The Politics of Lesbian Specificity

Agnes Bolsø, PhD

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

ABSTRACT. The notion of lesbian specificity must be understood in the context of heteronormative society. Heterosexual norms affect negotiations of power and sexual desire in lesbian relationships. But this investigation into woman-to-woman sexual practices also views the possibility of lesbian specificity as potentially subversive, in the sense that it poses fundamental questions about conventional discourses on sexuality and eroticism.

KEYWORDS. Sociology, sexual politics, lesbianism, lesbian sexuality, sex roles, role play, eroticism, orgasm, woman-to-woman prostitution

INTRODUCTION

My informant, AR, takes orgasm seriously, both her partner's and her own. "I've heard girls say that it's important that they come at the same time," she says, "but that spoils having sex for me. I'll concentrate on the other person and at the same time this person is supposed to take me, but of course, when using the 69, it does happen that we come simultaneously, but that's rare. I can't concentrate on both things at the same time." According to AR each orgasm is important and should be

Agnes Bolsø, PhD, is Associate Professor at the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Address correspondence to: Agnes Bolsø, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, N-7491 Trondheim, Norway (E-mail: agnes.bolso@hf.ntnu.no).

Journal of Homosexuality, Vol. 54(1/2) 2008
Available online at http://jh.haworthpress.com

doi:10.1080/00918360801951954

attentively brought about. She has abandoned any heterosexually rooted idea about simultaneous orgasm–the almost religious union in coitus, the orgasm that, statistically speaking, most often means his and not hers. AR favors equality and takes responsibility for both her partner's orgasm and her own. But why is she using the verb "to take"? Why use a word that in Norwegian (and English) is loaded with heterosexual power difference when used in a sexual context? Is it necessary to drag heterosexual power terms into a description of lesbian sexual dynamics? This article focuses on power and sexual desire in lesbian relationships. Based on interviews with informants like AR, it develops a notion of lesbian specificity based on an analytical approach that takes into account, that lesbianism is necessarily formed within a heteronormative society and that it is, also, distinguishable from heterosexuality.

Power and sexual desire is a contested issue within international feminist thinking (see Jackson & Scott, 1996; Kitzinger, 1987; Segal, 1994; Segal, 1999; Snitow et al., 1983). But this has *not* been the case among feminist academics in Norway. It is not because of academic achievements in the realm of sex and sexuality that Norwegians are among the "world-champions" of gender equality. However, lesbian s/m and the lesbian subcultural return to images of the butch-femme dynamic, together with the new voices on prostitution and pornography, has triggered and shaped the debate in the Norwegian *women's movement*, especially in the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. Organizations were split on sexuality issues here as in other Western countries. Lesbian s/m, female-oriented or lesbian pornography, and prostitution, between women, were seen by some as mere reproductions of heterosexual power inequality, far from an ideal and power-free female exchange. By others, pornography for example was perceived as an exciting and promising erotic possibility for women, and especially for women having sex with other women.[1]

These debates are the background for my interest in studying the power exchange in sex between women. What are the power issues? How is power negotiated in sexual practices between women? Is there a specificity as to how power is negotiated between women, and if so, how are the politics of lesbian sex related to the norms of a heteronormative society? These questions might sound old-fashioned and already exhausted, as some readers will connect them to debates about political lesbianism and lesbianism as the only logical outcome of feminist convictions. My discussion here aims beyond that debate, and I believe, in this connection, that queer theory opens new analytical possibilities for the debate. Let me first argue for the use of the term "lesbian specificity."

LESBIAN SPECIFICITY

Any sexual dynamic that involves the sexual desire for a woman by another woman is, in this article, a lesbian sexual dynamic. As far as a woman understands and defines herself as *acting* as a lesbian, she will *be* one, as far as the argumentation of the following is concerned. If she does not have an identity as a lesbian, she is, all the same, perceived as part of a lesbian erotic situation. Now, is there anything special to say about the sexual dynamics between women? What is there, if anything, that lesbians can be said to share (Butler, 1993b, 309)? Judith Butler asks this question and states that if there is one thing that lesbians *perhaps* do share, it is some knowledge about "how homophobia works against women" (Butler 1993b, 310). I believe one would also have to say, that what lesbians share, is a structure of desire, namely, the one, where a woman's sexual longings are directed at the body of another woman.

There is something "non-queer" about extracting common elements, or specificities, from a certain structure of desire and the erotic practices between women such a desire might imply. There are, however, good reasons for establishing some sort of general picture. The first is that social science would simply be meaningless if its practitioners were to refuse to make some sort of general statements about the social. It is more a question of how we do it. Sexual relations between women should be a far more visible part of the debates about, research on, and practices of, sexuality. I cannot see how we can achieve this without theorizing lesbian desire and practice as something that is possible to delimit, describe and name, in a continuous process of deconstruction, construction and struggle over the politics of theory and practice.[2] The Danish psychologist Dorte Marie Søndergaard offers perspectives on the delimitation of social phenomena and the act of generalisation that I find useful in my work.

