

## CHAPTER 4

### The Transformation of Heterosexism and its Paradoxes

CHRIS BRICKELL

My God, my God, this bloody country's got it all wrong, I mean they've got more rights than we have...don't get me wrong, live and let live, that's what I say, but when normal people have less rights than.... I mean does it make sense to you, because nothing makes sense to me any more.... (Mr. Rattigan, "This Life," TV4, June 1, 1998, pauses in original).

This fictional character from the British television series *This Life* expresses in his statement some key elements of the heterosexist *Zeitgeist*. He files for divorce when his wife has an affair with a woman, and when he finds that does not "count" as adultery he flies into a rage at his (unbeknown to him) gay male lawyer.

It is unspoken but implicit in this discourse that "normal people" have "less (sic) rights" than "them." "They" are lesbians and gay men, and "they" are supposed to know their place. In this discourse, the normative status of heterosexuality is under threat in a country that has allegedly "got it all wrong." The homosexual can be tolerated ("live and let live") provided that he or she does not usurp the place reserved for "normal people." Yet, according to this television character, "this bloody country" (England in this case) has granted lesbians and gay men "more rights than" heterosexuals.

This text encapsulates a shift in forms of heterosexism. Heterosexuals are positioned as "normal people," a construction that relies upon lesbians and

gay men being positioned as the abnormal. The category of the abnormal belongs to older forms of heterosexism, which are exemplified by medical and conservative Christian discourses. Those positions can be termed *ontological heterosexism*, because in such forms the lesbian or the gay man is considered to have a disordered being. According to conservative Christian discourses, the homosexual subject suffers from a flaw of the moral self; he or she was traditionally “sinful” and in need of moral regulation. As homosexuality was medicalized, the homosexual subject came to be seen as mentally or physically disordered and requiring medical intervention. Traces of this ontological inferiority live on in recent categorizations of the homosexual as the abnormal Other, “outside” of the universe of fully adjusted, mature, and fulfilling heterosexuality.

While aspects of ontological heterosexism continue within some discourses about homosexuality, the primacy of notions of homosexuals as sinful, sick, or in some other way innately deficient has been recently giving way to other forms of heterosexism. These newer forms can be described as *cultural heterosexism*. In the logics of cultural heterosexism, heterosexuality is understood to be under sustained political threat from “politicized” lesbians and/or gay men. The shift in forms of heterosexism, then, is a shift in focus from the inner deficiencies of the homosexual subject to his or her relationships to a wider culture. On one level, this culture is presented as neutral and as treating all equally, yet on another it is constructed as heterosexual and is defended on this basis. The homosexual “outside” is presented as threatening to enter the heterosexual “inside” and to overtake, subdue, and even dismember it. While not explicitly articulated, the fear is that ultimately heterosexuality will become “undone” and lose its normative status within the social order.<sup>1</sup>

Heterosexism can be understood as an interlinking of discourses. I do not mean to rely on an understanding in which discourse is so vaguely defined and yet so reified that it “does all the doing” in society. Sometimes, the concept of discourse is so pervasive that it envelops all within it like a fog, and yet it is so imprecise that it is hard to see what is meant by it in any specific sense. Instead, I regard discourse as the textual and symbolic means of transmitting and reproducing understandings of the social world. Discourse is intimately bound up with the expression and reproduction of power relations, where power is understood as both constitutive of selves, identities, and relationships in a Foucauldian sense as well as a force enabling relationships of domination between selves that are socially located in particular ways. Power constitutes social institutions as well as working through these in ways that secure forms of domination. The form of domination at issue here is that between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The deployment of particular, power-laden discourses about heterosexuality and homosexuality is one means by which domination is reproduced.

This chapter traverses four fundamental areas of discussion. First, I examine the notion of cultural heterosexism, using cultural racism as a template. I outline cultural racism here because it was the starting point for my inquiry about changes in forms of heterosexism in New Zealand, despite the fact that much of the racism literature was British. I move from a discussion of racism to an examination of heterosexism. Second, I examine four ideological positions that inform cultural heterosexism: libertarianism, liberalism, authoritarian conservatism and neoconservatism. Third, I summarize some specific discursive themes that appeared in discourses of cultural heterosexism—the ‘taxpayer’, totalitarians and defenders, the “ordinary person”, and marked vs. unmarked categories. Fourth, I summarize some of the ways in which lesbians and gay men have been positioned differently with respect to cultural heterosexism.

### Cultural Racism as a Template

Cultural heterosexist discourses are more sophisticated than earlier statements that configure homosexuality as a matter of innate inferiority. The literature on new forms of British racism offers a means of exploring the ways in which the equation of other = inferior has previously metamorphosed into a more subtle set of discourses that are not always immediately recognizable as discourses of domination. This literature emerged from the early 1980s and explored the ways in which immigration and antiracism were starting to be discussed by politicians and in the news media from the 1970s onwards. This is referred to as the *new racism* or *cultural racism*.<sup>2</sup> According to cultural racism, black immigrants were no longer considered to exemplify physical and mental inferiority, but instead they sought to patrol the thoughts of white Britons and thus bring about the downfall of the British nation in collusion with sympathetic white antiracists. White antiracists as well as immigrants are positioned in such discourse as “anti-British”: the colonized were seen as colonizers. Antiracism was coded as racism; hence, those who subscribed to cultural racist discourse were able to position themselves as the true defenders against injustice.

