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What is This?
Hegemonic Discourse in an Oppositional Community: Lesbian Feminists and Bisexuality

Amber Ault

ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes hostility toward bisexual women within lesbian feminist discourse. Based on interviews with feminist lesbians, this study uses a deconstructive approach to explicate the resonance of lesbian objections to women identifying themselves as bisexual with broader, dominant discourses on gender, sexuality, and racial purity—discourses that feminists often criticize as oppressive. The article identifies several specific discursive "techniques of neutralization" through which some lesbians construct bisexuals as "deviant others" against which the lesbian subject is defined as socially central, personally integrated, and morally pure.Broadly, the study analyzes marginalization within a marginalized community and the imbrication of dominant discourse in politically oppositional communities.

Negative sentiment toward bisexuality and bisexualy identified women finds expression in a wide variety of forms of discrimination, erasure, invalidation, and prejudice in lesbian-feminist communities and discourse. Ranging from gross personal bigotry to political exclusion, such practices silence bisexuals as individuals, disrupt the formation of a politicized bisexual identity, and prevent substantive debate over the implications of the emergence of a bisexual identity.
marker for feminist and gay critiques of dominant culture. The intense and personal objections of many lesbian feminists to bisexuality among women, particularly as it is signified by the use of “bisexual” as a label for sexual subjectivity, and the silence of feminist academics on the politics of bisexuality, suggest that many lesbian feminists perceive bisexuality as a deep and formidable challenge to both personal identity and movement politics. In this paper, I define and deconstruct some of the bases of lesbian feminist resistance to bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity category.

Recent sociological work on bisexuality has documented lesbian antipathy toward bisexual women (Silber, 1990; Rust, 1992; George, 1993; Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor, 1994) and a spate of personal accounts by bisexual women have reported and theorized lesbian resistance to acknowledging the bisexual category as socially legitimate (Clausen, 1990; Blasingame, 1992; Eridani, 1992; McKeon, 1992; Young, 1992). This paper extends these analyses by focusing on the meaning of lesbian discourse hostile to bisexual women for our understandings of the production of lesbian subjectivity. Because I write as a feminist lesbian sociologist, the critique offered here is an internal one, interested in examining how lesbian antipathy toward bisexual women recirculates larger cultural discourse that feminist lesbians have theorized as misogynist when it has been deployed against them. I am particularly interested in examining the reification in lesbian discourse hostile to bisexual women of binary constructions widely problematized in feminist theory as central to Western patriarchal discourse that underwrites multiple systems of social domination. While my stance toward the current common bases of lesbian enmity toward bisexual women is a critical one, I do not intend this paper as a defense of bisexual women or the propriety of any particular location of bisexual women within lesbian communities or politics. I offer instead a critique of particular social practices that seem to originate not in feminist theory but in heteropatriarchal systems of domination. Having begun to excavate the relationship between lesbian discourse unfriendly to bisexual women and dominant discourse hostile toward lesbians, I suggest not an end to the debate, but, instead, a shifting in its terms.

The Problem and Its Effects

Before I proceed to identify the techniques through which lesbian feminist discourse negates bisexuality, and the standpoints from which lesbians object to bisexuality, I offer three examples from my field notes that demonstrate the effects of such discursive practices. One example comes from the everyday world of “personal life,” one from gay, lesbian, bisexual politics, and one from academic social life.
Although the data in the following examples come from 35 bisexual women who participated in my qualitative study of the social relations between bisexual women and lesbians, my intention here is not to describe bisexuality or bisexuals, nor to identify a bisexual speaking position. I hope, however, to substantiate my claim that some lesbian discourse marginalizes bisexuals, and to begin to theorize the trouble therein.

First, an example from the realm of negotiation among intimates, in which a bisexual woman recounts her partnership with a lesbian negatively disposed toward bisexual identity:

My “ex” used to say she couldn’t trust me because I’m bi. I have seen this in other relationships, too. As much as we, the bisexuals, try to convince the people we love that there is a difference between being bisexual and being unfaithful, promiscuous, or disloyal, we can’t seem to convince the people we love. I would never leave someone for anyone else. I’m an extremely loyal and honest person, and it hurt not to have my girlfriend trust me, especially when she became the one to have an extra-partnership affair.

