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LESBIAN SEX/GAY SEX: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

A few years ago, a picture of two young lesbians appeared in a brief presented to the Ministers of the Ontario Cabinet on adding sexual preference to the antidiscrimination clause of the Ontario Human Rights Code. The photograph was taken at a gay rights march attended by at least fifty people in 1975 or '76, in Ottawa, the nation's capital.

A friend of mine spotted it. "Is this you?" she asked, incredulous.

It was: I was sixteen, a baby dyke. And so was the young woman beside me; we stood together, smiling proudly, propping up a placard that read in bold lettering, "REPEAL THE SODOMY LAWS."

Why was I carrying this placard? One could as well ask why a gay man now might carry a sign reading, "PROTECT ABORTION RIGHTS." But while a gay man might come to his allegiance with feminist issues through learning the connections between his movement and another, this was my own movement—a gay rights demonstration. Homosexual women and homosexual men, femmes and faggots, queers, queens, butches and dykes, we all fell under the rubric of gay: not simply an alliance of differences but an identification of sameness.

This picture's current relevance for me is not simply as a badge of honor (I've since earned my purple stripes) but as the opening

to the story of my nascent political and sexual identity. And it founds the politics of my sexual identity squarely on a male paradigm. I was never in danger of being thrown in jail for practicing sodomy, yet somehow the association with an outlaw sexuality defined my identity as dangerous.

This is not to say that lesbians weren't arrested and harassed by the police for being lesbian and that there were no severe repercussions for such "gender treachery." But there never were any laws specifically forbidding lesbian sexual practices; the only lesbian case ever charged in Canada fell instead under the code forbidding "gross indecency," and this did not occur until 1981.

For Post-Stonewall lesbians in the Canadian gay rights movement, the laws against which we fought and which therefore defined us to some degree were laws made by, about, and for men. Not surprisingly, what constitutes homosexual sex in the public eye has always hung on the penis.

THE PENIS IN PUBLIC

The phallus exists as *the* symbol of desire because it represents both the presence of the penis for men and the absence of it for women. It therefore becomes a symbol of exchange. And because there is not an obvious symbol of exchange in lesbian sex (as in a penis), sex between lesbians becomes almost unrepresentable

and unimaginable for the general public.

In trying to find ways around this impasse, lesbians who produce photographic images of lesbian sex have found that the form as well as the content of visual representations of sex are so culturally conditioned by the conventions of heterosexual male desire that a seemingly in-eradicable inequity obtains between who is photographed and who is caught looking. It doesn't seem to matter that women are taking pictures of women *for* women: the phallic economy of the structures surrounding the production of lesbian sexual images results in as much displeasure as pleasure in the final product.

I don't think that it's entirely possible for us to escape this paradox. But I do think that we need to take up the discussion from another angle. What happens when we talk about lesbian representation not as lessons learned from straight men but from gay men?

"Men have taught you well," wrote several viewers on the wall of Kiss & Tell's interactive exhibit of lesbian sex photographs, *Drawing the Line* (OUT/LOOK, Fall 1990). The implication was that the work of the artists involved a betrayal of political consciousness and a lack of lesbian originality. Was this not simply a mimicry of heterosexual pornography and 'objectification'?

Male influence is clearly present in recent depictions of lesbian sex—particularly in photographs. But it is relevant and important for lesbians to ask *which* men have been our teachers and in *which* classrooms the lessons have taken place.

The association of lesbian sex images with images of gay male sex is rarely brought into view or questioned. In trying to create explicit representation of lesbian sex and to expand our sexual knowledge and techniques, some lesbians turn to gay men for instruction and alliance. To what extent have images of gay male sex influenced the establishment of a distinctive lesbian sexual iconography? Are there aspects of gay male sex imagery that are troubling? Promising?

Our impetus for using aspects of gay male

sexual culture may be an outcome of our increased interaction with gay men in recent years. Since the early 1980s, the AIDS crisis and state censorship (in both Canada and the United States) have forced lesbians and gay men to talk to each other about sex and its depiction as never before. Gay and lesbian publications are becoming more integrated, meaning that we see a great deal more of each other, literally and in media. This is equally true of lesbians and gay men of color, although the issues around which their communities organize appear to be somewhat different than among white lesbians and gay men.

For reasons having to do with capital and the relationship of freedom to one's body, lesbian sexual representations have primarily been the domain of white women. It is here that the closest relationship between lesbian and gay male representation occurs—at this point, both are predominantly white. For white women, the connection with gay men is made primarily on the basis of sexual identity, since being white is not widely viewed as an ethnicity, except among peoples of color and those whites engaged in issues of racism. This shared homosexual identity with white gay men (who have had access to the means of producing sex images) may be one of the reasons why the production of sexually explicit material has been by white women. Lesbians of color, on the other hand, are more likely to express their connections with gay men of colour on a basis of shared ethnic/racial and cultural identity than on sexual identity.