There *is* no such thing as "lesbian specificity." The way we (have to) speak a phenomenon into existence creates what Søndergaard calls "discursive essentialism" (Søndergaard, 1999, 4). We have to make boundaries, she says, and by doing so, we name a core and a periphery, and exclude meanings that could have been articulated. Instead of attempting to canonize one's own essentialism, one could, as Søndergaard suggests, define the essential as "constructed and situated statements undergoing constant change" (Søndergaard, 1999, 4). I conceive of "lesbian specificity" as essential in exactly this sense.

It is more than clear that queer ideas have opened up for the examination of homosexuality as a desire and practice of desire that is deeply

embedded in a heteronormative society. The increased awareness of what heterosexual conceptualization and compulsory heterosexuality culturally mean, in terms of sexing and sexualizing individuals, opens up for new sociological analytical approaches to the questions I want to debate here: lesbianism as a specific practice of desire, *integrated* in heterosexual fantasies (or discourse, if one prefers that) as well as *integrative* of heterosexual fantasies. Regarding the power issues, that are my focus here, Judith Butler formulates such a focus admirably:

> Is it not possible that lesbian sexuality is a process that reinscribes the power domains that it resists, that it is constituted in part from the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace, and that its specificity is to be established, not *outside* or *beyond* that reinscription or reiteration, but in the very modality and effects of that reinscription? (Butler, 1993b, 310)

"Translated" into the empirical analysis I carry out in this article, it means that I look for lesbian sexual/erotic practices that to my mind are possible to recognize as containing power differences. I investigate how lesbians, whom I have interviewed, relate to, negotiate and rework the power issues I have identified, and ask, as I evaluate the results, what the notion lesbian specificity might mean in terms of socio-cultural change.

INTERVIEWS

I base my analysis on twenty interviews with Norwegian women. The interviews were conducted in 1998–1999. Seventeen of these women identified themselves as lesbians, one as bisexual and one as heterosexual. One of my informants considered a sex change, from being a woman having sex with other women, to that of becoming a heterosexual male. The oldest informant was born in 1946 and the youngest in 1979. Most of them lived in urban settings; however, they were not necessarily of urban origins. Seven of them could be characterized as middle-class, two were on social welfare and six had working-class jobs. Five of them lived on student loans and income from odd jobs. I used my knowledge about the Norwegian lesbian communities and my own contacts to recruit informants whom I did not know previously (the so-called snow-balling method).

In terms of my informants' social background, political values, sexual experiences, occupation, education the material was quite broad. I consider that an advantage, even though the representational issue was not my main concern throughout the fieldwork; I wanted a richness of stories. I wanted narratives about concrete erotic situations and sexual encounters; what the individuals did, what they said, what they thought-all related to specific erotic events in my informants' lives. The two questions I posed most frequently were: "Then what happened?" and "Could you be more specific, please?" At the same time I always tried to be aware of the ethical aspects of the situation. As in any other conversation, the researcher should not push the interlocutor beyond her limits.

I had chosen to divide the empirical analysis into two kinds on the basis of their relation to the socio-erotic, where two of the analytical themes tended towards the *social* while two other themes tended more towards the erotic, the latter understood as *symbolic* representations of the erotic. Such a distinction is not absolute, since the connection between the social and the symbolical erotic in every case was obvious. (And it might all the same prove to be a reasonable organizing of this presentation.) I will start in the symbolic realm.

POWER IN THE LESBIAN EROTIC

As indicated initially, some of my informants used the term "to take" to describe what they do sexually. We saw that AR, a working class woman in her late forties, used this verb in the quotation introducing this text. It became clear later in the interview, that to her "to take" a partner meant giving her partner an orgasm orally or digitally. Another informant, who used "to take," was GI. GI is in her mid twenties, and an active participant in groups of young gays and lesbians. She is a student, now living with her third partner, J.

AB: "Can you tell me about the last time when you had sex with J?"
GI: "Yes, I can. Or rather, the last time she had sex with me, because she had her period. It was yesterday, or no, it was the day before. I had gone to bed and was reading. She came and laid down and just started kissing me. Then she went down on me and wanted me."
AB: "And you let her?"
GI: "Yes, I did."
AB: "And then. . .?"

GI: "Well, I wanted her too, but I fully understand that she won't when she has her period. She wouldn't get as much out of it when she is in pain. And that is fully understandable. But I'm not that keen on being taken when I am not allowed to take her. Just taking her can almost satisfy me."

In this sequence GI is "taken" when her partner gives her an orgasm orally. GI, as the taken one, reaches orgasm, while J, the taker, does not. I have argued that the erotic charge of difference between "to take" and "being taken," which the term carries within a heterosexual context, is retained (Bolsø, 2001;2002). GI eroticizes her story for herself, and for me, by using the term.

