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Equally Queer?



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Strategic Lesbianism in Diane DiMassa's *Hothead Paisan*

von Katja Linke

In recent years, more and more people have chosen gender-neutral terms like “queer” over gender-specific terms like lesbian and gay to indicate their non-normative gender and/or sexuality. While there are many good reasons for this development, the loss of gender-specific terms makes it harder to address gender-specific experiences of sexism both within and beyond queer communities. A close reading of Diane DiMassa’s comic, “The Complete Hothead Pains. Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist”, points to the possibility of a strategic use of the term lesbian that avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and gender-normativity, while still retaining its critical potential.

Is queer the new lesbian?

Since at least the early 1990s, the term “queer”, which used to be a homophobic slur, was reclaimed as both a political and a theoretical term in the context of the gay and lesbian movement in the U.S., from where it travelled to many other parts of the world. In her introduction to queer theory, Annamarie Jagose (1996: 1) defines “queer” as, “[b]roadly speaking, [...] those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire”. German queer theorist Antke Engel (2002: 43) explicitly warns that

“[q]ueer is not a descriptive category with a defined referent, let alone a new identity category. When queer is used as an identity category, [...] power mechanisms of normative inclusion and exclusion are uncritically reproduced” (translation: Katja Linke). This does not, however, prevent many people from using “queer” as a term to describe themselves and others. As Jagose (1996: 98) notes, “queer” can indicate “a suspension of identity as something fixed, coherent and natural. But queer may also be used to signify a different kind of identity which is consistent and self-identical, ... as a way of distinguishing old-style lesbians and gays from the new”.

This trend of rejecting gender-specific terms like “gay” and – especially – “lesbian” in favor of gender-neutral terms like “queer”, is not only indicated by the September 2010 title of Berlin’s queer magazine, “Siegessäule”, “... und Tschüss! Hat schwul-lesbisch ausgedient?” [... and good-bye! Have the terms gay and lesbian become obsolete?], but is also corroborated by several North American studies (Horner 2007, Peters 2005, Rupp and Taylor in press, Sorensen 2010). In a study that was conducted among middle and high school students in California in 2003, 2004, and 2005, Stephen T. Russel, Thomas J. Clarke and Justin Clary (2009) found that 33,7% of the non-heterosexual

participants identified as gay or lesbian, while only 5,2% identified as queer and 8,2% provided write-in responses, with pansexual (open to sexual relationships with people of all genders, including but not limited to male and female) being the most frequently listed category in this rubric. They (Russel, Clarke, and Clary 2009: 888) state “that it is wrong to conclude that gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities are irrelevant to contemporary youth”. While these gender-specific terms might still be relevant to young people in California, it is nonetheless noteworthy that it was only due to student input during the pre-test phase that “queer” was included as a separate category in the response options for the survey question. Clearly there were at least some students who felt that the term “queer” was popular enough among their peers to merit explicit inclusion in the study.

Interestingly, a study of non-heterosexual, female-identified undergraduates at the University of California in Santa Barbara that was conducted in 2006, 2007, and 2012 yields a much higher percentage of participants who identify as queer (20%), pansexual (4%), or fluid (9%) (Rupp and Taylor in press). This study clearly shows the growing popularity of gender-neutral terms among young adults on college campuses in California. Evalie Horner (2007: 287, italics in

the original) concurs with this assessment when she writes that “queer” [...] is more and more frequently claimed as a sexual identity label by today’s youth”. The female-identified participants in the qualitative studies by Wendy Peters (2005) and Anna Sorensen (2010) seem to oscillate between the two uses of “queer” as a self-description outlined by Jagose above. In any case, they give good reasons for their rejection of the term “lesbian”. One of Sorensen’s participants (2010: 63) explains: “Just to be honest about my stereotypes of people who identify as lesbian, I think of people who are totally not open to a gender spectrum”. Peters (2005: 106) concludes that some of her participants “viewed queer identity as more inclusive of non-normative gender performance [than lesbian identity]. Some saw queer as a movement that tries to recognize differences of race, class, gender, and ability among queers and work toward equity in each of these areas. [...] Others saw queer as reflecting people who participate in BDSM [a wide range of sexual practices including bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism], leather and polyamory”. These contemporary responses reflect long-standing critiques of the lesbian movement in North America, which has been called out on its racism and classism (cf. Combahee River

Collective 1977 and Anzaldúa 1991), its sex-negativity (cf. Rubin 1984/1992), and its transphobia (cf. Stone 1991). More recently, the gay and lesbian movement has been criticized for its assimilationist politics and for fitting into “the logic of liberal pluralism” (Barnard 2004: 12). These critiques are valid and it is perfectly understandable why many people would not want to be associated with a term that calls up these problematic and oppressive connotations and histories.

