
Article

Politics as ‘Sinister Wisdom’: Reparation and responsibility in lesbian feminism

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Abstract This article takes up the commonplace antagonism between ‘second wave’ lesbian feminism and ‘third wave’ queer theory and politics, and argues that the antagonism itself is both historically and politically reductive. First, I make the case that ‘third wave’ queer theory actually shares its central concern – namely, accountability for intra-group inequalities – with lesbian feminism. However, I argue that ‘third wave’ queer theories ultimately founder in their bid for a more reflexive political praxis by tending to hold *others* – lesbian feminists – accountable for ongoing inequalities rather than grappling with them directly. By contrast, I show that lesbian feminists from the late 1970s to the late 1980s developed a reparative politics that succeeds where ‘third wave’ theories stumble by developing relationships of mutual accountability around issues of race and racism, and by establishing processes by which to repair these relationships when they founder. I conclude by arguing that a fuller attention to the history of lesbian feminism, in fact, offers important resources for feminists and queers dealing with issues of intra-group marginalization, such as transphobia, in the present. *Contemporary Political Theory* (2021) **20**, 524–546. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00457-7>; advance online publication 14 January 2021

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On 8 July 2018, a group of ten self-identified lesbian activists disrupted the London Pride Parade by lying across the parade path, holding banners reading ‘Lesbian = Female Homosexual’, ‘Lesbian, Not Queer’, and – making the argument that a focus on trans women within queer politics represents the misogynist erasure of women – ‘Transactivism Erases Lesbians’. Their argument was maddeningly circular: because ‘we stand for the rights of lesbians to choose their sexual partners on the basis of their sex’ (Get the L Out UK, 2018), they argued, lesbian activists ought to ‘stand against...misogynistic politics and systems that prioritise men’s interests’ by refusing to support ‘queer politics and transgenderism’ (Get The L Out UK, 2020). Almost immediately, parade participants, members of the press, and an audience of international queers responded by decrying the protesters’ position,



arguing that it invoked the worst of 'trans exclusionary radical feminist' (TERF) views. The episode reached viral-level notoriety within days. In June 2020 these tensions emerged into the mainstream when the popular author JK Rowling posted a blog post in which she wrote, 'I refuse to bow down to a [trans] movement that I believe is doing demonstrable harm in seeking to erode "woman" as a political and biological class' (Rowling, 2020). Rowling's blog post, which cited several lesbian groups notorious for their transphobic views (for example, that trans women are really men seeking to infiltrate women's spaces), elicited a profound backlash online and throughout LGBTQ+ spaces. Although neither side appears willing to back down, an uneasy consensus has emerged in the broader LGBTQ+ community: despite the egregious actions of the TERFs, 'not *all* lesbians are transphobic'.¹

Obviously, this glib conclusion, on a literal level, is true; indeed, most lesbians, some of them trans women themselves, argue that 'it is imperative that more trans women start participating in the feminist movement alongside others for our liberation' (Koyama, 2001). Still, scenes like the London episode raise ongoing political challenges with which feminists are intimately familiar. To what extent, it prompts, ought feminists and queers continue to organize around identity categories, like 'lesbian' or 'woman', that are seemingly rooted in essentialist and exclusionary conceptions of biological sex? In this regard, the London episode – and the broader 'TERF war' of which it is a part² – rhymes with what are now known as the category debates of the 1980s and early 1990s, in which feminist and queer theorists like Gayle Rubin (1984), Diana Fuss (1989), Denise Riley (1988), Judith Butler (1990), and Teresa de Lauretis (1994), along with many others, charged feminists – and particularly *lesbian* feminists – for their overemphasis on the ostensibly shared biological and social experiences entailed in being a woman. As Rubin put it in a 1997 interview with Judith Butler, for example, the 'romantic, politicized, and limited notion of lesbianism' fueled a context in which 'transsexuality, male homosexuality, promiscuity, public sex, transvestism, fetishism, and sadomasochism were all vilified with a feminist rhetoric'. She continued:

Somehow, these poor sexual deviations were suddenly the ultimate expressions of patriarchal domination. I found this move baffling: on the one hand, it took relatively minor, relatively powerless sexual practices and populations and targeted them as the primary enemy of women's freedom and well being. At the same time, it exonerated the more powerful institutions of male supremacy and the traditional loci for feminist agitation: the family, religion, job discrimination and economic dependency, forced reproduction, biased education, lack of legal rights, and civil status, etc. (Rubin, 1997, 82–83).

The deeply misguided and harmful claim that vulnerable trans women, and not powerful institutions, represent the patriarchy echoes quite clearly Rubin's framing: lesbian feminists, both then and now, not only insist too strongly on dubious criteria



such as biological sex to reinforce rigid political categorizations, but they also displace their critique of patriarchy onto the relatively powerless, like trans women. Indeed, Susan Stryker invokes the category debates in her more contemporary work on transgender theory, arguing that confronting trans vulnerability in the present ‘requires that some feminists re-examine, or perhaps examine for the first time, some of the exclusionary assumptions they embed within the unifying potential of the category “women”’ (Stryker and Wittle, 2006, p. 7).

The central claim of this article is that questions of intra-group responsibility remain as urgent today as they were during the feminist category debates. Indeed, the most profound task of social movements is to be accountable to the most vulnerable among them, even (perhaps especially) when these responsibilities are at odds with our most deeply held identities and attachments. However, I also argue that crucial dimensions of these questions of responsibility have been paradoxically obscured by the same theorists who sought to resolve them by contesting categories such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘woman’. When scenes like the London protest emerge as flashpoints that prompt us to choose between seemingly distinct categories, such as between ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer’, they conceal the more urgent – and more difficult – political questions of power and responsibility that prompted these debates in the first place. In the wake of the London Pride disruption, for example, questions of vulnerability and responsibility are posed as simple choices between whether one is ‘for’ essentialist, retrograde lesbians or trans inclusive queers, as if a rejection of the former and identification with the latter absolves one of the more complex responsibilities entailed in building solidarity with trans women.