When my informants "took" they actually "gave," since it was the partner's body they focused upon and genitally stimulated, and the orgasm of the partner was the result. That is, the erotic charge of "to take" within a heterosexual discourse is kept while, at the same time. It is the opposite that actually takes place, namely. "giving," I will not go into the more complicated issue of "taking," as in taking control of the other person's orgasm (see Butler, 1993b and Bolsø, 2002 on the debate about butch power versus what one might call self-abnegation).

Another question that intrigued me during the interviews was the importance of "masculinity" and the power signals attached to the term. This second analytical issue is also primarily *symbolic*, since it is not the concrete socio-erotic behaviour itself that is focused upon here, but rather the sense of the active erotic that is linked to masculinity.

JC (who is 24) was walking down the street on a summer day, dressed as she usually prefers to be dressed, in jeans and a tight t-shirt. She carried a small backpack and her hair was cut very short. She met two boys, slightly younger than herself. In the interview she told me that they called her "macho-babe," and that she liked it: "That was a huge compliment to me." I interpret the comment as signifying "heterosexual," because JC would not have been seen as particularly masculine in the lesbian club. However, there is something about her that these young boys recognized as different from the girls they usually see on the street. Other lesbians find it attractive, and/or they identify one of their own by it.

GG: "You'll have to talk about masculine and feminine, but you must do it in another way. These words might carry a different charge than in everyday life."

AB: "Everyday life, do you mean in a heterosexual . . ."

GG: (interrupts) "Yes, world, in language and stuff. These words might carry a different charge among lesbians. When you say masculine, you don't mean *masculine*. You mean being tougher. Lesbian radiance."
AB: "What you mean by lesbian radiance ..."
GG: (interrupts) "You want me to describe what that is?"
AB: "Yes."
GG: "It is, like, 'it', in a way. I have never become interested in a hetero-girl, because they don't have that radiance. That you are a girl, and are interested in other girls."

J feels attracted to women with big thighs and asses. She was young when she experienced such a desire. The other woman was her teacher. When I asked her what she wanted to do with her teacher, she replied: "It was, like, being naked together with her. Do you understand? I remember I dreamt about it once, too. It had much to do with her curves, her breasts, thighs, ass. belly, and things like that. I don't know I just wanted to wallow in it. Do you get me? It was not sexual, actually, even though it was." However, it was the same J, who, waiting for the green light, spotted a woman on the opposite side of the street al so waiting for the walk sign, and fell in love with her, although she was boyish (J's term). The other woman was young, with short hair, dungaree-shorts and a tank-top, who "looked purposeful. She knew where she was heading." She went across the street when the light turned green, said J, "while I kept standing there, trembling."

J's partner is fascinated, as is J, with women's bodies, thighs, asses and breasts. When I asked her to tell me about the last time she knew that she was sizing up a woman, she said it was the day before, a female police officer on the street: "I don't need to look much at her face when she is a policewoman. I concentrate on the curves in uniform." And this is not only about appearance. BA is strongly attracted to another young woman, and the object of attraction is different from herself: "She is stronger in how she thinks about herself, about where she stands," she says. "And she has been open for a long time, and then it is easier to live in the (lesbian) community. I am more insecure, and I'm sure she has had several partners, at least I think so. She has been together with X, that's for sure, and now she is dating someone else."

BA is herself rather strong and determined, and her heterosexual friends tell her that she looks much more masculine after she started dating other women. With reference to theoreticians like Judith Butler,

Teresa de Lauretis and Sue Ellen Case, I will argue that this is to relate actively to the hegemonic signifier of sexual desire, the phallus. It could be denoted as desire mediated via the phallus, but without the paternal power (de Lauretis, 1994). or we could call it the lesbian phallus, plastic, transferable and expropriable (Butler, 1993a). With regard to the butch-femme aesthetic, Sue Ellen Case asserts that this implies playing *on* the phallic economy and not *to* it (Case, 1993). My interview material is convincing in this case: signs of masculinity are very important in the social mediation of sexual desire and attraction between women.

In both those analytical cases (the use of "take" and the focus on "masculinity") it is possible to understand hetero-and homosexuality as interwoven in the sense that lesbians are reworking heterosexual discourse. The major signifier of active sexual desire is put into play, with the power element of masculinity not being fixed but flexible.[3]

POWER IN THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF LESBIAN PRACTICE

My material provides examples of lesbian sexual/erotic practices which it is possible to recognize as containing power difference between the persons involved in a particular erotic situation. OP offered the most striking experience. She had been paid for providing sexual services to upper-class women and mentioned these relations among several others, and not as qualitatively different. The money and gifts involved were not important.

For about one year, in 1968–1969, OP and a girlfriend used to connect with upper-class women in a café downtown. OP was nineteen years old and new in the lesbian community. After having meals and drinks at the women's expense, they would go to the latter's homes to have sex. Occasionally she was given money or presents.