It was supposed that this oppression of a white Britain and white Britons by the immigrants and their supporters occurred in several ways. First, immigrants were said to occupy areas of the inner cities, turning them (in the words of politician Enoch Powell) into “alien territories.”<sup>3</sup> In a geographical sense, white Britons were said to be in danger of being displaced by the new arrivals. Second, it was alleged that the immigrants and their white colluders took hold of the apparatus of the local state by seizing control of the Labour Party, which held majorities on several urban local authorities and the Greater London Council. This control ostensibly led to the “banning” of black coffee, golliwogs, and the nursery rhyme “baa baa black sheep” by a

"loony left," which was under the thrall of antiracist "agitators." In contrast, the "ordinary person" was "terrified" of the "Race Inquisition" that threatened to wreak terrible vengeance upon those who would not bow down to antiracist "fascism."

There was a clear discursive inversion or reversal in which "the people," who were to be understood as *white*, were said to be newly oppressed by the tyrannical immigrant/antiracist minority. This reversal served to reproduce racism, as the inferior/superior strand of traditional forms of racism continued in a modified form. Those who supposedly threatened to take over a vulnerable Britain remained an Other who should have "known their place." Accordingly, the ways in which immigrants were inferiorized in everyday life vanished from view, as they were constructed as powerful totalitarians. Such positioning as powerful legitimated their treatment as inferior.

Also crucial to the reproduction of racism were the accompanying significations of "Britain," "nation," and the "ordinary person." Insofar as they were to be defended from the incursion of the Other, these tropes were constructed as white. It was a white Britain who was allegedly at risk from the cultural influence and interference of the black immigrant, vulnerable in the face of antiracist tyranny. The "ordinary person" who was "afraid to speak" for fear of accusations of racism was the white Briton. Ironically, while being constructed as endangered by antiracist "fascism," white culture and nation remained normative within the social order.

### The Bases of Cultural Heterosexist Discourse

These patterns and positions have been reproduced within heterosexist discourse. Racism and heterosexism are not identical in their means of operation, nor are they reducible to one another. However, cultural racism can be used as a starting point for the exploration of cultural forms of heterosexism because there are several thematic and discursive similarities. First, the shift from traditional forms of racism to cultural racism involves a change in understandings of ontology. The notion that black immigrants from the "colonies" are innately, biologically inferior gives way to the idea that those who previously "knew their place" now harbor a profound political threat. Cultural heterosexism mirrors this ontological shift. Second, there are similarities in discursive themes, patterns, and positions between these newer forms of heterosexism and cultural racist discourses. The tyrannical Other, tropes of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism, "thought policing," fear of "speaking out," the "ordinary person," abuse of "taxpayers' money," and the image of the nation under siege are present in cultural racism and are reproduced in cultural heterosexist approaches.

Cultural racist discourses borrow from a range of (sometimes contradictory) ideological underpinnings, and cultural heterosexist approaches

often utilize elements from these same positions. These are libertarianism, liberalism, authoritarian conservatism, and neoconservatism. In the discussion that follows, I will summarize the relationships between these and cultural heterosexist discourses, while elaborating upon the use of the specific discursive themes in cultural heterosexist texts.

### Libertarianism

Libertarianism provides a notion of the individual who is detached from all social structure, self-directed, autonomous, and a possessor of a "negative" freedom—the freedom of action without restraint. The libertarian individual tends to be White, heterosexual, and male, as others (including gay men, lesbians, and/or women and/or "ethnic minorities") are regarded as members of "collectivities" who threaten "individual" sovereignty. Whereas for libertarianism the "individual" is upheld as the primary unit in both moral and ontological terms, the Others who occupy "collectivities" are constructed as inferior and dangerous. They are considered to be inferior because the "individual" is afforded moral superiority, and to be dangerous because they threaten the sanctity of that individual.

In libertarian writings, "individual" and "collective" are constructed as mutually exclusive and antagonistic terms. Within this logic, the collective seeks to impose on the male, heterosexual individual in a number of ways. Firstly, collective members appropriate the wealth held by the individual by means of taxes, and they use these taxes to fund social services and programs that further their collective interest, such as the Human Rights Commission or the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The collective is identified with the state, since both exist in opposition to the individual, and therefore the collective is said to have the coercive potential of the state at its disposal. Second, it is argued that collective members make false claims for resources upon the heterosexual male individual, and that these are based on assertions of systematic disadvantage that are fundamentally untrue. From a libertarian standpoint, such assertions are purely a means of receiving state largesse and thereby imposing upon the individual.

Third, members of collectivities threaten to police the actions of the individual, thereby infringing upon his (sic) liberty. Not only are the fruits of the individual's labor under threat from the collectivity's illegitimate demands, but the individual's very inner, possessive self and mind are under siege from policing by the state-supported Other. For example, human rights legislation is understood as prohibiting the freedom to discriminate and as censoring the freedom to speak. Feminists, lesbians, and "politicized" gay men are constructed as "Politically Correct gays and feminists," tyrannical "fascists of the Left" who seek to coerce the libertarian individual.<sup>4</sup>

These aspects of libertarian logic rely to some extent on the idea of the "level playing field." Before the abstract male heterosexual individual is coerced by "politicization," the existing social order is considered to be "un-politicized": it is simply an expression of a desirable neutrality. It is not acknowledged that heterosexuality is itself always already a part of a political, "politicized" order. Instead, a libertarian argument suggests that "politicization" occurs only when members of a collectivity seek to directly limit the liberty and freedom of the heterosexual, male individual. Discourses of political correctness share this logic, with the implication that he/man language (for example) does not express relations of power, while attempts to "ban" it are expressions of a repressive power that infringes upon individual liberties.

