

## Queer Sisters: The Politics of Fag Haggery

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Everyone can see we're together  
 As we walk along  
 And we flock just like birds of a feather  
 I won't tell no lie . . .  
 We are family  
 I've got all my sisters with me  
 We are family  
 Get up everybody, sing.<sup>1</sup>

The fag hag is a low credibility vocation these days. When Sister Sledge, the (high cred.) disco divas, sung about the glorious possibilities of a non-nuclear family, all the gay/straight, male/female and transgender sisters united to sing this affirmative anthem. But sexual politics is presently a serious business. While the sisters may be doing it for themselves, too many freebasing feminists are doing it *to* themselves, by discounting the role of pleasure and the power of coalition politics. Negotiation of the erotic landscape is increasingly becoming dangerous: we are all so politically correct, that nobody bothers defining politics anymore. While everything may be political, the boundaries of 'acceptable' behaviour are increasingly problematic and circumscribed. Effective political interventions must continually negotiate a set of discursive assumptions between different communities. Only through speaking and understanding the language of 'others' may political consciousness be generated. It seems that political correctness has encouraged the linguistic equivalent of a knee jerk reflex. We no longer have to think about the complexities of identity politics: we all *know* what we are expected to say.

The fag hag is a serious breach of political correctness. She is an acceptable target for disillusioned (modernist, essentialist, boring) feminists to launch an attack on exactly what is wrong with young women today. At the June 1993 'Regimes of Sexuality' conference, run by the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University, such a vitriolic attack

erupted during question time. In response to Lisa Duggan's discussion paper, which outlined 'The Shaping of New Cultures of Sexuality', Alison, a New Zealand visitor to the conference, exclaimed her dissatisfaction with the 'Queer identity':

Queer identity it seems to me is like camp identity was in the fifties. This is rather the politics of nostalgia for me: it is very much an in-your-face type of identity which worked for its time. The difference between the queer identity then and now is that it seems to be that now the fag hags have joined the queer identity . . . This seems to be a retrograde step and not one that brings out more lesbians. I want to bring out more lesbians.<sup>2</sup>

Fag hags do not fit into essentialist politics. They are not lesbians, and obviously enjoy men's company. These women cannot be 'brought out'. Alison's commentary was not greeted by angry fag hags claiming their right to be queer sisters. The politically correct humour that resulted from insulting a group that has no political voice or credibility was instantaneous. Fag hags do not attend academic conferences: essentialist lesbians do. While Alison may want to 'bring out' more lesbians, she is effectively shutting down connections between women. Sister Sledge's unifying sentiment appears somewhat false when contextualized by 'the queer debate'. This is not a good time to be fragmenting the sisterhood.

The fag hag is an elegant cynosure for the queer qualities of the postmodernist feminist. At a time when postmodernism, overshadowed by the spectre of AIDS, is becoming increasingly vulnerable to a pathological prognosis, fear and suspicion are being generated by a fag-hag phobia. One accusation suggests that we are being unknowingly double-crossed by the de-phallicized body of postmodern thought. Jane Gallop, in *Thinking Through the Body*, writes:

The female postmodernist thinker finds herself in the dilemma of trying to be like Daddy who is trying to be a woman. The double-cross is intriguing and even fun, but also troubling if one suspects that it is the father's last ruse to seduce the daughter and retain her respect . . . that legitimized the father's rule.<sup>3</sup>

If feminism has worked hard to unsettle the inference of the categories of man and woman, we can assume that the father and the daughter must rest on equally uncertain ground. Allowing them to momentarily hold significant social meaning, confirms Gallop's determination that female postmodernists want to 'identify'.

