

# **PLEASURE and DANGER: exploring female sexuality**

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**Edited by  
Carole S. Vance**



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# Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality

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Carole S. Vance

The tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful one in women's lives. Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.

The juxtaposition of pleasure and danger has engaged the attention of feminist theorists and activists in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, just as it has been an ongoing subject in the lives of individual women who must weigh the pleasures of sexuality against its cost in their daily calculations, choices, and acts. For some, the dangers of sexuality – violence, brutality, and coercion, in the form of rape, forcible incest, and exploitation, as well as everyday cruelty and humiliation – make the pleasures pale by comparison. For others, the positive possibilities of sexuality – explorations of the body, curiosity, intimacy, sensuality, adventure, excitement, human connection, basking in the infantile and non-rational – are not only worthwhile but provide sustaining energy. Nor are these positions fixed, since a woman might choose one perspective or the other at different points in her life in response to external and internal events.

Since the nineteenth century, feminist theorists have disagreed on how to improve women's sexual situation and, even more basically, on what women want sexually. Some have been broadly protectionist, attempting to secure some measure of safety from male lust and aggression, assuming either that women's sexuality is intrinsically muted or at least that it cannot flower until greater safety is established. Others, more often in the twentieth century than the nineteenth, have been expansionist and exploratory, believing that women could venture to be sexual in more visible and daring ways, especially as material changes which favored women's autonomy in general (wage labor, urbanization, contraception, and abortion) also supported sexual

autonomy.<sup>1</sup> Throughout one hundred years of intermittent but intense dialogue among theorists, organizers, and activists run a host of questions to which we do not fully know the answers, despite the progress we have made:

- Are male and female sexual natures essentially different, or the product of specific historical and cultural conditions?
- Has women's sexuality been muted by repression, or is it wholly different from men's?
- Does the source of sexual danger to women lie in an intrinsically aggressive or violent male nature, or in the patriarchal conditions that socialize male sexuality to aggression and female sexuality to compliance and submission?
- How can male sexual violence be reduced or eliminated?
- How does the procreative possibility of sex enter into women's experience of sexuality?
- Should feminism be promoting maximum or minimum differentiation in the sexual sphere, and what shape should either vision take?

Behind these questions are changes in material conditions and social organization wrought by capitalist transformations and the women's movement itself, most notably in the weakening of the traditional bargain women were forced to make with men: if women were "good" (sexually circumspect), men would protect them; if they were not, men could violate and punish them. As parties to this system, "good" women had an interest in restraining male sexual impulses, a source of danger to women, as well as their own sexuality which might incite men to act. Nineteenth-century feminists elaborated asexuality as an option for respectable women, using female passionlessness and male sexual restraint to challenge male sexual prerogatives. The second wave of feminism demanded and won increased sexual autonomy for women and decreasing male "protection," still within a patriarchal framework. Amid this flux, many women have come to feel more visible and sexually vulnerable. Despite the breakdown in the old bargain, which placed sexual safety and sexual freedom in opposition, women's fear of reprisal and punishment for sexual activity has not abated.

This sense of vulnerability has been played on by the Right. The conservative attack on feminist gains has taken the form of a moral crusade. In its campaign against the evils of abortion, lesbian and gay rights, contraceptive education and services, and women's economic independence, the Right is attempting to reinstate traditional sexual arrangements and the formerly

inexorable link between reproduction and sexuality. In this, the Right offers a comprehensive plan for sexual practice which resonates in part with women's apprehension about immorality and sexual danger.<sup>2</sup> To respond convincingly as feminists, we cannot abandon our radical insights into sexual theory and practice. Instead, we must deepen and expand them, so that more women are encouraged to identify and act in their sexual self-interest.

The papers, poems, and images collected in this book are a move in this direction. They originated at the Scholar and the Feminist IX conference, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," held at Barnard College on April 24, 1982. The conference attempted to explore the ambiguous and complex relationship between sexual pleasure and danger in women's lives and in feminist theory. The intent of conference planners was not to weaken the critique of danger. Rather, we wished to expand the analysis of pleasure, and to draw on women's energy to create a movement that speaks as powerfully in favor of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger. As feminists, we need to draw on women's experience of pleasure in imagining the textures and contours that would unfurl and proliferate in a safer space. What we want is not a mystery, not a blank. The clues to it are found in our daily experience already.

One clue lies in an obvious form of danger – the sexual violence committed by men against women: rape, sexual harassment, incest. As women began to speak out, it became clear that these apparently taboo acts were far from uncommon, and their damage to women was great. Beyond the actual physical or psychological harm done to victims of sexual violence, the threat of sexual attack served as a powerful reminder of male privilege, constraining women's movement and behavior. The cultural mythology surrounding sexual violence provided a unique and powerful route for it to work its way into the heart of female desire. A rag-bag of myths and folk knowledge that the contemporary feminist movement opposed depicted male lust as intrinsic, uncontrollable, and easily aroused by any show of female sexuality and desire. The main features of this ideology have been roundly critiqued by feminists, primarily for blaming the female victim while letting men off the hook, but its corollaries are equally pernicious. If female sexual desire triggers male attack, it cannot be freely or spontaneously shown, either in public or in private.

Instead, female desire should be restricted to zones protected and privileged in the culture: traditional marriage and the nuclear family. Although the boundaries of the safe zone have been somewhat renegotiated since the nineteenth century to include relatively respectable forms of unmarried and non-procreative

heterosexuality, gross and public departures from "good" woman status, such as lesbianism, promiscuity, or non-traditional heterosexuality, still invite – and are thought to justify – violation.

Many women think that this ideology is unjust, illogical, and misogynous. Nevertheless, they believe it is widespread and potent, although to what degree can never be known with certainty. Better safe than sorry is still a dominant caution. Women – socialized by mothers to keep their dresses down, their pants up, and their bodies away from strangers – come to experience their own sexual impulses as dangerous, causing them to venture outside the protected sphere. Sexual abandon and impulsiveness acquire a high price, since women must think not only about the consequences of their sexual actions for themselves, but also about the consequences for men, whose sexual "natures" are supposedly lustful, aggressive, and unpredictable. Through a culturally dictated chain of reasoning, women become the moral custodians of male behavior, which they are perceived as instigating and eliciting. Women inherit a substantial task: the management of their own sexual desire and its public expression. Self-control and watchfulness become major and necessary female virtues. As a result, female desire is suspect from its first tingle, questionable until proven safe, and frequently too expensive when evaluated within the larger cultural framework which poses the question: is it really worth it? When unwanted pregnancy, street harassment, stigma, unemployment, queer-bashing, rape, and arrest are arrayed on the side of caution and inaction, passion often doesn't have a chance.

