Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures

Joyce Trebilcot
Vivienne Louise
Kitty Tsui
Ann Ferguson
Julia Penelope
Marthe Rosenfeld
Claudia Card
Anna Lee
María Lugones
Edwina Franchild
Caryatis Cardea
Baba Copper
Bette S. Tallen
Michèle Causse
Sarah Lucia Hoagland
Nett Hart
Marilyn Frye
Kim Hall
Jacquelyn N. Zita
Monique Wittig
Nicole Brossard
Gloria E. Anzaldúa
Jeffner Allen

Jeffner Allen

Is There a Lesbian Culture?

ANN FERGUSON

What is lesbianism?[1] Is it a universal, crosscultural concept and identity or is it historically specific to that period of world history in which industrial societies develop? Do lesbians have a culture that cuts across the cultures of race, class and society? If so, is it co-extensive with women's culture? If not, how does it differ? Is being a lesbian like being Jewish or Afro-American? That is, is it like an ethnic identity: a social aspect of self that is deeper than a mere "preference" which can be changed by individual whim? Or, are homosexual desires a part of every human Unconscious even though repressed by the majority? Finally, is it plausible to argue that being a lesbian is a political act: an act of resistance to patriarchy? If so, how is it related to feminism?

Feminist theoretical answers to these questions have presupposed either a continuous, a discontinuous or a deconstructivist approach to understanding lesbianism. I shall critique all of these approaches, as much for their political implications as for their historical inadequacies, and offer a dialectical theory of lesbian cultures as cultures of resistance. Due to different systems of social domination in different countries, including forms of patriarchy (Ferguson, 1984, 1989, in press), class-divided production, racism and ethni-

---

[1] The original paper from which this version is drawn is longer and more fully argued. It is to be found in Ann Ferguson, *Sexual Democracy: Women, Oppression and Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, forthcoming).

cism, there is at present no international lesbian culture, though there are women who primarily love and/or have sex with women in every society. Lesbian-feminist theory and politics must acknowledge this discontinuity in our sisterhood before we can change it.

An international lesbian culture cannot be just defined or wished into existence, in the manner implied by some radical feminist theorists (cf. Cook, 1977; Daly, 1979, 1982; Rich, 1980). Indeed, as I shall argue, the very *concept* of an international lesbian culture is politically problematic, for the most likely model under which it could come into existence is a cultural imperialist one, of Western lesbian liberation movements importing our notions of the proper values for a lesbian culture of resistance onto other societies. Rather than taking as our political project the creation of an international lesbian culture, we would do better to work for the construction of international lesbian, feminist and gay liberation *movements* which develop a radical democratic form for promoting the development of indigenous national and local lesbian, feminist and gay oppositional cultures in their particular locales, social classes and racial and ethnic groups.[2] Only after such a political movement is created would the pre-conditions for a universal lesbian culture be present.

In order to develop the view that there is no international lesbian culture and the political implications of this for lesbian and feminist theory, let us consider different ways of conceptualizing culture and of framing lesbian history.

Lesbian Culture

What is a culture? Before we can answer the question of whether a lesbian culture exists, we need to define our terms. Lesbian-feminist theorists have claimed that there is a universal women's culture hidden under patriarchal cultures (Barry, 1969). Some say women's communities preceded patriarchal

[2] I owe this distinction between an international *movement* and an international *culture* to Cindy Patton.

societies 2(cf. Reed, 1973, Grahn, 1974, Cavin, 1985). Within women's cultural networks, some argue, women-loving women from an even more invisible lesbian culture (Cook, 1977, Rich, 1980). A more recent approach is to look at women's separate institutions and communities — convents, Chinese marriage resisters, contemporary lesbian communities—as examples of "gyn/affectionate" women's oppositional cultures without labelling them as "lesbian" (Raymond, 1986). This is at odds with Judy Grahn's view, since for her a distinctive social group of women, say spinsters, can be defined as lesbian, and as part of a gay culture, independently of whether they identify as such, just in case they perform what she calls a "gay office". But other lesbian-feminist theorists (MacKinnon, 1986) suggest that neither an authentic nor a women's culture exist in male dominant societies, for gender identity and sexual desires are patriarchally constructed. To assess these opposing claims we need to understand what constitutes a culture.

Anthropologists have studied different societies using a very broad concept of culture, as a cluster of activities by which a social group is distinguished from and distinguishes itself from other social groups; common language, values, habits, rituals, arts, religion, philosophy and so forth. Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that culture involves a public sharing of symbols, which Fern Johnson (1987) divides into three interrelated systems of meaning: (1) language and communication; (2) artifacts; and (3) abstractions.

