

Queer Globalizations
Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York and London

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Queer globalizations : citizenship and the afterlife of colonialism /

edited by Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8147-1624-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-8147-1623-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Homosexuality. 2. Globalization. 3. Human rights.

I. Cruz, Arnaldo. II. Manalansan, Martin F., 1960-

HQ75.15 .Q45 2002

306.76'6—dc21

2002004611

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,
and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

3 "There Are No Lesbians Here"

Lesbianisms, Feminisms, and Global Gay Formations

Katie King

"There are no lesbians here." Who might make such a statement and for what intellectual and political purposes? What counts as a lesbian? Where is "here"? Struggles with the meanings of this statement and its corollary questions today signal an intersection of feminism, lesbian and gay studies, and globalization processes. Can the term "lesbian" (or can other wordings) be used at this historic moment as a meta-term, a structural category laboriously produced as a new universal, plucked from its local particularisms and strategically deployed as the sign under which divergent local sexualities and specific alternative social arrangements can be displayed? Is this possible in an anti-essentialist feminist politics? How would various politics of naming produce responses to the statement "There are no lesbians here"?

Productive Instabilities and Contests for Universals

Some feminists, lesbians, human rights activists, and others have worked hard to produce just such a "global" category, in at least two meanings of the word "global." Activists from a variety of global regions came together in preparation for the UN's Beijing Conference (the Fourth World Conference on Women, 4-15

September 1995, Beijing, China), drafting regional versions of the projected Platform for Action precisely to construct this new global category. With its moral dimensions drawn from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a multinational response to the genocide and other war crimes of World War II, the document and the project to include lesbianism as a human rights issue are shadowed by Enlightenment humanism and politically mobilized within globalization processes activating individualism in neoliberal economic relationships of power and labor. Evidence of human rights abuses was provided by testimonies gathered by activists; for example, the report *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights* was compiled by the U.S.-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), in partnership with other groups, such as ABIGALE in South Africa, Chadra Kirana in Indonesia, NVIH COC in the Netherlands, El Closet de Sor Juana in Mexico, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights in the United States. (Rosenbloom 1995). At the eleventh hour (actually 4:30 A.M. on the last day of the conference) the phrase "sexual orientation," the phrase around which all this planning and preparation had finally coalesced, was stricken from the closing version of the Platform for Action (see discussion in Reinfelder 1996, 20ff). Constructing universals, stabilizing contested categories, is labor-intensive political work, sometimes only too ephemeral or situational, other times only too compromised within the materialities both constraining and enabling their construction.

So actually in this particular context it was the phrase "sexual orientation" that was offered as the new universal, not the word "lesbian." What would count as this universal term is differently inflected by the various human rights groups, strategically and in relation to particular constituencies. In its report intended for presentation at Beijing, the IGLHRC uses the term "lesbian" unproblematically, since its concern in *Unspoken Rules* is to focus on abuses, extensively documented for legitimate challenge within a particular legal and moral framework, rather than on the issues of "local variation" among sexual practices and political identities. Elsewhere, the draft Platform for Action for Beijing from the European and North American region used phrases such as "single women" and "women who are not attached to men" as alternative paraphrases, in response to arguments that Eastern European women would not identify themselves as "lesbians" (Reinfelder 1996, 10).

Both "lesbian" and "feminist" have local and global meanings for particular nationalisms and challenges to nationalism by women. Using them as global terms is a political act. Refusing them as global terms is also a political act. No uses

are neutral and purely descriptive, although some users intend them to be and long for such possible categories. Contests over metalanguage and object languages here, that is, over the languages talked about (object languages) and the languages used to do that talking about (metalanguages), over etic and emic categories, are material and activist, not only theoretical and abstract. Etic categories are broad, structural, analytic categories, which present themselves as descriptive rather than prescriptive. They facilitate abstract comparison by structure and function, but also produce new subjects and subjectivities within particular epistemic regimes, that is, within institutionalized powers of regulation and control. Emic categories are the ones used by "the people themselves," that is, by local populations under scrutiny by various powers, intellectual, political, religious, economic, and so on. Such emic categories are plucked from their contexts as exemplary, and thus are put to purposes not always intended by their users despite their representation as from "the people themselves." "Etic" is borrowed from "phonetic" and "emic" from "phonemic," thus traveling out of their strictly linguistic uses to other sites of discourse, often anthropological or sociological, and reflecting origins within the foundations of U.S. academic linguistic anthropology and a kind of colonial functionalism. Some emic categories are appropriated for etic purposes: for example, the term "berdache."