The second wave of feminism mounted a major critique of male sexual violence, indicting the complicity of state institutions and the cultural ideologies that justify it. However, feminism is newly beginning to appreciate the intra-psychic effects of a gender system that places pleasure and safety in opposition for women. Sexual constriction, invisibility, timidity, and uncuriosity are less the signs of an intrinsic and specific female sexual nature and more the signs of thoroughgoing damage. The resulting polarization of male and female sexuality is a likely product of the prevailing gender system, which is used to justify women's need for a restricted, but supposedly safe space and highly controlled sexual expression. The horrific effects of gender inequality may include not only brute violence, but the internalized control of women's impulses, poisoning desire at its very root with self-doubt and anxiety. The subtle connection between how patriarchy interferes with female desire and how women experience their own passion as dangerous is emerging as a critical issue to be explored.

The threat of male violence is, however, not the only source of

sexual danger. Sexuality activates a host of intra-psychic anxieties: fear of merging with another, the blurring of body boundaries and the sense of self that occurs in the tangle of parts and sensations, with attendant fears of dissolution and self-annihilation. In sex, people experience earlier substrates, irrational connections, infantile memories, and a range of rich sensations.<sup>3</sup> We fear dependency and possible loss of control, as well as our own greedy aggression, our wishes to incorporate body parts, even entire persons. Having been told that pleasure threatens civilization, we wonder: what if there is no end to desire?

Sexuality also raises the fear of competition, as we recognize our own wishes to compete for attention and for loved objects. Whether women are lesbian or heterosexual, the competitors are other women, an unsisterly prospect. Finally, to the extent that women's experience of desire signals the giving up of vigilance and control – the responsibility of a proper woman – it causes profound unease about violating the bounds of traditional femininity.<sup>4</sup> Transgressing gender raises the specter of separation from other women – both the mother and literal and metaphorical sisters – leaving one isolated and vulnerable to attack. These subterranean pulls on women are no less powerful by remaining unnamed. Our unspoken fears are added to the sum of sexual terror. Without a better language to excavate and delineate these other sources of danger, everything is attributed to men, thereby inflating male power and impoverishing ourselves. Moreover, we leave the irrationality and volatility of sex open to manipulation by others, easily mobilized in campaigns against sexual deviance, degeneration, and pollution.

The hallmark of sexuality is its complexity: its multiple meanings, sensations, and connections. It is all too easy to cast sexual experience as either wholly pleasurable or dangerous; our culture encourages us to do so. Women are encouraged to assent that all male sexuality done to them is pleasurable and liberatory: women really enjoy being raped but can't admit it, and the often horrid cartoons in *Hustler* are just a lighthearted joke. In a counter-move, the feminist critique emphasized the ubiquity of sexual danger and humiliation in a patriarchal surround. Initially useful as an ideological interruption, this critique now shares the same undialectical and simplistic focus as its opposition. Women's actual sexual experience is more complicated, more difficult to grasp, more unsettling. Just as agreeing not to mention danger requires that one's sexual autobiography be recast, agreeing not to speak about pleasure requires a similar dishonest alchemy, the transmutation of sexuality into unmitigated danger and unremitting victimization.

The truth is that the rich brew of our experience contains elements of pleasure and oppression, happiness and humiliation. Rather than regard this ambiguity as confusion or false consciousness, we should use it as a source-book to examine how women experience sexual desire, fantasy, and action. We need to sort out individually and together what the elements of our pleasure and displeasure are. What, for instance, is powerful, enlivening, interesting in our experience? Our task is to identify what is pleasurable and under what conditions, and to control experience so that it occurs more frequently. To begin, we need to know our sexual histories, which are surely greater than our own individual experience, surely more diverse than we know, both incredible and instructive. To learn these histories, we must speak about them to each other. And for speech to flourish, there must be tolerance for diversity and curiosity, which Joan Nestle calls "the respect that one life pays to another."<sup>5</sup> Without women's speech, we fall back on texts and myths, prescriptive and overgeneralized.

Even some feminist analysis runs the risk of overemphasizing sexual danger, following the lead of the larger culture. The anti-pornography movement in a sense restates the main premises of the old gender system: the dominant cultural ideology elaborates the threat of sexual danger, so the anti-pornography movement responds by pushing for sexual safety via the control of public expression of male sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Although this would seem in certain respects a decisive break with an oppressive system – sexual danger is being directly challenged – in other respects the focus continues unchanged in that sexual pleasure for women is still minimized and the exploration of women's pleasurable experience remains slight. Feminism has succeeded in making public previously unmentionable activities like rape and incest. But the anti-pornography movement often interprets this as an indicator of rising violence against women and a sign of backlash against feminism. The net effect has been to suggest that women are less sexually safe than ever and that discussions and explorations of pleasure are better deferred to a safer time.

Women are vulnerable to being shamed about sex, and the anti-pornography ideology makes new forms of shaming possible. Traditional objections that women's concern with sex is unimportant are restated in suggestions that sexuality is trivial, diversionary, or not political. If sexual desire is coded as male, women begin to wonder if they are really ever sexual. Do we distrust our passion, thinking it perhaps not our own, but the construction of patriarchal culture? Can women be sexual actors? Can we act on our own behalf? Or are we purely victims, whose

efforts must be directed at resisting male depredations in a patriarchal culture? Must our passion await expression for a safer time? When will that time come? Will any of us remember what her passion was? Does exceeding the bounds of femininity – passivity, helplessness, and victimization – make us deeply uncomfortable? Do we fear that if we act on our most deeply felt sexual passion that we will no longer be women? Do we wish, instead, to bind ourselves together into a sisterhood which seeks to curb male lust but does little to promote female pleasure? Sex is always guilty before proven innocent, an expensive undertaking considering the negative sanctions it easily evokes.

The overemphasis on danger runs the risk of making speech about sexual pleasure taboo. Feminists are easily intimidated by the charge that their own pleasure is selfish, as in political rhetoric which suggests that no woman is entitled to talk about sexual pleasure while any woman remains in danger – that is – never. Some also believe that sexuality is a privileged topic, important only to affluent groups, so to talk of it betrays bad manners and bad politics on the part of sexual betters toward the deprived, who reputedly are only interested in issues that are concrete, material, and life-saving, as if sexuality were not all of these. The result is that sexual pleasure in whatever form has become a great guilty secret among feminists.

Hiding pleasure and its sources in feminist discussion does not make the world safe for women, any more than women's acceding to the system of male protection made the world safe for them. When pleasure occupies a smaller and smaller public space and a more guilty private space, individuals do not become empowered; they are merely cut off from the source of their own strength and energy. If women increasingly view themselves entirely as victims through the lens of the oppressor and allow themselves to be viewed that way by others, they become enfeebled and miserable. The taboo on investigating pleasure led to an abstract sexual theory which bears little relationship to daily life. If theory is to have any valid relationship to experience, we need to acknowledge that sexuality is worth talking about seriously. We cannot create a body of knowledge that is true to women's lives, if sexual pleasure cannot be spoken about safely, honestly, and completely.