Let's talk about sexism!

I suggest, however, that the wholesale rejection of the term “lesbian” leads to the unfortunate loss of a gender-specific term that makes it possible to address the sexism that queer women face both in their lives in general as well as in queer circles. If we are all equally queer – whether we grew up as women or as men, whether we are intersex, cisgendered, or transgendered, whether we live in a monogamous, straight relationship or in polyamorous relationships with people of various genders – it becomes difficult to name crucial differences that still play out in important ways in our lives. As Engel (2002: 44) reminds us, “From the perspective of a power analysis, it is crucial to understand the analysis of androcentrism and phallocentrism as inherent elements of queer theory”

(translation: KL). I argue that the critical retention of the term “lesbian” is necessary if a critique of sexism is to remain part of queer theory.

It is important to emphasize that I am not advocating an essentialist or gender-normative usage of the term “lesbian”. I argue against seemingly commonsensical definitions like political scientist Shane Phelan’s (1989: 63) pronouncement that “the word ‘lesbian’ is clearly understood [...] A lesbian, to most English-speakers, is a woman who engages in sex with women”. Against this statement I would like to insist that lesbians are not always women, pure and simple. Most people who identify as lesbian will probably have experiences of having the label “woman” applied to them and/or of choosing this label for themselves, at least in certain situations. But this does not mean that all lesbians unproblematically identify as women, would only date people who do the same, and generally uphold the gender binary in every way possible. In fact, there is a rich history of lesbian gender-non-conformism. When the term “lesbian” first came up around the turn of the century, sexologists like Magnus Hirschfeld and Havelock Ellis (1913: 251) theorized that “inverted women frequently, though not always, convey an impression of mannishness or boyishness”. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy’s and Madeline D.

Davis's (1993) influential ethnography, "Boots of Leather", "Slippers of Gold", also describes butch/femme culture (a subculture in which more masculine lesbians (butches) and more feminine lesbians (femmes) date each other) as the most visible mid-20th-century lesbian culture. And Judith Halberstam's (1998) famous book, "Female Masculinity", ends with an analysis of contemporary drag king culture. It is quite surprising that a particularly essentialist, anti-butch/femme, anti-transgender strand of lesbian feminism as expressed in the work of people like Andrea Dworkin, Janyce G. Raymond, Mary Daly, and Sheila Jeffreys was able to eclipse this history (and present).

In light of this history I argue for a "strategic lesbianism" that recognizes gender diversity, honors the complex and often enough tenuous relationship lesbians have to the category "woman", and yet remains committed to anti-sexism. I will perform a close reading of Diane DiMassa's (1999) comic, "Hothead Paisan. Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist", to show that strategic lesbianism is indeed a viable subject position. Along with other comic artists such as Alison Bechdel and Roberta Gregory, Diane DiMassa is one of the most well known lesbian comic writers in the U.S. They form part of a large tradition of queer comics, which have mostly been pub-

lished and distributed through gay and lesbian channels and venues apart from mainstream comics and which, therefore, "have been an uncensored, internal conversation within queer communities, and thus provide a unique window into the hopes, fears, and fantasies of queer people" (Hall 2012: II). "Hothead Paisan" thus occupies a prominent place within lesbian culture in the U.S. and is well positioned as an exemplary text to elucidate the potential of strategic lesbianism.

The literary focus of my argument is due to women's studies professor Bonnie Zimmerman's (Sayer 1995) observation that "[i]n the absence of any kind of [...] exclusively lesbian politics, lesbian community practices and the fact that there are very few lesbian businesses or spaces that have sustained themselves over time, it is literature that continues to be a profoundly important place in which lesbian identities are constructed and deconstructed and contested and everything else". The visual medium of comics is furthermore particularly well suited to illuminate complex gender negotiations.

My analysis is based on Jacob Hale's (1996: 107) "reconstruction of the dominant culture's concept of 'woman'", which I use to demonstrate that Hothead Paisan, the central character of the comic by the same name, does not unproblematically fit this concept. I argue that it

is precisely Hothead's "wrong" performance of femaleness that exposes her to relentless sexism, which in turn makes it strategically useful for her to deploy the term "lesbian" in order to name and resist the gender-specific violence to which she is subjected.