Second, an example from public politics:

I used to be very out, as the founder of the local bisexual women’s group. My name was posted on the bulletin board at the Lesbian and Gay Center. Sometimes I would get harassing phone calls, telling me to “get the hell out of our community.” One lesbian called to say that she “wasn’t sure of our right to exist.” She yelled at me for twenty minutes, until I hung up. We are accused of neurosis, disloyalty, and immorality. This kind of reaction from separatist lesbians caused me to leave the lesbian/gay community for several years.

Finally, an example from academic social life, one with clear ramifications for the shape and content of bisexual women’s treatment in academic projects and products:

S., a bisexual woman of color who centers her academic attention on post-colonial theory, reports attending a work group on diversity issues at a lesbian-dominated feminist conference. Reviewing the axes of diversity to which the group will attend, S. notices the absence of sexuality issues and raises this. The group’s moderator responds with an acknowledgement of a need to include gay and lesbian issues in theorizing by Third World women. “And bisexual issues, too,” S. interjects. “No,” responds the moderator, “bisexuals don’t exist.”
This example from academic social life prefigures the fact that considerations of bisexual participation in community life and the theoretical and political implications of bisexuality are frequently simply ignored in academic feminist writing by lesbians. On those occasions where such writing acknowledges bisexual existence, it often reinscribes bisexuality as apolitical and as merely a substratum of either lesbianism or heterosexuality. Even Butler’s (1990) strenuous deconstruction of the relationship between institutionalized heterosexuality and the binary sex-gender system is guilty of this. Butler rescues lesbianism from Kristeva’s “prediscursive, psychotic” apolitical abyss, but leaves female bisexuality mired there.

The examples above are recurrent issues in bisexual women’s accounts of how they are situated by lesbians within feminist lesbian communities. I postulate a recursive relationship between the treatment of bisexual women in academic lesbian feminist circles, feminist texts, and both personal and political life in lesbian feminist communities. Personal hostility becomes political censure and theoretical invisibility, which supports the sense that bisexual identity is not legitimate in a lesbian feminist culture in which feminist texts figure as key informants about lesbian life and in which the feminist credo “the personal is political” has somehow come to signify the sexual as the intellectual, and the moral, as well.

The Sources

In the next section I identify four practices through which some lesbian discourse constructs and “neutralizes” or, alternately, refuses to construct bisexual women. It is important to note here that not all lesbians treat bisexuality this way, to remind the reader that this research explicitly focuses on lesbian discourse hostile to bisexual women, and that the discourse examined here exists within wider lesbian discourses on sexuality, community, relationships, and politics. The data upon which this conceptualization rests come from a set of intensive interviews with lesbian feminists.

The 13 lesbian feminists interviewed for this research are white, middle class, well-educated women, aged 28-53, employed in feminist organizations, gay and lesbian organizations, or as academics. The discursive practices I identify here, and the attitudes underlying them, may only be common among members of this particular socio-economic-ethnic segment of what many casually call “the” lesbian community. While I object both politically and theoretically to allowing privileged white women to stand for a more diverse community and to define its culture, limiting these data this way allows for a mapping of the meaning-making processes of this group. This group is often criticized for its social influence over lesbian feminist culture...
and, more generally, that broader social and discursive space referred to as “the women’s community.” My interest here is in exploring lesbian discourse hostile toward bisexual women as it is deployed by those lesbian feminists who arguably enjoy the greatest “power to define” within lesbian culture.

Because of the question at hand, interviewees were recruited through a snowball sampling technique known as purposive sampling; I used professional and social opportunities to describe my work and interviewed women who, upon hearing of my research, volunteered to participate. The phrase “representative sample,” used in the conventional sense, is irrelevant to a sociology of discourse, but I am comfortable regarding the interviews I conducted with this project’s lesbian participants as a “representation sample” that effectively allows access to lesbian discourse hostile to bisexual women. I interviewed volunteers until the refrains of the discourse had become so familiar that they were predictable. Although the focus of this project is on the discourse itself, and not the frequency of its deployment by lesbian feminists, Rust’s (1992) large quantitative study of lesbian and bisexual women is suggestive for those curious about such questions; about a third of the lesbians participating in Rust’s research held negative attitudes toward bisexual women.

