

A Glimpse of Lesbian Life in Lima

by Kaushalya Bannerji

L'auteure partage sa perception des expériences de lesbiennes qui vivent au Pérou.

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I recently spent a year in Lima, Peru. Although I did not go there to work in the lesbian and gay community, I naturally harboured a curiosity as to the nature, issues, and dynamics of lesbian life and history in Peru. As is often the case, I found the lives and history of the gay male community more accessible. Their social life was more public. They were more visible in the country's only gay-NGO as staff and users. As poorer community members, they were evident on the street working as both young hustlers and in drag.

It is difficult to talk for and about sexual liberation in any context where society is structured and maintained through a complex conjuncture of hierarchies, subordinations, and exclusions. Where this conjuncture comes together to perpetuate a society suffering 87 per cent un- and underemployment, a racially-determined system of government, and a massive gap in male and female social roles and rights, it's easy to overlook issues of sexuality as being secondary. Nonetheless, our sexuality is fundamental to the way we relate to the world, ourselves, and each other. It posits us on the side of the status quo or as its enemy, whether we like it or not.

In Latin America, as here, the femi-

nist movement has had a difficult relationship with lesbianism. This relationship is reflected in the class position of many leading feminists who follow a path of privilege and power similar to their male counterparts. The maternal feminism of nineteenth-century WASP culture is combined with Catholic "Marianismo" or the mythology of woman as a descendent of Mary, bearers of "original sin,"

who veer between temptress/whore and self-sacrificing mother. In this anti-sex dichotomy (where sex is only viewed/valued as procreational), class enters the equation as a link to the elite construction of reproductive rights. This is the state's class-biased attempt at population control.

Within this environment, it is hardly surprising that lesbians are at best rendered invisible and at most demonized as predatory, mentally-ill, desperately lost souls. Working-class attitudes to lesbian culture perpetuate a vicious cycle of hatred, homophobia, and stereotyping.

Much of lesbian life is organized formally around frequenting bars and informally around socializing in people's homes. While entering a bar assumes a level of self-possession and confidence, the lack of "safe" social places to meet and talk to other lesbians make the bars an attractive venue for lonely, confused, and often isolated women. Once inside, it seemed to me that lesbians drink to forget their social subordination and to attain a level of inhibition which allows them to act out sexually. Although it is an over-simplification, expressions of lesbian desire manifest themselves through a masculinization / feminization of gender, both transgressive, since one is about self-iden-

tification with masculinity and the other about same-sex object choice. For femmes who "pass" all week, the weekend release in the bars validates their desire/sexuality. For butches, who confront social and economic disenfranchisement daily, the availability of "females" and the sexualized femme's gaze becomes their solace in the hostile and compulsory sexualization of the relationship between sex and gender.

The few bars accessible to lesbians, however, have a mixed clientele. Straight men are often present. Although the site of working and lower-middle class lesbian life, these bars are not "safe" spaces as we might think. Lesbians, like all women who enjoy the "night out," learn to defend themselves. Forming couples is essential to expressing desire as well as being a source of protection in the aggressive and polarized bar environment. Heterosexual men frequent these bars to laugh, drink, and harass butches while trying to pick-up femmes. Their masculinity is threatened by two factors: an aggressive butch presence and femme rejection of straight men. Fights, related to both protection and jealousy, are not infrequent. Most lesbians cannot thus avoid confronting the transgression and "abnormality" of their desire/identity. Furthermore, lack of openness and financial independence lead to often furtive sexual encounters, clandestine love relationships, and obligatory bisexuality for survival.

Politically, little space is given or taken to articulate a lesbian-positive stance. Popular (i.e., working-class) women's organizing is defined by basic needs and the socialization of the obligations of (a largely single) motherhood. The country's only gay NGO, the *Movimiento de Orgullo Homosexual de Lima*, has attracted an educated yet dispossessed group of women activists who share a particular North American conception of

lesbianism as a static, hidden component of the psyche awaiting "discovery" and openness.