Much feminist work on sexuality starts from the premise that sex is a social construction, articulated at many points with the economic, social, and political structures of the material world. Sex is not simply a "natural" fact, as earlier, essentialist theories would suggest. Although sexuality, like all human cultural activity, is grounded in the body, the body's structure, physiology, and functioning do not directly or simply determine the configuration

or meaning of sexuality; were this so, we would expect to find great uniformity across the world's cultures. Yet the sexual diversity we see is startling: activities condemned in one society are encouraged in another, and ideas about what is attractive or erotic or sexually satisfying or even sexually possible vary a great deal.

Nor is the role of culture confined to choosing some sexual acts (by praise, encouragement, or reward) and rejecting others (by scorn, ridicule, or condemnation), as if selecting from a sexual buffet. The social construction of sexuality is far more thoroughgoing, encompassing the very way sex is conceptualized, defined, labeled, and described from time to time and from culture to culture.<sup>7</sup> Although we can name specific physical actions like anal sex, heterosexual intercourse, kissing, fellatio, or masturbation, it is clear that the social and personal meanings attached to each of these acts in terms of sexual identity and sexual community have varied historically. Without denying the body, we note that the body and its actions are understood according to prevailing codes of meaning. Recent work on the history of male homosexuality shows, for instance, that although sodomy occurred and was punished in earlier periods in Europe and America, it was viewed as the result of carnal lust to which any mortal could fall prey, not as an act committed by a particular type of individual, the "homosexual." The classification of sexual types awaited the late nineteenth century, when capitalism and urban development made it possible for individuals to exist beyond the sphere of the extended family as a productive and reproductive unit.<sup>8</sup> Historians have also traced the outlines of changing definitions of women's intimacy. In the nineteenth century, two women who shared the same household and bed were usually perceived as close friends; by the twentieth century, such women were increasingly viewed as lesbians.<sup>9</sup> Doubtless, modern forms of heterosexuality have a history to be written as well.<sup>10</sup>

One might expect that feminists would be especially receptive to a social construction approach to sexuality, since in many ways it is analogous to social construction theories about gender: that the body is the agent of human activity, but the body's configuration does not literally determine it. Scientific "knowledge" or folklore suggesting that the dominant cultural arrangements are the result of biology – and therefore intrinsic, eternal, and unchanging – are usually ideologies supporting prevailing power relations. Deeply felt personal identities – for example, masculinity/femininity or heterosexuality/homosexuality – are not private or solely the product of biology, but are created through the intersection of political, social, and economic forces, which

vary over time.

Yet social construction theory remains a radical view of sexuality which poses a range of unsettling questions for feminists and other thinkers brought up on an essentialist view of sexuality. What is the nature of the relationship between the arbitrariness of social construction and the immediacy of our bodily sensations and functions? Is sexuality not a unitary, ongoing phenomenon with an essential core, but something created differently at each time and place? If sexuality is not a transhistorical, transcultural essence whose manifestations are mildly shaped by cultural factors, must we then consider the possibility that desire is not intrinsic but itself constituted or constructed, and if so, by what mechanisms?

Social construction theory has run into some misguided interpretations. Some suggest that if sexuality is constructed at the cultural level, then it can be easily reconstructed or deconstructed at the social or personal level. Not necessarily. The cultural analogue is useful here, for although human cultures are arbitrary in that behavior is learned and not intrinsic, anthropologists do not believe that entire cultures can transform themselves overnight, or that individuals socialized in one cultural tradition can acculturate at whim. The mutability of sexuality in an individual lifetime is an interesting and important question, however. Clearly, there are examples of both persistence and fluidity in sexual desire: for example, individuals who "knew" they were gay at an early age and remained so despite aversion therapy and incarceration, and others who "become" gay or lesbian at different stages in the life cycle in a manner suggesting internal change, rather than belated expression of "repressed" desire. Although questions about fluidity of sexuality often focus on sexual orientation and object choice, there are many other areas where similar questions could be asked: fantasy, masturbation, or non-monogamy. The question of the stability and flexibility of sexual behavior within and across individuals remains intriguing and poorly understood.

The parallels between social constructionist approaches to gender (the cultural marking of biological sex) and sexuality (desire and erotic pleasure) make it possible to see that although both may be socially constructed, sexuality and gender are separate but overlapping domains or, as Gayle Rubin calls them, "vectors of oppression." Of particular interest is the articulation between specific features of each system, namely how the configurations of the sexual system bear on the experience of being female and, conversely, how the definitions of gender resonate with and are reflected in sexuality. Despite the many interrelationships of sexuality and gender, sexuality is not a

residual category, a subcategory of gender; nor are theories of gender fully adequate to account for sexuality.<sup>11</sup> The task is to describe and analyze how cultural connections are made between female bodies and what comes to be understood as "women" and "female sexuality."

Social construction, then, requires a more detailed investigation of how categories acquire meaning and change over time, how objects and acts become eroticized, how external symbols acquire internal, psychic meaning. If sexuality is constructed, what is the site of the construction? Recent work has attended not only to the larger social formations that organize sexuality – the political economy, religion, the educational system, the criminal code, public and mental health systems – but also to how these forces are mediated through "private" life: marriage, the family, child nurturing, the household, intimacy, and effect.

Information about sexuality comes from multiple sources, as well as from many disciplines. A survey of the literature reveals information, partial though it may be, on sexual behavior and acts, along with their physiological and biological dimensions; fantasy and inner, psychological experience; the public presentation of our sexual selves; visual images and representations available in the culture; sexual styles; the place of sexuality in the discourse of the political community to which we belong; sexual ideologies, both scientific and religious. Yet when we examine a specific group of women, we often find that a full range of information covering all these realms is not available. Nevertheless, rather than restrict our comments to the domains for which we have information, we often formulate large-scale generalizations, with varying degrees of plausibility. Unfortunately, one of the most interesting questions – the relationship between these sexual domains – are they consistent, or inconsistent? – can never be examined as long as data are lacking and, worse, we have a dulled sense of what is missing. These informational gaps have several consequences.

First, understudied groups are often victims of the most far-flung generalizations, spun on the basis of some lyric, poem, or piece of art. One cannot, for instance, assume to be knowledgeable about lesbianism in the twentieth century simply because one has read Colette's *The Pure and the Impure*. Second, it remains impossible to compare sexual domains among groups of women – to ask, for example, what is the content of fantasy for white, black, and Hispanic women? Third, attempts to gauge the overall situation of specific groups usually end up relying on not only incomplete but usually non-comparable domains: for example, images of women's sexuality in the oral literature of an

ethnic minority may be held up against Kinsey's data on the incidence of premarital sex among white, college-educated females in the 1950s. When we compare the sexual situation between and within groups of women, it is important to remember that no conclusions can be drawn by looking at only one layer of sexual information without considering the others.