Lesbian Discursive Techniques of Bisexual Neutralization

The sociologists Sykes and Matza (1967) called the practices male juvenile delinquents used to discount the harm they inflicted on their victims “techniques of neutralization.” I borrow the phrase here as an umbrella term to describe the ultimate effect of the practices deployed in this strain of lesbian discourse on bisexuality: to discount, negate, erase, and depoliticize it. In short, these techniques of neutralization serve as an index of the political and personal threat bisexuality poses to lesbian identity and culture.

When it turns its attention toward neutralizing bisexuality, lesbian discourse employs four strategies: suppression, incorporation, marginalization, and delegitimation. While I have constructed these categories as analytically distinctive, they are, in practice, inter-connected and often interpermeable, and they all reside within a larger narrative on sex, gender, and sexuality centered on dualistic categories in which the integrity of the dominant subject depends upon its capacity to maintain the other as a deviant object. I will define these techniques of neutralization, offer some examples of each kind of practice, and problematize each by offering brief deconstructive interpretations of the positions which promote these practices.
Suppression

Lesbian discourse suppresses bisexual identity both passively and actively. Passive suppression elides the existence of bisexuality by refusing to acknowledge it. This refusal promotes the construction of a unitary lesbian women’s community and culture, composed exclusively of women who identify as lesbian in sexual terms and whose sexual and emotional conduct meet the performative requirements of the dominant discourse. This universalization of lesbianism among women in relationships with women rests on the following syllogism: lesbians are women who sleep with women; women who sleep with women are, therefore, lesbian. Consequently, discursively, bisexuals do not exist. One woman I interviewed summarized this position with the following simple pronouncement: “I know that they are not part of the lesbian community.” Another woman elaborated on the common refrain that “bisexuals do not exist”:

It just strikes me as ... I just don’t think bisexuality exists. There! As a legitimate category. You want me to say that again, loudly and clearly? I think it doesn’t matter what people are saying, and this is not a polite conversation ... these are the impolite thoughts, right? ... It’s not a thing. Can’t be a category because it’s not complete yet; it’s not there.

Active suppression takes a variety of forms. One lesbian’s statement that “if a woman wants to date a lesbian, the last thing she should do is say that she’s bisexual” indicates the intimate stakes of successful suppression, as does the following account:

At the point where she said, “I think I’m bisexual; how would you feel if I slept with men?,” I had to address that in an immediate way, and I just said, “Well, I’d say, ‘It’s been real fun, and you’re out of my life, in terms of a sexual relationship.’”

Apparently this sentiment enjoys currency wider than the domain of romantic encounters. A recent study of a lesbian feminist community, for example, reports that “the significance of lesbian identity for feminist activists is well summarized by the name of a feminist support group at a major university, ‘Lesbians Who Just Happen To Be Dating Politically-Correct Men’” (Taylor and Whittier, 1992). The valorization of lesbian identity correctly identified by Taylor and Whittier depends for these “lesbians dating men,” as it does elsewhere in lesbian discourse, on the active suppression of bisexual identities.

The discursive production of a unitary lesbian culture and community depends upon the suppression of bisexual identity. This “boundary work” maintains lesbian culture as a unitary whole opposed to the presumably unitary dominant culture, founded on
heterosexuality. In this insistence on an internal monosexual culture, lesbian feminist discursive suppression of bisexual identity reproduces the binary gay/straight sexuality system, a system that underwrites the male/female sex-gender system, a system lesbian feminist politics conventionally theorizes as promoting male dominance and to which feminists commonly object. In its refusal to acknowledge bisexual identity among women, lesbian feminist discourse perpetuates the very cultural dualism feminist thinking usually analyzes as fundamentally oppressive.

Incorporation

I use the term “incorporation” to designate the practices through which lesbian discourse claims bisexuals as lesbians. Unlike discursive suppression, incorporation acknowledges bisexual existence but denies its integrity. This strain of discourse constructs bisexuals as “all really either heterosexual or homosexual.” This creates the possibility that those bisexuals who are “really lesbian” will eventually experience enlightenment on this point and thereby become legitimate. Bisexuals are incorporated through the construction of their status as “lesbian gonnabe’s.” A lesbian colleague reported she’d heard this referred to as the “Bi-Now-Gay-Later Plan.” A woman interviewed for this research project used this discourse as she recounted her new lover’s identity negotiations:

When I got involved with my current partner, this was her first experience with a woman. When she first came out, she was saying, “Gee, I don’t know who I am.” That was fine, we all go through that. Then she was saying, “I think I’m bisexual.” And I kind of said, “Yeah, right, you go through that stage for a while and we’ll see what happens.”

