

6 Feminist Sexual Politics and the Heterosexual Predicament

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'There is feminism and then there's fucking,' declares the bulimic literary critic Maryse, in the Canadian film *A Winter Tan* (1987), based on the published letters of Maryse Holder, *Give Sorrow Words*. Maryse tells her audience that she is taking a holiday from feminism to indulge herself and her 'natural sluttishness' with young Mexican men, one of whom eventually murders her. After gloomily absorbing this narrative, I found it hard to decide whether it was Maryse's notion of feminism or her own (and her killer's) predatory view of sex which was the more depressing in this sad tale of one woman's neurotic self-destruction. The fact that many feminists would confidently endorse Maryse Holder's dual depiction of feminism as anti-heterosexual pleasure and heterosexual pleasure as anti-woman (a dangerous, if not deadly pursuit) only adds to my sinking spirits. Some of us expect cautionary tales warning women of the price we must pay for sexual pleasure to come from our would-be patriarchal 'protectors', determined to stamp out the rich and hopeful dreams of women's liberation. It is harder to know what to think when the same message comes from our own side. (*A Winter Tan* was produced, written, directed and performed by Jackie Boroughs, a leading feminist in Canadian film and theatre for the last 25 years.)

One thing is clear, however, at least to me. The way to fight the continuing victimization of women cannot be to abandon notions of sexual liberation, or to make women's pursuit of heterosexual pleasure incompatible with women's happiness. It was not only the generation that came of age in the affluent 1960s that discovered that the fight against sexual hypocrisy and for sexual openness and pleasure could inspire both personal and political enthusiasm for creative and co-operative projects of diverse kinds. Such sexual openness lay at the root of the politicization of women and gay people in the 1970s, suddenly fully aware that pleasure was as much a social and a political as a personal matter; well before they

discovered Foucault, and his genealogy of the cultural institutions and discourses dictating the norms and regimes of 'sexuality'. It was seeing and hearing the dominant language and iconography of the joys of sex focused on the power and activity of straight men, while subordinating and disparaging straight women (as 'chics'), lesbians and gay men (as 'queers'), that inspired the women's and the gay liberation movements to engage in a battle against both sexism and, after a few early skirmishes, heterosexism as well.

The ramifications of this battle take us all the way from opposing gender hierarchies to challenging the very conception of 'gender' itself. From the extensive debate about the care and treatment of women in relation to fertility control and childbirth, alongside pressure on men to share the full responsibilities of household tasks and parenting, to the subsequent highly successful 'safer sex' strategies pioneered by gay communities against the spread of HIV and AIDS, the struggle for sexual liberation has played a crucial role in changing patterns of life in Western countries. Indeed, it was the repression of any moment or movement of sexual liberation in the former Eastern European 'state socialist' countries that constituted the most significant aspect of the oppression of women there. Despite greater access to childcare facilities and extensive participation in the workforce, Eastern Europe saw almost no politicization of interpersonal relationships or sexual experience, making sexism, violence against women and exclusive maternal responsibility for childcare and housework as unchallenged as it was ubiquitous (Einhorn, 1991).

Today, however, feminist sex radicals (who in these times are almost always lesbians) have repeatedly challenged heterosexual feminists 'to come out of the closet'. We're still waiting, they tell us, wearily, for you to discuss your sexuality, stop generalizing and get specific: 'Is domination and subordination a clear-cut issue in heterosexual sex? Do heterosexual feminists have thoughts on SM? Has anyone sighted a butch-het woman and femme-het man together? Answers in a *Feminist Review* article please.' (Ardill and O'Sullivan, 1989, p. 133.) Silence, as usual, greeted their challenge. *Feminist Review* is still waiting.

It is a silence I have come to expect. Straight women have been on a bumpy ride for some considerable time. But in many ways it has been bumpiest for those closest to feminism. In recent years it has been feminist polemic, rather than male backlash, which has done most to confuse and discourage new thoughts on sexuality in

feminist texts. Heterosexuality has been coupled consistently with male violence, and presented as both the cause and enactment of men's power over women. How, we might well wonder, did a movement which came out of, and drew its initial strength and inspiration from, the assertive sex radicalism of the 1960s manage to produce so many who would end up so silent about their own sexuality? It is a concern, clearly, which was not only central to the genesis of feminism, but remains central to the majority of women.

