

# **“SO FULL OF MYSELF AS A CHICK”**

## **Goth Women, Sexual Independence, and Gender Egalitarianism**

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*Drawing on interviews, participant observation, and Internet postings, this article analyzes gender in a local Goth scene. These Goths use the confines of the subcultural scene, where they are relatively safe from outsider view, and the scene’s celebration of sexuality as resources to resist mainstream notions of passive femininity. This article probes the struggles of women in this Goth scene to examine the broader possibilities and limitations of strategies of active feminine sexuality in gaining gender egalitarianism. I argue that although these women do transform sexual expectations and experiences, their gains are hampered by an overly narrow vision of gender egalitarianism that both obfuscates the broader landscape of gender inequality and blurs the reproduction of an ideological system in which romance trumps sex.*

**Keywords:** *gender; sexuality; youth culture*

At the Haven, a Goth dance club, Goths adorned in black fetish wear, leather and PVC, and dog collars and leashes gather weekly. While some men “gender blend,” wearing makeup and skirts, the women are dressed in sexy feminine outfits. The sidelines of the dance floor are populated by pairs and groups of people kissing, caressing, sucking on each other’s necks. This environment, Siobhan tells me, is “liberating.”

Drawing on interviews, participant observation, and Internet postings, this article analyzes gender in a local Goth scene. These Goths use the confines of the subcultural scene, where they are relatively safe from outsider views, and the scene’s celebration of active sexuality as resources to resist mainstream notions of passive femininity. Sexually active femininity is not, of course, unique to the Goth

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scene: Contemporary young women in a variety of arenas use active sexuality to stake out gender independence. This emphasis on women's emancipated sexuality reflects the substantive turn of postfeminism—what Anna Quindlen has labeled "babe feminism" (1996, 4)—a focus on women's right to active sexuality rather than on broader issues of gender equality. In this article, I probe this Goth scene's (sub)cultural contradictions to critically examine the possibilities and the limitations of strategies of active feminine sexuality in gaining gender egalitarianism.

Goth women and, to some extent, Goth men conceive of the Goth community as a neofeminist space. Although the women I encountered do not frequently use the term "feminist," they draw on the language of feminism to describe the benefits of being a Goth. Specifically, they use the language of "choice," "objectification," and "empowerment." These discussions, however, focus almost exclusively on sexuality rather than on employment or family concerns. In part, this focus is logical given the demographics of the community: Many are in college or employed in starter jobs, and most have not married or had children. It is also logical since much of the community's activities take place within the sexualized space of a dance club.

Goth women engage in strategies of active sexuality (proactive sexuality, nonmonogamy, and bisexuality) to create gender egalitarianism within the Goth scene. This approach has a number of benefits for Goth women: First, it allows them to be perceived as and to feel sexy despite physical self-presentations that are often not sexually validated in the mainstream culture. Second, it allows them to engage in sexual play with multiple partners while sidestepping most of the stigma and dangers that women who engage in such behavior outside the Goth scene frequently incur. And third, it allows them to see themselves as strong and independent women, as "feminist" in effect (even if they do not all use that term), and to see the Goth scene as a gender egalitarian, and hence politically superior, space.

Goth women's sexual discourse draws on the position taken by sex radical feminists: They present themselves as sexual players who enjoy and experience a range of sexual partners and behaviors, portraying their uninhibited sexuality as a platform for personal empowerment. But gauging the success of these strategies is a complex task. While clearly widening their sexual space, Goth women's attempts to use sexual agency as an emancipatory tool are limited, both in their ability to create conditions of sexual equality and in their ability to transform broader gender inequality.

In their eagerness to cast the Goth scene in general and the Haven (the Goth night at a local club) in particular as gender egalitarian spaces, Goths do not see, gloss over, and reinterpret evidence of persistent gender inequality in sexual relations: The compulsion for women to dress sexily and to be sexually available, the continued objectification of women as recipients of predatory and critical male and female gazes, and the maintenance of gendered double standards in individual sexual relationships. The women's significant transformation of sexual expectations is hampered by an overly narrow vision of gender egalitarianism that both obfuscates the broader landscape of gender inequality and blurs the reproduction of an ideological system in which romance trumps sex.

While Goths may scoff at commercialized romance, the Goth scene does not develop a critical analysis of the relationship imperative behind notions of romance. Rather, it tries to unpin separate notions of monogamous, “vanilla” (plain) sexuality from notions of “ideal” intimate relationships, suggesting, for example, that a person may be able to be involved simultaneously in more than one romantic relationship or that a person may be able to engage in sexual behavior with someone outside of the romantic dyad without undermining the emotional integrity of that pairing. These assertions attempt to expand the terms of romantic relationships without questioning their basic validity. Indeed, they actively recharge romance as a morally and emotionally important goal. Moreover, claims about the queer-friendly Goth scene notwithstanding, most primary Goth relationships are heterosexual, while same-sex relationships (usually between women) are subsidiary. In the absence of a broader politicization of gender relations, these heterosexual relationships repackage male entitlement.

#### **YOUNG WOMEN’S SEXUALITY: “WALK[ING] A NARROW LINE”**

The erosion of the old gender bargain, in which women exchanged sex and emotion work for financial support, has propelled young women to experiment with new rules about gender and sexuality (Sidel 1990; Thompson 1995). But while the rules of the sex game are changing, women are still held to a sexual double standard predicated on deep-rooted cultural understandings about differences between men and women. This double standard continues to impede women’s sexual agency, but without the economic payoff promised (for many women) by the old gender bargain. Within this disadvantageous framework, young women struggle to exercise sexual agency on their own terms.

Young women’s attempts to stretch their sexual wings are greeted with alarm by adults. The media frequently portray young women’s sexual behavior to be converging with young men’s, as more and more girls and young women engage in sexual relations outside of the context of marriage, engagement, or love. Moreover, changes in expectations for young women (i.e., college, career, and the consequent later marriage) have created a longer period of nonmarital sexuality for women. This alarm is crystallized in outcries about the “epidemic” of teen pregnancy. As Luker (1996) pointed out, the “epidemic” is actually an increase in nonmarital births, indicating that many young women are opting out of the marital prerogative that has been traditionally imposed on pregnant, unmarried, white, middle-class women.

