

Opposite

GAY MEN ON LESBIANS, LESBIANS ON GAY MEN

Sex

Edited by

Sara Miles and

Eric Rofes



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Contents

Introduction	1
SARA MILES AND ERIC ROFES	
"Jackie" and "Lee, the Boy"	6
PHOTOS BY DELLA GRACE	
1 Blackbeard Lost	8
LINNEA DUE	
2 GM ISO (m)other: A Gay Boy in the World of Lesbian Personals	15
FRANCISCO J. GONZALEZ	
3 Passage	37
SANDRA LEE GOLVIN	
4 The Ick Factor: Flesh, Fluids, and Cross-Gender Revulsion	44
ERIC ROFES	

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The Ick Factor: Flesh, Fluids, and Cross-Gender Revulsion

Eric Rofes

I meet two lesbian friends for lunch at an outdoor café on Castro Street. After salads and sandwiches and a lengthy conversation, we walk through the neighborhood; I run into another friend and start talking. The women start necking—right on the street. Out of the corner of my eye, I see one wrap her arm around the other, pull her lover's face up to meet her own, and kiss, at first quickly and casually and then more slowly and deeply. Although I never look directly at the women, my breath begins to shorten and my stomach quivers. As they make out, I can't deny I feel a little sick.

I am at the movies watching *Personal Best* or *Go Fish*, depending on the year. I'm interested in representations of lesbians in the media, but whenever (limited) lesbian sex appears on the screen, I notice a familiar reaction. I can watch hugging and kissing with

no problem, but when bodies appear naked, when hints of certain body parts (breasts and cunts), activities (cunnilingus, fingering, breast kissing or biting) or fluids (sweat, saliva) appear, I look away from the screen, feel queasy, and cautiously glance back to the film, anxiously hoping for a sudden shift in the scene.

A group of male friends and I are vacationing in Provincetown and drive to Herring Cove Beach for a day in the sun. We plan to sit in the gay guys' section but first must trudge through acres of lesbians who are reading books, playing paddle ball, or sitting in circles talking. Many have taken off the tops of their bathing suits. I'm never sure of the etiquette here: Is it OK to look directly at breasts, or is this too traditionally male? I find myself alternately grossed out and transfixed by the women. My eyes dart from the women's tits to the sand, to the tits, to their faces, to the sand. My forehead gets clammy. I see all kinds of breasts, all kinds of women's bodies—different sizes and colors, some smooth and some hairy, some dry and some sweaty. When we finally walk beyond the women's section and male torsos appear, my breath eases, my skin stops sweating, and my heart stops racing.

I am a gay man with long-term friendships with lesbians and a strong commitment to supporting lesbian culture. Yet I'm one of many gay men who share what I call "the ick factor"—a visceral response ranging from dislike to disgust when confronted with lesbian sex and bodies. Over almost twenty-five years of involvement in gay male cultures, I've witnessed many men express their revulsion at lesbian sex and women's bodies. I've

heard countless “tuna” jokes, seen men’s faces turn sour when lesbian sex appears in movies, and watched gay men huddle together in small groups voicing disgust at topless women in political demonstrations. Recently when a sexualized, naked woman appeared on-screen in a gay male porn flick showing in the Castro, men started hooting and yelling “fish” comments. The man in front of me turned to his friend and whispered loudly, “Gross me out!”

Though often unacknowledged and unexamined, the ick factor may be at the heart of many gay men’s inability to take women seriously, support lesbian concerns, or develop meaningful relationships with women. By examining the ick factor in this essay, I hope to grapple with some of the key barriers that keep gay men from deeper relationships with lesbians and gain a greater understanding of some of the ways in which an array of social and cultural power dynamics become mapped onto the body, its activities, and its functions.

Although I can recall “icky” feelings about girls’ and women’s bodies since my childhood, it was only recently that I began to confront them directly. For the last five years, a lesbian friend and colleague and I have convened a workshop called “The Ick Factor” at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s annual Creating Change conference.¹ The workshop was conceived as an opportunity for lesbians and gay men to talk about sex across gender lines and to discuss all kinds of cross-gender curiosity and revulsion. It opened my eyes to the wide range of responses that lesbians and gay men have to each other’s sexualities, sexual practices, and sex cultures. It also provided me with numerous

opportunities to talk with other gay men about the ick factor, to learn about their experiences and thoughts, and to begin to work through some of these things.