Recently, within a set of political contestations, the term "berdache" as an emic term appropriated for use as an etic term was replaced by another emic term, "two-spirit," in recognition that "berdache" was an emic term of the disparaging powers of colonialism when confronted with practices they demonized. Who counts as the "local" population, the colonizer or the colonized, has been renarrativized in this contest. Indeed, which "local" population the term is borrowed from is also renarrativized.

In 1988 an activist gay anthology, *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, could give several histories of the term "berdache," critical histories of its colonial uses, and still use it relatively unproblematically as a meta-term, including it as such in its table of contents and in its resources and appendices (Roscoe 1988). By 1998 an academic anthropological text attempting to situate the study of sexualities within the histories of social science investigation comments on its own production over the time in which the term becomes less acceptable and deproblematizes the political contests by putting in a footnote rather simply, "Although the term *berdache* is widely used in the literature under review, it has acquired pejorative connotations. Since the original publication of this essay, *Two-spirit* has replaced *berdache* as the preferred term" (Weston 1998, 223).

In Randy Burns's preface to *Living the Spirit*, a simultaneous history and definition is offered: "French explorers used the word *berdache* to describe male Indians who specialized in the work of women and formed emotional and sexual relationships with other men. Many tribes had female berdaches, too—women who took on men's work and married other women" (Burns 1988, 1). Midnight Sun, in an essay "Sex/Gender Systems in Native North America," offers a different history and definition. (The relationship between these two histories could emphasize their differences, or could synthesize one as a more expanded definition that is the same but with more detail than the other. Synthesizing such differences marks new alliances produced in the course of the contest for terminology. I emphasize the differences at this moment in this essay not to undermine such alliances, but to point out the moments in the labor-intensive processes of producing of such activist allies throughout "theoretical" debates.)

One of the most frequently used terms in the literature is berdache, derived from a Persian word meaning "kept boy" or "male prostitute" and first applied by French explorers to designate "passive" partners in homosexual relationships between Native American males. This is complicated, however, by the fact that many individuals labeled berdaches also engaged in cross-dressing and cross-gender behavior. . . . I use "cross-dressing" to refer to male or female transvestism; "cross-gender behavior" to the assumption of the role of the other sex; and "homosexual" or "lesbian" to refer to the identity of those engaging in patterned same-sex sexual behavior. This latter definition distinguishes between behavior and identity and also separates male homosexuality from lesbianism. (Midnight Sun 1988, 34–35)

How the French explorers come to use a Persian word is not explained, nor is the history of its use by ethnographers, as they move from traders and religious, to explorers and bureaucrats, to anthropologists and social workers. What Midnight Sun emphasizes are the categories that must be separated when analyzed by the methods produced by lesbian and gay studies in the United States, where distinguishing between identity and behavior has become pivotal as political identities and indeed identity politics itself are contested, and where feminism has influenced the political and erotic significance of differences between lesbians and gay men. The term "queer" might be understood today (2002) as a location of opposition to the terms in which these contests are framed within the kinds of distinctions made by Midnight Sun in 1988. "Queer" too, in its productive instabilities, is implicated in the struggles for universals that can mobilize global activism and yet can honor particularisms of meaning and action.

