

Double Positive: Lesbians and Race

By Dorian Leslie & Lauren Mac Neill

Racism affects all people, and the impact of racism and lesbians merits special attention. In the climate of our racist, sexist, and heterosexism culture, living with on oppressed identity is complex; living with plural oppressed identities can seem overwhelming. Challenges manifest on three principal levels: identity, community, and intimate relationships.

For lesbians of color, conflicts can abound: how do they integrate identities of lesbian, woman, person of color? White lesbians are not accepted by their white cultural community, because they are lesbians; still, they have access to power because they are white. Power is increased or decreased by other kinds of identified, such as socio-economic class, gender, age, and physical ability, among others. White lesbians who wish to work toward anti-racism must confront their own racism and position of white privilege, and challenge themselves to work consciously and without condescension toward ending all oppressions. Understanding the nexus of racism and heterosexual demand vigorous exploration and analysis.

Issues of Community

“Community” connotes membership, inclusiveness, a sense of shared characteristics and values. We learn our early sense of identity from communities such as family, neighborhood, gender and religious affiliations. All people are members of several communities. A feeling of belonging can be nurturing and empowering. At the same time, some communities can be exclusive, intolerant of difference, and can require strict adherence to values and norms.

Many lesbians of color describe a sense of displacement, of not feeling truly accepted or at home in either the majority lesbian community or in their ethnic community. This sense of displacements is fostered and sometimes even encouraged by racism in the lesbian communities and by homophobia in ethnic minority communities. White lesbians, particularly those who are politically active, can experience frustration and confusion when dealing with racial issues. Without fully understanding the issues involved, their efforts can be misguided, and thus frequently ineffective or potentially harmful.

Racism in the Lesbian Community

The majority of the most visible lesbian community is composed of white, middle class and upper class lesbians. Because of this lesbians of color, as well as working-class lesbians of all racial groups, often feel misunderstood, marginalized, or unrepresented by the better-known community and organizations. May communities, wishing to amend this problem, actively solicit the participation of women of color? While many argue that the lesbian community, having endured its own oppression, is more understanding of the struggles of other minority groups and as such is less racist than society at large, racism does exist in the lesbian community, and it hurts lesbians of color and white lesbians.

Racism in the lesbian community is manifest in several ways. Ethnic minority lesbians often experience a sense of not belonging or of tokenism in the majority lesbian

community. The women's newspaper in Dorian's community campaigned heavily on recruit "women of color". Dorian joined, her appropriate suspicion allowing her to think she was getting an "easy initiation." She wondered, "Do they think I'm black enough?" was her presence as a dark-skinned black woman enough at the monthly contributor's meetings? As a black lesbian, was she "woman of color" enough to include Latinos, Asians, Native Americans?

Exclusion is racism; overt exclusion exists when the leadership and/or membership of gay rights organizations is composed largely of white people. Paradoxically, the unchecked, and frequently erroneous, perception of inclusion is likewise racist. Covert or unconscious racism exists when predominantly white lesbian communities make assumptions about shared values and goals. For years, Lauren spoke on panels about issues of sexual orientation and said, "lesbians feel" or "lesbians want" not realizing that what she meant was "white lesbians feel" or "white lesbians want".

Unconscious racism occurs when white lesbian communities acknowledge racism but distance themselves from any personal responsibility, believing that lesbians have transcended racism. Racism is alive in the lesbian community when white lesbians fail to analyze and discuss their experience as white lesbians, to acknowledge how they have internalized and do not question white cultural values. However well-intentioned, organizations often fail to critically examine their possibly racist goals or structures. Lauren was part of a rape crisis collective that wanted to recruit more women of color as volunteer advocates. They never considered the politics of rape regarding race, they never looked at how, even with their collective structure, they might be unconsciously exclusive.

Homophobia in Communities of Color

Homophobia exists in ethnic minority communities for several reasons. In the context of dominant culture in which the values and traditions of white culture(s) are pervasive, maintaining and continuing an ethnic minority culture is threatened. People of color can feel resentful of white people's ability to "pass" as members of the dominant heterosexual community. Further, many people of color are confounded by a person's desire to take on yet another oppressed identity. While the cause of homosexuality remains a controversial subject even among members of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, the belief that homosexuality is a choice, as opposed to being innate, can exacerbate this confusion and frustration.

One form homophobia takes is a kind of racial stereotyping by the ethnic communities: the contention that lesbianism is "a white thing." Ethnic minority communities in the United States often believe that homosexuality is a defect of the dominant culture, and that if members of the community are acting as homosexuals, they are only doing so to be more like white people, and could and should stop. Ethnic communities can promote the idea of lesbianism being "a white thing" to discourage women of color from living lesbian lives. They contend that white women, having a higher level of privilege, can more easily abandon their lives with men. Lesbianism by any woman of color can be seen as destructive to the cause of racial civil rights, partly because she may choose to focus her social and political energies on her other oppressed identity, and partly because she may draw unwelcome negative attention to the community.

