

Is it Really Just About Being More Like a Fag? Confronting the Gay Male Model Mantra

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Abstract Although the debate between feminism and queer is by now a fairly old and some might argue, trite and overwrought one, in this paper I direct my attention to a specific feminist assessment of queer that I find to be especially unhelpful and pernicious: the automatic linkage of queer with the exaltation of a gay male subjectivity. This article is informed by my own ethnographic research on lesbian/queer public sexual cultures; specifically, two Canadian lesbian/queer bathhouses, where public sex and sexual exploration are encouraged. I argue that this contention, that lesbians who espouse queer are aping (gay) male sexuality and subjectivity—due to the privileging of non-normative sexual practices found within the gay male community—does two things: (re)essentializes genders and sexualities, and, more importantly, robs non-gay male subjects (e.g., women, lesbians, butches, trans identified individuals) of their own agency. In sum, I believe that this linkage to a supposed gay male imitation, and concomitantly, viewing lesbian/queer sexual cultures, behaviors, configurations, and signifying sexual economies as mere *derivatives of* gay male culture, reinforces lesbian/queer invisibility and (re)centers the heterosexual matrix. For the sake of lesbian/queer subjects' own viability, lesbian/queer sexualities must thus be pulled out of this discursive trap.

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Introduction

I believe that queer theory and feminism share much common ground, and if queer theorists and feminists dare to bridge the divide (assuming it can be?), the result will

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be tremendous potential for social change (see McLaughlin et al. 2006 for an exciting dialogue between feminism and queer theory). As it stands today, more time is spent name-calling and stoking the fires of enmity (on both sides), as opposed to a true engagement with the issues that are being contested and refuted (McLaughlin et al. 2006). Although my discussion in this article might be interpreted by some as an extension of this, at times, incendiary clash, it is by no means my intention. What I attempt to do here is unpick—so as to remove—from the discussion what I feel is particularly destructive, condescending and dangerous: the assertion that all lesbian sexualities that are non-normative, or “queer,” look to gay male sexualities as *the* point of reference for their own negotiations of desire and sexual practices. In sum, when it comes to sex and desire, it is presumed that lesbian/queer “sex radical” subjects strive only to emulate gay male sexual behaviors.

McLaughlin et al. (2006), assert that one of the most damaging aspects of the feminist-queer quagmire—other than replacing complexity with facile reasoning and accusation—is “the dangerous position of defining for others where and in what their interests lie” (69). The common move by academics to speak for “others” assumes one *knows* the people they are speaking about. Tong (1998) refers to such feminist maneuvering as “female chauvinism,” wherein some privileged feminists (Tong is referring in this context to race and class position) “presume to speak on behalf of all women [and queers]” (212). This I argue is what is happening here.

As an avowed feminist and lesbian (sometimes queer) myself, I find appalling this oft-repeated assertion that *all* queer subjects and those theorists who espouse the promises of queer, are simply privileging a male subjectivity in general, and gay male identity in particular (see Glick 2000; Jeffreys 2003; Nussbaum 1999). Walters makes this essentialist move when, in one moment describing the inability and sheer fallaciousness of lumping queer theorists together—in this case, Sedgwick, Rubin, Butler, and Warner, goes on, in the next moment, to state the following: “I would argue that they all, to a certain extent, share a problematic perspective on feminism and the women’s movement and have engaged, in different ways of course, with gay male identity as a site of privileged subjectivity” (1996, p. 836). When discussing “sex radicals,” Walters goes on to portray lesbian/queer pro-sex activists—specifically pointing to Pat Califia, and those lesbian subjects who engage in S/M, public sex and use dildos, as unenlightened individuals due to their eroticization of domination and masculine power. Walter states: “gay men *most assuredly* have become the model for lesbian radical sex...This has entailed a denigration of lesbian attempts to rethink sexuality within a feminist framework” (1996, p. 847-my emphasis).

And Wilkinson and Kitzinger, in their article “The Queer Backlash,” echo Walter’s sentiment concerning the lesbian valorization of, and obsession with, phallic sexuality and gay male culture. In seeing the erasure of lesbian in queer, Wilkinson and Kitzinger believe queer lesbians are complicit in their own invisibility due to their “emulation of gay men” and the fact that within queer politics, “Gay male concerns (notably the traditions of camp and drag and a preoccupation of anal eroticism) predominate” (1996, p. 380). This is so because “queer” originated out of a gay male sexual freedom agenda (Jeffreys 2003). Thus, lesbians who actively confronted radical lesbian feminism in the name of “queer”—protesting as they did the rigid protocols set by radical lesbianism when it came to

gendered and sexed behavior, desire and relationships—did so over and against their lesbian “sisters.” Jeffreys condescendingly notes that these queer lesbians were in cahoots with the “post-structuralist boys who came to the rescue and showed how meaningless and unnecessary this lesbian feminism was” (2003, p. 35). So, those lesbians who do not agree with a radical lesbian feminist agenda, disagree with it only because they have been hypnotized by queer men? Is there not something terribly wrong with this picture?

By no means do I have a problem with critiquing a queer theory project and its potential negative implications. And, indeed, those exalting queer theory have done their fair share of feminist bashing, such as for instance, derogating radical and lesbian feminism as solely an anti-sex politic. Not only does this dramatically oversimplify radical and lesbian feminism, ignores the enormous good that radical and lesbian feminism brought to the table, to society, and to women’s material lives, but shows the amnesiac condition of queer in forgetting its feminist roots. As I have asserted elsewhere, addressing the ways in which queer might be problematic for women *qua* women and society at large is a fundamental necessity for feminism and feminist activism. Thus, let me be clear: the issue is not about feminist suspicion of queer, but how this criticism has been carried out and articulated. Within such a discourse as Walters, for instance, lesbians—and those who identify as queer—are spoken for and left empty-handed.