While some feminists applaud women’s increasing sexual agency, others argue that changes in sexual expectations have only increased the pressure for young women to engage in sexual behaviors they might not otherwise choose (Jacobs Brumberg 1997; Pipher 1994). A discourse of victimization thus pervades discussions of adolescent girls’ sexuality. This discourse, which positions young women as passive recipients of unwanted sexual attention or as pressured into early or more

frequent sexual behavior acknowledges girls' relative disempowerment in heterosexual interactions but precludes any discussion of sexual desire on the part of young women. In an article aptly subtitled "The Missing Discourse of Desire," Michelle Fine (1988) noted that girls' voices of desire, submerged under this discourse of victimization, are glimpsed only fleetingly.

By positioning girls as victimized rather than desiring subjects, this argument reproduces the cultural construction of girls as naturally less interested in sex than in emotions and less interested in sex than are men. Girls who violate this construction of proper femininity are heavily stigmatized. As Lees (1993) argued, fear of being labeled a "slag" (slut, ho, or hootchie in the United States) constrains young women's behavior in a number of ways—by keeping them from going to a variety of public places, from walking alone, from dressing too provocatively, from talking to too many boys. The power of the label is that it can be applied at any time for reasons that seldom have anything to do with sexual behavior. To avoid the potentially ruinous label, young women must constantly manage their self-presentations, shelving their own freedom and desires. The label thus results in very real gender differences in behavior, strengthening young men's power over and distinction from young women. Moreover, the label divides young women, pitting good girls against sluts, categories that are often overlaid with race and class codings (see Tolman 1996).

Caught in the cultural trap of increasing expectations for sexual competency, the mandate to appear heterosexually attractive (see Wolf 1991), and the powerful persistence of the "slut" stigma, "girls walk a narrow line: they must not be seen as too tight, nor as too loose" (Lees 1993, 29). The sexual balancing act in which most girls and young women engage has a number of consequences. First, the desire to appear as "good girls" impedes the use of sexual protection, since carrying condoms suggests that the girl anticipated having sex (rather than being "swept away" by the moment) (Thompson 1995). Second, the pressure to fulfill men's sexual needs combined with the absence of a "discourse of [female] desire" reduces young women's ability to make sexual decisions that are rooted in their own desires, putting them in a passive position in sexual negotiations. The result, too frequently, is heterosexual experiences that do not meet the criteria for rape but are also not actively chosen by young women, reinforcing the normativity of female passivity in heterosexual relations (Phillips 2000).

In her study of adolescent girls' sexuality, Sharon Thompson concluded, "the greatest danger girls narrated was love. Once in love or set on trying to get in love, even cautious girls said they closed their eyes to sexual and psychological danger" (1995, 285). It is the ideology of romance, rather than sexuality, that encourages girls and women to sacrifice for the sake of the relationship or in desperate attempts to hang onto a relationship. Indoctrinated in the intertwined ideologies that "love conquers all" and that "hetero-relationships are the key to women's happiness," girls and women read romantic relationships as signs of their self-worth and of their identities, and thus risk losing both when they lose a relationship. The idea, moreover, that women are responsible for the maintenance of relationships adds to the

pressure women feel to make their romantic alliances endure (Phillips 2000). Thus, because romance continues to be ideologically privileged for women, the emancipatory potential of their sexual agency is limited. Furthermore, women's sexual liberation itself is often hard to unpin from romance, as Radway (1984, 16) argued in her study of romance novels, in which she found that the radical validation of women's sexual passion was based on "the natural and inevitable expression of a prior *emotional* attachment, itself dependent on a natural, biologically based sexual difference."

Empirical studies demonstrate that not all girls and women negotiate these constraints in the same ways. Strategies of accommodation and/or resistance may emerge in collective rituals and in individual interactions (Stomblor and Padavic 1997). But gauging these strategies is a complex task. As Barton (2002, 586) cautioned in another context, "what may be liberating on an individual level may simultaneously be indicative (and reproductive of) institutionalized constraints related to gender, race, class, age, and sexual orientation." Moreover, young women may experience the constraints as simultaneously pleasurable and oppressive. Many young women explain that makeup is "fun," yet they are unwilling to go outside the home without it (Bordo 1997; Currie 1999). Similarly, young women may at once be insulted and threatened by street harassment and take pleasure in being noticed by men (Phillips 2000). These contradictions make it hard to pin down behaviors as either clearly subversive or clearly oppressive.

Sue Lees (1993, 287) argued, "There is . . . a sense in which if women take on the word 'slag' as subject rather than object, it is possible to subvert the misogyny embedded in the term." Her claim is in line with the argument made by sex-positive feminists that women can find power in overt displays of sexuality that subvert the dominant notions of femininity as sexually passive. Other feminists, however, urge caution, noting that "with the sexual and the sexist as 'closely intertwined' as they are in our culture, it is difficult to assess what is truly freeing and what is subtly undermining of women's long-term health and happiness" (Barton 2002, 600, drawing on Chancer 1998). Thus, the centrality of sexuality to sexism makes the task of determining women's sexual agency complex indeed.

In this article, I explore young women's use of active sexuality as a strategy for gaining gender egalitarianism in one Goth subculture. This Goth scene is a space in which women are actively struggling to reject conventional standards of feminine sexual comportment. They do this both by embracing their sexual agency and by rejecting the restrictions of monogamy and heterosexuality. In many ways, these women are ideally situated to enact this struggle: Race/class and generational privilege enable these women's experiments. They are moderately secure economically, do not have to contend with "welfare queen" demonization, and have clearly benefited from second-wave feminism. Furthermore, the Goth scene allows them to draw boundaries around themselves that mitigate the consequences of their sexual experiments. The "freak" label provides insularity, and the club that is the scene hub is repeatedly described as safe from outside judgment. Moreover, their scene is centered in a Northeastern college town that prides itself on its progressive gender

politics and tolerance of sexual diversity. But while these women conduct their sexual negotiations in an unusually advantageous context, some women outside the Goth scene employ similar strategies. The Goth women's efforts provide an exceptional vantage on the limits and the potentialities of young women's struggles both to gain sexual freedom and to use sexuality to enact gender equality.

Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (2000) suggested that particular locations provide specific materials for the construction and negotiation of gendered, raced, and classed selves. In examining micro contexts, we can begin to tease apart the components of successful and unsuccessful strategies. Pointing to the rich material popular culture offers for renegotiating identities, Marr Maira (2002, 39) argued, "Popular culture is saturated with ideologies about youth that are racialized, gendered, and classed, but it also offers an arena in which youth may reappropriate or symbolically transgress existing racialized, gendered, and class boundaries."

Subcultural studies, however, have often portrayed subcultures as arenas of resistance for men while relegating women to the subcultural role of sexual plaything, thus reproducing the notion of women as less resistant and more passive than young men (McRobbie and Garber 1996). Thornton (1996) contended that participants in youth cultures draw on and articulate similar images of femininity as passive, undesirable, and unhip by attributing femininity to the mainstream. "Subcultural capital," Thornton argued, "would seem to be a currency which correlates with and legitimizes unequal statuses" (p. 104). These analyses suggest that subcultures are more likely to reproduce gender hierarchies than to subvert or rework them.

Two recent subcultural explorations have refuted this framework. LeBlanc argued that girl punks use the punk subculture "to resist the prescriptions of femininity" (1999, 219). Although they are marginalized and harassed within the male-dominated scene, girl punks are able to deploy the values of punk to remake their gendered selves through, for example, aggressive behavior and the adoption of punk style in opposition to feminine beauty mandates. LeBlanc contended that punk girls "subvert and challenge femininity, engaging in a reconstruction of its norms" (p. 13). In her study of alternative hard rock, Schippers (2002) argued that both men and women participants use everyday actions to disrupt and reshape the gender order. These micro practices, which she theorizes as "gender maneuvering," create "an alternative, collective set of rules and meanings for gender and social relations" (p. 16).

By appropriating the masculinist aesthetic of the punk scene, LeBlanc's (1999) punks carve out resistant femininities that challenge the mainstream while leaving the male-dominated punk gender order intact. In contrast, the alternative hard rockers in Schipper's (2002) study alter the gender dynamics of the scene (there is less harassment, a nod to feminist issues by male musicians, and a substantial presence for girl bands), but without significantly affecting the mainstream. Like the alternative hard rockers, the Goths in my study see their scene as pro-gender egalitarian; they use subversive sexuality to challenge both cultural notions of women and hegemonic gender relations.

I am going to argue, however, that in the case of these Goths, gender maneuvering in the form of subversive sexuality leads to less than meaningful resistance to the gender order.

### THE LOCAL GOTH SCENE

Most accounts of Goth locate its roots in an early 1980s melding of the punk scene with glam rock. Goth is thus considered a music-based scene. But to be Goth implies much more than shared musical tastes; it is, as I was repeatedly informed, an "aesthetic," a particular way of seeing and of being seen.

My study is concerned with the local Goth scene rather than the Goth subculture writ large. The participants in my study consider the local scene to be atypical, mostly, I think, because of its location in a less urban area than, say, Boston or New York (the immediate geographic comparisons). The local scene seems to be less rigidly bounded than the scene in other localities and hosts a large number of "Tuesday Goths" (people who dress Goth only for the club on Tuesday nights). While internal debates about authenticity proliferate, tolerance for people who downplay their "freakiness" for work seems to be the norm.

The scene prides itself on its inclusivity. Many in the scene claim overlapping memberships in the queer, polyamorous, bondage-discipline/sadomasochism, and pagan communities. Yet it is demographically homogeneous: With a few exceptions, local Goths are youth or young adults, white, middle class, college educated, liberal but not radical, unmarried, and childless. They are technologically adept; if they are not employed in tech support, they spend an enormous amount of time online. They are known for their brooding solitude, yet they call each other to task for perceived apathy toward the Goth community. Indeed, they are surprisingly social, coming together regularly at their local club night (called the Haven), at parties, for coffee, and on PVGoth, their online community.

The data for this article combine formal interviews, participant observation, and Web listserver data. I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with 17 self-identified Goths (10 women and 7 men). This scene is small enough that groups of friends are highly interconnected. Every person I interviewed knows, to a greater or lesser degree, everyone else in my sample. In addition, I engaged in numerous casual conversations with the interviewees as well as with other Goths.

For a period of about 18 months, I did participant observation at the Haven and at private Goth events. Once I gained initial access to the Goth community, I did not find it difficult to legitimate my participation. Indeed, I found myself invited to more events than I could possibly attend. This acceptance is surprising given Goth hostility to "tourists" (people with a prurient interest in, but no commitment to, Goth culture). However, I was viewed, I think, as a sympathetic audience and even a potential Goth recruit. In addition, my acceptance was enabled by the rapport I

developed with my first contact, Beth, who continues to fill me in on gossip and issues within the Goth community and to legitimate my presence at Goth events.

The third set of data for this article emerges from the daily musings, anecdotes, rants, debates, and "flame wars" (arguments) that take place on the Weblist, PVGoth (the PV is a reference to the geographical area). My six months of lurking (and some participation) on PVGoth yielded reams of data. At the time of my participation, PVGoth had approximately 80 members collectively posting up to 150 messages a day. These postings gave me more insight into the ongoing construction and negotiation of Goth identities than I could glean from single interviews as the Web venue was a regular forum for most participants, who used it to engage issues both silly and serious. Moreover, as an intra-Goth space, PVGoth fosters conversations that might not take place between Goths and outsiders, or tourists. Although I did announce my presence on the list, my participation did not seem to interrupt the flow of exchanges.

### **GOTH WOMEN'S SEXUAL AGENCY: "SO FULL OF MYSELF AS A CHICK"**

The Goth women in this study present themselves as agentic, independent women in control of their personal lives and their social spaces. PVGoth is replete with such assertions: "I'm so full of myself as a chick in general that I don't want people talking to me whose sole purpose is to stick their dick in my cooter"; "I'm not interested in making someone's life more exciting when they haven't done anything on their own. I'm not a novelty item"; and "Treat me like a person first, and then I might start flirting with you."

