

## Bonnie Zimmerman interviewed by Susan Sayer in San Diego

November 15th, 1994

In 1973 Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*<sup>1</sup> was published with the following dedication:

*This book is for my mother  
who should've been a lesbian  
And for my daughter in hopes  
she will be*

Here *Lesbian Nation* metaphorically represented the responsibility towards lesbianism Johnston assumed for all women. (To me the subtitle bears provocative resemblance to a **final solution**.) The debate surrounding the term lesbian was roughly divided into arguments for an inclusivity and arguments for an exclusivity in definitional terms. There are however considerable overlaps between these definitions as well as inconsistencies within them.

When the concept of *Lesbian Nation* was being framed what were the criteria for access to it and was there consensus amongst lesbians as to what forms this responsibility toward lesbianism should take?

I think the criteria were always contested and the history of lesbian politics in the 1970s are largely about what the criteria are. There were two fundamental criteria. First, that one be biologically female, and secondly that one be self-identified as lesbian. Beyond that, I guess there was a third criterion which is that one be feminist, although the definition of feminism was perhaps so taken-for-granted that it was not specified precisely. And it was all three of those criteria that really were challenged in what we now call the 'lesbian sex wars.' For example, the criterion of what constitutes a biological female being challenged by transsexuals, such as Sandy Stone and the Olivia Records controversy in the late 70s.<sup>2</sup> That one must be self-identified lesbian was challenged by bisexual women and the third, that one be feminist, that question became 'what

is the definition of feminism?' I suppose the feminist question was most contested around the issue of lesbian sadomasochism. Those debates shattered any notion of any kind of unified lesbian community or lesbian nation, so I think that probably answers the second part of the question as well, which is that there was perhaps an assumed consensus but one that from the very moment of its assumption was constantly being challenged and rewritten.

Even earlier than that, I recall perhaps the most intense arguments taking place around male children – the question of male children and female space – so in ways that I think have become fairly commonplace to talk about in the 1990s, any notion of an inclusive community was actually a veiled way of creating a community that excluded – there was always a question about who was to be excluded, rather than who was to be included, I think. That's probably where some of the seeds of the destruction of the notion of *Lesbian Nation* comes from.

Or the construction. It's interesting, because as you say, as soon as the term was there, it was immediately contested and it assumed something, but also the criteria began to be defined as to what was not included, or what could not be included.

*Lesbian Nation* is a metaphor of community which you have used, for example, the dedication in your 1990 book *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969 – 1989*,<sup>3</sup> is "To the women of Lesbian Nation." You also refer in your paper "Perverse Reading: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature,"<sup>4</sup> to lesbians who "look beyond individual relationships to female communities that do not need or want men" (1993, 139). Is this vision a practical objective or rather part of a literary strategy by those you refer to as lesbians

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Johnston, *Lesbian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> For a strongly partisan view of the controversy see Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 101-103, 201-202.

<sup>3</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, "Perverse Reading: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature," in Susan J. Wolfe and Julia P. Stanley, eds., *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993).

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“who employ the metaphor-seeking imagination?”<sup>5</sup> (1992, 10).

I would say that to the extent that *Lesbian Nation* was a literary strategy, a metaphor, it worked. Problems arose when it became an attempt to create a practical reality. Questions like practical material choices, how we live our lives in the real world, become tied up with the notions of community and nation. There were attempts to make it a practical objective, to create communities of women, country communes, urban collectives etc, but it always has had its potency primarily as a metaphor, a vision. I suppose that’s a natural way of thinking as a literary critic – in metaphors. Language can be stronger than reality in some ways.

At the 1994 Australian Lesbian Confest, lesbian transsexuals – some of whom had been members of the Brisbane organising collective – were ordered out when the conference began. Currently, there are heated debates about whether lesbian transsexuals are to be included or excluded as members of the Lesbian Space Project in Sydney.