The workshop is often standing room only, with women and men packed together in a hotel meeting room, sitting braced with anticipation. Over the years, a range of perspectives have surfaced during these discussions, but the workshop has always been a place where gay men have been able to examine publicly their “ick.” One year a man talked at length about his becoming nauseated at the idea of two lesbians “eating each other out,” yet he seemed obsessed with describing the event he supposedly found revolting. Another spoke about his inability to become physically close to lesbians because of the odors he believed their bodies emitted. Once a gay man confessed to me after the workshop that he enjoyed having sex with lesbians as long as he could avoid their genitals, which made him ill. As he talked about being fucked by women wearing strap-on dildos or anally penetrating lesbians, I detected a mixture of excitement and disgust in his voice, which pretty much matched my own feelings.

I’ve come to believe that gay men can be divided into three groups, of approximately the same size: those who find the lesbian body erotic, those who have no feelings about it at all, and those who experience “the ick.” Many gay men appreciate women’s bodies and experience no feelings of disgust when confronted with lesbian sex. Some find women’s bodies sexually attractive, and a few men who spoke at the conference workshop confessed to being turned on to women’s having sex with women. Still other gay-identified men enjoy sex with women (including

women who identify themselves as lesbians), raising familiar debates about bisexual identity and practice. Yet significant numbers of gay men at the workshops and outside, in the social worlds I inhabit, have talked about experiencing some kind of “ick,” although their particular triggers for revulsion and responses to specific sexual acts fit no single pattern.

Conversations with lesbians have led me to believe that even though some lesbians share a parallel range of ick responses, the sources of their ick and the sociopolitical issues surrounding it may be different. Many lesbians explain their disgust with penises, sperm, man-to-man rimming and fisting, and other activities as rooted in their experiences of violence, rape, incest, and childhood sexual assault perpetrated by men or boys. In the five years that I participated in open discussions on this topic at queer conferences, not a single gay man attributed his ick factor to violence perpetrated by women or girls.

Gay Men and Lesbian Sex

Lesbians are constantly confronted with issues, images, and experiences focused on gay male sexuality. Most lesbian and gay periodicals contain pages filled with graphic advertisements marketing gay phone-sex lines, hustlers and masseurs, sex toys, festivals, and cruises. Marches on Washington and pride parades teem with brazenly sexual men—ranging from muscle-boy clones who gleefully rip off their shirts at the drop of a hat; to leather men in harnesses, dog collars, and leashes; to a range of

community groups (ranging from Black and White Men Together to the Bear clubs) organized around specific erotic fetishism.

Yet most gay men rarely see, hear about, or politically confront anything having to do with lesbian sex. In fact, the many gay men who have no lesbian friends, do not go to the few lesbian films that appear in movie houses, and don't read lesbian-focused publications may never formally confront lesbians as sexual beings at all.

Annual lesbian and gay pride parades, “dyke marches,” and the infrequent gay and lesbian marches on Washington have become primary sites for gay men's confrontation with women's bodies and lesbian sexuality. The responses to bare-breasted lesbians, bawdy dyke humor, and public representations of lesbian sex, though diverse and uneven, occur primarily through informal channels—comments and asides in all-male settings or grumbling in the ranks of march organizing committees. Such responses occasionally find their way into America's “queer public sphere”—the letters to the editor pages of the gay press—and increasingly into the mainstream media.²

Boston's pride parade in 1996 evoked such a response. What one newspaper described as “a guerrilla theater rolling bed on which topless women simulated sex”³ ignited a firestorm of debate in the days following the parade, including a lead editorial in the local gay paper entitled “Gross Stupidity at a Great Parade.”⁴ The gay male editor of that local gay paper claimed he'd “received more angry phone calls and letters—from conservatives and progressives—regarding these incidents than any other

event in the last eight years.” Nonetheless, for three sentences, his editorial focused on an unidentified male flasher (dismissed as “an aberration” who “forgot his medication”), and for three vitriolic paragraphs, he concentrated on the Lesbian Avengers who staged the acts on the moving bed. At a town meeting to discuss the controversy, a member of the dyke march committee astutely stated:

It’s interesting that the year that the lesbians decided to be relatively sexual, out in the open, there’s been so much controversy. And yet for years upon years men have been humping each other without a whimper or cry being heard from the public. If this isn’t blatant sexism, I don’t know what is.⁵

Blatant sexism, yes, but I argue that the level of outrage concerning this incident illustrates a dynamic more complex than simple sexism. A gay Republican activist dubbed the act “extreme behavior” and “unhelpful, dumb, and silly,” and a local gay male activist decried the “small group of obnoxious women pushing a bed in the parade, with their only goal to offend” and insisted that the “jerk on stilts who kept exposing himself” was “not as offensive” as the lesbians who simply simulated sexual behavior and did not expose their genitals.

I have rarely seen sexualized gay male interactions at pride events or marches on Washington described in such terms except in far-right propaganda videotapes. But gay male sexuality in public spaces is more common than lesbian sexuality in public spaces. During pride marches and festivals, it’s common to see men dancing together, with one’s chest against the other’s back, crotch against butt, in acts of simulated butt fucking. When I

have witnessed such spectacles—and when I have participated in them myself—they have been considered wild or risqué, celebrations of male erotic energy, freedom, and love. I have never heard critical comments from lesbians or gay men or seen letters to the editor in gay newspapers following such activities.

At the core, this observation is about much more than a sexist distinction between who gets away with performing antics and who doesn’t. It is about the revulsion many gay men feel at the sight of women’s breasts, women eating each other out, and women as self-defined sexual beings and the tremendous threat this poses to the patriarchal status quo. It’s about many men’s power, access, and resources to channel that revulsion and fear into newspaper text, punitive legal responses, and political action.

Theorizing Revulsion

As social practice, revulsion is commonly considered to be a physiological response triggered by a particular causative agent, almost in the way that an allergy is triggered by a specific allergen. I might explain that witnessing medical operations “makes me sick” or that the sight of blood causes me to faint.

When specific sexual practices are identified as evoking revulsion, we articulate this response as a matter of “taste” and frequently probe no further. The French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu suggests that disgust merits deconstruction and that what many naturalize as “good taste” emerges out of powerful social, economic, and cultural processes.

Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ("sick-making") of the tastes of others. . . . Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent.

When gay men are confronted with the assumption that our homosexuality is rooted in our dislike for women, we often answer that male homosexuality has nothing to do with women—it's about loving men. Our reaction to women's bodies, however, suggests otherwise. An image of a single, naked female body with exposed breasts and genitals may simultaneously fascinate and repulse me. Add a second female nude and make the image sexual (cunnilingus, for example, or even simply kissing), and my revulsion intensifies while the fascination wanes. But make this an image of a naked female and a naked man engaged in some sexual activity, and the revulsion subsides significantly and the fascination increases.

Does the addition of a body that's gendered male distract my gaze and hence diminish the ick? Or does the disgust ease because the presence of a man frames female body parts in more traditional ways that appear less upsetting to me? Might my disgust simply be a historically rooted resistance to the centerfold nudes pushed before my face as I huddled in dark corners with boyhood friends? Or is there something threatening about naked, sexualized images of women's bodies that are not in a discursive relationship to male bodies?

Of course, my fear and disgust with women's bodies may also be the way I channel a larger fear of sex, of male bodies, of my own holes and fluids. It seems easier to project revulsion onto the female than to confront it in relation to the male. At sex clubs, I might gaze in horror and fascination at a male forearm protruding from a man's ass, but there are no spaces in which I verbalize that disgust. Perhaps the implication of this revulsion for my identity is more than I can handle.