In what follows, then, I reevaluate the political stakes involved in overdetermined frameworks such as ‘Lesbian, Not Queer’, refocusing on the questions of power and accountability that are at the heart of the scene. First, using a set of concepts developed by feminist political theorists Bonnie Honig and Linda Zerilli, I argue that the apparent antagonism between lesbian and queer identities emerged out of a more general feminist concern for intra-group accountability, and for the displacement of politics that can occur when theorists search for a ‘correct’ grounds of political thinking and acting. On its face, it is precisely these concerns that motivated the category debates, which unfolded as a broad shift toward capacious ‘third wave’ categories such as queerness and away from those associated with the displacements of ‘second wave’ lesbian feminism. Following this intuition beyond its most obvious resonances, however, I suggest that the tension between ‘second wave’ lesbian and ‘third wave’ queer politics is oddly paradoxical. Building from Zerilli’s conception of the ‘desire for solace’, I argue that frameworks which aim, as queerness does, to resist displacement politics often remain attached to the desire to produce ‘correct’ judgments. Queer theorists’ elevation of a ‘third wave’ methodology over and against what they perceive as the inherently flawed analysis of lesbian feminism exemplifies this desire. Thus, although queer theory’s methods



and political commitments have been proposed as a supersession of the historical shortcomings of lesbian feminism, this antagonism – and the notion of an exclusionary, hegemonic lesbian identity – is both invented and implicated in undercutting the very promise of queer accountability.

In the second part of this article, then, I argue that 'second wave' lesbian feminism as it actually existed historically shares the commitment to accountability that has preoccupied queer and transfeminist theorists. I turn to a reading of the lesbian feminist magazine *Sinister Wisdom* to show that lesbian feminists – and especially lesbian feminists of color – inaugurated and sustained a practice of reparative coalition-building that resonates deeply with the queer desire to resist the 'displacement of politics'. Rather than by engaging the reductive framing 'Lesbian, Not Queer', this article thus draws upon the contributions of lesbians of color during the 1980s to sketch a framework for thinking of intra-group inequality as a problem of accountability rather than as a problem of displacement.

I conclude by arguing that such a framework goes some distance in recentering questions about what it might mean to adequately grapple with the claims of marginalized groups, like trans women, in the present. Recovering the distinctively reparative valences of lesbian feminism is, on the one hand, an important historical task in its own right: it clarifies the role of lesbian feminist writers, activists, and scholars in developing the very political ethos that 90s-era queer theorists have claimed as their own. In locating the roots of this reparative praxis in lesbian feminist works of the 1970s and 1980s, I aim to remind historians and political theorists alike of a history that is too often papered over by simplistic heuristics like 'Lesbian, Not Queer'. On the other hand, however, it is also a political task. For those concerned with persistent hierarchies within the LGBTQ+ community, lesbian feminists' efforts to develop a reparative praxis that acknowledges its own internal hierarchies serves as an important reminder of the challenges that arise – and the possibilities that emerge – when the demands of the vulnerable exceed the obvious frameworks that enable theorists to easily resolve them.

Queer Theory and the Desire for Solace

At its core, feminist political theory has always been centrally concerned with political accountability; that is, it takes responsiveness to the asymmetries of power both within and between groups as a condition of its legitimacy. In other words, while debates over categories like 'women' or 'lesbian' have come to represent broader struggles within feminist and queer spaces, these debates are not primarily about the categories themselves, but are rather grounded in efforts to hold members accountable for intra-group inequalities that cut across lines of race, class, sexuality, gender identity, and so on. It is precisely the question of accountability for inequalities that has made feminist theory an important current of contemporary



political theory more broadly; as Bonnie Honig has put it, while feminism ‘may plant its specific flag in the question of gender or sexual equality, [it’s] most fundamentally about equality, and therefore it’s always... holding people accountable for inequality’ (Watson, 2013, p. 112).

If this concern with accountability gives form to many of contemporary feminists’ core claims, though, I also want to suggest that this goal is often eclipsed by the more abstract commitment to contesting categories that ‘third wave’ feminists have claimed is necessary for accountability-seeking. To the extent that contemporary feminists understand the practice of contesting categories as the best or only way to achieve political accountability, they have discredited alternative ways of challenging inequalities and practicing political accountability – such as those theorized and practiced by lesbian feminists – by casting them as exclusive, retrograde, and illegitimate. In so doing, contemporary feminists tend only to hold others, especially those in the past, accountable for the intra-group inequalities they identify.

Although I will argue below that lesbian feminists developed an intersectional practice of intra-group accountability during the 1980s that guided their theory and politics, it has become a starting point for feminist and queer political theorists to dismiss lesbian feminism as an identity that embodies ‘the displacement of politics’. I take this phrase from Honig (1993), who uses it to describe ways of doing politics in which ‘the task...is to resolve institutional questions, to get politics right, over and done with, to free modern subjects and their sets of arrangements of political conflict and instability’ (p. 2). Such displacements, argues Honig, have profoundly ‘antidemocratic resonances’, because they insist on ‘[lines] that [claim] some for democratic citizenship while remaindering others’ (p. 5). Put differently, displacements occur when theorists and other political actors seek to ‘reduce’ the ‘proliferation of political spaces’ in the name of stable identities and exclusionary boundary-making; these reductions, in turn, make it impossible to seek accountability in the name of those who have been othered, criminalized, and marginalized.

For Honig and others (e.g., Lauretis, 1990; Brown, 1995; Scott, 2008), feminist political theory in general plays an important role in challenging such displacements, which they see as endemic to much of the western political tradition.³ And yet, lesbian feminism stands as a peculiar exception. Traces of lesbian feminism’s purported ‘displacements’ abound in contemporary feminist literature: for feminists like Emi Koyama (2006) or Bettcher and Garry (2009), for instance, tracing lesbian feminism reveals a history of such displacements, ranging from the marginalization of women of color and sexual ‘deviants’ during the 1970s and 80s to the egregious transphobia of the ‘gender critical’ London protesters in the present. In this narrative, the lesbian protesters of the present are a kind of reanimated version of ‘second wave’ feminism; they wish to return us to a time in which essentialist categories and imagined consensus were uncontested facts of politics. In fact,



lesbian feminists are so strongly associated with such displacements that this image of the exclusionary 'feminist-as-lesbian', as Victoria Hesford has argued, has 'tended to be the figure through which generalized perceptions of second-wave feminism have been organized as memory in the academy and in queer and feminist subcultures' (Hesford, 2013, p. 15).