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Human rights activists might mobilize such universals in attempts to create a new global citizen, whose claims on human rights are not claims on single nation-states, but rather on such continually-recreated-as-stable ideas of the "universal." Such politics can be understood as "essentialist," but with the caveat that "essentialism" properly marks the moment of stabilization in a contested social construction, a stability that changes momentarily. Such stability is perhaps continually reproduced as "the same" through the institutionalizations of repressive political powers, or perhaps deconstructed and destabilized by oppositional movements, or perhaps struggled for as a liberatory practice, process, or identity, or—most likely—is a complex, always changing mixture of all these contradictions and contestations. Such politics might make global political interventions with strategic use of such universals, for example, asking of nation-states, as a transparently demographic question, "Where are the missing gay people?" With the assumption of a range of human variability within "sexual orientation" and with the weight and authority of new genetic research that works to stabilize sexuality as biologically determined, diadic and mutually exclusive, nation-states might be held accountable for their own insistence that "There are no lesbians here," the corollary being that such absences mark "disappeared" people for whom human rights intervention is necessary. That such "human rights" intervention could be put to repressive as well as liberatory purposes is only too obvious, as is also the ever present possibility that a biologically essentialized "gay" gene is subject to genetic manipulation and attempts at control and genocide.

"There are no lesbians here" may at other times actually be a local anticolonial liberation politics that refuses the narrow social institutionalizations of some particular cultural formation, under the term "lesbian," as inadequate to represent local practices, activisms, sexualities, or identities. The historical and fictive status of colonialism in the production of alternative sexualities or in the recognition or rejection of indigenous sexualities is various. Nevertheless, the insistence that homosexuality or lesbianism, even in its "globalized" versions, is an imposition of colonial rule can itself be repressive, as local lesbians document in *Unspoken Rules*, where they speak against their governments' claims that "There are no lesbians here." Feminism similarly may be refused in local anticolonial liberation politics, as a set of traveling political practices not applicable to some local political concerns, or as a threat to cultural values not easily separated from liberatory politics. Nationalisms may valorize marriage, the family, and traditional sexual regulatory practices, while local women's movements—feminist, nonfeminist, and even antifeminist—need local strategies for giving liberatory meaning to their challenges

to or adoptions of such "cultural" concerns. (Some of these so-called local strategies travel globally; for example, feminist refigurations of meaning around "the veil," or rereadings of the Koran and Islamic history.)

Lesbian Feminisms in Globalization Processes

Chandra Mohanty's critiques of feminist scholarship and colonial discourses have emphasized the dangers of a globally traveling U.S. feminism unself-consciously promoting itself as a universal project (Mohanty 1991). The problems and powers of such "global" representations are at stake in the refusal of such universals as "lesbian" and "feminist," however collaboratively produced. Such "global" and appropriative intentions of IGLHRC's *Unspoken Rules*, now reprinted in London in Cassell's series on lesbian and feminist international concerns, are made more explicit in another book in the series, *Amazon to Zami: Towards a Global Lesbian Feminism* (Reinfelder 1996). *Amazon* is a groundbreaking anthology and political project of importance, its difficulties of production heroically met, and necessarily immersed in tentative conceptualizations by a variety of activists in various political and national locations. Such an anthology produces its own fragile and formative alliances and affiliations within the collection of its authors, as individuals and as representatives of countries, activist groups, and coalitions, and exemplifies particular political visions and particular strategies for achieving social change.

The central political meanings established by the editor and displayed in her introduction crystallize around the term "lesbian feminism." Although the term shifts a bit in its ranges of inclusion throughout the various essays in the book, it tends to solidify a particular political formation, not simply lesbians who are feminists (however contested even those terms might be) but a particular political position produced in the tension between feminisms and lesbianisms traveling globally, and local particularisms of place, nation, and political moment. In editor Reinfelder's introduction, this "lesbian feminism" is produced by analogy with other feminisms taxonomized by implicit and explicit theories of the origins of oppression: "Lesbian feminism, unlike other forms of feminism, sees the institutionalization of heterosexuality as one, if not *the*, cornerstone of oppression" (Reinfelder 1996, 4). It acknowledges several theories of the origins and meaning of lesbianism, while locating itself most comfortably in lesbianism as a political choice (a claim made more explicitly in some of the other essays in the book): [in describing the effects on women of human rights abuses of lesbians]:

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Some give in to compulsory heterosexuality; but for others a change to heterosexuality is perceived as desirable, but an impossibility. Fortunately, for many of us our lesbianism is a conscious "choice," albeit one that the institution of heterosexuality structures and constrains. But in spite of the extreme difficulties and constraints this "choice" may impose on us, we like and prefer being lesbians. (Reinfelder 1996, 26)

(Obviously one hears echoes of debates embedded in terms "sexual orientation" and "sexual preference" here and tentative strategies for inclusion and alliance in a range of parallelisms.)

