Over the past decade scholarship on lesbian and gay issues has rapidly increased not only in scope and size but also in level of acceptance as “valid” research within the academy. Although lesbian-feminist theory has long been a part of the academic field of women’s studies, only recently has it begun to gain a degree of critical autonomy, a development that has been attributed to the need of some lesbian theorists to define their projects over against those of both feminist theory and the new darling of academia: “queer theory.” While lesbian theory diverges in some important ways from feminist theory, it’s opposition with queer theory is, I would argue, much
greater and more fundamental, to the extent that the two may be wholly incompatible as politically useful theoretical positions. Not all lesbian theorists would agree, however, as the most recent work on these issues attests; even when lesbian theorists wholeheartedly embrace queer theory, they are often reluctant to give up on some of the basic premises of lesbian feminism. This, I believe, suggests that lesbian-feminism provides a certain type of social and political analysis that is not available through queer theory, a case I intend to make through a critical review of some of the scholarship on these issues produced over the last five years.

Some of the issues that divide lesbian-feminists and queer theorists are the very issues that threatened to divide lesbians from feminists in the early stages of the women’s movement[1]. The practice of identity politics, with its concern for the nature and boundaries of identity, has been central to most social movements of the past few decades, with perhaps the most visible example being that of the Black Power movement. Identity politics assumes a coherent, unified, and stable identity on the basis of which individuals should not be discriminated against; while activists concerned with ending racism and classism have used identity politics with some success, gender and especially sexuality pose a more difficult problem, as we will see in the work of both lesbian-feminists and queer theorists. Another related issue that divides these two critical perspectives is the nature and function of the sex/gender system; for lesbian-feminists, sex and gender are conceptually interdependent categories, best exemplified by the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, but for queer theorists, sex and gender are and must be conceptually distinct, which opens up the possibility for an analysis of homophobia that excludes the role of sexism[2]. Lesbian-feminists and queer theorists also come to heads over the meaning of “sexual difference,” the construction of identities through hierarchical, binary gender roles, and what it means to be “anti-normative.” These are but some of the issues that scholars have recently taken up, as a way both of understanding the historical role and importance of lesbian-feminist theory, and of coming to terms with the emergence of queer theory.

Arlene Stein’s article, “Sisters and Queers: the Decentering of Lesbian Feminism” (1992), offers a brief but thorough account of the history and development of lesbian-feminism, as well as an analysis of the fallout from lesbian feminism’s recent encounter with queer theory. According to Stein, the recent increase in lesbian visibility and diversity has led lesbian feminists to reconceptualize what is meant by “lesbian community,” since it seems more accurate to refer to lesbian “communities,” and to recognize that not all of these communities will identify as feminist (35). But this has certainly not always been the case, and in order to understand the hegemony that lesbian feminism has had over constructions of lesbian identity, Stein reviews the basic assumptions of lesbian feminism as a political philosophy.

Early lesbian feminism developed in an attempt to counter the dominant medical construction of lesbianism as the congenital defect of “inversion.” The medical model clearly suggested that lesbianism was a biological trait, albeit a defective one, and early homosexual rights advocates used this evidence to claim that lesbians should be pitied for their condition rather than oppressed because of it (37). With the rise of the women’s movement in the seventies came an increasing dissatisfaction with the association of lesbianism with biological “abnormality,” as early feminists began to analyze other explanations for the existence of lesbians. The theory that came to dominate early lesbian feminism was that lesbians were those who resisted the regime of compulsory heterosexuality, that they, unlike heterosexual women, refused to become part of the male economy by choosing to identify only with other women; thus was born the concept of the “woman-identified woman.”[3]

Lesbian feminist activists in the seventies claimed not only that lesbianism had nothing to do with a medical, or biologically “essential” condition, but that it was, in fact, a choice available to all women, and a choice that any woman aware of the oppressive nature of heteropatriarchy would make. While lesbian feminism at first sought to
“liberate the ‘lesbian’ in every woman” (38), the movement soon found itself faced with the dilemma of identity politics. In order to gain political ground, lesbian feminists felt the need to fix lesbian identity as somewhat stable and coherent, in order to classify lesbians as a “minority” deserving of protection against discrimination, but the boundaries of this identity were fairly narrow, and excluded those whose experience of being lesbian didn’t measure up to the feminist “ideal” (45). The tension produced by this move, away from recognizing lesbianism as a personal and political choice and towards a more essentialist understanding of lesbian identity (ironically not too far removed from the medical models), sowed the seeds for the demise of lesbian feminism as a powerful political force in the eighties, although it also opened up the possibility for more specifically lesbian varieties of political analysis, such as those taken up by the sex-radicals of the early eighties (48).[4]