In the following two interview excerpts, incorporation hinges on an essentialist and binary construction of sexual identity; in this discourse, sexual identity is constructed as bifurcated; subjects “are” either heterosexual or homosexual. Once the woman who claims to be bisexual comes to consciousness of her “true identity,” she can be incorporated into lesbian culture, if, of course, she is “not straight.”

I just . . . for whatever reason that I don’t think I can defend, anyway, the way I feel is that you’re straight or you’re gay. You may not know—but it seems to me if you’re sleeping with men and women at the same time—or in the same time frame—you might as well just call yourself straight—until you become a REAL lesbian and cut that shit out.
I probably believe equally that they’re heterosexual or they’re homosexual. They’re lesbians who can’t say they’re lesbians, or they’re heterosexuals who can’t admit they’re heterosexual, because it means they’re missing out on something.

Another example of the tendency toward incorporation appeared in a lesbian feminist’s assertion that bisexual women in relationships with lesbians “should call themselves lesbian.” Another lesbian seemed to realize during the course of our conversation that this pressure for bisexual women in relationships with other women to define themselves as lesbian may account for some of “suddenness” with which long-time participants in lesbian feminist culture sometimes become involved with men. Lesbian feminist researchers Stanley and Wise have used the phrase, “homosexuals, both lesbian and bisexual” (1990) in another instance of the tendency toward incorporation. In this example, bisexuality is an overt category, but only exists with reference to its homosexual component.

While “incorporation” acknowledges bisexual identity at a nominal level, its certainty that bisexuality exists only as a mask for an ambivalent heterosexuality or lesbianism reconstructs the dominant culture’s bifurcated sexual systems. This technique of neutralization refuses to treat bisexual identity as a third category with the potential to disrupt binary oppositions. Further, incorporation commonly serves as a strategy through which cultural hegemony neutralizes its challengers. When lesbian feminist discourse incorporates bisexual identity as a way of neutralizing its threat to the binary system upon which lesbian discourse ultimately depends, it seems to employ the very strategies used against lesbians by the dominant culture. Heteropatriarchal discourse has long maintained, for example, that we lesbians merely need the oxymoronic “good screw” before we come to our senses and acknowledge our true heterosexuality. Lesbians deploy this discursive neutralization technique against other non-heterosexual women when they claim that bisexuals ultimately come to their senses and realize that they, too, are lesbian.

Marginalization

The techniques of neutralization that lesbian discourse uses to construct bisexua5ls as marginal involves, not surprisingly, many metaphors of location. I identify two general categories of “marginalization” in lesbian discourse on bisexual women: the obvious “on the edge” and the nearly ubiquitous “on the fence.” Some social movement theorists describe the construction of boundaries as necessary to the production and maintenance of cultures of resistance
Taylor and Whittier, 1992); in this discourse, bisexuals become territory markers.

The women I interviewed use a number of phrases to construct bisexuals as marginalized. They referred to bisexual women as culturally “on the edge,” “on the fringe,” “marginal,” “trendy,” and “dabbling” or “experimenting.” “Avant garde” surfaces repeatedly in lesbian discourse hostile to bisexual women. One interviewee summarized this sentiment with the statement that “the whole thing smacks of hippy-ness to me.”

This discourse also treats bisexuals as political opportunists taking advantage of lesbian political progress, riding on the tails of the proverbial flannel shirt. In efforts to reinforce the marginality of bisexuals to lesbian culture, community, and politics, several lesbians suggested that bisexuals “get their own movement” or “form their own centers.” The political common ground between lesbians and bisexual women resides, according to this discourse, in what is constructed as the “lesbian part” of bisexual women, a construction that seems to marginalize bisexual women by seeing their interest in lesbian concerns as only half. Alternately, several interviewees reported “tolerating” bisexual women’s participation in political efforts, while “drawing the line” at social interactions with them beyond activist space. One woman reported that she would accept a bisexual woman working on lesbian issues in a political organization by saying, “Okay in the office, but you’re not coming home to dinner, Honey. When we’re all engaged in some sort of political something-or-other, we have to get along, I suppose. But other than that, bisexual women can just go to hell.” While there is some variation on the theme, this technique of neutralization positions bisexual women as either politically marginal or socially marginal.