Interviews with women root their interpersonal independence in the sexual norms of the local Goth scene. Siobhan describes the "open sexuality" of the Goth scene as "liberating," while for Rory, the scene is a space in which she can be "predatory and female." And for Lily, it engenders the "ability to insist on safer sex." Consistent across these accounts is a notion both of Goth women as strong and independent and of the Goth scene as supportive of women's sexual power. Honeyblossom, one of the most consciously political women in my sample, claims, "From what I've seen, most Goth women are feminists—tends to strongly inform their relationships." In her generalized attribution of feminism to Goth women, she, like those quoted on PVGoth and my other interviewees, locates feminism clearly within the realm of the interpersonal.

These claims are further developed in discussions of two aspects of the Goth scene: The rule to respect spatial boundaries and the freedom "for women to dress sexy." These discussions, elaborated below, elucidate the contradictions in these women's claims to independence and thus point to some of the possibilities and limits of sexual agency as a platform for women's emancipation.



**SPATIAL BOUNDARIES: "I REALLY, REALLY  
LIKED IT THAT NOBODY GRABBED MY BUTT"**

In a formulation that appears contradictory, Goths present rules as the basis for women's sexual freedom. Rules, in these explanations, serve to reign in predatory men and thus create conditions of greater sexual freedom for women. Perhaps the preeminent Goth social rule is the mandate to respect individual spatial boundaries. People who violate this rule are, by all accounts, shunned: "The rules are that strong that if you break them, you're ostracized" (Honeyblossom). While this phenomenon is in many ways gender neutral, the Goth women and men I interviewed frequently invoked it as a particular benefit to women. Goths presented the rule about spatial boundaries as a fundamental departure from outside norms about heterosexual interactions, one that provides women with the freedom to dress more provocatively and to exercise more control over their sexuality. Alyssa connects these ideas: "If a guy dances closely to you, people will come down on him with a vengeance. They don't say, 'Oh, you wore a corset, what did you expect?'"

The spatial rules at the Haven are a big attraction to women. Many of the women I spoke with told me that the absence of unsolicited physical contact pulled them back to the Haven even if they did not immediately feel at home. For example, Honeyblossom comments, "I really, really liked it that nobody tried to grab my butt." Similarly, a woman on PVGoth writes, "At a regular club, it's fairly common for a guy to come up and grind with random girls. . . . In fact that's one of the reasons I prefer goth clubs to regular clubs."

Goths repeatedly use "regular" clubs as a foil against which they articulate the cultural and moral superiority of the Haven's social norms. Importantly, they portray their club behavior as superior not because it protects women's sexual purity but because it allows women more control over heterosexual interactions. A woman on PVGoth posts, "I'm perfectly capable of letting people know I'm interested in them, and I don't need to be pursued persistently. If I like you, I'll let you know. I wonder if most women in our scene are like that?" Honeyblossom, who responded affirmatively to the previous woman's query, later told me that "[Goth] women are more comfortable initiating relationships. . . . I think there is a definite idea within Gothic culture that to be a powerful woman who is able to say yes and no to things is sexy."

Although some Goth men comment that the spatial rules add to their sense of personal comfort, they also construct them as a particular benefit to women. This suggestion, while not necessarily invalid, glosses over the specific benefits Goth men accrue from the combination of spatial boundaries and women's sexual agency. The norms of heterosexual interaction in the Haven do not desex the club but rather change the game rules, distributing the labor of the chase between men and women and reducing the risk of sexual rejection for men. Goth men can count on getting sex, but without the pressures (often lamented by mainstream men) of a unilateral chase.

### **DRESSING SEXY: "AN EMPOWERING STATEMENT OF FEMALE CHOICE"**

The clubbing outfits worn by most Goth women in this scene are highly sexualized. The typical Goth woman's club ensemble fetishizes the whore, combining corsets with short skirts and fishnet stockings. Goth women use the heterosexual etiquette of the Goth scene to frame their clothing choices in ways that sidestep conventional interpretations of such dress. For example, Beth insists that the rules in the Goth scene allow her "to dress in a way that's sexy without people assuming that [she is] there to get laid." A Goth man echoes this sentiment on PVGoth: "I think people unfamiliar with this scene assume that just because some woman is wearing a short vinyl dress and fish nets that she wants to get some from you."

Goth women, then, use the Haven rule about spatial boundaries to look and feel sexy without the risks that come with overtly sexualized self-presentations in other arenas. Most obviously, the Goth community spatial norms reduce the incidences of unsolicited physical contact, making sexy self-presentations a physically safer option for women than in mainstream clubs or other contexts.<sup>1</sup> But in a questionable conceptual move, Goth women interpret the absence (or invisibility) of sexual assault as the absence of sexual objectification. This interpretation allows them to position themselves as the ones in control of their own sexuality. In Dallas's words, the Goth woman is not "objectified unless that's what [she] wants." At the same time, however, this construction plays off of the culturally hegemonic Madonna-whore dichotomy by allowing Goth women to see themselves as sexually appealing but not easy.

The Goth women's strategy negotiates the feminist dilemma of pleasure and oppression. The ability to participate in sexy self-presentations is pleasurable. For many Goth women, the Haven is an unusual arena in that it validates their particular expressions of sexiness. Many of these women may not be able to access sexual attractiveness in conventional contexts where sexy femininity is defined according to narrow beauty standards that emphasize thin, disciplined bodies. At the Haven, even women with larger bodies wear revealing ensembles involving, for example, the aforementioned corsets and short skirts. This freedom was pointed out to me repeatedly and was quickly confirmed by a cursory appraisal of the Haven crowd. Zoe says, "It's also true that anyone can go and feel sexy," presenting the Haven as a space in which women of all shapes and sizes are sexually validated.

Moreover, as Lily points out, the Goth subculture encourages dramatic interpretations of femininity, adding both to the sense of play and to the ability of a wider range of women to participate. Lily explains that she was not successful in the social context of the high school dance because she did not know how to do "stereotypically girly," but at the Haven, she "can always do over-the-top girly." Goth women (and some men) often accessorize their outfits with butterfly wings or sparkly crowns, dark or glittery makeup, velvet capes, or bondage gear (e.g., dog collars and leashes), creating some visual variations in the typical outfit I previously described.