Depicting lesbian/queer sex practices that find disfavor among some feminists as replications of a gay male sexuality—and thus, strongly anti-feminist and oppressive—is also, as already mentioned above, partly attributable to the loss of “lesbian” some feminists see as inherent within queer politics. This can be seen in the new allegiances that have occurred between queer men and women since the AIDS crisis. That is, many lesbian/queer individuals have shifted and centered their politics around queer issues over and against—or beside—feminist concerns. Thus, the weakening of the feminist movement, and moreover, lesbian defeat, since lesbians ostensibly can never be as “queer” as men. Whisman states:

the tendency in homo-land, as elsewhere, is to take male behavior as the yardstick, the norm, the lens through which all other behavior is viewed. By these standards, lesbian queerness is not ‘true’ queerness...Today, by allying with gay men, lesbians end up as the lesser queers, as deviant deviants.... (1993, pp. 57–58)

Indeed, lesbian concerns are *not* the same as gay men’s issues, and unfortunately, it has been the case that women’s issues within the queer movement have, at times, been continuously sidelined or dismissed in favor of what gay men deem to be most important (see Smyth 1992). While this is obviously a problem in need of rectification, identifying *as* and identifying *with* gay men are two very different things—differences which often go unrecognized in the harried need for some feminists to vitiate queer.

Yet, those feminists who problematize queer for its lesbian erasure are, I argue, culpable of doing the exact same thing—erasing the specificities and complexities of lesbian/queer subjects by equating a presumed phallic (read: active, possibly butch/femme, probably the use of sex toys, maybe some S/M, and non-monogamous

sex) lesbian sexuality to being, quite simply, gay/male identified. And, while some queer women might at times forgo their own interests to support their gay male comrades, it is certainly not at all the case that queer women see queer as solely a male-centered political agenda. Such sentiment is noted by Smyth when she states “for other lesbians, queer has little to do with gay men; its roots are firmly embedded in the dyke camp, with its history of cross-dressing, role-playing, gender-fucking and subversion of patriarchy” (1992, p. 27).

The “build up” to this article and thus, my arrival at this juncture, are informed and influenced by my own ethnographic investigation (utilizing interviews and participant observation techniques) of two Canadian lesbian/queer bathhouses, Pleasure Palace in Toronto and SheDogs in Halifax—a project that I have been engaged in for the past several years. These lesbian/queer bathhouses, which take over gay male venues once every two to three months to become women and queer-only events (all are welcome except non-transmen who were born biologically “male” at birth), employ myriad strategies in an attempt to facilitate sexual interaction so as to get patrons feeling a bit more comfortable and at ease in a setting that can be, for some, quite anxiety producing. These strategies include meet-n-greet games, having a variety of activities on offer—ranging from the sensual (such as the message room), to the stimulating (e.g., porn room, lap dance room), to the overtly sexual (e.g., fisting room, g-spot room), tours of the space, security personnel and an orientation for all bathhouse participants regarding the bathhouse “rules”—the cardinal rules include confidentiality, consent and respect. Bathhouse organizers—each bathhouse has its own bathhouse committee made up of between 6 and 8 members who are responsible for the advertising, security and staffing of each event, explicitly employ feminist principles, in combination with a queer politic, to create their bathhouse spaces. This combination—feminist in terms of fostering sexual agency and queer in the sense of inclusivity, celebration and acceptance of sexual and bodily variation—is thought to be the necessary admixture in order to achieve what many organizers deem to be one of the main objectives: the overcoming of sexual and bodily shame that circulates in and around women’s and queer lives.

Although I briefly discuss some of my findings later on in this article, I would like to point out now that a reading of these bathhouse participants’ narratives would quickly dispel the totalizing notion that lesbian/queer public sex and the public sexual cultures I interrogated are simply yoking gay male sexualities onto these lesbian/queer sexual spaces. Not only is this impossible—seeing that the majority of attendees are female bodied individuals and/or have been socialized as women for a significant part of their lives, but such suggestions imply that lesbian/queer sexual spaces are in essence, a “bad copy” of gay male sexual cultures. Nevertheless, upon getting comments back from reviewers from articles I had submitted for journal publication, remarks, either implicitly or overtly, caustically or mildly, often insinuated that these “lesbians”(important point: most of my participants did not identify as lesbian) were just aping gay male behaviors in their quest for sexual liberation. For them, this was another “sign” of the feminist backlash (one reviewer lumped these bathhouse patrons in with Britney Spears).

And, even though I acknowledge the disciplinary effects of these “liberatory” spaces, as well as their risks and exclusions—an important one, for instance, being the ways in which queer politics in general, and these sexual spaces in particular, have been predominantly white (although Pleasure Palace regularly holds “queer communities of color” events, and has implemented an anti-racist framework in order to evaluate, as one committee member put it, “their white and invisible privilege”), several reviewers nonetheless “encouraged” me to *really* reflect on how these spaces oppress women. I interpreted this emphasis to mean that I should have leaned much more heavily on the “not good for women” side of things, even though no interviewee I spoke to (which involved over 30 individuals) had had negative experiences or felt marginalized to such an extent as to mute what were otherwise very positive experiences. In other words, some patrons had indeed felt nervous, uncomfortable and awkward, but this had little to do with the bathhouse per se, and almost everything to do with the fact that bathhouses, being that they are explicitly sexual and sexually charged spaces, are intimidating and thus, have a tendency to provoke anxiety in some attendees.

