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CLOSER TO HOME:

BISEXUAL FEMINISM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF
HETERO/SEXISM

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The first time I sleep with "Jonathan," it bothers me that he wants to rush through savoring each other's bodies and get on to intercourse. I feel him controlling the tempo of the evening, setting a pace I don't like. I should say something, want to say something, but don't, accepting his expectations without protest. I am usually very direct about my needs and opinions; tonight I cannot bring myself to say anything. Later in the night, after he has fallen asleep, I lie awake, silent, sad, aching fiercely to be with a woman.

One of the great strengths of feminism is its ability to shed light on the social forces acting on our personal lives. This is especially the case when we as women experience ourselves as somehow inadequate; thinking in a feminist way about where the sense of inadequacy comes from leads us to focus on environments in which we are often in no-win situations, and in which doing the best we can under the circumstances is never quite good enough. If feminist analysis only went this far, it would still offer us respite from the self-blame that has, not accidentally, fallen to women in modern Western societies. Yet feminism goes further, asking how it has come to be that our best is never quite good enough, suggesting that our self-blame and sense of inadequacy have been defined, imposed and managed through a set of values that permeate our lives but that have their origins outside of our lives and beyond our full control.

Those of us who identify as bisexual feminists may be politically active in any number of ways, traditional protest strategies and commitment to women's culture and communities being two common approaches. In choosing these forms of activism, we focus on power structures generally understood as separate from our lives and con-

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straining us from the outside: the economy, the political system, the workplace. These structures are important, but they tell only part of the story of our isolation, sense of failure and disempowerment; struggling against their dominance is only part of bringing about long-lasting social change. The structures within us as individuals are as important as those imposed upon us in obvious ways; although these internal structures have not been the subject of that much analysis among bisexual feminists, focusing on them is legitimate and important work. In this essay, I want to consider two arenas of political struggle that are intricately bound up with the internal structures that drive our day-to-day lives: how we relate to our male sexual and romantic partners, and how we respond to heterosexual privilege.¹

Those are by no means concerns only of bisexual feminists, but we are in a position to bring interesting resources to these inquiries if we wish. When considering our heterosexual relationships, we have our experiences with women available for comparison; we can determine what the similarities and differences are and connect those to the subtle kinds of disempowerment present when we are with men. In this sense, we have access to certain resources that can help us understand the micropolitics of sexism, resources that heterosexual feminists may not be able to draw upon so easily. Yet unlike lesbian feminists, our attempts to transform, rather than reproduce, structures of sexism have an immediate impact on men and can actually directly change their perspectives and behavior. Understandings that enable us to make changes in patterns of heterosexual intimacy, household division of labor, child care and child-rearing, male-female communication patterns, money management and the like, may then become more accessible to heterosexual feminists and play a role in ending the reproduction of sexism that goes well beyond merely those women who identify as bi-feminists.²

Similarly, bisexual women experience heterosexual privilege differently than either lesbians or heterosexual women do, given our capacity to be on either end of its effects. We may have a more immediate interest in challenging heterosexism than many heterosexual feminists; we also have more opportunity than lesbians to struggle with our own reproduction of heterosexual privilege. Not only can we address sexism within our relationships with men, but we can also turn those relationships into arenas of struggle against heterosexism as well.

While sexism and heterosexism are generally discussed separately, they reinforce each other and interlock in significant enough ways that it seems reasonable to consider them together. Some bi-feminists and lesbian feminists talk of "heteropatriarchy;" I will use the term heterosexism. Although the two forms of oppression cannot be reduced to each other, we can see the overlap in the homophobia behind the enforcement of traditional gender roles and the sexism inherent in heterosexual privilege (a point to which I will return later).³ Using the term heterosexism provides a kind of shorthand for the mutuality of the two systems and may inspire bisexual feminists to look closely at the effects of that mutuality in our lives.

Crucial to any discussion of heterosexism as a system is the understanding that gender roles and sexuality are "imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained" and as such are not private concerns (in the sense of being apolitical), nor are they natural ways of being.⁴ Once we view heterosexism as an institution with a history, form, set of rules and definitions, and arrangement of goods and services, we rightly resist arguments that gender roles are biological and thus immutable; this resistance is necessary if we are to have any reason to hope that sexism can be eradicated. Similarly, although we are deeply accustomed to seeing our sexual orientations as natural, there are important ways in which they are socially constructed rather than simply biologically given; we do not merely engage in heterosexual or homosexual sex, but are understood (and understand ourselves) to be bisexuals, heterosexuals, lesbians or gay men. The role that our sexuality plays in our self-identities is not merely a matter of biology; sexual orientation is as carefully managed as gender roles are,⁵ and heterosexual privilege provides a structure for this management.

