

LESBIANS AND SAFER SEX DISCOURSES:
IDENTITY BARRIERS, FLUID PRACTICES

by

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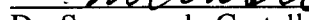
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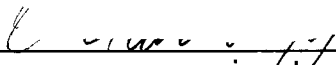
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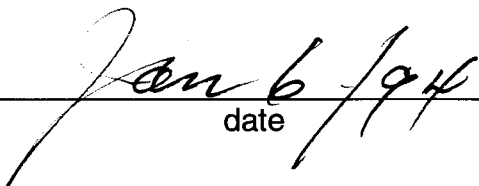
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines lesbians' positions in HIV/AIDS discourses. More specifically it will ask, how are lesbians negotiating their positions in safer sex within a discourse that is saturated with representations of lesbians as invisible, stereotypes and/or essential identities? The conditions of complete speech acts and the production of meaning are investigated in the context of lesbians' everyday lives and practices.

The approach to this research has been facilitated by synthesizing concepts from what has become known as "queer theory", feminism, critical ethnography and anecdotal knowledge on lesbian existence. Theoretical, demographic and historical framings are followed by a participant ethnography and interview analysis.

The manner in which power is negotiated within ethnographic projects such as this one is pursued in order to both raise critical questions about ethnographic methodology and demonstrate some of the issues involved when lesbians speak to each other. The interview data underlines the critical need for lesbian self representations, in particular, for explicit articulations on experiences of identity, marginalization and sexuality.

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INTRODUCTION

When I began graduate studies, my research was motivated by a growing awareness of and concern with the politics of AIDS. I was, like virtually all other members of queer community, affected by the deaths of men close to me. I was also, like most of the rest of the community at that time, more ignorant of the biomedical "facts" than the issues of power, marginalization and violence that in different ways are worn by lesbians and gay men like a second skin. My intention was to write a thesis on homophobic violence in the "gay" community and the discourse of AIDS.

Like many other politically active feminists, this was not a decision reached unproblematically. As a lesbian busy in a women's crisis center, I frequently felt relegated to the back burner on the basis of sexual orientation, but as an individual in the "gay rights movement", frustration with the chronic lack of many men's unexamined sexism was an effective deterrent against my wholehearted commitment. It was less evident to me then that being in the "lowest risk group" and working in the AIDS movement was not the compromise some of my feminist sisters believed it to be.

Indeed, it is the widely-held notion that lesbians are at no risk that has become my central concern. Throughout the last ten years, the public has ingested broadcasts, texts, AIDS "facts" (however hysterical) on gay men, Haitians, sex trade workers, IV drug users, innocent mothers and babies, basketball stars and medical professionals. Local and community groups reacted; gay male communities organized to educate themselves out of fear and anger with what appeared to be a looming genocide. By 1988, the transmission of HIV finally became at least partially dislodged from the gay identity and understood in terms of specific risk behaviours. Eventually, public health authorities

got on board and spoke to the issue of women and AIDS. Quite apart from feminists legitimate complaint that once again, the responsibility for safer sexual practises is placed on women, the very category of "Women" precludes the existence of lesbians. The issue of lesbians and AIDS remains virtually unexamined in both HIV statistics and public educational efforts, in spite of the homophobic spinoff resulting from the persistent conflation of homosexuality and disease. The knowledge that lesbians are at no risk of contracting HIV retains its near magical power, thus discouraging any further treatment of the lesbians who are in fact sero-positive as well as the political issues at stake. The silence is paradigmatically "normal".

In the early stages of this inquiry, as in my everyday life, I became sensitized to a blindspot in feminist thinking related to sexual orientation as an axis of identification and oppression. Many feminists have committed themselves to addressing the political questions of race and class that were taken for granted in earlier feminism. As a student and as a teacher in an academy, I have noticed more reluctance to seriously analyze heterosexism. These experiences occur in a postmodern paradigm, where everything is discourse and all essentializing discourse is under scrutiny. The oppositional structure of meaning embedded in the binarism of man/woman, and the related discourses on sexual difference, is a lens through which I look at the discourse of critical and feminist texts.

For lesbians trying to organize around the AIDS pandemic, a relative lack of economic power poses an obstacle. Moreover, women in the time of AIDS are called once again to an issue that coalesces around our bodies and sexuality. As the resistance of the reproductive rights movement was, among other things, a fight for sexual pleasure, so it is with AIDS activism. In the seventies, women in feminism began to voice their rights to their bodies, but left their actual bodies relatively unarticulated. This was, and still

is, a process of reconstruction of sexuality in terms that are, as writers such as Luce Irigaray and Teresa de Lauretis have argued, unrepresentable in masculinist discourse. This thesis will explore those terms in the current context of the AIDS crisis. Since AIDS is as much an epidemic of signification as a biomedical one, the problem becomes the relation between language and the individuals making sense out of it.

Lesbians' investment in reducing the spread of AIDS and AIDS-related violence requires more than an analysis of existent safer sex education programs. It also demands an inquiry into the production of knowledge and the means by which the discourses reaffirm, objectify and erase particular social positions. Understanding and redefining the field of AIDS information and interpretation is highly contingent on social practices rather than individual awareness, ignorance or rationality.

"Lesbians don't get AIDS" is the prevailing preconception in North American culture. Given the contradictory epidemiological evidence, (outlined in Chapter three), the question that I want to pursue in this study is, how did this knowledge come to be dominant? Why do so many of us believe this? And given that this truth claim ultimately plays out in the bodies of lesbians, safer sex education must be critically examined in terms of its efficacy in creating behaviour changes among sexually active lesbians. These acts of believing are not accidental anomalies, but are in fact legitimated by other non-state discourses that traverse history and culture. More specifically, I suspected three different, but related, issues underlying these questions.

First of all, the negotiation of safer sex discourses may be characterized as "incomplete speech acts" (Eco). This incompleteness can be traced to a larger and more complex problem of competing social discourses that represent "lesbianism". The ability of phallogocentric language to articulate and synthesize the ontology of the lesbian body has

only been marginally explored. I will discuss these theoretical quandaries in Chapter two.

Secondly, the very term "lesbian" defines a social identity, not simply an individual who engages in a particular scheme of sexual practices. Therefore, safer sex education directed at the "lesbian" audience may exclude women who have sex with other women but do not feel safe in self-defining as lesbian. The social construction of "lesbian" will be traced in Chapter four in order to raise questions on who may or may not be excluded from this social identity.

Finally, within the discursive space of lesbian safer sex forums, there are further problems that arise from the enterprise of identity politics. My experience is that these audiences are comprised of women who self represent "congruencies" between sexual behaviour and sexual identity ("real" lesbians). The complexities of how a woman who has sex with other women *can* enter into discourse and articulate her experiences is taken up with in Chapter five.

The specific question this research addresses is, how are lesbians negotiating their position with regard to safer sex, within a discourse that is produced by and mainly for men? The problems of (mis)representation in the very terms such as "safer sex" and "lesbians" will be analysed, using women's experience as a starting point. This includes studying the sites of resistance to the discourse and women's redefinitions, as subjects rather than objects, in the construction of meaning.

I will explore these questions through the use of a participant ethnography. In Chapters six and seven, narratives from the interviews have been documented and interpreted

with the purpose of understanding some lesbians' relation to their identity, community and safer sex discourses.

The concluding chapter, besides doing what conclusions always do, underlines the issues of power and negotiated meanings within qualitative research methods. In terms of this research project, the entire ethnographic process can be regarded as an instance in which the myriad of dynamics of power, desire and voices are being played out. Since these relations comprise, after all, the object of study, I continue to problematize them.

This research is centrally propelled by my own experiences of marginalization and my personal stakes in lesbian community. I hope it will illuminate critical questions that lesbians must address, those that have everything to do with the contours of our individual desires, personal identities, group bonds and both support and resistance strategies. For HIV/AIDS has affected how we take up with one another, socially, politically as well as sexually.

THEORETICAL NAVIGATIONS: LOCATING LESBIAN BODIES

She was completely bowled over at the very idea that difference cut her in two.¹

In an article in *Gasp*, a lesbian activist commented, "The State tells us that lesbians are by definition at no risk, and for the first time to my knowledge dykes actually believe the state".² I suggest that these acts of believing are not accidental anomalies, but that they are in fact legitimated by other, non-state discourses, and held in place by knowledges that traverse western culture and history. The notion that lesbians are immune to HIV is located at the convergence of the power/gender axis (lesbians are sexless) and feminism (lesbians are indeed sexual, but that sexuality conforms to an essential "politically correct" analysis). I will trace the lesbian body through both of these discourses, locating the contemporary positions of lesbians in relation to these.

When I think of the mechanics of power, I think of its capillary form of existence, of the extent to which power seeps into the very grain of individuals, reaches right into their bodies, permeates their gestures, their posture, what they say, how they learn to live and work with other people.³

Foucault's project in *History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, is to define the regime of power - knowledge that sustains discourses on sex. Writers of theory must account for the fact that sex is being spoken about, who does the speaking and their position in society, the location of the institutions that prompt people to speak on sex, and the discursive

1 Nicole Brossard, *These Our Mothers: Or: The Disintegrating Chapter*, translated by Barbara Godard, (Montreal: Coach House Quebec Translations, 1983), p.38.

2 Paula Louise Sypnowich, "Women, Aids and Activism," in *Gasp* (Winter 1991), p.9.

3 Quoted in Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will To Truth*, (New York: Travistock Publications, 1980), p.217.

channels that exist to permeate the individual modes of behaviour and ideas of pleasure, together referred to as a technology of sex.⁴ Foucault defines power as a personal and intentional force that comes into play in larger institutions, forming the basis for power alignments in the general social body.

Individual identity, subjectivity and sexuality do not exist outside of or prior to language and representation, but are actually brought into play through discourse and representational practises. These are themselves acts of power which produce knowledge and identity. The bare body does not give knowledge that is then simply translated into a neutral language, but language and discourse make the body an object of knowledge in the first place and invest it with power. The body then, is involved in a political field wherein it is immediately "held" by relations of power.

As Foucault proceeds with erudition to identify throughout history the power relationships at work in the production of knowledge on sex, he seems to drop his important argument of intention; that is, why do those in positions of power speak of sex as they do? He perceives power as a productive force that generates a "will to knowledge", meaning and values, both in its operation and its points of resistance. The problem with this analysis of power is its absence of ethical distinctions between the positive and oppressive effects of the production of knowledge.⁵ While Foucault is concerned with the knowledge that is produced in and out of the construction of sexuality, he fails to take up with the historical reality of the violence done to women and men as a result of that construction. This, it has been argued, is a direct corollary of his blindspot to gender which ignores the negative position of the female subject, who

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p.11.

⁵ Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

is defined in contrast but always in relation to the male. As feminists have long pointed out, one of the central aspects of the construction of sexuality is its gender specificity.⁶ The intervention of experts and their knowledge of the female body have everything to do with the constitution of male power. The first bodies to be saturated with representations of sexuality were women's. Deep structures of domination exerted through discourse include medicalization and pathologization of women's bodies, pregnancy as disease, physical and sexual abuse, witchburning, rape and abuse of women's bodies for the sake of "beauty". The psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality says, "that the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practise and representation of the sexual".⁷ Within this discourse, woman's desire for another woman, or for that matter autoeroticism, is incomprehensible. Female sexuality differed from male sexuality precisely in that pleasure for women was ultimately bound up with procreation.

Hence the paradox that mars Foucault's theory, as it does other contemporary radical but male-centered, theories: in order to combat the social technology that produces sexuality and sexual oppression, these theories (and their respective politics) will deny gender. But to deny gender, first of all, is to deny the social relations of gender that constitute and validate the sexual oppression of women; and second, to deny gender is to remain 'in ideology', an ideology which (not coincidentally if, of course, not intentional) is manifestly self-serving to the male-gendered subject...⁸

Feminism has been engaged in a variety of practices that devolve from the concept of "woman" as differentiated from man. Theorizing on gender examines the relationship

⁶ For an overview of these positions, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Film, Fiction and Theory*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.15.

⁷ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.86; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by H.M.Parshley, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952).

⁸ de Lauretis, (1987), p.28.

between patriarchal modes of power and the construction of female subjectivity. The resulting changes in discursive practices ("écriture féminine", women's meaning, for example) and political practices (women's self-determination, issues of choice) have successfully opened spaces for women to speak, as subjects. These developments, taking place in the postmodern paradigm, where everything is discourse and all essentializing discourse is under scrutiny, are producing debates within feminism on the oppositional structure of meaning embedded in the binarism of man/woman, essentialism and the related discourses on sexual difference.

The question of gender difference is problematic within, (as well as without), feminist texts. In a first approximation, feminist critiques of theories about mankind have taken issue with the absence of the female subject, insisting on difference as a feminist issue. In a second approximation, some feminists challenge the foregrounding of difference for its conservative effects. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, argues that this notion of gender as sexual difference, and all the cultural constructs it generates, have become a liability to feminist thought. She claims that it keeps feminist thinking bound to man, even if that thinking is about discursive differences ("différance"), and so ends up constructing a difference of woman from man, "or better, the very instance of difference in man".⁹

The first wave of feminism, whether it called for sexual purity, free expression, the "naturalness" of sex, or its spiritual quality, evoked meanings of sex that remained fixed to heterosexual intercourse and penetration. If representations of women (gender) are only a point of resistance to man, then the female subject is a still incomplete and negative one. Furthermore, gender as sexual difference tends towards over-

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

determinations of patriarchal power, ("sexual pessimism"), leaving little room for exploring how women have resisted those definitions of female sexuality.

Moreover, gender as sexual difference limits understanding of the extent to which the very gendered categories of Man and Woman oppress us, in ways other than strictly in personal relations to man. There is still an unchallenged heterosexual code; a complex set of ideas and practices that fixes women's emotional, mental and physical place, typically in relation to man. This discursive order is maintained by the real oppression of women, affected by real relations with other "feminized" objects¹⁰ and enshrined in the institution of "compulsory heterosexuality".¹¹ This analysis insists that the very categories of man and woman are homophobic myths that help to produce the obligatory social relationship between men and women.¹² Without a theory of gender, one cannot raise any questions about homosexuality, power and the way those differ from the dominant relations of heterosexuality.

Heterosexuality as a "master narrative",¹³ tends to reproduce and re-textualize itself, even in feminist (re)writings of texts and narratives.¹⁴ It follows that constructions of woman on the basis of sexual difference do little or nothing to explain differences between women. Thus the possibilities of conceiving gender and the social subject in

¹⁰ Lauretis has written perspicaciously on gender and discourse, specifically treating the question of the heterosexual contract. Her description of the recurrent representations of gender within texts have implications for theories of power. Paradigmatically, the hero of the text is the subject, the speaker, mobile in the textual space, penetrating areas as well as, more obviously, the victim. The subject is masculine. His object of action is passive, silent, the background space, supplier of orifice and is engendered as feminine. See *Technologies*, pp.42-44.

¹¹ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, No.4 (1980), pp. 631-660.

¹² See, for example, Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey*, (New York: Link Books, 1974), p.13-23 and Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born A Woman," in *Feminist Issues*, 1, No.2 (Winter 1981), pp.47-54.

¹³ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narratives as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981).

¹⁴ See Carol Smart, "Unruly and Docile Bodies", videotaped lecture at Simon Fraser University, 1990 and Irigaray (1985).

other ways, such as through experiences of race, class and non-(hetero)sexual relations are deflected by this theme in feminism. A formidable project remains largely unexamined. How can we explain why women (who are of one gender) have taken up different positions in gender and in sexual practises such as celibacy, monogamy, non-monogamy, butch-femme lesbians, S/M dykes as well as heterosexuality? How is the subject of transsexuals (which is neither a theoretical riddle nor an exotic detail, considering their legal non-recognition and the high incidence of sero-positivity among this group) approached? How can we explain experiences that intersect with other social differences and are as well gendered positions, like race, class and age? It is critical to acknowledge that these are not additive systems of oppression, but rather interlocking systems of power based on race, gender, sexual identity and class.¹⁵

Recent writings by lesbians have taken up with language and violence, how language has the power to do violence to our experience.¹⁶ I have said that feminist texts, and I mean this in the most inclusive sense, have been a vital institution in the construction of knowledge on the female subject. These texts are written by women who occupy extremely diverse positions with regards to their everyday practises and some of these texts have had the dubious distinction of being censored by the more dominant elements of women's movement.¹⁷ While there is an exchange of knowledge within feminism, that exchange is invariably blocked by the intransigence of the discursive construct of heterosexism. As Monique Wittig has written:

The discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those discourses which take for granted that which

¹⁵ See Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," *Feminist Issues*, 1, No.1 (Summer 1980), pp.103-11; Marilyn Frye, "Lesbian 'Sex'," in Jeffner Allen, ed., *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 305-316; Lauretis (1987).

¹⁷ SAMOIS, eds., *Coming To Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1987).

finds society, and society, is heterosexuality...These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms...These discourses deny us every possibility of creating our own categories. But their most ferocious action is the unrelenting tyranny that they exert upon our physical and mental selves.¹⁸

Lesbian theorizing has expanded the boundaries of knowledge on sexuality to the point where we can begin to interpret the social-power relations that affect our mode of speaking. A significant work is Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence".¹⁹ This essay makes visible the otherwise "naturalness" of the institution of heterosexuality and redefines it as a set of relations, not at the level of the body, but at the level of politics and discourse. In doing so, Rich detaches heterosexuality from sex, (Foucault's notion of "desexualization") and links it to power, allowing us to think critically about how those relations of power structure our identity, reproduce themselves over and over again and ultimately affect how we speak and what we know of our bodies. Constructive as this approach is, lesbian theorists today are left with the problem of how to reinstate sex/desire into the relation, a project deemed crucial for our differentiation from heterosexual feminists.²⁰

Lesbian representations depend on being able to separate the issue of an erotic sexuality that is not at all the same as women's (as defined in opposition to man) from the reality that it is nevertheless a gendered sexuality. While lesbians, like women, are different from men, our erotic practices do not let us address difference without taking up with desire and erotism, as well as power. There is thus a sense that lesbian identity can be assumed and spoken about through feminism and, as the contemporary debates

¹⁸ Wittig (1980), p.105.

¹⁹ Rich (1980).