Moreover, the question repeatedly posed to me in so many words was: can you *prove* this is empowering? I am not sure how one can prove anything is inherently empowering, and I never did make such an absolutist assertion to begin with. Obviously, all “experiences” are embedded in the socio-cultural and historical context from which they come. What I did do was highlight and invoke respondent narratives and their experiential knowledge as it related to the bathhouse to illuminate how *they* felt about the sexual space. Many respondents shared with me personal details about their sexual lives, and the ways that these bathhouse experiences made them feel “alive,” “visible” and powerful, while other patrons described feeling rather indifferent about the space. Should I ignore these declarations and show them to be false? I could almost feel contempt seeping out from the reviewers’ commentary, disguised as it was in telling me I was “too fixated” on the bathhouse’s empowering appeal.

Finally, given what I have found in my own ethnographic research, I do not understand how such sweeping declarations—where this bathhouse behavior is simply an aping of gay male sexual behavior—could emerge so easily and without equivocation. And, I have to ask, how can one (or a particular group of persons) *own* a sex act? That is, can a sex act or specific sexual desire *be* male or gay male? So, public sex is the invention of gay men? How is public sex between two consenting adults oppressive? If so, how exactly is this subjugating, and is this subjugation different, more insidious if it takes place between women or lesbian/queer individuals? What about heterosexual women and their dalliances in casual or public sex? Are they men/wanting to act like men? So, are these bathhouse participants, many (if not most) of whom also identify as feminists, under false consciousness because they attend bathhouse events? What about those patrons who go to these bathhouse events, not for casual sex per se, but to feel visible or recognized in some capacity? Are they too perpetuating the objectification of women? Can one practice S/M, engage in public sex, or support those that do, and be a feminist? And lastly, have *you* been to one of these bathhouses?

It seems that no matter what *lesbians and queers do*, they are forever being compared to men—especially if they carry their sexuality in overt and open ways. This is not unlike the butch-femme debates of the past (which continue to this day). Within the feminist lexicon butches are male-identified, misogynist and once again, merely mocking men to reap the benefits of male privilege—and the corollary, that the femme is the imitation of her straight sister. Nestle (1992), one of the most impassioned voices and defenders of butch/femme, debunks these simplistic portrayals. Nestle, who is speaking of course from her own personal experience, states:

Butch-femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic and social statements, not phony heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a deeply lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, love, courage, and autonomy. In the 1950s, butch-femme couples were the front-line warriors against sexual bigotry. Because they were so visible, they suffered the brunt of street violence. (1992, p. 138).

Unfortunately, the same things are now being said about those individuals who identify as transgendered or transmen (see for instance, Jeffreys 2003). The same can be said for those individuals who identify as bisexual. Bisexuality is not only glossed over (see for instance Rust 2000), but is often depicted as an inauthentic identity—that is, as a phase, or a position that one takes when unwilling to admit to their *real* homosexuality. Bisexual women have often been deemed traitors to feminism, and have often experienced more hostility from lesbians than from straight society (this was certainly the case with those bisexuals who were a part of this study). It is too bad that women can tell other women/queers/lesbians/trans folk who they are—as though they know. That many can use their authority to sum up *all* queer sex and queer expression as the replication of gay male sexuality—sans the penis (at times), goes against what I see as the core of feminist philosophy—the struggle for agency (be it corporeal, sexual, ontological) and “freedom.”

What is happening here is not unlike MacKinnon’s (1991) controversial assertion that *all* heterosexual sex is oppressive, because women’s consent and thus, sexual agency, is impossible in patriarchal society. Again, it is not difficult to understand MacKinnon’s reasoning. After all, MacKinnon is attempting to “shield” women from sexual violence and compulsory heterosexuality. Nonetheless, this structuralist logic is highly reductionistic, rigidly deterministic, and takes away any power women *do* have. Likewise, women’s sexual desires, praxis, and orgasmic pleasures come to naught, since all women really are victims in patriarchal society (Valverde 1989). In addition, within this perspective it is assumed that all heterosexual relationships are oppressive, and conversely, that same-sex relationships are, at the very least, more egalitarian (which we know is false). MacKinnon’s argument, like Walters, treats as negligible individual subjectivities (Valverde 1989, p. 243). I believe this is the juncture at which feminism is in a state of paralysis. Although feminism is as necessary today as it ever was (although this is a point of

contention—see Halley 2006), condensing all queer sex to gay male privilege is simply bad feminism.

In this framing of good sex/bad sex, some feminists fail to ask a simple, though significant, question: what do these behaviors, beliefs, and practices mean to you? I do not mean to suggest that feminism is a monolithic, homogenous body of thought. Obviously, we should be speaking of feminisms, since feminist thought is, now more than ever, highly diverse—punctuated as it is with, at times, quite pointed antagonisms and opposing perspectives. That being said, I am hesitant and unwilling to bracket the “type” of feminism that I am challenging here. Do all those feminists who oppose lesbian/queer sex reflect a particular strain/“brand” of feminist theory/feminism? I think not. Before engaging this debate further I believe it is necessary to offer a sketch, albeit a brief one, on the feminist-queer divide—a debate which has been simmering since the early 1990s.