Throughout the essays in the book, individual authors describe local practices of identity, political meaning (including its apparent absence), and practices—sexual, social, and gender-structured. The terms "butch" and "femme" are used comparatively by most authors, to distinguish and connect practices that depend on gender-specialists very different in their performances and their stratifications in terms of power. Authors simultaneously elaborate the local particularisms of such "butch/femme" relationships, while conflating them with feminist global critiques that theorize butch/femme pairs as modeled in political error upon heterosexuality. The meanings of lesbianism-as-political-choice and the critique of butch/femme pairs come to define the kind of global lesbian feminism embodied in the political project of the anthology.

Which Differences Make a Difference

I teach both *Unspoken Rules* and *Amazon to Zami* in an advanced undergraduate women's studies class I call "Lesbianisms in Multinational Reception." The first time I taught this class I plunged immediately into the international questions of "what counts as a lesbian," offering to students some of the examples of social practices least like contemporary U.S. lesbian performances, identities, and behaviors. I thought beforehand of the dangers of making some social and sexual practices "exotic" but had naively not thought about my students' simple refusal to consider any of these social and sexual forms as having any connection to U.S. lesbianism. I assumed the kind of universal constructed by human rights activists as the metacategory under which local variations would be meaningfully connected under the sign "lesbian" as I labored to demonstrate complexities of variation. I made this assumption despite the very title I had chosen for the course, a title that valued the refusal of the term by women in many locations and politics, the refusal to use it to describe themselves, and that highlighted the neoliberal

economics of globalization. The kind of refusal I privileged unself-consciously was that by international women critiquing the neocolonialisms embedded in the term "lesbian." If anything, I assumed my students might find themselves using the term as a kind of colonizing universal.

But my students instead were refusing to use the term to create alliances and meaningful relationships across variation, variations that were more powerfully significant, and less interesting to them than I had anticipated (and not innocent, either, of assumptions of universalisms of many sorts). The social formation that over and over was the site of their refusal to connect was what in *Amazon to Zami* was called globally "butch/femme." Butch/femme relationships were, they felt, not feminist, and therefore not really "lesbian." Until this experience I thought I had understood but really had not fully digested the power of connotations of "feminist" and "lesbian." I had also assumed that my students, especially lesbian students, were not only aware of, but indeed active participants in reconstructed U.S. meanings of butch/femme practices. Instead I discovered that my students were unaware of such contemporary debates in lesbian/feminist/academic/theoretical/erotic communities. I was clearly only too implicated myself in all these possible formations and assumptions. What struck me most was the sadness that my students demonstrated when they were confronted with a range of "global lesbian" practices in many variations on "butch/femme" gender specializations, as if an old fear had been realized rather than repudiated. (They were somewhat consoled, however, by the reiterated feminist critique of such practices in *Amazon to Zami*.)

Global Gay Formations and Local Homosexualities in Layers of Locals and Globals

As is the case with the Homosexual, the Lesbian is an object within an epistemological history that can be interrogated within a history of sexuality or within an anthropology of sexuality. Thinking through "global gay formations and local homosexualities" emphasizes that diachronic and synchronic investigations are each accountable to and also always metaphors for and about today's sexual politics under the regime of globalized capital. Such investigation requires thinking in layers of locals and globals, emphasizing that they are relative and relational. Thus implicit in a history or an anthropology of sexuality is the question "What counts as a lesbian?"—where the word "lesbian" has multiple uses and meanings, uses and meanings not exhausted by local particularisms, valuable though they

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are, central though they are to particular projects. What this means is that no localism or particularism is not caught up in the dynamic interactions between globals and locals, be they geographical or across time. This does not, however, assume that all trajectories are toward the dominations of U.S./Euro cultural, political, economic formations, or the dominations of presentist conceptualizations of sexuality and the self, rather than the possibilities of reassertion by multiple "locals" of the general priority and wide travel of local forms. Which locals, and their relative powers under the regime of globalization, their material abilities to "travel" and within what fields of power, from immigration to the Internet to currency as new archival objects, are the present circumstances that create new gay formations.