²⁰ Rich's interpretation does not require sexual attraction or actions between women for their inclusion in the category of lesbian. Hers was not a unique position in the second wave of feminism in North America, and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

on pornography and lesbian sadomasochism (S/M) illustrate,²¹ against feminism. Additionally, there are numerous (textual) indications that feminist discourses on lesbianism have been exclusive of other differences; sexual,²² racial,²³ class.²⁴ A critical point of contention is in the essential category of Woman, which some lesbian theorists have denied as meaningless outside of heterosexual relations.²⁵

French lesbian feminist writers have pursued the idea of an "oppositional structure of meaning", that is, we derive meaning through the interpretation of sets of opposites like day/night, activity/passivity, positive/negative. Importantly, the masculine/feminine contrast supplies the underlying symbolism for the whole set, thus ordering the thinkable into comprehensive couples.²⁶ In this perception, heterosexuality provides the foundation or interpretant ground of western culture. Writers like Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig begin here and proceed to develop the idea of a lesbian narrative space that is disruptive because it displaces sex/gender difference and begins with gender sameness. Here, representations of female subjectivity are not anchored in a heterosexual frame of reference.²⁷

²¹ *Coming to Power* and its opposition, Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E.H. Russell and Susan Leigh Starr, eds., *Against Sadomasochism*, (East Palo Alto, California: Frog in the Well, 1982).

²² Pat Califia, *Sapphisty: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality*, (Nalad Press, 1988); Julia Creet, "Daughter of the Movement: The Psychodynamics of Lesbian S/M Fantasy," *Differences*, Vol.5, No.1, pp.135-159.

²³ Lorde (1982); Cherrie Moraga, *Loving In The War Years: lo que paso por sus labios*, (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

²⁴ Caryatis Cardea, "Lesbian Revolution and the 50 Minute Hour: A Working Class Look at Therapy and the Movement", in Allen, ed. (1980), pp.193-218; Chrystos, "I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me", in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), pp.68-70.

²⁵ Wittig (1980), Irigaray (1985), de Lauretis (1987).

²⁶ The contributions of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray are summarized by Andrea Nye, *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*, (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp.191-194.

²⁷ Elaine Marks argues that Wittig's representation of the lesbian body is "sufficiently blatant to withstand reabsorption into male literary culture". Elaine Marks, "Lesbian Intertextuality," in George Stambolian and Elaine Marks, eds., *Homosexualities and French Literature*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p.375.

In this study, a participatory ethnographic research method was used to provide a space for lesbians whose voices are not typically or, for that matter, ever heard, whether in the dominant culture, the women's movement nor, to varying degrees, lesbian community, (but who nevertheless are included in the "intended audience" for lesbian safer sex education). This project is intended to provide a space for the participants to appropriate and redefine the discourses on sexuality, as subjects, and to voice possible and legitimate concerns about the representations of lesbian sexuality on which the education information is based. The ethnographic method I used is influenced by the works of Lather, Ellsworth, Clifford, Haig Brown and Smith. More specifically, it is based on Dorothy Smith's model of institutional ethnography.²⁸ This method attempts to map out an ethnographic method that corresponds to a feminist sociology informed by knowledges of power, feminism and representation. To Foucault, discourse is the process behind any act of communication in which meaning is created. Smith attaches the concept of discourse to social institutions and claims that, as members of a particular society, there are many kinds of discourses at play in our lives.²⁹ Smith's work assumes that forms of human consciousness are created as properties of "externalized" institutions or discourses. Power prevails in the "practices of ruling" which involve the process of representing individuals and actualities; the construction of the world as text. Institutional ethnography researches problems as they have been defined from the standpoint of subjects in the everyday world. It pursues how individual subjects and their practices are invisibly linked to the broader social body through relations that are not immediately knowable. Furthermore, positing the everyday as

²⁸ Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). The participants in this study are positioned far outside of institutions, resulting in some conceptual problems when attempting to identify social institutions that affect lesbian subjectivity. I will pursue this on p.19.

²⁹ Alison Hearn, *The Feminist Debate About Pornography in Canada*. (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1987), p.68.

problematic, rather than phenomenon, is a subtle distinction that does not construct its agents as objects of study or strictly matters of theory.³⁰ This method is therefore directed to women as "embodied" subjects, situated in the local, historical and actual setting of the everyday world. It is based on women's, (and the theorist's), observations of their practices and surrounding material reality.

This study, like other explicitly value-based research such as critical theory, Freirian emancipatory research and feminist research is what Patti Lather has called "openly ideological".³¹ Since interest free knowledge is ontologically impossible, and research is a kind of praxis,³² my position and objectives are explicit in this text and problematized in the concluding chapter. Ethnography is based on the tenet that people create their social realities and derive meaning in their lives through interaction with one another. This position is particularly appropriate for an understanding of the realm of sexuality. Sexuality (and desire) may be conceptualized as a process that is constituted by and through relations we have both with others and with the broader social body. Therefore, a methodology that pursues the interface of individual subjects with institutions accounts for the dialectic which holds that we are shaped by our sexual identity and that it is in turn shaped by us.³³ The distinction between institutions and discourses on one hand and the individual subject and her experiences on the other is useful in this project because it allows me to overcome the stalemates in feminist debates on sexuality.³⁴ Also, by regarding sexuality as both institutional and experiential, I can reveal how participants negotiate, resist, change, as well as acquiesce

³⁰ Smith (1987), pp. 90-91.

³¹ Patti Lather, "Issues of Validity in Openly Ideological Research: Between a Rock and a Soft Place", *Interchange*, Vol.17, No.4 (Winter 1986), pp. 63-84.

³² *Ibid.*, p.63.

³³ This argument is restated by Michel Foucault in "Sex and the Politics of Identity: An Interview with Michel Foucault," *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), pp. 25-35.

³⁴ These positions are described as the "sexual pessimists" vs. the "optimistic liberatarians" by Mariana Valverde, *Sex Power and Pleasure*, (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987), p.17.

to, those social forces. This is both an empowering and a critical process that is often lost in overly determinist notions of female sexuality.

The historical momentum within feminist discourse that emphasizes institutional power and determinism is not the most significant deterrent to this approach. One problem I immediately encountered was identifying institutions that affect lesbian subjectivity. Before I formed the research relationships with the participants, I asked some lesbians to have conversations with me for the purposes of orienting my work to institutions that have had significant effects on lesbians' lives. The historical marginalization of lesbians is confirmed by the results of these conversations; no institutions were identifiable, except - and this is no small exception - the complex of heterosexism.³⁵

According to Smith, the examination of institutions must also account for language, insofar as institutions function with the help of categories and concepts expressed in language.³⁶ This perspective advances some of the theoretical ideas articulated by Foucault. From a Foucauldian perspective, we cannot simply speak the truth of a subject. All our experiences are interpreted according to languages and codes available to us, so that "experience" is in fact a complex process of interpretation. This word of caution is all the more urgent when taking up with the topic of sex. The notion that "confessions" are somehow exempt from discursive biases and represent an inner core of sexuality that speaks the ultimate truth of oneself is, as Foucault argued, problematic.³⁷ In feminist practice, (for example, consciousness-raising groups), there

³⁵ Adrienne Rich characterizes the institution of heterosexuality as follows: "Heterosexuality as an institution has drowned in silence the erotic feeling between women. I myself have lived half a lifetime in the lie of that denial. That silence makes us all, to some degree, into liars"; "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying", in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1979), p.190.

³⁶ Smith (1987), p.160.

³⁷ The problems related to the confessional mode must be distinguished from those of superimposing heterosexual discourses over lesbian "sex" and making meaning out of it. I will pursue this question in greater detail in chapter five.

is also this presupposition that the stories we share of our personal/sexual experiences unproblematically become building blocks for further political analyses. Given that theory and knowledge have historically excluded women, and that confessions provide an effective conduit of social regulation, the researcher has to make decisions about the extent to which she can first of all, use these frameworks to come to a reasonable understanding of female subjectivity and, secondly, how she can overcome their limitations within her own writing process. These considerations affect the extent to which limited knowledges of women are reproduced. I will pursue these issues in Chapter four.

A number of points evolve from the above comments. First of all, there is still a vast amount of knowledge on lesbian existence that remains to be constructed and written, and little of that which does exist is in the realm of academia and theory. Regarding lesbian sexuality, I concur with Marilyn Frye when she writes, "As we explain and explore and define our pleasures and our preferences across this expansive and heterogeneous field, teaching each other what the possibilities are and how to navigate them, a vocabulary will arise among us and by our collective creativity."³⁸ Relatedly, in the earlier stages of this research project, I encountered a fundamental contradiction in my own deployment of the term "lesbian". Choosing, as I have, to interrogate both the essentialism of the lesbian identity in terms of the separate realm of practises, and how this plays out in safer sex educational efforts, I could no longer use the term "lesbian" unproblematically. I have dealt with the contradiction, (albeit imperfectly) by retaining the term "lesbian" to signify a social identity, while placing emphasis on the articulation of sexual practises between women.

³⁸ Frye, p.314.

The role and position of the researcher must also be stated and negotiated when doing ethnography. The researcher is always an intrusion into a system of relationships.³⁹ Dialogic research design relies on participant involvement in the construction of meaning, thus correcting the researcher's preconceptions. Research validity is provided by participants' responses, and this must take place in an environment where they can safely reject the researcher's ideas and interpretations.⁴⁰ Central to these social projects is the relationship between researcher and researched, how the former defines the problem, mediates her relative power, chooses a point of entry of social criticism, and how both parties go about articulating what they know. Awareness of these issues and a high degree of self-reflexivity throughout the interview and writing processes are necessary. The preliminary conversations with women, as well as my attempts to provide space for the participants to define problem(s), also help to re-focus on the ways in which they construct and experience their everyday lives.⁴¹ I have also attempted to critically examine the assumptions that underlie how the participants and I have spoken about sexuality. Finally, these problems are reduced by my self-identification as a lesbian and my prior social contacts with all but two of the participants.

Any articulation of lesbian practices and experiences runs the risk of appropriation and exploitation. These risks, however, must be weighed against the costs of invisibility as well as conforming to an already constructed identity. In the social context where lesbians are typically rendered invisible but have achieved a degree of visibility through a desexualized and political identification, and where the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) progresses along lines of practices rather than social identities, those "costs" have become too high. This qualitative inquiry into the experiences and practices of

³⁹ Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?," *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol.11, No.1 (1988), p.23.

⁴⁰ Lather, "Research as Praxis", *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol.53, No.3 (August 1986), p.268.

⁴¹ It would be a lie if I claimed that the participants defined the research problem; I did, but this decision arose from ongoing feedback and experience with other lesbians anyway.

lesbians and their relation to HIV and AIDS discourses is intended as a textual intervention that will inform the following questions; what are the broader social and political dimensions in which lesbian sexuality is situated, who defines lesbian sexuality and identity, who is included and excluded in these definitions, who is the intended audience and what is the intended effect, and what does "safer sex" mean to lesbians?

HIV/AIDS DEMOGRAPHICS: LIES, DAM LIES AND STATISTICS

The virus must spread unseen until it can be publicly counted.¹

The variety of frameworks used to understand HIV/AIDS cannot be isolated from historical meanings and assumptions which relate everyday experiences to larger social institutions. Paula Treichler has listed some of the frameworks in which AIDS has been characterized, including;

A creation of biomedical scientists and the Centers for Disease Control to generate funding for their activities, an imperialist plot to destroy the Third World, a fascist plot to destroy homosexuals, the result of genetic mutations caused by 'mixed marriages', the perfect emblem of twentieth-century decadence, of fin-de-siecle decadence, of postmodern decadence, a spiritual force that is creatively disrupting civilization, the price paid for genetic inferiority and male aggression, a golden opportunity for science and medicine..²

These different narratives refer to social relations of power. They position certain individuals and institutions as speakers, others as audience, while others are entirely excluded from the discourses. As Cindy Patton states, "...attention and surveillance, silence and relinquishing of control over one's own meanings are discursive effects symptomatic of relations of power."³

Situating persons with AIDS, as well as HIV/AIDS information in social relations is thus a huge project, further complicated in Canadian inquiries which must account for local

¹ Cindy Patton, *Inventing Aids*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.129.

² Paula Treichler, "Epidemic of Signification" in Douglas Crimp, ed. *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology and October magazine, Ltd., 1987), pp.32-33.

³ Patton (1990). p.3.

political realities while integrating knowledge on the overwhelming influence of U.S. institutions like the Centre For Disease Control (CDC). For example, the data collection processes used by the CDC and the B.C. Center for Disease Control are dissimilar, therefore research resources may be prioritized differently. Nevertheless, the CDC has significantly more resources and therefore produces knowledge on AIDS that affects our understanding of the disease in B.C.

I will argue that what we do "know" about risk, transmission and seroprevalence data on lesbians are indeed discursive effects symptomatic of relations of power. These data can not be interpreted outside of a social framework in which, on one hand, lesbians are invisible and, on the other, when we are considered it is on the basis of prevailing essentialist assumptions of what comprises lesbian "sex". Alternatively, how has the silence around sexual practices between women been maintained and how have lesbian communities set themselves into AIDS discourses when visibility is the condition of both community resistance and heterosexist oppression? Relatedly, as someone who has worked as an AIDS educator in the lesbian community, I have found it impossible to address transmission, risk practices and safer sex technologies before a rather exhaustive (and exhausting) interrogation of who "we" are; in other words, deconstructing and reconstructing "lesbian" in order to create the space necessary for all women in the audience to ask questions regarding their own risk and prevention practices. I will begin this chapter by focusing on the risk factors specific to women, and how they present themselves in women's everyday lives, noting the parallels between these and the feminist health issues raised in the seventies. Then I will situate lesbians in the health care system as well as in AIDS discourses. There is a brief overview of available statistics on HIV and AIDS demographics among women, followed by a critical interpretation of what the numbers mean in terms of woman to woman transmission.

There are a number of risk factors that make women generally more vulnerable to HIV infection. Penetrative heterosexual intercourse is the most obvious, and this practice has differential risks for men and women; virus transmission is more efficient from male to female than female to male.⁴ Other transmission routes are blood transfusions, invasive medical procedures and unsafe IV drug use, (unbleached, shared needles).⁵ Women who work in the sex trade are at increased risk of exposure to HIV, in spite of their historical diligence in terms of safer sex practices. Indeed, their use of condoms at work constructs an association between condoms and their working reality. This means that many of these women will choose not to enforce the use of condoms in their personal sexual practices in order to demarcate the difference between sex for pleasure and sex for work,⁶ which may mean sex with men and sex with women. Furthermore, there is a relatively high rate of injection drug use within the sex trade and between sex trade workers. Artificial insemination (A.I.) is another transmission route that exists exclusively for women, and lesbians constitute a significant component of this group.

Globally, over ninety five percent of HIV infected women live in developing countries and AIDS has become the leading cause of death for women of ages twenty to forty in major cities of the Americas, Western Europe and Sub Saharan Africa.⁷ Underdevelopment, large migrant labour pools, urban deterioration and resulting limited possibilities for populations to secure work in local economies systematically contribute to the high seroprevalence rates in colonized areas.⁸ Particularly in developing countries, women have a higher risk than men of hospitalization, invasive surgery, blood transfusion

⁴ Jacquie Manthorne, *Canadian Women and Aids: Beyond the Statistics*, (Montreal: Les Editions Communiqu'Elles, 1990), p.14.

⁵ In Canada, 23 percent of female AIDS cases have been infected through blood products. Manthorne, p.7.

⁶ Pat Tucker, presentation given at "Lesbians and HIV/AIDS" panel discussion, Gordon House, Vancouver, January 16, 1992.

⁷ Manthorne, pp.14-15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17.

treatment and contact with inadequately sterilized equipment, thus amplifying the epidemic among women.⁹

The historical problem of women's struggle for self determination over our bodies, sexuality and reproductive rights manifests itself in questions of AIDS transmission as well as the treatment of women with AIDS. Generally, that context is one in which violence against women is embedded. Women's capacity to protect themselves from unsafe sex and AIDS transmission cannot be separated from the prevalence of sexual assault. In Canada, forty three percent of women experienced sexual abuse before the age of sixteen and forty percent of women over sixteen have been raped at least once.¹⁰ Therefore, a woman's chances of contracting HIV cannot be simply constructed as a function of her rational response to safer sex education. Since women are economically disadvantaged, we are less likely to have access to expensive drug treatments, whether they be orthodox or unorthodox medical therapies. Therefore, any success in arresting the spread of HIV can only result from a profound change in women's lives. Different standards for male and female sexuality persist, with women still being held responsible for practising safer sex, notwithstanding the above factors and the misplaced demand for women to "use a condom."¹¹

Due to historically inadequate health care for women,¹² the western construction of AIDS as a gay man's disease, racism in the health care system (particularly in the U.S.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

¹⁰ Findings from Women's Safety Project, reported in *Times Colonist*, (July 30, 1993), p.A1.

¹¹ In November of 1991, an HIV positive woman was named and charged with aggravated sexual assault of two men for allegedly having unprotected sex with them. See *The Province*, (Friday November 29, 1991), p.A1. This case reflects the issues of HIV status confidentiality, media irresponsibility, sexism within the criminal justice system, the notion of women as vector of transmission, racism and allocation of responsibility, and therefore blame, for safer sex on women.

¹² See Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*, (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1973) and Boston

in terms of how racism intersects with class) and notwithstanding the incidence of HIV among gay men, AIDS can be characterized as a disease of poverty. The impact of HIV on women of color in Canada, the U.S. and globally is high. Since the American health care system is largely inaccessible to these women, and the CDC is the main body through which research resources are allocated, HIV infection in women is not well studied. Moreover, women may not have established a positive ongoing relationship with a doctor. They may be unable to overcome feelings of fear, denial or trepidation in order to seek medical care. Once women do see a physician, diagnosis is often delayed because, generally, physicians still fail to suspect symptoms of HIV infection in women.

The CDC definition was developed from observations of men and the infection data used for AIDS diagnosis, until April 1, 1992, is based on men's symptoms. For example, Kaposi's sarcoma is a main symptom on the criteria list when only 2.1 percent of women present with this.¹³ Women often manifest with an opportunistic infection before they consider having an HIV test. With CDC's recent modifications in the definition of AIDS in April of 1992 and then again in January 1993, a T-cell count of under 200, or a T-cell count of under 400 in combination with any other listed symptom constitutes an AIDS diagnosis.¹⁴ With the recent inclusion of female opportunistic infections, (chlamydia, yeast infections, esophageal candidiasis, invasive cervical cancer, Mycobacterium avium complex, bacterial pneumonia) women can be more readily diagnosable if they have become symptomatic.¹⁵ Other female symptoms involve an array of gynecological disorders including, vulvovaginal candidiasis, abnormal pap smears, cervical dysplasia due to papilloma virus, persistent or recurrent

Women's Health Collective, *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1984).