In order to analyze the ways in which heterosexism is not merely external to us but also somehow reproduced within our lives, we need an understanding of structure that goes beyond the ways in which the economy or the government works and focuses on how we learn to make sense of reality. Such an understanding must show how heterosexism is reproduced regardless of one's intentions not to do so, a crucial point for understanding why men may respond so badly to attempts to challenge sexism, and why heterosexuals (and bisexuals in some cases) are made so uncomfortable by accusations of heterosexual privilege. The perspective sought here is available if we view structure,

not as large-scale institutions, but as the rules and resources of a society or social setting.⁶ Rules here include both the technical rules (laws among them) about what people may or may not do and the understandings about what is true or good. Political systems, religious values, board games and school curricula are all composed of rules. Resources are any goods, services or ideas made available to (some or all) people that enable social relations to be constantly reproduced and made meaningful and sensible. Resources are not all equal or distributed equally; examples of resources might include money, a computer, a position of authority in some setting, technical or intellectual skills, a building with staff and equipment, access to the media, ownership of coveted fashion or art items, or a strong belief in one's capacity to accomplish something. Structure, then, is generally carried, not behind our backs but in memory traces or emotions, in what we know, in whom we are willing to root for, in what we believe to be possible or desirable.

This way of understanding structure offers a particular explanation as to why and how structural hetero/sexism persists, an explanation that is both realistic and not entirely pessimistic about the chance for change. Hetero/sexism is continually reproduced because people carry certain kinds of "knowledge" about what men and women are like, knowledge that informs their decision-making and behavior,⁷ and because some of the people who carry the most problematic (from a feminist perspective) "knowledge" have grossly unequal access to resources such as physical strength, money and control of the media and/or the legislative process. Moreover, if structure is carried in rules about what is and what ought to be—rules that most people obey—one of the important resources to have is the ability to make rules and get them widely accepted; feminism has long pointed to exactly this historical privilege of (some) men: to define what is important, what is good, what is permissible, what God wants or does not want, who governs, who benefits, who wins when rules or the distribution of resources are contested. In this way, certain men have exercised almost complete control over the initial setting up of social structures throughout much of history.

Yet the men who get to make these rules cannot enforce them alone. Even with unequal access to resources, there are too few men to use repression successfully (as police, jailers, thugs) or to run all the

mechanisms of manipulation (education, the mass media, child-rearing). The constant reproduction of hetero/sexist structure requires many, most or all people in a society to play a reproductive, rather than a transformative, role. There must be specific mothers who socialize their children in hetero/sexist ways, and specific children who are socialized to be hetero/sexist. There must be specific men who are rapists and gay-bashers, and specific judges who let them off lightly. There must be specific employees who work for companies that provide hetero/sexist educational resources for schools, and specific schools that use the resources. There must be specific mass media consultants, publishers, actors, broadcasters, technicians and the like who participate in reinforcing definitions of appropriate sexual behavior, and specific individuals who watch TV, read the paper or listen to the radio and have their definitions reinforced. There must be specific bosses who underpay or refuse to hire women, and specific women who accept the bosses' authority. It is not necessary that any of these people have bad intentions as they go about their business; it is only necessary that the rules and resources—the structure—of their "business" benefit men at the expense of women, and heterosexuals at the expense of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. If such inequalities are sufficiently built into the rules and the access to resources, people who consider themselves loving, kind and well-meaning will regularly behave in ways that are deeply hurtful to women and sexual minorities and will become extremely angry and confused when accused of being sexist or homophobic.

It is difficult to see that individuals are ultimately the agents for reproducing or transforming hetero/sexism, because injustice appears in patterns; it is not merely one sportscaster, professor, doctor, mother, man or woman on the street who is hetero/sexist, but many. Observing the patterns and looking for systematic ways to understand them can obscure the role of individuals (in specific social settings, with specific information available to them) in reproducing hetero/sexism. Yet it is possible, even necessary, to grasp how simultaneously individuals reproduce structure and structure reproduces individuals. Even if the people who are maintaining hetero/sexism exist in impossibly large numbers, they (and we) never cease to be specific individuals; hetero/sexist structures are always (literally) in our hands—and minds and hearts.

