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# **“How many lesbians does it take to screw in a light bulb?”\***

JANET BING and DANA HELLER

## *Abstract*

*This paper explores how humor reveals shared aspects of a culture of lesbian communities in the U.S. For lesbians, jokes and other forms of humor are an active, narrative means of self-construction and community imagining that help lesbians negotiate their positions both inside and outside mainstream culture. Whether consciously or unconsciously, much of lesbian humor challenges the dominant culture by rejecting its definitions of and presuppositions about lesbians, and by making lesbian experience central to its understanding of normalcy. Whereas the term “lesbian joke” usually activates a sex frame for the dominant culture, much humor created by and for lesbians is based on a switch from a sex frame to a non-sex frame. When lesbian jokes “are” about sex, they affirm the right not only to private sex, but also to public representation. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of lesbian humor is what it does not include. For the most part there are no references to heterosexuality, to harassment or to oppression, but many references to a self-empowering, self-conscious community based on cooperative principles.*

*Keywords: Humor; jokes; lesbian; feminist; identity; culture.*

The question, “How many lesbians does it take to screw in a light bulb,” evokes a well-known type of joke, and, like other jokes of its kind, raises different expectations for different groups. One punch line is: “Seven. One to change it, three to organize the potluck, and three to film an empowering documentary.” The humor of this punch line might escape heterosexuals, gays and lesbians from other countries, or anyone who has little knowledge

of the development of gay and lesbian culture in the United States. Contrary to the widely recognizable structure of the light bulb joke, the less familiar “in-group” knowledge required for understanding the humor is precisely what gives the joke value as one of the means by which lesbians come to recognize themselves. Like many of the jokes created by lesbians for lesbians, this joke assumes the expectations and definitions of the lesbian community, rather than those of the dominant culture. Some of the humor derives from the fact that the joke takes a mainstream format and uses it to acknowledge, ignore, and ultimately undermine attempts by the mainstream culture to define lesbians. Lesbian humor thus affirms the values, beliefs and politics of the in-group and forms part of a shared stock of stories and myths that help form, disseminate, and preserve an imagined community.<sup>1</sup>

### **The shared culture behind lesbian humor**

Is there a shared culture behind lesbian humor or is such a thing as “lesbian community” an imagined, rather than actual community? As Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope (2000: 382) have observed, lesbian humor of the 1970’s and 80’s tended to presuppose that lesbians saw themselves as participants in a homogeneous lesbian culture with more or less similar experiences. Thus, Alix Dobkin could once joke that lesbians can always identify each other because “We all have the same junk on top of our dressers: crystals, shells, labryses, odd feathers, river rocks.” (Wolfe and Penelope 2000: 382). Her comment assumes shared experiences (even for lesbians who might not keep such objects on their dressers). It mitigates against the isolation and invisibility that lesbians experience in a homophobic culture that has, until recently, denied their presence and perpetuated an image of them as moral and social deviants. In opposition to these images, lesbian in-group jokes constitute an imagined cultural community based in resistance, transformation, and survival, enabling even those lesbians who may live “in the closet” to construct an image of belonging. Lesbian humor deals with seemingly universal topics that are by no means exclusive to lesbian experience, ranging from food, fashion, family and relatives, to politics, psychotherapy, and sexuality. Humor written by and for lesbians can take a number of different forms, including verbal jokes, graphic cartoons, comic books and “zines,” theater and skits, literature, musical lyrics, stand-up comedy, independent cinema, and witty slogans found on buttons, T-shirts, and bumper stickers. While the topics and forms may themselves be universal, their adaptation to

a lesbian sensibility, or to an exclusive vocabulary of lesbian codes, experiences, and referents, becomes part of the process by which lesbian humor helps lesbians negotiate their contradictory social location both inside and outside the so-called “mainstream” culture. Put another way, lesbian humor, like lesbian culture, lives both within and against the norms, values, and expectations of heterosexual society.

### **What is lesbian humor?**

As with any attempt to define a sub-genre of humor, an attempt to define the terms “lesbian joke” or “lesbian humor” is not simple. In early May of 2002, a search of the web on *google.com* for the topic “lesbian joke” resulted in 113,000 hits, and one for “lesbian humor” resulted in 250,000 hits, with many of the sites maintained for and by lesbians. This suggests that these terms have meaning for quite a few people. However, a closer look at these sites suggests that the terms have different values for different audiences. These differences reflect the tensions of a contradictory and highly fragmented cultural climate in which lesbianism may represent a consumer demographic, a genetic predisposition, a dangerous moral threat, the vanguard of liberal civil rights activism, an erotic fantasy of male heterosexuality, or some combination thereof. “Lesbian joke” may thus be defined as the positing of the lesbian as object, an object of humor whose difference emphasizes the opposition of female homosexuality to standards of so-called normality. In this case, the legitimization of “lesbian” depends on her construction as “other.” At the same time, “lesbian joke” or “lesbian humor” may be defined by the positing of the lesbian as subject, an agent who claims the right of self-definition. Lesbian jokes proceeding from this definition acknowledge and reject the definition of lesbian as “other,” and by noting the self-sufficiency of lesbians, judge society’s standards of normality to be irrelevant and artificial.

