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ABSTRACT

I explore the ways in which political strategies promoting biological determinism as the basis of same-sex desire have historically been used to argue for the social and legal toleration of queer sexuality in the United States. While acknowledging that the focus on a fundamental lack of agency in queer relationships has historically been a beneficial political tactic to gain social and legal toleration, I problematize this tactic and assert that emphasizing lack of agency, instead of positive aspects of queerness, is more harmful than helpful for the future of a unified queer rights movement.

I begin by analyzing the political arguments of early twentieth century sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, who utilized biological determinism to argue for the social, political, and legal tolerance of same-sex desire.¹ Through the idea of “congenital inversion,” Ellis worked to prove the “naturalness” of same-sex desire by virtue of its ineradicable roots in biology (even though his personal views about the origins of human sexuality were more complex). I argue that this sort of political advocacy created a trajectory for the American queer rights movement to follow in which biology is invoked in an effort to gain tolerance and civil rights. I include the analysis of historian Jennifer Terry to show how such

¹ Ivan Crozier, *Sexual Inversion: Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

a project of biological determinism has emphasized same-sex desire as involving a “lack of control” rather than as a “positive choice.”²

Through an analysis of radical lesbian feminism and early gay liberation movements in the 1960s-1970s United States, as well as the contemporary Queer by Choice movement, I show the existence of groups of people whose queer identities fall outside of the biologically-driven model. I compare discourses of agency³ with what I argue is a predominant stance in the mainstream American queer rights movement that to be pro-biological determinism is pro-queer and that to embrace choice or agency is automatically associated with being homophobic.

After establishing the hegemonic influences of biological determinism in supposedly queer-friendly pop culture, including on liberal internet blogs, in movies, and in self-help literature, I ultimately posit that a focus on biological determinism shuts out the voices and experiences of queer people whose identities do not fit into this framework. Further, I argue that an emphasis on biology is inappropriately apologetic and fails to challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity. Finally, I propose that the American queer rights movement will be hindered in the future by clinging to biological

² Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 73.

³ Vera Whisman, *Queer by Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 56-62; 124-125.

determinism, and that as a movement, we must craft our identities in a positive framework for a more hopeful future for activism.

BEYOND "I CAN'T HELP IT": BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM IN
AMERICAN QUEER POLITICS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR AGENCY

by

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A Paper Presented to the

Faculty of Mount Holyoke College

Under the Direction of Professor Jane Gerhard

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Bachelors of Arts with Honor

Program in Critical Social Thought

South Hadley, MA 01075

May, 2009

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Jane Gerhard for agreeing to take on my thesis back in fall 2007, when it was an independent study slated for the spring of 2008 and I was a student in her Sexual Revolutions in U.S. History course. Since then, Jane has provided me with extensive knowledge about the history of queer sexuality and feminism, great book recommendations, and bountiful amounts of her time, reading countless chapter drafts as I pieced together my articulation of a better future for queer activism. I've enjoyed our many lengthy chats about life and politics, and the pizza with the rest of the 2009 Jane advisees was pretty great, too. I'd also like to thank Professor Joan Cocks, who taught me what it is to be a superb professor and who always pushed me to think critically and write to the best of my ability. The "A dots" still make me laugh. In addition, Professor Eleanor Townsley's Sociology of Gender seminar in the fall of sophomore year showed me the way to both my academic interest in gender and sexuality as well as my burgeoning realization that I really should be a CST major. Thank you also to Professors Harold Garrett-Goodyear and Liz Markovits for taking the time to be on my thesis committee.

Thank you to my friends for your encouragement and exchanges of

senior woe – Lily, I think you must be an expert on the L Word by now; Isaiah, we got through Senior Symposium and I can't wait to hear about the great things you accomplish at NYU. An enormous thank you to my parents – seriously, thank you for always believing in me and for raising me to become the person I have become. To Brian, thank you for becoming more politically conscious with every year – you're not just my teenage brother, but also my friend. Finally, to my talented, intelligent, beautiful, radical, hilarious wife, thank you. From Massachusetts to San Francisco and back, we have something phenomenal. Thank you for saving me breakfast, for staying up until the morning with me as we both worked on our theses, for proof-reading and fixing my tendencies towards British citation methods, for calming me, and for believing in my ability to be amazing. I love you, Meredith. And to the Class of 2009 in general – it's almost over. How did that happen?

One more thing – Ryan Sorba. Thank you for contributing to the best protest experience of my life at Smith College and for proving the point of this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

At Mount Holyoke College, the oldest women's college in the United States and an incredibly queer⁴-friendly bubble, sexual identities grow, change, are challenged, and become solidified through one's four life-changing years. Some students enter as bisexual or lesbian and graduate as bisexual or lesbian. Some students adopt the identity of pansexuality⁵ in order to recognize that they may be attracted to anyone, including people who do not identify as men or women. Some students identify as bisexual when they enter as first-years and then find themselves shifting towards lesbianism or simply towards queerness, refusing to categorize their experiences with a more limiting label. Others enter as heterosexual, fall into a daring new world of desire between women and the challenging of gender assumptions, and begin to identify as queer or lesbian. A woman may find that her sexuality is far more fluid

⁴ For the purposes of this thesis, I use "queer" as a synonym for "LGBTQ" [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer], that is, sexuality that falls outside of the hegemonic heterosexual framework. I most frequently use "queer" to navigate the politics and stigma of same-sex desire while understanding that people who engage in same-sex desire may not themselves identify as strictly lesbian or gay. "Queer / LGBTQ" also acknowledges the commonalities between the politics of same-sex desire and gendered minorities, i.e. genderqueer, androgynous, and transgender people. Although some people expand the word "queer" to apply to anyone whose sexuality falls outside traditional mores, such as heterosexual people who engage in BDSM [bondage, domination, sadomasochism], that is not the usage here.

⁵ "Pansexuality" refers to people who identify as being attracted to not just men and women, but people outside the traditional binarized gender spectrum who may not identify strictly as "male" or "female," such as genderqueer people and some transgender people.

than she ever thought it was; perhaps she never had a strong affiliation with any sexuality and then begins to discover what she wants.

Additionally, gender identities may change and become more fluid or more solidified; the idea of genderqueerness or androgyny can be explored in a relatively safe and supportive atmosphere. A few women may even come to identify as men by the time their Mount Holyoke years are over. What unites all of these experiences is the idea of growth, change, complexity, and acknowledging the specifics of individual situations. If Mount Holyoke has taught me nothing else about gender and sexuality, it is that the ways that gender and sexuality converge are complicated, constructed, and yet very personally and politically meaningful. Writing a thesis on the subject will only begin to scratch at the surface of the interdisciplinary field of sexuality studies.

As I began to identify as a member of the LGBTQ community at Mount Holyoke, I realized that my own identity, nurtured by the sexually fluid student body and gender studies-rich academic environment of the Mount Holyoke campus, is often at odds with a larger idea of mainstream queer identity in the United States that is put forth by heterosexual people sympathetic to gay rights as well as by queer people. I realized that while I frame my identity with specific social and political reasons and gravitate more towards the idea of "sexual preference" than "sexual orientation,"

this is a rather rare and at times controversial positioning of identity in the eyes of the dominant American queer community. By “dominant” I mean the depiction of queer identity through pop culture, including literature and film; the voices of leaders within the queer community such as Melissa Etheridge and various prominent internet bloggers; self-identified allies to the queer community such as certain chapters of PFLAG [Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays]; and queer people that I come into contact with in everyday life as well as on the internet. A dominant view of queer sexuality is that it is strictly or primarily biologically based and that any other conception is both incorrect and homophobic. My attempts at sorting through this discrepancy in vision, ideology, and identity have led me to my current project.

Many readers have probably heard the commonly-expressed sentiment that people are gay because they are “born that way;” perhaps some readers have even heard, as I have heard both from some queer and heterosexual people, that gay people would be “straight if they could” and that “it’s not like someone would choose a life filled with discrimination if they could help it.” Instead of discussing agency or positive reasons for why one may identify as queer, biology is emphasized in an attempt to gain toleration from people and institutions that are otherwise hostile to queer sexuality. I seek to destabilize these broad

assumptions. The queer community is far more diverse than this conception acknowledges, and not everyone, including myself, feels comfortable identifying in the same specifically biological way, without agency or a focus on positive attributes of queerness.

In this thesis I explore the ways in which political strategies promoting biological determinism as the basis of same-sex desire have historically been used to argue for the social and legal toleration of queer sexuality in the United States. While acknowledging that the focus on a fundamental lack of agency in queer relationships has historically been a beneficial political tactic to gain social and legal toleration, I problematize this approach and assert that emphasizing lack of agency, instead of positive aspects of queerness, is more harmful than helpful for the future of a diverse queer rights movement. To that end, I have divided the chapters of my thesis to focus on the following themes.

I begin in Chapter 1 by analyzing the political arguments of early twentieth-century sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, who, through a collaborative project with English writer Radclyffe Hall, utilized biological determinism to argue for the social, political, and legal tolerance of same-sex desire. Through the idea of "congenital inversion," Ellis and Hall worked to prove the "naturalness" of same-sex desire by virtue of its ineradicable roots in biology [even though Ellis' personal views about the

origins of human sexuality were more complex]. I argue that this sort of political advocacy created a trajectory for the American queer rights movement to follow in which biology is invoked in an effort to gain tolerance and civil rights. I include the analysis of historian Jennifer Terry to show how such a project of biological determinism has emphasized same-sex desire as involving a “lack of control” rather than as being a “positive choice.”⁶

Through an analysis of radical lesbian feminist activism in the 1970s United States in Chapter 2, I provide a study of lesbian sexuality that is politicized, purposeful, and focused on social revolution as well as personal transformation through the rejection of the hegemony of patriarchal heterosexuality. I include the manifesto of the radical lesbian feminist group Radicalesbians, among other texts, to show the jump from apologetic biological determinism to fiery injunctions to take up the liberated life of a “woman-identified-woman.”⁷ While acknowledging the limitations of radical lesbian feminism as a comprehensive guide for all women to find equal and satisfying relationships, I argue for the importance of recognizing moments, experiences, and identities imbued with agency within the queer community as an alternative discourse to

⁶ Terry, Jennifer. *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. 73.

⁷ Radicalesbians. “The Woman-Identified-Woman.” *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*. Ed. Barbara A. Crow. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 233-237.

the limiting narrative of biological determinism.

In Chapter 3 I show that there is a predominant stance in the mainstream American queer rights movement stipulating that to be pro-biological determinism is to be pro-queer and that to embrace choice or agency in terms of sexual desire and queer identity is automatically associated with being homophobic. I establish the existence and dominance of this position by giving examples of the hegemonic influences of biological determinism in supposedly queer-friendly pop culture, including on liberal internet blogs and YouTube videos, in movies, and in self-help literature, while explaining how this biological argument acts as a navigation of previous sexological discourses as well as a response to the hegemony of the Christian right since the 1980s. I ultimately posit that a focus on biological determinism shuts out the voices and experiences of queer people whose identities do not fit into this framework.

Narratives from the Queer by Choice movement are offered in Chapter 4 as contemporary examples of the existence of marginalized groups of people within the already-marginalized queer community whose queer identities fall outside of the biologically-driven model. I explore discourses of agency against the framework of biological determinism. I also point out the gendered dynamics of power within the

queer community that fail to take into consideration the fact that queer women, as a group who face subordination not just for their sexuality but also their gender, often report identifying in a more fluid, less biological way than do gay men. For example, while many gay men identify as being attracted to males since childhood or early adolescence, many women's accounts are less straight-forward, either coming to identify as lesbians later in life or citing more explicitly political narratives [such as lesbian feminism] as affecting their queer identities. Through a critique of male-dominated queer politics, I am able to provide an additional angle from which to critique biological determinism as a universal model of queer experience and identity.

Throughout, I argue that an emphasis on biology in the queer community is inappropriately apologetic and fails to challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity. I propose that the American queer rights movement will be hindered in the future by insisting on the primacy of biological determinism, and that as a movement, we must craft our identities in a positive framework for a more hopeful future for activism. I view this thesis as a contribution towards understanding the history of queer rights activism in the twentieth-century United States in terms of the tensions between biological determinism and theories of agency, and it is my hope that the American LGBTQ movement will be

able to make strides in the future based in queer pride that embraces diverse experiences without claiming to speak for everyone.

CHAPTER 1 – SEXOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF APOLOGY

Sexology emerged as a branch of the medical field, starting in Europe and taking root in the United States in the early 20th century, where it deeply shaped expert knowledge of sexuality into the 1920s. It blended what we now call biology, psychology, and sociology to examine new ideas about analyzing and cataloguing human sexual behavior. The influence of sexology on ideas about sexuality is particularly important due to sexologists' creation of the sexual label "homosexuality."

"Homosexuality" as a historical term originates in defining same-sex desire as something problematic and clinical; in fact, etymologists have not been able to trace either the term "homosexuality" or "heterosexuality" prior to 1892, and both terms are directly linked to sexology, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.⁸ Entries for both "homosexual" and "heterosexual" trace the words to sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in the 1892 edition of his work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and "homosexual" in particular is also traced to sexologist Havelock Ellis in 1897. Given this definition, sexologists viewed homosexuality as either needing to be "fixed," according to some, or, for others interested in decriminalizing same-sex sexual acts, explained in a way that allowed it

⁸See the Oxford English Dictionary Online: <<http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>>.

social, political, and legal tolerance. It is for this reason that throughout this work, the terms “homosexuality” and “homosexual” are avoided outside of a sexological context.⁹

Due to the political climate in the late 19th century in western Europe and North America, in which sexual activity between people of the same sex was criminalized, European sexologists sympathetic to social tolerance of homosexuality, such as Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld, dedicated themselves to finding ways of articulating why same-sex desire should not be punished by the law. Specifically, sexologists formed theories which medicalized non-normative sexuality. They hoped to use this medicalization as ammunition in the argument for decriminalizing sexual behavior between people of the same sex, and they based these theories around biological origins of homosexuality, or as sexologists termed it, “congenital inversion.”

The “first published medical article on homosexuality,” writes historian Jennifer Terry, was Karl Westphal’s 1869 “Die konträre

⁹ It is my intention for the reader to be ever mindful of the stigmatizing and clinical history of the words’ usage. I wish to draw attention to the problematic contemporary practice, by heterosexual and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people alike, of using “homosexuality” as a common parlance for same-sex desire and queer identity. I will, however, use the term “heterosexuality,” as its etymological history has occupied a normalized place of power that does not carry disturbing and stigmatizing connotations of perversion and abnormality.

Sexualempfindung," or "The Contrary Sexual Feeling."¹⁰ Westphal wrote about a lesbian who did not conform to feminine standards of gender. The article concluded with Westphal arguing that "her abnormality was congenital and thus should not be prosecuted by the police." The idea behind congenital inversion was that homosexuality stemmed from immutable, unalterable biological factors outside of a person's control. This focus on biology would become a common political strategy used by gay rights activists for decades in justifying what is now often termed queer sexuality. This political strategy of apologetic biological determinism, while working to gain leverage in the legal realm for protection of queer sexuality, resulted in leaving in place, long after the sexological period, the idea of heterosexual hegemony: heterosexuality was the "normal" default sexuality and queerness was the "other" that lacked agency.