(Ir)Reconcilable Differences: A Brief Introduction to the Feminist-queer Debate

Despite conceptual and epistemological distinctions, I believe in the potential for a civil and strong relationship between feminism and queer, with commonalities and intersections between them numerous. Since this is not the focus of my paper, and due to the fact that others have outlined in exquisite detail the tensions between feminism and queer theory (see for instance Bell and Klein 1996; McLaughlin et al. 2006; Namaste 1994; Smyth 1992; Stein and Plummer 1994), I highlight here only a few of the major antagonisms. Before spelling out these differences, it is important to recognize upfront that feminism and queer theory share some of the same major objectives: the exurgation of homophobic oppression and the dismantling of hetero-patriarchy.

Queer theory, which is informed by poststructuralism, feminism and sociology (Gamson 1995), is a deconstructionist project that seeks the simultaneous proliferation and denaturalization of sex/gender categories and identities (e.g., man/woman, heterosexuality/homosexuality). In short, queer theory views all gender/sex/ual categories/identities as restrictive, exclusionary and essentialist, built as they are on a binary, heteronormative paradigm. Within heteronormative society, heterosexuality is the norm, the unexamined, the center such that all other sexualities are demonized, scrutinized and seen as less than. Maintaining the invisibility of all other sexualities is the *modus operandi* of a heteronormative project. For queer theorists then, one way in which to rupture hetero-patriarchy is to expand the borders, make visible the genealogy of identities (putting them into their rightful historical and socio-cultural context), and undermine the “purity” of all sexual and gendered categories (Fuss 1991; Namaste 1994).

As a result, queer theory, which is an anti-foundationalist project, sees great promise in, and thus puts immense emphasis on, the fluidity, contingency and liminal qualities of identity formations. “Queer” is an indeterminate state, exposing and celebrating gender/sexual inconsistencies such that it can never “fully describe those it purports to represent” (Warner 1991). Queer’s argument that identities

emerge from an oppressive binary logic and thus, only serve to fix and stabilize the self, views social movements—based as they are on particular identities, as only working to bolster the status quo. As Gamson states, “in this deconstructionist politic, clear collective categories are an obstacle to resistance and change” (1995, p. 391). Feminists have challenged this deconstructionist approach on the grounds that identities, although potentially problematic, can be enabling, empowering and thus, provide the conceptual space necessary for political praxis and cultural intelligibility (Richardson et al. 2006). In addition, releasing and destabilizing the monolithic categories “woman” and “lesbian”—the very categories for which feminism depends, is, not surprisingly, anathema to feminists. Jackson, one of the most vociferous critics of queer, asserts “For lesbians, having a name specific to women who love women has been crucial to asserting the existence and difference of lesbians” (2003, p. 36). Considering the invigorated conservatism in the US today, where women’s issues are on the backburner, letting go of these critical categories is a frightening thought: reproductive rights are receding as we speak, social programs are collapsing, sexual violence continues unabated, and poverty is on the rise.

In this regard, feminists confront queer as being irresponsible, elitist and delusional. Given queer’s emphasis on “performative transgression,” discursive agency, and textual analysis, feminists see queer as far removed from worldly and material realities. Hence, Nussbaum’s (in)famous jab at queer—Butlerian theory in particular—when she states that queer is a “collaboration with evil” (1999). In short, many feminists view queer as devoid of political analysis and significance. Belittling queer and queer politics is also the basis of Jeffreys book, *Unpacking Queer Politics*. She states: “It is [queer], as male gay sociologists as well as lesbian feminists have pointed out, trivial in its obsessions and practices, and antithetical to any politics of real social change” (2003, p. 56).

In my reading of Butler, and queer theory more generally, it is neither apolitical nor dismissive of the feminist project. Although Butler readily points out what she views as flaws within feminist theory, she never states that queer should replace feminism or for that matter, that feminism is dead; rather, she envisions queer insights as being able to foster a stronger, more inclusive feminism (Halley 2006). For instance, in her article “Against Proper Objects,” Butler (1994) derides the authors of *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* for believing that gay and lesbian (or queer) issues supersede feminism, since feminist theory is without a progressive sexual politics and is only capable of dealing with gender as its “proper object of study.” In addition and on the other hand, Butler views queer theory as inherently political, as revealed here when she states: “The deconstruction of identity is *not* the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated” (1990, p. 127-my emphasis)

Furthermore, queer writers “are seldom as lacking in ‘real world’ interests as some of their critics present” (McLaughlin et al. 2006, p. 3). For example, queer activists and organizations, such as OutRage, ACT UP, and Queer Nation (to name a few), have been engaged in political protest and activity since the 1980s. Queers have taken to the streets, mobilizing large contingents along the way in the fight to end the AIDS crisis, eradicate homophobia, remove draconian laws and policies

against homosexual sex and sex in public, alter a medical establishment that is fundamentally in keeping to gendered/sexed binaries (e.g., “gender identity disorder,” the medical “rules” for transsexualism and SRS, “treating” those who are intersexed), and promote the visibility of queerness and same sex desire with “in your face” tactics. Who else was going to fight these battles with such courage, attitude and voracity? These issues were rarely front and center of any feminist agenda.