These ensembles, which fly in the face of popular cultural entreaties to subtle displays of feminine sexuality (e.g., “natural” makeup), expose the performative aspects of femininity. Their adoption by a number of Goth men adds to the sense of gender as play. For example, Greg, laughing because he spends more time applying makeup than his girlfriend does, comments, “It’s hard enough finding clothes for men that are interesting. I am not going to limit myself to men’s clothes. It’s fun.” And Crow says, “Because you can be an individual, some of the things—rules—aren’t there. I own skirts, girls’ tank tops. I like women’s clothing better.” Unlike in other contexts, these young men’s use of feminine accoutrements does not signal a rejection of heterosexuality. Rather, it is heterosexually validated in the context of the Haven where women report their attraction to androgynous men and to men in women’s clothing. “Men in skirts are yummy,” posts one Goth woman.

These experiments in self-presentation imply an ongoing parody of conventional heterosexual aesthetic rules. Goths suggest that the process of experimenting with femininity is an open one: Anyone, woman or man, can participate. This suggestion is tied to the idea of creative individuality (“because you can be an individual”): Sexy femininity is thus a choice. This logic is occasionally made explicit, as in the following woman’s post about corsets:

I believe that in the gothic subculture, this old symbol of female restriction has been turned into an empowering one. . . . Not only does the voluptuous figure it projects rebel against many modern standards of beauty, but many women embrace it *because* it emphasizes the sexual power that many goth women start to become acutely aware of. In addition, by taking a symbol of restriction and making a *self-conscious* decision to wear it, it becomes an empowering statement of female *choice*.

This statement, complicated on many levels, elides any compulsion to take part in the feminine performance. As social constructionists have long noted, all femininity is performance, but performing femininity is not a free choice, as a biologically sexed woman’s decision not to perform femininity is socially stigmatized (Butler 1990; Lorber 1994). In the context of the Haven, most women and a minority of men seem to participate in the performance of sexual femininity. In my repeated visits to the Haven, I saw very few women (if any) who abstained from this performance—an observation that Beth later confirmed. Thus, while Goth women may interpret their sexy apparel as “an empowering statement of female choice,” women in the Haven are almost universally mandated to perform a sexualized femininity.

The pervasiveness of women’s sexualized feminine presentations indicates that rather than being a free choice, this is the expected model for women’s ensembles, at least within the club. Goth women’s investment in their sexual attractiveness is further suggested by PVGoth comments indicating that their appeal extends outside of the Goth scene. A woman, for example, responds to a hypothetical “regular” man: “I know that goth girls seem mysterious and special, and like they must know

some three million sexual tricks, but in reality, they are no different than regular girls only they will have much less in common with you."

And despite the repeated disconnection of sexy dress from sexual behavior, the Haven is clearly an arena of sexual activity. In contradiction to most of the Goth narratives, Rory claims that one of the things she "really enjoyed" about the Haven when she began going was "the fresh meat sensation—everybody tries to sleep with you. . . . I ended up sleeping with, fooling around with, and dating a number of people, all of whom picked me up at Haven." As Rory's account suggests, the Haven, like many clubs, is used as a venue for arranging sexual encounters. While this aspect of the scene was downplayed in most of my interviews, it emerged frequently in PVGoth posts, especially in Wednesday morning "Haven reviews," in which people would report on whom they kissed, flirted with, or observed the night before.

Goths value the Haven because it allows them to play with self-presentations, validates sexual experimentation, and provides an arena for sexual interactions. Goths, especially Goth women, present these possibilities as liberating and enjoyable. But underlying these freedoms and choices is the unspoken (and perhaps unseen) absence of choice. While Goth women may enjoy sexual dress and sexual play, their claim to Goth membership depends on their participation. In Zoe's words, "as long as you dress sexy [you'll fit in]." And in Rory's, "if there is such a thing as a Goth is supposed to be, a Goth is supposed to be sexually open."

Moreover, sporadic evidence that the Goth gaze is not always so friendly peeks through. For example, during my visits to the Haven, I was occasionally advised by women to avoid certain guys with "sketchy" reputations. Likewise, when Beth arranged an interview with a Goth man for me, she warned me not to "hook up with him." The man apparently was willing to participate in the interview only if I were "cute and available." The "loser dance" (described to me independently by Beth, Zoe, and Chad), in which women use a series of gestures to signal their discomfort with an overly aggressive male dance partner to their friends, who then intervene, also indicates an awareness among Goth women that Goth men may not always respect their sexual space.

In addition, the Goth gaze may not always be supportive of the appropriation of sexy self-presentations by all women. One woman self-disparagingly confesses on PVGoth,

I've been known to be sitting on a cozy little chair at haven and think to myself (or even whisper to a nearby friend) about a passerby "omigod even if I were half her size I would NEVER try to squeeze my ass into something like that, how embarrassing!"

And Zoe admits, "Some women wear very little—large women. I feel two ways. I think it's good that they can feel sexy but think they'd look so much more attractive if they wore something else." Moreover, a number of women (and one man, Hunter) mentioned a few women who made a habit of traversing the Haven naked. While

Hunter suggested that this behavior was not appropriate outside of a strip club, the women told me that many of the men complained because the naked women were not attractive. Thus, despite contentions that women are not objectified or limited by mainstream beauty standards, Goth women are objects of the critical gazes of both men and women.

Goth women are aware of these ambiguities. Women and a few men occasionally use the Web group venue to engage feminist debates about beauty. For example, PVGoth hosted an ongoing conversation about women's breasts and whether it is ever appropriate to look at them. While participants did not reach a clear consensus on the issue, many expressed the view that when women wear tight or low-cut tops to the Haven, they invite outsiders to look at them. This debate reveals the complexities of objectification, as many women suggested a distinction between possessive ogling and appreciation. One woman wrote,

I dress for myself, whether that means a short vinyl dress or army pants and a big t-shirt. When it comes to people commenting on my appearance, I have to admit that their attitude and intent are much more likely to determine how I feel about their comments. . . . I believe it's called "objectification."