The idea that structures, including unjust ones, are to be found in the everyday knowledge and routine actions of most people in our society requires us to reconsider the meaning and value of the phrase "the personal is political." Although feminists generally appreciate the ways in which public and private realms are interrelated, we have tended to define political work as organized efforts to change formal and informal institutional rules; our work for safe, legal, funded abortion, the equal rights amendment, and the prosecution of rapists and batterers has been of this sort. An appreciation of both the necessity and the difficulty of transforming hetero/sexist structures in our intimate relationships may get lost in such large-scale mobilization efforts. Nonetheless, challenging the reproduction of hetero/sexism on a routine, daily basis is crucial to any long-term transformation of our society. Laws can be overturned or ignored if they are at odds with enough people's definitions of what is true or good. Only when sufficient numbers of individuals have stopped reproducing inegalitarian structures in taken-for-granted ways will hetero/sexism cease to be possible. I am not for a moment claiming that such a wide-scale transformation is certain or even likely to happen, or that it will be anything other than extremely difficult to accomplish. I am claiming that individual challenges to hetero/sexism, if practiced on a wide and deep enough scale, play a crucial role in ending hetero/sexism.⁸ Directing energy toward the transformation of our definitions of the possible and the valued in our personal lives is important and honorable work. It is to this work that I now wish to turn.

Our intimate heterosexual relationships are structured in hetero/sexist ways,⁹ and we will need to consider the institution of hetero/sexism in general and the specificities of our relationships simultaneously in order to begin the restructuring process. One important, if often neglected, point to keep in mind is that it is simultaneously easier and harder to be with men as a feminist than it is to be with women. Certainly, there are advantages to being in heterosexual relationships, but we also face educating our companions on the sheer taken-for-grantedness of their privilege, never an easy job. Angela Hamblin comments that:

when we confront male power in our sexual relationships with individual men, we come up against not only the values of an entire patriarchal culture plus the expectations, pressure . . . and force of

the individual man/men with whom we relate but also our own internalized beliefs and expectations, vulnerabilities and needs. It is a formidable and daunting task.¹⁰

The daily disparity between our political goals and our body politics, communication styles or sexual desires within heterosexual relationships can seem an unbreachable gulf. Attending a march or rally, writing a letter of protest, boycotting certain products, even engaging in civil disobedience may be easier than attempting to radically change someone about whom we care deeply.

However, the understanding of structure that I have presented leads us to an idea remarkably close to that of loving the sinner and hating the sin. We do not choose to carry the central structures of society; rather, we absorb them or are taught them at a very early age, and they are continually reinforced throughout our youth. The violence that men have visited upon women is unspeakable,¹¹ and our outrage is a good sign; at the same time, our willingness to trust men with our bodies and emotional lives is not simply a matter of brainwashing or economic need. At some level, we harbor notions of being able to separate our relationships from the sexist violence that has flourished over time and which continues to thrive today. The structure of hetero/sexism offers us both much caution and some hope where that task is concerned; the sin, after all, is deeply built into the sinner, but it is not the final word about who he can be.

Thinking about my discomfort during the sexual experience mentioned earlier, I realize how I took for granted his right to be in control of the evening's sexual tempo. That seemed absolutely normal at the time, as did the greater importance accorded his sexual needs by both of us. How could something so natural make me so uncomfortable? And why was it so natural to remain silent at the time, despite being uncomfortable? Reading stories of other women's experiences,¹² I am struck by similarities. I realize that the scenario was set up in such a way as to define his control of the situation as normal. I remained silent despite my discomfort because that, too, was somehow normal; to do otherwise would have been to challenge unspoken rules, to disrupt the flow, to draw unseemly attention to myself, to be uncool. It was simply easier to go along with the situation, and that it was easier tells me something important about the routinized nature of sexism. It strikes me that I rarely have these problems with

women; our sexual roles are not always clear before sex, so we have to do at least some talking ahead of time. I replay the night with Jonathan in my head, changing moments to add more communication before, during and after the sex, slowing down and taking breaks when I feel like it. Doing this saddens me even as it encourages me; there is something hurt in my life, and I am accepting it and trying to change it. I am angry, too, not at Jonathan, but at commonplace ways of being sexual in which my sexual desires are not as highly valued as his.

Examining how we reproduce hetero/sexism might begin with thinking through the ways in which "normal," "natural" sexual and social interactions with our male companions actually serve to express definitions of heterosexual relationships in areas such as communication, sexuality, the division of household labor, child-rearing and decision-making. How would our definitions be different from those generally taken for granted? What kinds of communication would we like to see? What kinds of sexual interactions? How would our household labor be divided? What are the various ways in which our relationships would be different if rule-making/reality-defining within them involved a completely egalitarian process?