¹³ Manthorne, p.8.

¹⁴ *Treatment Issues: The Gay Men's Health Crisis Newsletter of Experimental AIDS Therapies*, Vol.6, No.7, pp.1-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

genital herpes infections, menstrual abnormalities and pelvic infections due to STD agents such as gonorrhea and chlamydia trachomatis.¹⁶

Many of the political issues relating to the control of women's bodies were articulated by the feminist health movement of the seventies. It is worthwhile to look at the issues raised to place the AIDS crisis in a historical context of women's health. The feminist health movement redefined women's health as *health* rather than disease. Its project, like those of other women's groups, was twofold. An immediate goal was to provide institutional alternatives for health care, and, more generally, to confront the medical establishment as an industry that was sexist, racist and classist in its treatment of women. The five basic principles of movement were; 1) women's medical treatment was part of women's oppression: as a rule, all women received sexist treatment, 2) women needed to seize control of women's health and demystify common procedures, 3) collectivity, in both the operation and provision of health services, politicized health care and de-privatized women's common experiences, thus extending the tenet "the personal is political" to health, 4) the feminist health movement and women's clinics needed to operate autonomously from the state, 5) service work done in a political context was political, and women deserved to be paid for their work.¹⁷ Based on the belief that women couldn't control our own lives until we could control our bodies, the health movement worked to produce knowledge so that every woman could understand her body, learn basic health maintenance measures and thus become able to make autonomous decisions about her health. The similarities with the issues surrounding women and AIDS are obvious. In both, the claim to political control over the body is central, preventative health care and self empowerment are emphasized, and issues at the core of how our society is organized economically and sexually are addressed. The

¹⁶ Manthorne, p.8.

¹⁷ ACT UP/New York: Women and AIDS Book Group, *Women, AIDS and Activism*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 199.

parallels between the movements became more evident with the understanding that the meaning of reproductive rights is not coterminous with abortion. They include the rights to sex without punishment and without unwanted pregnancy, to have sex with whom we want and the right to sex without risk of illness, including HIV infection, whether to and when to have children, to have healthy children, to quality health services and to control our health care decisions.¹⁸

AIDS issues diverge from those raised in the seventies in their social intersection with male homosexuality thus raising critical concerns about heterosexism in the health care system. In this framework, it is important to note that lesbians experience the health care system quite differently from heterosexual women. Lesbians' fear of, or anxieties regarding inferior treatment by doctors is common, and will be discussed in greater detail later in this section.¹⁹ Furthermore, the absence of research on the risks of sexual practices between women precludes lesbians from making preventative and autonomous decisions about our own health and bodies.

Lesbians occupy an ambiguous place in the AIDS crisis. Lesbian existence is threatened by "AIDS-related" homophobia and violence. At the same time, lesbians are conspicuously absent throughout the AIDS enterprise, from data collection processes to public information that is intended to educate individuals on HIV prevention. In educational frameworks, lesbians may be subsumed under categories of sex with men (for pleasure and/or money, rape victims) or IV drug use, but rarely in the immediate context of our sexual realities.²⁰ For example, culturally defined attitudes regarding sexuality and gender play a significant role in women's ability to negotiate safer sex.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁹ See C. Hepburn and B. Gutierrez, *Alive and Well: A Lesbian Health Guide*, (Freedom, California: Crossing Press, 1988).

²⁰ There are marginal texts and groups who take up lesbians and HIV, for example, the information booklet produced by Vancouver Women and AIDS Project, "Lesbians and AIDS".

When this factor is discussed, even in feminist texts,²¹ lesbians are assumed not to exist. The specific factors in these discussions that can and must be raised in relation to lesbians are violence against women and safer sex technology. Regarding the former, lesbians, (like all women), are raped; indeed, lesbians are often specific targets for rape. In terms of the negotiation of safer sex, the critical issue is not only of securing enough power to enforce the use of condoms (when women have sex with men), but the prophylactic devices themselves. For lesbians, the prospect of introducing condoms into sexual practices is immediately problematic because the devices frequently remind us precisely of what we are not. In practical terms, condoms taste bad and are practically unsuitable for oral - genital sex. While dental dams do not signify hetero-sex, they are awkward to manipulate during sex, thicker than condoms, thus reducing sensation considerably, made of porous material and therefore not as safe as condoms, untested,²² and can only be obtained from medical supply distributors or select lesbian and gay sex stores.

Another problem facing lesbians is the availability of adequate health care. A physician who is both non homophobic and aware of lesbian body realities is a rare exception. A lesbian who consults her doctor for HIV information or testing has the dismal prospect of confronting heterosexist assumptions and educating the physician on her personal practices while demanding her right to the services she came for. In a 1988 study, forty percent of lesbians surveyed feared that their disclosure of their sexuality would result in inferior care. Eighty-four percent reported their reluctance to seek health care because of it's unsupportive context. In total, ninety-six percent of lesbians, "anticipated situations in which it could be harmful to them if their health care provider

²¹ Manthorne, p.16.

²² Sue O'Sullivan and Pratibha Parmar, *Lesbians Talk (Safer) Sex*, (London: Scarlet Press, 1992), p.20.

knew they were lesbian."²³ These studies confirm the accounts I have heard in numerous conversations with lesbians on the topic of health care and HIV testing in particular. A significant health risk for lesbians then, is their avoidance of routine health care which, as one participant noted, is a political issue.

I was in a long-term, committed, monogamous relationship. Although both of us are in a risk group and had chosen not to be tested.

- Why did you choose not to be tested?

Because Vander Zalm was talking about putting us all on an island at the time.

For these reasons, responses to the AIDS crisis by lesbian communities have been very mixed, ranging from acceptance of the view that lesbians are immune to HIV, denial of the existence of specific risk practices among lesbians, to active investigation of AIDS knowledge in the hope of acquiring information that is of use to women who have sex with other women. Those lesbians who are concerned are often considered alarmist or, worse, to have "AIDS envy".²⁴

On a worldwide basis, HIV is primarily transmitted through heterosexual intercourse. In North America, (and some parts of Western Europe), HIV first entered the gay male population and remained contained there for some time. Today, in these areas, the epidemic is largely in gay communities.²⁵ By early 1990, more than three million women around the world were infected with HIV, most of whom were of childbearing years.²⁶

²³ P. Stevens and J.Hall, "Health Beliefs and Experiences With Health Care in Lesbian Women," *Image: J Nurs Scholarship* 1988; 20 (2), pp.69-73.

²⁴ Daryl Yates Rist, "The Deadly Costs of an Obsession," *The Nation*, February 13, 1989, p.181.

²⁵ 76.6 percent of adult cases are homosexual or bisexual men; Manthorne, p.6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.14.

Women who are symptomatic with AIDS in Canada are twice as likely to have opportunistic infections than men.²⁷ Not enough is known about the natural history of HIV to say with any certainty whether women have shorter survival times from diagnosis to death, although the evidence appears to confirm this. While women do die in a shorter period of time than men after diagnosis, this is mostly attributed to prolonged or failed diagnosis.²⁸

Of the 1518 reported cases of AIDS in British Columbia, as of June 1993, 37 are women, (18 heterosexual, 9 blood transfusion, 6 IV drugs, 3 perinatal, 1 unknown and no homosexual).²⁹ These statistics, however, are "photos of the past"; current data on AIDS, (not HIV), cases do not necessarily reflect current transmission trends, due to the incubation period for HIV which equals approximately 10.6 - 13.0 years.³⁰

Provincial reports on HIV cases reveal somewhat more information. As of June 1993, at least 457 of the 6619 reported HIV diagnoses are women, (13 homosexual/bisexual, 1 homosexual/I.V. drug user, 80 IV drug users, 1 hemophiliac, 98 heterosexual, 6 prostitute, 42 prostitute/ IV drug use, 37 blood product recipient, 12 unspecified parental exposure, 1 donor screening, 21 no risk category, 141 unknown and 2 other).³¹ This aggregate number of female cases, however, is inaccurate due to unknown numbers of women included in the additional 258 "unspecified" HIV diagnoses. Unspecified HIV cases are either men or women classifiable in any "risk group".³²

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.8.

²⁸ ACT UP, pp.2-3.

²⁹ British Columbia Centre for Disease Control,(BCCDC), *AIDS Update: Second Quarterly Report, 1993.*, p.4.

³⁰ Manthorne, p.6.

³¹ BCCDC, pp.14-19.

³² The "other" category includes endemic area immigrants semen recipients, and persons who frequent prostitutes. See BCCDC, p.25.

It should be noted that, unlike the categories based on sexuality, "prostitute" only signifies one's employment. Since sex trade workers are highly informed on safer sex practices with clients, risk behaviors in their non-working lives, which in some cases involve sex with other women, are not reflected by this categorization.

Until relatively recently in the AIDS epidemic, research has been preoccupied with risk groups, rather than risk practices. This has had adverse effects on everyone's understanding of HIV, including those classifiable in the so-called "highest risk group", gay men. Lesbians comprise the "lowest risk" group, a nomenclature that has effectively deflected thought and research away from the sexual and drug use practices of those who identify as lesbian. The view that lesbians are not at risk is less based on epidemiological evidence than on deep-rooted misconceptions about how lesbians live and have sex. For example, Dr. Charles Schable of CDC told *Visibilities*, a U.S. lesbian magazine, that it is not necessary to study lesbians because "lesbians don't have much sex".³³ Even Jacqueline Manthorne's book, a feminist anthology, says, "On a global scale, however, heterosexual transmission remains the major route of transmission for women",³⁴ a comment that does nothing to illuminate the issues for lesbians. This epistemic position runs throughout the HIV/AIDS enterprise, producing scientific knowledge that is based on limited socio-political assumptions.

CDC's hierarchy of exposure categories has also been saturated with these assumptions, thus having consequences for testing data. For example, a gay man who has had a blood transfusion would be recorded as exposed by homosexual contact because it is listed first in the hierarchy. A bisexual women who has sex with a gay man

³³ Lee Chiaramonte, "Lesbian Safety and AIDS: The Very Last Fairy Tale," *Visibilities*, (Jan.-Feb. 1988), p.6.

³⁴ Manthorne, p.6.

would be listed as exposed thru heterosexual contact. A lesbian IV drug user would be categorized as exposed by IV drug use.³⁵ This system is an American model based on a construction of AIDS as a gay disease. Importantly, the category of homosexual/bisexual contact has excluded women, until 1992, when the CDC modified its categories to include lesbians with the much contested definition of lesbian as, "A woman who has had sexual relations with only women since 1977".³⁶ Therefore, the CDC's list of exposure categories has until very recently failed to allow the possibility of woman to woman transmission and thus inadequately accounted for all the modes through which women may contract HIV. In this context, it should be noted that the most significant difference in the statistics of men and women is that the rate of unknown causes is more than double for women.³⁷

The data collection process used in B.C. cannot be criticized in the same way as that of the CDC's. Since October 1985, risk categories on HIV testing forms have included "homosexual/bisexual" for women as well as men, and a hierarchy of risk exposure is eliminated by the possibilities of multiple risk categories.³⁸ Therefore, it is less likely that woman to woman transmission can be overlooked. Nevertheless, some critical interpretation of this system is necessary. Therefore, notwithstanding that the homosexual/bisexual category exists for both males and females, the grouping has different implications for each sex. Grouping homo- and bi- sexualities together serves to include those whose sexual practices are neither exclusively homosexual or heterosexual. Since risks involved with heterosexual and male homosexual sex are well studied, the homosexual/bisexual category for men benefits from being inclusive with

³⁵ ACT UP, pp.2-3.

³⁶ Information brochure, distributed at *Lesbians and HIV/AIDS* panel, Gordon House, Vancouver, Jan. 16, 1992.

³⁷ ACT UP, p.3.

³⁸ Personal conversation with Dr. Michael Rekart, Director, Division of STD Control, B.C. Ministry of Health.

obscuring the differences of risks associated with both. When this dual category is applied to women however, the net effect is not the same. Since heterosexual risks are known, but homosexual risks between women are not, the category, while being inclusive, effectively obfuscates the differential risks. Consequently, inquiry is allowed to default to the heterosexual practice of bisexuality without understanding the yet unknown degree of risk involved in sexual practices between women.³⁹

In addition to the "unknowns", there are a number of documented cases of women to women transmission.⁴⁰ The variety of responses to this data from AIDS educators and researchers and lesbian activists reproduce the confusion surrounding HIV transmission between women and ultimately deter any reasonable attempts by lesbians to rationally assess our own risks. Some individuals and organizations contend that these cases have not been sufficiently studied to reduce transmission causes to sex between women,⁴¹ while others insist, "There is no reason that this number should be considered insignificant since six gay men with PCP [pneumocystis carinii pneumonia] were considered significant in 1981".⁴²

While the 1989 CDC records reveal that 100 of the women with AIDS in the U.S. reported having sex with women,⁴³ this data fails to signify the risks of sex between women for the following reasons. First of all, many of the physicians who compile the

³⁹ In this analysis, one can also speculate on the extent to which this category facilitates "bisexual blaming" among all women.

⁴⁰ For documentation of these cases, see O'Sullivan and Parmar, p.33 and ACT UP, p.118.

⁴¹ For example, Beth Elliot and Garance FrankeRuta, prominent lesbian activists and writers, the University of California/San Francisco and the CDC, as summarized in Nancy Solomon, "Risky Business: Should Lesbians Practice Safer Sex?", *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, 16 (Spring 1992), pp. 46-52.

⁴² ACT UP women's network, referring to the occurrence of an opportunistic infection, *Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia*. Other advocates of this position are The Community Health Project in New York and Lyon-Martin Women's Health Services in San Francisco. See Solomon, pp.48-50.

⁴³ ACT UP, p.110.

risk data assume women are heterosexual, rarely asking if they have had sex with other women.⁴⁴ Indeed, the CDC was unable to classify 700 of the 5000 women tested in 1987 because their sexual practices could not be determined from the reports.⁴⁵ Canadian studies done in 1981 and 1985 revealed that less than one percent and 9.3 percent, respectively, of lesbians had been questioned about their sexual preference by doctors.⁴⁶ Due to biased (lesbian sex is "soft core") and scarce data collection on lesbian sex practices, little is known about the efficiency of HIV transmission between women. While transmission through blood is considered the most efficient, no information is available on the specificity of menstrual blood, as well as vaginal and cervical secretions. Neither are the potentially inhibitory qualities of saliva on HIV known.⁴⁷ Finally, there is a high chance of all women being misdiagnosed. This is particularly true for lesbians who physicians typically perceive as belonging in the "lowest risk group" and who therefore are unlikely to be tested for HIV infection. The result is that a lesbian with AIDS who is not classifiable in one of the three risk groups (IV drug use, blood transfusion, heterosexual sex) is likely to be classified in the "no identified risk" group where no research resources are currently allocated.⁴⁸

Finally, all the data must be interpreted with an understanding of how lesbians experience the health care system. As I have argued, most women are reluctant to disclose to physicians that they have sex with other women. This dynamic plays out in HIV data through cases which appear in one risk category, (such as "IV drug use" or "prostitute"), when in fact it may be placed in multiple risk categories.

44 Sometimes reporting forms are filled out in the patients absence; ACT UP, p.115.

45 Chiaramonte, p.8.

46 Ruth J. Simkin, "Lesbians Face Unique Health Care Problems". *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (1991) 145 (12), p.1621.

47 O'Sullivan and Parmar, p.45.

48 Solomon, p.50.

In response to these severe shortcomings of the medical institutions, lesbians have organized in marginal locations (educational forums, HIV test counselling for lesbians, VLC) around HIV/AIDS issues. In January of 1992, a small group of lesbians in Vancouver formed the first pre- and post- HIV test counselling services exclusively for women who have sex with other women. In addition to providing a safe and comfortable place for lesbians to undergo the test, the data collection process deliberately focuses on what has hitherto been excluded; lesbian sex. As such, a historical data base that provides the information necessary to generate knowledge on transmission between women is being developed.

The entire data collection process then is not capable of counting woman to woman transmission risks. Women who identify as lesbians may have been married, have children, sleep with men for pleasure and/or money,⁴⁹ practise S/M sex, share IV needles, be in prisons, get raped or undergo artificial insemination. Some lesbians identify primarily as women of color while some women who identify as heterosexual have sex with other women. In other words, the polymorphousness of the "lesbian community" is not sufficiently addressed through the social constructs that pre-date the onset of HIV and AIDS. Who comprises "lesbian communities", as historically and socially constituted subjects, will be explored in the following chapter.

⁴⁹ If it is for pleasure, these men are often gay or bisexual; ACT UP, pp.114-115.

THE LAST TWENTY YEARS: FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC AND BACK AGAIN

There is a danger run by all powerless people: that we forget we are lying, or that lying becomes a weapon we carry over into relationships with people who do not have power over us.¹

There is no single history of twentieth century lesbianism. The project of constructing lesbian histories is an ongoing one. In order to understand current lesbian and feminist views on sexuality and identity, the shifts in feminist thinking on gender over the past two decades must be examined in terms of who the speakers were, what were their intentions, what prompted them to speak about lesbian existence, and what were the effects of those discourses. In this chapter, I will outline reasons for the creation of lesbian identity and the correspondent organization of communities. An overview of how lesbian identity was constructed in order to achieve those goals follows. Finally, I will assess both the gains and losses of that project with a view to its effect on today's efforts to educate lesbians on HIV and AIDS.

The material, emotional and political costs of being a lesbian are high. Historically, female "inverts" underwent a variety of medical "treatments" that included shock therapy, clitoridectomy, hysterectomy, ovariectomy, hypnosis, cold sitz baths, drug therapy, including the use of hormones, LSD, sexual stimulants and depressants, chemical and electric shock therapies, institutionalization, aversion therapy, and a variety of behavioral and psychoanalytic therapies.² The shift from the pathological

¹ Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying", in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1979), p.189.

² Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1976), p.688.

medical model to the "lifestyle" paradigm in the sixties and seventies is still incomplete, as contemporary accounts still emerge documenting the psychiatric abuse of lesbians.³

Invisibility, pretense and concealment produce anxieties that are by no means resolved upon the first "coming out". These include fears of exposure, leading to loss of jobs and therefore financial security, and for mothers, of loss of child(ren) through custody or emotional estrangement as her child(ren) react to her difference throughout their maturation. Few lesbians have genuine acceptance and affirmation from their family, so many lead have half-lives of lies and omissions in the hope of maintaining some sense of family and home. Lesbians are special targets for rape, assault and murder⁴ Without constitutional recognition,⁵ lesbian partners are disadvantaged in terms of spousal benefits, inheritance and legal rights. Discriminatory immigration laws prevent immigration of lesbian (and gay) partners of Canadian citizens.⁶

For these reasons, lesbians have developed "communities" that provide support and affirmation as well as sites of political resistance. Through these communities, lesbians confront homophobia, heterosexual privilege, constitutional and legal reforms, media misrepresentation and sexism.

³ Persimmon Blackridge, *Still Sane*, (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1987); the Vancouver self-help group, *Lesbian Survivors of the Mental Unhealth Industry*, and Queer Press Collective, *Loving in Fear: Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, (Toronto: Queer Press, 1991).

⁴ American lesbians were murdered in 1989, in Ithaca, New York and in the Caribbean. Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.162.

⁵ Sexual orientation is not specifically protected in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, although this has been challenged in the courts in the cases of *Haig and Birch vs the Queen*, Jim Egan and John Nesbit, Brian Mossop, and Michelle Douglas; see *Ottawa Update*, Svend Robinson, M.P. (February 1992). Newfoundland, B.C., Manitoba, and Ontario have amended their provincial human rights acts to include sexual orientation.

⁶ Discriminatory immigration laws are also being challenged; Christine Morrissey and her partner Bridget Coll appealed their case as a violation of equality rights guaranteed in the Charter of Canadian Rights and Freedoms; *Angles* (January 1992).

Before women's liberation movement, lesbians for the most part engaged in underground networks and communities that were primarily social and centered in the bars. At the same time, agitation for political change related to civil rights was beginning. The transformation of lesbian identities and communities in the sixties cannot be understood without analyzing the pervasiveness of butch/femme roles in the preceding decades. In this historical context where it was still dangerous to challenge strict heterosexual gender roles, lesbians adopted social identities of butch/femme. These identities constituted a code of personal behaviour, especially in terms of image and sexuality. Furthermore, the roles prescribed the sexual practices between the members of the couple,⁷ as well as acted as an organizing principle for the lesbian community's interaction with the heterosexual world. As historians of sexuality have argued,⁸ butches' adoption of male imagery subverted understandings of women as passive and dependant and introduced overt sexuality into women's relationships with one another. During this time, virtually all women who came out as lesbians conformed to the established identities of either butch or femme.⁹ In this form of "minstrelization", the person procures the approval of the dominant social group by behaving according to stereotypes others have of the group, thus being a predictable, or "safe" deviant.¹⁰ In this sense, a butch dyke did at least not disrupt people's preconceptions.

The second wave of feminism radically transformed the newly politicizing lesbian communities. Feminism in the late sixties and early seventies was white, middle class

⁷ Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960", *Feminist Studies* 12 (Spring 1986), pp.7-26.

⁸ Katz pp. 209-211; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, (London: 1981), pp.115-117; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, "The Reproduction of Butch-Fem Roles: A Social Constructionist Approach", in Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, eds., *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp.241-256.

⁹ Kennedy and Davis, p.241.

¹⁰ Celia Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, (London: Sage Publications, 1987), p.92.

and composed primarily of heterosexual women with Marxist and New Left backgrounds rooted in the civil rights and anti-war movements. The women's movement also provided lesbians with activist opportunities that were unrelated to the male dominated "gay" organizations. Meeting spaces existed outside of bars in which lesbians could speak and radical feminist inquiry provided a political analysis of lesbian oppression in which to frame that discourse. Lesbians advanced the feminist axiom that the choice to relate to women sexually/emotionally is basic to one's freedom.

Language was an important source of non-institutional legitimation of the lesbian feminist identity. Name-changing, (names like Helensdaughter and Freespirit reflected their conversion from patrimonial identification to a "new" identity), kinship terms, ("sisterhood") and movement slogans, ("The personal is political", "Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practise"), all served to support those women who chose lesbianism.

Feminism also generated a massive coming out of previously heterosexual women that was rooted in a decidedly political analysis. Radical feminism argued that lesbianism was neither a personal or individual sexual "orientation", nor a source of "true love" (the latter considered a conformation to liberal romanticism), but a fundamental political challenge to patriarchal definitions of women. Since the ideology and practice of heterosexuality was regarded as the cornerstone of male supremacy,¹¹ lesbianism signified the limits of patriarchy.

Given that much of the dialogue on the politics of lesbianism emerged from the coming out of previously heterosexual radical feminists who brought along a political critique of

¹¹ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: A Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, No.4, (1980); Kitzinger, p.115.

objectification, violence and power from their personal consciousness-raised knowledge, sexuality lingered as suspect. Radical feminist knowledge produced a distaste and avoidance of sex: "...we are...when we're together in lesbian feminist circles...we're quite contemptuous about men, gay men, and we'll talk about 'queers' and be quite pissed off with the idea that gay men might claim some sort of solidarity with us. And also gay men are into casual sex and cruising and sadomasochism and pornography and drag and stuff like that. I find that quite sickening".¹² The practices of lesbian sex remained unspoken, while a new correct representation of lesbian identity was postulated, however incongruent with real practices.¹³

These arguments however were further highlighted with lesbian separatism, although the idea that feminism was contingent on separating from men predated the lesbian separatist.¹⁴ With the emergence of lesbian separatism, the previous accusations that lesbians were male identified was inverted, and the claim that, "You can't build a strong movement if your sisters are out there fucking with the oppressor",¹⁵ initiated the idea of the lesbian as superior feminist. Notwithstanding Brown's later unequivocal retraction of the statement, it did serve to reinforce the primarily political construction of lesbianism, as well as the (largely unspoken) belief that penetrative sex with men signified women's acceptance of domination and a compromise of the feminist character.¹⁶

¹² Kitzinger, p.114.

¹³ The more obvious indications of this can be found in any lesbian pro-sex text, but are also emerging in the discourses on lesbian battering. See K. Lobel, *Naming the Violence*, (Seattle: Seal Press, 1986), pp.29,74,75.

¹⁴ For example, a New York women's group, The Feminists, used a quota system in 1969 limiting the ratio of women who were living with men; Alice Echols, "The Taming of the Id," in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.55.

¹⁵ Rita Mae Brown, "The Shape of Things to Come," *Plain Brown Wrapper*, (Baltimore: Diana, 1976), p.114.

¹⁶ Kitzinger, p.138.

By the end of the seventies, early radical feminism's project of revolutionary radical social change seemed remote, and an alternative feminist analysis achieved hegemony in the women's movement. Alice Echols differentiates this shift by referring to this later strain of feminism as cultural feminism.¹⁷ Cultural feminism, rather than challenging the social constructions of gender, fully embraced polarized gender differences and equated femaleness with non-violence, nature and nurturing. For example, women's sexual inhibition was regarded not as a sign of women's oppression, but of inherent superiority.¹⁸ Female sexuality was thus redefined by a feminist discourse, "that swears it is the enemy of traditional gender categories and yet validates lesbianism as the ultimate form of femaleness".¹⁹

Other experiences of identity and practices were accounted for as secondary to gender. That race and class were regarded as ancillary to gender oppression acted to exclude women of color from feminist movement. Lesbians and heterosexual women of color were informed that their concern with the effects of racial oppression (on men and women) was another instance of male - identification.²⁰ Indeed, serious questions were raised about the extent to which radical lesbianism and separatism were inherently racist.²¹

¹⁷ Echols, p.51. I will also use the term cultural feminism to distinguish between the two, although my purpose is finally to point to their collective effect on the lesbian identity and subjectivity.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Women," *Signs* 9:4 (1984), p.558.

²⁰ Echols, p.54; Chrystos, "I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me," in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), pp.68-70; In the same anthology, Audre Lorde commented, "when radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us [lesbians of color], it encourages its own demise"; "An Open Letter To Mary Daly," p.96.

²¹ Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, p.120-122.

The same anti-violence analysis that informed the anti-pornography movement was later mobilized against lesbian sadomasochism or S/M.²² Both sides of what has become known as the Sex War, relied upon nature to reinforce their position; sadomasochists claiming a revelation of their true nature, and anti-sadomasochists defining the practice as unnatural and a symptom of urban decay.²³ Both positions continue to vie for legitimacy in feminism. That the topic of sadomasochism emerged as a critical issue among lesbian feminists when it also exists among heterosexuals ultimately points to relative rigor of feminist criteria.

If feminism gave lesbians a space to be visible and a vital political injection, lesbians, "returned more of a favour than was originally wanted".²⁴ Lesbians became a source of embarrassment to feminism.²⁵ Kathy Barry characterized the women opposing anti-pornography as leftist lesbians and heterosexual women whose interests were to collaborate in the sexual abuse of women and Ti-Grace Atkinson claimed that lesbianism "is based on the primary assumption of male oppression".²⁶ Homophobia and anti-sex attitudes among the women's movement were often mutually reinforcing and helped to preclude lesbianism as a sexual rather than a political choice.

Cultural feminism took up the problematic of transsexuality, which simultaneously subverts and restates gender categories, in even more categorical terms. Not only were transsexuals culpable for the ultimate objectification and appropriation of the female

²² Ruby Rich, "Feminism and Sexuality in the 1980's," *Feminist Studies* 12, 3 (1986), p.531. The two germinal texts are *Coming To Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* and its opponent, *Against Sadomasochism*.

²³ Ruby Rich, p.533.

²⁴ Sarah Pearlman, "The Saga of Continuing Clash in Lesbian Community, or Will An Army of Ex-Lovers Fail?", in *Lesbian Psychologies: Explorations and Challenges*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p.317.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Echols, p.55.

body, but male-female lesbian-feminist transsexuals were accused of, "invading women's presence and dividing us once more from each other".²⁷

These discourses attempted to unravel and eliminate the dangers of heterosex by representing specific sexual phenomena and practices as phallic (including what many lesbians did, if not publicly stated) and the relations that remained unscathed by feminist critique were lesbian identified. These differed between radical and cultural feminism, the former claiming lesbianism as an act of resistance or women's solidarity and the latter romantic love and authentic commitment.²⁸ Taken together, "The lesbian moved from a position of outlaw to one of respectable citizen."²⁹

The radical feminist account fails to give accord to personal fulfillment and to validate the experiences of women who self-define as "primary" lesbians, but not as feminists.³⁰ It also does not reconstruct political and personal stories in ways other than strictly in reaction to (male) heterosexuality. Critical questions of both theory and practise, those related to the (re)construction of desire, are evaded. It distorts the meaning of "the personal is the political", giving it a prescriptive rather than a descriptive formulation, and leads to judging women on the basis of sexual preference.³¹

²⁷ Mary Daly, as quoted in Echols, p.61.

²⁸ Echols, p.59

²⁹ Ruby Rich, p.532.

³⁰ The term "primary" lesbian refers to those women who believe that their lesbianism is beyond their control, sub-consciously chosen, or have experienced sexual attraction to other women or girls from a very young age, and contrast themselves with women who "choose" lesbianism at a later period in their lives. This distinction, (however problematic), was first made by Barbara Ponse. In fact, the term is rarely used by lesbians; instead "born" or sometimes "real" are the descriptions commonly used by lesbians who identify as such. See Carla Golden, "Diversity and Variability in Women's Sexual Identities", in *Lesbian Psychologies*, p.25.

³¹ At the 1980 NOW convention, the Sexual Preference Task Force adopted a resolution to enforce that NOW would not work with Lesbian Rights groups that could be associated with pornography, S/M, casual, cross-generational or public sex; Echols, p.61.

The notion that the only effective feminist was a lesbian meant that not only should all feminists be lesbian in order to be non-collaborative revolutionaries, but also that all lesbians should have a radical feminist consciousness. This assertion holds that an analysis of heterosexuality necessarily precedes lesbianism and therefore renders invisible the resistance that butches and femmes engaged in. A new idealized lesbian identity emerged that in effect reinstated a powerful politics of sameness.³² This essentialist denial of difference precluded consideration of other women's issues, most glaringly, those of women of color, as well as a variety of other differences among lesbians (as all other women) such as class, ethnicity, age, race and indeed sexual preferences.

Other lesbian representations caused conflict and fragmentation within and between communities on issues of separatism, transsexualism, S/M sexuality, pornography, monogamy, drug and alcohol use, and affiliation with gay men's groups. While these were all distinct debates, the reactions and behaviors across communities were remarkably similar; rigidity, inability to deal with differences, absolute rights and wrongs and exclusion of those who differed.³³ Relatedly, the possibilities of coalitions, such as between lesbians and gay men, were severely hindered.

While radical lesbian-feminists pursued visibility, one may question the effectiveness of these efforts in creating any long run social change. Barbara Smith comments, "We have noticed how separatists in our area, instead of doing political organizing, often do zap acts. For example they might come to a meeting or series of meetings then move on their way. It is not clear what they're actually trying to change".³⁴

³² The speakers of this discourse included Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, Jill Johnson, Rita Mae Brown, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Mary Daly, Robin Morgan, Adrienne Rich, Andrea Dworkin and Kathleen Barry.

³³ Pearlman, p.319.

³⁴ Smith and Smith, p.121.

The issues of taboo and eroticism have been raised in relation to the construction of lesbian identity. Ruby Rich suggests that many women who chose lesbianism did so - at least in part - out of a will to be an outlaw.³⁵ Thus, the transformation of the lesbian from outlaw to respectable citizen involved a sense of loss for some women; one that possibly created both new boundaries as well as new possibilities of pleasure.³⁶

Pre-movement lesbians had bravely come out as butches, an identification in which sexual activities with other women figured centrally and served to indicate lesbianism to the heterosexual world. In the newly organizing, pre-"political" community of the forties and fifties, butch lesbians set a strong tone of resistance to heterosexual domination. With the advent of feminism, many previously heterosexuals came out in an environment of political support and pride; a coming out process that could be afforded precisely because of the unspecificity of sex in that identity. The lesbian identity that was constructed in the seventies continues to affect contemporary lesbian politics and practices.³⁷ Correspondingly, new community configurations have developed with integral discursive categories of center and margins. The assumption that "other" (non-politicized, at least according to a strict feminist agenda) groups of lesbians comprise fringe minorities that are contaminating the lesbian feminist enterprise has reinscribed a new, maternalistic morality at the center. The discursive techniques that preserve conformity to a singular identity have (ironically?) been delineated by feminism;

³⁵ Ruby Rich, p.542.

³⁶ Julla Creet, "Daughter of the Movement: The Psychodynamics of Lesbian S/M Fantasy," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3.2 (1991): 135-158; Ruby Rich, p.532. Paula Webster, "The Forbidden: Eroticism and Taboo," in Vance, pp. 385-398.

³⁷ As I wrote this chapter, Vancouver's lesbian and gay newspaper published a center spread on radical feminism. The article restated the ideas of compulsory heterosexuality, lesbian existence as an act of resistance, disapproval of gay men and their politics, and the conflation of sex with danger; see "Memoirs of a radical lesbian feminist", *Angles* (March 1992), pp.14-15.

deflection, diversion and reduction.³⁸ Notwithstanding that these effects are more easily tolerated than when they are enacted by the dominant group,³⁹ they nevertheless reflect the crisis within feminism over difference. As Ruby Rich commented, "I suspect that, in creating this respectable sexuality, feminism has become a mother figure and what we are seeing is a daughter's revolt."⁴⁰

The revolt that has taken place warrants commentary. Many lesbians are exploring issues such as censorship, racism, non-monogomy, transsexualism, S/M sexual practices and lesbian battering, and in doing so, de-stabilizing the truth claims of radical and cultural feminisms. Vancouver's annual lesbian sex show is viewed by an ever-increasing diversity of women. Texts like *Powers of Desire* and *Sex, Power and Pleasure* successfully restimulate the debates on sexuality from positions that are not as readily classifiable in the polarities of the earlier Sex Wars.⁴¹

These later attempts to re-open the feminist debate on sexuality have been more successful. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* maps out a political ground that transcends the binaries of feminist discourses on sexuality and, to a lesser extent, gender. Amber Hollibaugh's essay boldly attempts to clear a space in the feminist discourse for all the women who have been terrified into silence by feminist prescriptions of "correct" sex, making critical connections between power, politics, fantasy and sexual practise; "Every history of desire that we have refused to acknowledge has removed us a step in an attempt to unravel and reclaim the daring of

³⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 74.

³⁹ bell hooks, *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), pp.20-21.

⁴⁰ Ruby Rich, p.529 and Creet.

⁴¹ Marianne Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987) and Ann Snitow et. al., eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

our sexual selves. Each judgement has scaled down our own ability to fuck, and our desperate need to explore why we feel the desires we each call our own."⁴²

Some have speculated, as I have, that through a desexualized and unrelenting critique of pornography, heterosexuality and the so-called sexual revolution, feminism reprivatized sexuality.⁴³ Quite apart from the contentious claims (which *Pleasure and Danger* has as its project to air) that feminism, like heterosexism, has abstracted female sexuality from lived reality, the privatization of sex precludes the participation of those once again in the margins (of the margins) in the social construction of lesbian sexuality. In Chapter two, I argued that people create and derive meaning through interactions with one another, and this social constructionist position also pertains to sexuality. In a cultural context in which "women's love for women has been represented almost entirely through silence and lies",⁴⁴ any impulse that discourages articulations of lesbian "sex" is antithetical to lesbian survival. But more specifically, without a linguistic community in which to negotiate meanings of "sex", our ability to create social meaning out of "safer sex" discourses is inevitably impaired.

⁴² Amber Hollibaugh, "Desire For a Future," in Vance, p.407.

⁴³ Echols, p.66.

⁴⁴ Adrienne Rich, p.190.