The information we have – social science surveys, literary analyses, fiction, poetry, visual art, biomedical observations, biographies and autobiographies – raises serious questions of interpretation. None is the straightforward report about women's sexual reality that we wish, and sometimes imagine, we had. If sex is a cultural product, all the representations, descriptions, and depictions of that sexuality are too. Just as our own bodily experience is mediated through culture, so reports or descriptions of others' experience are mediated through cultural forms, conventions, and codes of meaning.<sup>12</sup> We understand more readily that visual representations – movies, paintings, even photographs – are not literal or realistic; they betray a style, an emphasis, a perspective, raising questions for the viewer about the relationship between what is depicted and what is. The presence of the artist destroys the illusion of objectivity. Scientific reports, fiction, diaries, letters, social science surveys, humanistic accounts are also, to varying degrees, cultural products. Even the most empirically oriented form requires a cultural frame of organization, a code of meaning, a language that classifies feelings and the body. Since the 1890s, for example, sex researchers' attempts to define female pleasure and sexual gratification have undergone dramatic shifts, from vague euphemisms about marital harmony to Masters and Johnson's measurement of the strength and number of vaginal contractions during orgasm. For the viewer or reader, the question remains the same: what is the relationship between what is written in the text or shown in the image, and what *is*? We are most aware of embedded assumptions when reading material from another time or place, which may appear incongruous or disjunctive. Yet we must admit that contemporary work by both men and women has embedded meanings too. These embedded assumptions are especially significant, because so much of the literature on female sexuality has been written by men, suggesting the need for critical reading.

Whether scientific, religious, or political, prescriptive texts that aim to tell people what to do or what is normal pose a number of questions. Are they a self-assured restatement of prevailing norms, safely read as literal indicators of behavior? Or are they anxious attempts to resocialize renegade readers to norms they are flouting? To what degree do prescriptive texts reach a mass

audience, and did they in the past, and with what effect? Historical examination of even the most seemingly objective “scientific” prescriptive material reveals that its messages have not been homogeneous and static, but have changed over time. These fluctuations are traceable to the emergence of different scientific groups; changes in theories about workable solutions to social problems; battles and competition for ideology, professional turf, patients, and money; and the rise and fall of particular scientific paradigms.

Similar questions can be raised about depictions of women’s sexuality in the dominant culture, both in the privileged forms of high culture and in popular culture. Although different in formal intent from the prescriptive text and so nominally differentiated from it, mainstream representations of sexuality may perform a similar educative or socializing function. Such representations are complex, to varying degrees both depicting and distorting actual behavior, as well as influencing it. Yet the material being analyzed – for example, popular fiction in women’s magazines, 1950s movies, or radio jingles – suggests that dominant culture is not cranked out by an unseen hand, but that each cultural product bears a relationship to a particular genre and its conventions, as well as to other objects of its kind, and to the creator’s purpose and intended audience. Thus, within the dominant culture, there is inconsistency, contradiction, and tension, especially in relation to social change, as well as uniformity and pattern.

How do we understand such popular sexual images and representations? Are they overt restatements of conservative ideology; conspiratorial attempts to prevent cultural change; efforts to smooth over cultural contradictions and tensions; or a mixed bag containing both interruptions as well as continuities? For example, the proliferation of information about clitoral orgasm and oral sex in contemporary women’s magazines and popular sex manuals can be read in a variety of ways. It can be seen as a liberating expansion beyond the bounds of procreative heterosexuality, enabling women to learn about and experience a type of pleasure not connected to reproduction or even to the penis. Male concern that their partners experience orgasm may signal the development of more egalitarian and reciprocal sexual standards. On the other hand, the anxious question, “Did you come?” may demarcate a new area of women’s behavior men are expected to master and control – female orgasm. In this light, the marital literature may be seen as an attempt to capture and contain the potentially radical implications of clitoral orgasm, which challenges both the form that heterosexual practice usually takes and the notion that heterosexuality is superior.

The dominant culture and its symbolic system reflect the class

arrangements of that society, and are not mirror reflections of ongoing social reality. The cultural assumptions of higher-status groups receive a privileged position, with lower status groups consigned to varying degrees of cultural invisibility. Mainstream culture is white, male, heterosexual, upper and middle class in its point of view and assumptions. Appearing in mainstream culture either rarely (literal invisibility) or inaccurately through caricature or other distortion, members of lower-status groups become culturally invisible. Dominant culture often does not reflect the lived social reality of subordinate groups, although these groups by necessity must be familiar with it. Members of dominant groups not only participate freely and comfortably in mainstream culture, which reflects their own world-view, but they are also allowed the conceit that lower-status groups share their assumptions and that other perspectives or points of view don't exist.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that non-dominant groups, to the extent that their social lives are different from those in the mainstream, have different sensibilities and consciousness which are expressed in a variety of cultural forms – lyrics and music, oral tradition, humor as well as in fiction and art. Because the printed word is often the enclave of dominant culture, used to enforce cultural invisibility, the voices of lower-status groups are relatively absent from dominant texts. But these groups have not been silent; they have created rival cultural and symbolic systems, requiring methods which tap oral tradition in order to describe them. Thus, the minimal appearance of black women in dominant cultural forms is no guide to the way women's sexuality was represented by black people to each other. Such an investigation requires examination of jokes, songs, and oral narratives, important as sources of information, socialization, and transmission of knowledge across generations within the black community.<sup>14</sup> Lesbian subcultures are similarly absent from the written record, although they vigorously responded to a partial and distorting depiction of lesbians in dominant culture, which found the acknowledgment of love between women at once ridiculous and threatening. Although mainstream culture has a vested interest in keeping alternative cultures out of the printed record and invisible, stigmatized groups also have their own motives for keeping their cultural products and conventions hidden: for self-protection, to prevent cooptation, and to create a safe cultural space, a world over which they have some control. The description of alternative cultures makes it possible to entertain important questions: How powerful and vigorous are alternative cultural forms regarding sexuality? What competition do they offer to dominant forms, or what contradictions do they mediate or resolve?

Another interesting issue is the way in which political and

social movements position sexuality in theory, discourse, and action. For participants in social movements, whether ethnic, racial, or religious, the conventions of sexual discourse may not mirror literal behavior. Nevertheless, they constitute an important arena in which topics are consigned to importance or oblivion. The nineteenth-century feminist discourse about women's sexuality and sexual reform, for instance, remained largely heterosexual and marital, despite evidence of women's actual experience with romantic female friendships that offered physical and emotional intensity. The public, political discussions did not introduce "lesbians" or "lesbianism" as named categories for women's choices and experiences. Such a historical contrast between lived experience and constructed social reality is obvious to feminists now, raising questions about what other unnamed realms lurk silently in our own discussions.

