

***‘Are You a Boy or
a Girl?’:
(Hetero)sexism
and Verbal
Hostility***

GAIL MASON

This paper considers the phenomenon of verbal hostility directed toward lesbian women on the basis of their sexuality. First, I will consider the characteristics of such hostility and the meanings placed upon it by lesbian subjects. Second, I will locate this form of hostility within the mechanisms of disciplinary power exercised in the regulation of sexuality.

During 1993 and 1994 I conducted a series of interviews with seventy-three women in the State of Victoria who identify as gay or lesbian. Most interviews were held with participants on their own; however, some have been with two or three women together. In three instances I arranged large group discussions where approximately eight women participated.

Some background on the research participants: they range in age from 14 to 57 at the time of interview. They live in various parts of Victoria, including Melbourne, outer lying suburbs of Melbourne, provincial towns and some small rural areas. It is fair to say that participants are widely distributed across socioeconomic boundaries, perhaps with the exception of the very rich. Most have an Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic background, but approximately 20 per cent of participants are migrants to Australia and a number identify with a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds including Greek, Dutch, Chinese, Anglo-Indian and Israeli.

Over time the focus of my interviews has changed and gradually refined, but generally interviews have centred on experiences and perceptions of (hetero)sexism—particularly hostility, abuse, harassment and violence which participants believe is due to their sexual preference. I am using the word (hetero)sexism here to denote an ideological system which denies, denigrates or

stigmatises any non-heterosexual behaviour or lifestyle (Herek 1990).¹ The word homophobia is more familiar and is often used to denote the same phenomena.

As I have been listening, transcribing and analysing these interview recordings over the last twelve months I have watched the size of the file labelled 'Verbal Hostility' gradually expand in size. It is now only second in size to the file of interview excerpts labelled 'Invisibility'. Whilst I had expected to collect extensive interview material on questions of invisibility (anyone who has knowledge of this field would not be surprised by the size of the invisibility file) I had not expected to find such pervasive experiences of verbal hostility. I had not anticipated how often I would hear stories of lesbian/gay women being verbally abused or harassed on the streets, at work and in their homes. Nor did I expect to be told by so many women about their fear of anti-lesbian verbal hostility, the threat it represents and the strategies they employ on many levels to avoid it.

Of course, there was no reason for me to be surprised by the extent of verbal abuse experienced by lesbian women. The final report of the GLAD (Gay Men and Lesbians Against Discrimination) survey into discrimination and violence against lesbians and gay men, published this year, has attempted to measure the actual levels of discrimination and violence. This study, which surveyed over 1000 gay men and lesbians in Victoria, found that 70 per cent of lesbians and 64 per cent of gay men report experiences of verbal abuse in a public place because of their presumed homosexuality; 36 per cent of lesbians and 39 per cent of gay men report threats of violence in public because of their presumed homosexuality; and 11 per cent of lesbians and 20 per cent of gay men report actual physical violence in public because of their presumed homosexuality (Gay Men and Lesbians Against Discrimination 1994).

There has also been substantial research undertaken in the United States which suggests levels of public verbal abuse close to 80 per cent—depending on factors such as the construction of the survey and the region it which it was distributed (Herek & Berrill 1990). One of the limitations of the GLAD research (and of most overseas research) is that the survey only includes questions about violence and abuse in public places, yet hostility within the family has been shown in overseas studies to be a problem. However, it is just such 'public' experiences that I wish to focus on in this paper.² When I first began this research I assumed that verbal abuse was relevant but really only a minor player with little significance in an overall picture of more overt forms of discrimination and physical violence. However, I no longer subscribe to this view. After listening to the experiences and understandings of research participants I have come to see verbal abuse as an insidious, pervasive and very powerful strategy of regulation.

My use of the phrase 'verbal hostility' or 'verbal abuse' refers to comments made, words called out, things said which are interpreted by the intended

¹ I have chosen to bracket the 'hetero' element of this word in order to highlight the intrinsic sexism which is at play in acts of hostility directed towards lesbian women.

² I do not use the word 'public' unproblematically and have written elsewhere on the incoherence of the public/private dichotomy, particularly in relation to lesbian experience. *See* Gail Mason (1995).

recipient as offensive, derogatory, insulting, intimidating or threatening in some way. Of course the intention of the person speaking does not necessarily match the recipient's interpretation of it and certainly not all comments are read by recipients as abusive. Some may simply be annoying or others may be laughed at for being stupid, pointless or pathetic. However, some comments which may seem quite mild in comparison can have a strong negative impact upon individual women.