Male homosexuality and gay male identity might be best understood as terms that simplistically reduce a variety of complex constructions of masculinity and strategies of sexual/social practice to one common term. Searches for "the cause" of homosexuality may be misguided not only because they biologize, geneticize, or psychologize identities that are socially and culturally constructed but also because they draw together, unite, and reduce practices that are distinct and independently generated. Perhaps the only commonality among homosexualities as social practices is that the term has come to signify the presence of erotic relations focused on one's own gender and the absence of relations with the other gender.

Bourdieu's insistence that all determination is negation and all tastes are distastes raises a number of questions about categories and classifications of sexual "preference." Is monosexuality as evidenced in the practices of heterosexuality and homosexuality an aesthetic of intolerance? Does my comfort in an arm gendered male, a face marked with a beard, and genitalia containing dick and balls contain negation? When Bourdieu writes that "taste is what brings together things and people that go together" (p. 241),

might he mean that a disgust for cunt draws men together into a gay community?⁶ Do heterosexual and homosexual men share in misogyny, with one group disgusted by cunts and the other feeling (mostly) attraction? Is the only difference between heterosexual men and homosexual men the body part chosen as object of visceral horror?

The sense of distinction, the *discretio* (discrimination) which demands that certain things be brought together and others kept apart, which excludes all misalliances and all unnatural unions—i.e., all unions contrary to the common classification, the *diacrisis* (separation) which is the basis of collective and individual identity—responds with visceral, murderous horror, absolute disgust, metaphysical fury, to everything which lies in Plato's "hybrid zone," everything which passes understanding, that is, the embodied taxonomy, which, by challenging the principles of the incarnate social order, especially the socially constituted principles of the sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour, violates the mental order, scandalously flouting common sense.⁷

Perhaps disgust itself is a social practice that serves to draw a line around a population and hold it separate from others. Could my revulsion at lesbian sex function as an everyday practice of naming myself a homosexual to myself and others? When gay men tell "fish jokes," are we engaged in a process of alliance building, hierarchization, and communal classification constructed around a gendered sexual orientation?

Sister/Woman/Sister and Endless Waterfalls

When people argue that disgust at female sexuality is inextricably linked to misogyny, I immediately want to argue otherwise.

Yet I have come to believe the ick factor is impervious to ideology; it's so deeply inscribed in some men's bodies and minds that a dose or two of feminism has little impact. My own experience offers clues to why the ick factor has implications beyond everyday social practice and why, despite being steeped in feminism and inculcated in antisexist politics, disgust with women's sexuality may persist in gay men.

I came out as a gay man during the 1970s. While my social life was primarily situated in sexualized gay male spaces of the period (discos, bars, and sex clubs), my political life was based in the *Gay Community News* collective, a leftist, cogender group of activists/journalists that was a site of self-conscious struggle and debate about gender, race, and class. My alliances with lesbians at the newspaper and my emerging commitment to cogender community brought me into close contact with Boston's burgeoning women's culture of that period.

For a decade, I regularly attended women's music concerts, feminist bookstores, and activist events focused on women's issues. I eagerly awaited books published by feminist presses, read women's newspapers and feminist theory, and volunteered to provide child care at lesbian cultural events and a local shelter for battered women. My stereo played records ranging from early Village People to Alix Dobkin, Mary Watkins, and Meg Christian. Lyrics from Holly Near's *Sister/Woman/Sister* might filter through my head during a trip to the Mineshaft. For a while, my favorite background music for sex was Cris Williamson's *Waterfall*, with its powerful woman-centered erotic lyrics about "filling up" and "spilling over."

For a brief time, I regarded myself as one of the gay male “lesbian wannabes” of this period, a small subculture of gay men who developed a deep envy of lesbian–feminist culture. We wore loose-fitting shirts, drawstring pants, and Birkenstocks. We tried to produce male counterparts to the evolving women’s culture: men’s music albums, men’s rural gatherings, resource centers for “changing men.” Yet our efforts had limited appeal to most gay men, who were busily engaged in building sexualized urban cultures of highly charged, hypermasculine images. My immersion in gay male sex cultures of the period—and particularly the men’s-only leather scene on the East Coast—soon moderated any lesbian envy I may have felt. What does it mean that a key cultural thread weaving its way through my emerging identity was “womyn centered”? How did this relate to my queasiness around women’s bodies and my emerging awareness of my visceral distaste for women’s sexuality? I could spend hours flipping through the catalog for Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, admiring the vaginal imagery central to each place setting, but the thought of real-live cunt would turn my stomach. I’d sixty-nine my boyfriend while Cris Williamson’s *Waterfall* would fill up and spill over, but walking in on lesbian roommates engaged in cunnilingus would make me become faint and I’d have to lie down.