Well, I think that it’s become so clear now that there are certain rules about inclusion and exclusion at lesbian gatherings and conferences, but it continues to be a point of considerable struggle and conflict and particularly now – I’m perhaps anticipating what we’re going to be talking about – as lesbian is being redefined as part of an umbrella identity or concept called ‘queer,’ that nobody should be excluded and it becomes to me very questionable as to how you can ever talk about lesbian anything. So I think in some ways the issue has been resolved and in other ways it has been opened up again in new terms.

You express interest in the notion that lesbian textual practices create (or lesbian readers perceive) a narrative space in which writer and reader, or writer and assumed audience, or female character, come together in relationship

defined as lesbian (1993, 10). Women, however, continue to articulate political positions which could be identified on what Adrienne Rich defined in 1983 as a lesbian continuum. Furthermore you make the point that current lesbian criticism stands at an intersection between lesbian separatism and reconstruction (1993, 3). Is it therefore possible to speak of a narrative space called lesbian? (1993, 10).

Well I continue to think that it’s not only possible, but necessary. In part because, as I tried to argue in *The Safe Sea of Women*, I think that a good deal of what we have come to understand as lesbian feminism, as lesbian nation, as lesbian culture was actually created by literature. Of all the art forms, literature has been the most successful product of lesbian feminism. In the absence of any kind of recognizable lesbian politics, exclusively lesbian politics, lesbian community practices and the fact that there are very few lesbian businesses or spaces that have sustained themselves over time, it is literature that continues to be a profoundly important place in which lesbian identities are constructed and deconstructed and contested and everything else. So it seems to me that it continues to be extremely important to talk about what a lesbian narrative space, a lesbian aesthetic, a lesbian point of view might be. I have become increasingly skeptical that a lesbian narrative space is simply defined by the notion of the same, of similarity. This theory is very interesting but raises a lot of questions to me about the role of differences within lesbian relationships. There are always going to be questions about the difference between – I think this is the implication of what you’re saying when you bring up Adrienne Rich – the differences between a lesbian space and a feminist space and those boundaries have always been sort of wishy-washy, which in some ways makes sense.

I think that the lesbian narrative space is primarily a reader’s space more than it is a writer’s space. *Written on the Body*<sup>6</sup> really clarified and confirmed that for me. Lesbians read that novel

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<sup>5</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, “Lesbians Like This and That: Some Notes on Lesbian Criticism for the Nineties.” Sally Munt. Ed., *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and*

*Cultural Readings* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

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and construct it as a lesbian novel. Heterosexuals I think do not, or they may, but do not feel the same intensity of identification and I've listened to enough people talk about the novel to see a real difference in that. So I think that it is the intervention of the reader in the text more than anything else that creates a lesbian narrative space. Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian*<sup>7</sup> is just about my favourite book of lesbian criticism because she shares many of my views as opposed to many of the other people doing lesbian criticism these days. She has a wonderful discussion of how Greta Garbo was constructed as a lesbian icon and again it has very little to do with what Greta Garbo actually did or did not do – it has a lot to do with how she is perceived by lesbians – that's the kind of lesbian space that I think I am most interested in and most convinced by.

I am pleased to hear you talk about the reader's space being also a contested space. I wrote a paper which deconstructed one of my own short pieces of fiction in relation to an argument put forward by Lynne Pearce,<sup>8</sup> who talks about the feminist writer constructing the reader as ally; so that the feminist reader is allied to the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. I contested that feminist 'necessity' and argued that in "Kiss,"<sup>9</sup> I had created a deliberate challenge to an assumed allied reader response. So for me when you are talking about a reader's space, it is still a contested space, it is still one where a lot of negotiation takes place and it is not necessarily one of alliance with the author as narrator and/or protagonist.

Not necessarily, in fact my article "Perverse Reading" is really about how lesbians enter texts where perhaps the writer has created some tiny little flaw, from the writer's point of view, in the

fabric and that flaw tears open a space for the lesbian reader. I feel like we do that all the time.