THE PROBLEM OF SPEAKING

When I put to myself the task of theorizing about sex and sexuality, it was as though I had no experience, as though there was no ground on which and from which to generate theory...I seem not to have experiential knowledge of the sort I need.¹

Dominant understandings of both "lesbians", and "AIDS", rely upon phallic assumptions of the word "sex", resulting in difficulties when superimposing heterosexual discourses over lesbian "sex". Marilyn Frye, in an initial attempt to raise related questions, suggests that violence is done to the lesbian experience when lesbians must speak to the same issues, in the same rhetoric, as heterosexuals. Moreover, she argues that when many lesbians 'come out', they do so precisely against these discourses. Feminism's assertions that women in fact do have sex, own their own sexuality etc., are tentative for lesbians because these terms are saturated with phallicism and cannot be imported *without* that significance; "Our lives, the character of our embodiment, cannot be mapped out onto that semantic chart".²

In a heterosexist, patriarchal culture where "sex" is an essential, if incomplete, factor in the lives of these women and "sex" in turn has come under greater scrutiny as a result of AIDS, identity politics have become a main strategy "to make the invisible visible and the unspoken spoken",³ in spite of its limited ability to acknowledge that each lesbian's social history is central in forming what her identity means to her. The dangers of

¹ Marilyn Frye, "Lesbian 'Sex'," Jeffner Allen, ed. *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), p.307.

² *Ibid.*, p.313.

³ Anna Marie Smith, "Which One's the Pretender: Section 28 and Lesbian Representation," in Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser, ed. *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*, (London: Pandora Press, 1991), p.130.

heterosexist appropriation further inhibit lesbians from writing or speaking authentically about our experiences.⁴ Indeed, Foucault has argued that the *certainty* of appropriation of our expressions of pleasure qualifies the effectiveness of resistance strategies and identity politics.⁵ As these issues may well be reproduced specifically in the text of this thesis, the ethnographic method that I use to give voice to lesbians must too be problematized. In de-stabilizing the "normalized" meaning of lesbian,⁶ the interviews attempt to furnish a richer understanding of participants' everyday lives and, in so doing, map out the incongruencies between how these women represent themselves and how lesbians are represented in AIDS-related discourses. A framework is therefore required to examine how these women "fit" in terms of these latter discourses and therefore, are able to make meaning out of them.

In a recently released book, *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*, contributors Martha Gever and Nathalie Magnan commented:

Representation...is central to any public statement concerning lesbians. Stereotypes plague us, as does invisibility. An enormous rift exists between how we are portrayed and portray ourselves as deviant women in patriarchal, heterosexist societies and how we function and represent ourselves within our own subculture...Our caricatured personae and lives become the subject of voyeurism, displayed in order to be exorcised. We encounter hostility; we see lesbians pictured as vampires, witches, predatory beasts, sadists, murderers, lonely

⁴ In 1985, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*, was published by the small lesbian feminist press, Nalad, revealing personal stories by lesbian nuns and ex-nuns. The participants understood the intended readership to be a feminist audience. The risk of appropriation became evident when an issue of "Forum", a soft core Penthouse publication, featured select excerpts from the book entitled "Sex Lives of Lesbian Nuns"; Mariana Valverde. *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987), p.127. There are innumerable other examples of this process.

⁵ Bob Gallagher and Alexander Wilson, "Sex and The Politics of Identity: An Interview with Michel Foucault" in Mark Thompson, *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p.32.

⁶ The term "normalized" is employed as Foucault has interpreted "normalization"; a homogenizing power that allows people "to determine levels, to fix specialities, and to rend differences useful by fitting them to one another"; Maxine Greene, "Texts and Margins," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol.61 (February 1991), p.28.

spinsters and sexual conquests. These lesbian types function as pictorial codes and narrative agents; we rarely see anything else.⁷

In Chapter four, I outlined recent historical responses to these definitions and descriptions. Lesbians engaged in the women's movement adopted the rather problematic agenda of both visibility and acceptability, not only by the dominant culture, but by the largely heterosexual women's movement. Many lesbians, involved in the feminist project, learned how to construct knowledge from the bottom up, through consciousness raising groups. When it came to theorizing on desire and sexuality, deflection, resistance and labelling characterized the limited debates that did emerge. Carolyn Shafer claims that lesbian S/M, for example, produced so much heated debate precisely because it provided a specific, non-metaphoric language for our bodies to lesbians who were starving for a language.⁸ "Lesbian", as a social and political identity, became more visible in the seventies and eighties; at the same time, its relationship to sexual practises and experiences between women was de-emphasized.⁹ Thus, while it became easier to come out after 1970, that process, and more generally, the project of lesbian visibility, was conditional; lesbianism was first and foremost an act of resistance to patriarchal conscriptions, butch-femme or role playing was admonished as "male-identified" and equal power between lesbian partners was celebrated.¹⁰ In other words,

⁷ Martha Gever and Nathalie Magnan, "The Same Difference: On Lesbian Representation," in Boffin and Fraser, p.67.

⁸ Carolyn Shafer's hypothesis is restated by Frye, p.312n.

⁹ This preliminary framing can be used to examine what may appear to be a reversal of "naming the invisible" occurring in critical schools within the academy today. For the most part, the lesbian/gay axis of identification and oppression is named in the abstract by educators involved in critical pedagogy and conscious of the purpose of making one's position explicit, in terms of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. Nevertheless, educators and students alike usually fail to personalize the theoretical and social issues at stake when one adopts a marginalized sexual identity. While this homophobic deflection may be deliberate, (just as Friedan's evocation of the "lavender menace" in the short run interests of feminist credibility), appropriate (fear of violence against lesbians who are "out"), and/or unconscious (women are in the first place poorly prepared to speak about sexual practices), all of these factors underline the political negotiations required when one attempts to articulate lesbianism.

¹⁰ Jan Zita Grover has noted that lesbian photography in the eighties exhibited not sexually explicit works - significantly, those remained in personal files and closets - but scenes of

another set of discursive boundaries were laid by the women's movement which rendered chosen aspects of the lesbian experience to the center and others to the margins.

Truly the mind that resists colonization
struggles for freedom of expression. ¹¹

These developments took place in a climate where equal opportunity policies to redress under and mis representation of disadvantaged groups were being adopted.¹² The implicit assumption that negative meanings would be replaced by positive ones when members of these groups were granted space in various public institutions ultimately, "attempted to replace one myth with another - a simultaneous normalization and idealization, which presupposed some essence or common identity, in place of a radical recognition of multiple differences, both social and psychic".¹³

All lesbians' experiences of our identities are affected by the social context of heterosexism. Historical responses to invisibility have relied upon a lesbian identity based on a sense of "our true self" or "our true meaning". Just as the formulation of the term "lesbian" changed the social and self perceptions of those "romantic friends" at the turn of the century, the seventies and eighties privileged version of "lesbian" provided a new, "set of concepts and questions (which were uncomfortable to many of them) by which they had to scrutinize feelings".¹⁴ This understanding is applicable to the lesbian subject particularly because the sexual/social identity has for so long relied

"respectable" lesbians; "Framing the Questions: Positive Imaging and Scarcity in Lesbian Photographs," in Boffin and Fraser, p.186.

¹¹ bell hooks, *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1990), p.151.

¹² Boffin and Fraser, pp.11-12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁴ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p.2.

upon an essential notion of a "true self" or some core "belief system".¹⁵ As I will describe momentarily, these considerations problematized the approach that I had intended to take for the task of presenting the interview data.

Visibility then, depends upon representational practises that provide "safe houses" for lesbians to produce and consume cultural products,¹⁶ act as points of resistance to heterosexist inscriptions of gender and hopefully have potential applications for other oppressed groups as subversive discourse. These practises must reveal the heterogeneity of queer women in terms of race, class, ableism, urban or rural lifestyle, size and indeed sexual preference, as these are all (mutually) constituted.¹⁷

Lesbians subjectively experience our lives through the layers of social meaning associated with heterosexism, stereotyping/invisibility and essential notions of lesbian identity. Since discourses coexist and have mutual effects, all of these representations feature, to varying degrees, in what the subject speaks. The social constructionist approach¹⁸ holds that what and how participants speak is affected by their mediation of the dominant discourses of "lesbian"; by my conscious, active and speaking presence as interviewer; and by their past and present experiences in specific social conditions.

In critical ethnographies, the transcribed words of participants are admitted as subjective truth claims; participants can name their reality better than I can and any

¹⁵ The latter term is taken from Bakhtin's use of the Russian word "krugozor" which means "conceptual horizon" or "belief system", and anticipates a forthcoming argument based on his writings; James V. Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.59.

¹⁶ The idea of safe houses was introduced to me by Cindy Patton, "Unmediated Lust? The Improbable Space of Lesbian Desires," in Boffin and Fraser, p.238.

¹⁷ For examples that attempt to address the social complexities of the formation of desire, see Francisco Ibanez, "Leather-Folk in the Process of Becoming", *Angles*, (September 1992), p.36. and Deborah Bright, "Dream Girls," in Boffin and Fraser, pp.144-155.

¹⁸ Berger and T. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

attempt I make to do so may well do violence to their experience. Notwithstanding the obvious strengths of the "from the horses mouth" approach, I was left with the large project of how to work through the notion of a core belief system to an understanding of what Foucault has called the "polymorphous techniques of power", the consequences of power as they play out through discourse and affect what the individual "knows" of herself.¹⁹ The writings of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin provide a theoretical point of entry into this enterprise.²⁰ Bakhtin addressed language from a dialogic perspective, arguing that speech can only exist in the form of real utterances from a speaking subject, and voices always (co)exist in a social context.²¹ (This perspective is not unfamiliar to readers of a later scholar on discourse, Emile Benveniste). According to Bakhtin, meaning begins only when two or more voices come into contact; when a listener's voice responds to a speaker. This notion of *addressivity* is extended to include the voice(s) to which an utterance is addressed that may be temporally, socially and spatially distant so that, "ultimately an utterance reflects not only the voice producing it, but also the voices to which it is addressed".²² Therefore, a speaking subject invokes not only a genre of speech (typical speech situations, like genres of greeting, table conversation, military commands, etc.) but a social language (a discourse specific to a particular stratum of society) when producing an utterance.²³ The process whereby an individual speaks in her own voice but *through* a social language involves a process Bakhtin called "ventriloquation".²⁴

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p.11.

²⁰ There is controversy as to who has authorship of the texts I cite, since he wrote as a member of an intellectual collective. Consistent with his theorizing, he regarded the concept of a sole, isolated authorship as a bogus one anyway; Wertsch, p.49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.51.

²² *Ibid.*, pp.52,53.

²³ Bakhtin's defining sketches of social languages and speech genres are outlined by Wertsch on p.57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.59.

To return for a moment to the initial frame of the question regarding the fit between lesbian representation and self representation, Bakhtin's idea of ventriloquation allows a different answer. The condition of no relationship between these representations is impossible since, at the very worst, lesbians will signify resistance to meanings produced by others. Conversely, there cannot be an, ideal state of representing; "if our representations were merely the presentation of an original which we, as lesbians, immediately recognized as our true selves, then there would be no gap between the original concept...and subsequent representations".²⁵ If, however, the words a lesbian utters (self representation) are a hybrid of both her own voice and at least one other social language and genre, then the relationship between these representations can be explored and situated in a cultural, historical and institutional setting. Like any other identity, a lesbian identity is always differentiated by specific social contexts which are central to it's meaning. Furthermore, while any speech act comprises a partial truth, it represents both individual investments and social meanings.²⁶

Interpreting interview data in a way that accounts for ventriloquation is a tricky enterprise, primarily for ethical and, since I know the participants in this research, personal reasons. (Any attempt to locate social discourses that participants "speak through" runs the risk of invalidating their knowledge and experiences and second guessing what they define as truth) These problems are not finally resolved in this study; rather, they are identified in order to generate further critical inquiry of ethnographic methodology. Furthermore, given my working hypothesis is that we *all* ventriloquate, then the text I have produced here can too be critically analyzed. For

²⁵ Anna Marie Smith in Boffin and Fraser, pp.129-130.

²⁶ Wendy Hollway uses the term "investment" to denote agency. An individual takes up a position in one discourse rather than another in expectation of some satisfaction. This decision may be unconscious or irrational. See Hollway, "Gender Difference and the Production of Subjectivity," in Julian Henriques et al., *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984), pp.237-38.

example, I have no small investment in this position as graduate student; an academic discourse clearly speaks its voice in my written words. I will speak to the question of the social language(s) in the interviews in the concluding chapter.

The analytic questions I will "ask" of the interview data devolve from the preceding topics; heterosexism, stereotyping and invisibility, essentialism and their role in the construction of subjectivity. The first set of questions is intended to provide a "thick description" of the participants, as social and speaking subjects. How has heterosexism formed these women's identity? What does "lesbian" mean to them? Is a lesbian identity important to them? Why or Why not? What other social relations have contributed to their experiences of identity? Relatedly, *who* are the speakers, what are the languages that these speakers appropriate and who may be the intended audience or listener?

The resulting knowledge on how these participants self-represent can be compared to how lesbians are represented in AIDS information texts. The second tier of analysis investigates the participants' understanding of the object of study, HIV and AIDS. In what ways do representations of lesbians differ from self representations? What kind of access do they have to HIV/AIDS information? Who is addressed by this information? What does safer sex mean to these women? Do they practise safer sex? Why or why not?

Ten women, all of whom identify as lesbian,²⁷ were interviewed. I knew all but two of the participants before I began this project, therefore the issue of obtaining access to an

²⁷ Significantly, this can not and does not address the important issues of women who have sex with other women but do not identify as lesbian. Additionally, I should note that 12 women were in fact interviewed, but I chose not to use two of the interviews. I had huge personal disagreements with these women related to the break-up of my intimate relationship. Their rather abusive treatment of me undermined the degree of trust I required to work with them, as well as my emotional ability to re-visit their narratives.

"Other" community, (through a variety of ethnographic techniques like "personal front" or "impression" management, finding neutral ground with participants in order to attain "normal" social interaction, and other approaches ²⁸) was for the most part circumvented. I asked ten questions that were intended to address the two general issues outlined above. The first set of questions explored the social context in which they "came out", (a problematic term that some women addressed), in order to come to a fuller understanding of the institutions, experiences and relations that affected their early construction of sexual identity. The second series of questions attempted to trace participants' relation to safer sex discourses.

For ethical and safety reasons, the participants remain anonymous in my writing, although all but one were willing to have their names used in the text. I have chosen to present the speakers by way of using narratives that point to their position in social relations. Not only does this ensure anonymity, it is consistent with my theoretical perspective that individuals are positioned in social discourses along intersecting axes of identity and oppression.

²⁸ See M. Hammersley and P. Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practise*. (London: Tavistock, 1983), pp.78-82.

"FORGIVE US FOR OUR TRESPASSES..."

At the same time she asserts her difference, she would have to call into question everything which, in the name of the group and the community, perniciously breaks the individual's links with others, while forcing her back on herself and restrictively tying her down to her reclaimed identity.¹

But the soft leather around her ankles fooled her into thinking she could move.²

In the last chapter, I have argued that lesbians experience our lives through the layers of social meaning associated with heterosexism, stereotyping/invisibility and essentialist notions of lesbian identity. Although it is practically impossible to separate these mutual effects except in a cursory way, this chapter attempts to unpack these issues giving the participants' accounts which in different ways negotiate these complex issues. As I will argue, the determinant of lesbian identity that they/we make visible with coming out is very ambiguous. "Coming out" then serves as a point of entry into everyday or practical issues related to essentialism. The role of feminist discourse in constructing lesbian subjectivity is considered. Finally, accounts of marginalization within lesbian community and, relatedly, reprivatizations of social experiences are examined in order to demonstrate that for many women who have sex with other women, (including many "lesbians"), lesbian community is not a safe location from which to speak. These relations, as I will pursue in Chapter seven, compromise attempts to discuss sex, and therefore safer sex, in public education forums.

¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Cotton and Iron," in Ferguson et al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Culture*, (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT, 1990), pp.330-331.

² Solo Weaves, "On the Beam," in SAMOIS, eds., *Coming to Power*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), p.18.

The participants did not discuss heterosexism in great detail since they were addressing me, who they knew did not need it explained. Some experiences were described however, that refer to heterosexism as a significant obstacle in the process of self-realization.

...I'm coming out as a lesbian I don't give a shit what people think or like. If they think I'm doing it for political reasons or because of problems with men or because I'm on the rebound or anything, I just didn't care.

I tried really hard to make that work because the whole family wanted it to and wanted me to get married and all this stuff so I ended up marrying him. And in the middle of all that, in the middle of trying to get married to him because that's what I was supposed to do, I was really depressed, really suicidal, and I didn't know what was going on. I just thought I was a fuck up because I couldn't get married. I'd had this sort of weird experience with a woman and here I was supposed to be getting married and doing the right thing and I just had all this resistance to it...

I was in Vancouver and the police came to my hotel door and asked me to go home and I thought something traumatic had happened this is my parents dysfunction so I got on a plane flew home and there was nothing wrong and nobody said anything. My father finally called me into his room and wanted to talk to me and it was just before Christmas and I thought it was Christmas talk, I thought they wanted me to come home. So he asked me if I was a lesbian and I said 'I don't know' and he asked me if I had slept with a woman and I said 'yeah' and he said, 'that's like fucking a dog' and I said, 'yeah, what's fucking a dog like?' and he punched me. So after that they made me see a psychiatrist and the psychiatrist didn't think there was anything wrong with me. A group of his friends had gotten together and decided that it would probably be best for me and for them if I left town so they bought me a bus ticket to Vancouver, I was basically expelled...

Lesbian sexuality must be differentiated from heterosexual relations while retaining an understanding that it is nevertheless a gendered sexuality. In this context, desire/sex between women is both a pursuit of pleasure and fulfillment as well as a site of resistance.

...for me, and I think this is true of a lot of women, there's just still a lot of shame around sex and we put out, lesbians in particular love to put out this bravado around sex. You know we have these sex shows and everybody is just hot and don't we just love to do it? Well, no... I know that too many

women are too fucked up about sex for that to be real - what I call that bravado to be real, healthy, sexual attitude. I think we have incredible shame around sex, around being sexual persons, around our sexuality, around being lesbians, around orgasm and sensuality, just so much shame we're taught from birth. To cover ourselves, to hide ourselves, to be this, to be that, how can you grow up and be healthy about sex I mean, give me a break. Not to mention that three out of four women are victims of incest...I admire our attempt, it's not that I'm putting down that bravado entirely. I admire our attempt to be out there and try to enjoy our sexuality and I want us to continue doing that but I do think that there's a lot of shame that's not admitted and, so even though we are talking about sex, how honest is it?