We also need to look at how sexual information, instruction, and experience are transmitted across and between generations. Our understanding of the development of sexuality in infancy and childhood is only beginning.<sup>15</sup> The family, obviously important for infants and children, may remain an important socializing site for adult sexuality as well. Large social shifts often appear as generational contrasts that are observable within families. The shift, for example, from the nineteenth-century pattern of separate spheres for the sexes and female passionlessness to the modern pattern of companionate marriage with a modicum of female sexual pleasure is reflected in generational contrasts between mothers and daughters. Although some age cohorts provide a sharp contrast between old and new, other transitional ones provide clues to how, through what processes, and at what cost large-scale social change moved through individual lives. The notion of sexual transformation and change occurring within an individual lifetime is a crucial one, because it forces us to give up the static picture of an unchanging sexual order depending on infant and child socialization that is impermeable and rigid. It suggests that childhood experience, though perhaps not totally mutable, may be later shaped in various directions, and raises questions about individual perception of and reactions to sexual change and the degree to which individuals feel that their sexual expression is an intrinsic given or a choice. Examples include "frigid" women who did not reach orgasm in heterosexual penetration during the 1950s who became merely "preorgasmic" by the 1960s or "multiply orgasmic" in the face of a modern technological advance, the vibrator; and women whose close and lifelong intimacy with other women might have caused them to be labeled celibates or spinsters who are now called, or call themselves, lesbians.

In examining these domains in which women's sexuality is described or represented – and these are only a few – the observer, interpreter, or scholar is striving to understand what the various representations mean – that is, what their relationship is to women's thought and experience at the time of their creation. To answer this question, the analyst applies an interpretive frame, through which meaning can be detected and inferred. Do we assume that all women share this interpretive frame? That it is universal? This assumption may be especially risky if there is a social disjunction between the observer and the observed, if the interpretive frame of mainstream culture is applied to invisible groups, or if the analysis concentrates on implicit meanings and deep structure written at the level of the unconscious. In each case, the assumption about the universality of sexual meaning obscures one of the other questions we should be asking: how does the audience perceive sexual representations? The assumption of a universal meaning is economical and efficient, but it may be mistaken.

If we want to study sexuality, we need more information about individual responses to symbol and image. We need to know what the viewer brings with her to make an interpretation: a cultural frame, resonances, connections, and personal experience. The question of context is important too, since viewers read symbols differently depending on the material they are embedded in and the relationship they have to other symbols, as well as individual interpretive frames which are somewhat idiosyncratic.

To assume that symbols have a unitary meaning, the one dominant culture assigns them, is to fail to investigate the individuals' experience and cognition of symbols, as well as individual ability to transform and manipulate symbols in a complex way which draws on play, creativity, humor, and intelligence. This assumption grants mainstream culture a hegemony it claims, but rarely achieves. To ignore the potential for variation is to inadvertently place women outside of culture except as passive recipients of official symbol systems. It continues to deny what mainstream culture has always tried to make invisible – the complex struggles of disenfranchised groups to grapple with oppression using symbolic, as well as economic and political, resistance. Mainstream symbols may be used to both reveal and mock dominant culture.

The symbolic transformations presented by some butch/femme couples as they manipulate gender symbols, for example, are stunning.<sup>16</sup> To the dominant, heterosexual culture, the butch/femme couple appears to be a pitiful imitation by inferiors, who mimic the semiotics of gender distinctions while violating

fundamental rules of gender: that women do not have access to women, do not take sexual initiative, and cannot be sexual without men. Lesbians, depending on their historical and political positioning, may interpret the butch/femme couple as presenting a defiant statement to dominant culture about female power, visibility, and resistance, a refusal to be invisible and conform, or as replicating heterosexual patterns for want of a more original model or for lack of feminist consciousness. The relevance of context and individual aptitude at cultural transformation and play points to the speed and subtlety with which symbolic slippage occurs, and calls for much more intensive attempts to describe and understand the history and meaning of sexual symbols to both actors and viewers.

It is no accident that recent feminist sexual controversies about pornography, S/M, and butch/femme all demonstrate a need for a more developed analysis of symbolic context and transformation, especially difficult in regard to visual material where our education, vocabulary, and sophistication are far less developed than in regard to literary texts. Our visual illiteracy renders the image overpowering. The emotion aroused by an image is easily attached to rhetorical arguments, overwhelming more subtle analysis and response, and the audience as well, by manipulative imagery, as in polemical slide shows mounted by Right to Life groups or some feminist anti-pornography groups. In each case, the shock induced by the image of a fetus in a bottle or a woman in chains is effectively used to propel viewers to the desired conclusion.

Sexuality poses a challenge to feminist inquiry, since it is an intersection of the political, social, economic, historical, personal, and experiential, linking behavior and thought, fantasy and action. That these domains intersect does not mean that they are identical. Feminists need sophisticated methodologies and analyses that permit the recognition of each discrete domain as well as their multiple intersections. Recognizing these layers of sexual information, we form and adopt generalizations about even one apparently homogeneous group, white middle-class women, for example, more cautiously. Popular sex manuals, content analysis of women's fiction magazines, vibrator sales, number of contraceptive prescriptions registered, clothing styles – each provides a clue, but even for well-studied groups there are many lacunae. We recognize these lacunae only if we stop extrapolating from one domain to the other. This recognition spurs inquiry into missing areas, and ultimately makes possible the comparison of one domain to another.

A sophisticated analysis of sexual symbols requires that we

look beyond easy generalization. Feminist scholarship has delivered a scathing critique of an androcentric and falsely universalizing history in which the historical Everyman, like his authors, was male, white, heterosexual, and affluent. Such accounts omitted women as both subjects of inquiry and as self-conscious historical actors. Corrective research indicates that social characteristics modify the perception and experience of historical events, with gender a significant social marker. Despite its critique of false universals, feminist scholarship and inquiry has not escaped the same sin. Until recently challenged, feminist descriptions and analyses have often assumed that women are white, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and moderately youthful, or that the experiences and perspectives of these women are shared by all. The term "woman" used in feminist discourse often substituted part of women's experience for the whole, a "deadly metonymy" in Hortense Spillers's words, relegating the experience of some women to silence.<sup>17</sup> The experience of those standing outside both mainstream culture and "women's culture" has been excluded from the feminist canon as well. Self-criticism of feminist parochialism has proliferated in recent years<sup>18</sup> and has been persuasive in showing why feminist analysis must attempt to include the experience of diverse groups of women, with conclusions specific to particular groups identified as such.<sup>19</sup>

This development, when applied to female sexuality, suggests that sexuality may be thought about, experienced, and acted on differently according to age, class, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation and preference, religion, and region. Confrontation with the complex intersection of social identities leads us away from simple dichotomies (black/white, lesbian/heterosexual, working-class/middle-class) toward recognizing the multiple intersection of categories and the resulting complexity of women's lived experience.<sup>20</sup>