### Liberalism

Some aspects of liberal thought provide epistemological bases for cultural heterosexist discourse.<sup>5</sup> The concept of toleration has its roots in liberalism. It has as its basis a distinction between a powerful "we," who tolerate something with which "we" do not fully agree, and a tolerable, less than agreeable "they," who are on the receiving end of the tolerator's benevolence.<sup>6</sup> In heterosexist discourses, the tolerators are heterosexual and the tolerated are gay and/or lesbian.

As in the libertarian understanding, the liberal individual is regarded to be independent of any social structures that may define, constrain, or mold that individual. Accordingly, those who adopt liberal positions tend to avoid an analysis of the ways in which as subjects we are always embedded within particular relationships of power. In her writing about "race," Ruth Frankenberg<sup>7</sup> refers to a position that she terms "color blindness." According to color blindness, we are "all just people" for whom ethnicity is and should be irrelevant and insignificant. We are not "all just people." Instead, aspects of our selves are highly significant to life in a society where subjectivity is constituted through hierarchies of power that operate from above and below. As Henning Bech argues, "existing as a homosexual is synonymous with existing under certain conditions...which bear on that existence" (original emphasis).<sup>8</sup>

The insistence that "we are all just people" or that "everyone is the same" is an insistence upon ignoring the ways in which lesbian identities or gay identities exist within specific relations of domination. Such an insistence reinforces heterosexuality as normative by leaving intact its dominant, unmarked position and by rendering homosexuality less visible and viable.<sup>9</sup> The generic liberal subject remains, like the libertarian subject, male, White, and heterosexual.

Liberal assumptions and rhetoric are central to the position that I have referred to elsewhere as *excess equality*.<sup>10</sup> Excess equality posits that there is or was a time when lesbians and gay men had "equality" with heterosexuals,

but that such a time has been "gone beyond" with the seeking of "special privileges." Excess equality relies upon an abstract notion of equality with no consideration of the ways in which some identity positions are systematically inferiorized within the society in which we live. The excess equality position erases the ways in which heterosexuality is privileged and obligatory. In other words, a society in which one's lesbianness or gayness is a criterion for subordination, and in which dominance is naturalized and regarded as apolitical, is taken to exemplify "equality." In turn, moves to overturn that subordination are considered to be moving "beyond" equality. Liberalism's individualism downplays structural inequalities thereby allowing appeals to equality to function conservatively. The "equality" promised can express and hide already existing relations of domination as it is constructed in the name of such domination.

### Authoritarian Conservatism

Authoritarian conservatism is present in both ontological and cultural forms of heterosexism. This is not necessarily surprising, as these forms of heterosexism are not pure oppositions, and traces of the former reside in the latter. Authoritarian conservatism has as its basis an image of a fragile social order at risk from the failings of a hedonistic, fickle, and potentially amoral populace. Restraint is required, especially with respect to sexuality and the construction of "masculinity" and "femininity," in order that the collapse of a precariously balanced "civilization" be prevented. In authoritarian conservative positions, men and women are taken to have particular "natures" as active and desiring and passive and obedient, respectively, and these natures dictate particular positions and places within society, with women being subordinate to men (although women are often regarded as more morally pure—on this see Dworkin 1983).

Homosexuality is taken to exemplify sex out of control, and is coded as abnormal and in need of eradication. Individual lesbians and gay men are in need of conversion to heterosexuality if possible, or moral restraint if not. It is argued that the law should enforce conservative moral positions on abortion, sex education (again, promoting restraint), and punishment, and all legislation should send "messages" about the correct means of conduct.

Within cultural heterosexism, the discourses that utilize terms such as "special rights," "thought policing," "equality," "tolerance," and "political correctness" often function in the service of authoritarian conservatism. Anna Marie Smith suggests that conservative movements resignify terms such as "equality" and "tolerance" from their liberal meanings into a set of "reactionary" meanings, and that this is a part of the hegemonic project of such movements.<sup>11</sup> For example, in a letter to the editor, J. Hooker wonders whether he can "expect tolerance...when I rail against the

revolting perversion of homosexuality.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the liberal notion of tolerance is recuperated into authoritarian conservative discourse (“revolting perversion”).

In contrast to Smith, however, I would argue that what is going on here is not solely a conservative redefinition of these liberal or quasiliberal terms. Instead, the coming together of liberalism and authoritarianism results in part from shared precepts. While liberalism does not hold to ideas about homosexuality requiring restraint, both liberalism and authoritarianism refuse to acknowledge the materiality of the subordination central to the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

### Neoconservatism

The term “neoconservatism” has perhaps had a wider currency in the United States of America than elsewhere. It can be used to refer to some of the crossovers between libertarianism and authoritarian conservatism. The main themes include opposition to affirmative action and to lesbian, gay, and feminist “politicization” of the nuclear family, as well as a concern with leftist “political correctness” coercively challenging the existing social order. Discourses of “political correctness” (PC) are a site of meeting for libertarian and authoritarian conservative positions because those movements and positions that are positioned as PC are understood to politicize the private realm, and to attempt “thought policing” of those who have been positioned as normative within traditional discourses and practices.

According to the logic of political correctness discourse as applied to sexuality, the heterosexual as a normative person is under threat from a resurgent homosexual Other who is expected to remain in the private sphere.<sup>13</sup> Those who use political correctness discourse in the service of libertarianism also tend to argue that “political correctness” mobilizes the resources and coercive powers of the state against libertarianism’s heterosexual male individual. Political correctness discourse assists in the construction of this individual as heterosexual and male. It is white heterosexual men who are absent from the typifications in which the politically correct subject is constructed as a gay man or as a disabled lesbian of minority ethnic origin. Heterosexual men are left as the individuals who are “victimized” by “political correctness” when other identities are constructed as “political correctness.”