I think that writers use spatial metaphors all the time in different ways that correlate to their particular social positions. Clearly, Bachelard<sup>10</sup> has analyzed the poetics of space and from a totally male point of view. In teaching women in literature I constantly talk about the ways in which space is represented and becomes a force within the text itself and for women that has the mixed sense of the domestic space that entraps women and the private space that empowers her. But I think lesbian writers use space in ways that are different from heterosexual women – creating spaces where they have not been perceived to have existed – in isolation from dominant heterosexual society, a place where possibilities can be created that do not exist in the real world. I really do think that space is a profound metaphor for lesbian writers. This has a lot to do with the fact that we were scattered in such a way that we must create a concept of space because that space is not given to us. Again, that goes back to the power of *Lesbian Nation* as a metaphor – as long as we don't take it too seriously!

Now I'd like to move on to an idea which has some bearing on what you are saying about the power of the metaphor of *Lesbian Nation*. That is, to the politics of lesbian and gay involvement in *Queer Nation*. Andrew Kopkind writes: "*Queer Nation*, a metaphor of the 1980s was formed on the ACT UP model to deal militantly with gay issues . . ." <sup>11</sup> (600). Viewed from this perspective Kopkind has suggested that to date the gay liberation movement has been dominated by a radical gay minority and that the gay majority has not yet been heard from. *Lesbian Nation* (at least by Jill Johnston's formulation), and *Queer Nation* may thus be seen as the radical front of the

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<sup>7</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Lynne Pearce, "Dialogic Theory and Women's Writing," *Working Out: New Directions for Women's Studies* Hilary Hinds, Ann Phoenix and J. Stacey eds., (London: Falmer Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Susan Sayer, "Kiss," in *Me and Marilyn Monroe* Cathie Dunsford ed., (Wellington: Daphne Brasell Associates, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Kopkind, "The Gay Moment." *The Nation*. May 3, (1993): 591-602. At the time of writing Kopkind reported that half the gay men in San Francisco were said to be infected with HIV. The impact of AIDS Kopkind suggests, is the destruction of an affectional community very much like an ethnic or national community (600).

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lesbian/gay rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s respectively. Do you agree with Kopkind? If so, what are the implications of a majority gay politics of conservatism?

With his conceptualization of Queer Nation?

More the idea that so far we have heard from a radical lesbian and gay minority.

No, actually I don't. I think that what this overlooks has been the gay civil rights movement which has been an assimilationist movement rather than a marginalising, minoritising movement. *Lesbian Nation* never really quite correlated to a militant group. But if we have ACT UP and Queer Nation as representatives of a highly radical gay minority what they are really countering, and they are really quite articulate about this, is the large primarily middle-class gay and lesbian civil rights movement that is identified with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and with the groups that organize the marches on Washington, the big Christopher Street Stonewall march last year, whose goals have been assimilation into the mainstream of American society. And I would say this assimilative movement probably does represent the majority position, perhaps a little more loudly than all of the closeted gays and lesbians, who nonetheless would like to see these legal changes happen and continue to have their very quiet life undisturbed by any public scrutiny. The ACT UP and Queer Nation people – the whole queer movement – are really representing a position of remaining on the margins, continuing to have the somewhat romanticized view of the queer as the outlaw. That's what I think the struggle is and in that way I'd say it was a similar struggle to lesbian separatism in relation to the National Organization for Women, that would be a similar – perhaps an even more extreme difference.

I find it frightening to think of a right-wing conservative majority lesbian and gay community which seems to be what he's suggesting.

I don't think there is a right-wing majority community. Data from the 1994 election shows that self-identified lesbians and gays are disproportionately liberal. I think they voted

about 73% Democrat in the election which is only exceeded as a voting block by African Americans and that while there are conservative Republican gays and a very, very few Republican lesbians, I think they are quite the minority. But the majority gay and lesbian movement would identify with the broad mainstream of centre, slightly left, politics as represented by the Democratic Party.

