

sleeping with the enemy

Lesbians are pushing the bedroom boundaries
so far these days that it's now queer to be straight.

RACHEL GIESE reports on the death of the last lesbian taboo

It's the week before Lesbian and Gay Pride Day and I'm in

a crowded Toronto bar with 200 other lesbians dancing to Salt-n-Pepa's *Whatta Man*. My friend and I are shaking our asses and singing along with the lyrics: "My man gives real lovin' / that's why I call him Killer / he's not a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am man, he's a thriller / he takes his time and does everything right / knocks me out with one shot for the rest of the night."

illustration
Nancy
Reid

And all these gorgeous women are getting into it, from the elegant lipstick lesbians to the post-punk baby dykes. And it suddenly strikes me that no one is outraged that the DJ is playing this hip hop homage to a perfect man-lover. No one is screaming about patriarchy, heterosexism or straight privilege. No one is fleeing the dance floor in droves or requesting some Melissa Etheridge or k.d. lang. They're too busy boogying with Salt, Pepa, DJ Spinderella and the man with "a body like Arnold and a Denzel face."

Then I remembered being at a similar club only two years before. I was cruising this girl when a mutual friend told me to watch out for her.

"She has a straight streak," the friend whispered. "She calls herself a dyke but she sleeps with guys. I wouldn't trust her one bit."

And we're not talking about bisexuals here. That was last year. These are Lesbians Who Sleep With Men. That's right, sisters. With men. Like a Geraldo show or a *Penthouse* photo-essay. Like your worst nightmare about your ex-girlfriend. According to a 1987 study by the Kinsey Institute, almost 50 per cent of women who had called themselves lesbian from the time they were teenagers had had sexual intercourse with men since coming out of the closet. And while the study didn't differentiate between those who did it once and those who did it more often, that's still a lot of sex.

Elena came out when she was a teenager, and her credentials, from her cool haircut to her volunteer hours spent organizing Pride Day parades, have made her sort of a lesbian demi-legend among the friends we have in common. While I've only met her a few times, I've heard stories. Stories in which she's getting arrested at protests, or writing newspaper articles about dildos. Stories, too, in which she sleeps with men.

Elena tells me with all earnestness that no matter who she sleeps with, "every nuance of the word 'straight' doesn't fit me." But having been with her boyfriend for a year and a half, she knows she's walking a fine line. In a tight-knit community that is bound by sexual orientation, who a prominent activist is sleeping with is everybody's business. Or at least that's what everybody seems to think. Elena's sexual practices are so public that last year, her ex-girlfriend wrote an article for a Toronto gay newspaper denouncing lesbians who have sex with men, calling them dishonest, hypocritical and dangerous. It was a vicious and per-

sonal attack. But understand the context: For lesbians, hearing that your ex is dating a man is a Big Thing. It's The Big Thing. It lies at the heart of every lesbian insecurity. It's the myth that there is no such thing as a real lesbian. That lesbianism is just a bad case of penis envy. That lesbians are women who can't get men. That your girlfriend will leave you when the right man comes along.

Elena hit a nerve and found herself the centre of a heated debate. And she's not the only one in the trenches. She is part of a growing number of women who are taking the biggest lesbian no-no and trying to turn it into no big deal. Things have really changed.

I'm trying to imagine what would happen if somehow Elena could be magically transported to a womyn's community, circa 1971, some sort of women-only commune, featuring vegan meals and macramé decor. Everyone working together cooperatively, confident they know who the Man is and how to fight him. The excitement and intensity of 1970s lesbian feminist organizing would have suited Elena's political temperament. Both she and the 1970s feminists were working towards the same goal: a radical redefinition of lesbianism and sexuality. But their methods are very, very different. For those women it was: "I'm a lesbian because I play by the rules." For Elena, it's: "I'm a lesbian because I fuck with the rules."

It's easy to see how these rules came about. In the seventies, lesbianism was taken out of the political propaganda of "sickness" and redefined as a political orientation, an alternative to the patriarchal institutions of marriage and monogamy. Lesbianism became less about desire than about feminist rebellion. In their manifesto (*womyn-ifesto?*), the Radicalesbians wrote, "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion."

Since this new definition included any woman who simply identified with women, politically and emotionally, a rigid lesbian regulation manual needed to be established. Real lesbians didn't eat meat. Real lesbians didn't shave their armpits. Real lesbians didn't enjoy penetration. Real lesbians were separatist feminists. And real lesbians didn't



sleep with men. This was the time, after all, when Catherine MacKinnon coined the adage: *Man fucks woman. Subject verb object.*

Obviously, this kind of ranking system couldn't last forever. For every woman the new definition included, it excluded more. In response, nineties "pro-sex feminism" has in large part been about re-injecting desire into sex - with a vengeance. In this new sexual ethos, the only rule seems to be: *Woman gets off. Subject Verb.* And in many cases, men aren't the enemy, they're just one more tool to help you reach that goal. These days, nobody is talking about sex more than lesbians. Female ejaculation, dildos, sado-masochism, butch/femme roles. Non-monogamy and monogamy, sex with men, sex with straight women, sex in groups. Banned lesbian porn. Susie Bright, a.k.a. Susie Sexpert and one

of the founders of the lesbian-porn magazine *On Our Backs*, has sex with men and writes about it, saying the conception of her five-year-old daughter happened "the old-fashioned way."