In an article about lesbian comic-book characters, Robin Queen (1997: 233) assumes a lesbian audience for the comics she discusses. She claims that these comic book characters “play on commonly held stereotypes accessible to queers in general and lesbians specifically. . . The characters are all created by lesbians for a predominantly lesbian audience, and thus the characters’ believability relies on social knowledge that is assumed to be shared. One of the most popular and enduring examples of this genre is



Figure 1.



Figure 1. (continued)

Alison Bechdel's (2002), *Dykes To Watch Out For*. Since 1983, *Dykes* has provided a visual chronicle of modern lesbian life and has become a cultural institution for lesbians in the U.S. and around the world. The comic focuses on Mo, a politically alert, perpetually angst-ridden women's bookstore employee, and her community of friends, lovers, and ex-lovers, which includes Lois (political activist and unapologetic womanizer), Sydney (a women's studies professor), Toni and Clarice (lesbian moms), and Ginger (the perennial graduate student). The humor of Bechdel's characters derives from her ability to draw on familiar narrative forms such as soap opera and adventure comics while incorporating, with unflinching honesty, warmth, and clarity, the mundane and highly particular complexities of lesbian self-fashioning and social interaction. For example, in "Food For Thought," (see Figure 1), Mo and Sydney are shown at cross-purposes in their commitments to lesbian culture and community as they share a quiet dinner at home. Mo, preparing a vegetarian meal of miso and tempeh, proclaims her visionary, leftist commitment to bringing about political reform and a peaceful world through library science. Sydney, her lover and a women's studies professor who is anxiously awaiting her tenure decision, dines on tortilla chips and beer, accuses a feminist academic colleague of negatively reviewing her work, and dives hungrily into the Rosie O'Donnell autobiography for the lesbian coming-out narrative that it reportedly contains. Here, the idea of a "shared" lesbian culture is challenged as the lovers are depicted together yet at the same time isolated in their own thoughts and desires, suggesting a cultural orientation loosely shaped by contradictory investments in personal survival and global survival, professional divisiveness and anti-war activism, self-righteous political correctness, and vulgar consumer culture.

In Roberta Gregory's comic book series, *Bitchy Butch: World's Angriest Dyke* (1999: 6) the hero, a butch lesbian named Ronnie (aka Bitchy Butch) is routinely enraged by heterosexual sales persons who refer to her as "sir." She goes ballistic when she learns that a former lesbian acquaintance has begun dating a man, and she nostalgically longs for the old days of lesbian-feminism when butch dykes had pride and when women "knew what sisterhood was all about." At one point, she moodily questions her own legitimacy as a dyke upon realizing that she has not had a date for over two years. Bitchy Butch seems to live in a perpetual state of pre-menstrual syndrome, and she does not see herself or her oppression in patriarchal society as amusing. On one hand, it is her irrepressible rage and her inability to laugh at herself that makes her character accessible and believable to gay

and lesbian audiences. At the same time, these qualities make her funny, as Roberta Gregory, herself appearing as a cartoon figure in the prologue to her fifth collection, explains to Bitchy (1999: 2): "I think the humor comes from the fact that often there ARE individuals who represent the most extreme characteristics presented as a stereotype of a group." By inserting herself into the *mise-en-scene* of the comic to debate the definition of lesbian humor with her own character, Gregory suggests that the question is one that lesbian humorists are themselves at pains to answer, often in highly self-reflexive contexts such as this example illustrates.

Holmes (1998: 1) proposes that humor is "intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and is perceived to be amusing by at least some participants." However, in the case of lesbian jokes, the amusement of the participants will vary, depending on their familiarity with lesbian culture, history, and community. By analogy to Raskin's (1985: 205–209) concept of ethnic jokes, lesbian jokes might be defined as those in which the main opposition involves a script (Raskin 1985: ch. 4) involving at least two women in a same-sex relationships. However, as the above example demonstrates, lesbian humor may also derive from the blurriness of sexual scripts, and anxieties produced by the instability of identity categories that we rely on to simplify human sexuality and classify persons as "gay," "bisexual," or "straight." Bitchy Butch wonders if one can rightly consider herself a lesbian if she has not been with a woman for over two years. Although readers may readily conclude that a celibate lesbian is a lesbian nevertheless, the comic articulation of the question is aimed at unraveling some of the knot-tier, existential questions concerning lesbian self-definition and public perception, questions that lesbians must examine periodically throughout their lives. Is the truth of lesbian existence expressed in sexual actions or is it expressed simply in being a lesbian, in claiming that identity for oneself regardless of sexual activity? Is a celibate lesbian an oxymoron? Unlike ethnicity, the truth of sexual desire cannot be tacitly referenced by a dialect, national characteristic or metonymic name such as O'Brien or McTaggart. How then can we define true lesbian jokes? On this point, an analogy might be helpful. Hempelmann (2003) makes a distinction between "true" Christian jokes, which would not be funny without a Christian script, and jokes which just happen to use Christians, but which would be funny even if the characters were replaced by members of another group. We might then assume a similar definition for "true lesbian jokes," that is, jokes which would not be funny in a different context. For example, if you substitute the



word “nun” for “lesbian” in the light bulb joke, it is still a possible joke, but it is not funny. Thus, we might say that the humor of lesbian jokes arises from lesbian scripts, or from those scenarios that validate the uniqueness of lesbian experience.