Finally, queer theorists have argued that feminism ignores the power of sexuality when it comes to the derogation of bodies and desires. That is, queer sees sexuality, rather than gender per se, as the *sine qua non* of the heterosexual matrix—those hegemonic forces that regulate lives so as to maintain a heteronormative society (Ingraham 1994; Sedgwick 1990). Yet, as others have pointed out, a difference on emphasis—that being gender *or* sexuality, when it comes to a queer theory or feminist project, is not always so clear-cut. Indeed, feminists have long examined sexuality and sexual inequality. Again, Butler takes to task those queer writers who want to monopolize sexuality for themselves:

Significantly, this very feminist tradition [radical sexual theory and activism] in which both pleasure and danger govern the discourse on sexuality is elided in the articulation of lesbian/gay from feminist in the founding methodology of queer studies. (1994, p. 8)

What was radical feminism and lesbian feminism, if not the attempt in their own ways, to eradicate male sexual privilege and men’s entitlement to sexual pleasure? Rich’s (1980) “compulsory heterosexuality” was a concept that vividly exposed the institutionalization of heterosexuality, and debunked the false assumption of heterosexuality as natural and the norm. Moreover, Rich argued that it was actually more fulfilling—and thus more “natural”—for women to extend and direct their libidinal and psychic energies toward other women.

On the other hand, queer theorists have not ignored gender. Those who have espoused the promises of queer (Butler, Sedgwick, Warner, Rubin) have repeatedly highlighted the fact that gender and sexuality are constitutive, each informing the other—but with an understanding that these are distinct entities. Although sexuality is not always irreducible to gender (Reich 1992), under hetero-patriarchy, gender and sexuality are thought to be congruent and synchronous, easily congealing into binary categories such as “man”/“woman” and “hetero”/“homo” (see for instance, Sedgwick 1990). Queer seeks to break apart such causal logic—that is, that gender, sex and sexuality are congruent and binary alignments—by way of camp, transgression, and parody. According to Jeffreys (2003), queer theorists want to “play with gender,” while feminists want to get rid of gender altogether (McLaughlin et al. 2006). The queer play on gender and sexuality is often referred to as “genderfuck.” Genderfuck “structures meaning in a symbolic-performance matrix that crosses through sex and gender and destabilizes the boundaries of our recognition of sex, gender and sexual practice” (Reich 1992, p. 113).

I end this section with genderfuck, for it is this “playing” with gender that some feminists view as part of the “(re)phallization of society”—that is, the privileging of masculinity via drag, S/M, the revitalization of butch/femme and the acceptance of

non-normative sexual practices. Genderfuck, and gender transgression more generally, are depicted at times as the equivalent to say, Halloween, where you don a costume, pretend to be something or someone else, only to take it off when the party ends (Glick 2000; Jeffreys 2003). Treating all gender transgression with such triviality might have something to do with the overwrought words such as play, irony, parody, and pastiche that are repeated time and again whenever a description of “queer” is given. Yet, yoking genderqueer to a costume party or “lifestyle choice” belies the true costs of gender and sexual transgression that many queers endure. Although gender transgression can be temporary, and involve elements of fun, frivolity and celebration, for many, there is a permanency to being queer, which carries with it psychic pain, emotional, physical, and financial burdens and possibly, death (Spade 2005). These queer bodies are courageously navigating the world in defiance of gender and sexual norms.

Glick sees “genderfuck” and queer theory as problematic because it reduces sexuality “to a matter of style...and personal transformation,” (2000, p. 30). The result is, as Glick asserts, the replacement of a social liberationist project, as espoused by feminism, with an ethos of personal liberation and self-transformation. But, I think this greatly undermines the myriad and divergent paths people take to get to a place where they feel secure, ontologically, psychically and bodily. For some individuals, particularly among the abject and marginalized among us, transformation emerges via corporeal and psychic resistance. Hill Collins (1990) brings this point home in *Black Feminist Thought* when she cogently asserts that what we have come to know as “activism” and “power” needs to be broadened to include those resistances that occur in everyday life. According to Collins, “White male conceptualizations of the political process produce definitions of power, activism and resistance that fail to capture the meaning of these concepts in Black women’s lives” (1991, p. 140). While African-American women are continuously fighting against institutionalized inequalities and subordination, it is in the everyday moments of “self-definition, self-valuation” and “rejecting the controlling images of herself” that enable African-American women to survive. Although I in no way equate the conditions that African-American women face to that of queer bodied individuals, I do believe that all marginalized beings share a common struggle, in their own idiosyncratic ways, for self-assertion and subjecthood—in sum, resisting the conditions of misrecognition.

Untaming the Lesbian/Queer Body

Calling a club ‘Clit Club’ is an example of public sex because that level of visibility, that level of *sexualized* visibility, was highly political. (Thomas citing Taylor 1996, p. 55)

The regulatory heteronormative regime, where phallus is center, sees heterosexuality as the original/authentic/real sexuality, with homosexuality its derivative. And, as has already been discussed, those lesbian/queer individuals who engage in non-normative gendered and sexual practices are in essence said to be mimicking

gay male sexuality. I see in these comments what Sedgwick (1990) describes as feminism's heterosexual bias (at least, some variants of feminism)—it's focus on a binary gendered system that ignores the ways in which sexualities have their own distinct operating systems that, in turn, are not “always already” linked to gender. The linkage of lesbian/queer non-normative sex to gay male behavior also infers that lesbian/queer sex/ualities are the lowest common denominator. That is, it is copying a copy of an original (which is also a copy); thus, far removed from that most authentic of all sexualities: heterosexuality. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the lowest (or least) common denominator, used figuratively, means that which is the “least useful,” “least desirable,” and “least advanced.”