To be sure, sexologists who used congenital theories to argue for the social, political, and legal tolerance of homosexuality were products of a time that failed in the most basic ways at addressing underlying heterosexist assumptions about what constitutes "normal" sexuality. However, these sexologists worked within their historical situation to be comparatively radical political actors who strategically used the

¹⁰ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession*, pp. 36;45.

sexological field in order to advance a particular political tactic in favor of homosexual toleration. Historian Ivan Crozier argues that Ellis and fellow sexologist John Addington Symonds both “shared a political motivation to decriminalise homosexuality in England and to broaden public appreciation of the phenomenon...”¹¹ Ellis and Symonds used the idea of congenital inversion in their work to prove homosexuality’s “naturalness” by virtue of its ineradicable roots in biology.

Thus, in analyzing the socio-political and historical context that sexology was situated in, one arrives at the conclusion that sexology was not simply a neutral field of study in which objective doctors and psychiatrists set about understanding human sexuality. Rather, sexology served as a battleground in which highly influential sexologists and other prominent medical authority figures of the time such as Sigmund Freud had no intention of supporting the toleration of homosexuality and instead further stigmatized same-sex desire as degenerate and diseased. Freud, as the “father of psychoanalysis,” theorized that “an individual was neither naturally or inevitably destined toward heterosexuality or homosexuality, but gravitated toward these various outcomes through complicated psychosexual developmental processes,” writes Terry.¹² Thus

¹¹ Crozier, Ivan. *Sexual Inversion: Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. 85.

¹² Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession*, p. 56.

for Freud, not only was same-sex desire based in psychology, but it was seen as abnormal and inferior to heterosexuality: "In Freud's framework, the normal object of sexual desire was a member of the opposite sex. He included homosexual object choice among the problematic deviations signaling a perversion of the normal sex drive..."¹³ In contrast to Freud's use of "psychosexual developmental processes" to argue against tolerance of same-sex desire, other sexologists such as Westphal, Ellis and Symonds used their professional credentials to craft a specific biological argument that sought to secure a place of toleration for same-sex desire in society.

Crozier argues that Ellis and Symonds, in collaborating on the first English medical textbook on homosexuality in 1897, *Sexual Inversion*, "can be seen to be negotiating a text which followed the plan which both Ellis and Symonds agreed could best argue against the Law Amendment Act of 1885."¹⁴ This law was seen as troublesome by sexologists sympathetic to homosexuality because it involved, in part, the recriminalization of male homosexuality. Symonds' and especially Ellis' use of congenital inversion in *Sexual Inversion* as a political strategy to stop the recriminalization of male homosexuality becomes complicated, however, when one considers that Ellis, according to Crozier, actually had a more nuanced view of human sexuality. This nuanced understanding of sexuality was especially

¹³ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁴ Ivan Crozier, *Sexual Inversion*, p. 84.

pronounced in relation to women.

Ellis, according to Crozier, believed that “biological and social constraints lay the groundwork upon which the individual develops their own sexual desires”¹⁵ and that “it was dangerous to reduce everything to biology, as had some degeneration theorists.”¹⁶ In fact, in contrast to Ellis’ more sympathetic views of male homosexuality, there is some evidence that Ellis regarded female homosexuality in a more negative light; Terry writes that Ellis found lesbianism “particularly disturbing.”¹⁷

Interestingly, Ellis specifically seemed to associate lesbianism with more sexual agency and free will compared with male homosexuality. He advised that women could overcome their lesbianism through “a wholesome and prolonged course of physical and mental hygiene,” which although would not get rid of same-sex desire, would “render [it] comparatively harmless...” Through such a “disciplinary regimen of work and dedication to civic activities,” women could “allay homosexuality” and regain some self-control. Ellis’ opposition to lesbianism is also of note considering the fact that his own wife, Edith Lees, was a lesbian.¹⁸

It is thus reaffirmed that in addition to departing from a strictly

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁷ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession*, p. 104.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

biologically-driven view of human sexuality when discussing lesbianism, Ellis was most definitely embedded in the patriarchal views of his time; Terry argues that sexologists' "commentary on lesbianism emphasized the dangers posed by women's increasing interest in equality, independence, and pleasure..."¹⁹ Regardless of the extent to which Ellis was implicated in restrictively Victorian views about women, however, it becomes clear how complicated his views about same-sex desire were, and how he did not always attribute homosexuality strictly to biology. In fact, by arguing that women could "allay" their desire for other women, Ellis subscribed to "situational inversion" for women even while using congenital inversion as a general political strategy to gain toleration for homosexual men.

Situational inversion was a theory of inversion that provided for a type of homosexuality that was not predetermined by biology but which was produced in a person through situational forces. One example was the high rates of inversion thought to exist at women's colleges due to female students living in an environment saturated with women and absent of men; another was the perception of high rates of inversion in prisons due to male prisoners being surrounded only by men for sexual gratification. It is clear in Ellis' work that he allowed a certain amount of sexual flexibility for women in his understanding of female sexuality; he

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

did not argue, after all, that all women are congenital invert, or he would not have advised women to try to lessen their inversion through “physical and mental hygiene.” In light of this seeming contradiction in approach, it is perplexing, then, to read Ellis’ preface to Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*.

Radclyffe Hall was an English poet and author who identified as a congenital invert and who used *The Well of Loneliness* to promote the toleration and understanding of inversion by relying on an argument supporting biological determinism. By aligning herself with Ellis, Hall and Ellis collaborated on a political project of tolerance. In *The Well*, which quickly became popular reading for lesbians in the United States and Britain, Hall focused on the character of Stephen Gordon, a stereotypically “mannish” congenital invert who has always felt more masculine than feminine. In fact, Stephen’s father was convinced before Stephen’s birth that she would be a boy, which is why he gave her a masculine name, and her mother became convinced during her pregnancy that Stephen would be a “gallant male creature ... a man-child would be born.”²⁰ When Stephen is born, she is defined by physical characteristics that were widely believed by sexologists of the time to be associated with the congenital inversion of masculine woman-loving women: “narrow-

²⁰ Hall, Radclyffe. *The Well of Loneliness*. Garden City: Sun Dial Press, 1928. 5.

hipped, wide-shouldered." Stephen also exudes a certain lack of femininity that helps to set the stage for her inversion; Hall wrote of "a certain largeness about her, a certain crude lack of grace in her movements, a certain unconscious defiance."²¹

Stephen goes through life treated as if she were a son rather than a daughter, as her father takes care to educate her and she is raised to enjoy fox hunting. She also falls in love with her female housemaid Collins while still living at home, rejects the romantic affections of her male friend Martin with horror, and eventually turns her attentions towards her love interest, Mary, whom she meets during World War I while working as an ambulance driver. Mary is positioned as a situational invert, with more feminine characteristics than Stephen, and at the end of the novel, after enduring the painful, socially ostracized life of the invert with Stephen, Mary is lured away into heterosexuality and leaves Stephen for a man, to Stephen's utter despair.

Through a narrative of Stephen's tortured and alienated life, Hall crafted a pitiable depiction of the tragic lesbian who, in Stephen's case, cannot help the way she is and by virtue of her lamentable biology should be tolerated by society. Contrary to Stephen's mother's words that

²¹ Ibid., p. 6.

Stephen is a "sin against creation,"²² which echoes dominant culture of the day that regarded same-sex desire as an immoral vice, Hall created a biologically-constricted character who deserved sympathy and understanding. The controversy of this argument was real in 1928: the novel was subjected to an obscenity trial due to the content matter, which featured nothing more sexually explicit than the words "and that night they were not divided."²³ Hall and Ellis' argument that same-sex desire was tolerable because biological was, then, quite a progressive claim for its time.

Ellis' preface to *The Well of Loneliness* is a perfect example of his use of congenital inversion as evidence for social tolerance of same-sex desire, while his views regarding situational inversion were omitted as a matter of political expediency. The widely-publicized novel was a shockingly iconoclastic book in its time for its depiction not just of tragic same-sex love between women but also in its plea for social tolerance for inverts. Ellis argued, like Hall, that because of the unfortunately unchangeable nature of inversion, inverts should be left alone by society instead of shunned, ridiculed, and targeted with the potential of a "cure." Thus, Ellis' more complicated view that "a combination of natural, personal, and

²² Ibid., p. 227.

²³ Ibid., p. 358.

circumstantial factors, as well as social sanctioning”²⁴ drives human sexuality was reconfigured and simplified in order to argue for social tolerance of homosexuality in a way that would be socially, politically, and legally palatable. Ellis wrote in the preface to the novel,

I have read *The Well of Loneliness* with great interest because ... it possesses a notable psychological and sociological significance ... The relation of certain people – who while different from their fellow human beings, are sometimes of the highest character and the finest aptitudes – to the often hostile society in which they move, presents difficult and still unsolved problems. The poignant situations which thus arise are here set forth so vividly, and yet with such complete absence of offence, that we must place Radclyffe Hall’s book on a high level of distinction.²⁵

It is notable that Ellis describes inverts as “different from their fellow human beings” in this passage – the reference to congenital inversion is palpable. The fact that Ellis had to emphasize the novel’s “complete absence of offence” also points to the fact that the novel was considered anything *but* lacking in offense, and that the most effective way to counter public horror was to continually appeal to the “sometimes ... highest character” of inverts despite their crooked biology. The politics of apology jump out from the page.

Ellis’ plea for social toleration in *The Well* is bizarrely misleading when arguing for social tolerance for inverts, however. Firstly, he is arguing for the toleration of inverts *in general* even though his preface is

²⁴ Ivan Crozier, *Sexual Inversion*, p. 31.

²⁵ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, Preface [“Commentary”].

focused on female inverts, those inverts of a “particularly disturbing” variety whom he advises, in his other work, to attempt to stop being inverts. Secondly, he endeavors to use his standard political strategy of tolerating congenital inversion while writing a preface for a novel that acknowledges situational inversion in addition to congenital inversion, particularly in the character of Mary. Ellis chooses to completely ignore the dilemma of the situational invert represented by Mary while focusing solely on the politically safer congenital invert, Stephen Gordon.

Hall’s use of congenital inversion as an apologetic sexological argument for social toleration is clear throughout the novel in the character of Stephen Gordon, and especially so at the end. As Stephen collapses in anguish after Mary leaves her for a man, she cries, “‘Mary, come back! Come back to me, Mary!’” She then sees, as in a vision, the melancholy and humiliated faces of numerous other inverts she has known all around her: “She could see their marred and reproachful faces with the haunted, melancholy eyes of the invert – eyes that had looked too long on a world that lacked all pity and all understanding: ‘Stephen, Stephen, speak with your God and ask Him why He has left us forsaken!’” The voices continue, “‘We have asked for bread; will you give us a stone? ... You, God, in Whom we, the outcast, believe; you, world, into which we are pitilessly born...’” Stephen responds to all these tortured voices by

pleading to God, in the last few lines of the novel, “‘Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!’”²⁶ By painting “the haunted, melancholy eyes of the invert” with such wide-sweeping, essentialist despair, and by orchestrating Stephen’s desperate and dramatic plea to God for basic human dignity and toleration, Hall reinforces the idea of the congenital invert as someone who should be pitied rather than punished. She also portrays, no doubt quite accurately since she herself lived it, the tortured and ostracized life of the congenital invert in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Ellis’ goal in lending his sexological authority to Hall’s depiction of a female invert victimized by her biology and doomed to be homosexual was to use sexology in ways that would encourage social toleration of congenital inversion. However, we are still left with the idea of the situational invert, which represents a “dilemma” for sexologists like Ellis. Situational inversion, framed as the opposite of congenital inversion in a binarized idea of “nurture versus nature” sexuality, threatens to destabilize a medicalized idea of homosexuality used by Ellis and Hall to seek legal protection by apologizing about biological necessity and lack of agency. After all, the reason why homosexuality should not be criminalized, they argued, is because it cannot be *helped*; the case for social

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 505-506.

tolerance of homosexuality has been, from day one, a reactionary *defense* of same-sex desire in a society seeking to squash it. The figure of Stephen Gordon, while pitiable in her freakish, congenital “mannishness,” is nowhere near as disturbing as the figure of Mary, who is tempted into situational inversion by the masculine wiles of Stephen. If situational inversion has credence, then any reader may become Mary, and homosexuality becomes a dangerous moral contagion, passed on through continuous contact and strong personalities, rather than being a contained biological flaw.

The medical rhetoric of contagion is worth pausing to consider, since having to convince a member of the general public, that is, the heterosexual public, that he or she is free from “catching” same-sex desire points directly, again, to the heterosexist assumptions about sexuality that formed the foundation of sexology and the beginnings of articulating same-sex desire in the early twentieth-century West. As Terry explains, homosexuality went from being a “punishable moral offense” in the pre-sexological era to a “medical matter.”²⁷ As homosexuality began to be seen more and more by the general population as medicalized and based in biology, it became less of a threat in the sense that it created a specific medical class of identifiable people who were “the homosexuals,” who

²⁷ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession*, p. 70.

were set apart from the rest of civilization at birth. Terry writes, "Medical and scientific discourses about homosexuality ... were situated in relation to cultural anxieties ... [and were] used to argue that homosexuality ought to be tolerated on the grounds that it was primarily inborn and thus not contagious."²⁸ Thus it becomes more plain why Ellis would formulate complex ideas about human sexuality, including situational inversion, yet only incorporate biological determinism into his political strategies for social toleration of homosexuality: the tame and contained invert, the invert that doesn't threaten ideas about heterosexual "normalcy," is the invert who will succeed, passively, in the socio-political realm, and by proxy the legal realm of the early twentieth century.

The results of using biological determinism to justify what we now call queer political identity have been historically complex and politically problematic. Terry argues, in reference to her argument about quelling homosexual "contagion" via the medicalization of a neatly-contained and biologically situated "homosexual" person, that this approach "left a legacy of attributing to homosexuality a lack of control. Rather than being a positive choice, it was seen as driven by instinct..."²⁹ This can be seen in Terry's example of Natalie Barney, a prominent lesbian poet of the time who wrote in 1899, just two years after Ellis and Symonds' *Sexual Inversion*

²⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 73.

was published, “Why should they hold it against me for being a lesbian? It’s a question of Nature. My queerness isn’t a vice, isn’t deliberate, and harms no one.”³⁰ This biology-based logic, in line with Ellis and an apt precursor to Hall, was a progressive argument for same-sex desire in the late 19th century. Barney’s insistence that her desire was not a “vice” was an assertion that it was not criminal, and the way in which she described her same-sex desire as not being “deliberate” strove to create sympathy and tolerance for homosexuality by painting it as something outside of one’s will, and indeed, without agency.

While expressing homosexuality in terms of biology helped to decriminalize same-sex sexual acts and promote social toleration from the sexological era up until the present, the question remains whether this type of political strategy is appropriate for all generations of queer people. The theorization of sexuality between women by the radical lesbian feminist movement, for example, is further evidence for the idea that the promotion of congenital inversion is not an effective political tactic for all queer people in all times, but rather one part of certain sexologists’ opinions that was heavily emphasized to accomplish specific goals during a specific historical moment. In examining radical lesbian feminism and the subsequent conservative backlash that again created a defensive

³⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

position of biological determinism by the queer community, it is imperative to ask, what is lost when the concept of agency in romantic relationships is lost? How does a perceived lack of agency shape the future of the queer rights movement and LGBTQ community?

The way in which sexology used biological determinism to articulate a pitiable, medically contained, and therefore more socially tolerable homosexual political identity is crucial in understanding the way the stage was set for queer political identity in the twentieth century and, as the reader will see, even into the twenty-first century. The use of apologetics and focus on lack of self-control, we have seen, was used as justification for same-sex desire in a society bitterly hostile to non-normative sexuality, hostile even to the point of criminalizing homosexuality. The early gay liberation movement, then, and particularly the radical lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s, would emerge in stark contrast to a reactionary politics of biology and lack of agency.