Speaking ever-so-softly at the ANU's Regimes of Sexuality Conference in July 1994, Henry Abelove leaned in close to his microphone and whispered: 'queers prefer anonymity to identity, imitation to originality, appropriation to invention', exercising a 'disarticulation of individuality'.<sup>4</sup>

Added to this queer concoction is a penchant for irony and perversity, or, as Gallop inquired with great solemnity, 'what is the position of the woman who identifies with men who identify with women?'<sup>5</sup> If we are all in drag, we should laugh at Gallop's attempts to subject porno feminists to the double-cross. Perhaps her solemn dual genuflection should be replaced with an ironic wink. Engendering queer fear, the sartorial style of the fag hag has everyone guessing.

Women who do porno theory are sexually placed as staging their own incestuous seduction. With the exception of Deleuze and Guattari's anti-oedipal strategies,<sup>6</sup> queerness does not function on the same oedipal logic as psychoanalytic discourses, loosening the 's-triangulation' of desire. The fag-hag's queer impartiality to the psychoanalytic drama of daddy-mummy-me complexes, renders it an orphaned discourse, promiscuous in its allegiances and unfaithful to dogma. The queer sisters who flirt with postmodern theoretical paradigms are likely to be depicted as funny and frivolous. This is a convenient portrait of a free-floating intellectual teaser. Pursuing her ambitions inconspicuously, the fag-hag is granted the freedom of not being taken seriously.

The label 'queer' may be seen as a forthright mechanism by which to break the tyranny of essentialist politics. Unfortunately, 'queerness' is also becoming constricted by the ideology of victimhood. This is probably not surprising: 'queerness' is not a break away from the essentialist debate as it still relies on the language of the gay and lesbian communities. The reliance on an inhibitory discursive frame may access familiarity, but is also exclusory. A recent poster advertising the National Conference for queer students, which was held in Sydney during August 1993, illustrates this retraction from queer ambiguity to gay and lesbian fixity.

Welcome to the age of inclusory (and therefore exclusory) politics. Although the conference utilized the banner term 'queer', it was deemed necessary to list those incorporated in this classification. We find dyke, bi, lesbian, gay, transgender and poof. While 'queer' is granted the largest graphological font, the smallest lettering was dedicated to the words 'fluid' and 'non-heterosexual'. By de-emphasizing fluidity, the most beneficial side effect of queerness dissolves. More problematic is the affirmation that queerness is a 'non-heterosexual' activity. By definition, fag hags cannot be queer. As the most visual 'other' to queer culture, the fag hag remains not only hidden from history, but voiceless, displaced and disempowered.

The convolutions of transvestite politics recalls the story of Holly Woodlawn the Warhol drag queen. Interviewed by a talk-show host, Woodlawn was asked, 'Are you, like, a man who should be a woman, or are you a woman who was a man, or are you a man/woman?' Holly Woodlawn responded in queer exasperation, 'Oh - who cares? As long as you look fabulous!'<sup>7</sup> Looking fabulous is what fag hags do best. Seducing both the 'gay' and 'straight' gaze, fag hags are magnets attracting polyvalent desires. Being looked at has never been so much fun. Not only are we producing high anxiety, but delirious confusion and a frisson of intrigue.

Regimes of visibility encircle the fag hag's body, while sexual discourses deny her voice. Her presence in gay night clubs is both piquant and enticing.

While gay clubs are venues of bodily display, not everyone is incorporated in the search for gratification. The most pervasive division in gay clubs is between gay men, lesbians and fag hags. With a judgement of masculine gayness inferred by a presence in a gay club, the division between lesbians and fag hags is more complex. Postmodern reading of surfaces transfers sexuality into performative acts.

The fag hag (em)bodies the postmodern age. She is a thoroughly postmodern woman. Disillusioned with 'real men' and 'real sex', she grasps companionship and love from gay men, without all the messy interchange of bodily fluid. And these men call in the morning. While lesbians may despise her and gay men ridicule her, the fag hag remains a free floating (a)sexual being - taking her pleasure where she desires and (temporarily) shunning the commitment of home and 'straight life'.