From an insider’s perspective, the metaphor of the fence in lesbian discourse represents a line of demarcation between lesbian territory and the heterosexual world, and it is upon this fence that lesbian discourse accuses bisexual women of sitting. Ironically, this discourse invokes essentialism to press constructionist choices; lesbians deploying this logic argue that because “we are all heterosexual or homosexual, bisexuals should decide what they are.” One woman stated that “You’re either for us, or you’re against us” to express a common sentiment contingent on the assumption of a unitary lesbian subject. This metaphor is nearly universal in lesbian discourses resistant to bisexual identity. One interviewee reported that in sign language the “bisexual” sign consists of an elaborated version of the sign for “indecision,” a sign built on the base sign “fence.” In sign language, according to this woman, indecision about the side of the fence upon which one belongs is embedded in the term “bisexual.”
In addition to the binary structures again apparent in this complaint leveled against bisexuals in lesbian discourse is a subtext about gender. This lesbian discourse constructs bisexuals as not only on the sexual fringe, but also on a gender fence; though perhaps moving in a lesbian world, bisexuals are seen as “more feminine than the average dyke.” Even self-referentially femme lesbians describe disparagingly the traditional feminine gender presentation they assign bisexual women. One lesbian—who noted that she probably passes as heterosexual—offered the following analysis:

Women who are bisexual and call themselves bisexual usually look heterosexual. They still want to hang on to looking pretty and feminine and wearing feminine clothes, and wanting men to like them. Especially, or including, heterosexual men.

Another woman explicated the difference between traditionally feminine lesbians and bisexual women by making reference to a hypothetical bi-polar Butch-Femme Scale:

On the Butch-Femme Scale, I’d probably give the (bisexual) women a 7, with 10 being femme and 1 being butch. ... They feel more safe with the heterosexual side than the lesbian side. Or they want to appear more heterosexual than not. And I don’t think that a lesbian who would put herself at a 7 on the scale is doing it to fit into the patriarchy. ... Joan, for instance, I put her at like an 8, maybe an 8 and a half. But I think that’s just how she is. Maybe that’s how she was socialized, and that’s how she’s comfortable. ... I’m very comfortable putting panty hose on every day. It doesn’t bother me. I feel very comfortable in my business attire. I just feel like me. But I think that these bisexuals ... they’re gonna be a seven on the scale ... because they’ve got to put themselves on the edge.

A third woman reported that, on the same scale, bisexual women would be ranked “ten plus,” with their “long, flowing skirts, long hair, and pasty faces.” The difference between such a bisexual woman and her identical lesbian twin was defined as something discernable but indescribable. In all of these constructions of bisexual women’s gender presentation, lesbians interviewed in this research implicitly situated heterosexual women at the far end of the “butch-femme” scale, collapsing the gender category “femme” with the sexual category “heterosexual.” Such constructions indicate the imbrication of the dominant sex/gender system in feminist lesbian discourse and offer an explanation for both the lesbian prediction of the bisexual woman’s femme excesses and the lesbian construction of the femme as heterosexual.
This technique of neutralization deploys sexism, double standards for both gender and sexual identity, and the fracturing of the bisexual subject into component "lesbian parts" and "straight parts" to construct bisexual identity and bisexual women as outside the concern of lesbian politics and culture and appropriately peripheral to lesbian community life.

**Delegitimation**

Delegitimation seems the broadest category in this conceptualization because it incorporates aspects of the other techniques of neutralization. Perhaps most fundamentally, lesbian discourse delegitimizes bisexuality by constructing bisexuals as untrustworthy. Explanations of bisexual "fence sitting" for example, involve bisexuals as women who are either "confused" or who are unwilling to "just make a choice," women who are therefore untrustworthy.

A second focus for lesbian mistrust of bisexuals involves their purported sexuality and its purported difference from lesbian sexual practices. One woman, for instance, said:

> When I think of "bisexual" I think of bedhopping . . . They not only can't commit to being one or the other, but probably can't commit to whoever they're with, be it male or female. How could someone who wants to be in a long term committed relationship still call themselves bisexual . . . without some infidelity coming into the picture?

