Does A Lesbian Need a Vagina Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle?

Or, Would the "Real" Lesbian Please Stand Up!

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La question de l'apparence de la lesbienne a déjà été chaudement contestée et par moment a été utilisée pour qualifier la « vraie » lesbienne. L'auteure assure que la visibilité d'une lesbienne est en relation directe avec ce qui définit une « vraie » lesbienne et qui décide de définir qui l'est et qui ne l'est pas.

About five years ago I stumbled upon a comic strip from Alison Bechdel's brilliant *Dykes to Watch Out For* series that (like so many of her comics) made me laugh out loud and then shake my head in wonderment at her ability to so compellingly bring forward the very debates I'd found myself having with friends only weeks or days or maybe even hours before. This particular strip, "I.D. fixé?" (Bechdel 58-59), starts out as a debate about who "qualifies" as a dyke, and by the end of the strip leaves the reader pondering the ongoing relevance of identity categories *period* in the present "post-"(insert favourite now-under-fire-brand-of-theorizing-or-category-of-identity here) world. I was particularly struck by main character Sparrow's insistence that sleeping with a man need not entail renouncement of her "dyke" status (she self-identifies as a "bi-dyke" in the strip), while her boyfriend Stuart asserts that he considers himself to be "a butch lesbian in a straight man's body." The comic also points out how trans-identified people have the subversive potential to put identity categories into a tailspin, but (still, and perhaps stubbornly) identifying as a dyke myself, I am more intrigued by the questions the strip raises about who "qualifies" as a lesbian these days and for what reasons (hence it is these questions, rather than the equally important and challenging questions about the subversive potential of trans-identities, that became the focus of this paper).

Around the same time, I came across a personal ad in the notoriously gender-bending lesbian sex magazine, *On Our Backs,* in which the writer insisted that only "real lesbians" need reply: according to the author of this ad, a "real" lesbian is apparently a "professional woman who's childless, financially secure, spiritual, intelligent, and likes working out and reading" and is definitely not a "Bi." Hmm, I wondered, am I missing something here? When I came out, did somebody forget to send me some important guidelines that spell out exactly what qualifies one as a "real" lesbian? Or, if I *am* a real lesbian, would I just *know* the guidelines without needing to be told? Does Bechdel's Sparrow—complete with long hair, make-up, flowing dresses, and boyfriend—qualify as a "real" lesbian? Not according to the author of the *On Our Backs* personal ad, but what about to others? What about Stuart, the "butch lesbian in a straight man's body"—would he qualify as a lesbian in *anyone's* eyes but his own? And who gets to decide whether one "qualifies" as a lesbian or not, anyway? In this paper, I attempt to think through some of these questions.

To Be Visible

When I first started to explore my lesbianism in the mid-1990s, I had long spiraling hair and liked to wear full-length skirts or flowing dress pants with V-neck blouses or sweaters and, often, long dangly earrings. I applied perfume, make-up, and hair products daily as part of my beauty regimen. As I tried to break into the lesbian scene, I sometimes wondered if my appearance was a barrier. Did my looks somehow disqualify me as a lesbian? Similarly, a subject in Julie Melia's essay on the lesbian "continuum of resistance" describes a long-haired friend of hers who worried she "wasn't a real dyke because of her hair" (551). This connection between *looking like* a lesbian and *being* a lesbian—between appearance and identity—seems to be a common theme. A subject from Anthony Freitas, Susan Kaiser and Tania Hammidi's study on visibil-

ity issues in queer communities tells us that "if you feel you are a part of the greater lesbian community, it is important to look like you identify with that community" (99). In their short film *What Does a Lesbian Look Like?* Winnipeg performance artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan poke fun at the controversy and uneasiness surrounding what it means to "look like a lesbian": "Is she butchy, ball-busting, bad-assed with facial hair?" they ask. "Or does she strut her stuff, show some thigh, and leave a trail of kisses with her lipstick?" The question of what a lesbian looks like has been hotly contested, and has at times been used as a standard for judging who qualifies as a "real" lesbian and who does not. How much does being visibly identifiable as a lesbian relate to the question of who "qualifies" as a lesbian?