This kind of creative, alternative thinking is not always easy, but we have important resources to draw upon. At some level, we may be quite uncomfortable with heterosexual relations as generally defined; feminist analysis can offer an explanation for our discomfort by helping us to identify the ways in which official definitions of reality in relationships are not in our best interests as full human beings, moral and material agents. Conversations we have had, books and articles we have read, dreams and images of our brokenness and wholeness can aid us in trusting our senses that things are not right as they are.

If such a feminist perspective enables us to clarify some of the limits of our heterosexual relationships, our sexual and romantic experiences with women can offer us hints and hopes of what egalitarian relationships might look like, providing us with energy and ideas.¹³ Drawing upon our lesbian relationships to better understand our heterosexual ones needs to be done carefully, of course; the former are not perfect, nor do they always represent exactly what we might want in our relationships with men. I say hints and hopes because I believe that two people who have been historically frozen out of the definitional process can, in some cases, create an environment in which defi-

nitions arise mutually, in which the relationship is built equally by both partners. This may actually happen only rarely, given that we bring prior definitions with us when we begin lesbian relationships, but our knowledge that such egalitarianism is possible, as well as our memories or visions of egalitarian moments, may well be one of our most important resources when we turn to address our male companions.

Thinking about my past sexual encounters, I am intrigued to realize my compliance in bed with a system I oppose in most other aspects of my life. How exactly am I complying with hetero/sexism? I realize that several specific actions or lack of actions in my heterosexual encounters enable sexual business as usual to continue. At the first hint of discomfort during sex, I wonder whether I should say anything but always just let it go. Instead, I resist with my body or face momentarily—not terribly effective in a dark room at night. Nor is the physical resistance particularly strong; my partner may well not notice it. If he notices it, he may think nothing of it since folk wisdom says that women are supposed to resist. I rarely say anything ahead of time about my sexual tastes, and if I do, it is too far ahead of time to remain in context and I do not offer reminders later. Once the situation has gone far enough for me to be uncomfortable, my mental focus shifts away from the experience; I watch, detached, like a third party. I do not say anything, not then, not later. If I am cold or distant in the morning, it goes unnoticed by my partner.

The next step in the process of structural change might be to examine our day-to-day, face-to-face encounters with our male companions to identify minute ways in which we are reproducing, rather than transforming, hetero/sexist structures. What are the words spoken or not spoken that identify us as agents of our own lives or as dependent on male decision-making? How does our body language aid and abet inequalitarian structures? When and how is emotion expressed, and is its expression defined as a weakness or strength? How do we communicate our discomfort about a sexual request? When we are asked for a favor that would needlessly inconvenience us, what is our response and how is it made? The more we can identify the minutiae of hetero/sexism, and the more we can identify what an egalitarian version of the encounter would look like, the closer we are to taking steps toward putting this vision into place in our lives and offering it as a possibility

for other women.

I think about ways to break the natural flow of male-defined sexual encounters: things to say, body motions that cannot be ignored. I begin to test some of them out during sexual encounters with men. This is difficult, perhaps the most difficult kind of communication I have ever tried. I find that I must wrestle deeply with the image of being uncool and do not always succeed in speaking up. Sometimes I can say something directly in a clear voice; sometimes I can stammer out what I need to; sometimes my voice fails me entirely. I find that trying to speak with my body on these occasions simply does not work; somehow, it has been too co-opted to be helpful. I am left with my voice and its mumbles, cracks, nervous giggles and occasional complete sentences.

I can't explain to my male partners how this need to play an equal role during sex is connected to feminism, at least not yet. At first, I think that I just don't want to bother them with such conversations. Later, I realize why: that is the true challenge, the clash of perspectives on reality. Men who are willing to be somewhat more egalitarian about sex are not likely to want their basic definitions of male-female interaction to be challenged. Nor are they likely to appreciate being told how their habits and patterns sustain and reproduce hetero/sexism. They will argue about meaning well. How can I tell them that is not the point? How can I present this way of understanding society so that it will become real for them, real in their minds, real in their guts? I am only now coming to accept that this conversation is the next step, that it is not sufficient to request an isolated change ("request"—as though it were a favor to be granted if he so deigned). My commitment to transform hetero/sexist structures requires me to find ways to express my perspective and engage in dialogues complete with compromises, endlessly shifting boundaries and most likely a permanent sense of incompleteness. Getting laws changed seems so much easier in comparison—but it is not sufficient.