Except on rare, awkward occasions, my tour through women’s cultures of the period did not powerfully confront me with women’s sexuality. In retrospect, the sites and texts I was able to access—women’s music concerts, activist publications, feminist poetry and novels—privileged a lesbian–feminist political cul-

ture that de-emphasized the explicitly sexual. I’d see women holding hands and hugging, hear song lyrics that only obliquely referenced the erotic, and read lesbian fiction that, with rare exceptions, provided a romanticized and sanitized vision of sex between women. Before the lesbian sex wars raged and challenged hegemonic utopian visions of sexuality in women’s culture, the vision of women’s culture I witnessed (overwhelmingly white, middle class, and Protestant) was dominated by “womyn-loving-womyn” and was rarely troubled by matters such as dildos, handcuffs, power exchanges, or promiscuity.⁸

In contrast, I recall directly confronting women’s bodies and sexuality when a dyke couple visited my small, summer rental in Provincetown as weekend houseguests. The women seemed to spend hours lolling around naked, entwined on the floor of the small shower, or walking around the apartment topless. I felt queasy.

That hot summer, it seemed fair for friends of any gender to be as comfortable as they’d like in the privacy of my steamy, un-air-conditioned home. Yet why didn’t it also seem fair for me to express my visceral reaction? The fragile linkages between lesbians and gay men during this period made me cautious—few relationships of the time seemed to survive intellectual disagreement, social offenses, or political errors.

Perhaps more significantly, my own discomfort with my body at the time did not allow me to express myself easily—I rarely went shirtless, even at home. During these years when gay (white) men were constructing idealized visions of “the gay (white) body” in gay ghetto gyms throughout the nation, I think

much of my disgust at women's breasts and nipples must have intersected with my conflict about my own place in the emerging "pec culture" of the times.

On one especially warm afternoon, I bicycled to the beach and my friends went onto the porch of the apartment. On returning, I was met by an angry gay male neighbor, insisting I'd scandalized the neighborhood by permitting my guests to go topless in public. He told me that he'd had to retreat indoors, explaining that the women were "making out" and "going at it" in full view of all. He'd complained to my landlady, who lived in the next building and who had expressed similar concerns.

I recall reacting in an extreme manner—chastising my friends, shaming them, insisting they'd selfishly failed to consider the implications of their nudity on the remainder of my summer. On thinking back to the incident, I'm struck by how much of my response was about my neighborhood relations and how much was about my own revulsion at their bodies. Would my responses have been similar had two men been caught "going at it" on the back porch? Or was an undercurrent of disgust, outrage, and fury over women's bodies the engine behind my response?

The Centrality of Cunt to Gay Men's Sex

As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White wrote, "What is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central."⁹ What do I make of the nexus between my revulsion at women's bodies and genitals and the predilection of many gay men, including myself, to refer to the male orifices that we enter as *pussies* and *cunts*? If the

ubiquitous "no fems" is attached to gay male personal ads to keep femininity at a distance, why do so many other ads seek "tits and ass," "big nipples," "smooth holes," "pussy throats," and men with "large, sloppy cunts?"¹⁰ Perhaps we're seeing what Stallybrass and White consider "a perfect representation of the production of identity through negation, the creation of an implicit sense of self through explicit rejections and denials" (p. 89).

When a "bear" I meet on the street takes me back to his apartment, starts sitting on my face, and tells me, "Lick my hole, kid. Taste that hairy cunt. Chew on that pussy," I bury my own face in his tangled mane of thick hairs, and suck and lick with great delight. Why is his "cunt" wonderful to me, when women's cunts are revolting? If terms such as *pussy* inspire revulsion in some gay men, why do we inject them into our sex?