Within this discourse lesbian/queer desire cannot stand alone, for it is, in and of itself, dependent on others for its meaning while being, at the same time, without reciprocity—being that it is an “other” twice removed. These are the very conditions that create inviable subjects. Being inviable—an impossibility—suggests that lesbianism is so lacking that it does not even register as an object of prohibition. This is noted by Lamble who states that within the legal domain “lesbians pose less of a threat to the heterosexual order than gay male sexuality, and as such lesbian sexuality has often fallen below the radar of formal state policing (2006, p. 21). Butler remarks on the invisibility and unthreatening position of lesbian subjects:

inviable (un)subjects—*abjects*, we might call them—who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law...Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and nameable. (1991, p. 20)

This is not to say that lesbians have been unscathed by state policing (as the raid in 2000 on Pleasure Palace, one of the bathhouses I have examined, makes crystal clear). Rather, it is to say that “lesbian sex” is viewed in our phallogentric and androcentric society as somewhat of an oxymoron—seeing that lesbians cannot have *real* sex (Frye 1990). Thus, by arguing that the non-normative—or queer—whether it be the body, gender expression, and/or sexual practice, are instances of gay male behavior, only works to reconfigure an active lesbian/queer body into something passive, sexless and ultimately, knowable—that is, tamable. And, this is not to deny that gay and lesbian cultures are structured in part by heterosexual norms—they most definitely are, but as Butler rightly claims, “they are *not* for that reason *determined* by them” (1991, p. 23).

In other words, there are ways of doing heterosexual culture that simultaneously mimics and defies, replicates and denounces, such that the end product is fundamentally different—*because* these practices emanate from queer bodies that resurface in queer ways, thus taking on new meaning (Grace 1991). This is the proliferation of configurations that would, according to Butler, complexify sexualities and desire, ultimately leading to the demise of a hetero-centered sex/gender regime. Moreover and more importantly, it is precisely those variations in meaning—even when it is the very same act—that gives sex/uality its daunting excess. Such excess in turn cannot easily be molded and generalized into binary

frameworks such as anti-feminist/feminist, oppressive/liberatory, masculine/feminine, and domination/subjugation.

Butler (1990, 1991) argues that maybe the most useful strategy in creating a viable lesbian sexuality is not to strive for visibility per se, but rather to dismantle that which creates the very condition of lesbian abjecthood in the first place: the hegemonic ideology where heterosexuality is *the* original and thus “the ground of all imitations” (1993, p. 21). For Butler, the way towards a lesbian viability is:

not to establish the specificity of lesbian sexuality over and against its derivativeness, but to turn the homophobic construction of the bad copy against the framework that privileges heterosexuality as origin, as so ‘derive’ the former from the latter. (1991, p. 17).

Thus, according to Butler, illuminating a lesbian “specificity” only leads to a “set of contests and refusals...which make it clear that there is no necessarily common element among lesbians” (1991, p. 17). Rather, viability can be achieved by way of usurpation, resignification and parody as it relates to heterosexual constructs. Drag epitomizes just such a move, since transgressive gender performances not only expropriate heterosexual “acts,” but moreover, by doing so exposes and demystifies heteronormativity. In other words, the delinking and inverting of heterosexual practices from “straight bodies” reveals both the instability of gendered and sexed categories (“man”/“woman,” “homosexual”/“heterosexual”) and heterosexuality’s own “naturalized idealization” (Butler 1991). Butler states thus: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency (1990, p. 501).

Butler is attempting to denaturalize the regulatory regime of heterosexuality by way of illuminating the disciplinary effects of discourse, in particular, the way that discourse (re)inscribes bodies into normative gendered and sexed entities so as to fit into our heterosexual schema. In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” Butler (1991) attempts to work through the following query: how can we use “lesbian” to rework or call into question the claims of heterosexual priority? If that is possible—where “lesbian” throws into relief the artifice of the heteronormative, how can we then utilize this “lesbian” to also simultaneously reveal the fabrication of gender, without at the same time (re)essentializing “lesbian”? At the end of this essay, Butler asks:

How then to expose the causal lines as retrospectively and performatively produced fabrications, and to engage gender itself as an inevitable fabrication, to fabricate gender in terms which reveal every claim to the origin, the inner, the true, and the real as nothing other than the effects of *drag*, whose subversive possibilities ought to be played out and replayed to make the ‘sex’ of gender into a site of insistent political play. (1991, p. 29)

To reiterate, drag is, for Butler, one such way to illuminate the artificial assignations of “normal” bodies, genders and sexualities. But, how *can* drag and resignification bring with it such a monumental feat as the destabilization of heteropatriarchal society, wherein particular sexualities and bodies are read as the original/authentic/genuine? Such a huge task needs big answers, which she herself

acknowledges in *Bodies that Matter*. Questioning whether transgressive practices alone can bring about social change, Butler admits a potentially ineffectual project if left solely to its own devices:

Rather than denaturalization or proliferation, it seems the question for thinking discourse and power in terms of the future has several paths to follow: how to think power as resignification together with power as convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulation, domination, constitution? (1993, p. 240)

Taking cues from Butlerian theory, and in thinking about my bathhouse research as well as the reviewer comments that ensued, I want to depart from Butler, if only slightly, to suggest not another route per se, but rather, put emphasis on what Butler deemphasizes, and views as potentially a dangerous move: claiming the specificity of a lesbian (and I would add queer) sexuality. Strategies that attempt to establish a desirous, viable and active lesbian/queer sexuality must begin by reframing and/or removing any preconceived notions or a priori statements and assumptions of non-normative lesbian/queer sexualities. Replacing sweeping generalizations for a more helpful set of questions could illuminate the ways that lesbian/queer sexualities offer up their own set of meanings and spaces of resistance *on their own terms*—that is, their own specificities. Again, these are not eternal, innate lesbian/queer specificities or differences, but rather, emerge in the revolving discursive and cultural processes and chains that do shape the contours of sexuality and sexual desire.