AB: "How was that sex for you?"
OP: "It didn't give me anything, but I felt that I was a hell of a girl. I was so self-confident, that it could make you sick."
AB: "You just pleasured these women?"
OP: "Yes."
OP: "The ladies would be drinking wine. I suppose they had to, to gain courage. However, we [OP and her friend] were reckless."
AB: "The women paid the bill at the café, you said. Did they put money in your pockets as well?"

OP: "That would happen now and then, and they bought us stuff."
AB: "Did you see the same persons more than once?"
OP: "Yes, that would happen. Then I got a lover on a more regular basis. And that was the end of it."

At my request she provides an example.

OP: "I was nervous. It was one of the first times. Alone [without her friend] I was not so uppity. There was a lot of talking, and she was drinking. And I was talking wildly, because actually I didn't want this. You know–curtains down and so on. And we went to bed. She wanted me to have oral sex with her. A stranger, it wasn't exactly what . . . not to strangers. But I wanted to try, so we went to take a shower. I thought it might be easier after a shower, and there we had a very pleasant time. She wanted a lot of things. She wanted me to talk dirty to her. Fantasies. What I did to other people. Of everything I told her, I hadn't done half of it."

OP did not climax in these sexual encounters. She made the other woman come, but did not let the other woman touch her. In the interviews, these first experiences in the sex trade were presented as kicks she had as a young lesbian, socially shared with a friend, both new to the lesbian community.

Eventually OP established more permanent relations with women, and quit trading sex. Later on, however, she dated a woman who held an advantageous position in terms of social status. She gave OP material benefits such as money and the right to use her car and house. OP defined it as a relationship. She described it as an example of a relationship where she was not permitted to be dominant in bed. The other woman always wanted to be the boss. OP had to be "totally girl, you know. I was supposed to just be on my back." The other woman was on top, climaxing by rubbing her body against OP's. OP usually would not enjoy this, and took pleasure in it only a couple of times. OP dated the woman for half a year and they socialized with OP's friends. Her friends knew that OP was paid, actually very well paid, and they made fun of it. OP had no other regular work at the time and made it clear that it was an unequal relationship. However, in her perception it was the woman with the money, the nice car and big house, who was the exploited party in the relationship: "It wasn't nice," OP says. "She was terribly exploited, and she knew it. I don't think it caused any harm. She was supposed to move to another town in a couple of months, our time together was limited and would end."

The academic literature about woman-to-woman prostitution is limited, or non-existent. I have previously used material from pornography and a lesbian e-mail list, in addition to the interview with OP, to develop an argument about woman-to-woman prostitution (Bolsø, 2002). Here I can only recapitulate the main points of this analysis. Firstly, the market for heterosexual transactions is not the place for women who want sexual services from other women. There are reasons to believe that there is very limited overlap between the markets for heterosexual and lesbian prostitution, if they overlap at all. Secondly, "the closet" might have an impact on the power structure in favor of the prostitute, if the prostitute is openly lesbian and the client closeted. Thirdly, the available body-orifice (the open body) is of limited interest in lesbian commercial sexual exchange, since women do not usually climax from penetrating another person with hands or an object. This could imply a reduction of the risk for psychological damage, if we compare the results from research about sexual abuse to those of prostitution. And if we take literally the ideas about the symbolism connected to bodily penetration in our culture, it would mean decreased vulnerability for the woman who offered her services to other women. The female client's restricted ability to penetrate with an orgasmic object would probably mean a power-advantage for the prostitute. A fourth point, the promiscuous lesbian, who is known for her skills in pleasuring another woman, is not seen as a "loose" and available woman. In the lesbian subculture this rather tends to have positive connotations, something that would imply a less stigmatized social position for the female sex-worker, who is in the service of women, compared to sex-workers in the service of men. The conclusion, finally, is that the edges of the power problems are smoothed down. The control the customer has, is delimited compared to a man's control in heterosexual prostitution. The power problems do not vanish, but are socially unfolded with a more "democratic" result.

Yet another issue that came up during the interviews was the social aspects of the production of an orgasm. In an article titled "Orgasm and Lesbian Sociality," I conclude that the production of orgasms is taken seriously, and that orgasms are usually produced, either one after the other, or as a one-sided arrangement with some form of permanence (Bolsø, 2005). The orientation towards service is conspicuous, and for the most part, service is provided as a mutually pleasurable interaction. In the case of reaching orgasm, a display of masculine control seems to increase the risk of becoming the subordinate, in terms of becoming the provider of a one-sided sexual service.[4] My informants related actively to the

"coitus imperative," and the reworking of it took a variety of forms: rejection, repetition, and playing with it. What is important, in this connection, is that penetration does not hinder a focus on female orgasm. Orgasms are produced unrelated to a coital or penetrative imperative. As with the prostitution case, I conclude that the outcome of the power negotiations seems to be quite fair in the lesbian case.