Differences of sexual representation between racial and ethnic groups are not centrally addressed here. They need a discussion of form—art, fiction, poetry, theater—and of social context much broader than my present focus on photographs. I realize that I am raising more questions than I am answering; but I raise them here so that others can take them up.²

LOOKING TO OUR BROTHERS

Why not look to gay men?

Our brothers have created institutions out of fantasies, while we lesbians are still arguing over whether to engage in fantasy in the first

place. They have not been shy about their extensive repertoire; we need only the inclination to look. They have taught us the meaning of right and left and curious acronyms; the beauty of leather, though we already knew lots about being butch. Marilyn Frye observed in *Sinister Wisdom* (Summer-Fall 1988),

I once perused a large and extensively illustrated book on sexual activity by and for homosexual men. It was astounding to me for one thing in particular, namely, that its pages constituted a huge lexicon of *words*: words for acts and activities, their subacts, preludes and denouements, their stylistic variation, their sequences. Gay male sex, I realized then, is *articulate*. It is articulate to the degree that, in my world, lesbian "sex" does not remotely approach. Lesbian "sex" as I have known it, most of the time I have known it, is utterly *inarticulate*. Most of my lifetime, most of my experience in the realms commonly designated as "sexual" has been pre-linguistic, non-cognitive. I have, in effect, no linguistic community, no language, and therefore in one important sense, no knowledge.

This is not to say that lesbians don't have lots of sex. But even as we experience a lack of representations—images to represent or words to articulate what it is that we desire and do—we can't help noticing that we are part of a gay and lesbian community that probably has the best developed sex distribution network of any culture. Pat Califia stated (*Advocate*, July 1983),

Gay male friends and lovers have taught me things that I would have never learned in the lesbian community. I can't exaggerate my admiration for the well-developed technology, etiquette, attitudes and institutions that gay men have developed to express their sexuality. (Remember, this from a woman who can't go to the baths every night or answer fifty sex ads in the Pink Pages.)

The "tribal rites" of gay men hold a fascination for many lesbians, particularly the ease with which gay sex is apparently available with-

out emotional entanglement. Having experienced myself one too many times "lesbian bed death" syndrome and its accompanying (and devastating) emotional intensity, I find the idea of sex for its own sake refreshing.

Pick up a gay community newspaper and read the one or two articles that refer to lesbians and you will find yourself leafing through page after page of gay sex for sale or giveaway. The forms sex takes may have changed somewhat since the onset of the AIDS crisis (telephone sex has a new popularity), but the images are the same—hot, hunky male bodies offering themselves on every page. The personals are explicit and educational.

A lesbian in the gay community is exposed to more gay male sex fantasies than most heterosexual women are to straight men's. I speculate that gay men have become fetishized sex symbols in many lesbian sexual fantasies. My lover and I, for example, played out a gay male sex fantasy one night. It surprised me, I enjoyed it, and it is now a standard part of our repertoire. I know this is not unique because friends have told me of similar experiences. As one lesbian put it, "Although I am occasionally attracted to femmes, I am primarily drawn to other butches as partners. This 'butch-butch' sexuality is easily fed by images of two men doing it." Because gender-bending is a time-honored tradition in queer culture, it makes our imaginary crossing of sexual boundaries perhaps predictable in the more fluid realm of fantasy.

One photograph from *Drawing the Line* illustrates how lesbian fantasy is indebted to gay male sex. The image is shot through the door to a public toilet. Because toilets are commonly sex-segregated, they are not usual meeting places for straights, but they are fertile grounds for same-sex encounters. But is this fantasy part of popular lesbian lore or is it a borrowed one? One of the women stands with her back to the camera; the other is seated in front of her, visible only by the hand that presses against full cheeks. What is not seen but easily imagined is the tongue and the female lips it separates. But the image can as easily summon up a hard cock and a full mouth as well.

This suggestibility of the "scene" blurs the line separating public and private, gay male and lesbian sex. This fantasy's framework is homoerotic—more commonly gay male, but now lesbian too. This is both a statement about politics and about pleasure—a newly shared appreciation of erotic space.

COMING TOGETHER

To what extent do relatively familiar relationships with gay men have an effect on emergent lesbian styles and representation? In the realm outside of explicit sexual representation, lesbians' increased use of style has been identified by several lesbian writers as the direct result of our increased association with gay men. Madame X, an *Outweek* writer (4 April 1990), observed:

Frankly, this whole hype looks suspicious to me, dreamed up and advertised both by some guys who are happy to find (at long last!) lesbians dressed well enough so they won't be embarrassed in their company, and by lesbians who are finally making enough money to embrace a lifestyle popularized years ago by the same people they used to despise. The nightclubber guy as role model . . .