Towards the late eighties, Stein observes, lesbian feminism and lesbian politics in general were separate entities, often with contradictory assumptions and political aims. While the lesbian feminist analysis of oppression assumed an inherent link between sex and gender — arguing, in the words of Suzanne Pharr, that “homophobia is a weapon of sexism” [5] — other kinds of lesbian analysis (some of which also insisted on being considered feminist) argued for the “relative autonomy of gender and sexuality, sexism and heterosexism” (50). This latter position more closely resembles that taken by many queer (male) activists in the late eighties and early nineties, with whom these lesbians would come to identify as a way of marking their difference from “traditional” lesbian feminism. “Queerness,” for these gay men and lesbians, is understood as “a non-normative sexuality which transcends the binary distinction homosexual/heterosexual to include all who feel disenfranchised by dominant sexual norms” (50).

Stein’s primary critique of this newly emerging “queer” theory is that it fails to adequately “compensate for real, persistent structural differences in style, ideology, and access to resources among men and women” (50). In other words, it privileges sexuality, in both political analysis and cultural expression, over gender, and thereby threatens to erase or reduce the gender-bound experience of lesbians as women. While feminism may have failed to adequately address the multiplicity of sexual difference in its analysis of the sex/gender system, she argues, the new “queer theory” fails to address gender at all, which makes it an arguably less effective political philosophy for many lesbians. But a possible benefit of the clash between lesbian feminism and queer theory is that lesbian feminists have had to rethink their commitment to the belief in the primacy of the sex/gender system over other forms of oppression, to the extent that they have begun to theorize lesbianism as a provisional identity “situated in a web of multiple oppressions and identities” (51), taking into account differences of race, class, ethnicity in ways that queer theory has so far failed to do. According to Stein, then, this newer version of lesbian feminism, which has shifted away from an exclusive focus on gender towards an understanding of multiple oppressions, is a more “decentered” movement, which “may present new democratic potential” (52).

Not all lesbian-feminists have let queer theory off the hook quite so easily, though. While Stein argues that a newly “redesigned” lesbian feminism is more politically useful to lesbians than queer theory, she does not critique the assumptions and indeed arrogance of queer theory to the extent that other scholars have. This is perhaps in part due to the most recent developments in queer theory which Stein may not have been aware of in 1992; by 1994, however, lesbian scholars have become acutely aware of the hegemony that queer theory threatens to hold over all studies of gender and sexuality in the academy, and have thus launched into full-scale critiques of its totalizing tendencies.

Perhaps the most scathing critique comes from Sheila Jeffreys, whose work is not always received well by non lesbian feminist scholars because of her tendency to claim to speak for all lesbian feminists, when in fact she only speaks for a particularly radical group. In her most recent article, “The Queer Disappearance of Lesbians:
Lesbian-Feminism and Queer Theory:

Another “Battle of the Sexes”?

Sexuality in the Academy” (1994), Jeffreys states simply, “The appearance of queer theory and queer studies threatens to mean the disappearance of lesbians” (459). Jeffreys’ concern, like that of so many lesbian feminists, is that queer theory threatens to offset the advances made by feminism by failing altogether to recognize its impact in shaping contemporary understanding of sexuality and gender; queer theory, she argues, is “feminism free” (459). Despite its supposedly counter-normative associations, Jeffreys believes the word “queer” has come to signify white gay male, which renders any project associated with this signifier simply “more of the same,” while masquerading as “new and uniquely liberating” (469). Thus, unlike Stein, whose critique of queer theory is relatively mild in comparison, Jeffreys accuses this new theoretical discourse of deliberately reinscribing the very oppression(s) that feminists and lesbian feminists have been fighting against for years, in order to privilege (homo)sexuality and gay male culture as the epitome of the “anti-discourse” made so much of by postmodern theory.