The figure of the exclusive (that is, unaccountable) lesbian feminist is no accident. In fact, lesbian feminists' supposed essentialism is rooted in the very concept of displacement, which takes a profound ambivalence toward 'second wave' lesbian feminism as its point of departure. In her own development of the concept, for instance, Honig (1996) argues that displacements occur through the 'phantasmatic' projection of 'home-like' spaces. Honig draws on the work of Black feminist Bernice Johnson Reagon to develop her argument that 'to accept the impossibility of the conventional home's promised safety from conflict, dilemmas, and difference is... to recover [home] for the sake of an alternative, future practice of politics' (p. 270). However, while Honig acknowledges Reagon's 'exuberant' resignification of home, nowhere does she mention the historical context for Reagon's speech – the lesbian-centric 1981 West Coast Women's Music Festival, where Reagon's band Sweet Honey in the Rock was headlining – nor does she emphasize Reagon's use of 'home' and 'coalition' to describe the actual, material demands of 'second wave' lesbian feminist organizing. Rather than recognize the ways that Reagon's warnings against the allure of womb-like home were calls for accountability deeply embedded *within* lesbian feminist spaces, Honig instead moves to the more abstract language of identification to suggest the need for a new wave of theorizing generated by 'decentered subjects... who are plural, differentiated, and conflicted' (p. 272). In its bid to promote accountability, Honig's concept 'displacement' thus owes an unacknowledged debt to lesbian feminism even as it claims to supersede its context and terms.

If Honig is curiously silent about her debt to lesbian feminism in her account of displacement, she is by no means alone in her ambivalent relationship to its history in her hopes for a new wave of theorizing. In fact, some 'third wave' theorists have not only remained silent about lesbian feminism's influence over their own thinking, but have framed their own interventions as solutions to lesbian feminism's purported displacements. In a piece on lesbian autobiographies of the 1970s, for example, Bidy Martin (1993) critiques lesbian writing prior to the 'third wave', arguing that it suffers from an unrecognized essentialism and, with it, a lack of accountability to lesbians of color. Martin writes that much of early lesbian writing '[suggests] that there is... something coherently the same about all lesbians' (p. 275), and argues that this projection of 'home-like' commonality sustained lesbian feminists' desire to evade accountability. In other words, for Martin, the imagined consensus in what came to count as 'lesbian' contributed to the displacement of the frictions that inhere in raced, classed, and sexed experiences of actual lesbians. '[D]ifferences, for example, of race, class, or sexuality', she writes,



'are finally rendered noncontradictory by virtue of their (re)presentation as differences between individuals, reducible to questions of identity within the unifying context of feminism' (1993, p. 275).

Operating on the premise that lesbian feminists displaced responsibility for these differences, Martin argues that a feminist praxis accountable for its own internal hierarchies would move beyond the category 'lesbian' altogether. Properly construing the diverse lived realities of lesbians, she writes, ought to impel feminists to pursue 'more complex realities' marked, not by 'total or automatic identification', but by 'struggle and risk as well as pleasure and comfort' (1993, p. 284). In Martin's telling, eschewing categories like 'lesbian' is a direct route for demanding accountability. When feminists subvert such categories,

lesbianism ceases to be an identity with predictable contents... [It] ceases to be the exclusive and continuous ground of identity or politics. Indeed, it works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, not to dissolve them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible. (1993, p. 289)

It is this assumption – that adequately accounting for hierarchies within groups requires a new wave of theorizing premised on unsettling categories – that is at the core of the debate over 'lesbian' and 'queer' identities. Framed against the presumed shortcomings of lesbian feminism, even as it retains lesbianism as 'a position from which to speak' (p. 289), queer politics emerges in texts like Martin's as a liberation of the feminist commitment to accountability. If Honig silently borrows from lesbian feminism even as she claims to supersede it, then, Martin sees superseding the 'failed' project of lesbian feminism as necessary to accountability-seeking.

Yet, although lesbian feminism 'stands for the perceived essentialism of second-wave feminism' (Hesford, 2013, p. 15), scholars like Victoria Hesford argue that this image, both past and present, is an invented one, both in the sense that it is distinct from lesbian feminism as it existed historically and in the sense that it functions as a 'shorthand notation for women's liberation' in ways that '[eclipse] the heterogeneity and subversive force of the movement in its emergent moment' (p. 24). Indeed, like Honig's silence about the context of Reagon's speech on coalition, Martin's account of lesbian feminism as a site of political displacement sidesteps a central fact: the very texts that are most often cited as central to the project of so-called 'third wave' – for example, Moraga and Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called my Back*, the Combahee River Collective Statement, and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* – were written by women deeply involved in the larger lesbian feminist community. Characterizing them as inaugurating a supersession of lesbian feminism by challenging the displacement of women of color misreads the forms of accountability these thinkers sought. However, much like Honig's silence



on the political context of Reagan's coalition speech, Martin's argument depends on forgetting these details in the name of a new wave.

In other words, however much they feel intuitive, the key assumptions of 'third wave' feminisms – that certain past feminisms were fundamentally concerned with the displacement of politics, and that contesting their categories is a direct route toward political accountability – are both historically and politically shaky. Indeed, a growing number of scholars writing at the intersection of queer, lesbian, and trans studies suggest that both 'second wave' lesbian feminism and 'third wave' queer and trans feminisms share an ambivalent relationship, at best, to the category woman (e.g., Garber, 2001; Cvetkovich, 2002; Love, 2007; Scott, 2011; Wiegman, 2012). As contributors to a recent special issue on 'lesbian hauntings' in contemporary queer and trans histories point out, for instance,

lesbian as well as trans* history has emerged precisely through a critique of the category 'woman' ... Remembering this (rather than imagining 'lesbian feminism' as articulating an essential comfort with womanhood) produces a complex history of multiple critiques of exclusions from womanhood... (Eloit and Hemmings, 2019).