Some Examples of Public-Related Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse and hostility can take place in any environment and often the most mundane of activities can be affected by it:

Sharon: We'd go down the local shops and the bad boys would be hanging out there . . . there were young boys hanging around a certain supermarket, you know outside. You'd have to walk through these—walk the gauntlet. So there'd be comments . . . They called us 'Lesos!'. Yeah it was threatening because it was a group.

Dimitra operates a second-hand furniture store in Melbourne and her experiences reveal how verbal abuse can take place in a work environment and yet still be quite public. On the door of her shop she has a sign which says 'No homophobes. No misogynists.' She states that she put the sign up because of 'bad experiences'. When asked about these experiences she recalls:

Dimitra: Well, yobbos. . . They used to come and buy because it was so cheap . . . But it was rude and when they'd drive past they used to call out 'Leso!' They'd call out 'Leso!' or 'Look at that c-u-n-t with a couch on its head!' I'll never forget that one.

Of course, abuse may be written rather than oral:

Dimitra: I've had 'Leso' smeared on my door . . . Smeared with a pie or something like that. Mouthfuls spat on the door and things thrown on the door so I'm forever cleaning it.

Experiences of hostility from neighbours is not unusual, and may present the recipient with a conflicting mix of abuse which is so idiotic it is laughable, but which can be threatening at the same time:

Monica: I mean like we had neighbours across the road and there were five boys or something ranging from fifteen down, and you'd walk out to the car and you'd get them screaming 'Leso! Leso! Come root me grandmother!' . . . and you know you're always of the opinion are they're gonna do something, that's the thing once they come out with things like that.

The football, a popular Victorian pastime, came across in interviews as a common site of verbal abuse for those lesbian women who find themselves crossing the boundaries of visibility, even if unintentionally. For example, Sue found the following situation disquieting and uncomfortable:

Sue: We went to the footy. Just sitting at the footy. I don't know who was playing, Essendon and Collingwood, it didn't really matter. Sitting together, rug on both of our knees, that was as close as we were. And this guy a row in front of us was obviously intoxicated and he was a young guy and turned around, like there was obviously nothing going on with the football, and [he goes] 'Dirty, dirty lesos'. And it was really, like I was just here to watch the football, I don't need this, we weren't even being lesos. It became, it went on and on and that was just real uncomfortable . . . I'm sure had we been in the street alone it may have been different . . . He may well have been, taken it further, or followed us, you just don't know. That's what is so fearful, you don't know how far it will go.

The following example gives some idea of the ways in which verbal abuse and physical violence may be closely intertwined and represent an acute disturbance to a woman's physical and emotional safety. Catherine, who worked for a major international environmental organisation, narrates her experiences following the disclosure of her sexuality to workmates some weeks earlier. Referring to a work party held at her house she says that:

Catherine: By 3.00 in the morning I was the only woman in the house . . . Greg brought three friends with him, one of them came up to me, he asked me out and I turned him down and he was really quite okay about it. I didn't think twice about it . . . about half an hour later he came back and was saying to me, 'Oh my mate tells me you're gay and I wanna do something about it'. And all you need is a good fuck kind of thing. And he was drunk but not staggering kind of drunk, but he was pretty drunk . . . and he attempted to rape me, it was pretty clear cut attempted rape. By which point I managed to get him off and get out of there . . . [When Catherine went back to work] by the end of the next day it was public knowledge what had happened at that party . . . and then within a week of that party I started to get harassing phone calls at home. 'I know where you live, I'm gonna get you.' This person knew I was a lesbian, knew I worked with xxxx, knew what hours I worked . . . the phone calls were of a sexual nature and as time went on they became more explicit . . . they were really threatening . . . and the calls centred around my sexuality. And by this stage I was getting one of these calls every night.

The level of imagination generally used in verbal taunts and insults is certainly not high. I have drawn out two themes which are apparent from the words that are used. The first and most popular term used is, not surprisingly, 'Leso'. Teenage boys and girls seem to have developed a virtual profusion of different ways to say the word 'leso'. But all have the apparent underlying assumption that the mere identification of and speaking of the word represents an insult in itself.

Some of the most common adjectives used in this cultural marking of lesbians are 'dirty' and 'butch'. It is difficult not to associate the word dirty with misogynist constructions of women's bodies as unclean. Thus the etching of the lesbian as dirty is not just a cue for the supposed unnatural character of same-sex desire and sex but also for the construction of women's bodies as unhygienic. The frequency with which the phrase 'dirty' is coupled with the phrase 'leso' seems to signify a distaste for women's bodies and an abhorrence of sexual activity which does not revolve around masculinist notions of phallic pleasure.