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A week after my first sexual experience with a woman, I bought my first pair of cargo pants and played seriously with the idea of cutting my hair short and maybe getting a nose ring. My last lesbian lover, who was in a relationship with a man prior to me, cut her long hair drastically short within the first two weeks of our relationship. We had a running joke about who looked "dykey-er." Not long after that relationship ended, I decided it was time to (once again) go back to short hair in an effort to look more "like a lesbian." Of course, my idea of what a lesbian "looks like" is largely shaped by my own race and class backgrounds: being white, from a middle-class background, and coming to my lesbianism largely through my engagement with feminism in an academic environment, I can't help but suspect that my notion of lesbian appearance is shaped by the lingering influence of 1970s lesbian feminism. My ability to conform to this narrow notion of what a lesbian "looks like," then, is unquestionably influenced by my race and class privilege.

The subjects in Melia's study point out that there is a tendency to dramatically alter one's appearance shortly after starting to self-identify as a lesbian (550, 554). Thus I remain convinced that appearance is still intimately connected to my own and many other lesbians' sense of our identities *as* lesbians. For me, looking like what I think a lesbian is supposed to look like or occasionally adorning myself with lesbian signifiers (my current favourite is a button that reads "I got this way from kissing girls") holds several different meanings. I believe it is a way for me to be recognized by other dykes, which I secretly hope ensures my place among lesbians and communicates my sexual availability to other women (which relates to why "looking like a lesbian" seems more important at times when I'm not already in a relationship). As Freitas *et al.* indicate, "visibility is often coded for 'perceivers who matter'" (97). Visibility, then, is perhaps related as much to desire as it is to identity: being visible as a lesbian allows me to communicate my desire to others, just as being able to visibly identify other women as lesbian facilitates my desire for those women. My appearance is also a way for me to communicate to the rest of the world that I am different and proud of my difference. When I first came out I was eager to signal my resistance to heteronormativity and my willingness to take on whatever challenges I might have to face as a result of my difference, even if this meant harassment or personal attacks.

Although some postmodernist theorizing has encouraged a shift from thinking in terms of visible/invisible bodies to terms of marked/unmarked ones, Lisa M. Walker chooses to continue to use the former, despite the "lack of clarity" she perceives in these terms (868, fn). As she points out, the term "unmarked" is used to describe the normative body in theory, but "invisible" refers to those bodies that are *not* normative, and so the two sets of terms fail to "map directly onto each other" (868). She argues that a focus on visibility among several so-called minority groups has become a "tactic of late twentieth-century identity politics" (868). Melia points to how queer activists have privileged appearance and style as "a key part of resistance" (548), and the prevalence of the popular slogan *visibility = life* on the t-shirts of some gay and lesbian activists has also been noted (Freitas *et al.* 84). Clearly, visibility—looking "like a lesbian"—has historically been and remains an important aspect of many lesbians' identities, and hence gets tied to debates about who qualifies as a "real" lesbian.

So what *does* a lesbian look like? Although many have suggested that at various points in history there is an identifiable (normative) lesbian appearance, or very specific standards of dress and style, what a lesbian *actually* looks like depends a great deal (of course) on the historical period, on her personal preferences, and/or on her desire to conform to these standards (Melia; Freitas *et al.*; Myers, Taub, Morris

and Rothblum). It also depends a lot on her race or ethnicity, class, ability, and age. As soon as a categorical "lesbian uniform" is posited it becomes important to think about who is being excluded through this categorization of lesbian appearance. There are numerous testimonies, for example, of the unhappiness suffered by women who identified as femmes but abandoned this style (and, for a time, a femme identity) in order to continue to "qualify" as a lesbian during the heyday of the lesbian-feminist 1970s (see Millersdaughter; Faderman).

Similarly, many lesbians write about how being of colour or being from a working class background has resulted in their exclusion from gay and lesbian communities that privilege whiteness and middle or upper-class visibility (Allison; Feinberg; Khan; Law). These exclusions have caused some lesbians to struggle with their allegiance to lesbian communities, wondering whether they would have to forgo their racial or class allegiances in order to be "visible" as lesbians. Surina Khan articulates this struggle when she writes: "when I came out I identified only as a lesbian. It didn't occur to me to identify as a Pakistani lesbian" (130). Only after many years of struggling with her various identities and the intersecting impacts of racism and homophobia—often experienced *within* her queer and Pakistani communities—was Khan able to come out as and embrace a Pakistani lesbian identity. And relatedly, because predominant notions of what a lesbian "looks like" tend to privilege youthfulness, many older lesbians may struggle with perceived demands to maintain an appearance-identity connection.