In many cases, the gay community and the heterosexual community have different conventional definitions of *lesbian joke*. In most jokes told about lesbians by heterosexuals, the scripts activated by the term *lesbian joke* are usually sex scripts with references to oral sex between women. This might explain why news reports of former Senator Bob Kerrey telling lesbian jokes to former President Bill Clinton at a New York restaurant in 2001 was widely reported and deplored in the media as being in poor taste (Sigesmund 2001). The assumption that lesbian jokes are jokes about oral sex also seems to predominate in Internet chat rooms when the topic of lesbian jokes arises. By this definition, the light bulb joke would not qualify as a lesbian joke because it refers to potluck dinners and empowering documentaries rather than to sex. The expectations for lesbian jokes told to lesbian and heterosexual audiences are thus different. Of course, lesbians are aware of both sets of expectations and much of their humor works by thwarting these categorical expectations, or by drawing attention to their limitations, blind spots, and inadequacies.

### **Lesbian jokes as self-defining**

While lesbian humor may help confer a sense of coherent community and identity, it is our contention that the jokes which lesbians share are, at the same time, inherently deconstructive, in the sense that they challenge the very idea of “lesbian” as a discreet identity and “lesbian community” as a coherent social formation. As Gever and Magnan (1991: 67) say: “An enormous rift exists between how we are portrayed and portray ourselves as deviant women in patriarchal, heterosexist societies and how we function and represent ourselves within our own subculture.” The challenge to outsiders’ definitions of “lesbian” became especially apparent in the 1990’s, as political and academic debates over the definition — and, indeed, even the existence of “lesbian identity” — led to the study of sexualities as multiple and “queer,” a move which produced a far more diverse notion of “lesbian community” (Rudy 2000). Lesbian jokes began to challenge the images upon which straight society — and even some lesbians — based its assumptions of who lesbians are and what they do. Lesbian jokes became

more visibly aimed at demonstrating that *lesbian* itself is an externally constructed category of identity, a fiction that has been used by some in the interests of demonizing and disenfranchising lesbians and by others in the interests of identity politics. For example, the fiction that *lesbian* is a determinate identity category can be useful when lesbians fight for civil rights recognition such as the right to marry or obtain health insurance for a partner. However, the fiction that *lesbian* is a determinate identity category can also be used against lesbians as, for example, in the Clinton military's "Don't ask, don't tell," policy, wherein it is permissible to *be* lesbian or gay so long as one does not engage in any lesbian or gay sexual act. This policy resulted in a dramatic increase in the persecution and discharge of self-identified gay and lesbian military personnel, as has been documented by Halley (1999) and the Stanford Law Library (<http://dont.stanford.edu/>).

Lesbian humor seems to be somewhat different from that of other racial, ethnic, and religious in-groups. Davies (1991: 189) reports that Jews and other groups tell and enjoy jokes about members of their own community "that impute negative qualities to them." He cites authors who claim that African-Americans tell jokes about blacks being lazy, sexually immoral, and chicken thieves, that Irish laugh at jokes about drunken Irishmen, and that some Jews make jokes to each other about their love of money. It is our belief that lesbian jokes, and the in-group jokes of other sexual minorities, cannot be assumed to function in precisely the same way. In part, this is because homosexual identity itself is a product of late scientific modernity, a recently invented category of social identity that is not delineated by the assumed marks of national character (e.g., Irish like to drink), long histories of literary and folkloric representation (e.g., Jews like money), economic struggle, or cultural legacies out of which the jokes mentioned by Davies arise. Moreover, unlike many other minority groups, lesbians and gays are not publicly identifiable by any particular physical characteristics, hair or skin color, names, language, or a religious manner of dress; rather, they often experience their "minority" status internally, privately, or in the guarded company of trusted companions. This means that lesbian humor is less likely to incorporate the negative images, characteristics, and qualities that the dominant culture imputes to them for the simple reason that the dominant culture does not recognize lesbians as a legitimate social group with discernible cultural features and characteristics. Thus, while lesbian humor is often self-mocking, it is rarely self-deprecating in the manner that Davies describes. However, like some "minority" jokes discussed by

Davies (1991: 193), lesbian jokes may reinterpret negative stereotypes of lesbians in a positive way.

For example, lesbian humor often works to challenge the dominant culture's negative sexualization of lesbians or the dehumanizing reduction of the lesbian to sexual actor. Lesbian comics challenge this tendency in different ways. Karen Williams (1998), an African-American lesbian stand-up comic, jokes about being too tired to have sex with her dates if she has not had a good nap that day. Williams' humor plays with stereotypes of sexuality, race, and aging. Some lesbian jokes present a challenge to the homosexual/heterosexual divide by demonstrating the arbitrary and contradictory behaviors that make lesbians as a group impossible to define, to fix, and to recognize only in terms of a sex act. For example, almost all lesbians have heard this joke,

(1) Question: What does a lesbian bring on the second date?