In Geertz's sense of culture, the gender division of labor between domestic household activity and public market or organized state activity can ground differences in values, artifacts, and personalities and thus produce different "gender cultures" in every human society.[3] Certainly the work by

[3] This theses is problematic in complex societies in which those in the same gender may have more in common culturally with those of their same class, race or ethnicity than those of the same gender in different classes, races or ethnic groups. To be plausible, it would have to be modified to the claim that there are different gender subcultures within class, race and ethnic parameters which may or may not overlap across these lines.

Chodorow (1974, 1978), Gilligan (1982), Lakoff (1975) and Johnson and Aries (1983) suggests that women's personalities, ethical thinking and language, all important elements of culture, may differ from men's.

However, there is a problem with the characterization of culture as a shared symbol system. Languages, values, and production of artifacts may overlap so that people can be members of different cultural systems at the same time. For example, people can be said to be in subcultures connected to gender, race, ethnicity, religion—even occupation—as well as in a dominant culture defined by nationality, e.g. citizen of the United States. How do we decide when people's shared activities are sufficiently similar to constitute a common culture?

For example, Afro-American female slaves cared for planters' children as well as their own. And until recently, a large number of Afro-American women were employed as domestics in other people's homes. Does such activity constitute a common women's culture uniting Black women and white women slaveowners who also cared for their children, or white women who do domestic chores in their own homes?

What these examples point up is that there are two ways of defining membership in a culture or subculture. First, there is an "objective" sense of culture, defined by the theorist as sufficient social attributes in common for members to constitute a distinctive social group. Second, there is the "subjective" sense of culture; i.e. culture in the sense of a consciously held identification of others as members, along with self, as part of a particular group. This second sense of culture, which we can call the "identity sense", requires that one be recognized, both by oneself and by others in one's society, as being a part of a social category. Without such a recognition, as, for example, with societies who lack one of the several Western conceptions of race that developed with the institutions of imperialism and slavery (Harris, 1964), any so-called "natural" similarities between people, even when they involve shared tasks and values, will lack social implications for one's sense of self.

A problem with the objectivist approach pursued by Barry, Grahn, Gilligan, Ruddick (1984), Ortner (1974), Johnson and Rich are the political conclusions that some theorists draw from assuming a group has a common culture. This is, that such a group has a common interest, if a social domination system such as male dominance, capitalism or racism oppresses them, to "unite and fight" their oppressors. Such an analysis often ignores other social activities and structural positions of individuals which may keep them from feeling any common identification, hence common political cause, with each other (cf. women as a sex/class analyses, as in my earlier work, Ferguson, 1979; Delphy, 1984; Wittig, 1982).

The identity sense of culture insists that members of the same culture must identify as such. That is, every individual assumed to be a part of a culture or subculture must consciously accept, at least on reflection, this characterization of themselves. On this view it is problematic to assume that nonwhite and white women share a common women's culture in racist societies. Rather, such a sense of common culture must be struggled for and created by feminist and anti-racist movements in which women acknowledge their other social differences, privileges and oppressions vis a vis each other.[4]

The identity approach has another important consequence: it allows us to point out the asymmetry of gender cultures in patriarchal society and thus note the negative consequences of domination on women. Some of the objectivist theorists of culture tend to ignore the effects of domination in limiting the possibilities of women's culture. For example, Gilligan's theory of a women's ethical point of view assumes that men's and women's ethical voices are complementary not antagonistic. But patriarchal culture does not allow such a conclusion. For since dominant public cul-

[4]It was the failure of white middle class women in the first wave U.S. Women's Movement to do this, argue Angela Davis (1981) and Bettina Aptheker (1983), that was ultimately responsible for the end of militant feminism during this period. Similarly Black and Third World feminists have taken the second wave U.S. Women's Movement to task for its white middle class bias (Anzaldua and Moraga, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Combahee River Collective, 1979; Hull, Scott and Smith, eds., 1982).

ture is controlled by men, men both identify themselves with such a culture and exclude women as contributing members. They thus do not acknowledge the value of women's cultural activities. Women on the other hand, since our cultural activities tend to be devalued and less visible, are less able to identity ourselves proudly as members of a cultural group which produces valued artifacts, has its own distinctive language and values (Miller, 1976). In this sense McKinnon (1986) is correct to question the extent to which patriarchal cultures have allowed any independent women's culture to exist. And Daly (1982) and Rich (1979) argue that an important part of our task is not to uncover a hidden women's culture but to create it, which they (Daly, 1987, Rich, 1978) and Wittig (1971, 1986) have set out to do.