The dominant construction of what a lesbian "looks like" was developed, according to Deke Law, "by white women in response to sexism in the U.S. Left and in the gay men's movement, with an apparently rigid definition for membership" (144). Law insists we must critique this construct because, whether it is expressed "through clothes, politics, or space, there is an implicit understanding that all lesbians are alike in fundamental ways" (144). This assumption has frequently resulted in the exclusion of femmes, trans-identified people, lesbians of colour, working class, disabled, and older lesbians from the category of "lesbian," which has seriously undermined the revolutionary potential of lesbian politics.

For most lesbians in the 1950s, appearance was central to both identity and community. As described so poignantly by Leslie Feinberg in hir autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues*, in the 1950s there were butches and femmes, and femmes partnered with butches, period. Feinberg writes about primarily working-class lesbians, and in hir novel any lesbian who strayed outside of the butch-femme formation in the 1950s and early 1960s was ostracized and failed to qualify as a "real" lesbian. At this time butch-femme was a way of life for many lesbians, but a butch or a femme was defined as much by appearance as by behavior, sexual preference, or preferred roles in sex acts (Myers *et al.*).

With the rise of second wave feminism in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, butch and femme came under fire. A new breed of feminist lesbians, mostly middle-class, mostly academic, and mostly white, decried the "old ways" of butch-femme (Faderman). They believed the butch-femme configurations of most lesbian relationships up to that time were merely an attempt to mirror heterosexual relationships, right down to "appearing" like a "man" or a "woman." Claiming that she wanted to break with the trappings of patriarchy entirely, the new lesbian feminist did her best to achieve an appearance that was completely androgynous, similar to the style previously known as butch (Faderman). The pressure to conform to this regulation of appearance was enormous for those who still wanted to count as "real" lesbians and wanted a place in the lesbian feminist community. The 1970s "lesbian uniform" most prevalently accepted and adhered to was created to signal this desire for androgyny: "Flannel shirts, blue jeans, work boots, no jewelry or makeup, and short hair became *de rigeur*" (Myers *et al.* 21). Indeed, as recently as 1997, some women interviewed by Anna Myers, Jennifer Taub, Jessica Morris and Esther Rothblum indicated that their extremely butch or extremely femme appearances still drew hostility from other lesbians. Clearly, such a "uniform" posed significant visibility barriers for any lesbian wanting to represent other aspects of her identity.

In the 1980s and 1990s butch-femme made a comeback. It was once again becoming acceptable among most lesbians to claim a butch or femme identity, and to construct one's appearance accordingly. Lesbians who had suppressed their femme-ness and conformed to the androgynous dress code of the 1970s now re-embraced their

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"femmes within" and reclaimed dresses and makeup. The term "lipstick lesbian" was no longer necessarily a pejorative (Clark 488). Similarly, challenges to the centrality of white, middle-class women's experiences in feminist and lesbian communities made by women of colour, working-class women, women with disabilities, and more recently by older women, helped to increase awareness about racism, classism, ableism, and ageism within these communities (although there is still much work to do). This made it easier for lesbians to dress in ways that also reflect other aspects of our identities without (perhaps) the same level of hostility about our claims to lesbianism. The qualifications for a "real" lesbian shifted from rigid concepts of what a lesbian "looks like" to the more straighforward qualifier of one woman's attraction to or desire for another woman. Indeed, Jacquelyn Zita tells us that "lesbians are customarily defined by a preference for sexual encounters generally involving four breasts, two vaginas, and two clitorises, among other things" (112).

Privileging visibility as central to a lesbian identity causes an erasure of those lesbians whose appearance might not conform to the generally accepted standards of what a lesbian "looks like."

