that the

goal of gay liberation is the elimination of gender, and the argument that all women are inherently bisexual and therefore potentially lesbian. If the elimination of gender is the goal of gay liberation, then the ideal world of the future would be a bisexual world in which people love each other regardless of gender. Behavioral bisexuality, though it would not be recognized as such in that world, would be the norm. Cultural feminists whose own position is heavily grounded in the notion of gender, of course, strongly oppose this vision of the ideal future world and consider bisexuality a threatening, not a welcome, prospect. The argument that all women are inherently bisexual developed to support the argument that all women could and should become lesbians. Within this context, behavioral bisexuality—as are bisexual desire and bisexual identity—is understandable, although it misses the point, which is to realize the lesbian aspect of one's potential. But if arguments that heterosexual behavior is antifeminist are rejected, then the concept of universal inherent bisexuality leads us back to the conclusion that the ideal world of the future is a bisexual world and that feminists should struggle to create this world—an outcome that is far afield from the intentions of the lesbian feminists who proposed the idea that all women are inherently bisexual.

In summary, arguments that were used to construct lesbianism as a political issue have a variety of implications for the political meaning of bisexuality. These arguments all contributed to the formation of a pluralistic lesbian ideology which, despite its internal contradictions and disagreements, is at least sufficient to provide individual lesbians with a feeling that they belong to a group that can provide them with an identity. But the arguments arrived at that point via such different routes that when they are applied to a different subject—bisexuality—their differences emerge in full force. Because of these differences, lesbians disagree about what bisexuality is, and because they cannot agree on what it is, they cannot agree on its political meaning nor on how they should react to it. Is it a feeling of attraction, an identity, a lifestyle, or does it even exist at all? Are bisexuals allies, enemies, followers, hindrances, or neutral observers? Should lesbians welcome them, convert them, pity them, or shun them? Lesbians cannot agree on what bisexuality is because they do not agree on what lesbianism is. By necessity, lesbians have learned to overlook their disagreements about the nature of lesbianism in order to get on with the important business of living as

lesbians, but when they discuss bisexuality they are forced to reexamine their own old issues. The disagreements lesbians have with each other about bisexuality that I explored in chapter 4—does bisexuality exist, what is bisexuality, what are bisexuals like, how should lesbians feel about and relate to bisexuals—arise out of their own disagreements with each other about themselves.

Amid all of these differences, however, the one implication that follows consistently from almost all of lesbians' arguments is the implication that bisexuality per se, regardless of how it is defined, has no politics. In some cases, this conclusion is reached because bisexuality is considered the political equivalent of heterosexuality or the political equivalent of lesbianism. In other cases, it is reached because bisexuality is considered politically irrelevant or nonexistent. In other words, lesbian politics have been constructed at the expense of the possibility of a bisexual politics. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, bisexuals set themselves the task of politicizing bisexuality, just as lesbians embarked on the politicization of lesbianism in the early 1970s. Because lesbian politics rest heavily on the denial of bisexual politics, bisexuals' efforts to create a bisexual politics are necessarily threatening to the still fragile process of lesbian politicization, a topic I will explore in chapter 8. But first, I turn to the topic of bisexuals' own attitudes toward bisexuality.