What these authors suggest, then, is that the displacement of politics is a real threat to feminist politics of *all* varieties, and that the deep distrust of lesbian feminists within queer and trans theory may be as much a desire to hold someone else accountable for those dangers – someone safely in the past – as it is a desire to hold contemporary theorists' and activists' own categories, as well as the hierarchies endemic to their own praxes, to account.

As important as the concept of displacement has been for laying out the ways that groups evade accountability by privileging 'home' over 'coalition', then, contemporary feminists' tendency to cast lesbian feminism as an identity without accountability has less to do with lesbian feminists' own displacements than it does with contemporary feminists' desire to hold others – particularly others in the past – responsible for ongoing inequalities. This desire to hold others accountable for the displacement of politics is an instance of what Linda Zerilli has named the 'desire for solace'. Like Honig and other theorists concerned with keeping open the space of 'the political', Zerilli argues that feminists of all stripes must be wary of universalizing political scenes which '[create] once and for all a theory that would be so encompassing of the diversity of lived experience, so accurate in its account of cause and effect, so final in its articulation of normative commitments, that it could in fact tell us how to so act' (Zerilli, 2005, p. 35). Zerilli, however, challenges the idea that the tendency to displace politics is a damage wrought only by 'second wave' feminists, or that undoing it is as easy as elevating agonistic categories over essentialist ones. For Zerilli, the problem is much more complex: both second and third wave feminisms – and both lesbian and queer theorists – are implicated in the 'fragile achievement of practices of freedom' (p. 24). If this



essential point is too often forgotten, Zerilli argues that it is the ‘desire for solace’ – ‘a desire that would be satisfied by, and thus incessantly searches out, the perfect theory’ (p. 35) – that is to blame. The displacement of politics is a ‘disposition’ against which feminists have defended ‘the political’, Zerilli argues, but it is also a ‘disposition to generalize against which feminists... are by no means invulnerable’ (p. 35).

Following Zerilli’s insights, then, we might say that although ‘third wave’ queer theorists’ goals have long been to unsettle seemingly straightforward conceptions of the political in ways that make accountability possible, there is in much of queer theory a lingering attachment to the solace involved in laying out the ‘right’ way – and disavowing the ‘wrong’ ways – to pursue political transformation. Like Zerilli, I want to suggest that this attachment to ‘settling the known’ paradoxically coexists with queer theory’s attempts to unsettle master narratives, to subvert taken-for-granted knowledges, and to offer an accountable politics premised on contestation. In fact, queer theorists’ commitment to contesting categories as a vehicle of political transformation at once proposes a ‘correct’ way forward and, simultaneously, forgets and misreads alternative conceptions of what constitutes an accountable feminist praxis. In other words, ‘second wave’ lesbian feminism was in fact highly attuned to the very questions of accountability that rightly concern theorists like Honig, but they were articulated in registers that are obscured by the ‘third wave’ desire for solace.

Rather than seeing the debates of lesbian feminism as calls for accountability that differ in kind, the ‘third wave’ framework sidesteps the kinds of political spaces that lesbian feminism opened up – even those spaces, like Reagon’s coalitions, that have directly influenced ‘third wave’ theorizing – by positing an antagonism between a straightforwardly exclusionary lesbian feminism and its liberated counterpart, queer theory. This kind of story, of course, ultimately founders in its bid for an ongoing practice of intra-group accountability: as Hesford puts it, when theorists attempt to ‘account for the movement’s limitations and failures’ by creating easily digested historical dyads, ‘What counts as history ultimately is not the complex, contradictory, heterogeneous mess of any moment or era but a story that is already familiar’ (Hesford, 2013, pp. 11–12). By conceiving of lesbian feminism as the guilty predecessor against which ‘third wave’ theory’s accountability can be measured, ‘third wave’ theorists paradoxically hold others in the past accountable for the displacement of politics while both claiming and misreading those very pasts.

Moral Vulnerability and Repair in Sinister Wisdom

So far, I have argued that ‘third wave’ conceptions of politics are, on the one hand, centrally concerned with centering accountability for intra-group inequalities and that, on the other, they paradoxically tend to seek solace by recourse to a set of



moves that hold others accountable for ongoing inequalities. Thus, 'third wave' feminist and queer theorists have largely come to hold lesbian feminists especially responsible for the sin of displacement while sidestepping more complex questions about how they might build relations of accountability in the present. In so doing, they have forgotten and obscured the incredibly generative conversations about intra-group accountability that predominated in lesbian feminism during the 1980s. It is to that conception of ongoing accountability that I now turn.

In what follows, I focus on just one venue for the ongoing practice of accountability lesbian feminism: the popular lesbian feminist magazine *Sinister Wisdom*, which published its first issue in 1976. Throughout *SW*'s early run, lesbian feminists of color like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Barbara and Beverly Smith, and many others were frequent contributors and guest editors to *SW*; collectively, their work within the lesbian feminist community helped sustain a movement premised on the very principles of accountability and contestation 90s-era queer theorists have claimed as their own. Below, I focus on two conversations, each taking place in the pages of *Sinister Wisdom* between the years 1980 and 1985, to argue that the goal of ongoing accountability was central to lesbian feminists, although their practice of accountability takes place in a different register than do those that emerged from the category debates. Through these conversations, lesbians of color position themselves as participants in a process by which accountability becomes a condition of legitimacy for the movement.