A problem with the identity sense of culture when applied to those who share in lesbian culture is that it defines out of existence "false consciousness", i.e. women whose sexual and affectional preferences are for other women but because of internalized homophobia refuse to acknowledge themselves as lesbians. Is it not an arbitrary solution to the political issue of who should "come out" to eliminate the issue by a mere definition of the term "lesbian" which implies that women can never be mistaken about whether or not they are members of this culture? (cf. Zita's critique of my earlier work: Zita, 1981, Ferguson, 1981).

The shortcomings of both the objectivist and identity senses of culture seem to create a dilemma for lesbian theory. For the objectivist theorist can pick out any set of social activities shared by individuals and label that a "culture", regardless of whether the participants accept that designation. On the other hand, the identity sense of culture suggests that most human societies have been lacking a lesbian culture: since it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that a distinctive self-identified lesbian subculture arose. Is lesbian theory forced to choose between a notion of lesbian culture that is so broad as to include any woman who challenges gender roles or so narrow as to

exclude us from any authentic lesbian history before the nineteenth century?

A way to avoid these problems is to change the nature of our search: instead of looking in general for common subcultures involving women, we should be looking instead at cultures of whole societies in a more historical and dialectical way. If we do we may be able to identify lesbian and feminist oppositional and proto-oppositional subcultures, that is those which, in their historical context, generated or have the possibility to generate a political resistance to patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. A culture of resistance is one which challenges the social roles and valuation given to it by the dominant culture. It is when such an oppositional culture has arisen, or is in the process of arising, that individuals can make, and be asked to make, identity decisions as to whether they are members of the culture or not.

Contemporary lesbian-feminist theorizing has arisen in just such a historical situation, as a tool of lesbian, gay and feminist social movements seeking to re-evaluate and reconstruct existing lesbian, gay and feminist subcultures so as to forge them into a unified culture of resistance to a dominant culture seen as patriarchal and heterosexist. A dialectical historical approach can explain our historical uniqueness without sacrificing a broader sense of continuity to other actual and potential lesbian and gay cultures of resistance in other historical settings.

Feminist theories of lesbianism revisited: continuity, discontinuity and deconstructionist approaches. Before I discuss further my alternative approach to lesbian herstory, let us review other approaches to the subject. In doing so, it is important to keep in mind that the argument about how to define lesbianism, like most theoretical debates, is not simply a factual dispute about what is included in the concept. Rather, it also has political implications about the best way to conceive lesbianism in order to advance the cause of lesbian/gay liberation and feminism. Thus, it is important to look for the sometimes hidden political agendas and disagreements of those who enter the

fray. Let us now revisit the debate about the definition of "lesbian" engaged in by a number of lesbian scholars since 1977 to examine the political implications of theoretical differences

In my 1981 dispute with Rich I put forth three criteria for evaluating a successful definition which Rich and others in the debate seemed to assume: 1) that a definition should valorize the concept *lesbian* by freeing it from clinical and pejorative associations with deviancy, sinfulness and psychological sickness and neurosis; 2) that a definition should help us with a new approach to the project of lesbian history, which could help us uncover evidences of past lesbians so that present lesbian culture could have a sense of belonging to a valuable if hidden tradition that 3) could help us to grasp the magnitude of the underground resistance to the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.[5]

Looking back on this debate today, I think that it is not possible to characterize lesbians in a way so as to fulfill these three criteria—indeed I think this is a misguided task. What strikes me is that there are two conflicting emphases in these definitions which connect to two opposing needs of contemporary self-identified lesbian communities.

On the one hand, there is the need for historical *continuity*: we seek to identify with foresisters who also deviated from the strictures of compulsory heterosexuality in their age and society. On the other hand, there are also good reasons to stress historical *discontinuity*: there have never been gay liberation movements of the contemporary sort before, nor have there been lesbian-feminist movements like those in advanced capitalist societies today. What does this tell us about our historical uniqueness, both

[5] What is missing in this list of tasks for lesbian history is the political dimension. That is, knowingly or not, lesbian-feminist theories of lesbianism are used as tools in ideological and political debates in the contemporary lesbian community as to who counts as a "real lesbian" and a "real feminist". A clear example of this is Rich's view that lesbian existence should be dissociated from male homosexual values and allegiances (Rich, 1980: 65). This strongly implies that lesbians who identify with a mixed gay community rather than a separate lesbian one are lower down on the "lesbian continuum", thus not in the political vanguard of "woman-identified women" she wants to valorize.

as political subjects and as warriors against heterosexism and patriarchy? We need to pay attention to our historical context in order to develop an effective political strategy for our place and time.

CONTINUITY APPROACHES TO LESBIANISM There are three major overlapping continuity approaches employed by lesbian-feminist theorists. The first identifies lesbians crossculturally and transhistorically with"women-loving women" i.e. those who prioritize relations with women (cf. Radicalesbians, 1970; Cook, 1977; Sahli, 1979; Faderman, 1981).