CHAPTER 2 – CHOOSING LESBIANISM IN THE '70S

In contrast to certain biologically-driven arguments of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexology, radical lesbian feminism in the 1970s was responsible for the theorization of an alternate model of same-sex desire grounded in agency, choice, and emancipation from the patriarchal foundations of heterosexuality. While the homophile movement of the 1950s argued for tolerance based in a politics of assimilation,³¹ radical lesbian feminists from the late 1960s and into the '80s, with a heyday in the mid-'70s, gave a fiery critique of heterosexuality without hesitation. These radical women sought to forge a new path for women to break away from unsatisfying heterosexual lives in favor of choosing women as their emotional, intellectual, and, to varying degrees, sexual partners. A central tenet of radical lesbian feminism was not just the politicization of sexuality, but more specifically, an acknowledgement of heterosexuality as a patriarchal political institution that a woman has

³¹ For example, the Mattachine Society, the first homophile organization in the United States, explains in the "Missions and Purposes" portion of its hand-out that it is "possible and desirable ... [for] a highly ethical homosexual culture [to] emerge" and highlights its commitment to "develop[ing] a homosexual ethic – disciplined, moral, and socially responsible." In "A Quick Guide to Conducting Discussion Groups", the Society lists its main "aims": "(1) To aid in research on sexual deviation, (2) To promote understanding of sexual deviates amongst themselves, and (3) To develop public understanding of the social problem of sexual deviation." Among examples of discussion questions that have "proven good" for members of the gay community to discuss is, "What causes swishing?" For the rest of the excerpts, see: "Mattachine Documents." *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*. Ed. Will Roscoe. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. 131;133.

the potential to reject in favor of creating a life with another woman based on principles of equality and mutuality. Radical lesbian feminists, then, were not concerned with questions of biology in “explaining” same-sex desire; rather, they sought to interrogate the naturalized place of heterosexuality in American society, especially as it has historically resulted in the oppression of women. They directly posited that lesbianism *can be a choice*— a conscious political act of liberation from oppressive social mores. Through such an interrogation of heterosexuality, radical lesbian feminists worked to create alternatives to heterosexual patriarchy through political lesbianism.

This new wave of lesbian activism was in opposition to other lesbians at the time who believed, in the tradition of Ellis and Hall’s sexology, that they “were born gay, or became so early,” explains historian Lillian Faderman.³² On the other hand, some radical lesbian feminists used the dominant interpretation of inborn sexual identity to argue that *all* women are born with the ability to love other women, but that patriarchal society destroys this capacity through enforced heterosexuality and homophobia.³³ To properly understand the full import of the radical lesbian feminist position, it must be understood that

³² Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Penguin, 1991. 189.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

radical lesbian feminist politics burst onto the American socio-political scene after decades of repression against queer people from the sexological era up until the 1950s, including but not limited to, as Faderman writes,

the push toward companionate [heterosexual] marriage and the identification of same-sex attraction as a hinderance to its success, the [conservative social effects of] the depression, McCarthy-era persecution, the obsession with molding all women to fit the feminine mystique, and the identification of those who did not as queer or sick...

Thus, for a lesbian to argue that she *chose* to love other women, rather than pointing to biology to explain why she should not be considered an immoral and predatory "sicko," was unquestionably revolutionary.

The burgeoning radical lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s formed as feminist lesbians became disenchanted with the hegemony and marginalization found within both homophobic mainstream feminist groups as well as in sexist gay liberation circles. Prominent feminist Betty Freidan's denouncing of lesbians within the feminist movement as a "lavender herring," as well as Freidan's outrageous claim to The New York Times in 1973 that "lesbians were sent to infiltrate the women's movement by the CIA as a plot to discredit feminism,"³⁴ prompted many radical lesbians to seek their own movement outside of a hostile and heterosexist feminist circle ashamed to be associated with them. The

³⁴ Ibid., p. 212.

alienation from mainstream heterosexual feminism that many radical lesbian feminists experienced was sometimes channeled into working within the male-dominated gay liberation movement, because as Faderman puts it, "If we take up the [mainstream heterosexual feminist] issues of child care, wife battering, and abortion rights ... who will take up the issues of gay rights for us?"³⁵

However, attitudes of chauvinism in the male-dominated gay liberation movement, as well as the lack of focus on critiquing patriarchy and fighting for goals that were more specific to gay men than to lesbians, caused many radical lesbian feminists to create their own communities of activism separate from those of gay men. Faderman writes, "For many lesbian-feminists the problem stemmed from gay men's lack of a radical analysis over the questions of sex and sex roles. They accused gay men of being merely reformist³⁶ ... instead of understanding the deeper political

³⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

³⁶ It should be noted that not all gay men were simply "reformist"; Harry Hay's idea of the "subject-subject Consciousness" for gay male relationships spoke to the same sorts of ideals of equality and mutuality that radical lesbian feminists were seeking in their own lives. Hay's theorization of gay male sexuality rejects the heterosexual ideal of a strong male partner and a weak female partner: "I don't seek a clinging vine, I seek another Faerie who is as independent, as resilient, as self-reliant as I am, who will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with me looking down the same road ahead with similarly shining inquisitive eyes. In short, the love I seek to complete my life is 180 degrees different from the ideal sought by Heteros ... I call this subject-subject Consciousness..." (Harry Hay was the founder of the Mattachine Society in 1950, a loud critic of gay assimilation, and the founder of the radical gay liberation group the Radical Faeries in 1979.) Hay, Harry. "What Gay Consciousness Brings, and Has Brought, to the Hetero Left!" *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*. Ed. Will Roscoe. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. 287-288.

issues such as questions of domination and power.” The establishment of a radical lesbian feminist politic separate from gay men allowed the women involved to speak to their needs and experiences as a uniquely marginalized group of people who understood the double stigma and oppression of both sexuality and gender [and potentially additional axes of identity such as race and class]. In addition, radical lesbian feminist ethics of embracing love, sexual equality, and monogamy over what they saw as gay male battles for “washroom sex or public solicitation”³⁷ caused them to further retreat into their own enclaves of activism, and they blamed certain problematic elements in lesbian culture on the influence of gay men, such as the “violent, self-destructive world of the gay bars.”

Adrienne Rich, a widely-read feminist poet and central figure in the radical lesbian feminist movement, made similar arguments in 1980 when she pointed out the ways in which lesbians are not synonymous with gay men and that they have their own specific concerns that have historically been neglected. She wrote of how “lesbians, lacking a coherent female community, have shared a kind of social life and common cause with homosexual men”³⁸ but that this alliance with gay men has resulted in obscuring the differences between the two groups, including:

³⁷ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, p. 211.

³⁸ Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *Signs* Vol. 5, No. 4, Women: Sex and Sexuality. Part 1 (Summer 1980): 631-660. 649.

women's lack of economic and cultural privilege relative to men; qualitative differences in female and male relationships, for example, the prevalence of anonymous sex and the justification of pederasty among male homosexuals, the pronounced ageism in male homosexual standards of sexual attractiveness, etc. ... the lesbian experience [is] ... a profoundly *female* experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences.³⁹

Thus, in separating lesbian experience from her perceptions of gay male experience, Rich sought to theorize a uniquely "female" conception of queer sexuality in order for lesbians to establish a space in which their own history may be written and their community will be able to flourish.

Rich also contributed to the theorization of radical lesbian feminism through her term "compulsory heterosexuality" in the same 1980 piece referenced above, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." For Rich, the idea that lesbianism is simply either a "'preference' [separate from politics] or an 'innate orientation'"⁴⁰ was an inadequate way of addressing lesbian sexuality, especially in terms of its revolutionary potential. Rich identified heterosexuality as a "*political institution*"⁴¹ that "assur[es] male right of physical, economical, and emotional access"⁴² to women. Rich established the various ways in which heterosexuality, as a socially, politically, and legally-enforced system of patriarchal gender

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 649-650.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 633.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 636. Emphasis in the original.

⁴² Ibid., p. 647.

relations between men and women, perpetuates systemic violence and oppression against women, citing multiple examples across cultures and historical moments, including rape, murder, various forms of abuse, and denying women the autonomy to make their own choices about the progression of their lives in general.

Under compulsory heterosexuality, Rich explained, a woman's value is tied to the worth that men allocate to her; subsequently, she becomes "male-identified." Male identification is a concept Rich borrowed from feminist sociologist Kathleen Barry's 1979 book *Female Sexual Slavery*, which means "the act whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status, and importance in most situations ... Interaction with women is seen as a lesser form of relating on every level."⁴³ At the same time that women are socialized to turn against other women in favor of pleasing men, they are taught from childhood that their lives will have a heterosexual trajectory – no other option is considered. This can be seen, wrote Rich, in the "ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at [women] from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, [and] wedding pageantry..."⁴⁴ Women are thus *trained* to adopt heterosexual roles from almost the time they are toddlers. After all, who hasn't heard a softly

⁴³ Ibid., p. 646.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 645.

chuckling friend or relative point to a young girl and boy playing together and remark on how one of them is the other's "boyfriend" or "girlfriend", or how a little boy will "really charm the ladies one day"?

Heterosexuality is not only encouraged from childhood, but options outside a heterosexual framework are at a minimum balked at, generally vilified, and often outright persecuted. Far from being either the natural inclination or the free "choice" of most women, argued Rich, heterosexuality is "...something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force..."⁴⁵

Rich used the idea of the "lesbian continuum" to express "a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience." Woman-identified experience is when a woman connects with another woman in validation and comradeship rather than turning against one another in favor of male approval. Woman-identified experience is, then, the opposite of male identification. The lesbian continuum, explained Rich, encompasses all the contact a woman has with other women, including non-sexual contact: "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support"⁴⁶ are all examples of positive attributes of relationships between women that fall outside a strictly sexual

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 648.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 648-649.

framework. For Rich, identifying the positive aspects of relationships between women is just as important as positing woman identification as a way to protest male domination. One need not even identify as a lesbian, according to Rich, in order to “mov[e] in and out of this continuum.”⁴⁷ Rich elaborates on the continuum concept by referring to women through history and across cultures who have joined together in various ways to resist male tyranny and honor themselves and other women. From the followers of Sappho to women in China who formed “marriage resistance sisterhoods[,] ... welcomed the birth of daughters and organized successful women’s strikes in the silk mills,” to the existence of “romantic friendships” in 19th-century western Europe and the United States, these women are all a part of the lesbian continuum by virtue of their woman identification.

Thus Rich tied ideas of lesbian identity not simply to sexual desire – though she did write that “the physical passion of woman for woman ... is central to lesbian existence”⁴⁸ – but also to a politics of rejecting male domination and celebrating women. Needless to say, this analysis of love between women differs sharply from an earlier sexological model in which biology, not politics, figured in to an account of queer identity. It was also unlike the male-dominated gay liberation model of sexuality in

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 651.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 653.

that it challenged heterosexual male power and emphasized the joy found in the union of two women. Rich's ending proclamation that lesbianism is "an electric and empowering charge between women"⁴⁹ speaks to an outright celebration of female same-sex love.

Rich's conception of lesbian identity was echoed by other radical lesbian feminist groups who shared a firm belief in the importance and power of the woman-identified woman. As the radical lesbian feminist group Radicalesbians famously wrote in their manifesto "The Woman-Identified-Woman" in 1970, "What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion."⁵⁰ In other words, a lesbian is a woman who tires of the male-dominated oppression all women are subjected to and who pushes against the restraints of patriarchal American society in order to become a "more complete and freer human being." Radicalesbians wrote that the lesbian "has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society – the female role;" thus, becoming a lesbian is inextricably linked to analyzing gender relations and rejecting dominant discourses that place women in a role subordinate to men. Further, Radicalesbians argued that homosexuality, as well as heterosexuality, are "inauthentic categor[ies]"

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 658.

⁵⁰ Radicalesbians. "The Woman-Identified-Woman." *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*. Ed. Barbara A. Crow. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 233.

that would not exist if men did not oppress women, but that lesbianism in particular is used as a threat to scare women and keep them subordinate to heterosexist hegemony:

When a woman hears [the word "lesbian"] tossed her way, she knows she is stepping out of line. She knows that she has crossed the terrible boundary of her sex role. She recoils, she protests, she shapes her actions to gain approval. Lesbian is a label invested by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal ... for a woman to be independent means she *can't* be a *woman* – she *must* be a *dyke* ... For a lesbian is not considered a "real woman." ... [W]hen you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a "woman" is to get fucked by men.⁵¹

Instead of buying into these threats and fears, argued Radicalesbians, women must embrace the idea of entering into intimate emotional and sexual relationships with other women, because "[u]ntil women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status."⁵² When a woman aligns herself politically, emotionally, and sexually with other women, she becomes a woman-identified-woman.

Part of radical lesbian feminists' withdrawal from heterosexuality included the idea that sexuality should not be at the center of a lesbian relationship. In other words, focusing on the primacy of sexuality is itself a patriarchal notion that objectifies women rather than viewing them as

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 234.

⁵² Ibid., p. 235.

fully human; thus, radical lesbian feminist relationships must seek to move beyond such a male-dominated ideal. Radicalesbians wrote, “[T]he lesbian relationship is being characterized simply by sex [when seen as a sexual alternative to men] which is divisive and sexist.” This tenet was divisive for lesbians who identified strongly with the sexual aspect of their lesbian identity, which will be discussed more in-depth later. Included in this idea was a general challenge by radical lesbian feminists as to what counted as “sex.” Penetration, for example, was often criticized as inherently patriarchal.⁵³ In addition, argued radical lesbian feminist writer and activist Charlotte Bunch in a 1972 article for her radical lesbian feminist group The Furies, sex itself is imbued with the political, a fact that men in power choose not to acknowledge. Bunch wrote,

Woman-identified lesbianism is ... more than a sexual preference; it is a political choice. It is political because relationships between men and women are essentially political: they involve power and dominance. Since the lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses women, she defies the established political system.⁵⁴

The idea of “defying the established political system” is predicated on the concept that women have the *ability* not just to analyze but to actively

⁵³ When writing about the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, literary scholar Alexandra Chasin writes about what she terms the “pro-sex movement” as something that “changed the nature of the conversation about lesbianism ... [and] challenged a sexual ideology (often associated with separatism) according to which butch-femme roles, penetration, and s/ m were rejected as holdovers from oppressive heterosexual relations.” Chasin, Alexandra. *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. 74.

⁵⁴ Bunch, Charlotte. “Lesbians in Revolt.” *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*. Ed. Barbara A. Crow. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 332-333.

reject such a system. While Bunch recognized that identifying as a lesbian does not automatically make one feminist or vice versa, she directly argued that the two must [and therefore can] go together in order to achieve female liberation: "Lesbians must become feminists and fight against woman oppression, just as feminists must become lesbians if they hope to end male supremacy."⁵⁵

The Furies, like Rich and the Radicalesbians, made a notable contribution to the theorization of lesbian sexuality as political and imbued with agency; as feminist literary scholar Alice Echols points out, "The Furies forced heterosexual feminists to acknowledge that sexuality is socially rather than biologically constructed, and to understand the centrality of institutionalized heterosexuality to women's oppression."⁵⁶ However, these groups were in opposition to other radical feminist groups such as the New York Radical Women [NYRW, active 1967-1969], of which notable radical feminists Shulamith Firestone and Robin Morgan were members. Echols writes,

[I]t seems that the predominant feeling among women in NYRW was that men should be challenged, not abandoned ... the members of NYRW do not seem to have questioned the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality. The group was overwhelmingly heterosexual and, at least on the surface, uninterested in the question of sexual

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 333.