Negotiating femaleness in "Hot-head Paisan"

Even though Hothead Paisan is unambiguously positioned as a lesbian by the comic's subtitle, "Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist", she is not exactly what one would call "a woman who engages in sex with women" (Phelan 1989: 63). In his article, "Are Lesbians Women?" (1996), transgender studies scholar Jacob Hale compiled thirteen defining characteristics of the category "woman" as it is conceived of in the dominant culture of the contemporary US. While none of these characteristics are in and of themselves sufficient to place oneself or others securely in the category "woman", neither does one necessarily fall outside of it if one does not fulfill all thirteen of them. The characteristics are differently weighted so that it becomes possible to show how somebody might be placed within the category "woman" even if they do not exhibit all thirteen characteristics, or, conversely, how somebody might not be seen as a woman even

though they do fulfill some of these characteristics. Hale's characteristics are not meant to define once and for all what it means to be a woman; instead, they show the complexities of performing femaleness and of reading someone as a woman within the specific culture of the contemporary U.S.

Far from being unambiguously positioned as a woman, Hothead Paisan fails to fulfill many of these characteristics: Apparently unemployed, yet always able to afford food and housing, Hothead does not have "an occupation considered to be acceptable for a woman" (Hale 1996: 109). In fact, she has no occupation at all. Neither can it be said that she engages "in leisure pursuits [...] considered to be acceptable for a woman" (*ibid.*), since most of her time is taken up by killing sexist and homophobic men, when she is not watching TV or hanging out with her queer friends.

It is also more than dubious that Hot-head fulfills the criterion of "[h]aving a gender identity as a woman" (*ibid.*). Hothead never explicitly states that she "feel[s her]self to be a woman" (*ibid.*), but instead dreams of a world where everybody turns into "hermaphrodites" (DiMassa 1999: 33). To Hothead "this is infinitely more excellent than a mere gender takeover!" (*ibid.*: 34) because in this perfect world everybody would be

both male and female – and everything in between – and gender would lose its oppressive significance. Hothead's dream world literalizes Engel's (2002: 11) insight that "without a reliable gender classification, neither can the hierarchical configuration of genders be put into practice, nor can relations of desire be defined as 'same'- or 'opposite'-sex. The hierarchical order of gender and heterosexualized desire is based on the norm of the stability and coherence of two unambiguously separated yet mutually related genders" (translation: Katja Linke). Hothead knows that, in the absence of the binary gender system, sexism and homophobia would lose their power over her. Thus, far from feeling herself to be a woman, she longs for a world in which it would not be necessary to have a gender identity as either a man or a woman.

Most importantly, Hothead fails to fulfill a heavily weighted cluster of characteristics, which Hale (1996: 110, emphasis mine) groups together under the rubric of "gender attribution". On a very basic level, Hothead does not give "textual cues" that work together to produce the gender assignment 'woman' in those with whom one interacts [...] unambiguously, constantly, and without those with whom one interacts ever thinking about making this gender assignment" ibid.: 111), since her first name is gender-neutral and she does not object

when she is addressed with the male signifier "uncle Hothead" (DiMassa 1999: 94). Conversely, she does refuse to be addressed as a "young lady" (ibid.: 402). She also does not "behave" in ways that work together to produce the gender assignment 'woman' in those with whom one interacts" (Hale 1996: 111, emphasis mine). Quite to the contrary, Hothead exhibits behavior that she herself – probably along with most of her readers – categorizes as stereotypically, even exaggeratedly, male: she engages in extreme violence, even rape, demonstrates callousness towards her victims, and experiences a total lack of guilt. In one sequence, Hothead ponders who she would be if she had been born with a male body and she reaches the conclusion: "The stinking truth is [...] I would be a mean, nasty, live to ride – ride to live, die hard, I-love-my carburetor, dirty bad biker! [...] I'm pretty close to that anyway. Just take my heart away, and I'm a man" (DiMassa 1999: 371f.). In the last panel of this sequence, Hothead's usual self looks at the reader, but we also see her hairy back in the mirror, literally mirroring on a bodily level Hothead's insight that her behavior is much closer to stereotypically male behavior than to stereotypically female behavior.