Central to Jeffreys’ critique is that queer theory privileges and indeed naturalizes the masculine in a way that runs counter to the aims and goals of most forms of feminism. The notion of “camp” or “drag,” which Jeffreys sees as one of the key concepts of queer theory, is built on gay male notions of performative femininity, which not only excludes biological women but enshrines the dominant construction of masculine as the binary opposite of feminine; a drag queen’s enactment of femininity for the pleasure of other men, rather than calling into question the performative nature of all gender roles, instead fixes perceived sexual difference at the core of desire, a claim early lesbian feminists were most anxious to refute. According to Jeffreys, then, while queer theory may claim to expand the limits of gender by “playing” with the terms that constitute it — by supposedly separating femininity from the female body in the persona of a drag queen, for example — it in fact fails to account for the sexism inherent in the terms as they are constituted by the dominant culture. A man “playing at” being a coy, submissive woman, for the benefit of other men, is hardly a vision of sophisticated gender analysis to most lesbian feminists — which is not to criticize drag queens in and of themselves, so much as to point out the inadequacy of drag as core theoretical concept.

Jeffreys also criticizes the tendency of queer politics to “[accept] and [celebrate] the minority status of homosexuality.” This, she believes, is a politics “which is in contradiction to lesbian feminism” (469) because of its insistence on a stable, coherent albeit counter-normative identity. She continues:

Lesbian feminists do not see themselves as being part of a transhistorical minority of 1 in 10 or 1 in 20, but as the model of free womanhood. Rather than wanting acceptance as a minority which is defined in opposition to an accepted and inevitable heterosexual majority, lesbian feminist theorists seek to dismantle heterosexuality, and one strategy is the promotion of lesbianism as a choice for women. (469)

One of the supposedly progressive things about the word “queer” — its open and defiant stance against heteronormativity — is, to critics like Jeffreys, precisely its greatest weakness, since it presupposes the naturalness of that which it is supposed to be in opposition against, and lesbian feminism has long insisted that no system of sexuality is natural. Failing to see this fundamental insight of lesbian feminism, queer theorists are unable to account the total hegemony institutionalized heterosexuality has over all human interactions, ranging from the regulation of marriage and reproduction to a whole host of seemingly unrelated restrictions which prevent the self-identified queer from being free.

Jacquelyn Zita, in an article entitled “Gay and Lesbian Studies: Yet Another Unhappy Marriage?” (1994), raises many of the same objections to queer theory as Jeffreys, and with only slightly less anger at its critical dominance. While Jeffreys is concerned with the impact of queer theory and queer politics both inside and out of the
academy, Zita is primarily concerned with the academic field of queer theory, and its potential impact on departments of lesbian and gay studies departments and of women’s studies. According to Zita, one problem with subsuming gay and lesbian studies under the heading “queer” is that gay male academics haven’t adequately theorized oppression on bases other than sexuality (such as race, gender, class, ability), and instead tend to privilege homophobia as “the” central form of oppression (259-60). Feminism, on the other hand, has been much more willing to expand its analyses to incorporate multiple oppressions — to, in fact, argue that all forms of oppression are fundamentally linked to each other — although there are some feminists who argue that patriarchy lies at the heart of all other forms of oppression. While feminism works to be inclusive, then, Zita finds it particularly “disappointing when queer theorists unreflectively practice exclusion in their theory building, and [it is] even more disappointing when it is lesbian feminists who are among the marginalized” (261).

Like Jeffreys, Zita also criticizes queer theory for its reliance on notions of camp and drag, on the performance and theatricality of gender, which are male-defined and deployed. While gay men may engage in performative femininity as a form of entertainment, or as a means of erotic stimulation, Zita notes that lesbians who adopt masculine roles rarely do so for such reasons, but rather for survival, which suggests that theorizing gender solely as performance is a “luxury,” one that is “a function of social and theoretical privilege, where gender is radically deconstructed as an ontology-free artifice of sexual semiotics by the postmodern constructionists or as a history-free stylistic by what-ever-turns-you-on pro-sex liberals” (263). Zita’s frustration with the masculinist bias of queer theory is, in part, the result of her more general frustration with the critical hegemony of postmodernism, a theoretical perspective that may very well turn out to be hostile to the goals of most types of feminist analysis. In the passage below, Zita links the recent success of queer theory directly to the influence of postmodernism, and suggests, as Jeffreys has, that queer theory is essentially “feminism free.”