Heterosexual women are positioned in somewhat more ambivalent ways than heterosexual men with respect to political correctness discourse. Women, per se, tend not to be characterized as politically correct. In order that the charge of “PC” be leveled, “woman” must be qualified by other aspects of identity such as feminist or lesbian.

Having summarized the linkages between these four ideological positions and discourses of cultural heterosexism, I will move on to review some of the specific discursive themes that characterize such forms of heterosexism. To this end, I make use of a paragraph from an opinion column written by Rosemary McLeod in the New Zealand magazine *North and South*. This magazine is written for a middle-class audience and is generally neoconservative in tone. McLeod’s text encapsulates many of the discursive themes central to cultural heterosexism, and provides an example of the ways in which interlinkages occur. The themes are adopted, modified, and utilized within specific (con)texts, and they are able to be kept in circulation and hence reproduced because of their portability.

### Themes in Cultural Heterosexist Discourses

I have not heard about taxpayer-funded lunches for women at home with children at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. Still, they have a lot on their hands, what with organizing newsletters for disabled Maori lesbians.... Helen [Clark] will be happier when we pay higher taxes, too. The better to fund newsletters for disabled lesbians.<sup>14</sup>

In the above excerpt, McLeod refers to a catered meeting for lesbians in the public service hosted by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and that came to be known in the news media as “the lesbian lunch.” Here, McLeod ties together several of the key themes within cultural heterosexist discourse. The first sentence contains the figure of the heterosexual who is “left out” of the new political landscape in which lesbians, gay men, and their “colluders” are in charge. In this case, the “left out” is the woman “at home with children.” This image was widespread in coverage of the “lunch,” sometimes with the implication that “deviant” women were being given privileges denied to “normal” women. The “left out” clearly resonates with the idea that lesbians (and gay men) are receivers of “special privileges” that are part of the move toward excess equality, and also with the argument that the homosexual subject has become an oppressor of the heterosexual populace.

The “taxpayers” who fund this “lunch” are understood as heterosexual, and the lunch represents taxpayers’ money spent on Others. The libertarian formulation “tax-is-theft” echoes here, as the lesbian “collectivity” is seen to appropriate the wealth of the heterosexual “individual” taxpayer. The opposition between “taxpayers” and “Others” has been used in the context of British cultural racism, where taxpayers as white Britons were counterposed to immigrant and antiracist Others. Opinion columnist Karl du Fresne reconfigures “taxpayers’ money” as “public money” in the context of a gay and lesbian pride parade: “the gay movement holds its hands out for public money to subsidise its self-indulgent, decadent frolicking.”<sup>15</sup> In a letter to the

editor, another writer also refers to "the homosexual exhibitionist minority demanding public money."<sup>16</sup>

The phrase "public money" not only reproduces the notion that tax-is-theft but it also serves to exclude lesbians and gay men from the construct of "the public." The phrase "the public" could be read as shorthand for "the public of New Zealand" and the construction of citizenship and nationhood as exclusively heterosexual. Members of the heterosexual taxpayer "public" are constructed as representatives of the New Zealand economy and by implication New Zealand society, while gay men and lesbians are the "nonpublic" and thereby noncitizens.

The third theme at work in McLeod's text is the equation "PC = disabled Maori lesbians."<sup>17</sup> While the PC element of this equation is not overt here, it is implicit, and it appears when this text is read intertextually with the others circulating in the news media at the same time.<sup>18</sup> The "disabled Maori lesbian" represents multiple marginality, unreality, and impossibility, and is therefore cited as the identity on which a Ministry of supposedly dubious value would be most likely to be wasting its time (and "taxpayers' money"). The last two sentences in the excerpt from McLeod's column also engage an equation in the form of a chain of equivalence. In 1993, the Labour Party, then in Opposition, underwent a leadership challenge in which Helen Clark replaced previous leader and former Prime Minister Mike Moore. Clark's challenge was characterized as a "pointy-headed lesbian plot," and a discursive chain of equivalence was constructed between the challengers in the Labour Party, homosexuality, feminism, socialism, intellectualism, and "political correctness." The chain reappears here, as links are remade between Labour, socialism ("higher taxes"), lesbians, and possibly even intellectualism ("newsletters"). The close association made between Helen Clark and lesbians during the 1993 challenge and debate is also reproduced clearly here.

### Totalitarians and defenders

I have mentioned that the figure of the heterosexual "left out" resonates with the notion that the homosexual subject has become powerful and oppressive, having invaded the government sector and "public" space and proceeded to exclude and tyrannize heterosexuals. This idea is summarized in this excerpt from opinion columnist Karl du Fresne, writing in the capital city's evening newspaper:

The scorn and ridicule the gay activists once bitterly complained of themselves they now deal out to others.... Of course all this is consistent with the tyranny of the minority, one of the great curses of the late 20th century, whereby small groups of people play on the conscience of much larger groups of people.<sup>19</sup>

Du Fresne's text epitomizes the inversion that lies at the heart of cultural heterosexist discourse: the marginal has become the tyrannical oppressor. As a sign, tyranny underlies cultural heterosexist discourse and it is often not visible, but in this excerpt it appears explicitly.<sup>20</sup> Having sought excess equality, "gay activists" now seek to tyrannize an innocent heterosexual populace. Such a position is logically dependent on the strand running through liberalism and libertarianism, which denies the specific ways in which lesbians and gay men remain marginalized. This form of discourse, then, can be seen as a strategy to reinforce dominance while subsequently denying it. Not only is the homosexual not marginalized, according to this narrative, but he or she has become powerful and dangerous. The idea of the homosexual as a dangerous invader is played out within cultural heterosexist discourse in three senses.