Homophobia also manifests in the language used by ethnic communities to refer to lesbians. It is not only in American English that many of the words that refer to lesbians are pejorative.

One defense against the encroaching white culture and the obliteration of the minority culture is to bear children, to education members in values, traditions, languages of the culture, and to further bond and strengthen connections with other group members. As such, some ethnic minority women feel pressured to bear children and perpetuate the race. For example, some African- American women, having internalized images of the “strong, black women” responsible for creating more members of the black race, feel that if they admit to loving women they are betraying their people.

The face of homophobia has changed over time, and this change is attributed to greater economic and social mobility. A generation ago, economic necessity and more overt white racism meant that black gays lived within the black community; there they were tolerated, if not altogether accepted, although many lived fairly closeted lives. More recently, their movement away has led to less tolerance and made more permissible overt homophobia from the black community.

To counteract racism in the lesbian community and homophobia in communities of color, oppressed groups also recognize the differences in politics, class, culture, and race, and don't fight for priority status. Ethnic communities and lesbian communities must realize that it is not they who have created the system of oppression, but rather straight patriarchal white culture that has created and has the power to enforce it. The tendency to cross-blame other persecuted communities is easier on the community's psyche because it is less daunting than acknowledging the power of white oppression. It is imperative that all oppressed groups seek to understand, and define, oppression for them selves.

White lesbian communities must take responsibility for educating themselves, about anti-racism. They need better networking in communities of color, not simply among their few friends. White lesbian communities can challenge the notion of “community” as necessarily singular, and critically examine their goals and values. Ethnic minority lesbians must recognize the importance of spending time with others of their sub-group for affirmation and inspiration. These efforts are not without pain, but all communities can learn through the process.

Issues of Identity

“Coming out” is the phrase used to describe the p[rocess through which one recognizes her homosexuality, and acknowledges it first to herself and then, usually, to others. A similar process exists for coming to an awareness of one's racial identity and its meaning in the world. For both white lesbians and lesbians of color, these processes inform and affect each other in many ways.

Several studies describe certain key stages in identity development, both homosexuality and ethnic identity. Although the processes differ somewhat, there are three key stages common to both. The earliest stage involves a complete internalization of dominant cultural values; a middle stage is characterized by an embracing of the minority identity and complete immersion in that culture; the final stage involves identity synthesis, a more personal understanding of the identity within the culture. With an ability to selectively

accept or reject parts of the cultures. These stages are not, however, universal. Moreover, some lesbians of color reject entirely the possibility of “coming out ethnically.”

For a lesbian of color, coming to terms with her racial identity and coming to terms with her sexual orientation often occur separately. For some ethnic minority lesbians, discovering and accepting racial identity impairs the exploration of their sexual orientation. For other lesbians of color, coming to terms with lesbianism may inhibit examining issues of racial identity. For still other lesbians of color, the process of coming out—either as an ethnic or sexual minority—can strengthen and encourage the other coming out. For some white lesbians, the coming-out experience is a process through which they can begin to empathize with the experiences of oppression of people of color.

Because race and sexual orientation are two identities that are given a great deal of meaning and weight by the dominant culture, fragmentation—and not integration—is fostered. Many lesbians of color feel from their own cultural and ethnic communities. They frequently describe this as more painful than rejection from dominant or mainstream society. The need to assert an ethnic identity becomes more pronounced within the context of a racist dominant culture when the ethnic identity is readily visible. The rejection that ethnic minority lesbians feel from their own communities can be especially painful because they are then shut off from the place in which they can receive refuge from the racism outside, as well as sustenance, support, and affirmation of one’s racial identity.

White lesbians are also rejected from their own culture; yet the experience is markedly different from that of lesbians of color. Many white people have a very loose sense of connection to “white culture(s)” so that the isolation does not seem as complete, or the loss as great. In fact many white lesbians are not likely to even describe their rejection as being from “white culture”; rather, they will describe being rejected by their family of origin, or a particular town or region, or some other characterization that may in fact describe white culture, yet not consciously. White lesbians who feel a cultural attachment to a particular ethnic identity may feel the pain of rejection more acutely than white lesbians not similarly attached. Lauren had been wanting to attend a festival of Irish culture in Northern California. Then she read an article about these festivals being fruitful recruiting grounds for neo-conservative hate groups, and felt too afraid to go to one. She felt hurt and saddened, cut off from a piece of who she is.