But while some have (re)claimed butch or femme styles and challenged rigid "lesbian uniforms," there still exists some consensus among the lesbians participating in at least one study about what constitutes "conventional dyke style—jeans, T-shirt, boots" (Melia 550) with short hair and no makeup. While I am hesitant to suggest that this "conventional dyke style" has anything to do with who qualifies as a "real" lesbian, I am also struck by the fact that I (one who knows better) still make an effort to conform to this style when I really want to "look like a lesbian," even though I know that not all—not *nearly* all—lesbians conform to these conventions.

Debates about what a lesbian "looks like" in the twenty-first century have been rekindled by the increasing appearance of lesbians in popular culture. The TV drama *The L Word,* the first ongoing program to focus almost exclusively on lesbian life, has kicked off heated debates about whether the show's characters look enough like lesbians. I confess that until recently I refused to watch the program out of disdain for the so-called representation of lesbianism apparent in the show's advertisements: a group of thin, long-haired, extremely well-coifed, predominantly white women in expensive tailored suites and high heels is a far cry from what I would consider to be a grand achievement of lesbian visibility (which tells you something about *my* assumptions). But some dyke friends have told me that they really like the show and find it does a good job of representing lesbian life, so I decided to rent the first season to see if my assumptions would be challenged.

In the first couple of episodes of *The L Word,* I was genuinely surprised at the derision directed towards the show's only almost-butch character, Shane, who is informed that everything about the way she dresses "screams dyke" and is therefore embarrassing to some of the other characters. Shane, despite making some gestures towards butch style, still has long hair, is painfully thin, and frequently wears make-up and low-cut, femme-like outfits, yet in one episode she is (unconvincingly) mistaken for a gay man. As Karen X. Tulchinsky notes in her primarily positive review of the show in the feminist magazine *Herizons, The L Word* "has been criticized ... for not representing 'real lesbians'" (17) since most of the main characters are thin, femme, wealthy women who live in fancy homes and drive sporty cars. Rather than protesting whether a femme woman "qualifies" as a lesbian, though, I believe critics of *The L Word* (including myself) are primarily concerned with the lack of diversity among the characters: in other words, it's not the presence of femme lesbians so much as the predominance of femme style (and a very narrow representation of femme at that) at the expense of all other visible signifiers of lesbianism that is at issue.

In Canada, the feminist press has (surprisingly) been kinder to the show than the queer press: in queer bi-weekly *Xtra! West,* columnist Ivan E. Coyote points out that some of the show's advertising is specifically directed towards straight men, using the show's graphic lesbian sex to encourage a straight male audience to tune in to the show "right after the *Trailer Park Boys.*" Coyote, a high-profile Vancouver butch lesbian, was hired to teach the program's actors about how to look and act like more "authentic" lesbians, but was disappointed to note the significant absence of crew-cuts, boots, belts, or butches among the actresses. Not to mention the entire exclusion of working-class lesbians, which Coyote argues is a gross misrepresentation of the fact that most lesbians don't have the luxury of driving fancy cars since women still bring home so much less, on average, than men. Still, the debates that the show incites about

what a lesbian looks like indicate that a connection between appearance and identity is still highly relevant to many lesbians today.

Elizabeth Wilson (1990) argues that changes in style among lesbians are partly a reflection of changing styles for women as a whole. The butch-femme styles of the 1950s, she suggests, may have come about because it was becoming more and more difficult for lesbians to achieve a look that marked their difference from straight women, as mainstream fashion styles themselves became more relaxed. Pointing to how changes in mainstream fashions for women have made it more difficult to visually separate lesbians from straight women, Wilson laments "it's so hard to look deviant these days" (73). Indeed, short hair, no makeup, or clothing that would more traditionally be considered "mannish" can no longer automatically be assumed to be signs that are indicative of a lesbian, as "many of the signifiers of lesbian identity have become trendy in the avant-garde heterosexual community" (Inness 174). While some lesbians feel proud to see styles that we feel some ownership of adopted by a more mainstream audience, we are also faced with an identity challenge. After all, if there is no longer any sure way to "look like a lesbian," how will we know who the lesbians *are*?