And by implication, I think what you are saying is the more human rights, civil rights gains lesbians and gays achieve, the less radical we need to be.

That would tend to hold, I think. If we set our goals as assimilation into the dominant society and we achieve those goals through legislation and court actions, then we have no need to take to the street, except in these large symbolic parades. They are not really political demonstrations and they now have the same equivalency as Saint Patrick's Day parade or something like that. However, I don't really think the majority is going to allow us to assimilate quite that easily, so there will always be a place for radical action and probably I think the 1994 election is a good illustration of this. What guarantees minority rights in a majority rule society? When the majority is vehemently opposed to any kind of equality for a particular minority, that minority has no choice but either to aggressively demand it or to create some kind of alternative culture outside the dominant group. What is likely to happen right now in this particular historical era? It seems very unlikely to me that radical political action is going to do anything. Radical political action achieved a lot in the 60s and 70s. I don't see it happening very much in the 90s. I don't know what will happen, but I'm sure that we will continue to employ the same techniques – going to the courts, going to the legislatures, trying to change public opinion and so forth.

At the same time as we gain better representation?

Perhaps, and slowly begin to shift the general population towards a little more tolerance, which I think has worked effectively over the past ten years. It's definitely a much better world to be lesbian in than it was 20 years ago. Anybody who doesn't think so did not live as a lesbian 20 years ago!

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My question as to the implications of a majority gay politics of conservatism – I think that one has to go on hold.

Except that I think we have made some rather poor choices in our predominant gay and lesbian movement in the issues that it has taken on. The best example for me is the issue of gays in the military. A very, very complicated issue. I think that it is actually more interesting than I first thought precisely because of the way in which it keeps popping up. The question of sexuality in militarism is so charged. If it is so charged it must really speak to something deep in the American psyche and therefore is worth analyzing. But having made it the dominant issue of the gay and lesbian movement, we first of all seem to be supporting militarism, rather than questioning – as I certainly would have preferred – questioning the whole notion of the military and we set ourselves up for a fall when we demanded and insisted that Clinton treat this issue first. He put himself into real political trouble right off at the beginning by attempting to pay back the community. He could not deliver and so now he is condemned by the gay movement because he was not good enough and suspect to the rest of them because he is beholden to queers and perverts I think that our lesbian and gay political leaders don't have a real good sense of politics, they don't have the strategy and they don't have a good sense of tactics.

When I was preparing that question, I was also thinking about the gay demand for equal rights in the military. Kopkind said of the 60s, the best thing about being gay was that you didn't have to go into the army.

I knew many men back in the 60s who claimed homosexuality in order to get out of the Vietnam War. And now to have, 25 years later, gay men demanding to be allowed into the military! On the other hand I think this is even more salient for lesbians where the military has been a way out, where it has been a place, a location of lesbian

communities, the military is one of those places. So it is a very complicated and highly charged issue.

It is complicated. Paul Berman<sup>12</sup> suggests that the possibility of a majority gay and lesbian politics of conservatism is heralded by the example of the demand for dropping the gay ban in the American military. Such a demand for democracy by "gayocrats" leads Berman to suggest that the dream of gay liberation is derived from the larger dream of American liberty (31), although a patriotic and nationalistic gay-enhanced armed force is anathema to a gay liberation movement. Berman asks about the April 1993 march on Washington: "[m]aybe the uniformed military gays waving from the podium were the agents of imperialism, or maybe they were the sword and shield of American-style individual freedom, and who could say?" (31). It is this tension between notions of liberty which serves to highlight contradictions and conflicts within the gay liberation movement. Political conservatism goes hand-in-hand with a notion of the liberty or freedom of the individual at the same time as it requires a commitment to an idea of national liberty, or freedom to determine national ideals. It is at the level of nationalism that the gay liberation movement splits into a multiple politic(s) of difference(s). Andrew Kopkind calls this "the gay moment." The lesbian or gay person in this debate is in an extremely complex position.