Dependency on foreign funding has shaped the nature of projects and campaigns directed towards the gay and lesbian communities as much as heterosexual society. Concepts like "self-esteem," "safer sex," "outing," "coming out," etc., although relatively new, have become the symbolic

pulsory currency of male-female interaction in everything from work, to street, to night life, and to media. Innuendo and double meaning infuse the lyrics of popular songs, the camera lens, and the radio patter.

I found it difficult to look for resistance and "community" based on sexuality during my time in Peru. Race, gender, and class were such visible and brutalizing components

of social organization that I felt hesitant to push a critique of compulsory heterosexism, when it seemed to be diffusing limited resources. Yet this was a contradiction that I struggled

with as I tried to socialize only with gay/lesbian or lesbian-positive individuals when I was not at work, since I found it very easy to be subsumed under the straight male gaze which silently informs social interaction.

As a lesbian of colour categorized as a "femme," the attitude I encountered in the lesbian community was sexist and racist, not too different from how straight women of colour are treated throughout the country. Peru is, in fact, a highly race-stratified society, comparable to South Africa and Mexico in terms of the definite correlation between power and white skin.

I found myself wondering what kind of person I would have been growing up in this sort of society, a question that does not plague me when I return to India. India never unsettled my sexuality in the way Peru did, perhaps because of the availability of same-sex social spaces which are not sexualized and the public repression of heterosexuality. Straight sexuality was much more "in your face" in Peru than has been my experience in either India or Canada. In Peru, public sex literally means teenagers, "adulterers," and poor, straight couples engaging in sexual activity in public due to lack of privacy and

housing. The repression of one's own "marginalized" sexuality is thus constantly felt. I had to struggle not to react in an extremist manner—either to become a parody of a drag queen or rush out to shave my head and run to a high-class shopping center to buy my imported Doc Martens (rather an ironic symbol of liberation in a country still under *de facto* military rule)!

Although I met people from working-class sectors, I would not dare presume to decode nor analyse lives which for many are fraught with contradictions, oppressions, and basic survival issues which we under the Harris government are only beginning to imagine. It is difficult, for example, to find the words to speak of the reality of AIDS in a country where access to medical care is solely based on cash and connections, where basic standards of hygiene are not present for the poor, where water is available once or twice a week for shanty-town dwellers, and pollution and malnutrition contribute to mortality rates at an alarming pace.

This article is not intended as definitive research nor does it offer solid and static paradigms for understanding the complexity of gay and lesbian relations, communities, and expression in Peru. Rather, it is a glimpse of the more superficial aspects of lesbian and gay life in a rather middle-class context in Lima, where almost everything is available if one has money and access, even theorization on sexuality and gender.

Kaushalya Bannerji is currently a co-coordinator of Desh Pardesh, an annual festival exploring culture and politics in the diasporic South Asian community. She has published a book of poems, A New Remembrance (South Asian Review, Toronto, 1993) and has a forthcoming collection of poetry, The Faces of Five O'Clock (Sister Vision Press, Toronto, 1996). She has a M.A. in International Relations.

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currency which identifies one as part of the conscious gay and lesbian community. Bisexuality, as choice or inclination is not, however, as denied as it is in the North although it is difficult to find it used as an identity from which to organize.

Lesbians who believe in separatist politics and cultural spaces did not seem to be active in the organized and funded gay and lesbian community. In fact previous waves of women's organizing seem to have reached a peak by 1990, possibly coinciding with the escalation of the country's civil war between Sendero Luminoso and the Peruvian army's counter-insurgency strategy which was brought to the capital by President Fujimori. As well, the impact of AIDS foregrounded an expedient recognition (though never approval) of male homosexuality in the national media, simultaneously rendering invisible women's sexuality which is pathologized as passive carrier status in most work on sexually transmitted diseases. The current situation thus seems to allow for more co-gender organizing and different political frameworks than those I was familiar with in North America.

Nevertheless, the norms of straight life permeate every social interaction. Heterosexual flirtation is the com-