Within a global gay human rights activism the question "What counts as a lesbian?" is made transparently powerful within "sexual orientation" as an element of the humanist individual self that is emancipated through inalienable rights as a human. Anthropological and historical concerns with particularist cultural forms are subordinated to the difficulties of producing international laws, treaties, and conventions that are answerable to democratic machinery that dates from the end of World War II and draws on Enlightenment notions of liberty. Such productions create a new global citizen, whose claims upon human rights are not claims upon single nation-states, but rather upon continually-recreated-as-stable ideas of the "universal." Such "universals" are in fact quite unstable, produced and reproduced with great difficulty, legally, militarily, economically, scientifically, and through other discourses, representational and materially powerful.

One particular "local" formation, both geopolitically and chronologically local, the U.S. 1970s feminist version of the "Lesbian," may unself-consciously be used as the standard, the unmarked category, by a variety of locals and globals, of the term "lesbian," especially in the phrase, "There are no lesbians here." Local, but also materially powerful under processes of globalization, this formation has traveled widely, back through time in various historical and fictional discourses and today via gay and feminist activisms, tourism, media, commerce, and medical, legal, and psychological discourses. This U.S. 1970s feminist Lesbian's construction can be emblemized by three political claims: "Lesbianism is not a passing phase," "Lesbians don't ape heterosexuals," and "Bisexuals are confused Lesbians." Such claims create disjunctions from other sexual formations, historical or cross-cultural, that at various times have or could have also been displayed under the sign "lesbian."

For example, "Lesbianism is not a passing phase" excludes from naming under the sign "lesbian," sexual and cultural practices that do not construct as mutually exclusive from marriage (especially) or other institutional forms of heterosexuality, sex, sex play, love or affection, or varieties of stimulations between females, ones socially sanctioned, socially prohibited or socially trivial. Especially "Lesbianism is not a passing phase" excludes from naming as this "lesbian," sexual or cultural practices that are restricted to particular periods or to specific situations in a life cycle that prescribes marriage and motherhood. "Lesbians don't ape heterosexuals" excludes institutionalizations of gender-specialists, such as in some cultural-theatrical communities, or so-called butch/femme couplings, the so-called mannish lesbian, and sexual play with objects such as dildos, or sexual practices that figure the clitoris as an organ of penetration. Indeed, it is penetration itself that is especially prohibited with this claim. "Bisexuals are confused lesbians" excludes all practices and identities that are either not accommodated within a mutually exclusive, diadic homo/hetero sexuality, or that insist on identity-priority rather than practice-priority in an epistemology of polymorphous perversity. Bisexuality is figured only as a gateway in the production of Lesbians out of false heterosexuals. What is constructed is a Lesbianism that is lifelong, stable after "coming out," autonomous of heterosexuality, sex-centered, politically feminist, not situational, and exclusive of marriage. That this formation is both powerful and unstable is made clear by the range of contestations in U.S. lesbian feminism over the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, all sorts of debates/struggles from the lesbian continuum to butch/femme couples to gays in the military to sex toys and S/M to lesbian bed-death and lesbian motherhood and lesbian domestic violence to gay marriage. This formation shadows dramatically the question "What counts as a lesbian?" in any investigation of sexualities historically or cross-culturally. The range of contestations incompletely synthesized here could be taken to demonstrate the material power of this "local" (both historically and culturally) version of the Lesbian, or conversely could be taken to show how unstable such domination is, how powerful other local formations are in their reassertion of the priority of their own forms. Within an anthropology of sexuality other forms have come to vie for any such power: such forms as the gender-specialist, the penetrator, and the bisexual.