Given the dominance of heterosexual relations, lesbians must make decisions virtually everyday on whether to disclose their sexual identity or not. A concrete counterpoint to invisibility is the act of "coming out", a problematic notion that was discussed by participants. When a lesbian discloses her sexual orientation, what is the determinant of it's meaning? Or, as Judith Butler inquires, what closet does she leave and which new ones are created?³ Generally speaking, when lesbians do insist on a visible identity, through coming out, it can be understood as a an act of resistance to the threat of homophobic erasure.⁴ And this decision to counter erasure may make visible a lesbian identity that, in spite of strategists' best intentions, renders certain aspects of the lesbian subject visible while excluding others.

Some participants spoke about the effects that the women's movement has had on lesbian visibility and the individual act of coming out.

Thank god for the women's movement or you know, we'd still be in the closet, certainly in the last ten years, god it's amazing. I have a friend who just came out and she came out to herself and three weeks later to her family and I'm going, "Wow". But certainly ten, fifteen years ago when I came out, there was no way you told your family after three weeks of figuring it out for yourself, there's no way, And that's because of feminism and the women's movement that she can do that and I was really jealous, really, really jealous.

³ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp.15-17. This is a complex question that Butler's essay has as its thematic.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.18.

...a lot of people are just so unaware of race issues and class issues in the lesbian community and it's very, very frustrating...cause there's so much work that needs to be done and they think that oh just because they've come out and *they're lesbians they don't have to deal with all the rest...*[emphasis mine]

I moved right into the Commercial area and became a part like a main fixture of the drive and through different lovers too I became more politicized and discovered what feminism was...when I first came out I was a gay woman and then I became a lesbian.

I'm not so sure that it really benefitted the lesbians. I mean it was a show of force by inviting them to attend to the rallies and that but I mean the concentration certainly wasn't for a better life for lesbians in the workplace and or anywhere else.

If that identity is defined as a primary bond between women, (whether that be sexual or not), what kind of stake do women have in identity, when the determinant of their queer identity does not conform to that "essence"? What other differences are excluded, and how? In Chapter four, I suggested that the deployment of identity as the basis for claiming social inclusion also entails the job of "policing the boundaries".⁵ Indeed, the privileging of sameness has characterized the lesbian (and gay, to a different extent), movement in North America.

Then there was my other coming out. There was my coming out after I came out as a lesbian and became sort of politicized in feminism and I started to become, instead of being the Prince George hick, I was the Vancouver hick. We'd go to Seattle and just be amazed at the big bad girls down there and we started hanging out with all these S/M women. I was appalled, just appalled, with all the same arguments that are going on here ten years after the fact. It isn't violence against women, no it's not. I slowly sort of came out into a S/M mentality and just the resistance in the lesbian community to S/M was incredible...It's quite alarming because you do lose contact with certain groups and people won't talk to you anymore and a lot of values are put on you and you get sort of routed into the sublime of the subcultures and it's very interesting. All of a sudden, all of the things that I was fighting against; having the het community define me for what I do in the bedroom, was all of a sudden happening in the lesbian community; defining me by

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19 and Ed Cohen, "Who Are "We"? Gay Identity as Political (E)motion (A Theoretical Rumination)" in Ferguson et al., p.72.

what I do in my bedroom. So the fight's the same, only the people are different. But I came out with a vengeance both in Prince George as a lesbian and here as an S/M dyke.

Bisexual women or lesbians who sleep with men are pigeonholed and scapegoated and so are SM lesbians...it's judgmental and a lot of that comes from the internalized homophobia, the difference between gay men communities and lesbian communities. What I mean by that is that gay men have often been labelled promiscuous, only a sexual type of thing and therefore are less accepted within society and a lot of the *feminist and lesbian movement* have kind of adopted a more conservative line. [emphasis mine]

I definitely have experiences I don't feel safe talking to other lesbians about because I think "Oh, a good lesbian wouldn't do that"...for me abuse of women by women is really taboo in the lesbian community because we're so invested in believing that it's just the men who do this to us and we abuse each other in countless ways...I don't feel safe talking about it. I make myself do it anyway...and when I try to talk about that I've gotten some really weird either verbal or nonverbal shoulds, rules, to not talk about this. Like this will be destructive to my community if I talk about it...*I'm a traitor*. [emphasis mine]

Some participants spoke explicitly about the overlap between lesbian and feminist politics, suggesting that the expectation of being literate in feminist discourse can in fact disempower lesbians.

I never called myself a feminist and would never call myself a feminist. I think the feminist movement is a crock of shit...especially around race and class...a privileged white woman's little plum...as Canadian women, [there is] our privilege. We've been university educated, so we've all been exposed to some level of feminist theory. And, as lesbians, primarily, that's a course of study that most of us have chosen to take. So, we have the rhetoric. We have the theory down pat.

- Do you think that there's something like an inverse relationship here - the more rhetoric, the less practice?

I think so. Actually, I would say so wholeheartedly. In fact...I've heard enough times, university - educated women, saying something about some other woman. About, you know, she's...."She doesn't have the analysis, but she knows the stuff". And, of course, she doesn't have the analysis because she has not read the fucking theory. But, she knows the stuff because she lived it and it's a part of her everyday life. ...So? And she called me - God, I even wish I could remember what she called me. Could it have been a neophyte? Anyway, she called me something. I don't even know what the

word means. I asked her what it meant and it was....It was less than a pleb. It was like I was so totally uneducated and uncultured.

I think it's a situation the less I know the better off I am.

In the essentialism that exists in lesbian-feminist discourse and culture (singular intended), "essence operates as a privileged signifier".⁶ Queer criticism of this natural, essential or universal gay identity holds that lesbians (and gay men) construct and are constructed within existing and evolving social and symbolic regions. In theory, there is a widely presupposed "collective identity" that is reflected by the tendency to base one's politics on a sense of personal identity. That assertions of identity are problematic is confirmed by the differences of views articulated by participants.

And ableism affects me as well. I tend to want to see all of those addressed. Not very often. Things just tend to be done in a very segmenting way. So, it's not very often that I can really sort of come home in terms of having it all there...I think with any kind of activism or movement these days, it's just a luxury to follow one thing at a time. You have to be multi-issued, very diverse and interdisciplinary. When you're looking at anything else, it's a waste of time. I consider it a real privilege to single out one or another thing.

...when I first got introduced to feminism and the women's movement... I was very much in an internalized racism state where I bought all the myths and the hatred towards my own kind so I accepted the theories and all the ideologies easily. It was only in the past couple of years when I started coming out as a woman of colour and coming to terms with that and feeling very good about my identity that my impressions of the movement and feminism is quite screwed up in a good way. I'm glad because it makes me totally question all these assumptions about the women's movement which is really white for sure. So I think a lot of it's shit because a lot of lesbians have been excluded and also a lot of women of colour have been excluded. I think women of colour more than lesbians have been excluded and there's a very big split because you do have your wide range of radical separatists and your liberal nazi conservatives so there's a big diversity of women in the movement and it's really hard and there's lots of people just pick and choose what's convenient for them. So you know I practise what I practise in the same way I practise my environmental politics but, yea, I consider myself a feminist for lack of a better word.

⁶ Fuss, (1991), p. xlii.

We were so isolated I knew nothing... major abuse was a big part of that isolation. We were also isolated because she was totally homophobic and she didn't want to have anything to do with anything called a lesbian - we didn't call ourselves lesbians. We didn't call ourselves gay and we didn't know any other lesbians and it was only when we split up and I found myself just so isolated and with nobody, literally nobody that I decided well perhaps there are other people like me and perhaps there are services and I looked up lesbian in the phone book - and that's when I talked to VLC. I was thirty four.

This is of particular importance to me for the following reasons. Diana Fuss hazards a generalization to say that current lesbian theory "is less willing to question or to part with the idea of a lesbian essence and an identity politics based on this shared essence."⁷ This may foster a "looking in" by lesbians as a means to aligning oneself with the collective identity; the personal is political.⁸ Since one of my hypotheses is that the comparative void of silence that exists when lesbians attempt to talk about sex constrains the effectiveness of safer sex discourses, I am compelled to consider the extent to which certain social experiences of lesbians are reprivatized.⁹

One participant, in her fifties, comments on the social and political climate before the women's movement and the budding popularity of identity politics.

...[butch dykes] helped build the club and the stage and the interior decorating and that sort of thing and as years went by I guess it started to change unbeknownst to us...I guess that would be in the mid '70's you know '74 somewhere around there. So therefore... singing along with the drag queens was a no-no so it wasn't unusual for them to bar 30 people because we always drank and we circled at least 20 to 30 of us. There were sort of a lot of blaming...maybe a couple of girls would get out from Okalla or something and get into a fight in a club and that just meant all the girls were responsible and, again, we didn't get too involved in trying to make amends...A stranger came in to a club or a bar in the 70's you certainly didn't let them sit there by themselves, you say. "Oh are you from out of

⁷ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), p.98. She argues that lesbian theory's hold on essence may indicate that lesbians inhabit a more precarious subject position than gay men, that is, we have more to lose; pp. 98-99.

⁸ This argument is advanced by Fuss as well as Sunday Harrison, "Race Traitors, Religion and the Revolutionary Fuck," in *Rites Supplement* (March 1991), p.5.

⁹ Cindy Patton calls this "hyper-individualism"; *Inventing AIDS*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.106.

town? Come on over and join us". Nowadays you can wind up sitting there forever by yourself. I don't find people are responsive at all. ..I see a lot of paranoid single lesbians in their 40's now and it's difficult to interact. Paranoid because it's unfamiliar territory, it's all new faces, younger generation, what do we have in common beyond "Hi, how are ya....?"

Furthermore, assertions of identity based on a "lesbian essence" is central in this study because safer sex education directed to lesbians is predicated on certain notions of who comprises the intended audience. "Lesbian" as a sign, works to signify something, and the articulations by participants suggest that this is unspecific.

...it's [lesbianism] everything. It's intimacy between women it's the friendship, the bonding. There's more of a closeness between the women than you can have with men. It's kind of instant you don't even think about it.

We aren't just sex and which on the one hand I think is good because my lesbian identity isn't just about my sexuality and on the other hand I don't want to deny that a sexual attraction to women isn't about having an orgasm. I don't want to deny that, it is a sexual thing, I don't know, it is a line or difference.

...I do find that outside that for me my lesbian sexuality does not mean that that I am not attracted to some men because I do find myself sexually attracted to some men. Whether I pursue it or not is a matter of choice for me sometimes and also political thing and so I define myself as a lesbian because that's where I ground myself and who I connect with is women and whether I choose to fuck with men for fun that's a totally different thing. That's not about being a lesbian I mean that's not being straight or bisexual even.

Look I know there are women, I know women who have their primary when they get into serious relationships they're almost always with women but then in between they sort of fuck men, casual sex, they'll just do that with a guy. Sorry but no, to me that is a bisexual person and yea even under those circumstances. I don't like the idea of lesbians going to bed with men and personally I don't want to be involved with women who go to bed with men. Sexually I would not want to be involved.

I don't actually like the word "lesbian". I prefer to be called a dyke but I'm always glad when some asshole heterosexual man yells it out of his truck because at least he's noticed that I'm different. I think that women define themselves either as gay women, lesbian, or dyke and I'm damn sure there's other words but those are the three I'm familiar with. I think for me lesbian

is more sort of a generic term in that it doesn't suit me in how I define myself but how I use the word to define other people is more sort of leftist in the politics, I don't know a vegetarian, hangs out at circling dawn...Marxist lenthlists, yeah so am I lesbian yeah but I would prefer to be called something different dyke or queer or whatever. I don't know lesbian seems to be more like a psychoanalytical term on how to define a certain group of people it doesn't...even heterosexual women can be lesbians and that sort of baffles me. But heterosexual women can't be dykes.

Personally for me how I define lesbian is a woman who's having a sexual relationship with another woman and chooses to call herself a lesbian you know we can look at your friend and mine and you know and if we'd given her half an inch I'm sure one or both of us would have been getting into some kind of a mess with her but I can never imagine her calling herself lesbian so I think a lot primarily has to do with self identification... but I also don't, I mean, I know people who are celibate and not just for a small period of time. I mean, I can say I'm celibate right now because I'm in between relationships but I know women who have chosen to be celibate and still call themselves lesbians and I have a problem with that.

... it's [lesbian] a nondescriptive word in my opinion there's no such word but I mean there is if I listen to a lot of the ladies there in and around the community I mean it's really all fired important, but to me I find that's a worse label than being gay. Gay means happy to me and I'm a happy person so it's a better description.. What does a lesbian mean?

The constructionist view that challenges the essentialist position on identity can also work against the tendency to create ethnocentric theories of sexuality, which is important to me, and as the following citation indicates, some of the participants.

I guess what I've been feeling of late is that I don't really see myself in the representations of lesbianism that are out there. I think, for women of color particularly, I think, even the semiotics by which people are identified as lesbian, are very much white. And, I think, in some ways, that makes for white lesbians not to see women of color or recognize that. And I guess I really feel like lesbian culture is very Western-based...Like line-dancing, the whole country western thing, which is weird too because that culture is largely people of color. You know, like, the majority of it... it's just really weird that way. And I just find that constantly alienating. O.K., I don't like k.d.lang, I'm not really interested in Melissa Etheridge, where does that leave me?

The accounts by some participants support the argument that we need to constantly guard against the temptation to deconstruct essential categories while reconstructing

"lesbians" as a pure space above and beyond the problematics of sexual and other differences.¹⁰ Ed Cohen has pursued this line of inquiry and claims that by basing our collectivity on the notion of a common sexuality, we "tacitly agree" not to consider other critical differences that could undermine that supposed solidarity; "hence we almost inevitably render ourselves vulnerable to personal and political crisis whenever such putative certainty is destabilized from within the body, the psyche, the collectivity, or the polity".¹¹ I have come to a similar conclusion mostly as a result of compelling testimonies by some participants that reveal the psychic and physical pain they have endured largely as a result of relying on assumptions that "we" share a common personal politic. These experiences take place in the intersections of race, class, ableism, HIV status and age, and are woven throughout the interview texts.

The "out" lesbian may thus stand in supposed solidarity, but all too often remains isolated, notwithstanding the considerable investment she has made in resisting heterosexism through the appropriation of feminist-lesbian discourse. To some participants, feminism as the privileged discourse among lesbians is highly problematic because it poses as a substitute for the actual negotiation of other critical differences, thus reproducing relations of exclusion, invisibility and marginalization within lesbian communities. Relatedly, when the meanings of "lesbian" are carefully explored, it becomes evident that the identity we hoped would protect us is, after all, surprisingly indeterminate. Far from being only a thorny theoretical problem, the unspecified meaning of "lesbian" vividly intrudes on our attempts to discuss sex in any form of collectivity. These unexamined relations become amplified when we are called upon, not simply for our rhetorical participation in safer sex discourses, but to negotiate and practise safer sex.

¹⁰ This point is made by Fuss, (1989), p.45.

¹¹ Cohen, p.72.

NEGOTIATING SAFER SEX

AIDS education has a tainted and colorful history in the construction of lines of fault between gay and straight, white and of color, users and non-users, male and female, center and margin, responsible and irresponsible, natural and unnatural, innocent and guilty. One pervasive dichotomy that emerged was that of the "general public" and, of course, the "others"; gay men. There has been a considerable amount of critical cultural intervention in AIDS education projects that criticizes these highly problematic - and dangerous - constructions of Others.¹ For example, Cindy Patton claims, referring to the technologies of dominant culture, "When the marginalized confront these strange rules of control, what they come to see in themselves is identity".² In the context of this research, and the material reality in which the only group educating lesbians on AIDS is the lesbian community, the preceding discussion suggests a displacement of the same theoretical questions. How does HIV/AIDS education for lesbians acquire meaning when othering, "strange rules of control" and lines separating "normal" from deviant are enacted within an already marginalized community? Contrary to Patton's assertions,³ the category of lesbian/identity is not at all immediately obvious. Furthermore, the discourses on safe sex, as queer cultural critics have substantively criticized, were for many years involved in constructing identities around infection or presumption of infection, rather than discussing practical/biological routes of transmission and safer sex technologies.⁴

¹ Fransisco Ibanez-Carrasco, *An Ethnographic Cross-Cultural Exploration of the Translations Between The Official Safe Sex Discourse and Lived Experiences of Men Who Have Sex With Other Men*, (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, April 1993); Jan Zita Grover, "AIDS: Keywords" and Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism" in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology and October Magazine, 1987)

² Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.123.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) and Patton (1990).

Given the unspecificity of "lesbian", AIDS education directed to that audience is plagued by its own indeterminacy. How a woman (who has - or perhaps does not have - sex with other women) selects safer sex information depends not simply on how she defines herself, but on her own perception of membership in that community and this, as the previous chapter has pointed out, this is highly unstable.

...yeah definitely it gets to that one is a confusing issue for me because when they just say lesbian safe sex it's like it's such a general term but I don't really know how to answer that because when lesbians talk about safe sex I right away include myself in that but whether or not like disabled women or women of color feel comfortable or feel included in that label - not label - that word ...I'm not sure.

But there are other issues I must raise in this discussion of inclusion/exclusion.

Pregnancy, children and AIDS are not explored in this thesis. Women who are presently sex trade workers or of First Nations heritage are excluded from my text as well, and these are communities that are reeling from the social and biomedical effects of the virus. I have touched on the topic of rural lesbians but believe that this could do with far more investigation, in this and other lesbian studies. As I have argued in Chapter four, the predicament of lesbian identity politics is that when it confronts oppressive institutions with a positive and cohesive identity, the discussion of sexual practices is eclipsed. That lesbian identity then, relies on inadequate ideas about how a "lesbian" is constructed, ones which privilege the politics of marginalization and resistance over the formation of desire, practice, fantasy and the role of the power in the erotic.⁵

I think as a lesbian of color I involve myself in two different kinds of lesbian communities. One is the lesbian of color community and one is the white lesbian community which I play a big part in because that was the community that I was introduced to when I first came out and I've just discovered the lesbian of color community in the past year, which is really

⁵ This is what Patton has referred to as erotophobia; see *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS*, (Boston: South End Press, 1985), p.131.

good but you know it's really quite different in terms of my sexuality. I think...there is a large enough s/m community in the white community that there's more tolerance, I don't know because...s/m is very white defined, it's very white, so there are s/m fantasies or anything like that which I can identify with but usually only within that white lesbian community which I find difficult because just a lot of complex issues in the lesbian color community because there's so much and it's not that it's not valid it's totally valid because there's so much racism and oppression which we have been brought up with that a lot of s/m is kind of equated with that in the same way s/m has been equated with you know male dominance the same way s/m is equated with powerlessness in white and color relationships and stuff like that. You know I'm still I do know where I stand for myself you know where I am but it's difficult sometimes to express certain desires or fantasies or just talk openly in my safer lesbian of color community but you know I'm slowly getting to know more people and I think that now that there are more lesbians of color finding this community and more of us coming out that there's a way more diverse group of us and so there's more of us who are willing to get together and talk about this and that.