"People are more open to the idea that a lesbian can have sex with a man and still be a lesbian," says Laura Cowell, a 26-year-old film student whose short film *Boy Crazy* premiered at last year's Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Toronto. In the voice-over, Cowell confesses that she's a boy-crazy dyke "who still digs chicks." The film was a hit.

Michelle Tse, 22, is the changing face of lesbianism. A poster-girl for lesbian chic, Tse has perfected the genderfuck look with black bra, red lipstick, combat boots and her bedroom walls covered with photographs of Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo and supermodel Jenny

Shimizu. Tse dated a man for several years before they broke up and both came out. She still has sex with men occasionally. "We sleep with people for all kinds of reasons. Because we're lonely. Because we're fucked-up. Because they look like our ex. That doesn't make you gay or straight. Sexuality is so fluid. You can live a straight life for years and then come out as gay, or vice versa."

Before you understand how all these lesbians ended up sleeping with the enemy, you have to know something about the word *queer*. Over the past two decades, practical issues, such as the need to organize around the AIDS crisis, have seen the former insult flipped around to become an all-inclusive umbrella under which a diverse group of people – gays, lesbians, transsexuals, bisexuals and even sympathetic straights – could work together. The ambiguity of the phrase has also made it a handy signifier for advocates of sexual fluidity who identify strongly with the lesbian community.

Elena used to call herself bisexual, but when she got more involved with lesbian and gay politics, in particular with the in-your-face Queer Nation radicalism of the late eighties, she started using queer. "I obviously understand bisexual behaviour," she says, "but not [a separate] bisexual politics. There is nothing that the gay and lesbian community does that doesn't include bisexuals." Tse also rejects the "bisexual" label, explaining that her attractions to both sexes take different forms. "I don't gush over boys the way I do over girls."

The term bisexual doesn't appeal much to me either. It either sounds clinical or it conjures up images of earnest Women's Studies majors in batik skirts, whining that even though they have a boyfriend, they're oppressed too. The idea of bisexuality makes orientation more rigid rather than more fluid. Instead of expanding the definitions of "straight" or "gay" identity, bisexuality polarizes them more, setting itself up as a middle ground. It even

creates more specific, and ultimately meaningless, identities, like one I saw in an anthology of bisexual writers: "Lesbian-identified bisexual."

For Elena, queer is more of a statement about her life attitude than an identity label. It's a subtle difference, but Elena hates labels. She calls them "random categories of people based on the wrong things." What she wants is identity based on personal allegiances and political and cultural affinity, rather than on falsely constructed ideas about innate sexual traits. Queer is as queer thinks, not as queer does. Elena's idea of queerness is a polymorphously perverse, all-inclusive left-of-centre community. A world without labels.

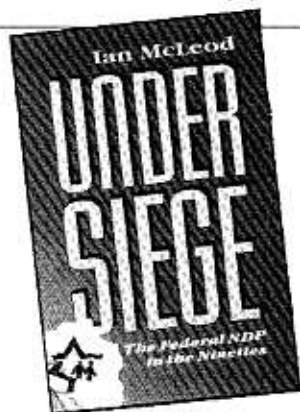
But there's a ways to go before we reach this labelless utopia – just ask Vancouver-based artist Persimmon Blackbridge. Her work was part of the 1990 *Drawing the Line* exhibit, an interactive photo show depicting lesbian sexuality, ranging from soft-core images to S&M and bondage. Viewers were invited to "draw the line" on the wall beside the pictures they felt were offensive. The show toured Canada, Australia and the United States, so if anyone is aware of the lesbian sexual zeitgeist, it's Blackbridge. "A lot of the attitudes are split by age. Most younger lesbians I know don't have time for the 'real lesbians don't sleep with men' argument. I think that since bisexuals have been so open and visible lately doing this explicit out-there shit, the idea of lesbians having sex with men isn't so unthinkable."

Still, as an example of the division in the lesbian community, Blackbridge points to a photo in *Drawing the Line* that showed a man watching two women have sex. Some thought it was a turn-on. But a lot of viewers flipped, feeling it bought into some straight-male porno myth. Others just plain didn't think anything even vaguely male, from dildos to fake mustaches, had a place in lesbian sex. Blackbridge realized that the dichotomy of "real" lesbians versus the ones who will leave you

The life and death of a Canadian factory

Inglis was once the bedrock of Canada's manufacturing economy. But in the 1980s it succumbed to foreign ownership, neglect and a 1989 shutdown. Historian David Sobel and trade unionist Susan Meurer tell the story of this important Canadian factory from the perspective of the people in Toronto who worked there.

Fully illustrated with over 150 photos
\$24.95 paperback



Down for the count?