In the first sense, lesbians or gay men or both are seen to have invaded a series of state agencies, be they the Labour Party, the Family Planning Association, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, or various local authorities. One commentator argues that the first two of these organizations have been "hijacked by the homosexual propagation machine. We now have about 2 percent of the population, and their hangers on, pulling the strings to further their cause."<sup>21</sup> Again, the colluder figure appears in the form of the "hanger on."

Second, it has been argued that lesbians and gay men have become powerful through their occupation of "public" space. For example, gay and lesbian pride parades have been characterized as examples of the "promotion" of a homosexuality that should remain in "private" space. Central to this discourse is the rendering invisible of the ways in which performances of heterosexual identities are enacted in public spaces.<sup>22</sup> Heterosexuality is unmarked such that its visibility is invisible; expressions of heterosexuality are not regarded as heterosexual as such.

Third, it is argued that homosexuals have emerged from the private sphere of their closet and home to tyrannize the minds of heterosexuals. As "mind Nazis," lesbians and gay men come to "play on the consciences" of heterosexuals with the aim of policing their thoughts, speech, and actions.<sup>23</sup> Anna Marie Smith argues that this inversion in which the marginal becomes the invader has allowed those who oppose homosexuality to position themselves not as opponents, but as defenders. Opponents recast themselves as "defenders of the norm against the invaders."<sup>24</sup> As the concerns about "mindNazis" illustrate, not only are the spaces of government agencies or the city street considered to be in need of defence, but so too are the imagined, metaphorical spaces within the minds of conservative heterosexuals.

The language of totalitarianism implied in the term "mind Nazi" dovetails with this notion of defense: the norm and the minds of those upholding it are at risk from the totalitarian impulses of "politicized" lesbians and



gay men. Such a norm needs reinforcement against the tyrannous invaders. Jean Bethke Elshtain<sup>25</sup> regards politicized "gay liberationists" as attempting "the remaking of human nature itself" and hence employing "a terrible engine of social control...absolute terror." A similar process is at work in cultural racist discourses, where immigrants and their supporters are seen to visit fascism upon an innocent white Britain.

### The "Ordinary Person"

Images of totalitarianism and defense are dependent, too, on the image of the "ordinary person" who requires protection from the jackboots of the homosexual tyrant. The trope of the ordinary person has a tradition in conservative discourses. Within ontological heterosexism, the ordinary person is he or she who is not sick or sinful. In contrast, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe<sup>26</sup> argue that in Reaganite and Thatcherite discourse, the category of "the people" as "those who defend the traditional values and freedom of enterprise" is counterposed to the subversives: "feminists, blacks, young people and 'permissives' of every type." It is this conception, in which the "ordinary person" and "the people" are those who oppose the politicized subversives, which appears in cultural heterosexist discourse, although there may at times be overlap with the older meanings. In both cases, the figure of the "ordinary person" serves to mark out boundaries of permissibility and impermissibility.

As controversy raged over a pride parade, two writers in *Metro* magazine constructed "the people" as heterosexual in their texts, suggesting that "people are sick to death of deviant homosexual behaviour being flaunted in public."<sup>27</sup> According to such a discourse, these "people" are putting lesbians and gay men on notice: "people" have had enough and the limit of tolerance has been breached. Another letter-writer<sup>28</sup> explicitly positions herself as the ordinary person, anticipating and disavowing a charge of homophobia in the process:

Not bigoted  
Not homophobic  
Just ordinary.

### Inside/Outside; Unmarked/Marked

In that the "ordinary person" valiantly upholds a heterosexual norm against totalitarian assault, the invocation of such a trope relates to a set of interlinked dualisms: inside and outside, unmarked and marked. In discourses of invasion, heterosexuality is positioned as a primordial space "inside" of norms, which is able to be infiltrated by homosexuality as "outside." As I have

suggested, this type of distinction is effected on at least three levels. The agencies and apparatus of the state are conceptualized as a threatened "inside," although one that has perhaps already been irreversibly infiltrated; "public" spaces in the landscape are at risk from entry from those who should remain "in private" and not "promote" their sexuality in public; and the conservative heterosexual mind is under threat from coercion and "thought policing."

Within the logic of such discourse, heterosexuality is under threat of dismemberment from an insurgent homosexual "outside." Once firmly established as a norm, heterosexuality is vulnerable to being overturned, with heterosexuals having their thoughts policed by "politically correct" lesbians and gay men. The figure of the heterosexual who is policed or "left out" is a particular point of concern for cultural heterosexism. Heterosexuality being positioned as *outside* is untenable to heterosexuality as an institution because it disrupts the social order and norms that heterosexuality should be *inside*.

According to cultural heterosexism, those upholding the norm are likely to be usurped by those who do not deserve power; if "we" open the gates to "them" then "they" will displace "us." This fear is epitomized by the comments of one city councillor who expressed concern that the homosexual subject has overstepped the boundary and is making inroads into heterosexuality. He argued that AIDS memorial pride parade floats were a cover for the "homosexual community" to "recruit": "there was a parade I think two years ago, when one of the placards read 'we recruit', now to me, that is deliberately provocative."<sup>29</sup> Having misunderstood the deliberate parody of conservative discourses represented by the sign "we recruit," the complainant understands the slogan as evidence of a concerted attempt to destabilize a heterosexuality that he seeks to defend.