This rapid ascent [of queer theory] into the esoteric echelons of academic discourse seems not only related to a quick resolution of male Oedipal tension between disgraced gay sons and forgiving straight fathers, but also a quick cover of the ass — and overreactive, if not homophobic attempt to sanitize and intellectualize over the cultural shame and embodied grit that grounds queer studies in the body and its heady sexual desire. (266)

As a result, Zita argues, feminist scholars who “have not been heavily schooled in the privileged Eurocentric discourse appropriated by queer theory may find themselves marginalized from this drama between fathers and sons” (266), which further underscores the divisions between queer theory and lesbian feminism.

Another scholar who links the development and critical success of queer theory to postmodernism is Shane Phelan, whose book, Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community (1989), was written several years before the term “queer theory” was even coined.[6] While she does not, therefore, mention it by name, it is clear that this is what she has in mind when she critiques the potential of postmodern theory to spawn theoretical perspectives that will be antagonistic towards the fundamental claims of feminism (140-1). According to Phelan, postmodernism is particularly hostile to lesbian feminism because of its insistence that all subjectivity is suspect, even though it is precisely the awareness of oneself as a “speaking subject” that lesbians most need to develop (140). Unlike Zita, neither Phelan nor Jeffreys seems to believe that the tensions between postmodern/queer theory and lesbian feminism can ever be resolved, because the problem isn’t that (male) queer theorists have not yet adequately theorized multiple oppressions, but that their theoretical project is fundamentally at odds with that of most feminists.[7]

This is not to suggest, however, that all lesbian feminists find it impossible to reconcile their perspective with queer theory; on the contrary, quite a few theorists who consider themselves lesbian feminists have embraced the
new queer politics enthusiastically, and in fact some of the most influential thinkers in queer theory are female: Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis. In her article, “Making it All Perfectly Queer” (1992), Lisa Duggan argues in favor of both the word “queer” and the project of queer theory, which she believes is a necessary counterpoint to the limited strategies of nationalism and liberalism which have for so long dominated gay politics (11). Because these earlier strains of activism posit a unified, coherent “gay identity,” they fail to adequately account for the varieties of difference within the ranks of “gay,” with the result being that a politics which claims to represent all gay people does so only for white, middle class gay men (18). Duggan argues that the notion of “a queer community” can work somewhat differently [because it] is often used to construct a collectivity no longer defined solely by the gender of its members’ sexual partners. This new community is unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender” (20).

While I would have to disagree with her implication that earlier models of gay identity were defined solely on the basis of the gender of one’s sexual partners, since lesbian feminism in particular worked towards a much broader definition, Duggan’s point that queer signals a “shared dissent” from heteronormativity is well taken, even though, as I mentioned earlier, this tends to naturalize heterosexuality. Duggan goes on to explain that the constructionist position supported by queer theory “stake[s] out a new stance of opposition… [which] is constituted through its dissent from the hegemonic, structured relations and meanings of sexuality and gender, but its actual historical forms and positions are open, constantly subject to negotiation and renegotiation” (23). In other words, Duggan claims that queer identity cannot, by its very nature, be fixed, but is constantly under negotiation, as it were, defining itself over against the non-queer, the normative, the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. This, Duggan believes, is a politically useful strategy, one that is bound to be more successful than traditional liberal or nationalist strategies, although it currently occupies the critical margins in the arena of political activism (26-7).

Michael Warner, in his introduction to Fear of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory (1993), also makes positive political claims for queer theory, although his analysis is slightly more problematic because he tries to suggest a partnership between queer theory and feminist theory that, to the minds of most lesbian feminists, does not exist. According to Warner, queer theory is “opening up in the way that feminism did when feminists began treating gender more and more as a primary category for understanding problems that did not initially look gender-specific” (xiv). Not only is Warner assuming that all feminists hold gender to be the central category of oppression, he is also implying that queer theory posits sexuality as the central category for understanding social problems, and given queer theory’s insistence on the complete separation of sex and gender, it would seem then that these two modes of theoretical analysis are therefore in contradiction with each other. Warner downplays the possibility of contradiction by drawing out similarities between the two theoretical positions:

Much of the work of feminist social theory has consisted of showing that basic conceptualizations — ways of opposing home and economy, the political and personal, or system and lifeworld — presuppose and reinforce a paradigmatically male position. Queer theory is beginning to be in a position to make similar criticisms, sometimes with reference to the same oppositions,… but also with others. (xxiii)

But what this analysis fails to account for is the “paradigmatically male position” that informs so much of queer theory, which is precisely Jeffreys’ and Zita’s most vehement complaint against it.