Up to this point, the primary requirements of change have been the courage to explore hetero/sexism in our lives and the creativity to imagine alternative ways of being. The requirements shift when we confront our partners on the ways in which their behavior, as well as our own, is maintaining hetero/sexism. Courage is needed, and lots of it, but clear thinking, tact and negotiating skills come into play as well. For example, openly addressing hetero/sexism is made more difficult

by the fact that it is not merely what we say or do but how we say or do it that is crucial. A hesitant, questioning protest is not likely to help our cause, though there is a good deal of evidence showing that women often address men, or for that matter simply put forth our opinions, in tentative ways.¹⁴ Other less than helpful approaches might involve lobbying for change during arguments or in manipulative ways. Challenging hetero/sexism is likely to require the same forethought and careful choice of method and timing needed in coming out to one's family, and the similarity is not coincidental; both processes involve the task of giving new information to someone important to you, information that will challenge—sometimes deeply—their prior understanding of reality.

Our attempts at change will sometimes lead to deep and fruitful restructurings in ourselves and our partners, but there is a great deal of room for tension and stagnation as well. We may fail to follow through with a planned change, or we may succeed in carrying out a plan but be dismayed by a partner's reaction, or a partner may respond with equanimity to one aspect of breaking hetero/sexist patterns but with defensiveness, hostility, manipulation or even violence to another aspect. If men respond poorly to our attempts at change, it is likely to be because they are protective of what they have always experienced as reality and (like most of us) are afraid of change, not because men are born with genes for evil. We must, to some extent, expect powerful resistance, and we may, at some points, simply give up on a particular issue.¹⁵ Male privilege, especially male power to define, is likely to have been taken entirely for granted as the natural right that "comes with the plumbing," and our assertions that this "natural right" is a social wrong are not likely to make for comfortable relationships.

Two especially difficult scenarios strike me, though I am not sure how common they are. The first involves a man who is willing to make changes because he cares about his lover and wants her to be happy. Although any willingness to change is helpful and good intentions are certainly welcome, this situation brings with it certain problems. First, it implies that the woman is the one with the problem (she is the problem), not the man; his willingness to change out of generosity may involve a roundabout "blaming the victim" and a belittling or demeaning attitude. Second, men and women tend to define the expression of love in different ways,¹⁶ women focusing on emotional closeness and

affection and men on instrumentality and sex; this difference can play a significant role in what a man will “instinctively” do in the name of love. Third, as long as a man fails to take seriously the extent to which “the problem” is a large-scale structural issue and not “merely” an idiosyncrasy of “his woman,” the degree to which he will be willing to change is necessarily limited. Although willing to rethink a certain issue such as sexual initiative or child care, he may not understand when one change does not satisfy his partner and may become quite alarmed and threatened once he sees what she “really” has in mind. It may be that the only way to forestall this at all is to be consistently as clear as possible about the motives and perspectives behind attempts at change.

The second scenario involves a man who identifies as a feminist. Although many such men may listen and learn carefully, providing support and becoming radicalized themselves in the process, others may respond, in anger, that their identification “as a feminist” is sufficient, or they may twist the male power to define by defining for their partners what feminism is “really” about (which presumably will not include challenging one’s male companion on his routine hetero/sexism). This latter response is, of course, just another version of telling women what we “really” want and once we recognize it as such, we will likely (and rightly) reject it immediately.

Throughout this process, the love and support of our feminist, bisexual and bi-feminist friends are crucial. Maintaining the energy and courage to challenge the meanings and practices taken for granted in our heterosexual relationships may be impossible without encouragement from others in similar situations; should this approach to political activism become common, it seems likely to me that there would be a call for support groups that could draw on the insights of second-wave feminist consciousness-raising as well as more recent self-help approaches. Yet regardless of whether encouragement comes from individual friends or an organized group, it will play a vital role in refreshing and restoring our energy and creativity.

At this point, bisexual (and heterosexual) feminists may well protest that we do not get into relationships with men in order to spend all of our time wrangling with them over seemingly impossible goals of social change, a protest with which I have no disagreement. All of us feel the “need of a [private] zone of experience off limits to instant political critique at various times,”¹⁷ and if the personal is political, it

does not cease being personal as well. My point here is simply that our relationships with men always contain opportunities to work against hetero/sexism, that these relationships represent an appropriate and important locus of struggle and that our experiences as bisexual feminists can offer crucial resources, should we want to take up these particular struggles.