The following statement, from another interviewee, echoes a core theme in this discourse:

> You get the sense they don't have a political commitment to women . . . to being involved with women to destroy patriarchy and its linchpin of heterosexuality. You get the sense they would leave you for a man if they fell in love with a man, because they still want to retain their heterosexual privilege, and because deep down they still feel that being involved with a man is as good as or better than, even, being involved with a woman.

For both of these speakers, the prospect of being left for a man constituted a nearly unbearable threat. The first reasoned that "Lesbian love is the highest form; it's pure; it's more emotional; it's the closest thing, to have two women together. Being left for a man, it would be devastating." The second speaker asserted that being left for a man would be a "slap in the face" because "it would be like someone leaving you for a dog! Woof! 'My wife left me for a poodle.'" Such a construction moves the lesbian into the subject position of the cuck-
olded heterosexual husband to the bisexual woman’s hyper-femme wife.

In this process of delegitimation, lesbian discourse deploys against bisexuals the discursive techniques used by the dominant culture to discredit lesbians. As lesbians are sexualized by the dominant discourse, lesbian discourse sexualizes bisexuals. As the dominant discourse challenges the capacity of lesbians to form coherent, stable family units, lesbian discourse constructs bisexuals as unable to maintain long-term committed relationships with same-sex partners, and, in the process, valorizes the idea of the nuclear family centered on a monogamous pair. This discourse insists on refusing a feminist ideology of sexual liberation that centers on women’s desire, if that desire is for the forbidden: in this case, for hetero-sex.

The sense that bisexual women always eventually choose men reflects not bisexual phallocentrism, but the phallocentrism of lesbian discourse, by affording men the power to define the bisexual woman’s life. The despair this discourse would encourage lesbians to experience in the wake of “being left for a man” expresses both internalized sexism and internalized homophobia. The lesbian discourse that says a lesbian “could not compete with a man” reflects broader patterns of female socialization that promote women’s deference to males; the sense that the prospect of a heterosexual relationship would be irresistibly alluring to a bisexual woman in a same-sex partnership reproduces the primacy of heterosexuality.

Finally, lesbian distrust of bisexuals is further amplified in the construction of bisexuals as “foreign bodies,” sources of literal and metaphoric pollution in the lesbian body. My interviewees variously described bisexuals as “carriers of AIDS into the lesbian community,” as “bringing male energy” into the community, and as “infiltrators” from the dominant culture. As biological systems engage various strategies for distinguishing self from other to protect against disease, the lesbian body employs discursive techniques of neutralization to construct and control the bisexual other in an effort to maintain its integrity. Biological bodies, however, do not always accurately identify threats to their well being and sometimes destroy themselves in an effort to destroy a mistaken threat. Some feminist theory has argued that contemporary language around infection and immunity has often served as a trope in the justification of political imperialism (Haraway, 1991), and it seems to have a stigmatizing function here as lesbian discourse constructs bisexuals as invading, polluting, carriers of male energy, male disease.
Techniques of Neutralization: A Metaphorical Summary

Contemplating the effect of these techniques of neutralization, I am reminded of a story involving other bodies and other boundaries. The primatologist Dian Fosse, a white U.S. citizen, marked out a sanctuary in Rwanda, a Black dominated country, to protect, preserve, and study one species, the mountain gorilla. According to a story that circulates among anthropologists, one afternoon a cow wandered into the compound Fosse had established in the forest reserve. Incensed that the Rwandan citizens who lived outside the reserve territory had failed to keep their property under control, Fosse spray-painted “FUCK YOU” on the animal’s side and sent it toward home at a clip.

Together, the strands of lesbian discourse on bisexuality I have identified here define the bisexual as male-identified, as male property. In lesbian discourse, bisexual women represent the phallus itself, and the lesbian response to the bisexual woman as male-property wandering into lesbian sanctuary is, oddly enough, to return her to the patriarchal world, but not without first scrawling upon her body a message to the men on the other side of the fence. In this instance, however, the FUCK YOU functions both to reject male dominance over women and to perpetuate it; the bisexual body becomes not only a vehicle for the rejection of male definition and male invasion, but also a lesbian-produced object for male domination. The metaphorical, manifest epithet becomes a literal, latent sacrifice; lesbian discourse returns the bisexual body to heteropatriarchy, a woman upon whom lesbians have written FUCK ME.