Bisexuality, rather than the identity the bisexual, may be the formation in greatest global circulation today. As one global gay formation, bisexuality has currency in a globalized economy of niche markets where the most circulated objects are those that can be viewed within the greatest range of divergent local markets

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as "like-us." This doesn't mean that bisexuality is actually "all things to all people," but rather that a highly commodified version of bisexuality can be exploited as differently important in a local and distinctive reception by a wide range of markets, especially media markets, as are also all local and global forms of "sexuality," especially in their specious "(hetero)sexual" variations. And in any collectivities of activism that are international, bisexuality must be reprioritized. In such activist locations the term "bisexuality" is useful in at least three contexts: (1) as a liminal category, such as its use as "gateway" from heterosexuality to homosexuality, in a universe of discourse effectively exhausted by hetero/homo sex; (2) as a third identity, modeled on the "sexual orientations" homosexual and heterosexual, thus bisexual, essentialist or anti-essentialist, within identity politics or in a queer anti-identity politics; (3) as an overflow category, in a universe of discourse not exhausted by hetero/homo sex, and thus representing all other possible local sexual practices without distinguishing among them under the sign "bisexual." Thus as overflow category, bisexual can also, like queer, name and valorize as well inchoate noninstitutionalized processes and formations connected with sexuality, possibly (or fictitiously) not "disciplined." This version of bisexual may be interchangeable with queer, and participate in a range of its meanings and productive instabilities as well.

Lesbianisms in Multinational Reception

The phrase "Lesbianisms in Multinational Reception" suggests that the term "Lesbian" is plural and various, that in some global locations it is engaged only as an outside term, not there a local term, that there are many kinds of reception of the term, that such receptions are inextricable from its traveling possibilities. Those travels are interconnected with other globalizing processes in an economy of multinationals in late capitalism, an economy also including representations and media, as well as activism, art, and cyberspace, and inextricably intertwined too with worldwide movements against colonialism. It includes the possibility that "lesbianism" is a rejected term, as well as the possibility of using it as an inclusive, unmarked, or continually reconstructed "universal," although plural, not singular. Naming lesbian in this context, through this phrase, is a method coming-into-being that arises from acts of translation across fields of power. Often one knows such methods when one sees them only in the midst of misunderstandings and struggles, when previously held assumptions are ruptured by micro and macro movements of power. To pay attention to such methodology coming into focus

requires a high tolerance for conflict and for beginning again, tasks with emotional, intellectual, and political costs.

Misunderstandings and mistakes are the paradoxical "common ground" on which such methodology is made, and misunderstandings and mistakes have their own consequences, sometimes separate from the coming into being of such methodology, and not at all necessarily mended by it. In this vision such conflicts as the ones shaped through political generations and differing geopolitics, and even through (inter)interdisciplinarity in the academy, are pivotal in producing "lesbigay" methodology. At this time I consider the most important task to be first the never simple recognition of such methods when we see them. I believe in eclectic methods that emerge in different local politics out of political and institutional struggles, that require always problematic translations, which themselves shape these methods. No generation of political activists can claim mastery or ownership of such methods, nor can any academic disciplines or political theories, nor can any national liberation movements.

Such new methods enable new translations, new visionary reframings of contemporary geopolitical realities. For example, Chela Sandoval translates "hyper-oppression" under globalization into another vision, an ironic one that recognizes simultaneously both terror and possibility, calling it "the democratization of oppression," and naming the activities, activisms, and oppressions of a new global citizen brought into being within shifting fields of power in late capitalism. She speaks of an alignment among decolonial theorists who, surviving "conquest, colonization, and slavery," develop methodologies "crucial to the project of identifying citizen-subjects and collectivities able to negotiate the globalizing operations of the next century" and names queers as one set of agents in these negotiations (Sandoval forthcoming). Any new political movements, among them lesbian, gay, and feminist human rights activisms, must be very sophisticated in their understandings of their own commodification within such layered global and local structures, and willing to take risks in their appropriations of pleasures, identities, and political strategies.

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