A second approach, articulated by Adrienne Rich, places all women on a lesbian continuum, with respect to those of their practices which resist compulsory heterosexuality and dependence on men. A third approach developed by Judy Grahn (1984), assumes that gayness is connected to a universal gay social role, or office, to convey cross gender information to human societies, which since they are otherwise gender segregated, lack access to this integrative function. This view maintains that women who reverse gender roles—"mannish" women and those who cross-dress—are examples of lesbians and that societies which institutionalize such possibilities for men and women, such as many native American cultures, are more "permissive" to homosexuality.

Though these continuity approaches overlap, they also involve implausible and incompatible conclusions. For example, Rich, Cook and Grahn assume that all women-loving women are patriarchal resisters. But though this may be plausible as a psychological description of such women, it may be questionable as a political judgement, depending on the historical context. So, in the nineteenth century in Western Europe, England and the U.S. when the prevalent ideology of true womanhood held that women were more spiritual and less sexual than men, women's romantic friendships were not seen as a challenge to patriarchal ideology, but rather a confirmation of it. And what of the "mannish" women that Judy Grahn describes in many native American cultures who cross-dressed and reversed gender roles? Are

they challenging patriarchal assumptions of bi-polar gender roles or just further supporting them?

Another disagreement concerns the status of men who reversed or challenged gender roles, e.g. the berdaches or holy men of some native American cultures, and those who cross-dressed, did women's work and married other men (cf. Grah, 1984, Roscoe, 1988). Were they patriarchal resisters, members of an oppositional gay culture and precursors of a unified feminist and gay liberation movement? Or were they simply breaking *one* general rule of patriarchal societies—the gender division of social roles based on biological sex—in order to validate a more important rule: that of male bonding by all possible means (Frye, 1983)?

Lesbian herstorian Judy Grahn tends to equate any gay activity, whether by men or women, with a challenge to patriarchy. Interestingly, she and others who identify as part of a subculture with gay men are either older lesbians who banded together in mixed gay bars and gay organizations in the 1940s and 1950s (cf. Nestle, 1987) or younger lesbians whose political work, e.g. organizing around AIDS or opposing radical feminist views of pornography, connect them more primarily with the mixed gay community than with lesbian separatist or feminist subcultures. On the other hand, those who identity with lesbian separatist and feminist subcultures seek a lesbian herstory that dissociates lesbian from gay male culture past and present (Rich, Frye).[6]

---

[6]The first model of gay liberation tends to conceive gayness as similar to ethnicity: it is something one is born into and does not choose (cf. Epstein, 1987). Gays like Jews are seen to be in minority subcultures oppressed in most human societies. Thus, unless we defend the value of gay ethnicity to challenge cultural homophobia, we will never be accepted as individuals. On the contrary the radical lesbian-feminist model may be either *essentialist* in the biological sense: women by nature have superior values to men (cf. Barry, 1979; Cavin, 1985), or else they are extreme *voluntarists*: any woman can choose to be a lesbian. These latter hold a social constructionism which maintains that women's developed personalities are superior to men's (Bunch, 1975). In either case, the political and theoretical strategy ends up being what has been called "cultural feminism"; women should separate ourselves from men in order to create a superior, and liberated, women's culture.

What these disagreements among continuity theorists demonstrate is that there is no one common characterization of *lesbian* that applies transhistorically and crossculturally. Instead, each of these approaches involves an implicit appeal to an objectivist sense of lesbian culture which picks out one cluster of commonalities between gender rebellious women or women and men and *re-articulates* (cf. Omi and Wynant, 1986) for contemporary lesbians one possible historical set of past women to identify as part of one's self-conscious lesbian community. But the competing clusters are not co-extensive and there is no objective way to resolve the issue.

LESBIAN AS A DECONSTRUCTIVE CATEGORY One way to avoid the problem of assigning a specific denotation to "lesbian" in order to do lesbian history is to argue that there is no specific denotation because of the logic of the term "lesbian" itself. On this view, "lesbian" is a sliding signifier with no fixed positive content: rather it is a *deconstructive* concept which can be applied to any woman who violates assumptions of gender dualism which are themselves historically specific.

Monique Wittig develops this idea of lesbianism in her essay "One Is Not Born A Woman" (Wittig, 1981). On her view, *lesbian* challenges the gender binary categories of compulsory heterosexuality. A lesbian is an anomaly in terms of these categories: someone who is No/Woman, Not/Man. No wonder then that lesbian existence is invisible in dominant culture (Frye, 1983). The possibility of lesbianism challenges the naturalness of the category "woman" as it is defined socially by systems of compulsory heterosexuality. Lesbian as a category challenges the essentialism of the idea of the eternal masculine vs. the eternal feminine, defined as natural complements, but does not itself have a fixed content or essence. It is merely a negative category, and as such empty of specific positive expectations. Nonetheless it creates the possibility of a radical third gender—presumably "gay male" would be a fourth gender (cf. Butler, 1987)—to challenge the dual gender systems of compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance.