And the reality that the military in the 1990s is also a job path for the working-class.

I'd now like to ask you for your thoughts on what could be called the lesbian and/or queer politics of sexuality. Featherstone<sup>13</sup> in her review of *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation*<sup>14</sup> finds its contributors positioned "at the center of a lesbian sexual revolutionary moment, as the articulate voices of a rising generation of pro-sex queer girls" (361). She refers to Soloman<sup>15</sup> who describes a "new split in the lesbian community between women whose analysis of sexuality was based on a model of

<sup>12</sup> Paul Berman, "Democracy and Homosexuality." *The New Republic*. December 20, (1993): 17-35.

<sup>13</sup> Liza Featherstone, "The Joy of Sex." *The Nation*. Volume 257, Number 10 (1993): 360-363.

<sup>14</sup> Arlene Stein, ed. *Sister, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation* (New York: Plume, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Alisa Soloman, "Dykotomies: Scents and Sensibility," Arlene Stein, ed. *Sister, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation* (New York: Plume, 1993), 210-217.

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oppression and victimization, and women whose model is Madonna: an emblem of autonomy and sexual taboo" (362). Featherstone finds a collection of writers who "are far more interested in their own visions of freedom than in a critique of the larger culture" (362). What is acknowledged by these writers is the commonality found "working politically with gay men in the Queer Nation/ACT UP eighties, [when] many lesbians came to appreciate and envy the sexual openness of gay male culture" (362). What is at issue for this generation is "women's sexual agency" and "sex-positive politics" (362-3). Do you think that the demand for women's sexual agency and sex-positive politics is that much different now to what was being articulated in the early 80s?

That's a really good question – I've been thinking about this because I've been somewhat uncomfortable with the characterization of lesbian feminism as anti-sex because that's not how I remember it. I do think that it was based upon a critique of sexuality which to me is self evident. I mean, one has to critique the way sexuality has been constructed and to simply talk about pro-sex as if sex were some kind of essential, natural life force that all you have to do is let it flow – to me that is just the essence of liberal humanism. I think it is so odd that these notions are returning in queer theory. I think that what has happened is that the complexity of lesbian politics from the 1970s to the early 1980s has become reduced to a stereotype that is based upon a handful of writers – writers that I'm not willing to dismiss because I think they have very cogent things to say about sexuality. So that the position really has been identified with say Andrea Dworkin and then Catherine MacKinnon when neither one of them, interestingly enough, writes openly as a lesbian, neither is really writing about lesbianism. Their critique is heterosexuality and male-dominated heterosexuality and yet they have become the whipping girls of the new pro-sex feminist and lesbian and gay and queer politics of the 90s.

It seems to me that the victimization model was only one model and that it was always countered

by a notion of lesbian sexuality as liberatory and a celebration of the erotic, but an attempt to understand sexuality and eroticism outside of heterosexual or male constructs. Whether they were successful or not seems to me to be very unimportant because we are involved in an ongoing process of raising questions, coming up with answers, rethinking them, defining them, dismissing them, going on to something new. So I would say in answer to your question, that the idea that lesbians were not concerned with women's sexual agency and sex-positive politics in the 80s is a distortion in a certain sense. It may be true that by the early 80s some of the complexity of lesbian thought and writing in the 1970s had been squeezed into narrower channels, but I think that there was always more depth to writing about lesbian sexuality than is implied by these current theorists who just seem to ignore their history – to not have read it, to just not know what they are talking about half the time. I think that lesbianism has been reduced to sexuality in current queer writing and to the elimination of virtually all other issues and that strikes me as a great impoverishment.

You know that I am interested in concepts of nationalism and how they intersect with *Lesbian Nation* and *Queer Nation*, so I'll preface my next question in the following way.