There is a diversity of opinion about which group. Such experiences are highly personal, and do not seem to follow any prescribed pattern or rules. Still, the ways in which identities co-exist appear to be influenced by factors such as time timing and possible overlap of the processes of identity formation the degree to which one is readily visibly identifiable as a minority group member, and the context or situation. Dorian came out at college, and hung around mostly white gay people. She felt more like a lesbian than a woman of color; “lesbian” was her social and political identity.

Since the earlier stages of minority identity formation are characterized by much internalized racism and homophobia, recognizing and dealing with cultural and sexual identity requires acknowledging that one’s ethnic culture is most likely homophobic and that the dominant culture is racist, sexist, and heterosexist. The need for empowerment within the minority community often manifests itself along gender lines. Images of male dominance prevent women from being accepted in independent or powerful roles. The lesbian, with no male as a part of her identity, becomes invisible.

Internalized racism and internalized homophobia involve a person taking in and believing the myths of the dominant culture about a minority identity. Since these myths are usually negative, internalized racism and internalized homophobia frequently result in negative self-image, conscious or unconscious dislikes of the groups members and characteristics, disassociation from same group members, and a desire to distinguish oneself from the group. For white lesbians, racism and internalized homophobia can manifest in a desire to distance from other white women, and to prove themselves as more enlightened or aware of racial issues.

Therapy can be helpful with identity formation and exploration of internalized oppression, and can assist in healthy integration and balance of identities. Conversely, therapy can be seen as being a white, middle-upper class indulgence. Having a therapist of a similar cultural background or sexual orientation, or both can help. The therapist needs to acutely aware of potential issues, given the therapist's own racial identity and sexual orientation vis-à-vis that of the client. One technique that can be useful is to deal with identities separately and with that understanding begin to integrate them.

Relationship Issues & Interracial Lesbian Couples

Interracial relationships present challenges and opportunities to explore the experiences of racism, white privilege, and cultural homophobia. White racism in society affects all lesbians, lesbians in interracial relationships face particular challenges. How does the white lesbian deal with racism and cultural homophobia directed at her partner? How does the lesbian of color deal with being lover to a member of the oppressive class, and the homophobia of her own community? Together, how do they examine and deal with the different perceptions, experiences, and values of each partner?

Lesbians in interracial relationships challenge and confront racism in them selves and in the other, in perhaps more active, overt ways than those in same-race relationships. Within the development of her interracial relationship, Dorian has said, "I want to know that you love me, that you know that my experience is different from your own. That you recognize that you cannot suffer for me, that some of my oppression cannot by your own."

Both women can experience pressure to choose lovers form within the race, or risk being accused of betrayal of their communities or of internalized racism. Lesbians of color in interracial relationships may respond to this by not acknowledging other lesbians of color when with their partners, or they may be ignored by other lesbians of color. They can experience pressure to be a representative of the race, to know everything pertaining to the race, and to teach all of these lessons to their partners.

Lesbians in interracial relationships confront differences in culture and values in areas such as the role of family, the role of the individual, money and economic issues, food, religion, childrearing behavior, and homosexuality. Recognition of the differences in essential. Sometimes the couple will find that the differences are destructive or divisive; other times, the partners will find them strengthening and enriching.

White lesbians usually have not had to evolve armor to deal with racism; thus they may be less prepared than their partners to deal with racial incidents or comments. They may be less likely to interpret a situation as racist. Further, the white partner in an interracial

relationship may not fully appreciate the risks involved or the differences in their coming-out experiences.

Interracial couples can benefit by developing a plan for dealing with racial situations. With such a plan, interracial couples can avoid blaming each other, and each partner can take time to examine her own responses independently of the others. For the white lesbian in an interracial relationship, strategies for survival include acknowledging her privilege, and recognizing that it is her partner who is the target of racism.

The interracial lesbian couple can benefit by viewing racism on a societal level as well as on the personal, by recognizing that racism is a set part of the culture and society, and by recognizing that the perception of the couple include racial and lesbian stereotypes and that some of these exist for each partner.

Issues that arise in interracial lesbian relationships cannot always be isolated and resolved by the couple alone. Therapy (individual, group, and couple), experiential workshops, and support—either formal or informal—can be helpful. Connecting with other interracial lesbian couples can also be beneficial. Being a partner in an interracial relationship and working through these issues can teach a process for examining other interpersonal relationships with different racial and cultural issues.

The challenges presented by looking at the nexus of homophobia and racism can be frustrating but exciting. The connections and insights can lead to critical examination of all power structures. The process is a valuable learning experience and can be a springboard to the eradication of all oppression.