Answer: A U-Haul.

When one of the authors told this joke to a group of self-identified heterosexual academics, nobody in the group "got" the joke, and when asked about how they interpreted it, one male reported that he assumed that the purpose of the U-haul was so that one of the women could leave her husband for a lesbian relationship. For him, clearly, the joke was mystifying rather than funny.

This joke *is* funny to lesbians, and to anyone who is familiar with complex emotional dynamics of lesbian courtship, because it challenges the tendency to reduce lesbianism to physiology, redefining it instead in terms of the emotional euphoria that often compels lesbian coupling. The joke plays on the idea that lesbians tend to disregard bourgeois courtship rituals and jump into "marriages" quickly and impulsively, acting on passion rather than reason. The question that leads into the joke sets up an expectation: What does a lesbian bring on a second date? Listeners will very likely begin thinking about sex toys, sexual paraphernalia, or objects that carry sexual reference. However, what makes the joke funny is that it thwarts these expectations, establishing no frame of reference for what lesbians do in bed, but rather what they do at home. In other words, the joke defines lesbianism as ultimately domestic in its aims, geared toward the establishment of a household. This is what Raskin (1985: 149) would call a "standard opposition of a non-sex-related script with a sex-related script."

The U-Haul joke also plays on the idea that lesbians are self-reliant. Lesbians don't call movers; they rent U-Hauls and move themselves. Thus,

what makes this joke funny for lesbians is that it undermines the externally imposed definition of lesbianism. It shows lesbians the extent to which they themselves are conditioned to expect certain kinds of responses based on homophobic or sexist stereotypes in a society that refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the families and partnerships that lesbians form with one another.

Because the humor in this joke comes from replacing a sexual script with a non-sexual one, like much of lesbian humor, this joke is the opposite of much of the sexual humor discussed in chapter 5 of Raskin (1985). A script switch is common for much of sexual humor, but in most cases, a non-sexual script is introduced, and a switch is made to a sexual script, as the following well-known joke discussed extensively in Raskin (1985: 100ff).

- (2) “Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.  
“No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in.”

By contrast, the humor in many lesbian jokes is just the opposite with the expectation of a sexual frame being replaced by a non-sexual frame, as in the light bulb joke and the U-Haul joke. One reason for this might be because of the stereotyped expectation that a lesbian joke is, by definition, about sex. For example, when speaking about jokes to a local chapter of the American Association of University Women, one of the authors discussed this joke by Kate Clinton (2002).

- (3) “If women should have to be in the military service, they should only be lesbians who process. We would never get around to having a war. A war? You get the beaches wheelchair-accessible, then we’ll talk.”

Only one or two women in the fairly large audience laughed; the majority simply looked puzzled. One woman raised her hand and said, “I don’t get it. What does this joke have to do with sex?” A number of other women in the audience nodded agreement with the questioner. As with the U-haul joke, the frame or expectation for “lesbian” for many in this audience included an expectation of sex. For more savvy listeners, however, Kate Clinton’s use of the word ‘lesbian’ evokes a more complex set of values and preferences, values that include compassion for the disabled (“You get the beaches wheelchair-accessible) and a rejection of the importance placed on war by the military-industrial complex. As with Bechdel’s (2002) character Mo in *Dykes to Watch out For*,” Clinton’s humor derives from lesbians’ image of their communities as driven by well-intentioned, but utopian—or impractical—political passions.

Another common belief about lesbians is that they possess “gay-dar,” or some secret, intuitive way of recognizing and zeroing in on each other for the purposes of friendship and dating. A number of lesbian humorists explore the problem of how lesbians can recognize each other and ascertain whether someone who looks like she might be a lesbian is actually a lesbian. In response to a question about this conundrum, Lea DeLaria (1995: 64) presents this dialogue between lesbians:

(4) Q: I’ve seen this woman I really like, but I have no idea how to approach her.

A: This is THE perfect lesbian question. Lesbians have no idea how to approach each other. If lesbians had to procreate, there would be no people in this world.

To the same question, Sara Cytron and Harriet Malinowitz (Flowers 1995: 39–40) respond:

(5) Sometimes you meet a woman and you ‘think’ she’s a lesbian, but you’re not really sure. So we have these little exchanges in code. Like you might casually say, “You know anybody driving to Provincetown this summer? With her cat?”. . . But an easier way to find out is to go to someone’s apartment, look inside her kitchen cabinet, and count how many Celestial Seasonings herbal teas she has. If there are more than six, she’s probably a lesbian.”

Shelley Robert (1998) has similar advice:

(6) Ask to see the prints in her wallet . . . should she produce prints of her pussycats, Hepsabah and Egregious, erase all scintilla of doubt from your mind. The more kitty color prints, the surer you can be. Don’t let pictures of tiny tykes or grandtykes fool you. Many dykes have tykes. Cat pictures . . . You want to know ask to see the feline photos. (Quoted at <http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/ip/sigs/life/gay/dating/detect> )

How are these ordinary domestic interests any different from those of heterosexuals? In fact, they aren’t, but if the heterosexual community accepted this similarity, it would be more difficult to categorize lesbians as “the other.”