The first impediment was, of course, men. Men as they are; and 'manhood' as it is figured in the inescapable discourses and images of masculinity in language and culture. 'Masculinity' in Western culture means, at least in part, the sexual pursuit of women, expressed in a type of sexist *brogadaccio* which betrays both a fear of real intimacy and a horror of 'weakness' or 'effeminacy'. Challenges to its presumptions can motivate men's rage and violence – often towards women or gay men – through attempts to shore up a flagging sense of personal power. But it may also encourage rebellion against oppressive forms of male identity, albeit with still limited success.

The second restraint, holding back discussion of women's erotic desires, came from within feminism itself. It was the attempt to identify authentically 'female' bodily experiences. These were to serve as alternative images, to be contrasted with the 'custom-made woman' designed only to please and titillate men. But the search for some fully autonomous, self-directed sexuality (only to be found in masturbation) would lead some women to abandon, and others to say no more, and certainly to write no more, about their longings for the admiration, desire and physical intimacy of men.

The many insecurities and uncertainties women feel about their bodies leaves little space between reclaiming sex and the setting of norms. For a while, it was only a small group of defiant lesbians who felt confident enough to question the Utopianism and growing prescriptiveness in feminist accounts of a distinctively 'womanly' desire for benign, sensual, egalitarian relationships. They spoke instead of the complexity, ambivalence and unsettling elements of power and submission present in all desire – female as well as male (Vance, 1984, p. 21).

The final impasse was thus the inescapable contrariness of sexual passion itself. Some level of confusion was inevitable in rethinking women's sexual agency, given the crucible of contradictions at the

heart of sexual desire – triggering emotions that make us feel both powerful and defenceless at one and the same moment. This was further complicated by a change in the political climate. All kinds of social anxieties are easily displaced onto sexuality, and the Right knows just how to orchestrate hostility against sexual ‘permissiveness’ as the cause of social ‘decay’, seen most recently in their virulent attacks on single mothers. Retreat from optimistic feminist hopes for women’s sexual liberation was always likely to accompany the defeat of broader attempts to build a more caring and equal society. And so in the 1980s it did.

Yet even as Catharine MacKinnon gains a popular readership for her own particular brand of sexually repressive feminist rhetoric, telling women that feeling good in sex with men is merely enjoying the seeds of victimhood, something is clearly awry (MacKinnon, 1987). For feminism’s greatest influence came from its campaigns in the name of the sexual liberation she denounces. Demanding women’s control over their own bodies and seeking changes in their relationships with men brought more responsive and respectful gynaecological provision and made it possible to identify and object to sexual harassment, redefine rape and prioritize violence against women. ‘Part of my attraction to feminism involved the right to be a sexual person,’ one North American feminist ruefully recalls. ‘I’m not sure where that history got lost’ (English et al., 1982, p. 42).

What is more, the current thrust of feminist criticism of heterosexuality is at odds with what most women are saying about their sex lives. No longer ahead, but *out of step* with many women’s dreams and desires, feminism in the 1980s became pessimistic or silent about straight sex just when women themselves were displaying much of feminism’s former enthusiasm for sexual (and social) independence. Reflecting a new liberal acceptance of women’s sexuality outside wedlock, marriage rates in most Western countries were declining, divorce rates rapidly rising and many women were choosing to cohabit. Parenting was being postponed until careers were established and, overall, women were having fewer children by the 1980s than in the 1960s.

Married women, it seemed, were also receiving greater satisfaction from sex with their husbands. Morton Hunt’s survey of sexual behaviour in the United States in the 1970s reported far greater variety and frequency of sexual activity compared with Alfred Kinsey’s a generation before: 90 per cent of wives claimed to be happy with their sex lives, three-quarters were content with its

frequency, with one-quarter wanting more. Blumstein and Schwartz reported much the same from their extensive survey of couples a decade later. Women and men were displaying similar sexual preferences, desiring frequent sexual activity, happiest when initiating or refusing sex equally as often, and – whether heterosexual, gay or lesbian – became discontented if sex was infrequent (see Segal, 1994, p. 67).