If addressing the hetero/sexism of gender roles in our heterosexual relationships seems difficult, addressing the hetero/sexism of heterosexual privilege may be more so, and there are a number of reasons why that would be the case. First, there is a great lack of clarity about what the privilege actually consists of. Second, bisexuals tend to be defensive about the term when lesbians and gay men use it about us (and we certainly seem to be the people in honor of whom it was coined). Finally, we benefit as well as suffer from heterosexual privilege, and addressing one’s privilege in this period of identity politics seems invariably to lead to immobilizing guilt or an abrupt changing of the subject. My discussion here is intended only to start opening up some ways of approaching this topic without confusion, defensiveness or guilt.

The first order of business in understanding heterosexual privilege is to distinguish between what Lenore Norrgard calls its intangible and tangible aspects.¹⁸ Tangible heterosexual privilege refers to the economic and legal discrimination against lesbians, gay men and bisexuals held in place by the inability of same-sex couples to marry legally. Tax breaks, insurance coverage, inheritance rights and child custody rights are only some of the advantages offered to married heterosexual couples and denied to other couples. (Some legal housing discrimination can be listed here as well.) Norrgard argues (correctly, I think) that the tangible aspects of heterosexual privilege are more appropriately understood as benefiting men—and the women who marry them—of a certain socioeconomic class. To understand how this inequality is maintained, then, we need to take seriously the intersection of sexism, heterosexism and classism in our society.¹⁹

Intangible heterosexual privilege refers to the lack of safety and inclusion offered to those who are openly queer or in same-sex relationships. Under this kind of inequality we might list the danger of being called names or bashed while walking with a same-sex lover or leaving a lesbian or gay social space; nonlegal discrimination and ha-

rassment in living arrangements ranging from college campuses to apartment rentals; and the need for keeping one's love life hidden from friends, family, co-workers and other important people.

Because these two forms of heterosexual privilege are enforced in different ways (official versus unofficial rules), they need to be challenged in different ways. People primarily concerned with tangible heterosexual privilege will rightly focus their energy on confronting legal and political institutions. Those who are more concerned with the intangible aspects can benefit from a strategy that takes into account the idea of structure and face-to-face transformation that I have been discussing.

It is not merely gender roles that must be reproduced to maintain hetero/sexism, but a set of understandings about sexuality as well. Basic, of course, is the idea that homosexuality is immoral, psychologically unhealthy, criminal or just plain weird, along with the attendant anger, fear and disgust. But because same-sex sexual acts are not generally practiced in front of family members, co-workers or hostile passers-by on the street, there must be other ways for one's sexuality to become public knowledge. Thus, there are two kinds of "folk knowledge" (informal rules) at play here, one focusing on values (homosexuality is bad), one focusing on truth (this is who and how homosexuals are). In order for intangible heterosexual privilege to be possible, there must be ways to identify a queer, or a pair of queers, as such,²⁰ as well as a particular kind of unthinking response to said queers. We are very familiar with the ways in which the unthinking response is learned, but have not focused much on the folk knowledge required to define situations in which heterosexual privilege can play itself out. This information includes physical (or at least visible) stereotypes, knowledge about gay and lesbian social settings, "understandings" about single men over a certain age renting a room together, and the like. Such folk knowledge functions similarly whether the heterosexual privilege is operating through secrecy and shame or through violence; the same information about homosexuality creates a diverse range of problematic situations for bisexuals, lesbians and gay men, whether open or closeted, as well as for heterosexuals who "look" or "act" queer.

Where does this folk knowledge come from, and how is it maintained? Here, the analysis of hetero/sexist structures above provides

useful insight. Initially certain decrees about the value of same-sex sexuality were enacted—primarily by white men in leadership positions, but at this point in time, sodomy laws are not required to maintain hetero/sexism. Most people in our society simply carry the folk knowledge described above and unthinkingly apply their definitions of normality in ways detrimental to lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. Understandings of "real" and "good" sexuality are reproduced regularly in a thousand small ways: locker room conversations; the absence of positive images of us in the media; passive acceptance by parents, teachers and other adults when children call each other "fags" in a derogatory way; Top-Forty love songs extolling boy-girl romance and (recently) advocating violence against gays; homophobic sexual humor; homophobic sermons and religious education in churches and synagogues; heterosexual-only educational materials; and the list goes on. Gender roles play an important part here as well: a "sissy" is probably a "homo," and vice versa. Nor are heterosexuals the only people who reinforce these stereotypes; gay men, lesbians and bisexuals who have certain information about what it means to be queer may well shape themselves around that information even if such shaping (like the aforementioned sexual encounters) is initially uncomfortable.²¹ Alternatively, those who do not shape themselves around that information may deny their homosexuality (since "I'm not a sissy") or may take advantage of their invisibility and remain closeted. In either case, the stereotypes are reinforced; the vicious cycle continues.