A completely arbitrary, but enticing connection may be made between the flapper of the 1920s and the fag hag of the 1990s. While the flapper was seen by Martin Pumphrey as complicit in the 'making of modernity'<sup>8</sup>, the fag hag can be configured as an integral conduit between the straight and the gay worlds. As the channel for the making of postmodernities, the fag hag provides an ideal voice to educate the 'straight world' about the gay communities, while utilizing the linguistic subtleties of both discourses. In a recent article in the Australian gay magazine *Campaign*, the relationship between gay men and their fag hags was highlighted. Most interesting in this piece was the conversation between Willi and Katie. Friends for eight years, sharing a house in Sydney's Kings Cross and maintaining a completely non-sexual relationship, Willi and Katie are a fine example of the benefits of fag haggery to both women and men. Katie was asked how she would react to the possibility of 'meeting a nice young heterosexual - and homophobic - man'. Her answer illustrates the political power that fag hags could wield if their voice was recognized and their special position realized:

I wouldn't be in a relationship with a homophobic man anyway, so it's not an issue . . . If I had a serious boyfriend I'd want him to be just like Willi - someone whom I feel completely comfortable with and can share the good times - as well as the bad. I wouldn't tolerate a straight man who was into power trips or trying to shove my life around.<sup>9</sup>

Katie is determining clear expectations of her personal life. She does not perceive wide differences between straight and gay men. In her remarks, sexuality was not prioritized, with Katie emphasizing the importance of autonomy and contentment. Instead, she spoke of tolerance, sharing and comfort. While Alison may argue at an academic conference that fag hags represent a retrograde political stance, Katie is a clear example of a confident woman with an unequivocal sense of independence and insight.

The fag hag actualizes the paradigmatic possibilities of both the gay and straight worlds by patrolling sexual boundaries. As the leaders of the

queer patrol, rather than god's police, her most provocative duty is to question the identity of 'real men' and 'real women'. Ann Clark, in her work detailing the fluid relationship between femininity and desire in the 1980s, described 'the girl' as

. . . *entirely perceptual*. What she attends to, what is real for her and hence what she exposes to us are the aesthetic surface of things. Differentiation, distinctions have to do with colour, shape, taste and feel.<sup>10</sup>

Clark was outlining 'the girl' as the archetypal text with context. The mobility of the fag hag to seamlessly shift between expectation and ideologies immerses her in a flood of binary oppositions: sexual and asexual, straight and gay, text and context. She remains an integral socio-sexual link in a complex and slipping border dialogue. As the most famous fag hag of them all, Camille Paglia, articulates:

My sense of identification with gay men . . . came from this shared adoration of Hollywood and the sleek international high style. Because of these early experiences and tastes, I am out of synch with current feminism.<sup>11</sup>

For Paglia, the politics of fag haggery hovers around aesthetics. This neurotic appreciation of the surfaces would be determined as a retrograde 'camp identity' by Alison from New Zealand. Such labels undermine Paglia's evocatively ironic queerness. As she states, 'My sexuality is a complete neuter!', 'I don't fit in anywhere!'<sup>12</sup> This is a delicious site for the fag hag to be. By denying all positions, including the missionary, Camille is, indeed, a queer sister.

As a pagan high priestess of theory, the fag hag moves between straight and gay sexual subjectivities, gesturing signs of the cross that neither feminist nor homoerotic discourses have managed to conduct in their exclusivity. While female postmodernists may be caricatured as riding on the back of gay theory (doggy style), Sadean theatrics positions the daughter in 'sodomitic union with the father',<sup>13</sup> rendering him dependent upon the daughter for his mobility of desire. Signs of the cross are not made in the name-of-the-father.