Barbara and Beverly Smith, Sinister Wisdom 18, 1981

In June, 1980, Beverly and Barbara Smith sat down 'across the kitchen table' with Cherrrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. The transcript of their conversation, which is best known for its appearance in *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981, also appeared in *Sinister Wisdom*'s 18th issue the same year. In her preface to the first edition to *This Bridge*, Moraga wrote that the motivation for the book – surely shared across the contributors, including the Smith sisters – was living through 'the deepest political tragedy I have experienced... how with such grace, such blind faith, [the] commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and reactionary' (Moraga, 1983 [1981], p. xiv). At a glance, Moraga's *This Bridge* preface seems to resonate with the claim that issues of racial inequality were never raised – or were effectively silenced – within early lesbian feminist politics. However, a closer reading of Moraga's stated political motivations reveals a different context for her sense of tragedy. Rather than insisting that her Third World feminism emerges from her own displacement from lesbian feminism, Moraga insists that her goal is to think from within the very premise of lesbian feminism: that women could forge new, mutually accountable relationships with one another. 'I had nearly forgotten why I was so driven to work on this anthology', she writes; 'I had nearly forgotten that I wanted/needed to deal with racism because



I couldn't stand being separated from other women. Because I took my lesbianism that seriously' (Moraga, 1983, p. xvii).

Moraga emphasizes the promise of acknowledging the lived dimensions of relationships between women – for example, the emotional relationships that inhere in shared experiences, or the physical and spiritual relationships it is possible to build between women positioned differently in the world. But she also notes the dangers of such relationships by noting that attempts at reciprocal accountability are tinged with the possibility of persistent, unacknowledged, 'underground' inequalities. For Moraga, lesbian feminism itself is what links the promise and the risk of creating relationships between women. 'I am a lesbian', she writes; 'I want a movement that helps me make some sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury, from white to black. I love women the entire way, beyond a doubt ... Lesbianism is supposed to be about connection' (Moraga, 1983, p. xiv). If lesbian relationships are of a double quality, in that they both promise connection and contain the 'potential betrayal, rejection, and failure that lives throughout the first and last gesture of connection' (1983, p. xviii), then Moraga's piece explores the harms caused when such attempts to forge truly reciprocal relationships fail; that is, it explores what happens to individuals and to groups when mutual accountability between and among its members is *not* achieved. Such harms are what philosopher Margaret Urban Walker (2013) describes as symptoms of a particular form of inequality she names 'moral vulnerability'. For Walker, while most social relationships depend on a sense of reciprocity – that is, on the 'assumption that we possess a certain moral status as full participants in reciprocal accountability relations' (Walker, 2013, p. 112), moral vulnerability occurs when these relationships break down, become asymmetrical, or are betrayed by one of the parties. As she puts it,

All of us who see ourselves as possessing this status anticipate that we are rightly able to call others to account even as we ourselves are rightly liable to be called to account by others. The vulnerability in question is the potential for being exposed to the insult and additional injury, when we perceive ourselves wronged, of having our standing to call others to account denied, dismissed, or ignored in ways that call our very status as full participants into question (Walker, 2013, p. 112).

If Moraga envisions *This Bridge* as a first step toward acknowledging injustices born of relations of power and authority internal to lesbian feminism, then we might reinterpret her claims of injury less as critiques by a displaced 'other' than as the invocation of a relationship of moral vulnerability from within these relations. From this angle of vision, lesbian-of-color writing in venues such as *Sinister Wisdom* is an attempt to address the asymmetrical relationships that 'call our very status as full participants into question' – not so much to overcome these harms as



to call their perpetrators to account, to help her 'make sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury'.

Viewed in this context, *This Bridge Called My Back*, along with the many pieces published alongside it in *Sinister Wisdom*, is an attempt to name a relationship of moral vulnerability from within the lesbian feminist movement. The choice to publish central pieces of that effort in *Sinister Wisdom*, then, was an attempt, as Moraga put it, to 'call my white sisters on this'; that is, to invite white women to account for their contributions to relationships of moral vulnerability.⁴ Beverly and Barbara Smith's conversation in *Sinister Wisdom 18* speaks particularly well to this task. The sisters, who were two of the three contributing members of the Combahee River Collective, spend considerable time recounting everyday experiences that, together, give a name to the 'grinding' injury that comes with not only being harmed, but also with having one's peers fail to acknowledge or accept those harms as credible. Speaking about a variety of issues ranging from lesbian separatism to homophobia in the black community, the Smiths both critique lesbian feminism as a site of moral vulnerability and hold out hope for its ability to repair the relationships damaged by this particular form of inequality.

A prominent theme of the interview, for example, is the tragedy of having abandoned one's 'home' community for a new one promising reciprocal accountability, only to have that expectation go unacknowledged and, at times, actively dismissed. On the one hand, the sisters describe the extent to which they feel that 'everyone who has our identity' (that is, Black lesbians) 'has to sacrifice' connections to the Black community. As Beverly put it in the interview, not only 'is... there is so much about Black identity that doesn't get called into practice' in the women's movement,

It makes me think about how I live my life because there are so many parts of our Black identity that we no longer get a chance to exercise ... I would just like to mention July 4th which happened a few days ago and watching the Black family who lives in the house behind mine as I have for the last four years and just having this feeling of longing like, you know, I'll never be in that situation. A few days later, I was talking to this white woman I know about that and she said, "Well, do you really want to be sitting out there with those men?" And I said, No. But the thing is that it's the whole thing. The whole damn thing! (Smith and Smith, 1983, p. 68).

Yet while Beverly expresses the act of leaving behind the cultural forms of one's childhood as a difficult but at times necessary step for feminists, she also clearly points out how difficult it is to exist in a movement in which the pain of that act is not recognized or understood by one's peers. The white woman in her anecdote, for example, has no context in which to understand how Beverly Smith, a Black lesbian feminist, might long for the kinds of celebrations of belonging that place



someone in the Black community. Worse, however, is the inability to name this sense of tragedy from within a movement that has no process for repairing these harms. Shortly after discussing the injury of having left one's community for feminism, for instance, Beverly continues, 'Some separatists believe that although women are racist ..., when we get rid of men, sexism and racism will end too. I think that this is one of the most racist aspects of it because it does not recognize the racism that women, including lesbians, have' (Smith and Smith, 1983, p. 70). In other words, not only have black lesbians suffered a kind of injury by having left behind specific modes of belonging and experiencing racism, but this injury is compounded by the dismissal of these claims by the very people with whom they have been promised reciprocal relationships. Like Moraga's, Beverly's expression of injury is rooted in the fact that, despite the promise of reciprocal accountability in lesbian feminist politics, these relationships carry the ongoing risk of betrayal. Moral vulnerability, as in Moraga's preface to *This Bridge*, appears as a failure of white lesbians to 'have a lot of comprehension about what Black life is all about in this country, period' (1983, p. 67).