A summary of both the symbolic and social aspects of lesbian power practices would be as follows. Firstly, what is understood as erotic or desirable in lesbian exchanges is often closely connected to the symbolic value of masculinity and the erotic charge of the difference between femininity and masculinity. This is not simply copying heterosexual activities, but rather, it means putting the main signifier of sexual desire into productive play between women. Secondly, the dynamic of lesbian erotic exchange is marked with a high degree of common-sense social justice. A short description might be that lesbian erotic specificity is marked by a flexible power exchange.[5] The question, then, is how the visibility and talk about lesbian specificity might alter how individuals of different desires think, talk and practice in the erotic field.

THE POLITICS OF LESBIAN SPECIFICITY

"Politics" is understood here as subversive effects when facing dominant heterosexual discourse. Are lesbian practices seeping into practices between women and men? Lesbians are reliable in providing orgasms for their female partners. Will that aid heterosexual males? Lesbians apparently have a story to tell about equality issues. Is someone listening? Another aspect of politics is what we might call the queer, subversive or ontological challenge. To be ascribed a specificity implies the possibility and "reality" of a lesbian existence or a lesbian presence. On many historical occasions women's desire for other women has not even been recognized as a site of prohibition, such as when the Norwegian parliament passed an act of criminalization of male homosexuality in 1902. Female homosexuality was not prohibited because the phenomenon was impossible (Friele, 1997). Is there an ontological effect of visualizing lesbian existence in terms of lesbian desire through a socio-erotic specification?[6] Can it change the way culture produces naturalized ideas about women, men, heterosexuality and homosexuality? Is masculinity, the main symbol for active sexual desire, threatened? Does language prove its inadequacy?

Here, I would like to organize the text with the help of a distinction that is actually inadequate, an understanding of political effect, as something that quite directly changes social structures versus an understanding of political effect as something that represents new tools, positions and means for an understanding of the social.[7]

What does the heterosexual community care about the socio-eroticism of lesbianism? Does a different erotic sociality have some kind of direct impact on the main culture? During the period when I was finishing my dissertation about lesbian sexual practices related to power issues (Bolsø, 2002), I was on the main Norwegian radio channel twice and interviewed by a newspaper journalist once, all in the same week. Some weeks later I was directing a one-day workshop for a unit within the Norwegian public health service, which I had also done some months earlier. During these events, I initiated a debate about heterosexuality from a lesbian perspective. Lesbianism obviously plays into a public concern about sexuality and equality, and there are indeed people, out there, who want to hear what might be said from this angle.

In 2000 the Norwegian government took the position that homosexual practices are significant because social change implies that heterosexuals are influenced by homosexuals. In a report to parliament the government claims that heterosexual society has some important things to learn from homosexuals; namely, how to break away from traditional sex roles and how to give priority to friendship as a form of social organization (*Stortingsmelding* no. 25, 2000–2001). On the basis of the specific experience of homosexuality, gays and lesbians are also credited with an advantage in understanding other people's life crises. The report states that in an increasingly complex society, which is more open than previously for personal choices of sex roles, cohabitation and sexuality, "homosexuals have been pioneers in establishing ways of living that are becoming more and more common also among heterosexual couples" (*Stortingsmelding* no. 25, 10; my translation).[8]

Even as a demonstration of governmental goodwill, this is probably a bit too optimistic. The report does not demonstrate how the structural changes came about. How did homosexual practices in a concrete sense effect a difference? Was it through political efforts to achieve citizen rights, or was it through the mere existence of homosexuals and their increased visibility in the media? Perhaps overlapping phenomena worked together? And, what about the effects of feminism on the very same issues? These are also the kinds of questions I am facing, when I want to comment on the impact of lesbian practices on the main culture.

I can only speculate. What I would like to suggest, based on the contact I have had already with the press, is that on the concrete level, the impact will be in line with the work of sexologists. The results from this study raise questions about what people do when they are together sexually. This will include questions about the anatomical technical aspects of sex (how are orgasms produced in women?), as well as about the social technology of sex (can "sexual service" be compatible with feminism?). Hopefully, some people will begin to examine their own practices critically and reflect upon possibility for change where they consider such is needed. Like any other change in people's practices, this will be a slow process-particularly so, as sexual identity might be at stake.

Lesbian specificity as accounted for above, may be used to comment on one of the issues of the feminist debate about sex and sexuality: female sexuality and the detachment from romance. The question has been whether female sexuality can flourish as long as it is inseparable from a romantic discourse, that makes the emotional and care giving aspects of relationships most important for the female partner. Emotions are connected to gendered structures of power difference. Women must, it has been said, become more aware of and specific about what they want in sex (Hollway, 1995; Jackson, 1996; Jackson, 1999; Segal, 1994). My informants take orgasm seriously. The production of it is not understood as secondary to the emotional and loving aspects of the relation. They are oriented towards service in the sense that they will help the partner experience orgasm, even when they are not aroused themselves. I believe that the self-evidence of female orgasm in lesbian relationships and the existence of women-to-women services in the sex market will contribute to a change. We will have to make the term "sexual service" compatible with feminism, and this requires a change in the feminist debate. In the future it should not be based on heterosexual experiences only, but on empirical investigations of woman-to-woman practices and the historically contexualized specificities of lesbian practices.