This reconfiguring has to also include deconstructing the automaticity of sexuality with gender—that is, the involuntary reaction that assumes a causal logic, and tossing to the side the “damaging bias toward heterosexual assumptions” (Sedgwick 1990, p. 31) within feminism. Rubin, who in criticizing the sexuality literature as a whole (not just feminism)—above all, psychoanalytically based approaches which are inherently heteronormative (see Wittig 1992)—when it comes to “explaining” variant erotic practices, asserts that most explanations “impoverish the rich complexity of erotic meaning and conduct” (1998, p. 52). Furthermore, according to Rubin, these interpretations are, in and of themselves, “speculative” since they are “applied to living populations of individual practitioners, without any concern to check to see if such interpretations have any relevance or validity” (1998, pp. 52–53). Just as feminist language and concepts have been guilty of doing violence to other gendered subjects—for instance, women of color and “third world women” (see for instance, Mohanty 2003; Wittig 1992; Hill Collins 1990), feminism robs lesbian/queer subjects of their own agency and subjectivity when they are depicted as coterminous with gay men and patriarchal domination.

Several major themes emerged during my interviews with bathhouse participants that are strikingly discordant with gay male sexual cultures and the perception that non-normative sexualities (e.g., S/M, public sex) are inherently oppressive practices. For instance, bathhouse participants patronize the bathhouses for numerous reasons. These include seeing the bathhouse as an opportunity to overcome bodily and sexual shame; to feel “empowered” and sexually “free” at the bathhouse; to explore their sexualities and get acquainted with their own desires—particularly because it is a space without bio-men; to gain “skills” so as to become

better at sexual articulation; and of course, to have sex and feel sexually satiated. This does not sound like the seedy and subjugating space feminists might assume it to be. But, this is also not to deny that power, exposure, voyeurism, vulnerability, pleasure and risk operate and weave throughout these lesbian/queer bathhouse spaces as well. Does the fact that power, voyeurism and the fact that impersonal sex does, at times, occur mean, in turn, that these sexual spaces (and the individuals who inhabit them) are simply, as one reviewer put it, “betraying women” due to “aping the gross behavior of men”?

I think by merely exposing the possibility of casual sex without victimhood, pleasure without guilt, and displaying overt sexualities without apology is, in and of itself, threatening to some feminists (and seemingly, an impossibility). Halley makes a similar argument in her critique of feminism and what she sees as feminism’s overreliance—to the point of absurdity—on the Injury Triad: female injury + female innocence + male immunity, with woman the subordinated and man the subordinator. Although the statement by Halley below is in reference to particular court cases that she reviews in *Split Decisions*, I nonetheless see it as also resonating here:

representing women as end points of pain, imagining them as lacking in agency to cause harm to others and particularly harm to men, feminists refuse also to see women—even injured ones—as powerful actors. (2006, p. 346)

Interviewees—most of whom identified as queer or bisexual, came to these bathhouse events for myriad reasons as already noted. And, while none of the interviewees described having come exclusively for casual sex (although this might have something to do with being embarrassed about having to admit such a thing), many did engage in casual sex at some point during their bathhouse experience(s) (see Hammers 2008a, b). Regardless of why people come to these events, when I asked several participants, including many of the bathhouse committee members, whether or not they saw themselves as imitating gay male sexual cultures, one participant simply stated “why is that such a bad thing?” Typically though, responses to such a comparison invoked statements such as that being “incredibly simplistic” and a “negation of what *we* are trying to do.” Akin to Califia’s (1998) having to defend S/M from feminist attack, many of the individuals I interviewed were similarly perplexed by this rectitude and monolithic depiction. Here is what one bathhouse committee member said in response to this question:

This is about feminists and sex activists who believe that women and queers deserve their own spaces, not based on a gay man’s framework.

And we are a committee of women. How are we going to make something based on men’s ideas?... You work with these women who have been socialized as women, whatever that means. They think like women, talk like women, and make agreements based on thinking and feeling like women. So, it is hard to put a male gay bathhouse framework with a bunch of queer women, feminists you know. I totally disagree with the whole modeling after the gay bathhouse idea. We are not men, we haven’t been socialized as men. I just don’t get it.

Many of these individuals discussed in detail the specific spatial arrangements, the array of diverse sexual activities on offer, and bathhouse themes that are carefully negotiated for each event so as to facilitate interaction and sexual encounters, while also attempting to maintain a safe and comfortable space for all bathhouse patrons. In sum, it was this balancing act in terms of creating a hybrid space—one that is simultaneously sexual and safe, playful and intense, that many saw as unique to these lesbian/queer bathhouses. It is also the facilitation of bathhouse interaction that one committee member, Tami, believed to be indicative of Pleasure Palace doing it “in their own way.” Tami remarks:

From what men have told me about their bathhouse experiences, it is vastly different from what we experience. For one thing, there is more anonymity in men’s bathhouses because men go looking for a quick lay and they are gone...Unlike with men’s bathhouses, we [committee members] do our best to facilitate people getting it on...Because that is just not the way most of us are socialized. The dynamics at our bathhouse are completely different, and sex with women tends to be a little less random. Also, we find here the shame regarding their bodies, their desires, their sexualities, that many of those who are coming are having to deal with. We see the space as a way to overcome this.