If this identification of folk knowledge as a prerequisite for intangible heterosexual privilege is on target, routine, face-to-face challenges to the informal rules will play a vital part in transforming hetero/sexist structures.²² As with the attempt to transform hetero/sexist structures in our intimate relationships, a combination of critical analysis and reflection on our experiences as bisexuals of both suffering from and benefiting from heterosexual privilege will provide crucial ideas and energy. We may work for transformation by correcting stereotypes and confronting derogatory comments, offering new information about the "truth" and "value" of homosexuality and bisexuality. We may use our positions as parents, teachers, consumers, ministers, landlords, friends, supervisors or adults to break into the taken-for-granted definitions of sexual reality, whether that means re-writing the Sunday school lesson, requesting more queer-positive mu-

sic on a radio station, renting to that female couple or offering time off from work to a man whose lover has just died. We may work to change our patterns of public affection with women and with men, refusing certain aspects of heterosexual privilege where this seems important.²³ These are only a few of the transformative tasks that people of all sexualities can take on.²⁴ Hetero/sexism is not a matter of illnesses but of structures carried within our hearts and minds; as the information fueling our behavior changes, so too will our behavior change. Concrete processes of change can be thought up by individuals, and suggestions can be found in any number of educational materials devoted to ending homophobia. Thankfully, we have plenty of resources available to challenge the folk knowledge behind intangible heterosexual privilege.

This way of analyzing and responding to heterosexual privilege has a number of advantages. It targets hetero/sexism, not heterosexuals or bisexuals, as the problem, a move that we may hope will free up bisexuals from our defensiveness, guilt and immobilization. Our experiences on both ends of the inequality can fuel our creativity in challenging taken-for-granted information in our various communities, and we can draw on both our bisexuality and our feminism in transforming hetero/sexism, within and outside of our heterosexual relationships. Moreover, if most or all people in our society carry hetero/sexism in emotions and knowledge, bisexuals are not somehow especially to blame for "taking advantage" of the system; we are as guilty (and as innocent) as everyone else, sinners along with the rest of society. We can play a powerful transformative role (sometimes, let it be admitted, at personal risk) through the various sexual, occupational and other social roles we play daily, without being solely responsible for changing the system.

The work I have described in this essay is not any easier for taking place close to home; in fact, it may be much harder than lobbying, voting, marching, writing and the other generally accepted forms of political activism that bisexual feminists may engage in. It does not bring the gratification of getting a law changed. It may, however, ultimately bring the gratification of getting many lives changed—piece by piece, moment by moment, with success and setback. Taking on the transformation of routine, taken-for-granted structures of hetero/sexism means challenging the definitions that have disempowered us as

women and sexual minorities and instead building structures of mutuality, togetherness and justice—structures that we can hold in our heads, hearts and hands with pride.

Endnotes

Warm thanks to Elizabeth Reba Weise for her seemingly unending faith in this paper and to Sarah Murray for her continual support and excellent suggestions.

1. I should note here that these ideas, at least at this point, are primarily addressed to women, though bisexual-feminist (and other) men may find them interesting and challenging.
2. However, to the extent that our arrangements reflect the privilege of being white and middle- or upper-class, they will need significant tempering and rethinking if they are to be useful for poor or working-class women and women of color. There has been a tremendous outburst of important writing by women of color, especially in the last decade, that speaks eloquently to these concerns. Some introductions to this literature include bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y., The Crossing Press, 1984); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981); and Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983).
3. See Lenore Norrgard, "The Myth of Heterosexual Privilege, *North Bi Northwest* (June/July 1990); and "The Reality of Heterosexual Privilege," *North Bi Northwest* (August/September 1990); Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (Inverness, Calif.: Chardon Press, 1988).
4. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1977), p. 648.
5. Because this point is so important and at the same time so counterintuitive, I want to take care to suggest some useful and accessible writings on the subject. The following differ in their reliance on academic jargon, but all are worth reading: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Jonathan Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality," *Socialist Review* 20 (January-March 1990), pp. 7-34; William Simon and John Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts," *Society* 53 vol. 22 (1984), pp. 53-60; John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (Portland, Ore.: Breitenbush Books, 1989); Lorna Wei and Leo Casey, "Subverting Power in Sexuality," *Socialist Review* 13 (May-August, 1984): pp. 139-57.
6. The following ideas draw heavily on the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens, especially pages 64-73 of *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) and pages 16-34 of *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: Uni-

versity of California Press, 1984).