### **Lesbian jokes as challenging strict categorization**

One significant aspect of homophobia is that it requires a clear division between the orientations of homosexuality and heterosexuality. One aspect

of lesbian jokes is that they destabilize this homosexual/heterosexual opposition and show it to be a fiction. This fiction of a determinate categorical difference, widely circulated through the media and referenced even in supposedly “gay-friendly” contexts such as the popular television situation comedy *Will and Grace* is anything but innocent; it can be strategically appropriated (as it has by right-wing fundamentalist groups in the United States) as a means of politically barring gays and lesbians from attaining full civil rights. In the United States it is still the case that most lesbians have no protection at work and can lose their jobs or even their lives simply by being identified as lesbian. Although most leading psychological and medical institutions no longer regard lesbianism as a deviant orientation, it was in fact the notion of disease that gave ontological distinction to the category *lesbian*, an invention by medical specialists of the 19th century who sought to classify and categorize deviant social types. Despite post-Stonewall advances,<sup>2</sup> the category has retained its association with illness and deviance to the extent that some state courts have felt justified in taking children away from lesbian mothers, as in the 1993 case *Bottoms vs. Bottoms* in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

This routine by Robin Tyler cleverly deconstructs this underlying assumption of essential differences:

- (7) “If homosexuality is a disease, let’s all call in queer to work.”  
“Hello, can’t work today. Still queer.”

The joke suggests ways in which queers might use sanctioned homophobia against itself in a manner consistent with De Certeau’s (1974) notion of poaching, or the everyday tactic by which workers beat the system at its own rules for their own enjoyment. What’s funny about the joke, of course, is that everyone — gay or straight — has probably at least one time called in sick for work when in fact he or she was not sick. The twist, however, is that Tyler highlights the absurdity of the idea of homosexuality as “sickness” by taking to an extreme the illogic inherent in that assumption. Indeed, being “queer” is a condition that one does not recuperate from after a day or two of bed rest and plenty of liquids. Tyler’s humor turns the marginalization and discrimination that gays and lesbians often encounter within the labor system against that very system.

Although *lesbian* was originally defined as deviance, clearly lesbians do not recognize themselves in the definitions or names imposed from the outside. Lesbian jokes are often jokes that implicitly ask: Am I that name? By positioning lesbian identity and community simultaneously inside and

outside the expectations of a dominant culture, these jokes create a cultural self-awareness not unlike W.E.B. DuBois' (2002) famous "double consciousness" of the African-American, or the "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of the other, and measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Lesbian jokes both reflect and resist the dominant cultural definitions and they suggest a self-awareness that is far more mobile, decentered, and contradictory than is generally assumed.

### Differences between Lesbian and Feminist Humor

Just as lesbian jokes challenge the essential heterosexual/homosexual division, many feminist jokes challenge the essential male/female division, and for the same reasons. Sandra Bem (1993) shows how women have been denied their rights because of biological essentialism (the belief that all men and women are essentially different), strict categorization (the belief that all members of a category share certain inherent characteristics), and gender polarization, "the ubiquitous organization of social life around the distinction between male and female." Like gender polarization, homosexual/heterosexual-polarization establishes (in the words of Bem) "a cultural connection . . . between sex and virtually every other aspect of human experience," including those that have nothing to do with sex. Similarly, biological determinism (the belief that biology is destiny) suggests that these groups are *categorically* different, and thus should be treated differently on the basis of category membership rather than on the basis of individual abilities.

Despite the similarities in their relationships to more powerful groups, women who identify themselves primarily as feminists, and those who identify themselves primarily as lesbians, (not always mutually exclusive groups) tend to challenge the dominant group in different ways. Much of feminist humor makes fun of male behavior and thus emphasizes differences between males and females (Bing 2001), as in the following three jokes taken from a web page called "Let's Insult Men!":

- (8) How can you tell if a man is sexually excited?  
IF HE IS BREATHING
- (9) How many men does it take to change a roll of toilet paper?  
WE DON'T KNOW. IT'S NEVER BEEN DONE

- (10) What is a man's idea of helping with the housework?

LIFTING HIS LEG FOR YOU TO VACUUM UNDER IT

All of these jokes criticize men, challenging male illusions of superiority, but by doing so, they also make men central. Lesbian jokes are usually different. Unlike feminist jokes, which often point out the foibles and deficiencies of men, lesbian jokes make little or no reference to men or to injustices imposed by a heterosexual and male-dominated society. By making men central, even in a negative, derogatory way, feminist humor directs its energies toward men and maintains an aggressive connection. However, as Sarah Hoagland, points out, "Lesbians love lesbians, so some lesbian energy and focus is not accessible to men" (1988: 5). Contrary to the common stereotype of lesbians as man-hating—which would require energy—lesbian humor suggests that lesbians have invested their energies in other lesbians. As a group, lesbian jokes such as the following are indifferent to men and to the heterosexual community altogether, including the oppression, harassment and violence that have historically been directed against lesbians.<sup>3</sup> Here, for example, are some widely quoted lines from *Robert's Rules of Lesbian Dating* (1998):

- (11) It is never a good idea to ask someone to marry you before the first date.