DiMassa makes full use of the visual opportunities afforded by the medium of comics to show that Hothead also fails

to fulfill the third and last characteristic that is concerned with gender attribution. Hothead does not “[a]chiev[e] and maintain [...] a physical gender self-presentation the elements of which work together to produce the gender assignment ‘woman’ in those with whom one interacts” (Hale 1996: 110). According to Hale (1996: 111), one’s physical gender self-presentation includes such elements as “attire, jewelry, cosmetics, hairstyle, distribution, density, and texture of facial and body hair, fingernail and toenail appearance, skin texture, overall body morphology and size, odor, facial structure, and vocal characteristics”. It therefore encompasses both characteristics of the physical body that are comparatively harder to change and presentations of the body that can be modified more or less at will.

With regard to the latter, Hothead is consistently differentiated from straight women, who are often disparagingly referred to as “spritheads” in the comic (cf. for example: DiMassa 1999: 131 and 224). Hothead is usually dressed in black boots, cut-off pajama pants and a sleeveless shirt. Sometimes she wears a leather jacket. Her nails are short, her hair is unruly and punky. She does not wear make-up and does not shave her legs and armpits. Within the parodic world of the comic, straight women in contrast are portrayed as embodying exaggerated

ideals of femininity, which are indexed through such markers as high-heels and tight-fitting clothes that emphasize their breasts and hips. In contrast to Hothead, they wear make-up and jewelry and are usually drawn with long nails, shaved legs and armpits, and carefully styled hair. This exaggerated portrayal of straight women serves as a visual critique of socially constructed ideals of femininity, which all women, including Hothead, are measured against.

However, Hothead is not only differentiated from “spritheads”, i.e. “real” women, who perform femaleness ‘correctly’, through her clothes and the grooming of her body, but also through her physical body itself. In one panel (DiMassa 1999: 189), Hothead’s body and the body of a straight woman are directly juxtaposed. While Hothead is drawn as muscular, unshaven and boyish, the straight woman has an hour-glass figure with large breasts and hips and has no hair anywhere on her body. Their stance is somewhat similar, but whereas Hothead takes on a challenging posture with her legs far apart and her hands on her hips, the straight woman has her legs closed and turns that pose into a tease for the male gaze. Significantly, the straight woman is drawn as a paper doll with a paper bag over her head and is held up by a man, while Hothead seems to stand on solid ground in

her big, black leather boots. The straight woman seems to exist only in relation to a man, is held up by him, positioned and modeled for his enjoyment, robbed of her individuality. The lesbian, on the other hand, stands on her own two feet, apart from the heterosexual matrix (cf. Butler 1990/1999: 194), representing a rejection of both femininity and masculinity in her gender-ambiguous body. This panel could, in fact, be read as a visual representation of Monique Wittig's (1992: 20, italics in the original) famous claim that "[the lesbian] is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation [...] a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual". In this panel, Hothead's independence from men does indeed seem to indicate an escape from the category woman even on the level of her physical self-presentation.

As the last paragraph already indicates, she also, and quite obviously, fails to fulfill the criterion of "[e]ngaging [...] in some form of sexual/affectional relationship with a man who is commonly recognized as heterosexual" (Hale 1996: 110). While most of her past lovers are portrayed as femmes, her most consist-

ent love interest in the comic, Daphne, is drawn as very gender-ambiguous and is "in the middle of a large-scale transition" (DiMassa 1999: 312). Since it is never revealed from what to what Daphne transitions and since she also never arrives at any obvious endpoint of her transition, Daphne further complicates Hothead's supposed status as "a woman who engages in sex with women" (Phelan 1989: 63, see above). Instead of having sex with 'women', Hothead has sex with a person who is neither male nor female and whose gender is best described as 'in transition'.

Hothead's relationship to the category "woman" as it is commonly understood is tenuous at best and challenges essentialist and identitarian accounts of what it means to position oneself as female and/or lesbian. In fact, it seems as if Hothead's desire for a gender-ambiguous world as well as her relationship to Daphne would position her as queer more than lesbian in the sense that her (ideal) gender identity falls outside the binary of male and female just as much as her sexual orientation defies the binary of hetero- and homosexuality.