There are two problems with this deconstructive analysis of the concept "lesbian". The idea that "lesbian" is used in a normatively negative way implies that it does have a denotation in our society, and thus that it is false that lesbians are invisible in our society. The concept "lesbian" denotes quite visible lesbians, e.g. working class butches, those who appear to act like men as well as to have sex with women. In so far as this role is viewed as a type of deviant womanhood, it is on the same level as prostitution: both lesbians and whores *are* women, but they are bad or "failed" women. In neither case does the existence of bad women threaten the hegemonic characterization of good, "true", "natural" women as nonpromiscuous, heterosexual and, eventually, married and mothers.

Second, even if Wittig is correct that compulsory heterosexuality in our society reinforces patriarchy by promoting a gender dualism that makes the concept of "lesbian" a challenge to the concept "woman," her point does not necessarily apply to other historical types of patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality and gender dualism. For example, it might be argued that those cultures such as the native American ones cited by Grahn which institutionalize forms of homosexuality do not have concepts exactly equivalent to our concept "lesbian" or "gay." If so, any deconstructive and hence patriarchy-challenging use of that concept in our society does not necessarily carry over to those and other non-Western societies.

THE DISCONTINUITY APPROACH: LESBIAN AS A HISTORICALLY DEVELOPED IDENTITY Whether or not one is willing to grant sufficient commonality to structures of male domination across race, ethnic group, class and culture to allow the univocal use of "feminist" to women who resist patriarchal structures, the concept "lesbian" seems more historically discontinuous. Perhaps this is because capitalist development has led to the historical separation of kinship and economic organization in a way which creates a much more open sexual economy for women. Wage earning allows the possibility that unmarried

women can live independently of kin, thus that for some women, living with and engaging in sex with women could take the place of heterosexual marriage. "Lesbian" acquires a unique meaning as networks of female homosex practitioners are enabled to create their own unique networks and subcultures facilitated by available wage labor and the development of urban centers. Key features in such urban centers are the possibility of living separate from kin in boarding houses and apartments, and the development of gay bars, which allows for a sexual economy permitting a cultural area and set of rituals for women to engage in lesbian sexual exchanges.

Another important factor is the success of late nineteenth and early twentieth century sexology (Krafft-Ebing, Freud, Ellis) in promoting a theory of essential self identity based on sexual identity. In the process, the new concept of a distinctive homosexual *identity* which is not simply reducible to homosexual sexual *practices* allowed the development of a sense of group identity and the possibility of a self conscious subculture (Foucault, 1978). A somewhat later development for lesbians was the "woman-identified woman"—a way of seeing lesbian love that resists the merely negative pathological implications of the sexologists (Ferguson, 1981).

The idea of *gay* and *lesbian* as distinctive historically developed identities connects to the identity sense of culture discussed earlier. It has the obvious advantages of allowing us to explain how and why the new social movements of the sixties and seventies in the United States and Europe led to more radical gay liberation movements. For though there were gay political organizations in these countries before the sixties, the idea that institutional racism infringes on the civil rights of radical minorities enabled the conception to develop of an analogous structure of compulsory heterosexuality, or heterosexism, which infringes on gays and lesbians as a sexual minority. Thinking of gays as an oppressed social minority rather than a set of individual deviants was made historically possible by the existence of a gay and lesbian bar culture, social clubs and friendship networks that constituted a segre-

gated subculture in some ways similar to the U.S. Afro-American subculture produced by slavery and social segregation.

Though the discontinuity approach to lesbian identity is helpful in understanding the unique aspects of contemporary women's history, some of the political appropriations of this approach are problematic. For one thing, many assume that the new homosexual identity is analogous to an ethnic identity; i.e., one that though socially constructed, is nonetheless fixed for those defined by it. Such an assumption is used to base an Identity politics: viz., of acknowledging one's inner "essence" as a lesbian or gay man, of "coming out" and of defining one's interests as centrally involved with promoting those of the lesbian and/or gay community. This is the deterministic pole of Identity politics: that individuals should not try to escape what they "really" are, in order to avoid social repression. As such, it is characteristic of much of "old" lesbian and gay politics of the 1950s in the U.S. and Europe as well of much of contemporary gay politics in these countries which centers itself around gaining civil rights for gays (cf. Plummer, Ed., 1981: Epstein, 1987).