The federal NDP is in crisis. In this book journalist and former NDP staffer Ian McLeod offers an inside view of how it happened and what party activists are now trying to do about it.

\$16.95 paperback

Order now by calling 1-800-565-1975

Fax order 902-421-0166

Or send your order to Formac Distributing, 5502 Atlantic St, NS B3H 1G4

James Lorimer & Company

for a man was still very much out there. For these women, Tse and Elena are little more than flight risks.

Nothing could be more absurd, says Elena. "There's this belief among lesbians that if a woman has any tendency towards men, that she'll choose the safety of the straight world. I think that's based on insecurity and self-hatred. I want to say to these women, 'Will you please look around you and see how dynamic the lesbian community is? Who wouldn't choose it over the straight community?'" Elena speaks so glowingly about the lesbian community, it's difficult for me not to ask the obvious: If lesbians are so great, why aren't you dating one? When I do ask, she tells me, "with sex and desire, other factors are more relevant than gender. I get attracted to people on a lot of different levels."

But the push to expand the definition of queer is also coming from an envious straight community, and that presents a whole other set of problems. Problems about the line between admiration and appropriation. "Is Everybody Gay?" asks the cover of a June issue of *New York* magazine. And a little less courageously, *Mirabella* asks, "Are we all a little bi?" This past year, it certainly felt like it. Gays and lesbians had the coolest thing going on. And almost everyone wanted a piece of it.

Toronto's "Bent" and Montreal's "Squeeze" parties, where "anyone but homophobes" are welcome, initially attracted a mostly gay and lesbian crowd. But as the aura of cool that surrounds no-commitment queerness spread, the nights became dominated by homo-friendly straights. The question arises: What's the point anymore?

In the face of all these slippery boundaries, everybody's scrambling for something to hold on to. It's clear that there is no one "real lesbian" but if who we sleep with doesn't define us, then by which criteria do we form community? We are engaged in a glorious experiment of breaking down the barriers of identity. But how do we create and define a community while simultaneously destroying its boundaries and definitions?

The search for answers is on. Some boy-inclined dykes suggest that we change the criteria of lesbian identity so that it's based on activity within

the community. But doesn't that exclude the closeted woman who lives in the suburbs and only makes it to a lesbian bar every other weekend?

Meanwhile, scientists are dissecting the brains of gay men for the telltale enlarged hypothalamus. Lesbians' testosterone levels are measured to determine the hormone's

relation to desire. Many gays and lesbians want biological "proof" that there is something essential, or "real," about homosexuality.

Without this proof, lesbianism has to be based on something else. The expression "practicing homosexual" always makes me laugh, but there's some validity in talking about identity based on behaviour. At what point is a lesbian who sleeps with men still a lesbian? Is there a statute of limitations on sperm? These questions come up because the boundaries of the lesbian and gay community are so precarious; it is one of the only minority communities that a person isn't born into. We don't learn gay traditions from our parents. So to a certain extent, we are gay by our actions and desires. Lesbian identity is different from ethnic or religious identity, in which one can be a non-observant, atheist Jew and still be a Jew, or a lapsed Catholic and still be a Catholic.

But maybe we are selling ourselves short. The gay community does have a culture, one which may be a more powerful bond than any consensus on sexual practice. This culture has a history, a shared belief system, a burgeoning academic movement and a set of visual and verbal signifiers. Richard Goldstein, the executive editor of *The Village Voice*, likens this new gay community to a religious movement with its own iconography – pink triangles and rainbow flags – and the coming-out process to a spiritual journey or salvation. Like practitioners of other religions, Goldstein suggests, queers should not be shy about their recruitment powers.

Where does this leave me?

Images of my queer world dance in my head: At a party with Michelle's gay ex-boyfriend. The two of us drunk, playing a queer Regis and Kathie Lee, interviewing all the guests about their sex lives and finding a straight couple who met in a gay bar. A girlfriend giggling, telling

queer is as queer thinks, not as queer does

me she's turned on by my gay male roommate's *Young Military Cadets* porn video.

Or last night, having beers with "my girls," six women whose lives have been interconnected since university: me and my best friend, a woman who sleeps with both men and women and who calls herself a "girl's girl," talking to a straight girl – who we have both slept with – about her new boyfriend. Two other straight women with long-term boyfriends, talking about grrrl power and the politics of the mosh pit. Discussing plans with the sixth, a newly and loudly out lesbian, to share a house. We flirt with the waitress and talk about approaching a celebrity, standing at the pool table, who we know is a dyke. And this is a straight bar.

All these paradoxes work in reality, if not in theory. My life isn't a separate hermetically-sealed world in which only women-loving-women exist. And yet I value my lesbian identity over all others. "Would you know immediately," a friend once asked me, "what to say if someone asked if you were a lesbian? Even if you decided to lie, would you know in your head and your heart that you were without doubts?" Yes, I would know, I said. I didn't always, but I know now, today. As filmmaker Laura Cowell says, "No matter what people say and no matter what people might do, we all know who is or who isn't lesbian. And we know who our friends are. And we can't start randomly throwing people out because they don't play by our rules." ♡