British surveys agree. They show women initiating more sexual contacts and married women having more affairs, reflecting their heightened expectations and sense of sexual agency. Contrary to conservative hopes or feminist warnings, the most recent survey of sexual behaviour here (the one Margaret Thatcher tried to abort by withdrawing promised funding) concluded that sex is both far safer and less fraught for women today than ever before. The overwhelming majority use contraception during their first sexual intercourse, and three out of four women felt that it occurred at about the right time, for the right reasons.

There is thus a dramatic lack of fit between what one very visible group of feminists have been saying about women's experience of sexual victimization, and what most women have been reporting about their experiences of sex and its importance to them. Nevertheless, while the gap between women's and men's sex lives is narrowing, and marriages seem happier, this is probably *only* because of the high rates of divorce. One in two marriages in the United States and over one in three in Britain ended in divorce in the 1980s, the majority initiated by women unhappy with the 'unliberated' behaviour of their husbands – behaviour that includes significant amounts of abuse against women and children.

When women's frustrations do lead to separation or divorce, they are economically disadvantaged. A woman may be just a divorce away from poverty. Nevertheless, contrary to the backlash stories broadcasting the bleak situation of women after divorce as a warning to them to stay married, it is actually men who most fear and try to prevent marital break-ups – sometimes with more of the violence which provokes it. Teenage pregnancy (though far from the spiralling problem conservatives denounce) can leave young women and their children impoverished. Around a quarter of adolescent girls still complain of feeling pressured into having sex with boys, and most report little physical pleasure from their early sexual experiences, finding it hard to talk about sex with their partners.

In fact, when Lillian Rubin set out to discover the impact of the sexual revolution in the United States, she found that both men and women typically spoke of being 'disappointed' with their first encounter with genital heterosexuality. But whereas almost all men saw it as an important achievement on the way to manhood (sowing the seeds for men's frequent resort to sexual coerciveness), no woman saw it as definitive of womanhood. (Menstruation conventionally serves as the far more ambivalent marker of entry into womanhood.) Women's most frequent regret was feeling cheated of the 'romantic fantasy' they had hoped to fulfil. Even so, most contemporary reports on teenage girls and their culture show them as much tougher and more in control of their lives than the previous generation (Rubin, 1991).

More women are feeling satisfied in their sex lives with men. Yet they still suffer disproportionately from (and pervasively fear) sexual assault from men. How can we shift the sexual codes which encourage coerciveness from men, endorse compliance from women and continue to serve as barriers to change? *Only by rethinking the very idea of heterosexuality*: pursuing a long and arduous cultural journey with endless setbacks on the way.

At the heart of the problem is the way in which 'masculinity' and 'femininity' tie in with the cultural symbolism of the sex act: masculinity as activity, femininity as passivity. As the lesbian theorist Judith Butler argues, following Foucault, gender contrasts gain much of their meaning through this more basic image of heterosexuality: 'The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine", where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female"' (Butler, 1990, p. 33). Such oppositions inevitably obscure the diverse initiations and activities which actually do take place between women and men. It is this symbolism which we need to keep on challenging if we are ever to turn around the idea that sex is something men *do* and women *have done* to them – with all its oppressive spin-offs, for both women and gay men.

The first way to do this is to talk more, not less, about the diversity and fluidities of heterosexual experiences and bodily contacts. But neither feminists, nor anybody else, have found this easy to do. When feminist-inspired research, like that of Shere Hite, reported that only 30 per cent of women reach orgasm during penetrative sex, this was quickly transformed, by Hite and by

others, into the spurious announcement that most women did not like penetrative sex (against the grain of the complexity of feelings Hite herself uncovered) (Hite, 1976). Before long the coercive message of much feminist sex advice literature was that wise women, in touch with their 'authentic' needs, would avoid penetrative sex. ('*Hmn... do I put it somewhere??*' a feminist cartoon muses, depicting a strong, naked woman, looking dubiously at a penis-shaped vibrator. She moves it around a bit, only to fling it down in horror, repeating in outrage the absurd suggestion, '*In my CUNTI?!*': Meulenbelt, 1981, p. 100.) Yet, any feminist insistence upon the significance of clitoral over vaginal, 'active' over 'passive', self-directed over self-shattering, sexual engagement, not only ignores the unruliness of desire, but reflects, more than transcends, the repudiation of 'femininity'/'passivity' in our misogynist culture.