⁵⁶ Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 238.

preference.⁵⁷

It is thus clear that while groups like New York Radical Women often embraced separatism from men, they did not endorse political lesbianism as did Radicalesbians and The Furies.

Rich, Radicalesbians and The Furies also differed in their sexual politics from certain outlier groups such as Cell 16 [active 1968-1973], which while advocating separatism from men, also advocated complete celibacy under the premise that “women’s interest in sex ... demonstrated not only the extent to which they were damaged, but the extent to which they collaborated with the system.”⁵⁸ According to Cell 16 members, for women to be sexual at all was a reflection of being ingrained in “male” values. Roxanne Dunbar of Cell 16 believed, according to Echols, that “the task of feminism was to get women out of bed rather than change the gender of their partners.”⁵⁹ Ti-Grace Atkinson of The Feminists, a splinter group from the National Organization of Women [NOW] existing from 1968-1973, echoed this sentiment when she claimed that lesbianism based around sexuality “is based on the primary assumption of male oppression, that is, sex ... [Therefore,] lesbianism reinforces the sex class system.” Thus, while Rich, Radicalesbians, and The Furies emphasized politics over

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 160.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 211.

sexuality, they did not completely denounce sexuality in the extremist style of Cell 16 or Atkinson. It may even be argued that anti-sex groups like Cell 16 cannot be properly included in an analysis of same-sex desire among radical lesbian feminist communities of the 1970s since their definition of "lesbian" lacks any conception of desire beyond the negation of it.

It is important to note that radical lesbian feminists have been roundly critiqued on a range of topics, including but not limited to issues involving sexual politics; political utopianism and gender essentialism; and racism. For instance, they have been criticized by lesbians interested in sexual practices such as BDSM [bondage, domination, sadomasochism] beginning in the 1980s, who argued that radical lesbian feminists were a politically policing and uptight group of women who were offensive and old-fashioned in their prohibitions against certain expressions of lesbianism that they did not agree with. Likewise, radical lesbian feminists criticized these self-identified "sex radicals" as participating in the oppression of women through their sexual behavior and by depoliticizing lesbian sexuality. To quote from just one account of these tensions, that of the founder of the lesbian S/ M group Samois, Pat Califia: "The women's movement of the sixties and early seventies was a hostile environment for sadomasochistic women ... Within feminist rhetoric,

S/ M existed only as a metaphor for sexual inequality in a male-dominated society.”⁶⁰ She describes a particular scene of interest, during the first Gay

Freedom Day Parade in which S/ M organizations marched:

[O]ur contingent was hassled by monitors who did not believe we had a right to be there. They tried to expel us from the parade on the grounds that we violated a parade regulation excluding images that were sexist or depicted violence against women ... [T]hen the monitors became hysterical about a lesbian couple who were marching together. The bottom [submissive partner] had a ripped-up shirt that showed her whip marks, and she was wearing a jewelry chain around her wrist and fingers. The top [dominant partner] was holding the other end of the chain. “Take that chain off that woman!” one of the monitors kept screaming. “Unchain her!” “I can’t,” replied the unruffled mistress. “I welded it on myself this morning.”⁶¹

Califia continues, “I don’t think radical perverts should obey gay or lesbian or feminist mind police any more than they should obey the vice squad.” This clashing of sexual ideologies defined the period beginning in the 1980s known as the “feminist sex wars,” which resulted in large-scale division in feminist communities and activist circles across the U.S. Many feminists argue that the ensuing strife and dissolution of political and social cohesion between various factions of the feminist movement created a fracture that never fully healed.

Additionally, lesbians who do not connect their sexuality to the

⁶⁰ Califia, Pat. “A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/ M Community and Movement in San Francisco.” *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987. 245.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253.

politics of patriarchy have argued that political lesbians are outright false lesbians who are not actually attracted to women, which is why they emphasize politics over sexual desire [or even the complete exclusion of sexuality from lesbian identity, as did Cell 16 and Atkinson]. Radical lesbian feminists have also been critiqued by post-second wave feminists and lesbians as naively viewing relationships between women as utopian and free from harmful power dynamics and oppression. Radical feminist separatist Frances Chapman, who took issue with accepting the entire radical lesbian feminist philosophy, referenced both these criticisms when she wrote in a 1972 piece for the radical feminist magazine *off our backs*,

That we are lesbians isn't automatically going to free us from our own sexism or solve our interpersonal problems ... The question of whether radical lesbianism works or not is really beside the point of my dilemma. Even if the strategy were clearly the most effective way toward female liberation, I would not espouse it as the package deal in which it is usually presented. Ultimately it is an abuse of human eros to channel its power for political purposes to lend solidarity to a collective or to effect a strategy. I would mistrust sexual feelings which were motivated by a political consideration, however worthy the political objective was. I'm selfish enough to want to be loved for me, or mostly so.⁶²

Frances ends her piece by advocating for the need for women to separate from men and then determine whether lesbianism is right for each woman, the implicit point being that it is unreasonable and "an abuse of human eros" to expect all women to become lesbians for political reasons.

⁶² Frances. "The Soul Selects: A New Separate Way." *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*. Ed. Barbara A. Crow. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 331.

Moreover, the radical lesbian feminist movement's racism remained another major point of contention. Black radical lesbian feminist Margaret Sloan spoke to the alienation that many women of color felt within white-dominated radical lesbian feminist circles when she wrote in the magazine *Lavender Woman* in 1971,

What have you [white radical lesbian feminists] got to offer us? You wonder where we are and we say right in front of you. You offer us psychological rhetoric and we give you feelings and emotions which you charge are loud and violent ... When you are around us you talk black and we find ourselves talking white and you even come to our parties bringing a 1969 Aretha Franklin record and when we confront you, you say we're too powerful to deal with and you don't come to our neighborhood after dark except in groups when *your* men have raped us (you too) for over 300 years. I can't call you my sister until you stop participating in my oppression.⁶³

Racial tokenizing, patronizing, hostility towards, and misunderstanding of women of color by white women within the radical lesbian feminist movement continue to extend into the contemporary feminist movement.

The flaws in radical lesbian feminist philosophy are duly noted. What matters historically, however, are the kernels of agency and acknowledgement of the fact that some women have indeed come to lesbianism through a politics of sexual emancipation from patriarchal heterosexuality. Some of these women have come to identify as lesbians, to live with women, have sex with women, and connect emotionally with

⁶³ Sloan, Margaret. "Black and Blacklesbian." *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*. Ed. Barbara A. Crow. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 327.

women for the rest of their lives. Their experiences are real, and their experiences of becoming lesbians through feminist philosophy and activism usually fall outside the framework of biological determinism. By elaborating on the politics of radical lesbian feminists in the '70s [and into the present, as we will see in the work of contemporary radical lesbian feminist and cultural critic Sheila Jeffreys], it becomes clear how some members of the queer community, especially women, have argued for a conception of same-sex desire and romantic love that falls not in the realm of biology but in the realm of revolutionary politics and personal self-improvement. For these women, becoming a lesbian has everything to do with challenging social norms, rejecting the male domination of patriarchal heterosexuality, and asserting one's individuality and self-respect. Such a theory speaks to a theorization of sexuality in which it is not simply a static, biological unknown for everyone; rather, it may take on multiple levels of personal and political significance.

An analysis of radical lesbian feminism and accounts of agency within that framework clarify the idea that there are reasons why one may wish to enter into a same-sex relationship. This is in itself revolutionary in comparison with the contemporary dominant discourse, as we will see in the next chapter, which again stipulates that queer sexuality simply *is*, with no real rhyme or reason outside of biological urges. Australian

feminist theorist Sheila Jeffreys, who is notable for maintaining a position of radical lesbian feminism into the twenty-first century, defends the radical lesbian feminist position in her 1993 book *The Lesbian Heresy*. "Lesbian feminists believe, not just from an ideological commitment to social constructionism, but because of their own experience, that human behavior can be changed."⁶⁴ Jeffreys represents the experiences of "[t]housands of women who had not knowingly considered lesbianism as a possibility, left men and committed all their emotional and sexual energies to women, and are still so committed today ..."⁶⁵ Jeffreys continues, "[N]o lesbian feminists would have thought of arguing that lesbians and heterosexual women were simply two distinct biological categories." Again, this theorization of lesbian sexuality provides an alternative to the sexological model offered by Havelock Ellis and Radclyffe Hall, as well as from many lesbians of the time who identified precisely in such a biological way. For Jeffreys and other radical lesbian feminists, a theorization of lesbian sexuality based in radical politics goes far deeper than a biological analysis is able since biology cannot provide an account of social relationships and political hierarchies. The result is a radical view of sexuality that not only challenges the once-unquestioned

⁶⁴ Jeffreys, Sheila. *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution*. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1993. 11.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

assumptions of biological determinism, but which refuses to deploy biology as a justification for the pleasures found in lesbian identity.

The 1970s, then, figured in the history of queer sexuality in the U.S. as an extraordinary moment in which certain women-loving women broke away from prior patterns of sexual and political identification in order to postulate a new way of interpreting same-sex desire, emotional intimacy, and love. Lillian Faderman even goes so far as to posit that

[t]here were probably more lesbians in America during the 1970s than any other time in history, because radical feminism had helped redefine lesbianism ... In this respect, the 1970s offer a prime example of sexuality as a social construct. It was demonstrated in that decade how the spirit of an era could influence sexual behavior in large numbers of people at least as much as those other factors that had long been regarded as determining sexuality.⁶⁶

Faderman's idea of 1970s radical lesbian feminism as a "prime example of sexuality as a social construct," which echoes Echol's sentiment about the social construction of sexuality, is precisely why radical lesbian feminist theories about lesbianism and compulsory heterosexuality prove to be such an important blueprint for sexual agency in sharp relief to sexologist Karl Westphal's pronouncement that "her abnormality was congenital and thus should not be prosecuted by the police;" sexologist Havelock Ellis' declaration that queer people, "while different from their fellow human beings, are sometimes of the highest character and the finest

⁶⁶ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, p. 207.

aptitudes;" and so on. Radical lesbian feminists' *desire* to be with women becomes, on a basic level, a shockingly refreshing model for positive expressions of lesbian identity.

It is also a model, however, that failed to secure itself as a dominant framework for rethinking ideas about queer sexuality in popular discourses. Given events in the 1980s that included the advent of the Christian Right, the scourge of AIDS in the gay male population and the lesbian baby boom, and the increasing visibility of the queer community, which both reacted to an upsurge in conservative politics as well as began to form the political clout that enabled it to argue for civil rights based in mainstream family values, many queer people decided to adopt a more conventional approach to the intersection of politics and their sexual identities. For a community that increasingly saw the possibility of making their goals for equal rights a reality, using biological determinism to gain those ends became an effective strategy into the 1980s and '90s.

CHAPTER 3 – BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM IN CONTEMPORARY QUEER POLITICS

The 1980s and the Reactionary Right

As the emerging American queer rights movement gained visibility and momentum during the 1960s and '70s, certain conservative groups found it their duty to respond to what they believed was a decline in "the family" and "morality" by asserting vocal political and social opposition. The increasing success of the queer rights movement's push for equality beginning in the 1970s was palpably felt by pro- and anti-queer people alike in the expansion of state hate crime legislation and domestic partner benefits, making discrimination against queer members of the military a visible political issue, and other gains. Most notably disturbed by these gains were the Christian evangelicals, a type of Christian group with extremely socially conservative values who believe both in the infallibility and literalness of the Bible. Evangelicals reacted with horror to various social and political changes having to do with gender and sexuality, including the growth of feminism for its destabilization of traditional patriarchal gender roles as well as its contribution to the widespread use of birth control; the sexual revolution of the 1960s for its promotion of an "if it feels good, do it" ethic as opposed to a model of sexuality grounded in reproduction; and the gay liberation movement for both its inherent

contestation of the primacy of a male-female relationship model as well as its acceptance of non-reproductive sex as pleasurable and healthy. Central to evangelicals' opposition to the above social changes was their conviction that these liberal socio-political movements were an abomination in the eyes of God and a danger to the future of a godly, moral nation. As a result of their fears and anxieties about their changing society, they created a loud and powerful political machine to disseminate anti-feminist, anti-queer, anti-liberal propaganda and scare tactics that continue to exert hegemony in American politics today. The coalition of conservative evangelical groups comprising this machine make up the Christian political right wing, or "Christian right."

In addition to the sexological trajectory established by Ellis and Hall towards embracing biology, the Christian right quickly became a central agent in persuading many queer people to use a defensive biological argument as part of their sexual identities. The resulting lack of focus on agency by queer people and their allies is due to the fact that much opposition to queer people's existence and equality comes from religious ideas, often those of the Christian right, that being queer is a sin and to be queer is therefore a willful act of rebellion against God. Therefore, to counter the Christian right's refrain that gayness is an abominable "lifestyle choice," the dominant queer and allied communities

have responded with their own refrain of rejecting the idea of choice and replacing it with biology.

One of the most prominent groups to attack queer identity and LGBTQ civil rights using “choice” arguments was James Dobson’s group Focus on the Family, whose first radio broadcast aired in March of 1977.⁶⁷ As a founding member of the Christian right, Dobson’s group officially became a non-profit organization with the addition of one staff member other than Dobson in June of that year, and in August 1980 Dobson was appointed to conservative President Ronald Reagan’s White House Conferences on the Family. Focus on the Family gained in prominence throughout the ‘80s, serving the Reagan administration [including receiving an official tribute from the U.S. House of Representatives in 1981] as well as the United States Army, when Dobson was appointed by the Army to serve as an advisor on “matters concerning soldiers and their families” in 1984. By 1986, Focus on the Family’s magazine reached one million subscribers. They expanded their headquarters worldwide through the ‘90s, with centers opening in Russia, Australia, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Costa Rica, and New Zealand, and their website was launched in 1999.

When one visits their website’s “sexual identity” section, two

⁶⁷ “Focus on the Family Historical Timeline.” *Focus on the Family*. 2009. 11 April 2009 <<http://www2.focusonthefamily.com/aboutus/a000000993.cfm>>.

“related resources” are prominently displayed on the right-hand side of the screen. The first is a DVD titled “Love Won Out: Testifying to God’s Grace” with the description, “Advice to help overcome the influence of homosexuality.”⁶⁸ The other is a book called *Coming Out of Homosexuality* by Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel, which features “proven strategies that can help anyone exit the homosexual lifestyle.” Thus, before one even reads Focus on the Family’s official position on queer issues, it becomes clear that two core beliefs about queerness form the foundation of their work against queer rights: that queerness is undesirable and that queerness can and should be changed.

Focus on the Family is extremely concerned about proving that “homosexuality” is not strictly biological, since being able to prove an etiology of choice can secure their argument that queerness is not a natural “state” created by God but rather an unnatural and *willful* perversion of how humans should be. Focus on the Family’s Melissa Fryrear dedicates an entire web page to various quotes from psychiatrists, sociologists, biologists, and others who affirm that homosexuality is not strictly biological.⁶⁹ In addition, the website has a Frequently Asked Questions section devoted to answering questions such as, “Can Gays

⁶⁸ “Social Issues: Sexual Identity.” *Focus on the Family*. 2008. 11 April 2009 <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/sexual_identity.aspx>.