Warner also uncritically assumes that the term queer “represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (xxvi). Here Warner is making a point similar to Duggan’s, but given his apparent need to demonstrate the similarities between feminism and queer theory, it is surprising that
he does not mention that this is precisely the position of early lesbian feminism: that lesbians represent “resistance to regimes of the normal” by resisting compulsory heteropatriarchy. He also fails to see the ways in which queer itself can operate as “minoritizing logic,” since it assumes not only a fixed majority “norm” against which it constitutes itself as “queer,” but also a fixed minority “queerness,” which never slips into the realm of the norm. Given that most gay men participate in normative male privilege, it seems unrealistic to believe that queerness alone is sufficient to constitute oneself entirely on the margins.

Although I was not clear when I began this review where I would locate myself in the debate, my particularly critical response to Warner leads me to believe that, at least at this point, I would argue that queer theory is not politically useful for lesbian feminism. That is not to say, however, that with a more thoroughgoing analysis of its assumptions about gender queer theory might indeed fulfill its promise of being “all-inclusive,” in the way that Duggan envisions, but as long as its central category of analysis is sexuality, to the exclusion of gender or indeed even race, class, etc., queer theory and feminism will continue to be at odds with each other. While lesbian feminists might usefully employ queer theory’s critique of US liberalism and the tendency of early gay activists towards militant nationalism, it is hardly necessary to embrace queer theory on the whole, especially since lesbian feminism, in its new “decentered” form analyzed by Stein, contains within it the elements necessary to make such a critique on its own. Perhaps, then, this is my most fundamental criticism of queer theory: that it fails entirely to acknowledge and build on the theoretical and political work that has long been done by lesbian feminists, preferring instead to assume that it alone is capable of inventing and sustaining “important” forms of political analysis for lesbians and gays. For so many feminists, the male arrogance that supports this assumption is all too familiar, and altogether unwelcome.

Works Cited


NOTES:

1 See Calhoun for an analysis of these tensions between feminist theory and lesbian theory even today. ( back up )

2 See Rubin for a critique of the feminist analysis of the sex/gender system; see Rich for an early lesbian feminist analysis of compulsory heterosexuality. ( back up )

3 The Radicalesbians’ statement by this name is the earliest lesbian feminist document that defines the concept. ( back up )

4 Fuss suggests that any increase in essentialist arguments is the result of an increasingly conservative political environment; this is a particularly intriguing notion in light of the religious right’s insistence that homosexuality is a “wrong” choice, not an biological or essential condition. ( back up )

5 See Pharr’s book by that name for an analysis of the intersections between homophobia and sexism. ( back up )

6 The term “queer theory” first appeared in published form in 1991, in Terese deLauretis’s introduction to a special issue of differences which examined the current state of lesbian and gay theory. ( back up )

7 For an argument that lesbian theory and postmodernism are in fact quite compatible, see Wiegman’s introduction to The Lesbian Postmodern. ( back up )

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- PWR Teaching Writing with Technology
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Lesbian-Feminism and Queer Theory: Another “Battle of the Sexes”?

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Feminism refers to a diverse variety of beliefs, movements, and agendas for action and aims to achieve equality between the sexes. Feminism is a complex set of ideologies and theories, that at its core seeks to achieve equal social, political, and economic rights for women and men. Feminism refers to a diverse variety of beliefs, ideas, movements, and agendas for action. Feminism focuses on the idea that since women comprise one-half of the population, true social progress can never be achieved without the complete and spontaneous participation of women. Feminist ideals and beliefs focus on what culture is like for women as compared to what the world is like for men. I did not know that the text would have as wide an audience as it has had, nor did I know that it would constitute a provocative intervention in feminist theory or be cited as one of the founding texts of queer theory. The life of the text has exceeded my intentions, and that is surely in part the result of the changing context of its reception. Whereas many feminists in the 1980s assumed that lesbianism meets feminism in lesbian-feminism, Gender Trouble sought to refuse the notion that lesbian practice instantiates feminist theory, and set up a more troubled relation between the two terms. Lesbianism in this text does not represent a return to what is most important about being a woman; it does not consecrate femininity or signal a gynocentric world. The goal of the feminist revolution, she wrote, must be "not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself" so that genital differences no longer have cultural significance. Firestone's theories have been described by philosophy professor Mary Anne Warren as follows: Firestone argues that the biological sexual dichotomy, particularly the biological division of labor in reproduction, is the root cause of male domination, economic class exploitation, racism, imperialism and ecological irresponsibility.