In cases such as this one, Goth women use the framework of the Haven as a woman-friendly space to reinterpret behaviors that they might see as sleazy in other arenas. This kind of reinterpretation is one strategy for reconciling the pleasure these Goth women take in sexual attention with their desire to be treated equally as women.

These Goth women's sexual strategies are often successful, even if limited. Negotiating the constricted space between pleasure and oppression, they assert themselves as sexual agents. Underlying the assertion of sexual agency, however, are suggestions that heterosexual relations are much more complicated than the scene's master gender narrative claims. For most of these Goth women, both the master narrative of empowerment and the undercurrents of persistent inequality are probably true at different points in time. As Barton (2002) noted in her study of erotic dancers, what is sexually empowering in the short run may not be empowering in the long term. For the women in this study, this trajectory seems likely because their strategy denudes sexuality from other components of gender inequality, including romantic hetero relations.

### **SEXUALITY AND ROMANCE: "IT'S NOT ABOUT SEX, IT'S ABOUT LOVE"**

This Goth community's construction of itself as proactively sexual is complicated by the continued reliance on, and even the reproduction of, an ideology of romance. These Goths present free sexuality as an avenue to achieving emotional sophistication. In their attempts to legitimize their sexual experimentation, they reinvest romance with moral and emotional importance without questioning

women's special responsibility for emotional intimacy. By positioning romantic relations as a preeminent personal goal, this strategy undermines the benefits of women's sexual agency.

For many Goth women, gender discrepancies increase when they enter romantic relationships. The predominantly heterosexual relationships within the Goth community often restrict women's sexual freedoms but not men's. Three aspects of the scene's culture support these double standards, which persist despite explicit support for women's sexual agency. First, tolerance for sexual experimentation provides the illusion of progressive gender relations: The equation of queerness with gender play and the practice of mild gender experiments on the part of (some) men create a sense of de facto gender egalitarianism. Similarly, the tolerance for (in fact, the assumption of) women's bisexuality adds to the sense of gender progress. Second, in the Goth scene (and elsewhere), women's bisexuality is frequently (1) used to excuse and obfuscate inequality in heterosexual relationships (both individually and collectively) and (2) harnessed to serve men's fantasies. Third, these cultural conditions occur in an environment in which the putative separation of romance from sexuality leaves romance unrecognized as an arena of gender inequity. Other nonsexual aspects of gender inequality are unexamined. By emphasizing sexuality as *the* strategy for women's emancipation, these Goths maintain the importance of successful intimacy for women's identities.

Active sexuality, as I have discussed, is important to these Goths' individual and collective identities. They actively attempt to break down assumptions about who has sex with whom and what that sex entails. In embracing sexual diversity and nonmonogamy, Goths divorce sexuality from romance, claiming the validity of sexual activity without emotional connection. The uneasiness of this separation, however, emerges in more specific discussions of sexual practices within the Goth community. In particular, descriptions of polyamory relocate free sexuality within a paradigm of relational intimacy.

"Polyamory,"<sup>2</sup> which means more than one love, embraces romantic intimacy but rejects sexual exclusivity. According to the polyamory Web site (alt.poly) that many Goths visit regularly, polyamorous relationships can take on a number of forms. For example, each member of a couple may engage in subsidiary sexual and/or emotional relationships with other people or with the same person. Or a polyamorous person may engage in several equally privileged sexual/emotional relationships. Or three or more people may be simultaneously involved.

While the permutations seem endless, they are held together by central relationship ideals of emotional and physical responsibility, honesty, communication, and trustworthiness, which in turn structure a moral differentiation between polyamory and sleeping around. These Goths, polyamorous or not, emphasize the moral dimensions of "real" polyamory, describing it as a lifestyle based in love. "In its purest form, it's not about sex, it's about love," Jeff explains. And Lily says, "I don't think it's impossible to be in love with more than one person at a time romantically." These descriptions routinely level contempt at people who, in Beth's words, "use [the label] as an excuse to sleep around." She adds, drawing a boundary around her

own practice of polyamory, "I don't want to be associated with people who I think are irresponsible—whether it be emotionally irresponsible or not using protection." In these claims, Goths suggest that sexuality is a tool they use to rebuild genuine emotional commitment.

Polyamorous discourse thus reinvigorates the importance of emotional intimacy to relationships. For the Goth woman, these relationship values and their assumed moral superiority mitigate her presentation of herself as sexually free, allowing her to play both sides of the Madonna-whore card. At once, she is sexually experimental and emotionally responsible. She is thus able to expand her sexual options without jeopardizing her position as a good woman. Rory raises these issues in her self-described (un)"popular" critique of the use of the "poly" label:

My experience is it [the poly label] is used to imply that everyone you sleep with you're having a relationship with. People use it who can't handle the label of promiscuity. No matter how open minded or free people say they are, there still needs to be an emotional justification behind the sex.

The values attributed to polyamory may be desirable to many Goth women for other reasons as well. By emphasizing trust and communication, proponents of polyamory privilege relationship styles commonly seen as more important to women. "There truly needs to be openness and respect between all people," Crow comments. Similarly, both Lily and Greg attribute the success of their (separate) polyamorous relationships to "honest[y]" and "communication." Especially in the context of polyamorous relationships, honesty and trust necessitate ongoing negotiations between partners as well as "self-knowledge" (alt.poly) and "emotional literacy" (Beth's phrase). Thus, even if individual relationships do not actually live up to these ideals, the predominance of this discourse may be useful to some women who are seeking to make men more emotionally accountable in relationships. In addition, as Goths themselves claim, the ideal of honesty about other sexual partners combined with strong pressure within the Goth community to practice safe sex may protect women physically from some of the risks associated with sexual behavior (e.g., HIV).

But while they may benefit women in some ways, these values are not inherently gender egalitarian. Evangelical Christians, for example, also favor words such as "responsibility" and "commitment," while tying such relationship ideals to male authority (Smith 2000). In her analysis of self-help books, Coontz (1997, 20) argued that "addressing communication problems alone ignores the differing social options and the patterned experiences of inequality that continually *re-create* such problems between men and women."