Nelson et al. refer to "the development of new forms of imperialism, [linked to] . . . the re-emergence of nationalism".<sup>5</sup> above <sup>16</sup> Berman, conversely, refers to

*a revolutionary coalition amongst groups deemed to be innocent of imperialist crime [which] implied a system of defining people by their historic grievances, the grievances of blacks, of Latin and Asian immigrants and – by extension – of women and homosexuals . . . [where] there was already a tone of pious sympathy for the victimhood of each and all.*<sup>16</sup> above

In various ways representations of *Lesbian Nation* and *Queer Nation* both mimic and subvert imperialist versions of nationalism while retaining

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<sup>16</sup> Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. "Cultural Studies: An Introduction."

Cultural Studies (New York/London: Routledge, 1992).

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discursive affiliation to “nation as narration.”<sup>17</sup> They are in this way conceptually implicated in the dominant (hegemonic) discourse of nation/s. In other words, they evoke a complicity with the discourses of nationalism, multinationalism, internationalism, intra-nationalism and transnationalism. Within this political range the question to which I am oriented is: What are the postcolonial implications of *Lesbian Nation* and Queer Nation where *Lesbian Nation* and Queer Nation discursively disrupt the dominant cultural and political economy/authority in which nation is narrated.<sup>18</sup> To what extent do you think the political interests of those who re-present *Lesbian Nation* and Queer Nation embrace nationalist and imperialist ideals?

This is a fascinating question and I really have been thinking about this over the past few years because at the same time that I have a nostalgic longing for the re-establishment of the concept of Lesbian Nation, I have been observing the consequences of nationalism across the globe and have had to really rethink my own attraction to notions of nation and nationalism and separatism.

In my horror of what is happening as a consequence of nationalism and separatism in various places, of which the former Yugoslavia is only one obvious example, I have had to think about the extent to which drawing upon metaphors of nation is continuing the imperialist project, since I do think that nationalism is the underside of imperialism. It reminds me, also, in some ways of the debates in the early Russian Revolutionary era, actually the communist era, the Marxist period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries about nationalism, and the problem that I see is that nationalism can serve the interests of imperialism by setting up nations against nations – nations over nations. The example of *Lesbian Nation* would be the idea that there is a certain

kind of identity one must have in order to be a part, and anyone who is not part of that is excluded, which oftentimes then replicates the power relations of white women over women of colour, for example – the most obvious example. *Lesbian Nation* – once it began to pay attention to this – quickly adopted the politics of difference, the politics of identity, almost to the point of fragmentation, into infinite numbers of separate identities, little honeycomb cells you could say.

On the other hand, the denial of national identities is also complicit in the imperialist project and I think about, for example, the Bolsheviks destroying any element of nationalism in the name of some larger global human ideal. So I think that holding to either extreme of separatist, nationalist goals or total global internationalism, either of those extremes fails to understand the complexity of national identities of which lesbianism might be perceived as one, in a metaphorical way.

I think this is even more significant for the concept of Queer Nation. *Lesbian Nation* was always a somewhat limited concept, even though there is a kind of notion – in Jill Johnston – that every woman could be a lesbian, that every woman is a lesbian except those who don't know it, or Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum, a sense of not so much that lesbianism is going to go out and take over, as the sense that it is offering a gift that any woman could take; any woman could be a lesbian. Queer Nation, as a concept, really does strike me as imperialist in its consequences, the way in which it has overtaken and wiped out lesbian feminism. It has overtaken and wiped out whatever gay male separateness there was. I think this is more in the academy than it is in politics, but it goes back and forth, because people straddle the line between the academy and the community. Queer now is an umbrella term, but it's also a term that denies us specificity and in that way I see it as

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<sup>17</sup> Homi K. Bhabha puts it thus:

*The address to nation as narration stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic. What emerges as an effect of such incomplete signification is a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated.* (Bhabha, Homi K., ed. “Introduction” and

“DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1-7, 291–322).