The use of 'butch' as an insult represents an attempt to highlight the supposedly masculine nature of the lesbian. An assumption which is already contained within the (hetero)sexist construction of the concept of lesbian, but which is further reinforced through the 'butch' adjective.

Talking of her ex-husband one participant recalled:

Sharon: It's just in the last month that he's really harassed me about my sexuality. Screaming at me in the street, calling me a butch lesbian . . . He's used my sexuality to retaliate. Which is a typical kind of response, I mean the homophobic response.

A second interesting theme to emerge very strongly from an examination of the type of abuse taking place is what I have called the sex/gender perplexity. A common example would be the 'Are you a girl or a boy?' type question; usually made when the person speaking is quite certain that he/she is speaking to a woman, but not of the type which they find acceptable. Consider the following examples:

Lesley: In a supermarket on New Year's Eve . . . it was about 5.00 and we'd gone up, [with] the children . . . to do some shopping, and were walking around the supermarket and there was a woman with her partner and her children . . . and she walked past me and said [loudly] to her boyfriend, 'Is that a girl or a boy?' And so I just ignored that, and so I passed them again in the supermarket and then . . . [about me] they made a comment about, you know, said 'What is it?'

Kim: It was about four in the morning, a bad time, Carlton Gardens, and we were walking back and a car load of probably about five boys, probably about 19, with P plates roared out of the Carlton Gardens and started, 'Hey are you a boy or a girl? Are you a boy or a girl?' And then when they realised that we were both women and that we were together it was all, 'Can you kiss for us, go on let's see you kiss, go on, go on!'

Maria: We were walking from the Southbank to Collins Street, the Paris end of Collins Street and there was a [stream] of remarks . . . guys just going after us. And I stopped, probably about six times . . . We had our arms around each other . . . Often they'd [try to] figure out who was the boy and who was the girl, 'Oh my god, they're both girls!'

Of course, there is also the occasional AIDS-phobic comments which might be thrown in with other abuse, such as 'I hope you all die of AIDS'. This sort of comment rarely seems directed to lesbians on its own and is usually accompanied by various other comments—as are most of these forms of verbal abuse.

The Multiple Subject

One of the important things to note about verbal abuse is not just the character of the words that are used, but the fact that, like other forms of violence or hostility, it cannot be neatly classified into discrete categories. Neat discrete categories may be perfect for simple analysis, but unfortunately they frequently fail to match the reality of many women's lives.

For example, there were some rare instances where research participants believed that it was their sexual preference, and sexual preference alone, which caused them to be the target of the abuse. But many lesbian women seem less able to isolate hostile reactions to them as stemming merely from their sexuality. Thus, participants commented that at times they were unable to tell if they are being hassled because they were women or because they were lesbian:

Sarah: There's one that yelled out to me 'Are you a woman or are you a man?' So that could have been directed at my sexuality, I'm not actually sure . . . Like I think he knew I was a woman because I don't think he would shout that to a man.

Yet it is futile in many situations for lesbians to attempt to isolate the anti-woman sentiment from the anti-homosexual sentiment. The 'double' positioning of the lesbian as homosexual and as woman means that she occupies a distinctive place within a (hetero)sexist culture. The lesbian signifier does not denote homosexuality alone, it combines femaleness and homosexuality within the one sign. It is not that lesbians can never separate out the fragments of their multiple subjectivities but rather that reactions to homosexuality are shaped by the individual bodies upon which the labels of sexuality have been placed; and such bodies are invariably sexed bodies. Thus much anti-lesbian hostility represents a network of inter-related prejudices which cannot necessarily be separated into discrete categories of sex, gender or sexuality.

But, of course, such an interpretation is limited in itself because individuals are not merely sexed, we are also culturally positioned according to categories of ethnicity and race. If you are white or an Anglo-Celtic lesbian woman you have the privilege to locate the apparent source of hostility towards you in your sexuality and/or your sex; that is, stemming from discourses of (hetero)sexism and misogyny. Yet some of the lesbian women I have interviewed who are not from this hegemonic white/Anglo background, had something else to say. These women have suggested that the way in which they are perceived by the dominant Anglo heterosexual community is not simply as a woman who is a homosexual. If I can simplify what these research participants have said to me, it is that when they experience verbal abuse it is likely to be not just a simple reaction to their perceived homosexuality, nor to their presence as a homosexual woman, but rather as a Chinese or a Greek homosexual woman for example.