This insight leads to a scholarship increasingly self-conscious about omissions, gaps, and silences, which is willing to qualify and specify findings, if they apply to particular groups only, and to take more aggressive efforts in researching areas and topics up to now ignored. The simple recognition that little is known about Asian lesbians, Jewish working-class prostitutes, or Catholic women who patronize singles bars does not in itself produce the needed information, although it is certainly a necessary step in its production. Additional steps include: better use of available material, which requires more funding, freer access to papers and diaries held in private collections, and a willingness to ask more imaginative questions about the sexual aspects of women's lives; further work by scholars who are

members of the groups under study as those most attentive to and attuned to nuances in the material; and an effort to generate more data, especially about contemporary life. A great deal of interesting research is being conducted outside the formal boundaries of academe by community projects and groups that have been imaginative and resourceful in locating and developing unusual kinds of material.<sup>21</sup>

But if careless overgeneralization about women's experience is dangerous and mystifying, so too is the avoidance of generalization in the belief that each woman's experience is so unique and conditioned by multiple social intersections that larger patterns are impossible to discern, and that to attempt generalization is to do violence to individual experience: the anarchy of sexual idiosyncrasy. Feminist work on sexuality must confront the dialectic between specificity and generalization, and endure its ongoing tension. Theory can only be developed through reference to an ever-expanding body of information, made possible through more intensive use of historical material and through eliciting women's current experience in a comfortable climate.<sup>22</sup> Specific data about one group of women may then acquire more meaning through comparison and contrast with those for other groups. It is important to simultaneously examine women's similarities and differences, questioning whether the acquisition of femininity and the conditions for its reproduction affect all women in similar ways, cutting across sexual preference, sexual object, and specific behavior. Since feminism, for political even more than intellectual reasons, is unlikely to abandon using the term "woman" until all of women's experience has been adequately described, its provocative overgeneralizations might be most positively viewed as an invitation to test the hypotheses proposed: to object, qualify, and correct.

Although a portion of feminist reluctance to acknowledge differences among women derives from arrogance on the part of mainstream feminists, a significant part derives from another source: the fear of difference among women. If women organize around their oppression by and through differentiation from men, should they not maintain a united front, stressing their shared and unifying characteristic, femaleness? Does the admission of women's cross-cutting allegiances and links to groups containing men weaken the universal sisterhood? Once differences are admitted, what is to prevent them from becoming bitter and divisive, fracturing the base for shared political action? In a society that structures and maintains group antagonisms, what model do we have for acknowledging difference and working together? Exploration of differences has, in fact, been a painful experience, beginning with lesbian and heterosexual differences

in the early stages of the women's movement and continuing in recent years to differences involving class, religion, ethnicity, and race. Although some have retreated to doctrines which emphasize women's commonality on the one hand, or women's total separation by factors of race and class on the other, many feminists see the importance of dealing with difference, while they remain wary and uncertain of how to do so.

Our discomfort with difference is especially evident around questions of sexual variation, which have expanded beyond the topic of lesbian and heterosexual difference to include all the ways women can obtain pleasure. Sexual orientation is not the only, and may not be the most significant, sexual difference among women.<sup>23</sup> Our ability to think about sexual difference is limited, however, by a cultural system that organizes sexual differences in a hierarchy in which some acts and partners are privileged and others are punished. Privileged forms of sexuality, for example, heterosexuality, marriage, and procreation, are protected and rewarded by the state and subsidized through social and economic incentives. Those engaging in privileged acts, or pretending to do so, enjoy good name and good fortune. Less privileged forms of sexuality are regulated and interdicted by the state, religion, medicine, and public opinion. Those practicing less privileged forms of sexuality – what Rubin calls members of the sexual “lower orders” – suffer from stigma and invisibility, although they also resist.<sup>24</sup>

The system of sexual hierarchy functions smoothly only if sexual nonconformity is kept invisible, hence the interpersonal tension when sexual difference surfaces. For dominant sexual groups, the appearance of the sexual lower orders produces anxiety, discomfort, the threat of pollution, and a challenge to their hegemony. Sexual liberals are caught between a reluctance to lose the privileges attendant upon being members of the majority and a fear of losing their claims to political savvy if they do not side with the newly vocal, emerging minorities. The women's movement has already experienced a similar scenario with the “lavender menace” panic – a consequence of more visible lesbian participation in the movement. Some feminists may still feel that it would be easier to attain their goals without the liability of perceived “sexual deviance” of any sort. In the current sex debates, some fear that the women's movement will come to be identified with issues even more stigmatized and threatening than female homosexuality. Thus, feminists' fear of sexual difference manifests itself as a concern with public relations, an attempt to keep the women's movement respectable and free of pollution.

The appearance of any sexual difference thus raises a question about its positioning in the sexual hierarchy: Is it normal? Sinful?

Deranged? Given this backdrop, feminists, like all members of the culture, find it difficult to think about sexual difference with equanimity. The concept of benign sexual variation is a relatively new one, as Rubin suggests, and for most of us, differences in sexual taste carry great significance, whether explained in terms of sin, pathology, or bad politics. Our relative ignorance about the actual range of sexual behavior and fantasy makes us into latter-day sexual ethnocentrists; the observer is convinced that her own sex life is normal, understandable, and tasteful, while the observed's preferences may be frightening, strange, and disgusting. The external system of sexual hierarchy is replicated within each of us, and herein lies its power. Internalized cultural norms enforce the status quo. As each of us hesitates to admit deviations from the system of sexual hierarchy, nonconformity remains hidden, invisible, and apparently rare. The prevailing system retains hegemony and power, appearing to be descriptive as well as prescriptive, a statement of what *is* as well as what should be. Individuals who deviate appear to themselves to be few and isolated; they resolve anew to hide their nonconformity.

Underlying reactions of shock, disgust, and startle lurk other, more complex reactions. Our own insecurity and sexual deprivation make us wonder about what other women are doing.<sup>25</sup> Could I do that too? Is it better? Are they getting more pleasure? Do I come out unfavorably in the sexual sweepstakes? Are they pathetic and sick? Am I? Our state of sexual insecurity, fueled by ignorance and mystification, turns any meeting with sexual difference into an occasion for passing harsh judgment on ourselves as well as others. Stigmatized acts or preferences are devalued according to the rules of sexual hierarchy, yet paradoxically we judge our own behavior second-rate and unsatisfying, resenting those whose mere existence makes us doubtful and deprived. Thus, the presentation of sexual difference, whether intended or not, is often interpreted as a chauvinistic statement of superiority, if not an exhortation to experiment or an attempt to prescribe a new sexual norm.