⁶⁹ Fryrear, Melissa. “Sexual Orientation Not Fixed at Birth.” *Focus on the Family*. 2009. 11 April 2009 <<http://www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/homosexuality/maf/A000001534.cfm>>.

Really Change?”, “What About the 2008 Swedish Twin Study...?”, and “Are People Really ‘Born Gay’?”⁷⁰ These questions are answered in articles by various Focus on the Family writers. The authors of these articles reject biological determinism by referring to several studies commonly cited by pro-biology LGBTQ civil rights activists and debunking them in order to show that human sexuality cannot be linked solely to biology. For example, Caleb H. Price excerpts quotations from the research of Simon LeVay’s brain study, Richard Pillar’s twins study, Dean Hamer’s chromosomal study, and Barry Dickson’s fruit fly study to show that scientists who performed studies on various aspects of biological queerness concluded that queerness is not strictly biological.⁷¹ Price even uses the fact that not all queer people agree about the biological origins of queer sexuality as evidence in his article, concluding, “Clearly, pro-homosexual advocates and their allies aren’t dealing with all the evidence in their insistence that people are ‘born gay’ and cannot change.” While Price is correct in this assertion, he forms a conclusion that is quite literally the antithesis of this thesis: a condemnation of queer identity and civil rights rather than a call to embrace agency and choice as valid components of queer identities and as qualities which do not hinder the

⁷⁰ See <<http://www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/homosexuality/>>.

⁷¹ Price, Caleb H. “Are People Really ‘Born Gay’?” *Focus on the Family*. 2009. 19 April 2009 <<http://www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/homosexuality/maf/A000007215.cfm>>.

legitimacy of queer people's fight for equal rights.

Of particular importance is the Christian right's use of the American Psychological Association's inconclusive data to further their anti-queer ends, which will be further analyzed later. Ironically, Focus on the Family is so preoccupied with disputing biology-based claims of the dominant queer rights movement that arguments against biology are the most prominent part of their "sexual identity" and "homosexuality and gender" sections – one has to dig deeper to find their foundational religious premises for rejecting same-sex desire. It is under the "Family Concerns" section that one learns that "[b]iological sex matters," that men and women are "divinely separated, divinely ordained," and that "God's goodness in setting boundaries – for our own protection – that limit sexual expression to the context of one-man, one-woman marriage and lead to the procreation of new life and the formation of families ... [is] the most basic building block of a stable and productive society."⁷² Thus, queerness goes against God's boundaries, the Christian right idea of what a family is, and is anti-"society."

Another primary player in the development of the Christian right and the evangelical movement to protect "the family" at the expense of LGBTQ equality on the premise that it is a "choice" was the group Moral

⁷² "Casting God's Vision for Sex and Sexuality." *Focus on the Family*. 2009. 11 April 2009 <<http://www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/homosexuality/concerns/A000009534.cfm>>.

Majority. Moral Majority, which was active from 1978-1989, was credited with helping Ronald Reagan win the 1980 presidential election over Jimmy Carter.⁷³ [Reagan, doing his part to support his Christian right followers, promised to resist “all efforts to obtain government endorsement of homosexuality.”⁷⁴] The founder of Moral Majority, Reverend Jerry Falwell, was a prominent voice of the Christian right until his death in 2007. Besides being a minister, televangelist, political commentator, and founder in 1971 of his own Christian right college, Liberty University, Falwell wrote several books extolling the righteousness of evangelical Christianity and condemning liberal social issues and minority groups, including queer people. For example, in his 1980 book *Listen, America!*, he referred to “homosexuals” as “flagrantly boast[ing] their sin and march[ing] in public view” and opined that “[t]hey are an indictment against America and are contributing to her downfall.”⁷⁵ After quoting various biblical passages to justify his statements, he went on to explain how queer people are not biologically

⁷³ “The combined efforts of Christian Voice, Moral Majority, and the New Right electoral vehicles, like Conservative Caucus and the Free Congress Foundation, produced about two million new evangelical voters in 1980. That was a significant minority, given that Reagan was elected by only 26 percent of the electorate. Pollster Louis Harris estimated that white evangelical voters accounted for two thirds of Reagan’s 10-point margin over Jimmy Carter.” Diamond, Sara. *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1995. 233.

⁷⁴ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, p. 272.

⁷⁵ Falwell, Jerry. *Listen, America!* New York: Bantam, 1981. 157. [Note: original version published in 1980 by Doubleday Publishing Co.]

queer:

A person is not born with preference to the same sex, but he is introduced to the homosexual experience and cultivates a homosexual urge. It is innocent children and young people who are victimized [sic] and who become addicts to sexual perversion. I have read letters from ex-lesbians and ex-homosexuals who admit that sometime in their life they had a bad experience ... that triggered their entrance into a homosexual or lesbian relationship ... Homosexuality is reprobate and an abomination – a sin against the human body and against nature ... Heterosexuality was created by God and is endorsed by God ... The root sin of homosexuality is actually rebellion against God.⁷⁶

Interestingly, Falwell's characterization of queer sexuality reflects the same homosexuality-as-contagion model, discussed by Jennifer Terry, that progressive sexologists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries sought to delegitimize through an emphasis on biology.

Falwell also believed that "the homosexual crisis is really spawned by the family crisis" of men and women refusing to live their lives in terms of strict traditional gender roles; he wrote, "We would not be having the present moral crisis regarding the homosexual movement if men and women accepted their proper roles as designated by God."⁷⁷ Feminism was thus implicated in Falwell's argument, as "[f]eminists desire to eliminate God-given differences that exist between the sexes; that is why they are prohomosexual and lesbian. In fact, it is shocking how

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 158-159.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 159.

many feminists are lesbians.”⁷⁸ Through his gender-based analysis, Falwell interestingly confirmed radical lesbian feminists’ social constructionist argument that women wishing to liberate themselves from the rigid domination of patriarchy may choose to enter into relationships with other women; however, because of his firm dedication to the promotion of patriarchy, especially through his penchant for patriarchal biblical verses, he wished to turn back the clock on accepting, let alone promoting, same-sex desire and relationships. Therefore, while Falwell and radical lesbian feminists often deployed the same type of social constructionist logics about a queer sexuality imbued with choice, such as acknowledging that one may identify as queer based on a “bad experience” with heterosexuality, they did so in very different ways and towards opposite political ends. [Indeed, radical lesbian feminist groups such as Radicalesbians and The Furies claimed that heterosexuality in general is a “bad experience” that must be subverted entirely!]

It was during this reactionary conservative attack on queer people premised on choice that many queer people deployed the political strategy of focusing on a biologically deterministic approach to securing equality. In addition, as queer people began to emerge openly on the political scene, they deciphered that an effective campaign for equal rights

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 160.

could be realized if they could get the heterosexual majority on their side. Appealing to family issues was a helpful way to accomplish this in the age of “family values.” Thus, mainstreaming and biologically-based political strategizing was picked up over radical theorizations of freedom in resisting hegemonic heterosexuality. Additionally, factors such as the AIDS crisis and the lesbian baby boom made it clearer than ever that rights such as legal partnerships and marriage equality were essential in securing fundamental access to hospital visitation, parental rights, and other family-based issues. Both the AIDS crisis and the lesbian baby boom “resulted in the [queer] community’s sudden, mass experience of two key stages in the life cycle that exert special pressure on any relationship: parenthood and death,” explains historian George Chauncey.⁷⁹

Visible Vote '08: Case Study in Biological Biases

A perfect example both of the legacy of sexology’s biological determinism as well as the defense of queer people against the Christian right’s rejection of biology in contemporary queer politics can be seen in the interaction between Gov. Bill Richardson and lesbian music icon Melissa Etheridge at the Visible Vote '08 presidential forum in 2007. On August 9th, 2007, the Human Rights Campaign joined forces with LOGO,

⁷⁹ Chauncey, George. *Why Marriage? The history shaping today’s debate over gay equality*. New York: Basic Books, 2004. 95.

the first and only LGBTQ-centered American television channel, to host a presidential forum in Los Angeles called "Visible Vote '08". The forum was held to discuss the 2008 Democratic presidential candidates' stances on issues of gay rights. Human Rights Campaign president Joe Solmonese joined Margaret Carlson of the LOGO network, *Washington Post* editorial writer Jonathan Capeheart and popular musician Melissa Etheridge on a panel to ask questions to six out of eight Democratic contenders who agreed to be on the show: former Senator John Edwards, former Senator Mike Gravel⁸⁰, Representative Dennis Kucinich, then Senator Barack Obama, and Governor Bill Richardson. Senators Joe Biden and Chris Dodd were invited but declined to attend. The candidates were asked about their stances on a range of prominent issues in the mainstream LGBTQ civil rights movement that had emerged since the family-based political strategizing of the 1980s, such as repealing the Don't Ask Don't Tell ban on queer people serving openly in the military; repealing the Defense of Marriage Act prohibiting the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriage and allowing states to refuse to

⁸⁰ Gravel was at first not invited to participate in the forum; the stated reason from an HRC spokesperson was that he had not raised enough money to be seen as a main contender for the presidency. However, after Gravel published an outraged article in *The Huffington Post* that drew attention to what he saw as HRC's hypocritical unfairness in not inviting "the most outspoken advocate for gay rights", as he called himself, HRC invited him to the forum and he acquiesced. Gravel, Mike. "Why I Wasn't Invited to the Debate on Gay Issues." *The Huffington Post* 12 July 2007: 1. 2 Dec. 2008 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sen-mike-gravel/why-i-wasnt-invited-to-t_b_55931.html>.

recognize same-sex marriages in other states; supporting a federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act that covers sexual orientation as well as gender identity; and supporting same-sex marriage or, barring that, civil unions.

All of the presidential candidates expressed similar views about being broadly hospitable to gay rights; however, only Rep. Kucinich and Sen. Gravel gave their support to same-sex marriage. Kucinich gave a particularly glowing account of his support for equality for all people and the power of human love, which was in direct conflict with the “main contenders” – Clinton, Edwards, and Obama – who generally tried to avoid confrontation regarding their refusal to support marriage equality. One of the biggest criticisms of the night focused not on a specific policy position, however, but rather the stance of Gov. Richardson on the “origins” of queer sexuality.

Melissa Etheridge’s first question to Richardson was, “Do you think homosexuality is a choice? Or is it biological?”⁸¹ Richardson responded quickly, “It’s a choice. It’s, it’s-” before being cut off by Etheridge, who followed up, with a tinge of surprised condescension in her voice, “I don’t know if you understand the question. Do you think a

⁸¹ Visible Vote ‘08 Democratic Presidential Forum. Los Angeles, CA. 9 Aug. 2008. Full video transcript available from <<http://www.youdecide2008.com/video/logo-visible-vote-08-democratic-presidential-forum/>>.

homosexual is born that way, or do you think that around seventh grade we go, 'Ooh, I want to be gay'?" Seeing that he had made a major gaffe,

Richardson attempted to explain himself:

I'm not a scientist. I don't see this as an issue of science or definition. I see gays and lesbians as people, as a matter of human decency. I see it as a matter of love and companionship and people loving each other. I don't like to categorize people. I don't like to answer definitions like that that perhaps are grounded in science or something else that I don't understand.

Etheridge did not seem to be satisfied with this answer, for she in turn responded,

It's hard when you are a citizen of a country that tells you that you are making a choice when you were born that way and your Creator made you that way and there's a document that was written two hundred years ago that says you are entitled to certain rights that you are not given. How can there be anything other than absolutely equal rights for homosexuals?

Richardson stated his agreement with Etheridge's last sentence and was able to make the transition to talk about other issues.

This tense exchange is helpful in illuminating several aspects of the choice versus biology debate in contemporary American queer politics. Firstly, the fact that Richardson's response was catalogued as being inherently homophobic because it did not embrace biological determinism, and the fact that Etheridge focused so heavily on being made by her Creator, is consistent both with the historical influences of sexology and the Christian right on the modern American political

landscape. Etheridge's defensive and pointed questioning of Richardson also underscores the effects that the Christian right have had in telling queer people that they are not normal and do not deserve equal rights because their behavior is chosen and sinful. The "country that tells you that you are making a choice when you were born that way" is most definitely in reference to the pervasive attitudes of the Christian right. Additionally, it is significant that Richardson's actual words, about "human decency" and "love and companionship," could have been uttered by any of the candidates who agree with Etheridge's belief about the origins of queer sexuality. Richardson's lack of focus on biology was not related to a more homophobic position on the actual issues, yet as soon as he broke away from the expected response of a sympathetic heterosexual "ally," he was pegged as offensive, ignorant, and a man who could not be trusted by the queer community. Finally, Etheridge's invoking of religion mixed with biology is particularly reminiscent of Stephen Gordon's pleading for equality in *The Well* – "'Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!'"

The couching of equal rights language in biological determinism, rather than personal liberty and freedom of choice [for example], points to sexology's early influence on the American queer rights movement as well.

Etheridge's insistence on biology is only one example that reflects a broader trend in the mainstream American queer rights movement to either implicitly or explicitly invoke scientific or medical authority even when such institutions of authority are themselves undecided about the "roots" of sexuality. A pamphlet published by the American Psychological Association⁸² on its website as of 2008, for example, assures readers that "most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation."⁸³ However, the APA also freely admits in the same pamphlet that "[t]here is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay or lesbian orientation ... no findings have emerged to permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors." The lack of findings described in the latter quote are often used by the Christian right, such as Focus on the Family,⁸⁴ in an attempt to

⁸² The American Psychological Association is not to be confused with the American Psychiatric Association, the latter of which was responsible for classifying homosexuality as a mental illness until 1974 as well as creating the controversial diagnosis of "gender identity disorder."

⁸³ *American Psychological Association. (2008). Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality. Washington, DC. [Retrieved from <www.apa.org/topics/orientation.pdf>.]*

⁸⁴ Melissa Fryrear of Focus on the Family includes the inconclusive APA findings in her web page of evidence disputing biological determinism referred to earlier in this chapter. See <<http://www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/homosexuality/maf/A000001534.cfm>>. Additionally, Focus on the Family refers to the APA's findings in the previously-quoted "Frequently Asked Questions" section of their website; see <<http://www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/homosexuality/maf/A000007215.cfm>>.

prove that because queerness has not been proved to be strictly biological, it is in fact not only a choice, but a sinful choice that flies in the face of God and nature and which should not be tolerated. Meanwhile, as the reader will see, the part of the APA pamphlet referencing biology is simultaneously used by mainstream pro-queer groups to make the case for LGBTQ civil rights. The fact that these two parts of the APA handbook are used in such dichotomous ways by opposite political agendas is representative of the black-and-white way in which the ideological categories of biology/ pro-equality and choice/ homophobia are paired in the current American political landscape, as they were in the Richardson-Etheridge exchange. Further, the fact that queer-friendly people continue to focus on biology even when medical authorities cannot agree on a definitive “queer origins” narrative indicates that focusing on biology to the detriment of agency may prove limiting in future activism and, as the reader will see in the next chapter, increasingly unnecessary in the legal realm.