The repetition of this repudiation is easy to understand: even the most recent feminist encyclopaedia on sexuality in Britain, *The Sexual Imagination*, has no entry under 'vagina', although the history and meaning of the 'clitoris' is boldly covered by its presiding editor as playing 'a disproportionately major role in women's sexual pleasure' (Gilbert, 1993, p. 56). It did not go unchallenged, but when affirmed, the reproductive resonance of vaginal iconography as 'birth canal' always threatened to override or undermine any pleasure-encoding signification. It was the pioneer of postwar Western feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, who affirmed, with reference to the vagina, that 'the feminine sex organ is mysterious even to the woman herself... Woman does not recognise its desires as hers.' Her own description of this 'sex organ', so often 'sullied with body fluids', tells us why:

woman lies in wait like the carnivorous plant, the bog, in which insects and children are swallowed up. She is absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx, insinuating and viscous: thus, at least, she vaguely feels herself to be.

(de Beauvoir, 1988, pp. 406-7)

There is no vagueness in this description. It is a perfect illustration of the horror of what Kristeva has elaborated in her (currently much over-used) conception of the 'abject' object. Kristeva describes abjection as the process whereby the child takes up its own clearly defined ('clean and proper') body image through detaching itself from – expelling and excluding – the pre-Oedipal space and self-conception associated with its improper and unclean,

'impure', connection with the body of the mother. The mother's body, having been everything to the child, threatens its engulfment. On this view, entering the symbolic space of language brings with it a horror of (and fearful attraction to) everything without clear boundaries, everything which suggests a non-distinctiveness between inside and outside (Kristeva, 1982). Elaborating Kristeva's thoughts, Elizabeth Grosz explains that her notion of an 'unnamable, pre-oppositional, permeable barrier, the abject requires some mode of control or exclusion to keep it at a safe distance from the symbolic and its orderly proceedings' (Grosz, 1990, p. 95). However culturally-specific this psychoanalytic narrative of the child's entry into the symbolic may be (and Kristeva, with unconvincing but characteristic Lacanian grandiosity, takes it to be universal), it would seem to resonate with the place of vaginal iconography in our culture, and its absence from respectable discourses and contexts). The vagina has served as a condensed symbol of all that is secret, shameful and unspeakable in our culture.

The question which Grosz raises is whether it is discourse itself which confers the horror of 'abjection' onto female bodies, and whether there might thus be other ways of registering, or resignifying, the sexual specificity of female sexual bodies (which may include, but would not reduce to, reference to the mother's body, however conceived). Neither de Beauvoir nor Kristeva addresses this question. It is indeed a formidable task. That some interference, shift or resignification in standard perceptions and meaning are possible, however, when old images are repeated in contexts where they may be seen in new ways (always involving contention, and fears of recuperation), is evident from the battles which have already been fought around women's film and art-works involving female genital anatomy.

When Anne Severson started showing her short silent film, *Near the Big Chakra*, assembling close-up, colour photographs of women's 'cunts' or vulvas, back in the early 1970s, she incited extraordinarily strong reactions of both pleasure and disgust. Women fought over it, one supporter telling Severson, 'I would kill for your film.' Some women saw the images as powerful, teasing and pleasurable, suggesting energy and activity, 'an active passivity'. For them the intricate delicacy, complexity, varied shapes and different hues making up the 'whole' female genital (vaginal opening, pubic hair, mons, outer-lips, inner lips, clitoris, magnified pores, secretions, occasional tampax string, and so on), can mock and reverse the

'hole' male discourse has made of it – as sheath for the penis. Cathy Schwichtenberg explains its subversive effect as follows:

the absence which is not an absence, gazes back at male viewers producing a double-bind of fear and desire which alternatively sucks them in, pushes them out; and asks for more than a penis/phallus closure. These vulvas ask for textural/sexual caresses – a pleasurable foreplay and a questioning of ideas. (Schwichtenberg, 1980, p. 81)