Many lesbians choose styles for the visual pleasure that prefigures sexual pleasure, donning symbols that we hope will invite a new variant of lesbian sex. Hand in glove—latex, leather, lace—sexiness and style go together. Faded country uniforms are an increasingly marginal look; gay-influenced style rules the urban landscape.

Despite recent rapprochements, however, sexual hostilities between lesbians and gay men continue. For example, *Angles*, a Vancouver lesbian and gay paper, featured Li Yuen's 1987 International Lesbian Week poster on its front cover. Many copies of this issue were dumped into the garbage by disgusted male bar owners, some of whom also cancelled their advertising because of its depiction of lesbian sex. Similarly, many lesbians are offended by images of gay male sex, particularly when they appear in journals catering to the "gay and les-

bian" community at large, complaining that gay male sexuality in any form is anathema to lesbian sensibilities.

While there is little resemblance or sense of community between lesbian separatists and men in the backrooms of bars, larger numbers of gay men and lesbians recognize themselves as sharing political and/or sexual proclivities. The *Leather Journal*, for example, although formerly a gay men's publication, has recently announced a new column, "For Women, By Women." The leather Man and Woman of the year, with matching cross-your-heart harnesses, share facing pages. Sex itself has become the common ground between leather lesbians and gay men. This doesn't mean that lesbians and gay men are doing the same things; rather, what emerges is perhaps the first commonly shared homoerotic language. "Fisting," for example, can involve very different parts of the anatomy for men and women, yet when understood in homoerotic argot, it speaks of a sameness in practice.

AIDS activism and safe-sex discourse have also provided a shared language and forum for lesbians and gay men. While the majority of AIDS information in the community is aimed toward high-risk male behavior, lesbians are also discussing if not practicing techniques for safe sex. From what was primarily a gay male crisis, rubber dams, latex gloves, and condoms on cucumbers have now brought legitimation and laughs to public talk about lesbian sex.

The extreme sexual imagery embedded in AIDS discourse has extended existing popular identification of homosexuality with gay male sexual practices. For lesbians who find themselves forging allegiances with gay men, the importance of gay male sexual representations to lesbian explorations of sexuality and identity must not go unexamined. And while I recognize and appreciate points of convergence between lesbians and gay men in the arena of sex, I think important questions remain. Since at least the late 60s, lesbians have been linked by one set of needs and analysis or another with both the feminist and gay movements. We will always have to negotiate

between the two (at least). The problem lies in choosing what we adopt or adapt from gay men's sexual culture and feminism's political analysis—or vice versa. What meanings do singular labels (*homosexual, gay, queer*) or even the elided connective *and* between gay men and lesbians, as Teresa de Lauretis has pointed out, have for lesbians as we begin to establish a distinctive sexual iconography?

PLAYING WITH TOYS (THE BOYS' TOYS?)

While I would defend the production of lesbian sex imagery, it seems we are emulating some practices that have developed in gay male communities with very little analysis of how they fit into structures of power. Since lesbians began talking about s/m, there has been nothing short of war among us. I am not aware, however, that comparable contestation over the meanings of s/m takes place among gay men. Discussions of racism (when it is discussed) among lesbians have been painful; interracial couples have been scrutinized for sex in bad faith. Meanwhile, gay male eroticization of class and racial differences is widely acknowledged and even promoted as pleasurable.

The most controversial choices take place around lesbian photographs and confessional narratives.³ There are no guarantees as to how such texts will be read for they are always reformulated by the reader. What meanings are made, for example, of photographs of lesbians wearing and using dildos? Here the influence of gay male culture seems particularly important. I would argue that the charges of heterosexual mimicry that we've hurled back and forth miss the point. Lesbian "maleness" may be a "gay maleness"—not a reenactment of fixed gender roles but an exploration of the very signs "male" and "female."

A lesbian photographed wearing a dildo evokes a homoerotic rather than a heterosexual sensibility. It expresses desire between two women. "Heron and Lucille," a series of images from *On Our Backs* (July–August 1989), illustrates this point exactly. Heron is a large, powerful woman wearing a dildo. She is positioned behind Lucille, who is much smaller.

Lucille wears white underclothes; Heron sports a black leather cap and black gloves. The visible differences between these two women emphasize an erotic exchange—most notably, through the presence of the dildo. But these markers of gay masculinity (the cap, the dildo, the positions) could easily be exchanged, though modified by the women's physical difference. Masculinity takes the form of a masquerade and is represented by apparel to be donned or removed at and for one's pleasure. This is not heterosexual but homosexual masquerade. It is a part of a long history of gender slippage, where the appeal of difference is often expressed in terms of self-conscious parody.