The other pole of Identity politics is implicitly anti-deterministic. This was, ironically, both a feature of early lesbian-feminist separatism (cf. Myron and Bunch, eds., 1973) and radical humanist lesbian and gay liberation (Dworkin, 1974, 1978, Altman, 1973). Early lesbian-feminist separatism stresses that since heterosexuality is itself socially constructed, all women have a choice as to whether to be lesbian or heterosexual. Thus, women should choose lesbianism as the vanguard of feminism. Radical humanist gay liberation, on the other hand, stressed that all humans have unconscious homosexual tendencies, so coming out will ultimately allow the development of a bisexual or pansexual orientation for everyone. On this view that we are all homosexuals as well as all dual gendered, the best strategy is a non-separatist sexual liberation movement which attacks homophobia and sexism within and without its ranks (Altman, 1973, Escoffler, 1985). This view, like the corresponding ideal of androgyny

in the women's movement (Ferguson, 1977) has now been discounted as utopian by most feminist and gay liberation activists (Raymond, 1979, Altman, 1983).

The discontinuity approach, though it suggests an Identity politics, gives us no way to adjudicate between the politicization of conflicting identities (Weeks, 1985). For example, though some lesbians identify as a vanguard against patriarchy, others make common cause with gay men in a struggle against heterosexism, for example by working against the homophobia engendered by the AIDS crisis. Since lesbians and gays do have a common interest in fighting heterosexism, why not then identify ourselves as part of a mixed lesbian/gay community?

A Dialectical Approach to Lesbian Cultures

In the review of continuous, deconstructive and discontinuous approaches to lesbian history, I have argued that none gives us a totally satisfactory approach to understanding lesbianism and what constitutes a lesbian culture.

The alternative approach that I recommend, a dialectical and historical approach to the question of lesbian culture, assumes that there is a historical discontinuity between societies in which women have a high status and homosexuality is legitimated and those whose forms of patriarchy involve some type of compulsory heterosexuality[7] for most women, though types of male homosexuality may still be permitted, for example, in Hellenic Greece and various mid-Eastern cultures (cf. Allen, 1986; Hatem, 1986). Lesbian practices which are legitimated because they are connected to the religious

[7] Even the analytic concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" needs to be used with care, for it may lead us to ignore historical differences between our own contemporary social formation and others. For example, a case can be made that the concept of "heterosexual identity" is itself a contemporary one. Previous types of patriarchy—father patriarchy, husband patriarchy—based on kin organization of the economy did not require the self-identification of individuals as having a heterosexual sexuality, since men's sexual control of women was guaranteed by patriarchal marriage and property laws. Thus, both men and women could engage in homosexual practices which did not challenge their gender identity as long as they were, or planned to be, married.

rituals of priestesses or corss-dressing women who are given an accepted social status in a society, for example, Mohave and other native American societies, do not constitute a lesbian culture in the dialectical sense in which I am interested.

Rather, I want to focus on lesbian cultures which are, or have the potential to be, oppositional subcultures, that rise or continue as a feminist practice of resistance in a primarily patriarchal society. Some interesting cases involve those peoples that have developed a mixed culture with both patriarchal and women-empowering elements because a conquering more patriarchal group has failed to completely eradicate women-centered practices from the culture as a whole. More empirical work needs to be done on Judy Grahn's theory that there was a real human culture of Fairies in the British Isles, which was a women-centered and homosexually permissive society. Grahn's view is that this people were conquered by the Celts and incorporated into their culture, making the product a mix of patriarchal and women-empowering elements. This would explain the features of Celtic society which allowed for warrior queens like Boadicca to exist alongside of male warriors, the fact that women had many more rights to property than in more patriarchal societies, and for the presence of religious rites involving lesbian practices.

After the Roman conquest of the Celts and the opposition of the patriarchal and heterosexist Roman Catholic religion on the populace, we can hypothesize that an oppositional lesbian culture formed from the remnants of Celtic culture. This was connected to witchcraft and pagan nonpatriarchal religious practices that also involved some men engaged in gay religious rites (cf. Dworkin, 1974). This would explain why the Inquisition regularly charged witches with lesbian sexual practices, and why Joan of Arc was targeted as part of such a heretical woman-centered culture since she insisted on wearing men's clothes, thus challenging patriarchal privilege as well as the Catholic male clergy's right to interpret the will of God. It would also explain the elevation of the Virgin Mary to high status in an otherwise patriarchal reli-

gion, as an attempt to co-opt some of those who would otherwise have rejected Roman Catholicism for more women-empowering pagan religions.