Sucheng: It's very hard in some ways 'cause it's quite clear for white women . . . but when you're a person of colour you sometimes wonder whether you're getting hassled because you're a person of colour or because of your sexuality. And sometimes they're both. So it's quite hard to pull them apart sometimes.

When I get harassed on the streets I can't say that it's because I'm a lesbian, I do know that it's because I'm Chinese as well as a lesbian as well as a woman.
(Excerpt from an interview with members of *Internesbian*, a multicultural lesbian group based in Melbourne. See Neville 1993, p. 14).

In many situations the multiple character of identity and subjectivity means that we experience and interpret abuse in relation to a complex interplay between the various fragments of our self. (Hetero)sexism and its hostility is always

racially and ethnically located, either through the privileges brought by a white/Anglo-Celtic positionality or through the absence of such for lesbians situated according to racially and ethnically marginalised categories. Aspects of the self can certainly be separated and experienced in different ways at different times, but they cannot necessarily be separated into neat categories which bear no relationship to each other.

Knowledge of the Imaginable: The Impact of Verbal Abuse

When looking at the lives of the women who have participated in this research it is fair to say that the impact of verbal abuse is widespread, both upon actual and potential recipients. Circumstances such as time of day, who you are with, sex of the person making the comment, and the tone in which it is said can make all the difference as to how threatening it is or how seriously it is taken.

As I have indicated some comments are merely laughed off. Others, however, are interpreted as direct threats, as signifiers of potential physical violence, as downright offensive and invasive, or as humiliating situations to be avoided at all costs. For some lesbian women verbal abuse operates as a reminder of the threat of violence. For example, a number of participants stated that there are certain areas in Melbourne where they would hold hands with a lover, but others where they would never hold hands or show intimacy with another woman. Situations and locations are critically assessed and judged for the risk they present. This is a strategy which most participants said they do both constantly and consciously. One woman commented:

Sarah: If you don't, you just leave yourself open to it . . . [it's] mostly men, mostly men who I look out for. That's who I feel the most threatened by. But I feel personally threatened by men as a woman and I feel being a lesbian is a double threat and I feel doubly threatened.

Another woman felt that the threat of verbal and physical abuse is ever-present:

Amanda: I'm always thinking about it when we're out. I look out all the time, before we kiss or something . . . If I want to be affectionate in public it's really difficult . . . A simple thing like going to the movies and seeing like a romantic movie or a sexual movie and you feel affectionate towards each other or whatever. You're just limited to do anything. Because I 'spose for me the fear behind that is that of bashings or verbal abuse. And in the shopping centre and that too . . . Like sometimes you want to hold hands, really simple things. But you can't do that. And I don't know if it's just my frustrations. I was thinking the other day, what if I just do it anyway? There's still that fear that people will verbally abuse and it won't be okay.

Another woman who has been very public about her sexuality in newspapers, at work and with her family, commented that:

Jackie: I've always been more concerned for my personal safety than anything else with coming out issues. You know, never worried about the repercussions within work or within the union or anything like that, or even worried about my family.

Hostility, Visibility and Regulation

Verbal hostility, and indeed physical violence, do not operate as an attempt to forbid or prevent lesbian sexuality but rather to circumscribe its public expression. Verbal hostility is one strategy in a network of power relations, operating from innumerable points, which do not prohibit peripheral sexualities, but which attempt to delineate the acceptable boundaries within which such sexuality can be expressed.

Thus verbal hostility can be contextualised within the broader mechanisms operating in the regulation of lesbian sexuality. For example, it is informative to look briefly at the legal constitution of the lesbian subject. Within modern legal history sex between women, unlike sex between men, has never been specifically criminalised in either Australia or England. A now infamous attempt was made in 1921 in England to outlaw homosexual behaviour among women, but the relevant amendment was rejected by the House of Lords. It is their reasoning which is so interesting. For example, in arguing against the amendment to outlaw homo-sex between women, Lord Desart declared:

You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamed of it. I think that is a very great mischief (Lord Desart, House of Lords, 1921, cited in Jeffrey Weeks (1990, pp. 106-7).

Clearly, their Lordship's strategy for minimising the perceived danger of lesbian sexuality was not through a process of legal prohibition but through a more formidable and effective manoeuvre, namely, the refusal to allow public recognition of the very existence of lesbian sexuality; to keep the knowledge of such sexuality confined to the emerging scientific and psychiatric disciplines of the day.