Gay men have taught us a thing or two about the masquerade of femininity by their exaggerated and sometimes misogynistic drag. Might the butch lesbian serve the same purpose for gay men? Who knows? We've never asked. Sue-Ellen Case has discussed the theatrics of parody, in which both masculinity and femininity are recognized masquerades:

the butch is the lesbian woman who proudly displays the possession of the penis, while the femme takes on the compensatory masquerade of womanliness. The femme, however, foregrounds her masquerade by playing to a butch, another woman in a role; likewise, the butch exhibits her penis to a woman who is playing the role of compensatory castration. This raises the question of "penis, penis, who's got the penis," because there is no referent in sight; rather, the fictions of penis and castration become ironic and "camped up."

In the case of the Heron and Lucille photographs, there are signs that the fantasy of difference is played out in terms borrowed from gay men.

This isn't to say that "camped up" representations and styles should be received without considering their political implications. Leo Bersani, for example, is skeptical of claims that machismo in gay men is a true subversion of dominant masculinity. Rather, he says, it manifests a yearning for masculinity that is upheld

even as it is parodied. But while Bersani sees very real problems with gay male camp, some lesbians are embracing the idea that lesbian camp is potentially subversive.

LOOKING AWAY FROM OUR BROTHERS

Despite the convergences of lesbian and gay male sexual cultures and their representations, significant divergences also exist between the sexual imagery of lesbians and gay men. Overwhelmingly, photographs of lesbians by lesbians feature two women whose connectedness is visible. In most scenes, the participants are engaged with each other, inviting the viewer to imagine themselves as one or both of the actors. Body types are diverse. In contrast, much of gay male magazine culture promotes the image of the single man, willing and waiting. Gay male porn is one-dimensional, favoring ideal body types and focused on the center of excitement—the hot throbbing dick.

Gay male influence is only *part* of what comprises lesbian sex representation, however. Lesbian imagery can develop in several directions, some closer to already existing forms and some more divergent. Lesbian artists cannot help being self-conscious about the politics of producing images; this will probably lead to more interactive work like *Drawing the Line* and other experimental forms that draw attention to the dynamics of production and viewing.

But with more depictions of lesbian sex, there is a greater likelihood of censorship by larger society. When the cover of *Rites*, a Toronto publication, featured photographs of lesbians ejaculating, the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association sought legal opinions about its liability for possible charges of distributing obscenity. The magazine went on the stands, but an informal poll of the Association's board found that all of the men and none of the women found the photographs obscene. Incidents like this suggest that questions of what are legally acceptable representations of lesbian sex may become equally the focus of both feminist commentary and state censorship.

It remains to be seen how current cases of state censorship will be resolved. Despite the lo-

cal victory in Cincinnati over the Mapplethorpe exhibit, there is still state harassment—for example, Toronto's Glad Day Bookstore and Little Sisters in Vancouver are fighting indictments by Canadian Customs. Once again, gay male desire and its representation are the focus of public outcry and state suppression. But although lesbian relations vary greatly, both strategically and visually, from those of gay men, lesbians dedicated to producing lesbian sexual imagery may find that state surveillance will soon focus directly on their work. Visibility in the 1990s is at least a double-edged scene.

When a group of gay men and lesbians read this essay in draft to discuss it with me, it provoked true confessions from the men: "Those images of men do nothing for me," "They do," "They do not represent me," and "I am not responsible for them." I would like to hear more men talk about how their desire is or isn't represented. And then, perhaps, we—lesbians and gays—can start to have a conversation.

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For editorial insightfulness and conciseness, thanks to Jackie Goldsby, Jan Zita Grover, and Lynne Cunningham; for discussions and other kinds of understanding, Nathalie Magnon and Joanna Kidd.

1. A quirk or memory; or at least that's how I remembered it. But when I checked recently, I discovered that the sign actually reads, "Police Repression Must Stop." The difference between my memory of the sign and what is historically accurate may attest to what I remembered between the lines—the ironic meaning of the photograph to me. I was protesting the policing of male desire. But beyond this photograph, the slippage between literal meaning and other associations attributed to images is at the heart of this paper. I will retain my remembered version of the sign, for that is what it said—in my mind.

2. Two writers who have both addressed and partially answered these questions are Jackie Goldsby, "What It Means To Be Colored Me" (*OUTLOOK*, Summer 1990), and Makeda Silvera, "Man Royal and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on Afro-Caribbean Lesbians," *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), pp. 48-60.

3. Much of Samo's *Coming To Power* (1981) and Jan Clausen's and Jan Brown's pieces in *OUTLOOK* (Winter 1990) fall into this category.