The father-daughter alliance within Sadism elevates the daughter and renounces the mother.<sup>14</sup> Somer Brodribb in her book, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, takes the Sadean father-daughter alliance against the mother as a serious and literal reading of the misogyny of postmodernism, and of the even greater betrayal staged by its female practitioners. By colliding the parameters of fag-haggery with postmodern feminism and queerness, it becomes apparent that the fag hag is punished for collaborations with dangerous regimes of thought and flippant independencies from legitimate knowledges. What an intellectual tramp. Acting as God's Police within theory,<sup>15</sup> Brodribb reprimands female

postmodernists for partaking in a master's discourse defined as 'the cultural capital of late patriarchy'.<sup>16</sup> In the politics of fag haggery, there are no prizes for guessing who are 'god's police' and who are the 'damned whores'. Fag hags are queer sisters in crime, producing high anxiety amongst high society feminists.

As queer sisters, rather than vulnerable daughters of seduction, fag hags mischievously elude the oedipal strangleholds of much feminist cum psychoanalytic reading that insists on viewing women's relation to theory within an incestuous family romance. Perhaps Brodribb should put away her Freud and pick up a Harlequin. Amongst gay men, fag hags may be considered as trophies, emblems or rare acquisitions, but if seduction is occurring at all, queer sisters are probably doing it for themselves.

From incestuous to pathological paradigms, the promiscuity of fag-haggery in its theoretical dimensions exposes it to a literal reading of disease. Acting as conduits for *dialogue* between frequently incompatible discourses, fag hags appearing to straddle the bisexual divide are in danger of being dis-figured in discourse as actual conduits of *disease* between gay and straight communities. To be accurate, the female postmodernist has yet to be transfigured by a discourse of contamination in this way. Postmodernism, however, has already been pathologized on numerous occasions. Frederic Jameson trembles at the schizo spaces and the 'hysterical sublime' of the postmodern experience<sup>17</sup>, but Somer Brodribb goes all the way with her pathology of the postmodern. The postmodernist according to Brodribb is a PMS sufferer, a 'postmodern/poststructuralist man', exhibiting at least three of eleven 'delusions' in his 'Political, Personality and Discursive Disorder'.<sup>18</sup> Brodribb's unsaid assumption renders the PMS woman, if there was one in her schemata, truly mad.

At the 'Regimes of Sexuality' conference, Catherine Waldby gave a paper on 'AIDS and the Body Politic'. Focussing on the morphology of disease of contaminated and contaminating bodies, Waldby's conclusion was the old, if unresolved, idea of the female body as a site of disease and disorder. Male homosexed bodies had of course also been inscribed within epidemiology as channels, carriers, reservoirs and receptacles of potential disease. Waldby's insinuations however still seemed to be that although the image of the impenetrable male heterosexual body was under threat, his body still continued to maintain phallic prestige over the bodies of women and the male homosexual.<sup>19</sup> There was no speculation that a notion as pervasive as the 'femme fatale' had, at least temporarily, been challenged by a version of the 'homme fatal', a disease of desire that had initially proliferated among men.<sup>20</sup>

The radical possibilities of a new morphology of the fatal gender at the closing of our century has been deferred. Our own expectations were writing another story. A body in ruins desexualized and degendered is not without its own discourse. The postmodern body seems less hermaphroditic, less androgynous, than just plain queer.

If the categories of sex, sexual identity and gender are, as Judith Butler states, consequences of 'compulsory performance', the bodies of postmodern-postcoital culture are becoming increasingly tired of performing.<sup>21</sup> Butler works towards a 'sexuality against identity', fag hags

perhaps do the reverse. However imaged, AIDS has transfigured and disfigured the morphology of sexual politics. While in the 1970s the pill was some protection against the perpetuation of new life, the condom in the 1980s and 1990s is the barrier against the *consumption* of life. Sex has always been an over-determined metaphor for danger and death. AIDS signals a certain end to metaphor, forcing a literalization on the once metaphorical playground of desire-disease-death.