Visibility Problems

Despite the importance of appearance to an individual and communal sense of identity for many lesbians, several writers have raised some serious problems stemming from a connection between appearance and identity (Melia; Freitas *et al.*; Walker). Walker, for example, argues that privileging visibility as central to a lesbian identity causes an erasure of those lesbians whose appearance might not conform to the generally accepted standards of what a lesbian "looks like." Such an erasure or dismissal causes some lesbians to struggle precisely with this question of whether we qualify as "real" lesbians or not, putting our sense of identity in crisis and sometimes resulting in our ostracism from lesbian communities. Walker argues that these problems tend to be most profound in relationship to lesbians who—like Sparrow in the comic strip—can pass" for straight: "Because subjects who can 'pass' exceed the categories of visibility that establish identity, they tend to be regarded as peripheral to the understanding of marginalization" (868). Shuffling those who can "pass" to the sidelines of lesbian communities results in a further marginalization of such women within our already-marginalized communities and constitutes a use of oppressive tactics for the purposes of "lesbian" boundary maintenance.

Although those in queer communities who hold tightly to the *visibility = life* philosophy view passing for straight as perhaps the greatest threat to gay or lesbian identities, women who pass as straight may do so for a variety of reasons. A lesbian who shapes or adorns her body in a way that does not make her easily identifiable as such often causes others (both lesbian and straight) to react with "uneasiness, anger, or even terror" (Inness 161). Yet Melia points out the many dangers some lesbians still face if we choose to always overtly assert our lesbianism, ranging from loss of employment to harassment or assault. She argues that a "continuum of resistance" (556) should be used to expand our understanding of how passing can sometimes be a subversive strategy for lesbians. Sherrie A. Inness insists that passing at some point is inevitable for all lesbians, and argues that the roll of the onlooker is essential in determining whether a lesbian will "pass" in a given situation—in other words, whether a lesbian will "pass" in a given situation may have little to do with whether she *herself* desires to pass.

Historically, the backlash from within lesbian communities against the lesbian whose style preference is more traditionally feminine has been rooted in femme women's abilities to more easily pass as heterosexual. For some lesbians, the fact that a femme (or a bi-dyke, for that matter) can pass more readily as straight is considered a sign that femmes and bi-dykes are less committed to lesbianism or less willing to risk being identified as a lesbian, possibly out of a fear of the various ways in which lesbians are oppressed. An outright decision to pass as straight in some areas of her life may have drastic consequences for a lesbian—as a subject from Melia's research explains, "you lose friendship and community" (551). However, a closer theoretical examination indicates that femme lesbians, bi-dykes, or lesbians who, consciously or not, pass as straight in some areas of our lives, may pose a deeper threat to heteronormativity than a first glance allows. After all, there is a desire not only among some lesbians but also among many people who identify as straight to be able to visually identify a les-

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bian in order to ensure her exclusion from the realm of "normal," or, in the Butlerian sense, from the realm of "bodies that matter." Disruptions of what a lesbian "looks like" have the potential to confound those people who would like to continue to define the lesbian body as deviant. As Sherrie Inness so astutely points out,

> the lesbian who passes as heterosexual calls into question the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual. Ultimately, she threatens to overthrow the whole heterosexual order because heterosexuality can only exist in opposition to homosexuality. (161).

So the lesbian who some would argue fails to "qualify" as a lesbian because she differs in appearance from what is *expected* of a lesbian actually has as much, if not more, potential to disrupt heteronormativity than the lesbian who looks like what she is: for some, a good argument to suggest that women like Bechdel's bi-dyke Sparrow have just as much entitlement to the signifier "lesbian" as women who have short hair, wear t-shirts, jeans and boots, swear off make-up, and have sex strictly with other women.

The Lesbian "Bodies that Matter"

Judith Butler's theories on how certain bodies come to "matter" can be helpful in articulating how lesbians who sometimes pass as straight can present a significant challenge to hetero-normativity. Although Walker has argued the limitations of Butler's earlier writings in defining the subversive potential embodied by lesbian femmes (884), in *Bodies that Matter* there are several passages that indicate Butler's belief in such a potential. For example, Butler insists that she does not wish to suggest the masculinized (or butch) lesbian and feminized fag are the "only two figures of abjection," or only two figures excluded from the category of bodies that come to matter in our society (103). Rather, she goes on to tell us that to take these two figures as the only "figures of abjection" causes us to lose sight of those figures that incorporate "precisely the kind of complex crossings of identification and desire which might exceed and contest the binary frame itself" (103). The femme "bi-dyke" would certainly be a figure for such "complex crossings."