Both Barbara and Beverly insist, then, that acknowledging the 'class differences we experience on this kind of basic level which "high level" analysis and rhetoric don't get to' (1983, p. 63) must be a priority for any lesbian feminism that hopes to live up to its own promise of reciprocity. Ultimately, however, for both Barbara and Beverly the task at hand is to repair the relationships between white and Black women; to critically evaluate 'who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose face you can touch' (1983, p. 72). 'There are bunches of white women', they add, 'for whom these things that I've mentioned are unknown experiences with women of color' (1983, p. 72). Crucially, rather than advocating the abandonment of lesbian feminist politics in favor of some fundamentally new praxis, the Smith sisters argue that they see the main task of lesbians as acknowledging and repairing the relationships of mutual accountability that lesbianism promises – not presuming to transcend issues of inequality between women altogether. Repairing these relationships, the sisters insist, would be truly radical precisely because the task of repairing relations of moral vulnerability is so seldom undertaken. As Barbara put it,

I read in a women's newspaper an article by a woman speaking on behalf of lesbian separatists. She claimed that separatists are more radical than other feminists. What I really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think that is really radical because it has never been done before ... (1983, p. 75).

After acknowledging that such a 'coalition politics' would neither overcome nor ignore inequalities between and among differently positioned lesbians, the sisters



point out that these inequalities serve as the occasion for reflection on accountability, not a reason to contest the premises of lesbian feminism altogether. As Beverly puts it,

The way I see it, the function that Third World women play in the movement is that we're the people who throw the ball a certain distance and then the white women run to that point to pick it up. I feel we are constantly challenging white women, usually on the issues of racism but not always. We are always challenging women to go further, to be more realistic ... Third World women are not in actual leadership positions in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But we certainly have the vision (1983, p. 76).

Like Moraga, then, the Smith sisters argue that what is at stake in acknowledging racism within lesbian feminism is the very possibility of accounting for the lived inequalities between and among women. While they argue that the process of accounting is a potentially dangerous one, it is also necessary. Their perspective on lesbian political praxis, then, echoes Bernice Johnson Reagon, who succinctly expresses the dual promise and risk of coalition politics: 'Coalition *can* kill people; however, it is not by nature fatal' (Reagon, 2000 [1983], p. 361).

Elly Bulkin on White Lesbian Racism, Sinister Wisdom 13, 1980

Moral vulnerability is occasioned by the expectation of reciprocity; that is, it is what happens when expectations of reciprocal accountability are disappointed. The lesbian feminist context, precisely because it promised a deeply relational political praxis, became the scene of these critiques of its failures for lesbians of color. Rather than conceive of lesbians of color as revealing the essential incapacity of lesbian feminist categories to hold space for accountability, in the context of *Sinister Wisdom* pieces like 'Across the Kitchen Table' attempt to name these failures, to contextualize them in a specific set of hierarchical relationships, and to define when and how these practices of mutual accountability break down. Of course, though, it is one thing for lesbians of color to write, share, and critique from a position of moral vulnerability, and another altogether for the privileged within a movement to account for the conditions of that vulnerability and to establish processes by which they can repair these relationships.

From *Sinister Wisdom's* first issue, white lesbian feminists debated how to come to terms with claims about moral vulnerability put forth by writers of color like Moraga, Anzaldúa, the Smith sisters, and other frequent contributors such as Beth Brant, Audre Lorde, and Michelle Cliff. The editorial note in the first issue of *SW* in 1976, for example, included an urgent reflection on the unequal moral standing implicit in the discussions above. 'A central part of our vision has been to exercise



the unconscious and therefore most deadly forms of racism in the feminist movement', then-editor Harriet Desmoines writes,

But here we are with Issue I, birthed white as the day is long. Meridel Leseur said this about a white woman and an Indian woman: 'The two women had lived a parallel life curiously knowing each other, but the Indian was the knower. Something in the white woman willed not to know ... willed to evade the final knowing'. And so it is with white lesbians (Desmoines, 1976, p. 3).

As so many pieces by lesbians of color had argued, Desmoines suggests that problems of racism in *Sinister Wisdom* are a kind of double harm – first, as the harm of racism itself, and second, as the willful refusal to acknowledge or recognize these harms by one's so-called sisters. By 1980, however, white contributors to *SW* began taking seriously the claims about moral vulnerability that pepper lesbian feminist of color writing, attempting to acknowledge that white women's willingness 'to evade the final knowing' was something for which they needed to take responsibility. The first major piece reflecting on the responsibilities of white women to account for race and racism in *Sinister Wisdom* appears in its thirteenth issue. Elly Bulkin's (1980) piece, entitled 'Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics' is an attempt by a white-identifying Jewish lesbian feminist to examine what it would take to repair the relations of accountability that have been damaged by moral vulnerability. Bulkin's is an argument, in a word, about the moral standing of lesbians of color to impel white women to reflect on the responsibilities they bear for harms like those described in *This Bridge*.

In her piece, Bulkin describes a process by which reflection on homophobia serves as an occasion for reflection on racism. Here, homophobia is neither an analogy to, nor a pass for, racism; it is an occasion to acknowledge the unresolved hierarchies that exist within lesbian feminist communities, a practice that she argues is essential for repairing those contexts in which the lesbian feminist promise of reciprocal accountability has failed. In one example, Bulkin describes having 'called out' straight women presenters at the widely-attended *Second Sex at 30* conference for having ignored issues of homophobia within the women's movement, but also having failed to call out their racism. The presenters, she writes, 'just spoke as if all women writers – with the exception of Alice Walker – were both heterosexual and white' (1980, p. 4). They had discussed Adrienne Rich, 'but not as a lesbian; Alice Walker was praised, but seen only within the context of a white women's literary tradition'. Bulkin describes her reaction as follows:

After some discussion, I objected to the heterosexism of the presentations and met first with embarrassed silence and then with the assurance that, of course, they were all well aware of lesbian writing – it just didn't happen to receive



attention in these particular papers. Going home on the subway, I realized that I could well have objected to the white solipsism of the presentations and didn't – caught as I was in the immediacy of my anger at my own oppression. The following day, given a chance to speak at an open mike, I made the connections I had failed to make the day before (1980, p. 4).