According to Bourdieu,

Disgust is the paradoxical experience of enjoyment extorted by violence, an enjoyment which arouses horror. This horror, unknown to those who surrender to sensation, results fundamentally from removal of the distance, in which freedom is asserted, between the representation and the thing represented, in short from alienation, the loss of the subject in the object, immediate submission to the immediate present under the enslaving violence of the "agreeable."¹¹

Is the horror I feel reading the sexually graphic parts of lesbian poetry or fiction actually an "enjoyment extorted by violence?" Does the ick that I feel in relation to women's bodies simply serve to mask deeply held forbidden pleasures, obsessive delights, from which the acquisition of gay male identity has severed me? Are all gay men truly bisexual or polysexual beings—or only those

of us whose desires have been twisted and contorted into an ick? Some have suggested that our erotic lives are the sites where we wrestle with the deeper tensions in our lives and where we attempt to resolve vexing conflicts and disentangle the twists and kinks of our psyches. Hearing men spit into public urinals makes me ill; swapping spit with a sex partner exhilarates and excites me. Perhaps the centrality of cunt in my own homo-sex life suggests that the flip side of disgust may be desire.

Implications for a Cogender Movement

Most men seem to be unable to deeply empathize, support, or understand a range of women's health, economic, and sociopolitical issues. At different times, some of us have described the barrier as the obsessive self-centeredness of patriarchy, men's inability to see beyond themselves, or the drain of AIDS on gay men's energies.¹² Some lesbian activists have explained men's consistent failure to "deliver the goods" for women (equity of funding, services, or power) as examples of sexism and misogyny.

Of course, gay men have often spoken out in public settings to applaud "the lesbians" for their selfless support for gay men amid the escalating AIDS crisis. This rhetoric suggests that lesbians have traditionally been the caregivers to the world and have instinctively dropped other commitments (and outstanding grievances) to care for their "brothers" facing the plague. Gay men usually close such speeches with a commitment to support women facing "the epidemic of breast cancer," which is followed by thunderous applause and a standing ovation.

I am waiting for the time when lesbian activists respond to this by silently rising and turning their backs. Gay men have not gotten significantly involved in the fight against breast cancer—or in any of the dozens of health issues confronting their lesbian "sisters."¹³ Men rarely contribute much money or volunteer hours to women's health organizations, provide individual support services to ill lesbians, or make the effort to acquire even a superficial knowledge of women's health issues.

For some gay men, the barrier to supporting a lesbian-focused agenda may be symbolized, even naturalized, in the ick factor. What does it mean for the gay male director of a lesbian and gay community services center to be grossed out by lesbian sexual activity? Is this revulsion implicated in his failure to provide significant resources to lesbian gynecological services? How does the gay male board member of a national lesbian and gay political organization cope with his aversion to women's body smells? Does this disgust have anything to do with the failure of his group to take the lead on lesbian health advocacy or abortion rights work?¹⁴ Is it possible for an entire range of cross-gender revulsions to circulate between gay men and lesbians without being implicated in the continuing disparity between the priority given to gay and lesbian matters in queer organizational life?

To answer these questions, we need to understand how the lesbian body has been constructed in queer social formations. As Stallybrass and White write, "The body is neither purely natural nor is it merely textual metaphor, it is a privileged metaphor for transcoding other [aspects of social life]."¹⁵ For some gay men, a range of anxieties and social misgivings become deeply connected

with and assigned to women's bodies, female functions like menstruation and childbirth and female sexual acts. A process of devaluation, denigration, and stigmatization ensues, and these bodies and their functions become objects of gay males' visceral disgust.¹⁶

I cannot say that the ick factor in my life bears no relationship to misogyny, as woman hating is deeply inscribed on men. Many progressive gay men may have significantly altered our social practices and established strong relationships with women, so that we do not overtly "hate" women. But our political decisions and alliances may have diverted misogyny into visceral triggers, bodily gestures, and sensory reactions to the sights, smells, and tastes gendered "female" or perceived as "dyke." I've come to believe, however, that there's more to ick than misogyny.