(p. 1)

A lesbian date usually lasts at least three years. (p. 6)

A lesbian one-night stand, on the other hand, is over in mere months.

(p. 7)

If you have to talk about your ex, give your date equal time to talk about hers.

That way each of you will be bored only about half the time. (pp. 52–53)

Arousal, attraction, complete panic, love and OD'ing on Hershey Bars all feel pretty much the same.

They do not, however, call for exactly the same response regardless of which one you are enjoying. (pp. 118–119)

Like the light bulb joke and the U-haul joke, these lines reference and satirize the lesbian community, and make no reference to men or the straight community. There are some lesbian jokes that are openly anti-male; however, they tend to be in the minority, like Suzanne Westenhoefer's response to a heckler who wanted to know if she got "that way" because she had some sort of bad sexual experience with a guy. Westenhoefer (1995: 181) responded,



“... Yeah-like, if that’s all it took, the entire female population would be gay, sir, and I’d be here talking about the weather, all right?”

More typical, however, are Chris Lanter’s (2002) “10 Questions Most Commonly Asked of Lesbians and the Answers You’ll never Hear.”

(12) Q: What exactly, do two women do together? (Usually asked by a woman)

A: It takes too long to explain. A lesbian quickie lasts hours. We lay there and discuss politics until we figure it out. But if you like I’ll show you. How about this evening at six?

(13) Q: Which one of you is the man? (Usually asked by a man)

A: We’re lesbian, not confused. Look it up!

Although they make fun of the discomfort and ignorance of heterosexuals, these two jokes still keep lesbians central. Addressing women, Barecca (1991: 193) emphasizes “the importance of defining and using our own humor” and claims that humor is “a powerful way to make ourselves heard.” (p202) Lesbian humor provides a good model for self-definition and affirmation. At the same time, lesbian jokes reject the idea that lesbian culture needs to be heard or affirmed by outsiders.

There are exceptions, of course. Diane DiMassia’s (1999) cartoon creation, Hothead Paisan, Homicidal, Lesbian Terrorist, a well-known contemporary of the above-mentioned Bitchy Butch, leaves a trail of bloodied male body parts as she rages against the absurd heterosexism of the mass media and injustices of the dominant political culture (see Figure 2). However, her outbursts stand in sharp contrast to the caring, tolerant behavior of her cat, Chicken, and her friend and mentor, Roz. Both of them appreciate Hothead for who she is, yet concentrate on their own interests and demonstrate none of Hothead Paisan’s obsession with (and fury against) heterosexual society. Like Bitchy Butch, Hothead Paisan provides lesbian readers a cathartic release of the frustrations and anger that they may experience in their day-to-day encounters with the straight world. Fueled by caffeine, Hothead merrily acts out the most savage revenge fantasies, decapitating greedy corporate executives, castrating rapists, and blowing up right-wing Christian fundamentalists. She sharply contradicts the 1970’s image of lesbians as peace-loving, herbal-tea-drinking pacifists. But this is precisely what makes Hothead Paisan funny to lesbian readers; she allows them to laugh at all manner of extreme stereotypes that define lesbians as well as their perceived “enemies.” Hothead’s urban guerilla antics and her psychotic rantings straddle the boundary between the mainstream image of

# HOTHEAD PAISAN



**HOMICIDAL LESBIAN TERRORIST**

Figure 2.

lesbians as mentally deranged man-haters, and lesbians' genuine desires for agency and control over their lives and environments. (Heller 1993)

Although lesbian jokes tend to ignore the male/female divide, they do not ignore the masculine/feminine divide, as the dynamics of gendering within lesbian communities is part of a long, rich cultural tradition. For example:

(14) Question: What can two femmes do in bed?

Answer: Each other's makeup. (DeLaria 1995: 63)

On one hand, this joke functions to acknowledge the on-going vitality of butch/femme role play in lesbian communities, an aspect of lesbian culture that has been criticized by straight feminists as an example of lesbian internalization of patriarchal gender oppression. The joke ignores that critique and engages with gender politics that are highly specific to lesbian communities. Specifically, it reflects the commonly held butch perception of femmes as essentially narcissistic, sexually incompatible with one another, and thus dependent on butches for "true" sexual satisfaction. This joke, like so many other "in-group" lesbian jokes, participates in the debates that were generated by the 1980's "sex wars," a time when divisions between feminist prescriptions for "politically correct" sex were sharply rejected by sex-positive lesbian activists, many of whom had formed new political coalitions with gay men in response to the AIDS crisis. The 1980's was a time when lesbian communities began to openly acknowledge and represent the diversity of sexual practice and gender orientation that makes lesbian identity irreducible to any fixed set of rules, codes, or expectations. Lesbians began to acknowledge the humor inherent in the seemingly limitless possibilities of lesbian erotic self-definition, as is evident in Bechdel's 1986 comic strip, "Butch and Femme" (see Figure 3). Lesbian humor of this period frequently addressed the divisiveness that existed within many lesbian communities over the value of butch/femme roles.