For Bulkin, the fact that homophobia and racism are so closely intertwined presents an opportunity to reflect on how they produce complex patterns of inequality that come to bear on what one does or does not notice, the kinds of accountability one demands of or accepts from others, and whose voices matter when the expectation of accountability fails. 'I mention [the Second Sex conference]', she writes, 'as neither mea culpa nor simple success story, but as a way of beginning to look at the dynamics and socializing factors that interfere with our confronting racism, both in ourselves and in other white women. For I assume that I/we do not have to be non-racist in order to be anti-racist. For me this has been a crucial realization' (1980, p. 4).

After noting how her own 'solipsism' had prevented her from speaking out about racism for too long, Bulkin turns to consider what it would look like to start to repair relations in which reciprocal accountability has failed. For Bulkin, the process of repair requires two crucial recognitions. First, repair means taking account of the many ways that white lesbian feminists have guarded themselves from taking responsibility for racism. Bulkin describes several instances in which she was taught to willfully dismiss her own entanglement in racism. She recalls, first, how her grandmother '[referred] to Black people as 'schwartzes', dropping a word of Yiddish into a stream of English sentences and thereby impressing on me ... that 'they' (and, by extension, other people of color) were so alien to my white world that their very existence could not be acknowledged in my own language' (1980, p. 5). Later, in the mid-50s, she writes that her parents '[spoke] with the simple superiority of Northern liberals about civil rights for Black people in the South ... For them, racism was floating around someplace out there ... and if I only believed in the equality of all people, I would be forever safe from the corrosion in my grandmother's message' (1980, p. 5). For Bulkin, the anecdotes suggest more than an excuse for not having recognized racism; they represent her own entanglement in, and willingness to ignore, internal relations of moral vulnerability within lesbian feminism. Recognizing that one is not only confronted by 'difference,' but is rather shaped from within hierarchies of accountability, she argues, is necessary for her to be able to hear claims of moral vulnerability as such.

Second, and relatedly, Bulkin defines the reparative process as one that acknowledges that 'anti-racist' is different from 'non-racist'. What this means, practically, is that accountability can occur in situations where inequality is still present. On the one hand, Bulkin suggests that a process a repair must refuse to accept the idea that these inequalities can be solved at the level of analysis:



The concept of racism itself is often intellectualized by white feminists ... It is possible to make obeisance to the abstract existence of racism, even to work politically on issues of immediate concern to black and Third World women, such as sterilization abuse, out of an intellectual right-mindedness which actually distances us from the point where black and white women have to begin together (1980, p. 5).

White lesbian feminists cannot, she suggests, absolve themselves of racist legacies by reconceptualizing racism as problems of ‘difference’ that one is either for or against. Neither can white lesbians ‘defer’ problems of racism by ‘[waiting] for the never-never-day when we will be blameless enough to speak’ (1980, pp. 4–5). Although white lesbians like Bulkin are irrevocably entangled and invested in the kinds of hierarchies that lesbians of color critique, Bulkin argues that deferring the problem will only further entrench white women’s unwillingness to recognize moral vulnerabilities. Rather than assume that one must be ‘non-racist’ – to be absolved of guilt by seeking ‘solace’ in one’s moral correctness – to confront issues of racism, then, Bulkin suggests that lesbians recognize that ‘the issue... is not to belabor this reality, but to explore what can, in fact, still be done in spite of it’ (1980, p. 5).

Bulkin’s approach to redress – her insistence that it emphasize relations of accountability rather than straightforward displacements, as well as her claim that white lesbians’ accountability will remain partial and imbricated in relations of inequality – may seem dissatisfying to those used to ‘third wave’ queer theory’s more concise methodological move of contesting categories. But for Bulkin, at issue in instances of moral repair is decidedly *not* to recognize that lesbian feminism relies on some definable category, or to insist that fundamentally different experiences of sexuality ought to call into question the promises of lesbian feminism altogether (Bulkin et al., 1984). Rather, her attempt to take account of white lesbians’ contributions to relations of moral vulnerability evokes the praxis of reparations. In other words, there is no methodologically correct way to address moral vulnerabilities; there are only practices that, as Bulkin puts it, ‘[invest] with inescapable concreteness the concept of racism... [practices which spring] from that synthesis of reflection and feeling, personal struggle and critical thinking, which is at the core of the feminist process’ (Bulkin, 1980, p. 5). Bulkin thus suggests that repairing racial inequalities in the lesbian feminist movement will not require a final solution, but an open-ended commitment to re-establishing relations of accountability that have been breached or betrayed. The responsibility, she writes, must be to address ‘the most basic of questions: What will we undertake?’ (Bulkin, 1980, p. 19).

This final point not only illuminates the process by which white lesbians can be called to account for their contributions to moral vulnerability, but also suggests that the way forward, for those committed to an accountable feminist praxis, is



uncertain and fragile. It underscores, for example, Audre Lorde's famed statement in her 'Open Letter to Mary Daly':

The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, perhaps, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering and passing beyond, I hope (Lorde, 2007 [1984], p. 71).

What does it mean to engage in the process of 'shaping our future', of entering into the 'process of shattering and passing beyond'? For Barbara and Beverly Smith, and for Bulkin and Lorde, the process must be one of reciprocal accountability – a promise both radical and fragile, and one fraught with difficult decisions about how to move forward together. Those committed to a lesbian feminist politics must bear in mind, they seem to suggest, questions like the ones raised by Adrienne Rich in *SW 18*: 'What makes us believe these decisions can be simple, and who wants us to over-simplify them?' (Rich, 1983, p. 88).