An enduring slogan in the women's movement has been "the personal is the political," born from the initial discovery that personal life as lived and experienced is not totally private and individual, devoid of cultural and social shaping. Discussing personal life in consciousness-raising groups provided a way for women who participated to see commonalities in their lives, to realize that they were not crazy or alone in their dissatisfaction, and to begin to trace the economic, political, and social forces that articulated with domains previously thought of as private: the family, relationships, the self. Examination of women's lives also affirmed that they were important and instructive, in fact, in Joan

Nestle's words, "our deepest text" in a society which marginalized and ignored female experience.<sup>26</sup> Not only did personal life have social and political dimensions, but personal pain and unhappiness often suggested possible targets for political action and organizing.

The ubiquity of the slogan, however, led toward unintended and problematic extremes which proved particularly damaging for sexuality. If personal life had a political dimension, did that mean that sexual life was singularly and entirely political? If so, it was perhaps logical to expect that feminists who shared the same politics should have identical or highly similar sexual lives, and that there should be a close conformity between political goals and personal behavior. If the personal was political, then perhaps the political was personal, converting efforts to change and reform sexual life and relations into substitutes for political action and organizing. If so, scrutiny, criticism, and policing of peers' sexual lives, if not fantasies, may become a necessary political obligation.<sup>27</sup>

The quest for politically appropriate sexual behavior has led to what Alice Echols calls prescriptivism, the tendency to transform broad, general principles like equality, autonomy, and self-determination into fairly specific and rigid standards to which all feminists are expected to conform. There is a very fine line between talking about sex and setting norms; we err very easily given our ignorance of diversity, our fear of difference, and our naive expectation that all like the same sexual food as we. Although we need open discussion to expand theory, we are especially vulnerable to transforming statements of personal preference that inevitably appear in honest discussion ("I like oral sex") into statements that may be probabilistically true ("Women like clitoral stimulation more than penetration") into statements that are truly prescriptive ("Women should avoid penetration"). Certainly, there are intentional efforts at chauvinism. But even mere statements of individual, personal preference are often heard as statements of superiority, criticisms of the listener's practice, or an exhortation to try something new. Women's insecurity, deprivation, and guilt make it difficult to hear a description of personal practice as anything but a prescription.

All political movements, feminism included, espouse social and ethical ideals as they articulate their vision of the good life or more just society. Such movements attempt to analyze and change current behavior, as well as the prevailing social institutions that shape such behavior. Beginning as radical renegades, visionaries, and outsiders, their political success exposes them to the danger of becoming the orthodoxy, if only to their own members, with their own structure of deadening

conformity. The dangers of political analysis transmuted from illuminating vision to stale dogma loom especially large in regard to sexuality. Our vast ignorance, our reliance on overgeneralization, and the invisibility of so many groups suggest that we are in a particularly resourceless position to determine which sexual paths will lead to heaven. Although declaring opposition to patriarchal culture, some recent feminist pronouncements about politically desirable and undesirable forms of sexuality bear a striking resemblance to those of the dominant culture, with one possible exception: the repositioning of certain varieties of lesbianism. Within feminism, lesbianism has been rehabilitated, undergoing a transition from the realm of bad sex to the realm of good sex, and within some sectors of the movement, given a privileged position as the most egalitarian and feminist sexual identity. With this exception, new feminist punishments are still meted out to the denizens of the same old sexual lower orders.

Quite apart from our ignorance and prejudice, sexuality may be a particularly unpromising domain for regulation. As Muriel Dimen argues, sexuality remains fluid and everchanging, evolving through adult life in response to internal and external vicissitudes: flexible, anarchic, ambiguous, layered with multiple meanings, offering doors that open to unexpected experience. The connection of both sexual behavior and fantasy to infancy, the irrational, the unconscious is a source of both surprise and pleasure. We impose simplistic and literal standards congruent with political goals at our own peril, ultimately undermining the search for pleasure and expansiveness that motivates visions of political change and human connection.<sup>28</sup>

A serious effort to examine the relationship between sexual fantasy and behavior and agendas for social change is circumvented by the enormity of what we do not know: silences, oppressions, repressions, invisibility, denials, omissions, lies. Paradoxically, the effort to rein in sexual behavior and fantasy according to political dogma guarantees that the silence will continue and that information challenging it is unlikely to emerge.

Following the path of older political movements, the prevailing feminist ideology has the power to punish non-conformists by exclusion and personal attack. If adult sexuality is not so mutable – an interesting question that remains to be answered – how do we regard someone whose sexual practice or thought falls short of current standards: the detritus of patriarchy whose sexual acts are stigmata of oppression; a fossil, soon to be replaced by a younger generation free of such taint; or a victim, entitled to special consideration as long as she laments her unhappy state? If patriarchal socialization makes the achievement of the sexual

ideal impossible, we may charitably continue to love the sinner, while hating the sin.

Like religious orthodoxy, political ideology about sexual behavior contrasts lofty goals with gritty, or fleshy, reality, exhorting individuals to strive against the odds for perfection. Falls from grace may be tolerated for those who continue to believe; thus, actual practice can become quite discrepant from theoretically desired behavior, without posing any challenge to the empirical or logical foundations of sexual ideology. The ideology functions to set up new social categories and maintain strict boundaries between them: the good and the bad, believers and infidels.

In its first stage, this wave of feminism moved women by speaking about what lay below the surface of daily convention and acknowledged social reality. The excitement of feminism, its ability to propel women into extraordinary changes in their lives which were as joyful and exhilarating as they were unexpected and terrifying came from breaking silence and from naming the unspoken. This revelation, along with the thought and analysis it inspired, was radical and revolutionary: it changed women's lives.

In the course of any social movement, the passage of time and its very success renders the radical insight routine, as formerly exciting discoveries become natural and familiar features of the landscape. At this point, feminism needs to excavate new levels of women's experience. The fear and hesitation we feel are akin to what we felt fifteen years ago: where will this take us? This is a terrifying undertaking. To overcome our anxiety, we need to remind ourselves of what excited us: pleasure in discovery, the enjoyment of complexity, delight in each other.

What directions might a feminist politics on sex take in the future? Above all, feminism must be a movement that speaks to sexuality, that does not forfeit the field to reactionary groups who are more than willing to speak. We cannot be cowardly, pretending that feminism is not sexually radical. Being a sex radical at this time, as at most, is less a matter of what you do, and more a matter of what you are willing to think, entertain, and question.

Feminism must, of course, continue to work for material changes that support women's autonomy, including social justice, economic equality, and reproductive choice. At the same time, feminism must speak to sexuality as a site of oppression, not only the oppression of male violence, brutality, and coercion which it has already spoken about eloquently and effectively, but also the repression of female desire that comes from ignorance, invisibility, and fear. Feminism must put forward a politics that resists deprivation and supports pleasure. It must understand pleasure

as life-affirming, empowering, desirous of human connection and the future, and not fear it as destructive, enfeebling, or corrupt. Feminism must speak to sexual pleasure as a fundamental right, which cannot be put off to a better or easier time. It must understand that the women to whom it speaks, and those it hopes to reach, care deeply about sexual pleasure and displeasure in their daily lives; that sexuality is a site of struggle – visceral, engaging, riveting – and not a domain of interest only to a narrow, small, and privileged group.