I am left wondering about other possibilities and questions but find few definitive answers. Are my disgust and fear of lesbian sexuality in any way a substitute for my misgivings about my own sexuality? While I maintain a sexual consciousness that on the surface holds gay male bodies, desires, and sexual practices in high esteem, do I actually hold unacknowledged revulsions to male sex?

My ick factor, after all, is not limited to women's bodies, even if I pretend that it is. I have my own set of fears about men's fluids, body parts, and sexual acts that lurk just under the surface of consciousness.

There is a great deal about gay men's sex that frightens, disgusts, and confuses me, and I do not believe I am isolated among gay men in harboring these unaddressed feelings. I wonder

whether projecting these fears and revulsions onto lesbian sex offers the opportunity to project externally uncomfortable and perplexing responses that are too frightening to confront.

In this way, gay men might be doing precisely the transcoding that Stallybrass and White suggest. We transcode uncomfortable aspects of male identities and social and sexual practices onto women's bodies and sexualities. To what extent is the lesbian body forced to carry the burden of gay male fears and misgivings about our own sex? To what extent is the ick factor the social practice that inscribes these difficult-to-resolve gay male conflicts on lesbian sex?

Interrogating the ick factor offers us the possibility of learning more about ourselves as we learn more about one another. We might find that our identities as gay men are constructed on a defensive disgust at women's bodies. Or we may find that without the ick factor, our desires for other men remain solidly in place. I don't expect to find easy answers to my questions, but I do know one thing: by remaining silent about cross-gender revulsions, we allow to remain in place a entire series of body relations and social practices that divide men from women, gay man from lesbian. This is slippery ground on which to construct a movement for social change.

Notes

1. Urvashi Vaid, then the executive director of NGLTF, and Sue Hyde, the conference coordinator, conceptualized and named this workshop; I appreciate their invitation to convene it with them.

2. See, for example, Michael Greene, "Destructive Agenda," letter to the editor, *Bay Windows* (Boston), June 27, 1996, p. 7. Also see Jonathan F. Alex, "Gay Pride March Should Have Made a More Positive Statement," letter to the editor, *New York Times*, July 6, 1996.

3. "Pride and Parades," editorial, *Boston Globe*, June 15, 1996.

4. Jeff Epperly, "Gross Stupidity at a Great Parade," editorial, *Bay Windows* (Boston), June 13, 1996, p. 6.

5. Rachel Keegan, "Controversy over Pride: Whose Community Is It," *Sojourner* (Boston), July 1996, p. 18.

6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 56.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 495.

8. One rare exception I recall was Kate Millet's *Sita* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), which at the time struck me as radically sexy. Reading it in the 1990s still excites me, yet now these passages seem heavily romanticized and a bit tame. For discussions of the de-sexing of the lesbian-feminist cultures of the 1970s and early 1980s, see Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," and Amber Hollibaugh, "Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure," both in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge, 1984). Also see Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

9. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 5 (italics in original/italics added).

10. These terms, and similar phrases, were found in personal ads in various issues of *Drummer*, *San Francisco Sentinel*, and *Odyssey*, gay men's magazines.

11. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 488.

12. One example appears in a letter to the editor in a lesbian/gay paper urging men to support Camp Sister Spirit, the Mississippi femi-

nist retreat under attack in 1993-1995. See Jay Davidson, "Support Camp Sister Spirit," *Bay Times* (San Francisco), January 27, 1994, p. 13.

13. See my discussion of this matter in Eric Rofes, *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men's Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Press, 1996), pp. 258-259.

14. One notable exception was the late Ken Dawson who, in March 1992, headed the "Brothers for Sisters" campaign to raise money for Astraea, the National Lesbian Action Foundation.

15. Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*, p. 192.

16. This paragraph is heavily influenced by the work of my Berkeley colleague Matt Wray, a doctoral student in ethnic studies, and adapts portions of his paper "Unsettling Sexualities and White Trash Bodies," presented at the UC Berkeley American Studies meeting on October 10, 1994. I am grateful for his permission to paraphrase and apply his work on white trash bodies to lesbian bodies.