The thesis that lesbian subcultures tend to form when a mixed culture composed of dominant patriarchal and subordinate matrilocal and more women-centered peoples has developed also makes sense of the lesbian culture in Mombasa, researched by Gill Shepherd (1987). In this society the Swahili, who long ago merged with invading Islamic Arabs, have a religion and familial-gender ideology which is patriarchal but a social reality which is more bilateral and matrifocal. Thus, women are veiled, have limited legal autonomy, are expected to marry and be obedient to their husbands and ought to inherit only half as much property as their brothers. Nonetheless, the high divorce rate, the practice of leaving children of divorces with the mother and of divorced women leaving property to their daughters has created a situation where 50% of Swahili women live independently of provision by a husband. There is a lesbian subculture consisting both of lesbian couples living together—usually a high status, wealthy woman with a low status dependent woman — and a social life of salons of lesbian women which meet regularly in one another's houses. A sexual economy permitting such lesbian relationships is based on the higher status a poor woman achieves by being paired with a wealthy lesbian than by being a dependent first or second wife of a poor man.

A sign of the matrifocal nature of the whole society in spite of the patriarchal Islamic culture imposed on married women is that lesbian women do not need to cross-dress to have high status: rather, this is achieved by wealth which allows them to outdo married women in feminine finery at all women activities surrounding marriages and funerals. Also poor homosexual men achieve status by cross-dressing and being accepted into the salons of wealthy lesbian women.

The United States is another example of a society which has developed lesbian oppositional cultures, though these

have been importantly divided by race and economic class.[8] Nonetheless, our society has unifying common social spaces for lesbians. Bars, women's bookstores, lesbian magazines and newsletters exist which allow any woman regardless of class, racial or ethnic background to find a common identification as lesbian. Thus, with a coalitionist politics that is sensitive to race, class and ethnic differences there is the potential of a minimally unified lesbian oppositional culture in the U.S.[9] But this is not necessarily so in many third world subcultures.

This is not surprising if we acknowledge that there are different forms of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality in different societies. Though most existing societies could be said to have some degree of compulsory hetrosexuality, this condition is enforced by a number of mechanisms. Since any of these can vary in strength depending on the context, resistance to patriarchy can take any one of a number of different forms which may have no common "core" of cultural practices or self-identifications. Post-industrial capitalist patriarchal societies create the material conditions for a contemporary lesbian-feminist culture that challenges gender roles. But such conditions are not present in every society. Thus, in some societies and some historical periods, resistance to patriarchy may involve women "passing" as men or women banding together with gay men to identify a common gay culture (cf. Myron and Bunch, 2973, Katz, 1978). This seems to be true today where marriage is such a dominant institution that even those engaging in lesbian and gay practices

[8] Work by Davis and Kennedy (1986) has explored the butch/femme relationships of a typical American working class lesbian bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s. The Daughters of Bilitis, a middle class lesbian organization of the 1950s, attempted to make lesbianism respectable by rejecting butch/femme roles and bar culture (Van Staveren, 1987). The lesbian-feminist movement of the 1970s also showed a class intolerance to working class lesbian culture by challenging butch-femme roles and implying that those who engaged in them were not real feminists (Nestle, 1987).

[9] But a tightly unified American lesbian culture is probably not possible due to serious value disagreements. For example American lesbian-feminists disagree about the propriety of butch/femme roles, S/M sex, cruising sex, bisexuality, penetrative sex, motherhood, pornography and separatist politics, to name a few!

must first marry, unless they find a religious role as monks, nuns or priests, or drop to the bottom of the social ranking altogether by becoming prostitutes. For example, in most Latin American countries, what constitutes a lesbian or gay identity has been very different from first world countries. That is, the key distinction is between "activos", or those who play the macho role, and "passivos", or those who play the feminine role (Adam, 1987). The activo men and the passivo women are not considered "real" gays or lesbians, respectively, since they act according to correct gender roles with the exception of their sexual preference. Thus there is a lack of a sense of common gay or lesbian culture: passivo gays and lesbians identify primarily with straight women and feminists, not a unified gay male or a unified lesbian community in our sense. This makes it difficult for independent gay liberation movements to develop in these countries or for organized feminism to develop a strong demand for lesbian liberation.

These cross cultural and historical examples make it plausible to argue that there are historically different gender and sexual formations in place in different societies—different family structures, economies, forms of the state, which embed different forms of patriarchy and sexual hierarchy. In other writings I have called such systems "modes of patriarchal sex/affective production." (Ferguson, 1984, 1989 in press). In different sexual formations there will be somewhat different ways available to resist patriarchy and sexual hierarchy. Many of these can be associated with lesbian sexual practices that will involve different senses of self identification, not only between one country or region of the world and another, but within cultures, between different economic classes, racial and ethnic groups. Our lesbian history thus should conceive of a number of lesbian subcultures rather than one universal lesbian culture.