I think of certain things that I really miss, like a sense of roundedness. I think in feminist or lesbian politics there are certain places where, for example, this is especially talking to friends and stuff like that, if you go to see a movie, which is a totally bad feminist movie, but it has some really good-looking women in it, it wouldn't be worth seeing otherwise. Then how can we, sort of, explain that objectification of women by women.

One thing that strikes me is like being a lesbian is that, rarely do people ever talk about sex at all...which is so weird... I've found there's just been a real risk between communication and sexuality. I find I can communicate with lesbians, just have a pretty good communication if there's nothing sexual involved. But if there is something sexual involved, then somehow the word count tends to really drop.

From this perspective, safer sex information intended for the lesbian audience may reinforce the denial of outlaw practices (consensual drawing of blood, penetrative anal, and to some, vaginal sex - with women or men, I.V. drug use) and identities (S/M dykes, sex trade workers, needle users). This moral/political intervention into analyses of sexual activities in relation to safer sex serves to retain the confusion so well known to gay men between difference and risk.⁶ The reassertion of center-margin relations

⁶ To support this argument, AIDS educators Sue O'Sullivan and Pratibha Parmar assess the illogical inclusion of fisting in the list of high risk practices, surmising that this had more to do with the practice, "not considered proper or acceptable gay sexual behaviour by some gay men and lesbians"; in their text, *Lesbians Talk (Safer) Sex*, London: Scarlett Press, 1992), p.45. See also Gayle Rubin's remarks in her article, "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole," in Mark

within lesbian communities resonates with Lynne Segal's poignant discussion on the contemporary sexual climate for lesbians, where shame, guilt and secrecy prevail around talking about sex.⁷

Working in the downtown eastside I think that any lesbian that doesn't fit into the sort of the status quo of the lesbian definition doesn't get addressed...there's another group of women who are doing the pimping in the bars and they don't consider themselves lesbians or gay women or queer for that matter. In a way they're very closeted they just are the way they are... So they're sort of slipping through the cracks and they're probably the ones that are at the most risk because their partners are sex trade workers, because they are IV drug users, because they are or tend to have alcohol problems on top of that. ...I think if we could call ourselves a community; as a community if we could enlighten ourselves a little bit more about different kinds of lesbians and not be so moralistic about lesbian standards that might be an improvement too so that people aren't silenced who are sex trade workers or who are HIV positive who want to stand up and sort of recount what their experience are and they won't feel threatened that they're going to be automatically branded with either bisexual or IV drug user...I mean it's almost better if you're gonna get AIDS to get it through drug use than to get it from fucking a man...

I was on the streets I was using drugs, I was hooking i was doing a lot of things - oh there's another thing we don't talk about - we don't talk about being hookers no way, no way man, and there was only one way I could get my drugs and that was to get money and there was only one way to get money...

I still have difficulty being this sexual person who could really delight in my sexuality, I'm still struggling with that so shame is a big barrier and I think that gets in the way a lot of moving along to what is healthy, sexual practice, whether that's safe sex or not.

...there's so much denial about lesbians having sex with men. Just at Kinesis last week, this argument came up, you know, what is lesbian? what is bisexual?..well lots of lesbians have closets and what's this really sexual liberating movement if there are so many other aspects to that, you know, choice and empowerment etc. It's just really oppressive, really, really silencing and pretty ridiculous.

Thompson, ed., *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1991), p.130.

⁷ Lynne Segal, "Lessons From the Past: Feminism, Sexual Politics and the Challenge of AIDS," in Erica Carter and Simon Watney, eds., *Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), p.140.

Of course, these relationships exist in a culture in which lesbian sexuality is already marginalized and, again, this is reflected by safer sex discourses. For example, dental dams have never been promoted as prophylactic devices for heterosexuals but have been urged for use between lesbians, notwithstanding their unproven effectiveness.

A typical way of organizing educational projects is to continually acquire and assess AIDS knowledge and "facts". This is no easy task for lesbians, given the dearth of research done on transmission between women. Moreover, the language that we have to articulate these meanings is inadequate and heavily dependant on subjective interpretation. For example, after interviewing "Debbie" (who is HIV positive), I did a global change of the term "safe sex" to "safer sex". In either case, "safe" or "safer" elude objective truth, and instead rely on an individual's understanding of her own sexual practices. Below are some responses to the question, "do you practise safer sex now?"

Generally, yes. I've kind of slipped, I could say, a couple of times. But, generally, I do to a level that I'm satisfied with.

- Based on your own assessment of risk?

Yeah.

...not always, sometimes. It's a hard question to answer because I do practise safe sex but the bottom line is do you practise safe sex all the time and the answer is no. It's hard because like I said I practise safer sex, for sure, I'm very aware my lover and I talk about it and you know we get tested and have that information available to us. We know when we're bleeding or about to bleed and we know if we have a cold you know, not going down on each other and things like that because you know all kinds of things can be transmitted through sex not just AIDS, or HIV, and so I'm very aware in that respect so I would say pretty much I practise a very safe sex. If there was more information out I might find that I'm not practising as safe sex as I could.

Interestingly enough, as I get older I get a little smarter and I'm tired too, I've done the bar circuit and the one-night stands and I've fallen into a pattern of having fairly monogamous relationships, fairly monogamous.

-That's like kind of pregnant.

Yes, kind of pregnant.

I concur with Patton that there is a more totalized language for HIV, AIDS and immune systems than we have for sexual practices and community formations.⁸ This asymmetry makes AIDS education efforts for lesbians extremely difficult to negotiate in practise. In addition to working through the contested layers of meaning evoked through a discussion of lesbian identity and essentialism, (that is, we are speaking to each other now), there is the problem of language. The language of sexuality is *essentially* phallic. In spite of its heterosexual saturation, gay men have succeeded in constructing a vast lexicon of terms that proved fruitful in facilitating safer sex meanings. Lesbians' positions in relations of gender preclude possibilities of such an effective appropriation of language. Straight feminists are still on the front lines of abortion rallies trying to claim their right to their bodies from the opposite gender and, while not always immediate, this reality does not escape lesbians. Indeed, it may even complicate matters. Many lesbians are aware of the differences, aware that in the gendered tension between pleasure and danger, pleasure usually wins. Therefore, while lesbians foray into the rough terrain of an explicit sexual language, that venture is nevertheless troubled by stereotypes and gendered meanings which, to many, seem inescapable.

...well I hate this - that lesbians only have sex with lesbians and all we do is eat each other out - it's so bogus - there is so much more going on - I've only ever had one relationship where that was true and that didn't last very long. It's like gay men have their own language, straight men have their own language, straight women have their own language but I don't think we have our own language that belongs to us, this is how we talk about sex, you know, because what we have is either what the straight men say or what the straight women say and we're not allowed to say any of those things really... because who wants to identify with heterosexuals in any way? Well, most lesbians when they talk about sex don't want to... if you said "pussy", that's straight men and if you say "vagina" that's medical in our bedrooms. What do we use?

⁸ Patton (1990), p.54.

I mean, if we don't talk about a "cunt" we talk about a "yoney", you know? Why can't we just say fucking "vagina" Why can't we just say "vagina"?

...we're not accustomed to talking about sexual activity. What we talk about is sexual fantasies that *others* have. And I find it entirely different than the way men talk about sex. You know men are out there, talking about who they fucked and what a good lay she was. I think, in some ways, we want to be women politically correct, not objectify women. And when we do that we forget how to have fun and how to laugh and talk about sex. And we make it some great big mystical, earth-moving, earth-shattering thing...perhaps as lesbians we get too caught up in this...I don't think I'm going to finish that sentence because my mind has gone off to the S/M women...

I think a lot of women have been trained not to talk about sex and what they want so it's difficult when you're in bed with somebody to tell them what you want - sort of a passive..then in the S/M world you learn to tell people what you want, how much and when so that's not ever been a problem for me

Most of the words like "fucking" when I first started using them, felt wierd. Yeah, "fucking" was like this thing men and women do, but it didn't take long to get comfortable. All you've got to do is use the word a couple of times and it starts. Its getting past that initial - "cunt" isn't like that for me, I can't get past it.

I have claimed that, in the formation of lesbian identity/community, the realm of sexual practice was subordinated. Articulations of how, when or why a woman wants to engage in sex is, "cultural treason against the idea that sex is unspeakable".⁹ However, this erotophobia that plagues dominant and, ironically, lesbian culture, has been contested, most dramatically during the Sex Wars. Effects of these heated debates have not retired within lesbian communities, but the problems of unspecificity play out in the resulting articulations of sex between women as much as they do in lesbian identity. Some of the participants, now willing to articulate sexual practices, found that the available terms were inadequate to specify the actual acts.

⁹ Patton (1985), p.131.

We don't have a lot of definitive terms and, yeah, what is "fucking"? I don't know. When lesbians talk about fucking, I can't assume I know what they are talking about, the specific act.

These relations render us invisible, not only within society, but to each other.

I don't know what is a norm, or what, I just don't know what anybody does other than myself and whoever I'm with.

I think one of the biggest barriers is the myth of what lesbian sex is about 'cuz I've just heard so many stories about women talking about you know that lesbian identity is being this whole and beautiful blah blah blah new age type of idea.

- transcendence or something?

Yeah and I think that's a big thing 'cuz people think that if you put some barrier between the two bodies it's just going to cut off that spiritual experience...

Related to the language question is the expectation of linguistic mobility. In addition to the plethora of information that lesbians feel compelled to master - nature versus nurture arguments, the entire range of feminist concerns, identity politics, our sexuality, marginalization (on the basis of race, class, ableism, age, gender, but not yet sexual diversity) analyses - we now must have an authoritative grip on AIDS "facts".¹⁰

I don't necessarily practise safe sex and it's like I just want to be an ostrich. If I really get honest with myself it feels like a lot of work. It's a lot of work to educate myself go to workshops and stuff. I want to pretend that it's not really going to infect me...

The discourse of safer sex has become integral to a wider sexual conversation of this decade or, in Bahktin's terms, a social language, particularly for those who have historically been constructed as "deviants" or "perverts". This social language, through

¹⁰ Lesbian AIDS educator Beth Zemsky groups these under the heading, "What gets into bed with us?", in O'Sullivan and Parmar, p.29.

which meanings of things such as monogomy, non-monogomy, safe sex, homosexuality, and bisexuality circulate, is being used as a medium by progressive organizations and individuals to raise an array of issues including sexual freedom, racism, censorship, health care and queer rights.¹¹ From this perspective, how a lesbian takes a position in the social language of HIV/AIDS depends on her position in social relations and the nature of her individual investment. It is these historical and experiential dimensions that ultimately affect what one "knows" about safer sex, HIV and AIDS.

"Gizelle" is a white lesbian activist who, (at the time of interviewing), was highly engaged in community organizing and events. An affirmation of her central position in lesbian community may be interpreted from her ventriloquation of lesbian safer sex discourse.

Let's start from the toes and work our way up. First of all you have to figure out what kind of sex lesbians have and then you get into the practicality of how to have safe sex in these different areas. So general kissing is a safe sex practice but again there are things that can be contracted through mouth to mouth, mono for example. Anything that isn't directly in contact with bodily fluids. So if you're biting or licking skin and you're not coming in contact with the vagina or anus or the mouth or something like that the risk level is immediately lowered and so breast sucking is very safe in general unless the woman is lactating then there's a body fluid for you. There's a body fluid happening out of these nipples here.

Another participant testified to the role of producing HIV/AIDS information in the social positioning of the speaker.

Have I ever gone to a safe sex forum for lesbians? Yes. Why? Because I was asked to speak. For the thrill and the glory.

¹¹ For example, cultural projects such as the AIDS awareness music/video collaboration, "Red Hot and Blue", songs by Cole Porter, not only raise issues of risk and safety, but also confirm that the contributing artists are hip.

"Sue", an invisibly disabled lesbian of color who has investigated HIV/AIDS information through her broader research on women of color health issues, discusses what this investment means in her everyday life.

Among women of color...I find a tendency towards over-achieving and taking on a lot more than you can handle...Having to be twice as good. And also a real tendency to, sort of, do things and not be reimbursed. You know, a lot of putting in a lot of free time on all sorts of issues that are really important. And, I think, you know? White men would definitely get paid if they were doing this sort of thing and just that and how it would contribute to quality of life and stuff would be pretty different. Because, I mean, having a disability, being on welfare, and, I don't know. In a month, I log a lot of hours of volunteer time and I think, like, how is it that I can be under-developing myself in this way? You know? What am I working towards if I'm not, you know, putting whatever out there. And I'm not really being sustained myself.

To "Liz", a working-class lesbian and recovered alcoholic in her fifties, learning about safer sex was associated with anxiety and a sense of nihilism that was so prevalent in her generation of queers, (She told me they regarded themselves as the "dying generation")

Gee I really don't want to [learn about safer sex]. Oline I really don't know, I doubt it... I looked at this package of stuff and I'm going, well all that's missing is a questionnaire, you know, twenty questions...It was intimidating the gloves and all this sort of thing and I'm going you know if I was stoned and half drunk I certainly wouldn't feel as intimidated. But I'm just sort of raw and sober... If I die, so I die, whatever...if it's a few years sooner at least I won't be sexually frustrated. You can only read so many books.

For "Lee", a rural lesbian who, until the age of thirty five, believed she was the, "only person like this", HIV/AIDS provides a medium through which she can engage in the (only) gay organization in her community.

Well, as you know, I'm the president of the organization - not of an AIDS organization. But yes, I have [access to safer sex information] primarily because I help bring it over here.

In the case of "Debbie", who is HIV positive, and her partner, their stake in safer sex discourse is motivated by their critical need for information regarding their long-term health.

I've given at least half a dozen [workshops] and I've been to I don't know how many. Working in the AIDS community, everybody wants you to come and write their workshop, before they do it.... I'm positive and what more can I say...?

These interview accounts point to various issues that relate to what we are doing here, in this discourse. There are as many reasons why lesbians make an investment in safer sex discourse as there are lesbians. The preceding passages show that (HIV negative) lesbians choose to learn about safer sex, that is, take a position in that discourse, for complex reasons that cannot be reduced to the rational prevention of HIV transmission. In this chapter, I have discussed the indeterminacy associated with terms like "lesbian", "sex" and the variety of terms that we appropriate to represent our practices. For example, when the socially constructed definition of the term "lesbian" is imposed on women who have sex with other women, (and this is what "safer sex for lesbians" does), marginalized identities and activities are created. HIV education for "lesbians" is caught in a position in which marginalized activities are vigorously denied and, at the same time, understanding "safer sex" and "risk" demands that the activities in those margins be thoroughly articulated. It is, after all, a discourse, "a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable."¹²

This brings me to the language question. The narratives in this chapter underline Patton's claim that there is an asymmetry between the totalized language for HIV/AIDS and the language we have for "lesbian sex". After talking our way out of heterosexism,

¹² Michel Foucault, (1978), p.100.

stereotypes and invisibility, many lesbians are at a loss to articulate "making out", "sleeping together", "fucking" "having sex" or as one past casual lover said to me, "boffing". Safer sex education for lesbians provides one of the only spaces, both discursively and actually (ie. gatherings for education nights), in which women who have sex with other women can meet with the purpose of talking about sex. I suspect that one thing that is going on when women stake a place in safer sex discourse is that they are attempting to even out that asymmetry. Many lesbians are still hungry for a sexually explicit language. This is where we struggle over meanings, hear about what other lesbians do, find new words, other techniques, restate our limits, assert our (relative) power, cruise for lovers, silence others. In this framework, the phenomenon in which lesbian AIDS educators fail to practise safer sex is not the contradiction it appears to be. The discourse of safer sex is an important location in which the issues of sex and language are being negotiated.¹³

¹³ The discourse has also produced new knowledges; the broader issue of lesbian health and health care is presently in some circulation and many of the participants used the interviews as an opportunity to raise these concerns.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME: RE-THINKING THEORY, METHODOLOGY AND (SAFER SEX) PRACTICES

For, the vitality of the ungrateful receiver lies not in destroying the giver, but in understanding that giving is mutual, and thereby in baffling expectations and unsettling the identification process of giver, given and gift.¹

The HIV enterprise can be called a technology of sex, in terms of its increasingly bureaucratized institution, the way in which it prompts people to speak about sex, and the routes through which the resulting discourses permeate individuals' ideas of pleasure. If, as Foucault has argued, sexuality does not exist outside of or prior to language but is brought into play through discourse and representational practices,² then what can be said of lesbian sexuality? What effects do past and present representations of lesbian sexuality, (which I have characterized as heterosexist, stereotypical, invisible, and/or essentialist), have on today's lesbians' ideas of pleasure, identity, desire and sexual practices? Lesbian bodies have not entirely escaped the saturation with stereotypical representations of female sexuality; a considerable amount of HIV/AIDS research and information is predicated on the perception of lesbian sex, (if we have it at all), as "soft core".³ A Foucauldian interpretation stresses how critical it is for us to continue representing lesbian sexuality and producing multiple subjectivities, (although one may say that is politically naive and fails to account for multiple

¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Cotton and Iron," in Russell Ferguson et al. eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT, 1990), p.333.

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p.40.

³ Dr. Charles Schable of the Centers for Disease Control, told a lesbian magazine that it wasn't necessary to study lesbians because, "lesbians don't have much sex," as quoted in ACT UP/New York: Women and AIDS Book Group, *Women, AIDS and Activism*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p.113.

(oppressed) realities). Assertions of *identities* contribute to de-essentializing "power metaphorized as epistemological center."⁴

In the lives of many urban lesbians, feminist discourse occupies that epistemological center. Teresa de Lauretis has argued that feminism's insistence on difference (from Man) has become a liability that prevents us from understanding differences between women.⁵ That women have yet to negotiate differences that are as well gendered - sexual, racial, age, class, body ability - is supported by the interview data.