***Biological Determinism in Pop Culture:
Internet, Film, Self-Help Literature***

Indications that queerness is biological and that ideas of choice are offensive and homophobic pervade queer American culture, from groups on popular social networking sites like Facebook to liberal and queer-friendly blogs expressing outrage over politicians who say that being gay

is a choice. A sampling of pro-queer, pro-biology groups on Facebook includes titles such as “Being Gay is NOT A CHOICE,” “Being Gay is genetic, not a choice,” “Yeah, I’m gay. It’s not a ‘choice’, it’s my LIFE,” and “If being gay is a choice, then when did you choose to be heterosexual?” Echoing this sentiment, Amanda Terkel of the liberal blog Think Progress posted a blog entry on October 1st, 2008 in outrage over infamous Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin’s comment that her alleged gay friend “made a choice that isn’t a choice that I have made” by being gay. Terkel responded to Palin’s comment by using the pro-biology segment of the APA pamphlet previously quoted in this chapter in order to defend the status of queer sexuality as biological.⁸⁵

Jonathan Capeheart, the same *Washington Post* editorial writer at the LOGO presidential forum, agreed with Terkel’s biology-based approach to Palin. Capeheart focused on the negative repercussions of being queer when he wrote, “No one would choose to put their careers on the line ... No one would choose to be part of a marginalized group whose members have to sue their way to basic rights so that their relationships and their families are respected ... No one would choose to be prey for

⁸⁵ Terkel linked to a Letter to the Editor in *The Washington Post* written by a PFLAG member, which referenced selective statements that supported biological determinism, including the pro-biology APA statement. Terkel, Amanda. “Palin: Being Gay is a ‘Choice’.” 2008. *Think Progress*. 15 Feb. 2009 <[http:// thinkprogress.org/ 2008/ 10/ 01/ palin-gay-choice/](http://thinkprogress.org/2008/10/01/palin-gay-choice/) >.

bigots ...”⁸⁶ Capeheart thus argued that no one would ever adopt an identity that is stigmatized, by proxy implying that people take the “easy way out” whenever possible in terms of social relations and politics. Meanwhile, even though Terkel noted in her blog entry that Palin belongs to a church that attempts to convert queer people to heterosexuality, Terkel did not employ any sort of argument asserting that queer people should be able to make their own choices free from coercive religious intervention. Instead, she linked to the APA, in effect arguing that attempting to convert people out of queerness is wrong because it does not work rather than because queerness should be a viable option.

This invoking of biological determinism from a variety of different pro-queer sources may be seen in light of the ongoing political project to gain more support for queer rights, specifically by reaching out to people who don’t understand why anyone would want to be gay. Instead of explaining why queer people have the right to live their lives as they want without government intrusion, the mainstream queer response becomes, *You’re right – who would want to be gay? We sure don’t want all the problems that come with being gay!* This type of response serves in collapsing the differences between the issue of actually being queer – loving someone of the same sex, wanting to build a life together, rejecting the heterosexual

⁸⁶ Capeheart, Jonathan. “C choices.” *The Washington Post*. 2008. 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/postpartisan/2008/10/choices.html>>.

trajectory that has been established for everyone in society to follow – and the stigmatizing repercussions of being queer in a heterosexist society.

Additionally, to argue that queer people would never willingly take on such a hard life is to be inconsistent with the numerous groups of people who have actively chosen to take a stance against dominant socio-political power relations, be they atheists in evangelical Idaho or feminists in a misogynist society. If everyone truly took the “easy way out,” there would never be political and cultural dissenters of any sort, nor any sort of vibrant and diverse subcultures. To agree that one’s sexual identity is so loathsome that no one would ever willingly live with it is to subject the queer community to shame. As *The Los Angeles Times* editorial writer Nathaniel Frank wrote in response to Capeheart’s *Washington Post* editorial, “[I]nsisting that homosexuality is wholly involuntary does little to defend gays and lesbians from social disapproval ... Whether our DNA or our free will are ‘at fault’ really only matters if being gay is a bad thing.”⁸⁷ Frank went on to compare sexuality to religion, pointing out that freedom of religion is championed in American society even though the general consensus is that religious belief does not stem from biology but from deeply held convictions. He wrote, “The concept of choice should be no more – and no less – applied to sexual orientation than to our religious,

⁸⁷ Frank, Nathaniel. “Gay is a choice?” *Los Angeles Times*. 2008. 16 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-frank8-2008oct08,0,3944795.story>>.

political or vocational identities.” In speaking about Sarah Palin’s allegedly gay friend, Frank wisely pointed out that “her sexual orientation is neither a choice to be tolerated nor a sentence to be served. It’s an expression of her freedom to be herself...” This focus on individual freedom is what is consistently lacking in the strategies of the contemporary queer rights movement.

The use of biological determinism to persuade conservative Christian audiences into tolerating queerness can also be seen in mainstream media representations. One in particular, the 2009 Lifetime made-for-television movie “Prayers for Bobby,” stages the conflict between Christian right morality and biological queerness in explicit terms. The film, which is based on a book of the same name, depicts the true story of a young gay man who is not accepted by his conservative Christian family in 1970s Walnut Creek, California. His mother, believing in a typical evangelical manner that her son’s gayness is willful disobedience against God, attempts to “cure” him of his gayness, believing that God will be able to “heal” her son and that if her son continues to be gay, he is just not trying hard enough to listen to the Holy Spirit. She even takes him to a heterosexist, presumably-Christian psychologist who asks him questions such as “Do you want to be gay?” to which Bobby responds no, he just has certain “feelings.” When his mother

expresses her disgust at what Bobby has “become,” Bobby desperately snaps back, “What I A M!”

After Bobby does not become heterosexual and his mother lets him know that he is no longer her son as long as he “chooses” to be gay, he commits suicide by jumping off a bridge. Eventually his mother repents of her bigoted ways and becomes a gay rights activist. Towards the end, as she is giving a regretful monologue about her son, she talks about how she always knew her son was “different” and that his “difference” extended back “to conception.” She is clearly promoting the message that she should have accepted her son for what he inherently “was” since birth. This is a message that directly contests her previous evangelical assessment of her son’s gayness; therefore, she is able to speak to audience members who may identify with the Christian right in order to convey that she was once like them, but that there is an alternate way of looking at gayness that does not have to be fraught with judgment and rejection. The new way forward is to embrace biological determinism, the same brand that created Melissa Etheridge’s gayness – part of God’s natural plan. Therefore, just as proponents of equality for “homosexuals” like Ellis and Hall argued using biological determinism in the days of early sexology, so are contemporary queer rights activists chained to the idea of biology as a way to make queerness less sinful and therefore more

permissible for the Christian right.

Given the mainstream and tragic portrayal of the gay teen who does not want to be gay in "Prayers for Bobby," the intended audience seems to be queer teens in hostile environments who understandably need some sort of affirmation that being queer is okay, and viewers who lean towards condemning queer sexuality but who may be persuaded to live and let live if some people are just born "different." Perhaps most importantly, the Lifetime network is part of basic cable television packages, reaches millions of viewers, and focuses primarily on the trials and tribulations of heterosexual nuclear family arrangements. Therefore, to showcase "Prayers for Bobby" has cultural and political significance in terms of what a mainstream channel is willing to portray and how widespread the portrayal's message is. In other words, if a primarily heterosexual audience sees a movie that finally features a gay character who is portrayed as being gay "from conception," the idea that queerness is inherent spreads, thereby securing the linkage of inherent queerness and social tolerance for a characteristic that cannot be changed.

Indeed, "Prayers for Bobby" did make a mark on evening viewing. According to PR Newswire,⁸⁸ the premiere January 24th screening of

⁸⁸ PR Newswire, according to its website, <http://www.prnewswire.com>, is an association that "provides electronic distribution, targeting, measurement, translation and broadcast

“Prayers for Bobby” drew 3.8 million viewers, and its repeat screening the following evening reached 2.3 million viewers. Additionally, the movie’s premiere increased the traffic of MyLifetime.com by 169% compared to page views a week prior during the same time period.⁸⁹

When viewing a movie such as “Prayers for Bobby,” however, a question arises: Would Lifetime be willing to launch a movie premier of someone who experienced agency in being gay? How often, when a gay character is represented to begin with, does that gay character present a narrative of sexual identity that differs from an account of biological determinism? Depictions of queer people in the mainstream media consistently leave out accounts of agency and choice. Given the high number of Lifetime movies dealing with women’s failed heterosexual relationships with men, for example, a radical lesbian feminist may ask why Lifetime has not featured a movie about a real-life woman who left her husband for another woman and experienced freedom in her decision to reject male domination and embrace same-sex love, as can be seen in Deepa Mehta’s [fictional, though controversial] film *Fire*. The answer is that Lifetime is a mainstream television channel that usually uses the most

services on behalf of tens of thousands of corporate, government, association, labor, non-profit, and other customers worldwide.”

⁸⁹ “Sigourney Weaver Starrer Prayers for Bobby Draws 3.8 Million Viewers During its Saturday, January 24, Premiere on Lifetime Television.” PR Newswire. 2009. 19 Feb. 2009 <<http://news.prnewswire.com/ViewContent.aspx?ACCT=109&STORY=/www/story/01-26-2009/0004960744&EDATE=>>.

conventional, universally-accepted storylines in order to advance the real-life causes of the victimized characters in its films. Biological determinism is the orthodox way of expressing same-sex desire and love in a society hostile to queerness as a chosen identity; therefore, biology reigns supreme as an aid in promoting LGBTQ tolerance and equality.

The idea of helping conflicted queer people and homophobic heterosexual people “come to terms” with queerness can also be seen in a genre of self-help literature by and for queer and, more importantly, confused and homophobic heterosexual audiences. This literature contributes to the mainstream queer community’s political project of arguing for queerness in a biological framework for increased toleration of and equality for queer people. While authors may take the time to state that only “most” queer people feel or act a certain way, they actively deploy biologically-driven arguments and artificially simplify the issue as they portray it to mainstream readers; thus, dominant cultural ideas about “the gay experience” or “the queer experience” are not only reflected but perpetuated through these books. In Eric Marcus’ book *Is It a Choice? Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gay and Lesbian People*, the primacy of the “choice” question in the very title, as well as its positioning as the most important question out of 300 “frequently asked questions” about gay and lesbian people, is telling.

Marcus' own biases toward biological determinism in explaining his gayness are clear from the beginning of the book, when he talks about how shocked he was to learn that his straight friends actually thought being gay is a choice: "I almost fell off my chair. These were my friends. Didn't they know? ... I just assumed they already had the answers."⁹⁰ Marcus' incredulity at people "not getting it" is a manifestation of the frequency with which biological determinism is argued in the queer community and accepted as orthodox. Marcus suggests not only that there are answers to the question, but that "the answers," that is, correct answers, do not lie in a theory that advocates choice. Marcus answers the question "How do you become a homosexual?" in part by writing, "No one becomes a homosexual any more than a man or woman becomes a heterosexual."⁹¹ He goes on, "Where exactly these feelings come from ... has plenty to do with genetics and biology and nothing to do with sin or morality..." With this statement, Marcus does two things. He invokes biological determinism despite no clear-cut agreement on the subject by actual medical authorities, and he makes the only-too-telling connection between biology and acceptance of queerness juxtaposed with the Christian right's idea of choice-as-sin. In this binarized idea of sexuality,

⁹⁰ Marcus, Eric. *Is It a Choice? Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gay and Lesbian People* New York: HarperCollins, 1999. xi.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

as we see time and time again, the “obvious” and pro-queer stance is to be found in biology.

To the question posed on the front of his book, “Is it a choice? Why did you choose to be gay?” Marcus responds, to his credit, that a simple “yes” or “no” answer is too simplistic. He credits bisexual people with being able to choose between partners of the same or opposite sex. However, to the people who argue that queerness can be “willful[l] ... in order to defy fundamental religious and cultural norms,” Marcus responds, “Those people, who generally understand nothing about homosexuality, happen to be wrong.” This sort of analysis, while progressive in the context of challenging the homophobia found in the Christian right, has its limits. It fails to take into account the experience of many a radical lesbian feminist, for example, in a discussion of what “counts” as queer experience, implying instead that certain lesbians are “wrong” about their own experiences and political consciousness. According to Marcus, gay and lesbian people have no control over their sexual desires because such desires are “genetic” and “biological;” the only “choice” lies in whether they choose to live a lie or be true to themselves. Marcus divorces sexual drive from politics or other social forces, thus avoiding arguments for why queerness is positive and beneficial, and he doesn’t discuss the experiences of women who have

found empowerment through loving other women.

Of course, this is not Marcus' political project – he is trying to reclaim some semblance of acceptable queer identity from the cultural aftermath of the choice-based, reactionary attacks of the Christian right. His very assertion that queerness has “nothing to do with sin or morality” is a daring and controversial departure from the frenzied insistency of the Christian right that queerness is a sinful abomination that must not be tolerated. However, when attempting to articulate a diverse conception of queer identity and politics that includes members of the LGBTQ community whose experiences differ from the biological model, the limitations of this sort of analysis are evident.

Curiously, only one page after claiming that queerness “has plenty to do with genetics and biology,” Marcus admits that “no studies have yet concluded unequivocally that sexual orientation is biologically and/ or genetically based...”⁹² He then, however, bolsters his argument that even so, “the evidence points in that direction,” quoting from two questionable sources. His first is the journalist and *New York Times* official perfume critic Chandler Burr.⁹³ His second source is none other but A bigail Van

⁹² Ibid., p. 12.

⁹³ Burr wrote a book investigating biologists' work around sexual orientation and is convinced by the Bailey and Pillard twins study that concludes that gayness may be genetic and may reach as far back as the development of human embryos from eggs. This echoes, quite literally, the argument put forth in “Prayers for Bobby” that queer people are queer “from conception.” In regard to his status as *New York Times* official

Buren, known colloquially as “Dear Abby,” whose legitimacy is established by being an “internationally respected purveyor of commonsense advice.”⁹⁴ Apparently, if Dear Abby believes that queerness is biological, then we should too.

More examples could be cited from Marcus’ book that strongly advocate a theory of biologically-driven queerness, but why, one may ask, is this book so significant? For one, since its first edition in 1993, it has since been translated into Hebrew, Thai, Spanish, and Japanese.⁹⁵ More importantly, rather than having marginal and insignificant arguments, Marcus’ book is but one example of a socio-political project within a macro project of arguing a pro-gay stance couched in biologically-driven rhetoric that does not take accounts of agency or choice into consideration when writing about “queer people.”

Overall, one cannot look only to institutions of national influence, as we will with PFLAG below, in order to analyze how biological determinism is propagated among the queer and heterosexual allied communities. Indeed, the push in favor of biology comes from an array of

perfume critic, according to his personal website, www.chandlerburr.com, “He speaks around the world on scent and perfume and hosts interactive masterclasses in gourmand scents...” <<http://www.chandlerburr.com/newsite/content/biography.php>>.

⁹⁴ Marcus, p. 13. “Dear Abby” states that “I’ve always known that there was nothing wrong with gay and lesbian people, that this is a natural way of life for them. Nobody molested them, nobody talked them into anything. They were simply born that way.”

⁹⁵ See the press release for *Is It a Choice?* at Eric Marcus’ website: <http://www.ericmarcus.com/content/pressinfo_isitchoice.htm>.

sources, both inside and outside the queer community, from power above and horizontally, to mutually reinforce and reify the dominant view that queerness is biologically innate and that theories of choice are offensive and homophobic. Marcus' book, and its appeal on Amazon.com,⁹⁶ is indicative of the popularity with which arguments and positions like Marcus' are received in the mainstream queer community.