The politics of a lesbian-feminist dialectical approach to lesbian cultures as potential cultures of resistance against dominant patriarchal cultures are coalitionist and non-sepa-

ratist. We must reject the comforting image that there is one correct way to construct a model lesbian identity with a specific cultural content which will allow us to build a vanguard lesbian culture of resistance. A more democratic approach would conceive of an international lesbian culture to be possible, if at all, only after a long process of networking among those disparate subcultures of women, all of which engage in same sex sexual practices but whose conception of lesbianism may be very different. We need, as I shall explain below, to conceive of our goal as international political *movement* building (of interconnected lesbian, gay and feminist movements) rather than *culture* building.

Building an International Lesbian Movement

What is the difference between the goal of building international lesbian, gay and feminist *movements* and building *cultures*? My view is that those who see themselves as building a political movement are more able to tolerate value disagreement than those who see themselves as building a culture. Those who define their task as movement building will tend to recognize the need for strategic and tactical thinking which inevitably involves disagreements, experimentation and changes in political positions as a result of perceived failures in the results of political actions. On the other hand, those concerned with culture building will tend to fall into the pitfalls of Identity politics. That is, they will emphasize the importance of symbolic unity in oppositional lifestyles, rituals, social practices, that is, of agreement on all values of the relevant oppositional community, on order to validate an alternative way of living to the dominant culture.

To avoid the weakening of potential sisterhood that lesbian vanguardism involves, we should conceive of ourselves not as building one unified lesbian culture, but as building a plurality of lesbian cultures, each with its own set of self-definitions, and each of which can, out of its reconstructed sense of its own self-interest, choose to involve itself with the lesbian and feminist liberation movements, but none of which

gets to define itself as "the" vanguard of that movement. Hopefully then we will feel more free to disagree yet to support each other on general campaigns challenging sexism and heterosexism.

This point is even more important for international lesbian-feminist politics. Since the aim of international sisterhood requires that any feminist culture-building be democratic, we must adopt a model that permits the self-determination of local and national lesbian cultures. But such a process, to involve self-determination, would have to suppose a cultural pluralism and not a cultural imperialism.[10] This presents the paradox for American lesbian-feminists: to avoid cultural imperialism we can only aid in the constructing of such a culture by not defining international culture-building as our goal! Another way to express this result is that aiming for an international lesbian-feminist culture is subject to the same problem involved in the paradox of hedonism: that the desired result cannot be achieved if directly aimed at.[11]

---

[10] The partial success of women's, gay and lesbian liberation movements in some Western democracies, particularly in the U.S., have given us access to institutional resources—academic jobs, women's and gender studies programs, and support from parts of the political liberal establishment for gay liberation issues. We have won the political space for lesbian/gay pride marches on the national level and in many local spaces. The space for gay and lesbian research and some financial resources means that international lesbian and gay academic conferences and political networks are dominated by Western gay and lesbian sensibilities, and even more by American gay and lesbian consciousness. Not only does this tend to lead us to ignore differences in the histories of lesbian/gay politics but to assume that Second and Third World countries should develop lesbian and gay countercultures and politics after the American model.
An example of American gay cultural imperialism occurred in the early seventies when gay American volunteers to cut cane in Cuba staged a gay pride march and were met with incomprehension and embarrassment by Cuban gays and repression by the Cuban authorities. Since Cuban lesbians are invisible and only the "femme" gay men even define themselves as gay, the gay subculture in Cuba requires a different model for liberation than gay pride marches. This does not imply that Latin American lesbian and gay cultures will never use such tactics—indeed some small lesbian and gay public demonstrations have occurred. Rather, it implies that North Americans must be respectful of local lesbian and gay judgments about the value of such tactics in their particular contexts.

Conclusion

In this paper I have distinguished two senses of culture: an objectivist and an identity sense. Both of these senses, employed by continuity and discontinuity approaches to lesbian history, involve theoretical and political problems. Instead I have defended a historical and dialectical approach to thinking of lesbian cultures as potential cultures of resistance within historically specific patriarchal cultures. I have maintained not only that no international lesbian culture exists, but that the goal of lesbian-feminists who seek to promote an international sisterhood opposing compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy should be, not to construct such a culture, but to work instead for the creation of an international lesbian movement which is culturally pluralist in its approach to defending lesbian subcultures.

---

[11] The paradox of hedonism is this: she who seeks pleasure directly or as her sole end will find it difficult to achieve, while she who seeks activities for their own sakes will tend to realize pleasure as a byproduct of these activities! Similarly, lesbians who seek not to impose our values by defining a common culture for women-loving women from different cultural contexts, may succeed better in creating such a culture than those who do. This may be true if we pursue friendships and minimum agreed on political goals to defend our perceived common interests as women and as lesbians.