Discussions of power are noticeably absent from Goth accounts of polyamory: Relationship ideals and dilemmas are constructed as gender-neutral phenomena unlinked to "situated social power" (Wartenberg, cited in Coontz 1997, 18). Instead of locating their discussions of polyamory in a broader gender analysis, Goths are much more likely to assume that sexual diversity automatically confers gender

egalitarianism to the Goth scene. Rory and Honeyblossom argue, for example, that the "BDSM [bondage-discipline/sadomasochism] crossover" "gives people the idea that they can make up their own rules about power dynamics" (Honeyblossom's words). And Lily comments that "queerness" creates "different" "gender rules," implying that the context of "gender as play" obliterates the gender hierarchies that attach to conventional gender roles.

But when Goths talk about the dynamics of specific intimate relationships, the contention that relationship negotiations are gender neutral breaks apart. For example, both Beth and Zoe describe a polyamorous couple (Siobhan and Bill) in which (in Zoe's words) "he's dated lots of women but she's only dated one guy. She says it's never worked out but I think he's always protested it." Siobhan, no longer in the relationship, bitterly recalls, "[Bill] was jealous and insecure and didn't want me to date any other men. Women were fine as long as he got a piece of ass too."

While Siobhan condemns Bill as an individual, her situation adheres to a common pattern in the Goth community in which straight men are involved with bisexual women. In these relationships, as Zoe complains, "there seems to be a double standard—girls in heterosexual relationships can date other women but not other men." The intersection of women's bisexuality with polyamory in these relationships begins to expose the ways in which the power dynamics of the romantic relationship are gendered, despite the discourse of open and egalitarian negotiation.

Zoe and Beth independently point to Sean and Lily's seven-year relationship as another example. Lily, however, explicitly denies that a double standard exists. Instead, she explains, "We each have our own set of rules. Mine are harder to put into words. His are based on binary gender rules." Her rules include discouraging Sean's involvement with girls who are "bad news . . . girls who are going to hurt him." But Beth tells me that over the years, Lily has frequently complained about individual women whom Sean has dated, indicating both that her "rule" is less binding than she portrays it to be and that their polyamorous negotiations are emotionally painful to her. This in turn suggests that Lily relies on a version of what Russell Hochschild (1989) called "family myths." Like the women in Russell Hochschild's study who convinced themselves that their objectively unequal splits of domestic labor were in fact equitable, Lily seems to have mentally reconstructed her relationship with Sean so that their imbalanced negotiations appear fair. Or at least that is the strategy she uses with me. In keeping with this portrayal, she adds, "It does get more complicated because I'm bisexual and he's not—we can't be just like 'I can see other girls, he can see other guys.'" Her bisexuality, then, allows the appearance of more equality than actually exists.

Sean and Lily's complicated situation is not unusual. More often than not, it seems, bisexual Goth women are involved with straight men. Indeed, while the community positions itself as queer friendly, and there is indeed diversity in sexual identities, the assumption, as Lily points out, "tend[s] to run toward women being bisexual and men being into women." Of my interviewees, for example, all but one woman claimed bisexuality (the one exception identified as lesbian) while none of the men did. Similarly, in a playful PVGoth survey that asked for sexual



identification, almost all the women indicated their attraction to both men and women while almost all of the men identified as straight (about half of the approximately 80 PVGoth members participated in the survey). Some of the women responded to questions about their sexual identity with playful rejoinders indicating a dominant understanding of bisexuality as fun rather than political: "Let's say I'm a people person"; "Sexual"; "I play with all the crayons in the box." Honeyblossom further suggests that bisexuality is not politicized in the Goth culture: "Especially in the Goth community, women don't have to answer to the queer community for being primarily involved with men if that's what they want because it's not really a big deal."

The depoliticization of female bisexuality provides cultural support for women's physical experimentation with other women but does not provide structural support for sustained intimate relationships between women. In the absence of a politicized community of women involved in lesbian relationships, it is easier for bisexual women to meet men, as Beth, Jenna, and Rory all lament. Consequently, Goth women's relationships with other women are frequently subsidiary to heterosexual relationships. While some Goth women do get involved in enduring relationships with other women, short-lived relationships are normative. Zoe comments,

I know a lot of bisexual girls who just date other girls for a week at a time. . . . Even for my own self, I tend to be in these really long relationships with men and barely ever date women.

And Beth notes that "permanent relationships are more likely to be heterosexual—bi girls with boyfriends go looking for girls."

The predominance of this arrangement has both benefits and drawbacks for women. The prevalence of women's bisexuality creates an atmosphere in which women who might otherwise practice strict heterosexuality are able to experiment sexually with other women. Moreover, some women (both in and out of the Goth scene) are able to use bisexuality to traverse the boundaries of monogamy, as Zoe points out:

I've been in relationships with men who didn't care if I saw other women but I felt like he didn't perceive women as a threat. . . . I can still fall in love with a woman . . . felt like he didn't take it seriously but I took advantage of it.

Women like Zoe are able to maintain the advantages of a central heterosexual relationship while also engaging in sexual play outside the relationship.

Bisexuality also enhances the women's sexual allure. The idea of women's being sexually involved with each other is a turn-on to many heterosexual men, as the following quote indicates: "You just hit on the number one reason 'normals' go after goth chicks . . . and because a lot of them assume we're bisexual and will screw another chick while they look on" (PVGoth). Within the Goth scene, Siobhan tells

me, "It's sexy for women to be bisexual." And Honeyblossom notes, "It's definitely an 'in' thing to be young and bi and poly and friendly—to be available." Not only are bisexual women understood to be sexually experimental by definition; they are also still heterosexually available, both in terms of their potential sexual behavior and in their physical self-presentations.

But, as Zoe's earlier quote makes clear, while individual women may be able to use bisexuality to push against the constraints of feminine sexuality, this strategy is fragile precisely because it uses the terms of gender hierarchy to garner some sexual space. The predominant construction of bisexuality "that doesn't perceive other women as a threat" is predicated on a sexual double standard that defines sex between women as less real. This construction is then turned into reality by the structures that support heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, the eroticization of women's bisexuality (at least between "properly" feminine women) heterosexualizes it by turning it into a performance or a fantasy for men and thereby devaluing the women's own sexual pleasure. Not unique to the Goth scene, this dual use of bisexuality demonstrates the ways in which seeming gender progress can be harnessed to serve traditional sex/gender hierarchies.