The dualism of inside/outside is related to a distinction between the marked and the unmarked. As Monique Wittig has suggested, heterosexuality is constructed as a general, unmarked category. Those who identify and are identified as heterosexual are not positioned within discourses as heterosexuals so much as "people," and heterosexuality is merely "sexuality." The performances of heterosexual identity are not recognized as such, even if specific performances (such as sex in public) are regarded as problematic in themselves. In their discussion of conservative Christianity and "lust," Patricia Jung and Ralph Smith<sup>30</sup> argue that "whereas lust merely *disorders* heterosexual behaviour, lust *expresses...the disorder* of homosexual behaviour" (my emphasis).

The second aspect of this distinction between markedness and unmarkedness is the connection of markedness with politics and power, and unmarkedness with an apolitical stance. Wittig argues that those who employ dominant, unmarked positions "claim to say the truth in an apolitical

field." Dominant positions, such as heterosexuality, come to be seen as zones free of power relations—hence Elshtain's position in which only challengers to dominance, and not that dominance itself, are regarded as being "politicized." This alignment of the "political" with the marked category is also visible in those discourses of political correctness into which lesbians and gay men are abjectly incorporated. As a linguistic term or signifier, "political correctness" was ripe for resignification in ways that marginalized subordinate groups. This is because the term itself implies that particular positions are "political" (and therefore "politically correct") and that others are apolitical and even commonsensical.

### Gender Differences within "Tyranny"

In the discussion so far I have sketched out some of the themes that have been employed within texts to refer to both lesbians and gay men. While the dualism of heterosexual/homosexual has provided the framework for my investigation, gender and sexuality are never fully discrete or separable; instead, they are always mutually informing and intertwined. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that lesbians and gay men are sometimes represented differently in given moments. Anna Marie Smith suggests that when homosexuality is considered as an expression of same-sex sexual acts, the gay man has been seen as somewhat more of a threat than the lesbian. Smith argues that during British debate in the 1980s over Section 28 (a law prohibiting local authorities from "promoting homosexuality"), homosexuality was for the most part considered to be an expression of sexual acts. This was also true for the debate surrounding the decriminalizing of sex between gay men in New Zealand in 1985. In Britain and New Zealand, debate focused upon the sexuality of gay men, who were considered to be conduits for the spread of AIDS. British MP Lord Halsbury, for example, stated that lesbians are

not a problem.... They do not molest little girls. They do not indulge in disgusting and unnatural acts like buggery. They are not wildly promiscuous and do not spread venereal disease.<sup>31</sup>

In such discourse, lesbian sexuality is rendered invisible, and to a degree impossible, precisely because it is not phallic.<sup>32</sup> Within this perception, however, lies the genesis of a construction of lesbian identity as threatening. The lesbian's repudiation of a male-centered sexuality has often been seen as threatening to men. While gay men's sexuality is regarded as a problem, it is "what lesbians *refuse* to do" (i.e., have sex with men) that attracts attention.<sup>33</sup>

Rosemary McLeod ties lesbians into the trope of fascism by positioning them as man-haters who have gained power through what she terms

the "sex abuse industry." For another columnist the "Femi-Nazis" and "frustrated dykes" who would censor "sexy billboards" and "come after us [heterosexuals] in the privacy of our own thoughts" are embittered and vengeful because they go without men—precisely because they have "spent their lives trying to get a date with a real man" and failed.<sup>34</sup> In these examples, lesbians' alleged "political correctness" and fascistic tendencies are constructed as an expression of their repudiation of heterosexuality and supposed animosity toward men. One letter-to-the-editor writer refers to a gay and lesbian TV show segment titled "Lesbian Cooking with Libby" by invoking the image of a lesbian as a castrator:

can someone in the know explain to me why lesbians should cook any differently than the rest of us? I can only surmise that "Libby" and her ilk are maybe working on a new cookbook—100 ways to prepare and serve a mountain oyster.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, in some texts, lesbian identity is not overtly constructed as powerful and highly visible. The archetypal "politically correct" identity is often constructed as lesbian and also in terms of disability and ethnic minority membership: the "Chinese-speaking Maori lesbian with a limp."<sup>36</sup> I have suggested that in this formulation, being lesbian becomes a marginal and somewhat incredible possibility, and lesbian identity is seen as somewhat ridiculous. Julia Penelope (1980) suggests that making the lesbian seem in some way unreal is a means of dissipating a sense of lesbian threat to patriarchy and heterosexuality. The lesbian-as-tyrant and the lesbian-as-impossibility can then be seen as two sides of the one patriarchal coin.

An examination of other examples of homosexual "tyranny" leaves the reader sometimes unclear about whether gay men, lesbians, or both are included in the textual formulation in question. Lesbians have been located quite explicitly as "politically correct" and/or "man-haters." Many of the media texts that include gay men, however, use the term "gay" or "gays." Both of these terms have an ambiguous markedness that can make it difficult to discern whether lesbians are supposed to be included. The term "gay" can be used to refer to men or to men and women. As an example of the former possibility, one writer refers to "gays" and to "lesbians."<sup>37</sup> In an example of ambiguity, Rosemary McLeod<sup>38</sup> refers to "gays such as Ms. Murrie-West," however, elsewhere she writes specifically of lesbians, and her comments on "gays" are accompanied by a cartoon image of a man.<sup>39</sup>

Sometimes, the term "gay" is clearly intended to include lesbians: one article that refers to "gay and lesbian marriages" has as its title "Push on to legalise gay marriage."<sup>40</sup> The term "homosexual" has a similar ambiguity to "gay." In one column in which he argued that "homosexual activists" were policing heterosexuals' speech, Karl du Fresne<sup>41</sup> started by using the term



"homosexual" in a seemingly inclusive sense, but at the end of the column he referred to his association with "homosexuals and lesbians." MP John Banks differentiates between men and women in his argument that the Labour Party had been overrun with "homosexuals" and "lesbians."<sup>42</sup>