The goodwill in the government report just mentioned is formulated as follows: "The basis for the government is respect for the homophile and acceptance of the homosexual life" (*Stortingsmelding* no. 25, 13; my translation). A question of fundamental political and theoretical importance is whether this goodwill will have an influence upon heteronormativity. Increased respect and acceptance is not necessarily the same as a change in the norm; someone is still in the position of having the power to accept or reject someone else. Let me illustrate this point briefly with an example.

In recent years we have in Norway seen girl-girl kissing in different kinds of media, ambiguously related to the hetero-homo distinction. I often hear this phenomenon presented as an instance that demonstrates postmodern tolerance for and acceptance of homosexuals. This interpretation is of course possible. However, I have not yet seen one such media representation without an accompanying statement from the women involved indicating that they sexually prefer men. This may be seen as an example of the media's increased tolerance toward the sight of a woman kissing another woman, and at the same time, as a signal of *rejection of the desire it might have represented.* The government is probably correct in assuming that we have an increased level of respect and acceptance, but that does not mean, that the culturally conceived normality of heterosexuality is not still intact. In my understanding the subversion of heteronormativity is a different matter.

The discussion is more theoretical than practical. What does it mean to say that the development of a notion of lesbian specificity has an ontological effect, a queer effect, or subversive effect? What I choose to do here is to focus on the ways lesbian specificity may be understood as being a practice that is between or beyond hegemonic discourses. In other words, I am addressing an aspect of "effect" that is of a different quality from that of being tolerated, respected and accepted by society in general. To illustrate this difference I will cite two of the prominent figures within the Norwegian gay and lesbian movement, when the right for homosexuals to legally "get married" was being discussed:

> I support the right for homosexuals to get married, because I believe that homosexuals should have the same right as heterosexuals to do something as stupid as that. (Gerd Brantenberg; my translation)[9]

> The problem is that *Løvetann* ["Dandelion"][10] surpasses the authorities in reproducing existing ideology. There are no limits as to how normal, responsible and powerful we have become, I used to believe that some of the point of being a homosexual was to undermine power, to alarm, to challenge and to revolt.[. . .] I for one feel more comfortable on the fringe, on the periphery and in perversion, and I choose to fight for a space on the margin, in infectiousness, in absence, in the thoughts of an end–as a weed, as a heretic. (Dag Strand Nielsen, quoted in Halvorsen, 1999, 322-23; my translation)

Strand Nielsen does not want to be associated with the center of power, with normality and adjustment. Brantenberg points to the absurdity of gay and lesbian marriage. I do not know the opinions of my informants about identity politics and civil-rights issues. It simply was not part of our conversation. Nor have I studied my material for possible approaches to such matters. What follows, is therefore *not* about political attitudes and positions. I address instead an aspect of what may be called "effects of lesbian specificity," that has the theoretical potential to alter some common understandings of sexuality.

What have I said about lesbian specificity that should be emphasized in the *context of an ontological discussion?* I will point to the following: it means to put masculinity into play between women: it means for a woman not (only) to desire men; it often means that a woman penetrates another woman; it often means giving sexual service by one woman to another; it means that in some cases a woman replaces a man. symbolically as well as anatomically; it means to be a female subject of sexual desire; it means that sexual desire *itself* might be a directing force in a woman's life; it means that "having sex" is about pleasure only, never about procreation.

These points represent a positioning outside important discourses in the field of sexuality, specifically outside the romantic discourse, in which women in a heteronormative society are expected to represent the one who is into sex as a complementary aspect of her loving emotions. How could a woman, who may receive sexual service from other women, and who also gives sexual service to other women, be a trustworthy representative of a romantic discourse related to sex? She will admit that sexual desire in itself, not just the bonds to a concrete lover, may determine her choices. This is not compatible with the expectations that women are primarily concerned about the emotional aspects of relationships. This is not to say that lesbians are less romantic than heterosexual women when it comes to looking for "the one and only" or planning candle-light suppers. The point I am making is about the lesbian who practices as a sexually autonomous subject in a culture, where women are turned into objects for men's active desire. This is to be between, beyond or to reject the discourses of masculinity and femininity.