Institutional Pressures: The Politics of PFLAG

Prominent institutions in favor of queer rights have also tended to advocate biological determinism while downplaying choice. These institutions have gone further than saying that a specific individual, such as Melissa Etheridge or Eric Marcus, experiences their queerness as biological – rather, they claim that queer people in general have the same experiences, as if “LGBT people” are a monolithic category of people who all identify with biological origins of their sexual identities. The national chapter of the prominent queer rights and support organization PFLAG included in their position statement the following declaration from 1989-2000: “[LGBT people’s] sexual orientation is neither chosen nor something

⁹⁶ Out of twenty-eight reader reviews conducted as of February 20th, 2009, nineteen reviews gave the book a 5-star rating; six a 4-star rating; two a 3-star rating; zero a 2-star rating; and one a 1-star rating. <http://www.amazon.com/Choice-Answers-Frequently-Questions-Lesbian/product-reviews/0060832800/ref=pd_bbs_1_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1>.

they are taught to be.”⁹⁷

Radical queer activists from the Queer by Choice movement, which will be discussed in the next chapter, succeeded in persuading the national chapter of PFLAG to remove this part of their statement in the interests of being more inclusive towards all queer people after corresponding with the national and various regional chapters of PFLAG for over a year. In the National Annual Meeting of PFLAG in October of 2000, new PFLAG President Arnold Drake acknowledged that the cause of sexual orientation has not been conclusively established. He proclaimed, “Our children and friends deserve our love ... whether or not they have a choice. And they deserve the same civil rights ... no matter whom they choose to love ...”⁹⁸ Drake continued, “[W]hile there are a lot of questions about the cause of sexual orientation, there is no question about the validity of our children’s claims to their equal rights.”

Prefacing these admirably inclusive statements, however, were references to Drake’s own belief in the universal biological origins of human sexuality:

[A]bsence of choice was a big part of [PFLAG’s] early educational message to our friends and neighbors. Fifteen years later, I still believe that we do not choose our sexual orientation. I do not

⁹⁷ “PFLAG Former National Position on Choice.” *Queer by Choice* 2009. 21 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.queerbychoice.com/position1.html>>.

⁹⁸ “The October 2000 Inaugural Speech of Dr. Arnold Drake, PFLAG National President.” *Queer by Choice* 2000. 21 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.queerbychoice.com/drakespeech.html>>.

know how much, if any, of our sexual orientation is genetic, and how much if any is environmental. I don't know how much if any is fluid or changeable. I think whatever the cause, it is biological...

Therefore, while Drake took special care to note that there is no conclusive evidence that queerness is biologically driven and that it doesn't matter in order to support queer people's equal rights, he found it important enough to include his own personal thoughts about how he maintained the same dominant stance that PFLAG had officially held for over a decade. His mentioning of the fact that "absence of choice was a big part of our early educational message" is also crucial to understanding the impact that mainstream LGBTQ rights organizations have had on the American public's consciousness about queer identities. As an organization with over 200,000 members and more than 500 chapters throughout the United States,⁹⁹ PFLAG has long helped set the agenda for how queer people have argued for social tolerance by their heterosexual friends and families. By using dominant accounts of biologically-driven queerness in order to establish universal knowledge about queer sexuality, PFLAG's stance has also helped to shape queer people's core senses of self outside of a political rubric. Similarly, PFLAG has helped shape how heterosexual allied communities understand queerness – as

⁹⁹ "PFLAG's History." *PFLAG: Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays*. 2006. 21 Feb. 2009 <<http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=267>>.

excusable and tolerable because biological.

The fact that certain chapters of PFLAG, such as the New Orleans chapter, continue to propagate a specifically biologically-driven message rather than embracing the updated policy statement of the national chapter, is indicative of how deeply entrenched biological determinism is in the queer and allied community.¹⁰⁰ Active resistance to letting go of the universality of biological determinism denotes a certain panicked tendency towards holding on to what is familiar and what will gain the most sympathy from the heterosexist public. It is also important that the voices and experiences of queer people whose identities lie outside a strictly biological framework are not represented or actively encouraged by such chapters. In fact, some chapters responded to Queer by Choice members' inquiries by saying that queer people who experience choice in relation to their identities are simply confused about their sexual identities, thus nullifying the experiences and identifications of certain

¹⁰⁰ After Frank Aqueno of Queer by Choice wrote to the New Orleans chapter of PFLAG about their stance on the origins of queer sexuality for six years without receiving a response, in January of 2000 the New Orleans chapter sent an e-mail to Aqueno that read, in part, "It is our understanding that you believe we have an obligation and a duty to present positions other than the position that there is a biological basis for sexual orientation. It is also our understanding that you believe our chapter is not fulfilling PFLAG's Mission Statement unless other views are presented ... [W]e believe that an individual's sexual orientation is a product of biology." See "Response from PFLAG New Orleans." *Queer by Choice* 2009. 21 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.queerbychoice.com/neworleans.html>>.

members of the queer community.¹⁰¹ Clearly, queer people who experience choice or agency as important parts of their sexual identities would not find the appropriate solidarity they may seek in order to help explain their identities to friends and families if such chapters insist on holding on to biology as “the” source of queerness.

¹⁰¹ See “Quotes from Unsafe PFLAG Chapters.” *Queer by Choice* 2009. 21 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.queerbychoice.com/unsafequotes.html>>.

CHAPTER 4 – CONCLUSION: AGENCY AS RESISTANCE

Queerness and the Law

Historian Jeffrey Weeks argues that while once the queer community was avant-garde¹⁰² in breaking away from “the naturalness and inevitability of received roles and identities,” they have again internalized an explanation for their existence based in what Weeks refers to as sociobiology. This biologically-based internalization may lead to a repressive dominant mentality in which “little can be risked because too much is at stake.”¹⁰³ This could not be truer when it comes to the intersection of queer rights and the American legal arena. Through self-regulation, the biologically-driven queer majority may uncomfortably look down at the agency-imbued queer minority who is making queer people everywhere “look bad” by using arguments of choice that are often highjacked by the rhetoric of the Christian right. The Christian right seeks to argue that queerness, by virtue of being a choice rather than biological, should not be a characteristic protected under law. Therefore, the dominant queer civil rights movement’s fear of losing gains in equality

¹⁰² This is in reference to the period of radical gay liberation and radical lesbian feminism discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁰³ Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myth and Modern Sexualities*. London: Routledge, 1999. 199.

often serves to stifle a multiplicity of queer identities, as the threat of political backlash may be seen as too high a cost to merit tampering with.

It is understandable that in the increasingly oppressive conservative backlash of the 1980s up until the present, it became more politically efficacious for the queer community to gain civil rights if the argument for equality was based in biology rather than in individual liberty. In order to be constitutionally protected under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment as a “discrete and insular minority,” for example, members of a marginalized group must be a suspect class possessing an “immutable” characteristic, among other criteria. This refers to a trait that theoretically cannot be changed, and categories of people such as women and people of color fit into this. To argue for the inclusion of queer people into this category of protection means that queerness must be seen as an essential, unchangeable part of who someone is. Thus, the dominant queer movement focuses on biology and “not being able to help it” rather than on ideas of what best represents the incredible diversity of experience and identification in the queer community, or what appeals to queer people, or what queer people prefer.

To respond to the fear of deteriorating queer rights if biological determinism is dislodged from its current place of honor, cannot sexuality be immutable as well as imbued with agency? Is it so hard to conceive of

a queer sexuality in which a person is steadfast and unchanging in their sexual identity simply because that is what they identify with and want in their life and anything else would result in stripping them of happiness and agency? Is severe psychological stress and emotional pain and denial of freedom of choice not enough to make something “immutable?” The Iowa Supreme Court agreed with this line of reasoning in their groundbreaking April 3rd, 2009 holding in *Varnum v. Brien*, in which they unanimously ruled that barring same-sex couples from marrying is unconstitutional:

[C]ourts need not definitively resolve the nature-versus-nurture debate currently raging over the origin of sexual orientation in order to decide plaintiffs’ equal protection claims. The constitutional relevance of the immutability factor is not reserved to those instances in which the trait defining the burdened class is absolutely impossible to change ... That is, we agree with those courts that have held the immutability “prong of the suspectness inquiry surely is satisfied when ... the identifying trait is ‘so central to a person’s identity that it would be abhorrent for government to penalize a person for refusing to change [it].’”¹⁰⁴

While the Iowa Supreme Court acknowledged that “plaintiffs [representing marriage equality] could not prove, as a matter of fact, that sexuality is immutable”¹⁰⁵ in terms of being “impossible to change,” they resolved that this was no reason for the anti-marriage equality defendants

¹⁰⁴ *Varnum v. Brien*, Iowa Supreme Court No. 07-1499 (3 April 2009): 43-44.
<http://www.judicial.state.ia.us/Supreme_Court/Recent_Opinions/20090403/07-1499.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

to claim a victory against the protection of LGBTQ rights, for same-sex relationships are what allow queer people to live happy, productive, meaningful lives, regardless of how it is they came to be queer. Jon Davidson, the legal director at Lambda Legal, takes the same approach and likens sexuality to religion: "It doesn't matter whether you were born that way, it came later, or you chose ... We don't think it's okay to discriminate against people based on their religion. We think people have a right to believe whatever they want. So why do we think that about religion and not about who we love?"¹⁰⁶ Basically, people should be free to live their lives as they see fit and still be treated equally under the law as long as they are not harming anyone, so at a certain point, a biologically-based explanation for sexuality becomes a moot point in the legal arena.

Further, insisting on science as a way to "save" queer people from homophobic hatred and condemnation becomes ludicrous when one realizes that if queer sexuality was genetic, and homophobic authority figures could use gene therapy [all too reminiscent of eugenics] to expunge queerness from the human population, there is a chance that they would. As prominent queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote,

¹⁰⁶ Greenberg, Gary. "Gay By Choice? The Science of Sexual Identity." Mother Jones. Aug. 2007: 4. 21 March 2009 < <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2007/08/gay-choice-science-sexual-identity?page=4>>.

referencing how either a “nurture” or “nature” explanation of queer sexuality can be used by anti-queer people and institutions to eliminate queerness,

I am additionally eager to promote the obsolescence of “essentialist/ constructivist” because I am very dubious about ... the essentially gay-genocidal nexuses of thought through which they have developed ... under the dire homophobic pressures of the last few years, and in the name of Christianity, the subtle constructivist argument ... is being degraded to the blithe ukase that people are “free at any moment to” (i.e., must immediately) “choose” to adhere to a particular sexual identity (say, at a random hazard, the heterosexual) ... [Meanwhile,] [t]he number of persons or institutions by whom the existence of gay people – never mind the existence of *more gay people*– is treated as a precious desideratum, a needed condition of life, is small ... By contrast, the scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large ... in the United States, at any rate, most sites of the state, the military, education, law, penal institutions, the church, medicine, mass culture, and the mental health industries enforce it all but unquestioningly ... So for gay and gay-loving people ... every step of this constructivist nature/ culture argument holds danger: it ... ends in the overarching, hygienic Western fantasy of a world without any more homosexuals in it.¹⁰⁷

Sheila Jeffreys parallels this insight when she points out, “Social theorists [in the 1960s and ‘70s] vigorously opposed biological arguments about racial inferiority, gender differences, mental illness. It was recognized that biological explanations provided the scientific basis for conservative social engineering.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, it is best to avoid playing on the terms of the

¹⁰⁷ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 40-43.

¹⁰⁸ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy*, p. 59.

Christian right whenever possible, for inherent in anti-queer extremists' discourse about queer people and the origins of queer sexuality is an attempt at mitigating the reality of the existence of queer people as much as possible, including the need for equality. Engaging in biologically-driven arguments to challenge homophobic ideas of choice as sinful is to refuse to challenge the foundational "truths" which sediment heterosexuality and certain brands of Christian values as hegemonic.

Queer by Choice: Alternative Identity Within an "Alternative Lifestyle"

Sociologist Kenneth Plummer comments on the ways in which members of the queer community, through historical regulation by "experts," have eventually become their own sexual regulators. Plummer writes, "[N]ow these experts need no longer [regulate homosexuals], for the homosexual has assumed that role for himself or herself."¹⁰⁹ What with the biological arguments of early sexologists, attacks about choice from the religious right, and well-meaning supporters of LGBTQ rights who endeavor to "prove" queerness' genetic origins,¹¹⁰ queer people are

¹⁰⁹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, p. 199.

¹¹⁰ A famous and oft-quoted 1991 study by neuroscientist Simon LeVay sought to prove that the hypothalamus is linked to sexual orientation, or more specifically, that heterosexual men's hypothalamuses are twice as large as that of both women and gay men. The study was conducted on "postmortem tissue from three subject groups: women, men who were presumed to be heterosexual, and homosexual men." See <<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/253/5023/1034>>. The 1999 book *Exploding the Gene Myth: How Genetic Information is Produced and Manipulated by Scientists, Physicians, Employers, Insurance Companies, Educators, and Law Enforcers* by biologist Ruth Hubbard and writer Elijah Wald is an informative source of

pressured to internalize a biologically determined image of who they should be in order to “fit in.” For example, queer people who embrace biological determinism, believing that they must have always been queer, may look at events in their pasts as a “sign” of queerness that they did not understand at the time. While this is not an inherently problematic approach, it quickly becomes a problem for some queer people who may feel alienated in attempting to align their childhood, adolescence, and/ or teenage years with a pre-determined biological discourse. For instance, what if a woman who identifies as a lesbian later in life did not experience sexual fantasies about other females in her childhood? What if there was no awareness that being queer was an option and so no strong elements of queerness manifested themselves to the best of a person’s knowledge? Again, these queer people’s voices are marginalized within the more dominant discourse of biological determinism.

A media-based example of someone who frames her lesbian identity in terms of agency rather than biological determinism may be

information in understanding the numerous flaws in LeVay’s study. Besides the male bias of the survey [it did not aim to study lesbians], Hubbard and Wald also point out that because LeVay studied corpses rather than live subjects, the “presumed” heterosexual men in the study could not speak for themselves to clarify their actual sexual identities; the “homosexual men” were in fact presumed to be homosexual because they had HIV/ AIDS at their time of death; the quality of the corpses’ brains was marred due to the fact that some brains were more rapidly decayed due to the HIV/ AIDS; and LeVay was himself a gay man who was motivated to explain the scientific origins of gayness in the hope that gay people would be treated more equally socially and politically as a result of his study, thus throwing his objectivity into question.

found in an internet video on YouTube called “10 good reasons to be a lesbian,” which was created on May 23rd, 2007 by a young Norwegian woman named Kimmi.¹¹¹ In this video, which as of March 2009 has been viewed over 184,000 times,¹¹² Kimmi takes the rare approach of discussing what she likes about being a lesbian rather than discussing her difficulties with identifying as one. Instead of referencing biology, she lists, with a touch of humor, her “ten fucking good reasons.” While Kimmi does not give any explicitly political reasons why it is good to be a lesbian, as did radical lesbian feminists of the ‘70s, she provides a theorization of erotic choice and sexual pleasure which acts as another alternative to the mainstream discourse of biological determinism. Her reasons range from simply “the girls, they look good,” to the humorous and gently self-deprecating “you don’t need to watch TV anymore ... well, not drama ... you have it already. The L Word, the OC ... you have it in your life.” She also includes more reflective reasons, such as how girls “fuck much better ... I know what I like, and so when I do it on my girlfriend, she likes it too!” In addition, “Girls understand each other much better ... We fight and we argue, but not in the same way [as women do with men].” She also references her somewhat androgynous gender presentation in saying

¹¹¹ Kimmi. “10 good reasons to be a lesbian.” YouTube. 2007. 20 March 2009 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk3NwGSeXQw>>.