### **If being lesbian isn't primarily about sex, why are there so many jokes about sex?**

Having claimed that lesbian jokes are about much more than sex, we now want to consider why so many lesbian jokes *do* focus on sex, specifically on lesbian oral sex. For example:

(15) Question: Why can't lesbians go on a diet and wear makeup at the same time?

Answer: You can't eat Jenny Craig with Mary Kay on your face.

# Dykes To Watch Out For



From *More Dykes to Watch Out For*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988.

Figure 3.

Although this joke refers quite explicitly to lesbian oral sex, it also evokes and criticizes a culture that commodifies women's bodies and eroticizes their engagements with consumer culture. The humor of the punch line derives from its ambivalence in relation to the public disciplining of female bodies perpetuated by the contemporary cosmetics and diet industries. The joke "buys in," so to speak, yet at the same time subverts standards of female physical attractiveness and body image based in passivity and narcissistic engagements with the heterosexual "beauty system."<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the joke is a good example of how lesbian humor participates in such systems and at the same time revolutionizes them, in this particular case by repositioning the distinctively "feminine" pleasures associated with these beauty icons within a scenario of lesbian sexual pleasure. There are countless examples of such jokes, a good illustration of which is Kate Clinton's (2002) recollections of her Catholic girlhood and her gratitude for the strength and dexterity that her tongue developed from manipulating the communion wafer in her mouth. Here again we see how lesbian humor often inscribes itself within repressive social and ideological institutions, particularly those that eclipse and silence gays and lesbians, precisely in order to validate gay and lesbian bodies and voices. Clinton positions her lesbianism graciously within the traditions and rituals of Catholicism, appropriating the meaning of these rituals in an affirmation of lesbian sexuality. Clearly, such strategic moves in lesbian joke-telling view the lesbian body as a site of struggle. However, it would be incorrect to assume that lesbian humor assumes a lesbian body liberated from social constraints and unfettered by the normalizing functions of heterosexual consumer culture and conventional religious practice. Rather, it is our contention that lesbian humor and joke-telling challenge the categorical oppositions that would define the lesbian body as unnatural or abnormal by subverting the very terms of sexual nature and social normality.

For example, another well-known lesbian joke indirectly refers to natural female genital odor and at the same time critiques a culture obsessed with "feminine hygiene," or the marketing of commodities designed to sterilize and normalize female bodies.

(16) Question: What do you call an open can of tuna in a lesbian household?

Answer: Potpourri.

On one hand, this joke assumes the lesbian body is a "natural" body, a body resistant to the unhealthy shame and self-loathing that women are

induced to experience in relation to their bodies, and specifically in relation to their vaginas. On the other hand, the joke references an unnatural displacement of erotic gratification onto the consumer practices of house-keeping and home beautification. From a Foucauldian perspective, we might argue that lesbian humor acknowledges the ubiquitous force of the “repressive hypothesis,” or the possibility that the ‘resistant’ body is no less a product of cultural discipline than the ‘dominated’ body of ‘gender normalization’”(Radner 1995: 141). In other words, the ways in which people resist the dominant culture are ultimately determined by the dominant culture. By contextualizing the lesbian body within current consumer culture, this joke suggests that while lesbian desires may be very particular, commodity fetishism is the cultural equalizer through which all consumers — regardless of sexual orientation — experience their sexuality. More to the point, however, is that lesbian humor acknowledges the ineluctable presence of the lesbian body in lesbian experience

In other words, lesbian humor refuses the political erasure of lesbian bodies. By actively writing the lesbian body into existence and by acknowledging its pleasures, lesbian humor defies the homophobic violence that is so often enacted on lesbian bodies, as was the case with two lesbian campers murdered in a Virginia state park (Price 2002).<sup>5</sup> Lesbian jokes that make unhesitating use of the otherwise vulgar slang designating female genitalia, or jokes that refer to lesbian orality, tongues, acts of oral sex, are jokes that claim the body as somehow central to lesbian experience and resist the limits imposed on gay and lesbian language and bodies. Such jokes are enactments of the feminist belief that the personal is the political. Moreover, they create a connection between orality as a condition of public speech acts and orality as a condition of private sex acts. Lesbian sexual pleasure is thus understood as an extension of lesbian communication and the imagining of community. By humorous references to oral sex, lesbians affirm their rights not only to private sex, but also to public representation.