Points, Counterpoints, Concluding Musings

I have identified and illustrated the discursive techniques lesbian discourse employs to neutralize bisexuality to reveal how these techniques are extensions of the conceptual practices of power dominant discourses turn against lesbians. Specifically, I argue that the dualism, sexism, homophobia, and male-dominated dynamics of sexual social control of western culture pervade lesbian resistance to the idea of bisexuality and to embodied bisexual women. Moving beyond narrow considerations of sex and gender to incorporate considerations of race in the analysis allows us to begin to understand what Susan Phelan has argued is the privilege of whiteness at work in constructions of a unitary and essential lesbian self, constructions dependent in part upon their juxtaposition to those of the confused, fence-sitting bisexual.

Butler (1991: 17) supports this contention, though I understand her argument here to focus on erotic sexuality:
Is it not possible that lesbian sexuality is a process that re-scribes the power domains it resists, that it is constituted in part from the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace, and that its subjectivity is to be established not outside or beyond that reinscription or reiteration, but in the very modality and effects of that reinscription?

Given the social fact that most white lesbian feminists in western societies are socialized through the practices of dominant culture, practices that reinscribe compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1992) in a restrictively gendered order, the reproduction of that order in some lesbian feminist discourse is not surprising. Much feminist criticism has analyzed how race marks lesbian and feminist discourse; less attention has been paid to analyzing the phallocentrism of lesbian feminist discourse. Decoding lesbian discourse hostile to bisexual women begins to raise new questions and to press further our understandings of how systems of domination along lines of social demarcation reinforce one another. Is lesbian discourse inherently and irre-mediably phallocentric? Are bisexuels in lesbian discourse “the new femmes,” providing a dualistic resolution to the androgy nous ambi-guity of the 1980s? Can the lesbian subject and can lesbian discourse move beyond the terms of heteropatriarchal matrix of articulation? Is it possible for a lesbian discourse predicated upon the privileges of white subjectivity to survive beyond its critique? Should it be possi-bile? And when it comes to the denigrating construction of the bisexual other, what are the stakes?

A politicized bisexuality might pose a distinct challenge to the system that produces a world of pairs in which one member always dominates the other. Beyond this, a feminist bisexuality might repre-sent a challenge to male dominance distinct from—but related to—that presented by lesbian feminism. A bisexual feminism in prac-tice, in the deployment of politicized bisexual identities in everyday life, may produce a unique set of radical meanings. For instance, a bisexual woman choosing to make her life with women, refusing to make her life with men, sends a clear message, as does the bisexual woman making her life with men who refuses to deny her affinity for women, as does the bisexual woman who consciously, politically, refuses to choose.

I do not argue, however, for a lesbian conception of bisexual iden-tity as original, prediscursive, universal, or unproblematic. Indeed, to argue that bisexuality is originary reproduces the foundational binarism to which I object throughout this paper. While I argue that women’s use of the bisexual label does not represent the threat to lesbian feminists articulated by the current discourse and that to recirc-ulate these terms constitutes lesbian participation in hegemonic
systems of domination, neither of these criticisms negates the very likely possibility that the dissemination of the category as a marker for sexual subjectivity is politically suspect. Indeed, the stakes appear to be less about whether a woman will leave her woman lover for a man than about whether the proliferation and institutionalization of a bisexual identity category during the present period constitutes a hegemonic move to incorporate lesbians into the patriarchal order.

The bisexual identity category is as worthy of critique as lesbian discourse hostile to it. Unconvinced that more categories of oppression produce more liberation, I argue that it is important for feminists to examine the political, social, and sexual expediency of creating, promoting, and supporting a proliferation of sexual identity categories that need to be mobilized into movements for their respective rights. Perhaps the bisexual category carries with it the prospect of disrupting the sex/gender/sexuality system through its appearance as a potentially disruptive third party in the dualistic rift, although it assumes for the sake of its existence the stability of a binary system, and those marking themselves with the sign move increasingly toward solidifying the category. From my lesbian feminist position, it is in that particular binary construction that the real trouble always begins, and within it that we legitimately might begin theoretically to interrogate bisexual identity.

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