But if there is no set definition of what a lesbian "looks like," then what sort of body "qualifies" as a lesbian body? In the 1970s, the acceptable construction of what a lesbian looked like involved, as I have discussed, appearing as androgynous as possible. Yet such restrictions on who qualifies as a lesbian are comparable to the oppressive tactics used to measure who qualifies as "human" (white heterosexual men), or as a "body that matters." The more relaxed standards for what a lesbian looks like in the late 1980s and 1990s are partly a response to a growing awareness of the fragmentation caused by the strict "lesbian policing" (Freitas *et al.* 99), or pressures from within lesbian communities to conform to normative standards for appearance. According to Butler, we have to adopt certain positions or categories (e.g. "Lesbian") while at the same time contesting or being open to contestation of the boundaries or limits of these categories, in order to develop a more "complex coalitional frame" (115). This frame would allow women to maintain different aspects of our identities (for example, our race and class backgrounds) without needing to privilege one at the expense of another. Such an understanding of how change occurs certainly encompasses the negotiations within lesbian communities over who qualifies as a "real" lesbian that have been taking place throughout the last few decades.

Still, Butler warns us to be aware of instances when "denaturalizing parodies," such as the parodies of masculinity and femininity encompassed by butch and femme, reiterate norms without questioning them (231). The subversive potential in both butch and femme, and indeed in lesbianism itself, lies in the challenge these identities pose to heteronormativity, or an understanding of heterosexuality as natural, normal, or the only sexual choice available. Butch and femme appearances can denaturalize gender, sex, and sex roles by showing how they are constructed rather than natural. But if at any point butch lesbians, femme lesbians, or lesbians in general create or "police" norms of our own, without at least being open to exceptions to or contestation of these norms, Butler warns that our radical or subversive potential will be diminished. To provide just one of many possible examples, in a particularly significant scene from Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues,* Frankie, a butch, announces to the main character, Jess, that she's dating another butch. Frankie says "you don't have to understand it, Jess. But you gotta accept it. If you can't, then just keep walking," and Jess tells us "that's exactly what I did. I couldn't deal with it, so I just walked away" (202). Jess denies that two butches in a relationship together can qualify as lesbians, and she adopts oppressive tactics for ensuring their exclusion from lesbian community, tactics that actually work to support hetero-normativity rather than challenge it: as the late Audre Lorde continues to remind us, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (112).

But if there can be no boundaries to the category "lesbian," no directives for what a lesbian "looks like" (or who she necessarily sleeps with), is there *such a thing* as a lesbian? Or could *anyone* be a lesbian?

Certainly some postmodernist theorizing might lead us to think so. As Cathy Griggers explains, "lesbians in the public culture of postmodernity are subjects-in-the-making whose body of signs and bodies as signs are up for reappropriation and revision" (123). In the past few years, the place of trans-identified people within lesbian communities has been a source of much debate. Zita makes note of the following signs surrounding what she calls the "precious little lesbian space there is in the world:" "Women only. Lesbians only. Women-born women only. Genetic female dykes only. No boys over the age of twelve" (122). Yet most lesbian communities have slowly started to accept that trans-identified people can and should "qualify" as lesbians if they desire to identify as such. But what about someone like Bechdel's Stuart, meaning an anatomically male human being with a penis, testes, male secondary sex characteristics and no plan to alter any of these, whose gender identity is also masculine and who would unquestioningly be interpreted by onlookers to be, without hesitation or doubt, a man? In Bechdel's comic strip, Stuart makes a claim to a lesbian identity. Could Stuart qualify as a "real" lesbian? Should he?

The Male Lesbian (?)

Can a man "qualify" as a lesbian? This is perhaps the most difficult identity question that a feminist-postmodernist-lesbian has to ponder. For some lesbians, of course, the question is also an absurd one, and may understandably seem highly irrelevant in the context of trying to survive, support a family, and deal with the day to day pressures of being an out lesbian in a homophobic culture.[1] But the male lesbian keeps popping up on our radar: five years ago there was Bechdel's Stuart, and today we're confronted with "Lisa," a "lesbian-identified-male" who becomes one of the main character's "lesbian lovers" during the first season of *The L-Word*. Hence I remain persuaded of the importance of the figure of the male lesbian to lesbian and feminist theorizing and politics, and as such I will flesh out his theoretical and political significance in this section.