When comparing the literature on gay male sexual bathhouses, there are innumerable differences between what I found when examining Pleasure Palace and SheDogs, and that which is discussed in relation to gay male bathhouse culture (see Hammers 2008, b). For instance, the atmosphere in male bathhouses is characterized as one of silence and being discreet (Berry 2007; Bérubé 1996; Flowers et al. 2000; Richters 2007; Tewksbury 2003), while sexual interactions are bounded, efficient and impersonal (Weinberg and Williams 1975). Such qualities did not appear in my fieldwork on lesbian/queer bathhouses. Instead, what I found was a much more social, loud and personal atmosphere, where identities (that is, a personalized element) were important aspects of those sexual encounters I observed.

I recognize by characterizing and differentiating male and female bathhouse cultures, I am playing into the hands of essentialism. It is after all highly problematic to even bracket out “male” and “female” sexualities—especially given the queer environs I am speaking of here. Moreover, by “capturing” and “comparing” men’s and women’s sexualities in bathhouses, I do little to complexify “maleness” and male sexualities. I will only say here that I certainly do not want to imply that *all* men, and gay men in particular, adhere to a particular sexual ethos. Additionally, I realize that what I have uncovered at the lesbian/queer bathhouses is not generalizable to all lesbian/queer sexual encounters, all lesbian/queer individuals who engage in non-normative sexual practices, or other lesbian/queer bathhouses. I have no doubt, for instance, that some lesbian/queer individuals go to Pleasure Palace and SheDogs specifically to find sexual opportunities that are strictly impersonal and noncommunicative. Conversely, some men go to bathhouses to find a partner, or to engage in sexual practices they deem to be highly personal. Again, I only want to raise the point that there are lesbian/queer specificities that arise in these spaces, if only because these individuals were not socialized as bio-

men. It is, in addition, to counter feminist claims of gay male emulation by bringing to light these very differences—differences which arise out of, but are not entirely reducible to, gender. Gender socialization and the ways in which male and female bodied individuals are given divergent trajectories and templates when it comes to sorting through and dealing with these desires is certainly part of the picture. But fantasies, notions of power and desire *qua* desire are convoluted, momentary, and intangible. Above all, sex practices and what they come to signify are beyond any one explanatory framework, and are not the property and possession of any one particular gender or sexuality.

Conclusion

Distilling lesbian/queer sex into gay male sexualities only serves to spin the wheels of antagonism and mutual misunderstanding. In dismissing lesbian/queer subjects—in particular, those who engage in such things as public sex, polyamory, butch/femme and S/M, as copies of predatory male sexual behavior, sexual dissenters are left feeling defensive, trapped and misunderstood. Examining sexualities are, in and of themselves, a challenge, for I often wonder whether attempts to “grasp” sexualities, although a noble goal, are also nonetheless potentially problematic and counterproductive. At least, this is how I often feel when using language to describe my own “findings.” As soon as we understand/reveal sexual “understandings,” we import a certain rigidity, essence and invariant quality to sex and desire. But, sex and sexuality are mutable, erratic, context-bound, layered, impermanent, stable, and contingent. Individual desires change over time, are sensitive to place, and often morph when entering into and leaving relationships behind. It seems the more we probe into sexual lives, the more fleeting sex becomes. Static and unmediated, sexuality is not! For instance, elucidating the impossibility of extrapolating and demarcating a “homosexual condition,” McIntosh (1968) remarks that “One might as well try to trace the aetiology of ‘committee chairmanship’ or ‘Seventh Day Adventism’ as of ‘homosexuality’” (in Plummer 1981, p. 31). According to McIntosh, trying to establish the “origins” of homosexuality is both unproductive and unnecessary. As queer writers have also tried to show, it is equally farcical to categorize desires and sexual acts solely into gendered dichotomies. For as many S/M practitioners routinely assert, S/M roles are not solely (if at all) related to gender (Califia 1998).

In light of these cautions, coupled with feminist assertions that queer sex is male sex, it seems an equally daunting task to *prove* that queer gender expression and moreover, “radical sex,” are not simply fashion choices and symbols of male representation (as displayed and overly thematized in butch/femme for instance), but real lived experience with diffuse symbolic and ontological meaning. How to do this, while also holding onto instability, performativity and resistance? I believe we can begin to hold these seemingly contradictory processes in tension by acknowledging that transgressive and destabilizing sexual practices are more than “personal liberation”; rather, such practices are ontologically meaningful precisely because of their stability, and political because the body is not just a sign, but that

which provides the “grounds” for corporeal praxis and sexual subjectivity. If one heeds Martin’s notion of sexual subjectivity as “a necessary component of agency and thus of self-esteem,” since “one’s sexuality affects his/her ability to act in the world” (1996, p. 10), can this not also be a fulcrum for social change?

Going back to my work on lesbian/queer bathhouse cultures, when it comes to these sexual spaces, it is about giving women and queers an opportunity to explore their bodies in an atmosphere that is playful, celebratory, and political. And if playing with power and domination in a safe, consensual context is, according to some, about “appropriating (gay) male sexual practices,” the dialogue ends. As many have already pointed out, not all forms of sexual expression are products of male power and privilege (Califia 1998; Halley 2006; Rubin 1984). Exposing the ways in which men and women employ and enact sexual practices and desires and experience vulnerabilities in similar ways, is a vital step in getting away from reductive explanations of sexuality based solely on gender.

By highlighting lesbian/queer specificities, my aim is not to emphasize difference, but to counter a rigid discourse that omits lesbian/queer sexual agency through assumptive interpretations where phallus permeates and defines all other sexualities that do not fall under the rubric of what is considered appropriate “feminist sex.” To depict lesbian/queer sexual practitioners of S/M, role-playing, and casual sex as poor persons in need of moral guidance and instruction as to what *real* freedom and morally good sex looks (and feels) like is, I believe, fundamentally anti-feminist.

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