Such a rejection is not new, of course. Among women in general the distinction between masculinity and femininity is often dismissed, blurred or balanced in a variety of ways. This often implies an attempt at compensating in one direction what you have lost in the other. Lesbians challenge the binary at what is understood as the core of gender difference: sex in an anatomical and symbolic sense. A woman replaces a man in all respects

(except for the reproductive capacity, which I do not consider being of particular importance in respect to eroticism). How is it possible to compensate for this? And what does it do to the dichotomy homo-hetero when women replace men in all respects? And what does it do to this dichotomy that lesbians exploit the main erotic signifier of heterosexual desire? An obvious conclusion is that lesbians are neither homosexual nor heterosexual.

Lesbians cannot properly, convincingly do sex. "Man" and "woman" are culturally understood as natural categories embedded in a heterosexual norm. How can lesbians possibly be understood as natural women? How can one be without a man sexually, use masculine strategies for picking up women for sex, perform sex in a way that never would entail the possibility of motherhood, be sexually serviced by women, penetrate women, even say that one has "taken" another woman and perhaps paid for sex offered by a woman, and still be culturally understood as a woman? How can society count on such womanhood for womanhood to prevail? Or as the French philosopher Monique Wittig argues: "it would be incorrect to say that lesbians, associate, make love, live with women, for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women" (Wittig, 1996, 148).

Lesbians cannot be considered as belonging to the category "woman," unless the category itself is fundamentally changed. This leaves us with two options: either the category "woman" *has* changed and is able to contain women whose sexual desire is for other women, or the category "woman" has *not* changed, and since in Norway, lesbians are viewed as human beings, it is now normal and natural to exist outside what defines a human being at the time of birth, namely, that of being either female or male.

I am not sure whether I would choose the first or second option, both, or perhaps neither. What is important for contemporary debate on sex and sexuality is that the scrutiny of lesbian practices puts these fundamental questions on the agenda. I understand this aspect of lesbian specificity as a positive, politically subversive aspect, that has the potential to alter categories and make new phenomena and creatures come into being (in order to be recognized). This I call an ontological aspect with the potential to make someone think and theorize sexuality and eroticism within other frameworks than those marked by the so-called self-evident naturalness of the eroticism of the sexual difference between women and men.

Sexuality and eroticism are, in any case, imagined, repeated and produced into existence–as in this text. What is required to make lesbianism

seem as self-evident and natural as heterosexuality? The answer to this is as simple as it is complicated: what signifies sex must change. Judith Butler puts it as follows: "the entrance of homosexuality into the symbolic will alter very little if the symbolic itself is not radically altered in the course of that admission. Indeed, the legitimation of homosexuality will have to resist the force of normalization for a queer resignification of the symbolic to expand and alter the normativity of its terms" (Butler, 1993a, 111).

These changes are so fundamental that we are not able to imagine them, not to say suggest a specific formulation of what queer resignification would look like. It is beyond the language we speak and with which we think.[11] It is about new ways in which we will be able to experience our bodies and our sexuality; it is about what it is that makes sexual desire a feature of the human being. I will suggest that the queer politics of lesbian specificity is about its potential to communicate a new language and new signifiers of desire, thereby erasing the notion of heterosexuality as well as that of lesbianism itself, which is problematic, because the delight of sex and sexuality is also on and beyond the limits of sex categories. Wanting it all.

NOTES

1. For different positions in the international feminist literature see Harris and Crocker, 1997; Hart, 1996: Jeffreys, 1990: Kennedy and Davis, 1993; L[uddot]tzen, 1987; Nestle, 1987; Nestle, 1992.

2. The question of lesbian specificity is connected to the debate about essentialism in the social sciences and humanities. Teresa de Lauretis argues in an article about essentialism and feminism that we need concepts of specific, or essential, differences (de Lauretis, 1989). I find her argumentation convincing, but space does not admit a lengthy restatement.

3. The female body itself can also be seen as a signifier of desire for a woman, what a woman desires in another woman (de Lauretis, 1994). I perceive masculinity as the most prominent signifier in our culture, and the importance of masculine signs among lesbians are documented by other researchers as well (Blackman & Perry, 1990; Esterberg, 1996). This does not mean, however, that it is the only one or that it is impossible to change. A theoretical reasoning for the penetrability of the symbolic is to be found in Butler 1993a (see especially "Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex"). I will return to this in a discussion of language and the consequences of language for how we possibly can understand our experiences.

4. This represents a parallel to the classic butch-femme dynamic. See for instance Kennedy and Davis, 1993 and Butler's reflections on the issue (Butler, 1993b, 315–316).

5. This does not mean that lesbian relationships are never abusive. See for instance Scherzer, 1998 and Girschick, 2002.

6. The term "lesbian existence" is from Adrienne Rich's famous essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." "Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence," she writes (Rich, 1983, 192). If nothing else is said, I use lesbian "specificity" and "existence" synonymously.

7. Adrienne Rich's distinction would be between lesbianism as an accepted alternative lifestyle and lesbianism as constituting a resistance against compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1983).