A belief in the constructed-ness of gender forms the basis of many feminist theories. A belief in the constructed-ness of sex follows close behind, and has been argued by Butler and adopted by many feminist and postmodernist theorists. If sex is a construct, then a deconstruction would certainly allow the possibility of a male lesbian, since the category "male," and, for that matter, the category "lesbian," no longer hold the same meaning. After all, Butler has insisted that it is "unclear to [her] that lesbians can be said to be 'of' the same sex" (65-66). But is the possibility of a man wanting to represent himself as a lesbian not antithetical to almost everything that lesbianism has stood for or tried to accomplish in the last few decades? Yet if the category of "lesbian" can stretch (as it mostly has and certainly must) to include those who fail to "look like" a lesbian (i.e. femme lesbians) or to always "act like" a lesbian (i.e. bi-dykes), or to those who resist narrow and essentialist meanings of the signifier "woman" (i.e. trans-identified people), what recourse (if any) do we have to argue that a man cannot "qualify" as a lesbian?

Opening the definition of "lesbian" to include women whose appearances stray from the androgynous "lesbian uniform" discussed before seems to be a far cry from opening the definition to include men. But at the same time there is certainly precedence, even within lesbian communities, for such an opening to occur. In the 1970s some lesbians tried to desexualize lesbianism, arguing that instead of being defined by her desire to have sex with other women, a lesbian was defined merely by her "woman-centeredness" or her political commitment to other women.[2] Given such a definition of lesbianism, I certainly know a few men who could qualify. Indeed, Adrienne Rich's notion of the lesbian continuum, long hailed as the cornerstone of lesbian theorizing, contributed to a de-sexualizing of lesbianism in its attempt to marry feminist and lesbian thought. Monique Wittig has often been quoted for her infamous pronouncement that "lesbians are not women" (qtd. in Wiegman 16), leaving us to beg the question: "Can they be men?" And, in one of the only existing theoretical writings on male lesbians, Zita suggests that a male who is willing to relinquish the significance of his penis and also ask others to do so, or who is willing to engage in "sex acts, mutually interpreted as 'female' sex acts" (120), might have grounds to consider himself a lesbian and ask others to do so as well.

However, many (or most?) women who identify as lesbian might opposed the idea of men qualifying as "real" lesbians (well, for sure the woman who wrote the personal ad in *On Our Backs* would, anyhow). As Zita points out, "[t]he 'male lesbian' seems to be an oxymoron. Yet I have met more than a few. Other lesbians report similar encounters. Is there a problem here?" (107). How much weight does the opinion of other lesbians carry in the ability of a man to self-identify as lesbian? Well, Sherrie Inness argues that the roll of the onlooker is essential in determining whether a lesbian will "pass" in a given situation. Similarly, in critiquing Judith Butler's work, Susan Bordo argues that "subversion of cultural assumptions is not something that happens in a text or to a text. It is an event that takes place (or doesn't) in the 'reading' of the text" (8). What is the

likelihood that observers of the text of man-as-lesbian will read "Lesbian"? How would a man signify his lesbianism to an audience for which such a reading would basically be implausible? Even if he adorned himself in lavender labryses and double-woman symbols from head to toe, these signifiers don't tend to "signify" much for the general population anyway, and even when they do, for a reader who recognizes these signifiers but notes that they are attached to a male body, "*Oh*, he's a *lesbian*!" is not likely the first thought to come to mind.

Still, some men wanting to qualify as lesbians might find acceptance in a community of postmodernist-dykes willing to interpret the representation or "text" he is creating in the manner that he wants them to (think of Ginger's half-hearted acknowledgement of Stuart's lesbian potential when she grumbles that he could be "*Soft* butch. *May*-be" in the Bechdel comic, or of the main characters' apparently unquestioning acceptance of "Lisa" in *The L Word*). Would such a man then qualify as a lesbian? Zita argues that even if such acceptance is found, the man who wishes to identify as lesbian is unable to control the readings of his (male) body undertaken by the outside world. "When these readings numerically outnumber the less frequent 'lesbian' attributions in the charmed circle," she argues, "this external world definitively 'sexes' his body" (125). "Lisa," the lesbian-identified-male from *The L Word,* passes as lesbian only with the support of the show's lesbian community: outside of that community he is clearly *not* read as lesbian, as his confused encounter with a straight male in episode ten makes clear. Zita points out that the outside world's reading of the subject's body as "male" also determines his access to certain types of privilege inaccessible to a subject read as "woman" or "lesbian," even if such readings occur against his will.