Like their historical counterparts the Australian judiciary and legislature have shown a similar proclivity for insisting upon a profound privatisation of lesbian sexuality. For example, Jenni Millbank has shown how lesbian women face discrimination when applying through the courts for legal custody of their children. Whilst a lesbian relationship is not of itself a disorienting factor Millbank has highlighted how judicial distinctions are drawn between lesbian parents who are 'private' and those who 'flaunt' their sexual identity. She concludes that it is in the interests of lesbians to be 'discreet' and to conform to sex role expectation, as 'overt' lesbian behaviour runs the very high risk of jeopardising a custody application (Millbank 1992). This judicial preference for maintenance of a public charade through the insistence on lesbian invisibility is neatly exemplified in the following comments in a successful custody hearing in the Family Court:

Neither the wife nor Miss Y. are obvious homosexuals. Both dress in a pleasant and appropriate fashion and neither gave me the impression that they flaunted their homosexual relationship or went out of their way to communicate to the world at large that they were homosexuals living in a homosexual relationship (Baker, J. *In the Marriage of L and L* (1983) FLC 91-353 at 73 365).

In contrast to male homosexuality, the primary pattern of lesbian subjugation has been not through the juridico-political structures of western culture, but rather through the exercise of what Foucault calls, local disciplinary powers, powers of normalisation (Foucault 1977). Such normative mechanisms have constructed the lesbian as a distinct aberrant category of person, but one that remains hidden from public view. In this way she is marginalised and shrouded in stigma and myth.

Thus it is the trope of the lesbian as an undesirable body marked by mannish tendencies and failed femininity which has characterised her minimal presence in dominant discourse. Until very recently this has been her only public persona, a vilified image which remains obscured yet suspected to be lurking in the murky perimeters of peripheral and dangerous sexualities. The contradiction embodied in the category of lesbian is that whilst she may be obliquely present within discourse as an 'abiding falsehood' she is concurrently excluded from dominant discourse as a visible or knowable subject. Judith Butler refers to those who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law as 'abject': unviable (un)subjects. She asserts that, 'Here oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability. Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable' (Butler 1991).

To conclude, it is apparent that lesbians are culturally marked, yet rendered simultaneously invisible within a (hetero)sexist culture. Verbal hostility epitomises the manner in which lesbians are marked within the public sphere yet disciplined into believing and acting as if they should not be there, into regulating their own behaviour so that they remain unseeable. This final comment from a research participant exemplifies this understanding:

Lyn: Because whatever is behind that comment you know there is some kind of maliciousness behind it . . . It doesn't make me feel bad it makes me feel discriminated against. It makes me aware of where I stand with other people in society. That I'm going to be, I'm going to be maybe pointed out, and tried to be the subject of someone's smart comment or humiliation and that's what they want to do. I find it threatening in that way. I mean I don't feel ashamed but I feel threatened . . . I mean you can be just . . . doing a common thing, walking down the street or you're in the market place and then all of a sudden this, this, ugly thing can crop up from nowhere and remind you of what you are, what you are . . . It says something about your sense of freedom in a so called free place, in a free society.

References

- Butler, J. 1991, 'Imitation and gender insubordination', in *Inside/Out*, ed. Diana Fuss, Routledge, New York.
- Foucault, M. 1977, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

- Gay Men and Lesbians Against Discrimination (GLAD) 1994, *Not A Day Goes By: Report on the GLAD Survey into Discrimination and Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men in Victoria*, Gay Men and Lesbians Against Discrimination, Melbourne.
- Herek, G. 1990, 'Notes on cultural and psychological heterosexism', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 316-33.
- Herek, G. & Berrill, K. (eds) 1990, 'Violence against lesbians and gay men: Issues for research, practice and policy', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 5, no. 3.
- Mason, G. 1995, '(Out)Laws: Acts of proscription in the sexual order' in *Fragile Frontiers: Feminist Debates Around Public and Private*, ed. Margaret Thornton, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Millbank, J. 1992, 'Lesbian mothers, gay fathers: Sameness and difference', *Australian Gay and Lesbian Law Journal*, vol. 2, no. 23.
- Neville, K. 1993, '"Internesbian" rebellious: Fear of a female planet', Women's edition of *Rabelais*, La Trobe University.
- Weeks, J. 1990, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, Quartet Books, London.