Conclusion

At the outset of this article I described two simultaneous impulses in much of 'third wave' queer theory: the impulse to eschew the perceived lack of accountability in 'second wave' lesbian feminism, on the one hand, and to nevertheless reestablish grounds from which a 'correct' judgment about accountability can be leveraged, on the other. By contrast, I suggested that lesbian feminism as practiced in the 1970s and 80s in the pages of magazines like *Sinister Wisdom* offers an alternative, if often misrecognized, framework for pursuing the ongoing work of accountability that is at the heart of feminist and queer political projects – and does so in a way that more effectively resists the 'desire for solace' that lingers in 'third wave' projects like queer theory. Lesbian feminists involved in communities like *Sinister Wisdom* sought to understand how relations of inequality produced what I have argued are best described as moral vulnerabilities: it is the demand for accountability from within imperfect relationships that lesbian feminists referred to as the '*sinister wisdom*' of lesbian feminism.

To return to the example with which I opened this article, then, how might seeing lesbian feminism as centrally concerned with accountability help us to make sense of contemporary intra-group inequalities, such as the transphobic activists who speak in the name of lesbian feminists? First, insofar as the TERF argument rests on the claim that lesbians have been marginalized within queer politics, it is worth recognizing the ways that queer theory's lingering desire for solace has obscured some lesbian feminist claims in profound ways. In the first part of the article, for



instance, I suggested that there is a very real dynamic in which ‘queerness’ has produced a paradoxical dismissal of lesbian feminist concerns, writing off an entire era of political and theoretical contributions as either methodologically unsound or politically unsophisticated even as it borrows its conceptual and political tools. To acknowledge this history, however, is not to undermine the project of repairing trans vulnerability in the present. Far from validating the notion that ‘transactivism erases lesbians’, insisting on a more complex historical relationship between lesbian and queer practices reveals most fully how egregiously groups like Get the L Out have mischaracterized the very lesbian feminist erasures that they purport to defend. If any group is making a claim of moral vulnerability and a demand for repair, it is the trans activists who, like lesbians of color in the 1980s, articulate a breach of accountability upon which the feminist and queer movement is premised. And it is the TERFs who, in the name of an egregiously inaccurate version of the history of lesbian feminism, have attempted to ‘Get the L Out’ by refusing engagement with trans people.

Indeed, the TERFs’ refusal to engage altogether in the demands for accountability articulated by trans women not only seeks recourse to an essentialist category, as ‘third wave’ queer theorists might suggest; even more fundamentally, it breaches the reparative promise of lesbian feminism. Taking seriously the legacy of lesbian feminism reveals that the harms the TERFs perpetrate are not only exclusions – even the more nuanced ‘constitutive exclusions’, as Kramer (2017) might characterize them – from some sort of imagined class of homogeneous biological women. Instead, we might name TERFish-ness a relationship of moral vulnerability, in which cis women not only enact direct harms toward trans women, but also evade accountability by refusing to acknowledge them as harms in the first place. Indeed, the TERFs’ central claims – that they are the real victims of marginalization – are designed to obscure their fundamental refusal to account for the claims of trans women, whose experiences they refuse to acknowledge and whose authority to speak they deny. Accounting for these harms requires more than contesting displacement; rather, as the Smith sisters articulate, demands for accountability are fundamentally about who is authorized to speak in the name of the movement, and about who is obligated to hear the demands of others as legitimate concerns to which the relatively powerful must respond. At minimum, as the Smiths point out, no demand for accountability can be legitimate if its claims to authority are premised on mischaracterizing, obscuring, or denying the experiences of vulnerable others.

Finally, moral repair, as Bulkin suggests, requires a continual commitment to remain in community with others, even as the process of accounting tempts us, out of fear or discomfort, to withdraw from the hierarchies in which one is entangled. If TERFish-ness is a problem of accountability, we might also argue that the impulse to ‘Get the L Out’ – an impulse to withdraw to an imagined place of safety – is fundamentally about refusing the very accountability that motivates feminist and



queer projects. Flashpoints like those around trans vulnerability within the LGBTQ+ movement thus point to a more fundamental and widespread political reality than much contemporary theory has tended to recognize: the conditions of inequality that make moral vulnerability possible will not disappear because we have a 'more thorough' conceptual apparatus for understanding how differences inhere in categories. Instead, we must take these relationships as a condition for – and an invitation into – relational practices of accountability. Lesbian feminism, in fact, tells us just this: transformative change *can* come if we would only focus on what appear, at first, to be more provisional goals: trust-building, accounting, working through, loving well, evaluating 'who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose face you can touch'. Such a politics is a promise both radical and fragile, one fraught with difficult decisions about how to move forward together, a kind of 'sinister wisdom'.

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Notes

- 1 See the social media response to the London Pride protestors, who have responded to calls to 'Get the L Out' with alternative campaigns – ex. #LWithTheT and #NotADebate (L'Amour, 2018). Beyond this particular episode, each year organizers of local 'Dyke Marches', a series of events self-styled as the more inclusive version of Pride, make the case that traditional Pride parades celebrations too easily erase trans women. Even more broadly, Zein Murib (2017) has documented the profound uneasiness of 'LGBT' as a political category.
- 2 Indeed, the 'TERF wars' have fully arrived in academia as a high profile debate over the use of the term in the philosophy blog *The Daily Nous* makes clear (Flaherty, 2018; Allen et al., 2018).
- 3 Honig's earliest uses of the term 'displacement of politics' are directed toward those she names 'virtue theorists': Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, Michael Sandel, and, later, Bernard Williams. Yet while Honig has consistently used feminist theorists to make her case against these thinkers, the notion of such 'displacements' within feminist political theory have become ever more common.
- 4 Several pieces from *This Bridge* appeared in *Sinister Wisdom 18*, including Chrysts' 'I walk in the History of My People', Gabrielle Daniels' 'Millicent Fredericks', hattie gossett's 'billie lives! billie lives!', and Barbara and Beverly Smith's 'Across the Kitchen Table'.

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