These readings point to the significant political consequences of the notion of the male lesbian: if he is so unlikely to be consistently identified as a lesbian, is he really making any sort of political statement through his act of claiming a lesbian identity? Is he really more politically allied with lesbians, when his male privilege remains intact? Yet we must consider that this is a slippery slope: femme lesbians, bi-dykes, lesbians of colour, working class lesbians, disabled lesbians, older lesbians, or trans-identified people may also be read most often as something other than "lesbian" or, sometimes, as other than "woman," yet to disqualify these individuals as lesbians, as outlined above, is not only highly problematic but is a practice that has been rejected by a significant proportion of lesbian communities today. Hence there seem to be potentially significant political consequences of both including and excluding men from the category "lesbian:" the consequences of excluding them risks reproducing the kind of lesbian policing that has also at times (and ongoingly) excluded large numbers of women on the basis of other forms of difference. Yet the consequences of including men in the category of "lesbian" in the present might result in an undermining of lesbian political organizing, since, as discussed, men are seldom likely to be read as "lesbian" outside of a potentially small, welcoming circle at the present moment in time.

So, can a man qualify as a lesbian—or should he? This is, at present, perhaps a question better left unanswered, although certainly an important one to ask. For a related question we would have to ponder would of course be whether the very category of "lesbian" is still relevant, important, essential, or meaningful. Consider the assertion of Sparrow, in Bechdel's comic strip, that perhaps now "identity is so much more complex and fluid than these rigid little categories of straight, gay, and bi can possibly reflect" (58-59). After providing a framework for understanding how some postmodernist theorizing has made it possible for a man to qualify as a lesbian, Zita concludes by providing us with tools for a continued exclusion of men from this category. While she agrees that readings that confer a sex to a given body, regardless of the wishes of the subject, may be "utterly constructed and arbitrary," she nevertheless reminds us that they are also "encumbering" (125).

Perhaps for the present, it might be more politically expedient for a man wishing to identify as a lesbian to instead focus his energy on deconstructing masculinity and the many restrictions that construct places on his behaviour and identity. Such a critique of masculinity might even undercut the need some men might feel to identify as lesbian, since the desire to claim a lesbian identity might stem in large part from a rejection of hegemonic constructions of masculinity ("Lisa" makes this point in the *The L Word* when he insists that straight white men represent "everything that's wrong in the world"). However, it is equally important that we remain open to contestation of the boundaries of the category "lesbian," perhaps always with the vision of a time when it will be commonly or popularly accepted that there are more than two genders, more than two sexes, more than two sexualities—in short, what Zita describes as "a number of different ways to inhabit the body" (123). But until we have gone further in popularizing the notion that gender, sex, and sexuality are constructed, it might be more politically astute for a man who wants to qualify as a lesbian to identify himself instead as what Zita has coined a "lesbian-identified-non-lesbian-hating-male" (123).

While it may be necessary in the current political context to continue to raise questions and debate about men who wish to represent lesbianism, it is absolutely essential that we maintain a vision for a future in which such policing of the boundaries of lesbianism will become unnecessary or perhaps irrelevant. As Butler suggests, "it may be only by risking the *incoherence* of identity that connection is possible" (113, emphasis in original). Because we live in an imperfect world, it is at times politically necessary to create and maintain a working definition of "lesbian," while always remaining open to contestation of who "qualifies" as a lesbian. But perhaps in the "post-postmodern" period, the male lesbian will have his day.

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[1]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this fact.

[2]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer who pointed out that there was also an effort among some lesbian feminists in the 1970s to define a "real lesbian" as a woman who had *never* had sex with a man. Clearly, these debates from the 1970s are still reverberating in our communities today.

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