Such ambiguities make it difficult to separate the representations of gay men from those of lesbians for the purpose of analysis, unless the sexes of the homosexual subjects concerned are explicitly stated. That they are often not stated illustrates the ways in which lesbians have become partially incorporated under the term "gay."<sup>43</sup> There are clear similarities here between the use of the term "gay" and the ways in which "man" is often said to include women.<sup>44</sup> In the few cases where gay men are mentioned specifically rather than merely implied, another paradox is reproduced. The lesbian is on the one hand somehow unreal and on the other a tyrannical man-hater. The gay man, in contrast, is weak and yet powerful. Sarah Boyd<sup>45</sup> implies this weakness through her oxymoronic reference to the "PC softy" in her discussion of a gay male MP. In another example, a television presenter stated of a meteorologist's reluctance to disagree with a colleague: "It's just too PC for me: limp-wristed as my friend would say."<sup>46</sup> The paradox here is that while weak and "limp-wristed," the gay man who hijacks language and orders heterosexuals what to say and what to think is regarded as powerful.

In some ways, these paradoxes of weakness/tyranny for gay men and unreality/tyranny for lesbians reflect the distinction between older and newer, ontological and cultural forms of heterosexism. The weak gay man and the unreal or invisible lesbian are old figures: the former dates back to the medicalization of the late nineteenth century if not before, and the latter is reminiscent of comments made by law makers since the nineteenth century to the effect that it was better to pretend that lesbianism did not exist lest more women come to hear about it.<sup>47</sup> The image of the tyrannical gay man or lesbian, in contrast, is the central theme of more recent cultural heterosexist discourses.

Tyranny is attributable to either gay men or lesbians, or to both, depending on who is speaking or writing, and sometimes it is unclear whether the tyrants in question are "gay" or "lesbian." The libertarian magazine *Free Radical*,<sup>48</sup> for example, refers to "feminists and gays as 'fascists of the left,'" and elsewhere in that magazine lesbians are attacked vehemently.<sup>49</sup> While opposing pride parades as "exhibitionism" by "homosexualists," journalist Warwick Roger<sup>50</sup> appears to find gay men to be less of a problem generally than lesbians. He speaks highly of writers James Allan, Witi Ihimaera, and Peter Wells, while explicitly positioning them as gay. However, his references to lesbians are all negative, and often involve seeing lesbians as the harbingers of a threatening feminism. Rogers "hasten[s] to add that I published Carroll du Chateau's mid-80s *From Feminism to*

Fascism...and for my trouble was subject to a lesbian-led invasion of my office."<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere he refers to "lesbianese feminazis,"<sup>52</sup> and asks whether "there [have] been any outbreaks of mad cow disease at the Women's Studies department at Waikato University?"<sup>53</sup>

These connections between lesbian identity and feminism are frequent, and "lesbianism and feminism are often used to stand in for each other within popular culture."<sup>54</sup> When material about lesbians and feminists is read intertextually, the discourses surrounding them become indistinguishable at times. In one text, the term "feminazi" may be employed to refer to lesbians quite specifically, and thus other texts that use "feminazi" echo with the meaning "lesbian," although lesbians may not be specifically mentioned. In the coverage of the Labour Party leadership challenge, for example, all of the party's feminist woman MPs who supported Helen Clark were implicitly positioned as lesbian, whether or not this was in fact the case.

### Conclusion: the Denial of Domination

Cultural heterosexism has as its basis two paradoxes. In the first, heterosexuality is positioned as normative while, at the same time, a social order typified by heterosexuality is said to be essentially neutral. The normativeness of heterosexuality is expressed through the tropes of the ordinary person, the public and the taxpayer, and through the double standard that marks homosexuality as an illegitimate occupier of a range of spaces while rendering heterosexuality invisible. The privilege of the right to visible invisibility that is accorded to heterosexuality in certain contexts is not regarded as a "special privilege," but as simply a reflection of the way things are. On the other hand, it is made out that the world as it is expresses an equality between subjects, and that this is a desirable equality. In the language of libertarianism, a level playing field exists on which all must compete and can take equal chances. An infringement of this level playing field, this essential equality, constitutes totalitarianism.

It is at this point that the second paradox comes into play. Those who are positioned outside the norm in the first paradox become the tyrants and totalitarians in the second. Here, an inversion takes place and marginal homosexual identities become the oppressors of a normative heterosexuality and of individual heterosexuals. Those who identify with cultural heterosexism regard themselves as newly oppressed by lesbians and gay men whom they regard as a "special interest group" that has won "special rights."

The trope of "special rights" signifies a move "beyond" the "equality" that is said to characterize the social order. Because it is asserted that this social order is equal, any recognition that homosexuality is inferiorized and that remedies may be needed can be constructed as an appeal for "special rights." According to this logic, if lesbians and gay men seek "special rights," then

they can be viewed as illiberal. In addition to seeking such rights, the homosexual politicizes this supposedly equal social order, it is argued, introducing politics where previously there were none.

Perhaps a liberal notion of equality that masks the realities of domination on the basis of homosexuality has become the new ground on which the struggles of lesbians and gay men are judged from within conservatism. I am suggesting that less frequently are lesbians' and gay men's alleged medical or moral inferiorities the basis for heterosexist discourses. Instead, the central concern is the deviation from a particular definition of equality. This definition of equality is not what it seems, for it incorporates a dualism of norm and Other that is partially hidden from view. In this logic, to reject an implicit subordinate status is to reject equality and to express a desire to go beyond it. "Beyond equality" lies the search for special privilege and the oppression of conservative heterosexuals, the "ordinary people." This position goes hand in hand with a denial of the ways in which lesbian and gay identities do have a degree of specificity that exists, moreover, with respect to domination. To acknowledge this and to refuse to concede to the claim that we are all "just people" is to be seen to move away from "equality" and toward a form of tyranny. Yet, to concede to the "just people" claim can only serve to reinforce the privileged position of heterosexuality, because the ways in which this privilege is naturalized and rendered invisible remain unchallenged.