Feminism should encourage women to resist not only coercion and victimization, but also sexual ignorance, deprivation and fear of difference. Feminism should support women's experiments and analyses, encouraging the acquisition of knowledge. We can begin by examining our own experience, sharing it with each other, knowing that in sexuality as in the rest of social life, our adventures, risks, impulses, and terrors provide clues to the future. Feminism must insist that women are sexual subjects, sexual actors, sexual agents; that our histories are complex and instructive; that our experience is not a blank, nor a mere repetition of what has been said about us, and that the pleasure we have experienced is as much a guide to future action as the brutality.

In doing so, we admit that it is not safe to be a woman, and it never has been. Female attempts to claim pleasure are especially dangerous, attacked not only by men, but by women as well. But to wait until a zone of safety is established to begin to explore and organize for pleasure is to cede it as an arena, to give it up, and to admit that we are weaker and more frightened than our enemies ever imagined.

Social movements, feminism included, move toward a vision; they cannot operate solely on fear. It is not enough to move women away from danger and oppression; it is necessary to move toward something: toward pleasure, agency, self-definition. Feminism must increase women's pleasure and joy, not just decrease our misery. It is difficult for political movements to speak for any extended time to the ambiguities, ambivalences, and complexities that underscore human experience. Yet movements remain vital and vigorous to the extent that they are able to tap this wellspring of human experience. Without it, they become dogmatic, dry, compulsive, and ineffective. To persist amid frustrations and obstacles, feminism must reach deeply into women's pleasure and draw on this energy.

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### Notes

- 1 Ellen Carol DuBois and Linda Gordon, "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-century Feminist Sexual Thought", in this volume.
- 2 Faye Ginsburg, "The Body Politic: The Defense of Sexual Restriction by Anti-Abortion Activists", in this volume.
- 3 Muriel Dimen, "Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect?", in this volume.
- 4 Lucy Gilbert and Paula Webster, *Bound By Love*, Boston, Beacon, 1982.

- 5 Joan Nestle, "The Fem Question", in this volume, p. 234.
- 6 Alice Echols, "The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-1983", in this volume.
- 7 Social construction texts include: Michel Foucault, *A History of Sexuality, vol. 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Pantheon, 1978; Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain*, London, Quartet, 1977; Jonathan Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac: A New Documentary*, New York, Harper & Row, 1983, pp. 138-74.
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- 9 Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, New York, Morrow, 1981; Nancy Sahli, "Smashing: Women's Relationships Before the Fall", *Chrysalis*, no. 8, 1979, pp. 17-27.
- 10 Jonathan Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality", unpublished manuscript, 1983.
- 11 See Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex", in this volume, for a fuller development of this argument.
- 12 For varied approaches to the question of representation, see: Meryl Altman, "Everything They Always Wanted You to Know: The Ideology of Popular Sex Literature"; Bette Gordon, "Variety: The Pleasure in Looking"; Barbara Kruger, "No Progress in Pleasure"; and Kaja Silverman, "Histoire d'O: The Construction of a Female Subject", all in this volume.
- 13 I am indebted to Frances Doughty for many conversations about representation and the question of invisibility. See Francis Doughty, "Lesbian Biography, Biography of Lesbians" in Margaret Cruikshank (ed.), *Lesbian Studies*, Old Westbury, Feminist Press, 1982, pp. 122-7.
- 14 Hortense J. Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words", in this volume, pp. 73-100.
- 15 Mary Calderone, "Above and Beyond Politics: The Sexual Socialization of Children"; Kate Millett, "Beyond Politics? Children and Sexuality"; and Sharon Thompson, "Search for Tomorrow: On Feminism and the Reconstruction of Teen Romance", all in this volume.
- 16 See Joan Nestle, op. cit.; Esther Newton and Shirley Walton, "The Misunderstanding: Toward a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary", in this volume.
- 17 Spillers, op. cit.
- 18 See, for example, Margaret Cruikshank (ed.), *Lesbian Studies*, op. cit.; Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith (eds), *Conditions Five: "The Black Women's Issue"*, 1979; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds), *This Bridge Called My Back*, Massachusetts, Persephone Press, 1981; Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (eds), *But Some of Us Are Brave*, New York, Feminist Press, 1982.
- 19 Self-consciousness about the limitations of one's data and the specific category of women to whom conclusions apply raise interesting questions of style. How and when should such qualifications be made? At the beginning of a report or article, after which one resumes the word "women" in describing one's subjects? Or should the article doggedly and probably awkwardly continue to specify the subjects, for example, "white, middle-class, heterosexual Bohemians

in the 1920s" or "urban, working-class Hispanic single mothers"? Although the awkwardness in the second form is evident, use of the first results in unintended illogical statements. Consider, for example, an article noting that post-World War I feminist thinkers on sexuality included both heterosexual and lesbian women. It then goes on, a mere paragraph later, to characterize these women's thought:

Even when it contradicted their own experience, they continued to accept a male and heterosexual definition of the "sex act." They were, so to speak, upwardly mobile, and they wanted integration into the sexual world as defined by men. The man's orgasm remained the central event, although now it was preferable if a woman had one at the same time. (Ellen Carol DuBois and Linda Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 99.)

It seems unlikely, without further evidence, that lesbians of the time defined sex in this way. Yet the problem is linguistic, as well as conceptual and political: do we have the words or an available apparatus that can simply and elegantly specify the subjects of study?

This essay in no way escaped a struggle with the use of words like "women," "feminists," and even "we," reminiscent of the issues raised by Lorraine Bethel in her poem, "What Chou Mean We, White Girl?" in Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 86-92.

- 20 Frances Doughty, "Introduction: The Daily Life of Lesbian Sexuality", unpublished paper, National Women's Studies Association, Columbus, Ohio, June 1983; and Oliva M. Espin, "Cultural and Historical Influences on Sexuality in Hispanic/Latin Women: Implications for Psychotherapy"; Roberta Galler, "The Myth of the Perfect Body"; Carol Munter, "Fat and the Fantasy of Perfection", in this volume.
- 21 For example, the Buffalo Lesbian Oral History Project (Liz Kenneday and Madeline Davis) and the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Men's History Project.
- 22 Frances Doughty, "Introduction", *op. cit.*
- 23 Pat Califia, "Doing It Together: Gay Men, Lesbians, and Sex", *Advocate*, July 7, 1983, pp. 24-7.
- 24 Rubin, *op. cit.*
- 25 Paula Webster, "The Forbidden: Eroticism and Taboo", in this volume.
- 26 Joan Nestle, *op. cit.*
- 27 See Alice Echols, *op. cit.*, for a fuller discussion.
- 28 Dimen, *op. cit.*
- 29 Olga Broumas, "Artemis", in *Beginning with O*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 24.