### **The shared culture behind lesbian humor**

Lesbian communities may be imagined, but this does not mean that they are imaginary. Despite multiple differences of race, ethnicity, gender-orientation, age, and class, there is evidence for a lesbian humor community in the sense of Carrell (1997), and such a humor community helps explain the popularity of Alison Bechdel, Karen Williams, Shelly Roberts, Kate

Clinton, Margaret Cho, Karen Williams, Suzanne Westerman and Diane DiMassa as well as the existence of anthologies of gay and lesbian humor such as Larson and Carr (1990) and Flowers (1995). Although "culture" has been defined as total way of life including "shared behavior patterns, values, norms, and material objects," (Rogers and Steinfatt 1999: 79), it has also been defined as the sum total of stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves (Geertz 1973). Humor represents one of the story-telling modes that contribute to the on-going process of "cultivating" culture, or of actively enriching ourselves and our communities. Given the diversity among lesbians, the fact that lesbian lives have often been lived in secret, and that the fact that lesbian relationships have often been erased from history, this process of cultivation has been difficult to imagine, let alone document and legitimize. If we define culture in terms of elite cultural discourses, or exhortations of the "best that has been said and thought," a legitimate lesbian culture seems doomed to remain invisible. However, if we retain a progressive sense of culture as a set of values and assumptions that finds expression in the genuine voices, creative energies, and desires of a community, then we can begin to record the processes by which these values are negotiated, not only through social contacts, but also through various media, including films, T.V., songs, and various forms of humor, including jokes. Needless to say, it is necessary to understand both the notion of a culture-in-the-making, and the shared values negotiated through it, in order to understand the jokes and find them funny.

However, just as important as what these jokes include, is what they do not include. Most of the jokes we have discussed include no references to man-hating, harassment, or oppression. They presuppose a self-empowering, self-conscious community based on cooperative principles. They acknowledge, but do not share the wider community's equation of *lesbian* solely with "sex" ("screwing" in light bulbs notwithstanding). At the same time, lesbian humor in the United States does not blind itself to the violence (rhetorical and physical), social inequality, and political alienation that lesbians continue to experience in the United States. Lesbian humor does not presume to be able to offer any escapes or immediate solutions to this problem; instead, it challenges the cultural biases and distortions by which lesbians are mocked as hyper-sexed and deviant; it mocks the illogical claims used to dehumanize lesbians and to deny them basic civil and human rights. And in that sense, lesbian humor constitutes a mode of social critique that offers transformative possibilities. That said, we will conclude this paper by revisiting the question of our title, "How many lesbians does it take to screw

in a light bulb?” The answer, “Seven. One to change it, three to organize the potluck, and three to film an empowering documentary,” reveals a lesbian community different from popular stereotypes. For a community whose very visibility and survival has depended largely on its ability to continuously organize itself, document itself, feed itself, and attend to its internal conflicts and inequities, this joke, like many others jokes that lesbians share, will refer at once to the miracle of lesbian survival and to the personal and political price that lesbians have paid for that survival.

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## Notes

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\* The authors are listed alphabetically and contributed equally to this paper. We have attempted to give credit to the authors of the jokes quoted, but since jokes, like recipes, get “passed along,” we may not have always been successful, and apologize for any omissions. We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers as well as the following people for comments on earlier versions: John Broderick, Caroline Dunlop, Charles Ruhl, Joanne Scheibman, and Heidi Schlipphacke.

1. Here we are invoking (and extending) Benedict Anderson’s (1991) definition of nation as “imagined community,” a concept which has been widely applied in analyzing the particular styles according to which political communities based on ethnicity, race, religion, and sexuality are imagined. Both authors of this article are white, middle-class American academics, and this paper reflects—to a significant extent—our ethnicity, social class, and social contacts. There are, of course, lesbians in every subculture in the U.S., and humor (such as that of Karen Williams and Margaret Cho) often combines issues of race, ethnicity, and sexuality. That, however, is the topic for another paper.
2. “Stonewall” refers to the event that many historians regard as a landmark in the 20th century Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights Movement. In June, 1969, the Stonewall Inn, a New York City bar frequented by gay, lesbian, and transgender clientele became an international symbol of gay militancy when, for the first time, homosexual patrons fought back against New York City police who came to raid the bar and arrest gay individuals.
3. An exception to the indifference which has tended to characterize lesbian jokes is evident in the more recent spate of “breeder” jokes. “Breeder” is a derogatory term used by some gays and lesbians to describe heterosexuals, both male and female. The term has the effect of reducing heterosexuality, and heterosexuals by extension, to their base, animal function. Implicit in the term is the assumption that gays and lesbians are possessed of a more enlightened humanity and a refined sense of pleasure. “Breeder” jokes tend to turn the table on heterosexual stereotypes of lesbians and gays, thus challenging presumptions of sexual normalcy. For example:



- Q: How do breeders have sex?  
 A: Yuck! Who cares?  
 Q: What do breeders do for foreplay?  
 A: Take their underwear off.  
 Q: What's a breeder's best pick-up line?  
 A: Oh, baby, I'm sooo drunk.

4. See Dean MacCannell and Juliet Flower MacCannell's (1987) "The Beauty System". In *The Ideology of Conduct*. Armstrong, Nancy and Leonard Tennenhouse (eds.), New York: Methuen, 206–238.
5. In April 2002, Darrel Rice was indicted for the murder of Lollie Winans and Julie Williams and was charged with four counts of capital murder, two of which allege that he murdered the women specifically because they were lesbian.

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