In the "excess equality" view, lesbians and gay men "have" equality, although we want more and are supposedly well on the way to achieving it. With "political correctness" on our side, gay men and lesbians are no longer victims of our own misfortune, but we have become *oppressors* of the heterosexual innocent who feels (according to one-letter-to-the editor writer) "obliged to bow, in the name of political correctness, to [the] strident minority trying to impose its will on society."<sup>55</sup> The circle is complete. According to cultural heterosexist discourses, the homosexual, previously confined to the private sphere, now invades the heterosexual imagination and the minds of individual heterosexuals.

Perhaps the greatest irony of this position for me was my experience of "living" the dissertation project out of which this chapter evolved. When others asked about the topic of my work, I often wondered what to say. The first half of the title reads "Deregulating the Heterosexual Imagination." I used the phrase "deregulation" as an ironic way of suggesting that while so many areas of New Zealand's economy and society have been "restructured" and "deregulated" under the neoliberal "reforms" of the last twenty years, the heterosexual imagination remains in need of deregulatory attention. Heterosexuality remains an "organizing institution," as Chrys Ingraham argues,<sup>56</sup> it still "circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring and unquestioned."

My responses to questions about my dissertation topic were often limited by a strategic assessment of how the questioner would respond to being told that I was examining aspects of heterosexism and media representations. If I judged the questioner to be conservative, I talked in vague terms about media and ideology; if sympathetic, I mentioned sexuality and the media; and if the questioner appeared to be a kindred spirit, I launched into a tirade about various media texts. If I could not tell what the questioner's beliefs would be, I was cautious. There was an element of panoptical power at work: I was "watching myself" in case I gave information that would elicit negative responses. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham explain the precarious position that I felt at times was my own:

Any lesbian or gay men anywhere in the culture poses the dangerous knowledge that the heterosexual norm is arbitrary. So long as heteronormativity remains unquestioned, it is sacred. And exposing the arbitrariness of the sacred...is always potentially fraught with risk.<sup>57</sup>

I felt that to mention homosexuality may incite hostility, but that to mention heterosexuality in other than naturalistic terms may well have been construed as a personal attack, as "going too far," given the assumption that a critique of heterosexuality is a charge against heterosexual individuals.<sup>58</sup> I was not, it seemed, doing much "deregulating" at the level of these interpersonal discussions. If a radical lesbian and/or gay male politics has indeed become a powerful, unquestionable orthodoxy as those who engage cultural heterosexist discourses allege, I am left wondering about my reticence.

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## Notes

- Butler, 1991: 23
- Seidel, 1988; Gilroy, 1990
- Gordon and Klug, 1986: 15
- Free radical*, 1998: back cover
- I use "liberalism" in the sense of the liberal tradition in the broadest sense (Adams 1998: 35). While this tradition has several sometimes competing strands, fundamental to all are the concepts of "individualism," "equality," and "rights." For more detailed discussion of the antecedents of, and tensions between, different strands of liberal thought, see Adams (1998); Arblaster (1984); and Sandel (ed) (1984)
- Altman, 1993: 59
- Frankenberg, 1993
- 1997: 102
- See Due (1995: 256) for a slightly different formulation of this point
- Brickell, 2001
- Smith, 1997: 229
- Hooker, 1995: 1/8
- Brickell, 2000
- McLeod, 1994: 34
- Du Fresne, 1997: 10
- Carter, 1998: 16
- The Maori are New Zealand's indigenous and colonized people who now represent about 12 percent of the country's population
- See Brickell, 2000; 2001
- Du Fresne, 1997: 10
- For an interesting analysis of the ways in which 'tyranny' constitutes the superordinate gloss of much discourse on 'political correctness,' see Weir (1995)
- Carter, 1995: C4
- Brickell, 2000
- Hall, 1996: 16; du Fresne, 1997: 10
- Smith, 1991: 131
- Elshtain, 1982/1983: 253
- Mouffe, 1985: 170
- Turner and Turner, 1998: 18
- Leonard, 1998: 15
- TVNZ, 1997
- Jung and Smith, 1993: 24
- Smith, 1994: 208
- Frye, 1983: 157
- Jung and Smith, 1993: 129
- Maw, 1995: 19
- Davey, 1996: A10. A "rocky mountain oyster" is a bull's testicle — hence the connotation of castration
- Evening post*, 1994: 6
- McRae, 1993: 30
- 1997: 8
- 1995: 8; 1993: 40
- McLennan, 1996: 1
- 1995: 6
- Scherer, 1995: 1
- Zwicky, 1997
- Laurie, 1987: 147

45. 1995: 12
46. Wood, cited *Express* 1998: 8
47. Marshall, 1981; Lesbian History Group, 1989: 2
48. May–Jun 1998: back cover
49. Coote, 1997; *Free radical*, 1995; Maw, 1995
50. 1997: 4
51. 1997: 4
52. 1996b: 4
53. 1996a: 4
54. Bell and Valentine, 1995: 11
55. Auger, 1994: 17
56. 1994: 203
57. Hennessy and Ingraham, 1992: 18–19
58. Jackson, 1997/8: 62

## 2 The Paradox