"Hothead Paisan" as an example of strategic lesbianism

Hothead's strategic use of the term "lesbian" is due to the simple fact that she

is relentlessly read as a woman by a sexist and homophobic world because she fulfills Hale's (1996: 107f.) two most weighted characteristics: "Absence of a penis [...]. Presence of breasts". While she does not fulfill seven of the thirteen characteristics and gives no clues with regard to four more of them (having to do with reproductive organs, hormones, chromosomes, and gendered life history), the fact that her otherwise gender-ambiguous body does have breasts and no penis is enough to place her as female in the eyes of the sexist world around her. And the world does not approve of what it sees. Read as a woman who does not conform to the expectations of 'true' womanhood on many different levels, she is made to bear the brunt of what Hale (1996: 106) calls a "multiplicity of regulative strategies [...] necessary to keep people straight, to keep women from being bad girls, and to keep people clearly within their gender categories". Hothead encounters sexism everywhere in mainstream U.S. culture: on TV, on billboards, in the feminine aisle in the supermarket. Positioned as a gender non-conforming woman, Hothead is directly targeted by these messages: Not only do people on TV reach into her living room to put her in "a beautiful 'mold' [...] with [her] name on it" (DiMassa 1999: 15, emphasis in the original), Hothead also finds herself standing on a literal tar-

get when she feels overwhelmed by all the sexist advertisements in the street. If there was any lingering doubt about Hothead being personally impacted by the sexist culture around her, it is quickly dispelled by the many men physically and verbally assaulting her in public. One panel in particular (DiMassa 1999: 332) visually expresses the connection between being placed as a woman and becoming a target of sexism: Hothead is shown with a women's sign on her chest, the upper part of which looks like a target. Hothead is dwarfed by a huge, partially visible figure, poised to attack her. The shadows of the figure's hands are already on Hothead's shoulders, demonstrating that her perceived femaleness positions her as a target and a potential victim of sexist violence. Here it becomes clear that the comic actually directly contradicts Wittig's assertion quoted above that lesbians can escape the category (or class) of women simply by refusing to be in a relationship with a man. Hothead would love to escape the sexism attached to a categorization as female, but the sexist world around her simply will not allow her that escape. To be clear: It is not any 'innate', 'natural', or 'essential' femaleness that ties Hothead to the category woman, nor do her breasts and lack of a penis in and of themselves 'make' her a woman. It is sexism that attaches such

huge importance to these two physical characteristics of her body. And it is precisely this sexism that informs Hothead's everyday experiences that establishes a tie between Hothead and the category "woman". In one sequence, she advertises on TV, "Is your career suffering due to unworthy penises?? [sic] Are you tired of fearing for your life because penises are stalking the planet? [...] Then I am the girl 4u [sic] [...] Never again walk away quietly because there's 'nothing u can do'. This convenient homicidal dyke [slang word meaning "lesbian", often used as a derogatory term for masculine women, but reclaimed by some lesbians, who self-identify with the term] will come right to your door!" (DiMassa 1999: 83). She defiantly identifies as a "girl," a "dyke," and as women's rightful avenger in order to point out and fight against the sexism she encounters everywhere.

While Hothead's multifaceted gender performance can in many ways be read as an attempt to put Engel's (2002) proposed strategy of ambiguation into practice in order to subvert the binary gender system, on which the heterosexual matrix rests, this strategy also has its limits because a fully gender-ambiguous world is clearly marked as a dream world within the comic. In my reading, replacing the gender-specific term "lesbian" with the gender-neutral term queer to

describe Hothead's subject-position would violate Engel's (2002) criterion of dehierarchization, which is supposed to govern the use of the strategy of ambiguation. The term queer would not allow Hothead to name, analyze, and therefore work to dismantle the very real gender hierarchies that govern her everyday life. Since it is impossible for her to lead a non-gendered life under conditions of sexism, it would be an expression of wishful thinking and political naivety to deprive herself of gender-specific terms that allow her to name her gender-specific experiences. Hothead's strategic lesbianism is akin to Tuija Pulkkinen's (1996: 204) "politics of names", which is based on a strategic assumption of an "identity as not a universal characteristics but something relevant here and now, something formed as a political entity against the hegemonic power" (*ibid.*). The politics of names is supposed to give "different positions names and in this way acquiring them as socially recognized existence" (*ibid.*). While Hothead's naming of her position is less concerned with social recognition, it seems to me that resistance against hegemonic power is also impossible without a politics of names. It is not enough for this politics of names, however, to create new names for emerging subject-positions beyond the heterosexual matrix (as Pulkkinen

seems to imagine); it also needs to retain old names to make strategic use of their critical potential.