They may well ask. Schwichtenberg is right to suggest that these new images of the female body, which some women (and perhaps even men) may find pleasurable, especially in cultural contexts where viewers are already hoping to stir up trouble for traditional meanings, can begin a slow process of resignification. But with other women rejecting Severson's art-work (and those which would follow it, with similar intent), as disgusting, demeaning and 'pornographic' (one man vomited at a London screening), we have a lot more stirring, and a lot more explaining to do, before female genitals exist securely in language as more than 'manholes'. Many other women writers, poets and artists (like the late Helen Chadwick, especially in her 'Piss flowers') have since continued to provide us with a supply of new and subversive images, but these works have so far had little impact on what became the orthodox feminist theorizing of heterosexuality.

Yet, for all the psychic and cultural pull of dominant binaries of heterosexuality, its codings have never been secure. Because it has always been in desired sexual encounter, of whatever kind, that the presumed polarities of gender can most easily be felt to falter and blur. Sexual pleasure – taking us all the way back to the fears and longings of childhood attachments – is as much about letting go and *losing* control for men as it is for women. Nor is there any inevitability about either the occurrence or the preferred form of heterosexual bonding. As any prostitute knows, straight men are both terrified of, yet passionately attracted to, powerlessness and loss of control. Many men like nothing better than a good spanking, although it bores the pants off *Ms Whiplash*. Sexuality can be as much a place for male as for female vulnerability (though any physical coercion men face is almost always from other men). This is precisely why men, more than women, so often remain so fearful of physical closeness, denying themselves the pleasures of passivity which, in the end, is what much of joyful sex is all about. Men,

much like women, long for what they also fear and dread: the intense vulnerability which accompanies the embraces, enclosures and penetrations of another – whether rhythmically stroked by fingers, tongues, lips, teeth, arms or that most fragile and fluctuating of all appendages, the penis. The distinction between inside and outside breaks down as fingers, lips, nose or tongue wander over, in and between the flesh of the other.

In contrast with texts (whether mainstream or feminist), which suggest that women can never escape the ‘subordinating’ meanings of heterosexuality, it is actually harder to insist upon its strictly gendered oppositions. *There are many ‘heterosexualities’, and all sexualities, including lesbian and gay ones, are ‘hetero’ in one way or another.* There is diversity and ‘otherness’ in same-sex encounters and relationships, and there are pluralities of cross-sex meetings. It is usually assumed that we consolidate our gender identity and endorse male dominance through sex – heterosexual: ‘A man can become more male and a woman more female by coming together in the full rigors of the fuck,’ cocksman Norman Mailer crows (Mailer, 1971, p. 171). But do we? Sex is often the most troubling of all social encounters just because it so easily *threatens* rather than confirms gender polarity. The merest glimpse of the complexity of women’s and men’s actual activities suggests that straight sex may be no more affirmative of normative gender positions (and in that sense no less ‘perverse’) than its gay and lesbian alternatives. In consensual sex, when bodies meet, the epiphany of that meeting – its threat and excitement – is surely that all the great dichotomies (activity/passivity, subject/object, heterosexual/homosexual) slide away.

Indeed, as Leo Bersani (1987) suggests, we can see much of men’s phallic swagger as not just about denying power to women, although it certainly has that corollary, as the denial of the reality, the pleasure and the assertive pull of men’s feelings of passivity and dependency. Even mainstream surveys on health, happiness and sexual patterns have been highlighting for some time now that, as a recent US study puts it: ‘What most men really need is to develop their “feminine” side and become more focussed on relationships, more emotionally expressive and more comfortable with being dependent’ (Segal, 1994, p. 285).

Men’s dangerous anxieties over power (‘manhood’), and for some the accompanying resort to sexual coerciveness, will only fade away with the passing of their general social dominance – which was always the motor of ‘phallic’ symbolism. But within the diversity of

heterosexual encounters and relationships, some are compulsive, oppressive, pathological or disabling; others pleasurable, self-affirming, supportive, reciprocal or empowering. Many move between the two. Taking note of the self-display and barely covert homoeroticism currently thriving (and selling commodities) as never before in images of men in the media, any insistence that male sexuality is simply predatory becomes little more than a new way of affirming what it pretends to deplore.