The lesbian identity that was constructed in the seventies and eighties is not, according to Foucault, strictly a matter of representations and discourse, but of how we are constituted and produced. That identity had no small stake in facilitating the acceptance of a feminist agenda to dominant culture. The evasion of sexuality that occurred causes a propensity for erotophobic regressions when lesbian existence is threatened. AIDS has ushered in another wave of homophobia that, like the virus itself, spares no (oppressed) identity, especially queer folks. It is therefore unsurprising that in lesbian HIV/AIDS forums, outlaw practices are being both vigorously denied and asserted. One participant described these tensions as follows:

The words that are coming out of our mouths...we're trying to move away from the old P.C. stuff, be accepting and tolerant...and say, "just whatever you do, whoever you are, its just fine" - real liberal right? And in fact its just talk. I think it's just talk.

"Just talk", as this woman said, translates theoretically into Bakhtin's idea of ventriloquation. An individual does not simply speak the truth of a subject, she also

⁴ Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.125. From this perspective, the enduring quality of S/M is the wide range of practices it encompasses and its practitioners' steady production of cultural and sexual images, a topic I will turn to a little later.

⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Film, Fiction and Theory*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.2.

tells you what you may want to hear. What is spoken is a hybrid of her own voice and at least one other, evoking the appropriate social language(s) and genre(s). If "just talk" is ventriloquation, then what can be said of the meaning effect? Can words that are ventriloquated create meanings that make a difference in practice? I will attempt to come to grips with these abstractions by pursuing the idea of the "incomplete speech act" that I referred to in the introductory chapter. Since I have suggested in that chapter that the phenomenon whereby lesbians who "know" all about safer sex repeatedly fail to practise it may be traceable to the incomplete speech act, I must take up this problem in some detail.

Lauretis' theoretical work on discourse helps to unpack the complex and incongruent relationship between "just talk" and practice. In her rendition of semiotics,⁶ there is no discontinuity between the arbitrary symbolic system and material reality. The "interpretant" is what underlies the series of mediations between object-sign-meaning. Interpretants are of three categories. The first is an emotional significate effect; the sign evokes some feeling. If the force of a sign is strong enough, it passes beyond this feeling into a second category, the energetic interpretant. By this she means the sign requires a mental effort, "an exertion upon the Inner World". The third type of meaning effect is produced by, and therefore consistent with, the prior emotional and mental interpretations. Its significance is such as to initiate a habit change. Otherwise stated, the real and logical conclusion of semiosis is change in behaviour. As Eco said, (with relief?), this logical interpretant provides the "missing link" between signification and concrete action.⁷

⁶ Her analysis follows from the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce.

⁷ This semiotic analysis is described in Lauretis (1987), pp.38-42.

Lauretis seizes on this final category to position real subjects in the process of signification. Meaning thus lands in the individual subject, in her/his habit change or, as she notes, a disposition to act. A person's habit, then, is logically tied to her/his inner emotional and mental, subconscious and conscious processes. Since the meaning of that behaviour in turn enters the ground of experience in which other signs exist, she concludes that semiotic production is both the result and condition of the social production of meaning. To her, the focus of the production of meaning is as much grounded in the reality of the interpretant. Experience and habit are indissociable from meaning. Behaviour changes are the condition as well as the product of the social construction of meaning. While Lauretis does not disagree with Bahktin's idea that our self-representations are hybrids (given her claim that meaning and behaviour are re-circulated in culture), she does add one stipulation: meanings are inseparable from activity, namely, contemplated or enacted behaviour changes..

So what do safer sex discourses for lesbians *mean*? Since there does not appear to be any consensus on the specific relationship between sexual behaviour and sexual representation ("lesbian"), the actual meaning of "lesbian", and therefore who comprises the intended audience, is still up for grabs. Superficially, this claim may seem daft, given our perceived ability to spot each other a mile away. However, both my experiences as an HIV/AIDS educator and the interview texts cause me to stress this (lack of) specificity/meaning. At one public information night for lesbians, the panelists (including myself and two of the participants in this project), spent one and a half hours insisting on the need to specify and deal with differences.⁸ (The subjects discussed included transsexuals, S/M sex, sex trade workers, women of color and bisexuals). The first question to come from the audience was, "Yeah, but what has all this got to do with us? I thought we were here to talk about lesbians." "Us", it was understood, meant "real

⁸ Lesbian and HIV/AIDS Panel Discussion, Gordon House, Vancouver, January 16, 1992.

lesbians". The experiences of the "rest of us", now expelled from our claim to lesbian subjectivity, remained silent and the experiences re-privatized. Not all that women who have sex with other women *do* is articulated. In terms of the interviews, I was surprised with the diversity of definitions for "lesbian" expressed.

In doing this research, it occurred to me regularly that the method I was using ought to bear a meaningful relationship to this enterprise of speaking to each other. I began to regard the methodology as an instance of dialogue between women who have sex with other women, the ways in which we can negotiate differences that have everything to do with power. The following hybrid thoughts are influenced by two speakers I was fortunate enough to hear, Trinh-T Minh ha and Della Grace.⁹

The works of Trin-T Minh ha are an ongoing process of challenging western productions of knowledge. She refutes the categorizations of meaning and knowledge because cultural phenomena are always changing and in motion. Cultural productions, she insists, should not refer to "facts" but to the information that is the motion between subjective experiences and formalized meaning. The pursuit of knowledge can then only be advanced when more questions are invited by a text. For example, I hope that my ideas on the *relationship* between lesbians and safer sex discourse (final notes of Chapter seven) generate some explicit narratives on why a lesbian makes an investment in the HIV/AIDS discourse on safer sex.

The implications for ethnography are significant. Interview data cannot be interpreted as factual information, but as representative of that moment in the relationship between interviewer and participant. My presence as interviewer changes the context,

⁹ Trinh-T Minh ha, Harbourfront presentation, Toronto, May 14, 1993 and Della Grace, "Xenomorphis" at *Queer Sites: Bodies at Work, Bodies at Play*, May 14, 1993. Both speakers radically prodded me to re-think my "role" as ethnographer for which I am grateful.

so that what I am "in fact" capturing is the tension between "natural" and "faked". This is part of her overall strategy to break the dualist relation between subject and object, between center and margin. (This ethnography can not be characterized as a relation of center (interviewer/I) to margin (participants/them), given our mutual lot in dominant relations of power). She pursues displacement of center(s) by repeatedly introducing difference within difference; "the transformation (without master) of other selves through one's self".¹⁰

These ideas reverberated with the presentation by Della Grace that I attended some hours earlier. However, Grace, an S/M photographer,¹¹ embraces the role of master in both the transformation of selves and in the explication of limits. I want to pursue Grace's ideas of using S/M, not for pleasure, although it does not exclude this, but as a model of discourse, particularly in regards to this ethnography.¹² There are several reasons for this radical departure.

First of all, S/M has played a productive role in de-stabilizing the essentialist ground of "lesbian". Its practitioners are positioned outside of dominant lesbian culture and, from that location, call attention to those in the center of that culture who marginalize those who acknowledge there can be gratification in dominating and/or being dominated. To me, this evokes Laretis's discussion on the "subject of feminism", wherein the radical potential of feminism is its accounting for certain *processes*, not representations, from the position of real women who are at once inside *and* outside of the ideology of gender. Displacing the subject to lesbianism, and substituting "lesbians" for "women", an S/M lesbian is positioned both inside (as Lesbian, as representation, after all) and outside

¹⁰ Trinh-T Minh ha (1990), p.332.

¹¹ She defines herself as an S/M photographer by virtue of her practice, photo subject matter and relationship with subjects.

¹² S/M may be defined as a form of eroticism based on a *consensual* exchange of power and involving a directly experienced sense of responsibility.

(as subjects in real, physical engagements) of the ideology of lesbianism. This is the site of contradiction, one which, Lauretis notes, is "the very condition of possibility".¹³

Furthermore, the congruencies between how one self-represents and behaves in S/M provides a practical point of entry into the theoretical abstractions of semiosis. In S/M, the consequences of one's utterances occur in the body and through actions. In preparation of a sexual scene, the roles of the dominant ("top") and the submissive ("bottom") players are elaborately negotiated, including how much pain the bottom can take. Should the masochist mis-represent the degree of pain she can tolerate, it will hurt too much, sometimes, it is a matter of life and death...This relation is huddled in discourse theory. S/M participants are obviously aware that they are playing roles, and the words they utter support their respective roles. More specific to the question of meaning as I have framed it here, the speaker ("top" or "bottom") must be highly conscious of the relation between these acts of ventriloquation and the effects on the players' bodies. Following de Lauretis' argument that meaning is physical, a fully completed speech act is therefore produceable.

The concept of ventriloquation can become a thorn in the side of ethnography. Ethnographers, as the term implies, are specially trained, honed for their enterprise, unlike the other half of their work, the participants. *They know this*. Convinced of the participants' relative lack of power, the ethnographer essentially tries to keep her own exertion of power in check. Like the interview data on the unspecificity of lesbian "sex", there is a vagueness in ethnographic methodology. In both, power, social positions (however temporary) and what both subjects want to have happen are not explicitly laid out. That is, who will gain, and how, in what ways are both going to be satisfied?

¹³ Lauretis (1987), p.10.

Critical ethnographers typically address this problem with a "positioning statement", a section in the final text delineating who the researcher is in terms of relations of power, privilege etc. I am still unconvinced that this statement does more than act as a rhetorical alibi for not actually negotiating that position with participants.¹⁴

Grace's ethnography requires participants who know "what to ask for, when and how", and the researcher to actually *perform* according to her position in power. Perhaps because I had completed most of this text before developing these ideas, I believe that, while no abuse occurred in my interviews, these relations were not sufficiently examined, except perhaps theoretically. In my interviews, I notice inconsistencies in relation to my presence. At times, I felt that I imposed too much self-censorship in the interests of having the participants define their own reality.¹⁵ Other times, I was aware of dropping questions and sometimes leading questions. In both cases, the discursive space I occupied was not directly negotiated with the participants. Like the subjects of Grace's photography, there were some elements of eroticism underlying the interviews which I, in proper academic form, refused permission to enter, although I can argue that these played a role in the transformation of (my) self.

It is precisely these kinds of issues that I have grappled with throughout researching and writing this manuscript and that I now want to argue are reproduced in the arena of negotiating safer sex between women. Categories of knowledge and meaning persist alongside the fluidity of fantasy, eroticism and interplays of power. Safer sex information that is framed within rational categories of private behaviours and which

¹⁴ Relatedly, Trinh-T Minh ha argues that the ethnographer's imposition of power is not done by force, as in the colonial model; in contemporary ethnography, it takes the form of a consent letter; her lecture, March 14, 1993.

¹⁵ Perhaps this effect is inevitable in the ethnographer as "passive participant", a role so difficult to navigate through. In her critically sensitive ethnography, Janisse Browning also raises questions about this role; see her M.A. thesis, *Part of the Patchwork: Representations of Race and Gender in Theatre*, (Simon Fraser University, 1992), pp.60-61.

ignores the slippery movements of "polymorphous perversity" exist mainly at the level of Conscious, which in itself is insufficient for a complete meaning effect.

Every time we have been afraid of our own desires, we have robbed ourselves of the ability to act. Our collective fear of the dangers of sexuality has forced us into a position where we have created a theory from the body of damage done to us.¹⁶

The critical issues of difference within lesbian communities must be situated in the broader material reality. HIV and AIDS have become the medium for a wider struggle over sexual freedom, queer rights, women's liberation, family values, pleasure, diversity, difference and death.¹⁷ Lesbians are part of this and the outcomes will have profound effects on our lives. In that sense, lesbians more than any other group should understand HIV/AIDS as an epidemic of signification.¹⁸ Catapulted into this epidemic, lesbians are forced to re-examine the investment in feminism and relatedly, our uneasy history of alliances with gay men,¹⁹ our non-explicitness, non-agency, homophobia and erotophobia. At the same time, the belief - and we can't evaluate yet whether it is justified - that this sexual identity suffices as a prophylactic demands de-stabilizing, particularly in light of the failure in discussing the diversity of our experiences (drug use, work, race, class, but mostly sexual, and as this intersects with all of these listed).

¹⁶ Amber Hollibaugh, "Desire for the Future," in Carole Vance, ed. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p.406.

¹⁷ Sue O'Sullivan and Pratibha Parmar, *Lesbians Talk (Safer) Sex*, (London: Scarlet Press, 1992), p.48.

¹⁸ Paula Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp.31-70.

¹⁹ In the past and still, many lesbians have admonished gay men for their unexamined sexism. Today, personal, intellectual and political coalitions are developing between gay men and lesbians that are arguably unprecedented. Indeed, we have so much in common, we are calling ourselves "queers". Through this, however, a critique of feminism has been launched from another location; queers who are disappointed with feminism's failure to take up AIDS. See Lynne Segal, "Lessons From the Past: Feminism, Sexual Politics and the Challenge of AIDS," in Erica Carter and Simon Watney, eds., *Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), pp.133-146.

And finally, these meanings must circulate through a health care system that is plagued by homophobia.

It is no wonder the business of safer sex education for lesbians is so confusing. As O'Sullivan and Parmar have written:

Today, some are saying that safer sex for lesbians is a red herring: it detracts from the real ways lesbians are affected by HIV and obscures the need for safer-sex education and practice in the communities and groups who are really at risk. Others say this position is irresponsible: no one knows for sure if the virus can be transmitted by oral sex, for instance, and it is better to be safe than sorry. Still others, including some positive lesbians, are convinced that lesbian sexual transmission has already happened and may happen more if lesbians don't practise safer sex now.²⁰

I have argued that the language of safer sex has become a social language for groups and speakers that are on the margins of dominant white, heterosexual, middle class culture, but at the center of those subcultural formations. This social language becomes one through which we may ventriloquate, but not necessarily incorporate into practice. To be linguistically mobile in safer sex discourse neither means I am adept with latex nor indeed that I have resolved outstanding issues regarding communication among ourselves and in relation to a culture that would rather have us on the moon, not contending for any form of social/political power.

While I have substantively criticized lesbian identity politics, I nonetheless think that a commitment to one's identity does not require the effacement of an other. It is a matter of carefully assessing the practical uses of identity in the historical moment.²¹ As bell hooks has written in relation to blackness, "identity is evoked as a stage in a process

²⁰ O'Sullivan and Parmar, p.20. Note also that technology supports our ambiguous position in discourse; dental dams are promoted for lesbian use only and they are untested.

²¹ The perception of "lesbian as a condom" (O'Sullivan and Parmar, p.12) is a striking example of a strategic error.

wherein one constructs radical black subjectivity."²² In today's Brechtian theatre of resistance, the lead role belongs to HIV/AIDS. Virtually every queer speaks to it. The virus and the syndrome comprise a historical moment; "we are all living in a continuum HIV/AIDS. This is not a biological but a cultural distinction".²³ In the context of lesbian existence, we are here (still) in mediation and battle with heterosexist society, trying to build a safe space, and for some of us, the "radical subjectivity" we believe we need to get there. Sometimes we need to declare "our" solidarity, to insist on "our" difference in a collective sense, we need *identity*. And we need to explicate what we are "faking" to the outside world so we know how to "get real"²⁴ with each other.

Nobody else is going to do this on behalf of lesbians. "We" have to critically examine lesbian identity and the form in which community identities have been constructed and we have to come up with something else.²⁵ Attempts to strategically reconstruct "lesbi-gay" identities are now being debated. For many of the reasons I have raised throughout this text, more women who have sex with women are distancing themselves from essentialist identities. Indeed one of the reasons the politics of AIDS demands our participation is that it tilts the strategy to one side. Lesbianism is not in itself a vaccine. The virus insists that we unfasten ourselves from our identity and speak explicitly of our practices, this even at the risk of heterosexual consumption which occurs at the significant human expense of our psychic, physical and intellectual existence.

²² bell hooks, *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), p.20.

²³ Francisco Ibanez-Carrasco, *An Ethnographic Cross-Cultural Exploration of the Translations Between The Official Safe Sex Discourse and Lived Experiences of Men Who Have Sex With Men*, (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, April 1993), p.14.

²⁴ I write "get real" to playfully resonate with the ideas expressed by Tina Portillo, in her article, "I Get Real: Celebrating My Sodomasochistic Soul", in particular, the careful detail in her explication of her sexual desires and practices; Mark Thompson, ed., *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1991), pp.49-55.

²⁵ One recent example of such a renegotiation was the conference held in Toronto, *Queer Sites: Bodies at Work, Bodies at Play*, May 13-15, 1993.

APPENDIX 1: INFORMED CONSENT BY SUBJECTS TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

The research topic I am engaged in for my M.A. thesis is entitled, "Lesbians and Safer sex Discourses: Identity Barriers, Fluid Practices". It is an academic attempt to represent a range of critical issues relating to AIDS education for lesbians which I believe have thus far been inadequately addressed. With the participation of subjects who self-identify as a lesbian, I will explore what lesbians know about HIV and AIDS and the ways in which various institutions (such as heterosexism) help or hinder our ability to understand the social, political as well as health concerns surrounding AIDS. The critical data for this research is a series of interviews with between ten and fifteen participants.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in one interview for one half to one hour in length. The topics addressed will be biographical details of your life pertaining to your experiences of identity, your views on lesbian identities and communities, safer sex information and practices. You will have the opportunity to review transcripts of the interviews and to read and comment on the research draft.

Understanding that there is always some personal risk resulting from the disclosure of sexual identity, your name will not be used in the final document. You have every right to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice. Following the study, the tapes and transcripts will be disposed of unless you specify otherwise. I would be pleased to answer any questions you have about the study at any time.

If you have any concerns or complaints about the research process which you would like to raise with someone other than me, please contact Michael Manley-Casimir, Director of Faculty of Education, Graduate Program at 291-3395.

If you agree to participate, please sign a copy of this letter and return it to me personally, or by mail to:

Oline Luinenburg
Box 863
Lake Cowichan, B.C.
V0R 2G0

Participant's signature

Yours sincerely,

Date:

Oline Luinenburg

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- 1: What was the context of your "coming out"?
- 2: How do you define "lesbian"?
- 3: How do you define yourself?
- 4: What, if any, is your relation to feminism and/or the women's movement?
- 5: Do you have feelings, fantasies, experiences that you feel you are unable to share with other lesbians?
- 6: Have you ever gone to safer sex forums for lesbians? Why or why not?
- 7: Have you ever had an HIV test?
- 8: What do you think are the barriers for lesbians in practising safer sex?
- 9: Do you practise safer sex now?
- 10: Is there anything I have not asked you that you would like to talk about?

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