7. These "kinds" of knowledge include all the information about "natural," "normal" and "desirable" sexuality that we learn; that this specific knowledge exists *within* our understanding of gender roles is yet another argument for analytically linking sexism and heterosexism.
8. The other crucial aspect is reallocating resources fairly; individual change alone will not suffice as long as there are people with the resources to keep defining what is and what ought to be in ways that reinforce hetero/sexism. This is also no easy task, but it directs us to consider the ways in which the current class structure intersects with hetero/sexism.
9. As are our lesbian relationships. If we carry hetero/sexist structure within us, it inevitably colors our relationships. I choose not to focus on lesbian relationships here because there are various resources within women's communities upon which we may draw, whereas there are not many guides for transforming heterosexual relationships.
10. Angela Hamblin, "Is a Feminist Heterosexuality Possible?" in *Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions*, eds. Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (London: The Women's Press, 1983), pp. 105-123.
11. Op. cit. Rich "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"; see pages 638-40 for a list of some of the mechanisms by which women have been silenced, controlled and excluded.
12. Op. cit. Hamblin, "Is a Feminist Heterosexuality Possible?"; see pages 108-110 for an extremely helpful list of male definitions of "normal" sexuality, and pages 116-117 for some preliminary redefining of heterosexuality that women can do.
13. I want to be careful in my use of the word "egalitarianism." I am not proposing that all interactions should be completely even and equal, that power struggles will disappear from our relationships, or for that matter that power imbalances are always equally undesirable. I mean by egalitarianism only that both partners have equal say in defining what the rules of the relationship are to be, including how resources are to be divided, how conflicts are to be handled and who gets to make various decisions. A sexual analogy to this might involve completely mutual sadomasochism (s/m) or other role-playing: the crucial factor is that both parties equally define the setting, not that both parties are necessarily always defined as equals within it.
14. Sandra L. Bartky, Chapter 6 "Shame and Gender", *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 83-98; Laurel W. Richardson and Verta Taylor, eds., *Feminist Frontiers: Rethinking Sex, Gender and Society* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1983).
15. It is also, of course, conceivable that we will give up on particular men at times.
16. See Frances Cancian, "Gender Politics: Love and Power in the Public and Private

Spheres," in *Family in Transition*, ed. Arlene Skolnick and Jerome Skolnick (Boston: Scott Foresman and Company, 1989), pp. 219-230; Lillian Rubin, "Changing Expectations: New Sources of Strain" and "The Marriage Bed," *Worlds of Pain* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp. 114-154.

17. Jan Clausen, "My Interesting Condition," *Out/Look* 7 (Winter 1990): p. 13.
18. Op. cit. Norrgard, "The Myth of Heterosexual Privilege"; "The Reality of Heterosexual Privilege." I will rely on her analysis throughout much of this section.
19. Although I will not discuss the sexism behind intangible heterosexual privilege, it can be argued that much of the discrimination is based on stereotypes that conflate what a "real man" or "real woman" is with certain images of (hetero)sexuality.
20. Op. cit. Clausen, "My Interesting Condition," pp. 20-21; Clausen discusses the way in which being able to pass because of one's appearance plays a role in lesbian-bisexual tensions; her point is particularly useful here, given that the rules that have been set up miss a number of queers and mistakenly identify as queer a number of heterosexuals. See also Amanda Udis-Kessler, "Culture and Community: Thoughts on Lesbian-Bisexual Relations," *Sojourner: The Women's Forum* (December 1990, Vol 16 No. 4): pp. 11-12.
21. It also may not be uncomfortable at all. If folk knowledge about homosexuality is deeply ingrained enough, fitting queer stereotypes and devaluing homosexuality will be entirely "natural" in the same way that the male power to define is "natural."
22. Once again, the question of resource allocation should not be ignored, though I am not directly covering it here.
23. This approach to heterosexual privilege is not a particularly popular one, but if our routine public interactions with (or discussions about) our opposite-sex lovers are contributing to hetero/sexism, they represent an arena of potential change. I am not suggesting that we take risks with our same-sex lovers that endanger our lives or that we simply avoid all public displays of affection with our opposite-sex lovers. It does seem to me, however, that taking this aspect of heterosexual privilege seriously requires some thought and can clarify our commitment to transforming hetero/sexism. There is certainly room and necessity for creative strategizing on the subject.
24. It is particularly important that heterosexuals engage in this work, since they are seen as more neutral than sexual minorities with "special interests."