Moreover, in polyamorous relationships, women's bisexuality may be used to circumscribe women's sexuality, as in Lily and Sean's case. While Sean's participation in a central committed relationship does not require him to delimit his chosen field of sexual eligibles, Lily's participation requires her to cut hers in half. Her bisexuality is used as the justification for this imbalance. Her ability to sexually engage other women makes it seem like she is gaining something and thus obfuscates the inequity of the arrangement by suggesting that her sexual freedom is equivalent to Sean's.

But it is not sexuality that underpins Lily's relative disempowerment; it is her romantic commitment to Sean. Because of her belief in the enduring love of that relationship, Lily does the emotion work necessary to allow her to stay in it. The pervasiveness of conventional relationship ideals is further evidenced by their on-again/off-again discussions of marriage and by Lily's confession that she engages in fewer and fewer outside relationships at all. Further indicating that monogamous sexuality and love have not been so successfully unpinned after all, Rory, Zoe, and Siobhan, all previously polyamorous, told me that they were currently monogamous because they did not want to hurt their boyfriends. And the woman and man with whom Beth once had a triangular relationship (all three participants were romantically and sexually involved with each other) have recently sealed their monogamy with marriage. In all of these examples, the promise of love triumphs over the freedom and choice of Goth sexual experimentation.

The preeminence of romance in this Goth scene emerges out of contradictions in the Goths' sexual strategies. On one hand, these Goths attempt to release sexuality from the hold of heterosexual monogamy. And they are partially successful: Both women and men are able to engage in proactive and experimental sexual behavior with a range of sexual partners in and out of relationships. But when this experimentation takes the form of polyamory, as it frequently does, these Goths reconnect

sex and romance by arguing that they are engaging in multiple loves rather than in free sex. This discursive strategy cloaks an unconventional practice in conventional morality and thus mitigates some of the potential costs of sexual experimentation. At the same time, it elevates the importance of romance, making it central to their moral selves. And while they consistently question gendered sexual double standards, they do not question women's unequal responsibility for making romance work. The importance of love as the discursive justification for polyamory leaves intact, and possibly increases, the need for women to invest in emotional labor within relationships while women's relative sexual freedoms mask the inequities in heterosexual relationships.

### CONCLUSION

The local Goth subculture at the heart of this study, and its members' sexual negotiations, provide a case study of the relationships between sexual attitudes, sexual behavior, and gender egalitarianism. The victories and limitations of the Goth women's struggle provide insight into the role of sexuality in the quest to create gender egalitarian spaces. The active negotiation of sexual roles by the Goths in this study show that it is possible for women to create a space in which they are able to access sexuality on more gender-egalitarian terms even while they encounter stumbling blocks to full sexual autonomy. Goth women's attempts to balance gender equality on a platform of sexual agency are not successful, however. Intervention in the arena of sexuality does not propel a reconfiguration of other gendered negotiations.

Perceived as freaks by outsiders, Goths create an insulated space for their community in which they can experiment with behaviors that are stigmatized in the mainstream culture. The sexual haven created by the Goths in my study allows Goth women to engage in proactive sexual behavior without the "slut" label. Goth women experience their sexuality as personally empowering: It provides them with a sense of control over their bodies, with the right to feel and act on desire and with external validation of their expressions of sexiness. For women struggling to walk the narrow sexual line mandated by the mainstream culture, these gains should not be understated. They are mitigated, however, by the persistence of sociocultural ideas that position men as sexual consumers/owners. As feminists have argued about the sexual revolution, simply increasing women's right to enjoy sex does not undo the basic heterosexual relationship that confers men with sociocultural power. Indeed, in the absence of other changes, women's sexual freedom benefits men more than it does women by providing men with greater sexual access to women without altering heterosexual power arrangements.

Goth women hope that by transforming the terms of sexuality, they can also transform sexism. But even though they do enact significant transformations in the

internal sexual culture of their scene, they do not significantly alter gendered power. First, centering gender change on sexuality only partially challenges interpersonal inequalities between men and women. The relative escape from sexual double standards does not necessitate an accompanying escape from heterosexual, monogamous romance. Even when sexuality and romance are sometimes uncoupled, the meanings attached to relationships within this Goth scene privilege successful romantic ties as symbols of moral and emotional development, maintaining women's sociocultural reliance (for personal meaning, for self-esteem, and even for justification of their sexual behaviors) on the sexual relationships they establish.<sup>3</sup> This reliance, in turn, reproduces their disempowerment within those relationships by undercutting their ability to demand men's accountability for sexism in intimate relationships. As Stompler and Padavic (1997) found in their study of women in fraternity little sister organizations, a central focus on "getting a man" impedes women's ability to enact forms of resistance. Thus, when sexuality is the central emancipatory tool, its continued entanglement with heterosexual romance may even be counterproductive—centering, rather than decentering, sexuality and romance in women's lives.

Second, the focus on sexuality leaves systemic inequality unchallenged. Focusing on sexuality as the arena of change deflects conversations from other areas where gendered power is being enacted. But even more than simply leaving other aspects of sexism undiscussed, the focus on sexuality may also undermine the possibility of enacting systemic change. The psychological investment in the equation of sexual emancipation with feminism too easily allows for the idea that substantial change is already occurring. Interpreting transformed sexuality as inherently feminist allows participants to feel morally and politically superior to people who have not transformed their sexuality and allows participants to justify their own lifestyles on political and moral grounds. The psychological benefit of identifying individually and collectively as gender progressive is often as seductive as the sexual gains themselves and can thus be used to stifle internal or external challenges to sexism. In effect, participants can use their involvement in transformed sexual relations as evidence of their *de facto* feminism, shielding themselves and their community from further challenges to the configuration of gendered power.

## NOTES

1. This discussion is not meant to imply that women's dress is responsible for sexual assault in other arenas.

2. In the following discussion, I am referring specifically to how polyamory is manifested in this Goth scene, not to its practice in the broader polyamorous community.

3. I want to further suggest that their sexual strategies are undermined by their efforts to maintain their race and class standing, an argument that I develop elsewhere.

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