I am not suggesting, however, that the struggle to break the codes linking active ('masculine') sexuality to cultural hierarchies of gender will ever be easy. Sex and gender hierarchies have survived despite their increasingly obvious contradictions. It is a trap to assume (with the *Cosmopolitan*-led, fashionably feminine layer of mass culture) that we can ignore both the symbolic dimensions of language and the existing relations of power between women and men. In *Cosmo* and its ilk, women are presented as already the equal sexual partners of men, and told how to obtain and please their men, as if men were all seeking much the same advice. Such rhetoric nonchalantly neglects the extent of men's general power over women, and its defensive façade of endemic misogyny: apparent from the merest scratch on the liberal surface of sexual equality. Who's afraid of women's independence? Of the single working woman? The single mother? The sexual female? Watch your local cinema for clues.

We must also take on board the mass-cultural images of women, especially in romance fiction. We imbibe it from our mothers' fantasies and daydreams and our own enjoyment of most popular film or novels, where we see ourselves reflected only in the *waiting* female heroine. Many studies of young women's sexual experiences point to the disabling aspect of this heritage. Defining sex in terms of love and romance is the main reason young women offer for allowing their male partner to dictate their sex lives. It also explains their frequent disappointment, even though the pervasive games with power in such narratives reveal some of the contradictions of 'feminine' identifications.

Yet however powerful the iconography of sex and the conventions of romance, their effects are diverse. If the first trap for sexual radicals is to ignore the constraints of symbolic codes and social hierarchies, the second trap is to declare them fixed and immutable. In fact, they are chronically fragile and unstable, easy to subvert or parody – however equally easily recuperated. There have always

been men who could consciously delight in being the object of a woman's (or a man's) desire; and who could see the penis as merely a penis. Just as there have always been women who are lusty, aggressive and sexually dominating, and everything in between. Many already suspect that it is precisely the icons of masculinity who can barely conceal the 'woman', the 'faggot', inside. The more rigid the sexual norms people feel they must affirm, the greater the threat of all those experiences they struggle to exclude. Was there ever more than masochistic pleasure for men to gain from *Rambo's* muscled display of grunting, passive, patriotic flesh – repeatedly wounded, in pain, humiliated and tortured with his own knife?

As I have indicated, it is lesbians and gay men who have played the critical role in revealing the artifice of the gender and sexual oppositions constructing heterosexual norms. These norms not only provide repressive accounts of heterosexual experience. More destructively, they impose themselves on homosexual experience too, producing our lasting images of the 'effeminate' male and 'butch' lesbian. Today, 'queer' activists turn traditional symbols on their head. Whether insisting that penetration is no more heterosexual than kissing, waving the lesbian 'phallus' or asserting the power of 'passivity', they subvert the heterosexual norms which have tried to imprison them.

What I want to suggest is that straight women (and men) should also play a part in this subversion. Instead of guilt-tripping heterosexuals, we would do better to enlist them in the 'queering' of traditional understandings of gender and sexuality, questioning all the ways in which women's bodies have been coded as uniquely 'passive', 'receptive' or 'vulnerable'. But we must also look at *male* heterosexual desire (and how their bodies become 'receptive' and 'vulnerable') since the two are inextricably linked.

We all, and young people especially, need new sources of sex education, new erotic narratives and images which depict both women and men asserting *or* surrendering control in situations of mutual esteem, safety and pleasure. Surveying the diversity of heterosexualities enables us to affirm those encounters which are based on trust and affection (however brief or long-lasting), and to wonder (because it is never easy) how best to strengthen women to handle those which are not.

There is still a long way to go in creating a radical sexual politics that includes heterosexuality. When Joan Nestle wrote her moving recollection, 'My Mother Likes to Fuck', other women picketed the

London magazine which published it. In it she had dared to protest: 'Don't scream penis at me, but help to change the world so no woman feels shame or fear because she likes to fuck' (Nestle, 1987). Quite so. Straight women, like gay men and lesbians, have everything to gain from asserting our desire to fuck if (and only if), when, how and as we choose.