It is important to emphasize that, in the tradition of women of color feminism and Black lesbian feminism, I understand strategic lesbianism less as an identity, an ‘accurate’ description of who one is and who one desires, but more as a position from which to launch “critiques of heterosexuality and patriarchy” (Ferguson 2004: 127). As Roderick A. Ferguson (2004: 127) puts it with recourse to eminent Black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith, “‘lesbian’ actually identifies a set of social relations that point to the instability of heteropatriarchy and to a possible critical emergence within that instability”. Chicana lesbian feminist Cherrie Moraga (2000) echoes this use of the term “lesbian” when she relates how she uses her lesbian subject position to critique the sexism and the homophobia of the Chicano nationalist movement. For her, naming herself a lesbian is more political than using the term queer because it makes sure that sexism is named and that feminism does not disappear under the umbrella of “queer”. Hothead’s choosing of the name “lesbian” is similarly strategic in that it is not based on an essentialist understanding of herself and her partners as unproblematically and unchangeably belonging to the category “woman”, but on a

political analysis of her life as informed by both homophobia and sexism. In fact, Hothead distances herself from some forms of essentialist lesbian feminism that use the name “lesbian” as a narrow identity category that excludes people who “eat meat and talk about sex out loud” (DiMassa 1999: 43). I propose to read Hothead’s strategic lesbianism as a tactic deployed by what Chela Sandoval (2000: 58) calls “differential consciousness”. Sandoval (2000: 60) writes, “Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility, and strength: enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power’s formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race, gender, sex, class, and social justice, when these other readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands”. Since strategic lesbianism is decidedly not an expression of an innate and fixed essence, it is helpful to see it as only one among many possible tactics that can be used to dismantle the heterosexual matrix and other forms of oppression. However, given the prevalence of sexism in Hothead’s life as well as in contemporary Western socie-

ties such as the U.S. or Germany (which form the context of this analysis), I see strategic lesbianism as a crucial tactic in the fight against sexism in queer circles as well as in the wider society.

Given its focus on both homophobia and sexism, strategic lesbianism is one step removed from being the “single-issue mode of difference divorced from race and gender” against which Ferguson (2012: 217) warns in his most recent book, “The Reorder of Things”. However, it is important to note that even though strategic lesbianism in “Hothead Paisan” is largely set in a white context and even though issues of race and class are not adequately addressed in the comic, strategic lesbianism should not be construed as a white, middle-class tactic. As the above example of Moraga’s work demonstrates, strategic lesbianism can be deployed in all racial and class contexts to name specific ways in which these contexts are shaped by sexism and homophobia. However, strategic lesbianism is clearly a limited tactic in that, like the term “queer”, “it doesn’t ensure that people of color are named, it doesn’t ensure that working-class people are named, or poor people are named – it doesn’t ensure any of those things” (Moraga 2000: 69). And, as both Ferguson and Moraga (cf. 2000) emphasize, it is of the utmost importance that these (and other) subject positions are named and

critically mobilized so that strategic lesbianism does not become another “mode of difference consistent with interest politics in liberal capitalist nation-states” (Ferguson 2012: 217).

Lesbian as “queer’ on a perhaps smaller scale”

With this brief analysis, I hope to have shown that it can be strategically useful to retain the term “lesbian” – whether as an exclusive self-identification in the realm of gender and sexuality or alongside other self-identifications like “queer” – in order to mount a critical challenge against sexism in different contexts. Clearly, I am not implying that all queer women should identify as lesbians – the racist, classist, transphobic history of the term severely limits its appeal. However, I would like to contest the perception quoted in the beginning of this article that a movement that comes together under the gender-neutral banner of “queer” would be particularly well suited to “recognize differences of . . . gender” (Peters 2005: 106). Currently, “lesbian” seems to be the only term in common usage that serves to indicate the particular subject position at the intersection of (at least) homophobia and sexism that queer women inhabit.

In accordance with English scholar Anne N. Thalheimer (2002: 202f.), I would pro-

pose that “lesbian” could potentially function similarly to ‘queer’ on a perhaps smaller scale – in that ‘lesbian’ is one grouping that does not have a single, set, fixed definition”. For “Hothead Paisan” this is certainly true: like the term “queer”, “lesbian” functions as a signifier for people who attempt to live outside the heterosexual matrix, but unlike “queer”, “lesbian” only designates those people whose current politics and gender performance grew and grow out of a female positioning within that matrix. Lesbians are not (in any simple sense) women, but neither can people, who have never (been) identified as women and who have never experienced sexism at all, identify as lesbians. It is this tenuous and difficult connection to the category “women” that differentiates lesbians from queer people more generally. And it is also this tenuous and difficult connection to the term “women” that distinguishes the term “lesbian” as a helpful term that makes it possible to name and speak about the effects of sexism on some queer people – and not on others – as well as about the effects of sexism within queer circles themselves.

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