8. It is interesting that a normative status on matters of gender, sexuality and relationships is assigned to homosexuals. And it is also something of an irony, given that until 1972 homosexuality was illegal and until 1978 defined as an illness, and that homosexuals are still not enjoying equal rights in the Church of Norway.

9. Brantenberg did not write this statement when the gay and lesbian movement debated the legal right to domestic partnership, but she gave interviews and participated in meetings about the issue. Her position may be summed up as in the citation. Permission given in a conversation. April 2001.

10. This is a Norwegian journal for gays and lesbians.

11. Attempts are made, though. See e.g., Grosz and Probyn, 1995.

REFERENCES

Blackman, I., & Perry, K. (1990). Skirting the Issue: Lesbian Fashion for the 1990's. *Feminist Review, 34*(Spring), 67–79.

Bolsø, A. (2001). When Women *Take*: Lesbians reworking Concepts of Sexuality, *Sexualities, 4*(4), 455–473.

Bolsø, A. (2002). Power in the Erotic: Feminism and Lesbian Practice, Doctoral dissertation, Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Bolsø A. (2005). Orgasm and Lesbian Sociality. *Sex Education, 5*(1), 29–48.

Butler, J. (1993a). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993b). Imitation and Gender Insubordination. In H. Abelove, M.A. Barale, & D.M. Halperin (Eds.), *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 307–321.

Case, S.-E. (1993). Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic. In H. Abelove, M.A. Barale, & D.M. Halperin (Eds.), *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 294–307.

de Lauretis. T. (1989). The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the US, and Britain. *Differences, 1*(2), 3–37.

de Lauretis, T. (1994). *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Esterberg, K. G. (1996). A Certain Swagger When I Walk: Performing Lesbian Identity. In S. Seidman (Ed.). *Queer Theory/Sociology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 259–280.

Friele, K.-C. (1997). Hva vi er. er resultatet av hva vi tenker. Fragmenter av homohistorien i Norge. In V. Benum, E. Friis, & A. Offerdal (Eds.), *Vite for å forstå. 10 artikler on homoseksualitet og lesbiske og homofiles levekår i Norge idag*. Oslo: LLH, 12–34.

Girschick, L. B. (2002). *Woman-to-Woman Sexual Violence: Does She Call It Rape?* Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Grosz, E., & Probyn, E. (Eds.) (1995). *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism.* London: Routledge.

Halvorsen, R. (1999). Partnerskapslovens Tvetydighet. *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* (3), 310–334.

Harris, L., & Crocker, E. (Eds.) (1997). *FEMME: Feminists, Lesbians and Bad Girls.* New York: Routledge.

Hart, N. (1996). From an Eroticism of Difference to an Intimacy of Equals: A Radical Lesbian Separatist Perspective on Sexuality. In L. Mohin (Ed.), *An Intimacy of Equals: Lesbian Feminist Ethics.* London: Onlywomen Press, 69–78.

Hollway, W. (1995). Feminist Discourses and Women's Heterosexual Desire, In S. Wilkinson, & C. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives.* London: Sage Publications, 86–106.

Jackson, S. (1996). Heterosexuality and Feminist Theory. In D. Richardson (Ed.), *Theorizing Heterosexuality: Telling It Straight.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Jackson, S. (1999). *Heterosexuality in Question.* London: Sage Publications.

Jackson, S., & Scott, S. (1996). *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Jeffreys, S. (1990). *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution.* London: The Women's Press.

Kennedy, E. L., & Davis, M. D. (Eds.) (1993). *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community.* New York, London: Routledge.

Kitzinger, C. (1987). *The Social Construction of Lesbianism.* London: Sage Publications.

L[uddot]tzen, K. (1987). *Hva hjertet begjærer. Kvinners Kjærlighet til Kvinner.* Oslo: Cappelen.

Nestle, J. (1987). *A Restricted Country.* London: Sheba.

Nestle, J. (Ed.) (1992). *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader.* Boston: Alyson Publications.

Rich, A. (1983). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. In A. Snitow, C. Stansell, & S. Thompson (Eds.), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 177–206.

Scherzer, T. (1998). Domestic Violence in Lesbian Relationships: Findings of the Lesbian Relationship Research Project. *Journal of Lesbian Studies.* 2(1), 29–47.

Segal, L. (1994). *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure.* London: Virago Press.

Segal, L. (1999). *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Snitow, A., Stansell, C., & Thompson, S. (Eds.) (1983). *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality.* New York: Monthly Review Press.

Stortingsmelding no. 25 (2000–2001).

Søndergaard, D. M. (1999). *Destabilizing Discourse Analysis-Approaches to Poststructural Empirical Research.* Copenhagen: Institutt for Statskundskab, University of Copenhagen.

Wittig, M. (1996). The Straight Mind. In S. Jackson, & S. Scott (Eds.), *Feminism and Sexuality, A Reader.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 144–150.