¹¹² It is interesting to note that as of April 12th, 2009, the video has been viewed over 191,000 times, thus showing a jump of roughly 7,000 more views in one month.

that because she now chooses to dress less stereotypically feminine and wears far less make-up than she did when she was trying to attract men, “you don't have to think about sleazy bad disgusting guys that are looking at you ... because they can see that you're a lesbian ... they don't look at you anymore ... I am just so free. Oh god I love it.” Although Kimmi is not part of the American queer community, she is speaking to a global community on an American-created website that is extremely popular in the United States, and her reasons for being a lesbian are familiar and translatable to the U.S.

It is interesting to note, then, that refrains of a certain “biology or bust” mentality are heard in the message that Kimmi gives in a second video released two days later after receiving comments on her video. On May 25th, 2007, Kimmi released a new video called “Comments on my own video.”¹¹³ She created the video to address two main topics that her girlfriend and YouTube viewers had commented on. The first is the fact that lesbians often do like to dress up, which is something her girlfriend pointed out to her. The second has to do with biological determinism. After Kimmi clarifies that her video is “ten funny reasons if you’re in the closet,” she says, “It's not like, ‘to be or not to be a lesbian.’ If you're a lesbian, you are. If you're not, you're not. You can't help it. It's you, who

¹¹³ Kimmi. “Comments on my own video.” YouTube. 2007. 20 March 2009 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5X0JivBCCA>>.

you are. But, if you *know* you're a lesbian inside, now you have no reason not to be one." The key phrases "You can't help it" and "a lesbian inside" serve to negotiate between, on the one hand, Kimmi's earlier enthusiastic championing of women's sexual pleasure and erotic agency free from the subpar skills of men, and on the other hand, the dominant biological discourse in the queer community in which affirmations of queer sex are less likely to be touted. Kimmi therefore clarifies her message by asserting that her first video may be read as ten reasons why someone should accept being a lesbian and come out of the closet: "Because there's many good reasons to be a lesbian. If you are already. I'm not saying everybody should be a lesbian!" Kimmi's reactionary second video thus points directly to the popularity and dominance of biological determinism that is asserted across the internet among Western queer audiences even as her first video serves as a valuable challenge to the hegemony of biological arguments and the creation of a space for a politics of pleasure and positive queerness. The story of Kimmi may be viewed as a sort of case study in how the dominant biological discourse acts in certain situations as an attempt to rein in the "unruly queer" who is straying too far from the acceptable rhetoric of biological determinism, which many queer people believe is the best rhetoric the LGBTQ community can use in order to gain equal rights.

There are many individuals like Kimmi who have broken away from the hegemony of biological determinism in order to embrace an idea of queerness imbued with agency and complexity. In fact, there is an entire contemporary movement of people who claim that they “chose” their queer sexuality, or that they at least experience some sort of agency involved with it. Gayle Madwin founded the Queer by Choice mailing list in 1998 when she was twenty-two; in the early to mid-nineties when Madwin was a teenager,

everything on TV was about queers saying they were “born that way” and “couldn't help it” ... I found it very hard to believe that all the other queers in the world saw things in such an entirely different way from me ... I ran a search on several different websites that list mailing lists, and I couldn't find a single mailing list anywhere that was about choosing to be queer, so I started a list of my own.¹¹⁴

Unlike Melissa Etheridge, Eric Marcus, and many other queer people in the United States, Madwin disputes the fact that she was pre-programmed a certain way: “It sure felt like a choice to me. If it wasn't a choice I'll have to stop believing in free will altogether, because if that wasn't a choice then the ‘choices’ I make about what to wear and what to eat and who to vote for are definitely not choices either.” She continues, “To *become* gay ... was a fabulously daring adventure and it brought new meaning to my

¹¹⁴ Madwin, Gayle. “Gayle Madwin.” *Queer by Choice* 2003. 26 January 2009. <<http://www.queerbychoice.com/gayle.html>>.

life.”¹¹⁵ It is evident that other queer people agree with Madwin or have at least somewhat similar experiences, for on the Queer by Choice mailing list website, there are forty-eight other member “profile” pages with stories parallel to Madwin’s, and Madwin claims to have about 150 members on the mailing list in the U.S. and Canada.¹¹⁶

Sociologist Vera Whisman, in her book *Queer by Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Politics of Identity*, conducts interviews mostly in New York City of thirty-nine lesbians and thirty-three gay men to analyze how they speak about their sexual identities. She calls this ethnographic research a collection of “identity accounts.” Interestingly, she speaks to women and men who associate their sexual identities with agency and/ or choice similar to Gayle Madwin as well as to members of the queer community who identify in the more orthodox, biologically-driven style of Melissa Etheridge. Some respondents have “mixed accounts” in which they identify partly with choice and partly with forces beyond choice.

Whisman makes her position on the biology / choice controversy

¹¹⁵ This idea of queer people being attracted to daringness echoes Sheila Jeffrey’s discussion in her chapter “The Lesbian Outlaw” about the “romance with outlaw status” that many lesbians find themselves attracted to, even if it is because lesbians are reacting to being relegated to “the status of pariahs by a lesbian hating society.” Jeffreys goes so far as to argue, “Most lesbians probably don’t really want to be like ‘regular folks’ anyway. Lesbian existence, let alone the bar, is a rebellious thumbing of the nose to heterosexual society and to a family of origin which may have been lost.” Even though one may take issue with Jeffreys’ assertion about “most lesbians,” it is nonetheless true that some lesbians and other queer people do in fact find satisfaction and sexiness in this type of identification. Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy*, pp. 99;102-103.

¹¹⁶ See <<http://www.queerbychoice.com/profiles.html>>.

transparent when she writes, “[P]redicating the legitimacy of homosexuality on its not being a choice is profoundly heterosexist ... [T]o the extent that homosexuality is acceptable only if it is not chosen[,] it remains stigmatized, illegitimate, deviant.”¹¹⁷ That is, to argue for the political toleration of queerness based in a repudiation of choice is to refuse to challenge the heterosexual hegemony that balks at the premise that someone might actually *prefer* to be queer and that heterosexuality is not the universally desirable pinnacle of human sexuality.

If the people interviewed by Whisman who repudiate choice believe that their sexual identities are fluid, chosen and/ or imbued with agency, what form does this agency take? Reasons include not wanting to blindly follow mainstream heteronormativity; undergoing an “internal metamorphosis” from heterosexuality to a gay identity; and a burgeoning interest in feminism leading to a re-evaluation of one’s sexual identity and personal politics, to cite a few examples. For Art Turner, “[J]ust because everybody else was doing something, that didn’t mean I would do it. And when I think about it, being gay is that way too.”¹¹⁸ In contrast, Brian Polaski’s “internal metamorphosis” occurred as his heterosexual fantasies “expired, between the ages of eighteen and twenty,” while his sexual

¹¹⁷ Whisman, Vera. *Queer by Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Politics of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1996. 6.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

feelings for men grew more “fully developed.”¹¹⁹ In addition, his commitment to existential philosophy leads him to value freedom of choice, and he subscribes to the idea of “infinite instantaneous liberation from any kind of past, in a moment of absolute choice ... [s]o that we make ourselves gay every time we do something gay.” Respondent Anna Blumberg echoes the framework of radical lesbian feminism when she states, “I was getting in all these feminist ideas ... seeing other [lesbian] possibilities.”¹²⁰ It is deeply important to document these identity accounts of agency and/ or choice because the voices of men and women with such experiences and identifications are almost always left out of dominant pro-queer discourses about queer sexuality. Indeed, if one were to believe the institutional and pop culture-based representations of a universally biologically-driven queer identity, it would seem that the people referenced here from Whisman’s study do not even exist!

The narrative of Adrienne DuBois is particularly striking in how it challenges the conventional thinking and assumptions of biological determinism. DuBois identifies her lesbianism at least in part with being “really tired of playing games with men,” and she adds,

I’m not going to spend a lot of time forgiving myself or forgiving anybody else because I started out straight, damn it. Okay? I say to people, “You’re going to have to take me as I am. I am

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

converted, if you wish, okay? I used to be straight, now I'm gay. I'm sorry if it would make you happy that I was born this way, but I wasn't."¹²¹

Adrienne's ability to use the word "converted" in a way free from defensive sarcasm is extremely unusual in a political climate in which queer people have had to actively argue since the era of sexology that they cannot change and certainly do not "convert" to being gay. In fact, the idea that gay people convert impressionable youth was the basis of one of slain gay rights icon Harvey Milk's jesting and sarcastic campaign mottos: "I'm Harvey Milk, and I want to convert you." Therefore, Adrienne's departure from the historic social script of biological determinism, in which it is taken for granted that queerness is undesirable and should be limited as much as possible, is striking. Especially important is how it highlights, as do the other accounts of choice and/or agency excerpted from Whisman's work, that the current mainstream queer rights movement often attempts to speak for a collective "us" that leaves out the voices and experiences of those queer people who do not fit into a model of sexual identification based solely or primarily on biology.

Whisman sets out her own definition of "queerness" that is well-suited to moving beyond the limiting monopoly that biological determinism currently has on the American queer community and queer

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 62.

rights movement. For Whisman, queerness is “a recognition that living as sexual outlaws is what unites us, not a shared and essential identity.”¹²²

She continues, speaking about what to make of the various identity accounts unearthed in her study, whether biological, chosen, or a mix of both,

[A]llow them to proliferate. If homosexuality is a point around which we cluster, let the paths for reaching that point be visible. One person arrives there because of a deeply felt physical desire for others of the same sex, another for a desire that is more emotional than physical. One woman arrives there because she has chosen to explore feelings for women and extinguish those for men, because her feminist understanding tells her that is the best choice for her. Another woman has felt different all her life, more masculine than feminine. One man has always been sexually interested in both men and women, and finds queer worlds more to his liking than straight ones. There is no essential Gay Man, no timeless Lesbian, but instead gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and others, who collectively and individually widen the range of possibilities.¹²³

This passage is particularly illuminating in how it highlights the need for an understanding of sexual identity as diverse and varied as individual people’s experiences and life philosophies. Rather than assuming and promoting the idea that queerness and biological determinism inherently go hand-in-hand, we must dig deeper to appreciate the complexity and nuance of various expressions of queer sexuality.

An interesting gendered dynamic of Whisman’s research is the fact that in her interviews, as well as in several studies she cites from the late

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

'70s to early '90s, gay men have a much higher likelihood of identifying as solely biologically gay than do lesbians.¹²⁴ There is more diversity within the lesbian community of experiencing sexual fluidity, such as leaving a heterosexual marriage later in life and finding greater emotional bonds with women, or in adopting a feminist position of resisting male domination, as discussed at length in Chapter 2 in relation to 1970s radical lesbian feminism. To echo Sheila Jeffreys, "The belief in biology comes mainly from gay male theorists ... The lesbians [Jeffreys had as students in the early 1980s] ... had often not thought of loving women until well past their teens. A biological explanation would not have made sense in terms of their experience or their politics."¹²⁵ Jeffreys' discussion about the importance of gender as a lens with which to analyze the centrality of agency in lesbian experience echoes Adrienne Rich's sentiment that lesbianism is "a profoundly *female* experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences." In order to understand why women report more agency in their sexual identities than do men, it is vital to keep in mind the role of gender-based oppression women face in heterosexual society that may play a greater, more explicitly political role in women's active rejection of the institution of

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

¹²⁵ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy*, p. 59.

heterosexuality.

Given the sexist framework of heterosexual relations, it is clear that gay men and lesbians experience different positive and negative socio-political consequences from adopting a gay identity. To adopt a gay male identity often results in loss of male privilege and a sense of tarnished masculinity; the gay man has "fallen" from the righteous place of heterosexual masculinity. The situation is of course not the same for lesbians, who already hold a subordinate place in society by virtue of being women. When a woman identifies as a lesbian, although she may be criticized as not being "feminine" enough, she may actually profit from not being economically dependent on men, and she usually forms a sense of self that is not based on male acceptance and approval. To again echo Rich's previously-quoted sentiments, women are thus able to find empowerment and strength through "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" from other women. For some lesbians who see their sexual identities as related to political choices which cast off male oppression, such a new way of living can be very liberating.

The results of using biological determinism as not only a political tactic but a universal marker of queer identity, then, perpetuates a practice that the American queer movement is already under constant critique for:

being male-centric. When being “born gay” is experienced by gay men at a higher rate than by lesbians, one must ask whether there is indeed an additional aspect at play of sexist non-engagement with varied lesbian experiences.¹²⁶ This negation of the complicated world of lesbian experience is reminiscent of my previous discussion of Havelock Ellis’ contradictory treatment of homosexuality as biologically driven while theorizing two versions of female sexual inversion, one congenital and one situational. The glossing over of lesbian experience in favor of political expediency, we are reminded, is nothing new.

Ultimately, it is dangerous for the contemporary queer rights movement to react in a negative, knee-jerk manner to any discussion of sexuality that does not embrace biological determinism as a given. In the future, it may be more progressive to argue for equal civil rights not because someone’s biology has steered them towards a particular fate, but because all people’s consensual sexual and relationship decisions deserve to be treated equally under the law with liberty and respect as long as they are not harming anyone. The American queer rights movement has fortunately made enough gains that many of its members are out in the open, protesting and blogging and loving, living their lives in a way that

¹²⁶ As Whisman argues on page 6 using the words of journalist Lindsay Van Gelder, this biologically-driven model “reflects the universal male experience in this culture, not the complexities of the lesbian world.”

refuses to buckle to shame and fear. Consequently, neither the old biological rhetoric of apologist sexology or the placating of Christian right rhetoric through biological determinism always fit in with people whose identities are not based in biology but in a more conscious embracing of the possibilities for agency in being queer and appreciating the richness that it brings to one's life.

Additionally, if gay people are to be tolerated only or primarily because they were "born that way," where does that put bisexual or pansexual people? If bisexual and pansexual people are theoretically able to date opposite-sex partners, why shouldn't they completely renounce same-sex relationships? If they can avoid having tougher lives, why don't they just opt out of the stigma and take the "easier way out?" Why not cling to heterosexual privilege? Such questions are, of course, ludicrous in assuming that people automatically want to make their lives as socially acceptable as possible. If there was nothing truly redeeming about same-sex relationships, then those people with the most obvious theoretical ability to "choose" – bisexual and pansexual people – would ostensibly lead heterosexual lives and avoid same-sex partners all together rather than being a visible component of the queer community and queer rights movement. The former is generally not the case, and even if many people have the potential to be bisexual or pansexual but choose to lead

heterosexual lives, should bisexual and pansexual people with same-sex partners be barred from the same tolerance and equal rights as gay and lesbian people who cannot “escape” their biology? The answer is a firm “no,” and respect for freedom, not pity for hardwired deviance, should be the goal for the queer rights movement.

Again, this is not to say that being part of a marginalized group is always filled with joy and free from persecution, but it does mean that there can and should be a separation between lamenting discrimination and being proud of who one is and how one lives one’s life. It is not that one cannot identify both as biologically queer and as happy and proud, but that attacking someone for departing from biological determinism points to a specifically sexological and evangelical-pandering discourse that runs the risk of collapsing engaging dialogues about sexuality and holding back the beautifully diverse expressions of future waves of LGBTQ activism and identities. Those queer people who identify with agency should not, out of political necessity, have to remain silent outsiders to the queer rights movement.

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