AIDS has made sex very queer. When the French called the orgasm 'la petite mort' they perhaps did not envisage it becoming 'le grand mal'. Jouissance may still hold possibilities for erotic transgressions, but queers are becoming a little impatient with the play. AIDS has placed an urgency upon the discussion of sexuality. Queer sisters will have to unite and very quickly, as phobias, fears and anxieties place unexpected rigidities upon forms of desire.

Postmodernism is coming to us as an already spent discourse. The body may not be able to perform for much longer. Nietzsche declared God dead, Foucault did the same to man, Kristeva erased the category 'woman', AIDS decomposes the body politic. And even worse, the hangover from the end of the century party (10 years early) is starting to throb. If this pulsating continues, 'po-mo' theory will come to imply that postmodernism is ready for a *post-mortem* report. The body, as Francoise Lionnet writes, may indeed be 'on its decline, but the corpus is soaring'.<sup>22</sup>

Fag hags are not victims of a misogynistic culture: they have not lost their bodies to an unwinnable cause. If we access the experiences of these straight women and attempt to fathom their connections with gay men, then we may increase our understanding of women beyond the confines of the feminist movement, and substantially enlarge the political possibilities of a postmodern feminism. The exchange of nitrate giggles and chaste kisses between fag hags and gay men may be archetypal liberatory pomo sexuality of this AIDS-blemished age. Fag hags are women who have (temporarily) traded a room of one's own for a room with a view.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sister Sledge, "We are Family", written by B. Edwards and N. Rodgers, *70s Party*, Milano, New Music, 1992, Track eight.

<sup>2</sup> Alison, question time following Lisa Duggan's 'Discussion on the shaping of new cultures of sexuality', Regimes of Sexuality Conference, Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, July 7, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> J. Gallop, *Thinking through the Body*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p.100.

<sup>4</sup> H. Abelove, 'A history of Gay History', Regimes of Sexuality Conference, Australian National University, July 5-8, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Gallop, p.100

<sup>6</sup> G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (1972), trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, H. Lane, London, Athlone Press, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> C. Paglia, 'The M.I.T. Lecture: Crises in the American Universities', transcript of lecture given on September 19, 1991, in *Sex, Art and American Culture*, London, Viking Press, 1993. p.277.

- <sup>8</sup> M. Pumphrey, 'The flapper, the housewife and the making of modernity', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1987.
- <sup>9</sup> Katie, quoted in D. Philips, 'Women are a Fag's best friend', *Campaign*, August 1993, p.20.
- <sup>10</sup> A. Clark, 'The girl: a rhetoric of desire', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, May 1987.
- <sup>11</sup> Paglia, p.111.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.261.
- <sup>13</sup> J. Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982, p.52.
- <sup>14</sup> G. Deleuze, *Sacher-Masoch: An Interpretation*, trans. J. McNeil, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p.52.
- <sup>15</sup> A. Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: the colonization of women in Australia*, Melbourne, Allen Lane, 1975.
- <sup>16</sup> S. Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers*, Melbourne, Spinifex Press, 1992, p.21.
- <sup>17</sup> F. Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, No. 146, 1984, p.76.
- <sup>18</sup> Brodribb, p.21.
- <sup>19</sup> C. Waldby, 'AIDS and the Body Politic', Regimes of Sexuality Conference, Australian National University, July 8, 1983.
- <sup>20</sup> Martha Vicinus' original title to her proposed paper seemed to offer the promise of such a reading: 'The Adolescent Boy: Fin-de-siecle Femme Fatale'. However, Vicinus altered her title at the last minute to the more pedestrian 'Women at the turn of the century: Women as Sexual Actors'. Like Henry Abelow, Vicinus was another closet historian from an English Department. Unlike Abelow, the liminal figures in Vicinus' paper were framed or rather clothed in a 'heterosexual romance', whose transvestite, transgressive gestures offered fleeting performative titillations to a 'heterosexual audience'.
- <sup>21</sup> J. Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in D. Fuss (ed.), *Inside Out*, New York, Routledge, 1991, p.29.
- <sup>22</sup> F. Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989, p.76.