<sup>18</sup> It is in a context of interrogations and narrative dissidence that I am interested in, theorizing discursive formulations of *Lesbian Nation* and *Queer Nation*. As discursive forms of nationalism these metaphors are useful for theorising lesbian/queer writings in neo-national and postcolonial contexts.

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much less amenable to difference. Queer Nation seems to be a concept of queer in its most limited sense. At its least it embodies everybody who is sexually other, and at its most grandiose – and I have heard this said by defenders of queer – everybody who is outside of normal is queer and if you push it far, and far and far enough, then queer takes over everybody, because everybody is in some ways outside the normal, except maybe Jesse Helms.<sup>19</sup> What that means is the next step after queer is liberal humanism, because there are no categories, there are no identities, there are no labels – we are all just individuals. I think, for example, of Judith Butler’s “Gender Insubordination.”<sup>20</sup> She seems to be so denying of the category lesbian, the name lesbian, that ultimately it is as if she is saying “I’m just me.” That seems to me to be the essence of liberals, the essence of humanism in leading to and perpetuating a kind of imperialist totality. Maybe I’m going too far in saying that, so that ultimately I think that the metaphor, the queer planet – we talked about, Michael Warner’s book<sup>21</sup> – seems a logical conclusion. We are not just simply talking about Queer Nation. We are just going to keep going until we have taken over the whole planet. And part of me says “Hey, that’s really cool,” but somehow those metaphors just bother me.

There’s something getting very lost in there, isn’t there?

Some understanding of difference, and a certain humility. I think I have some real problems with it and it might be too extreme to say that they have to do with questions of nationalism and imperialism, but I do feel that as a resident of Lesbian Nation, my country has been taken away from me, it’s been conquered by the Queers and so I feel very much like a colonized person. Even the use of terms like ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ in this context is somewhat inappropriate. One needs to remember always the material

differences between forms of colonizing, forms of nationalism and there’s a concrete and historical difference between the actual conquest of the peoples of a country and the symbolic overtaking of one theory by another theory – very different.

I understand. I think this is a good place now to move on to my last question because we may be able to retrieve something through this question.

I feel the notion of a transnational diaspora may be of some use in theorizing *Lesbian Nation* and Queer Nation. For example, the meaning of the “diaspora experience,” as intended by Stuart Hall is “defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives through, not despite difference; by hybridity. Diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (400).<sup>22</sup> Do you think the notion of diaspora is relevant to *Lesbian Nation* and Queer Nation politics?

I do, and again with some attention to the concrete material historical differences in the meaning of diaspora. I say this because I remember a discussion at an MLA conference about the metaphoric versus historical use of diaspora and some people rejecting very strongly the idea of diaspora as an analogy. However, I think that it makes sense to talk about a gay, lesbian or queer diaspora, both materially and symbolically. Materially, the fact is that movement and uprooting and diaspora really is a factor in many gay and lesbian lives – I mean, the movement from the family home to a new home, from the small town to the city, from the mid country to the coast, from the outskirts to the centre, and this has been a characteristic of gay and lesbian lives since the first gay communities began to develop around the 18th century. So there has been an actual diaspora in gay people’s lives and this is usually in response to both psychic and physical violence

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<sup>19</sup> Jesse Helms is the US Senator from North Carolina, and a prominent sponsor of homophobic legislation.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, “Gender Insubordination,” in Diana Fuss ed., *Inside Out* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Michael Warner ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Patrick William and Laura Chrisman eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 222-237.

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which is also a factor in diaspora.<sup>23</sup> So physically, materially and historically, I think that makes sense.

I think it makes sense symbolically in both the terms that Hall is speaking to, but there is another aspect to diaspora, which is that in the experience of diaspora there is some attempt to maintain the core identity, the root, the nation. And the model of course for me, is the Jewish diaspora, which I suppose is the origin of all diaspora language when the Jews were exiled from Palestine, and spread out throughout the world. It's true there was constant change so that the Jewish experience in Ethiopia is very different from the Jewish experience in Morocco, very different in Poland and so forth – but within that there is also a maintenance of a sense of oneself as a Jew. The same thing with the diaspora from Africa, slavery, the sense of one still maintaining a connection to Africa, to the motherland, even amidst all the many different experiences, depending on whether one was a slave in the United States or in the Caribbean or in South America.

This is what is so often simply not addressed anymore in gay and lesbian critical theory. That sense of the otherness that is established by the dominant society and that we are still constructed by homophobia and heterosexism, even as we attempt to assimilate and transform, and create our own identities and see ourselves as fluid in all of that. Maybe I feel this way because of when I came out and I have not been able to simply put all of that aside. The way in which I'm thinking, for

example, of Sartre's argument that what constructs the Jew is anti-Semitism, what constructs the woman is misogyny, what constructs the homosexual is – the words don't work. 'Heterosexism' and 'homophobia' are just the wrong words – we need a word that simply says 'gay-hating.' The hatred of homosexuality is part of what constructs homosexuality.

So our diaspora is both a movement of transformation and assimilation, but it is also a holding on to a certain kind of identification, no matter where and how we go. I think that that truly is something that gay and lesbian people experience as you move around the world. It's probably much truer for males than it is for females, but as you move around the world, there is a sense – even though our experiences may be very different – that you have a family, and the words like 'family' reminds me of 'landsmann,' a Jewish word which basically means 'kinsman' or 'family' and wherever you go as a Jew when you meet another Jew, it is your 'landsmann.'

Now I don't think we have developed that concept among lesbians and gays quite as fully, but our diaspora is only a couple of hundred years old – perhaps only 100 years old in terms of self-conscious identity as lesbians, whereas Jews have been doing this for 2000 years. So I think that the diaspora model, with due recognition of the historical differences and the material differences, matters and means something, but I think it is a little more complex than Hall's definition.

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<sup>23</sup> Psychic and physical violence are factors contributing to the growing numbers of gay and lesbian homeless. Reporter Victoria Brownworth estimates that there are three million lesbian and gay homeless in America. Amongst these are "[w]omen jettisoned from straight marriages, gay men dumped

by wealthy lovers, teenagers thrown out of their homes by homophobic parents, queers who have lost their jobs to homophobia, lesbian alcoholics, gay male drug addicts, [and] women and men with AIDS." Deneuve 4.6 (December 1994): 70-71.

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2. For a strongly partisan view of the controversy see Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 101-103, 201-202.
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11. Andrew Kopkind, "The Gay Moment." *The Nation*. May 3, (1993): 591-At the time of writing Kopkind reported that half the gay men in San Francisco were said to be infected with HIV. The impact of AIDS Kopkind suggests, is the destruction of an affectional community very much like an ethnic or national community (600).

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12. Paul Berman, "Democracy and Homosexuality." *The New Republic*. December 20, (1993): 17-35.
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14. Arlene Stein, ed. *Sister, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation* (New York: Plume, 1993).
15. Alisa Soloman, "Dykotomies: Scents and Sensibility," Arlene Stein, ed. *Sister, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation* (New York: Plume, 1993), 210-217.
16. Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. "Cultural Studies: An Introduction." *Cultural Studies* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992).
17. Homi K. Bhabha puts it thus:  
*The address to nation as narration stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic. What emerges as an effect of such incomplete signification is a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated.* (Bhabha, Homi K., ed. "Introduction" and "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1-7, 291- 322).
18. It is in a context of interrogations and narrative dissidence that I am interested in, theorizing discursive formulations of Lesbian Nation and Queer Nation. As discursive forms of nationalism these metaphors are useful for theorising lesbian/queer writings in neo-national and postcolonial contexts.
19. Jesse Helms is the US Senator from North Carolina, and a prominent sponsor of homophobic legislation.
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21. Michael Warner ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
22. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Patrick William and Laura Chrisman eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 222-237.

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