

and warm. It is full of energy, of crisp air, brilliant skies, sudden excitement, peaceful contentment. But where to begin? Feminist dyke that I am, I believe the best place to start is with us, with our community.

Kate Morrow, East Falmouth, MA

Orchids in the Arctic:

The Predicament of Heterosexual Feminism

in Hagan, Kay L.
Fugitive Information

When we undertake a difficult task, our chances of success are increased if we clearly understand the level of difficulty involved so that our efforts can equal the challenge. For instance, if we attempt to raise orchids in the arctic, we would be well advised to appreciate the effects of the frigid culture on the fragile blossoms we want to grow. We cannot forget or deny that the arctic climate is dangerous, even deadly, for orchids, typically a tropical flower. And so it is in the case of heterosexual feminism.

Women do not live in a benign or even neutral society. Our society is prejudiced against us in the most fundamental ways imaginable, and in many ways we cannot dare imagine. Most of us move through this culture in denial of its prejudice because

the reality of it is too horrible to bear. The basis for this prejudice is male supremacy, and the practice of it is woman-hating. We tend to avoid naming the condition so specifically because of the absurd injustice it implies: a caste system based on gender. Feminism teaches us ways to recognize the existence of this prejudice in institutions, systems, and individuals around us; to understand how we have internalized the prejudice; and finally to acknowledge that our private, personal relationships are affected by this prejudice. Yet whether or not we call ourselves feminists, we know this caste system exists. All of us, women and men alike, are conditioned to conform to this culture. Men are trained to be dominators; women are trained to be subordinates. No one is exempt.

To survive in a misogynist environment, a woman must learn how to protect innate female power from a society designed to destroy it. After she learns to recognize and avoid male violence in its many forms, a woman's capacity for self-love blossoms, and her female power begins to thrive—creativity, vitality, and confidence emerge, along with a refusal to subordinate herself to male power. But heterosexual women choosing this path face particular challenges, for the cultural resistance to female power is most extreme in the more intimate realms. Even women who do not choose men as partners must occasionally relate to fathers, brothers, sons, male friends, and colleagues. Essentially, then, the predicament of heterosexual feminism is this: What kind of intimate, individual relationship is possible between the oppressor and the oppressed?

Over the years, from a heterosexual and now a lesbian perspective, I have pondered these questions. Can orchids grow in the arctic? Possibly, providing a woman has adequate resources

and information and she prepares herself appropriately for the relentless hostility of the arctic climate. So button up your overcoats. In the spirit of scientific inquiry, I want to explore the predicament of heterosexual feminism and the floricultural potential of frozen tundra.¹

FIELD NOTE

What is the orchid?

Female power.

What is the arctic?

Male supremacy, woman-hating, patriarchy.

What is the climate?

Hostility and aggression, expressed by males to females.

What is the culture/soil?

Frozen tundra: the practice of dominance and subordination.

The Prevailing Winds: Heterosexuality

Heterosexuality may be the norm in our society, but there is no way to know if it is actually normal. If you currently identify yourself as heterosexual, think back to the first moment you realized that you were heterosexual. Possibly it was not until you became aware of homosexuality. As children, most of us never questioned our sexual orientation. We followed the cues, both subtle and obtuse, telling us that the opposite sex was attractive, compelling, and correct for our affectional partners. Some of those cues were obvious, such as the model set by most parents. Others were more discreet, such as advertisements using sex-role stereotypes. At any rate, we all got the dominant culture's

message: Hetero = YES, Homo = NO, and the majority of us never examined our choice. But if in fact heterosexuality were the only option perceived, can we call it a choice at all?

Until we elect to take over the job, the dominant culture constructs our reality and forms our values. Our sexual orientation is not immune or exempt from this process. The belief that one's heterosexual "preference" is natural is purely speculative. Society has a sexual agenda for us. Our choice is made in response to it. We cannot know what our choice of sexual activity would be if left to our natural desires in an unbiased culture. As feminists, we come to understand that while heterosexuality may in fact be a natural choice for many women, when practiced under misogynist rule, it can also function as a tool of oppression.

Adrienne Rich has observed, "To take the step of questioning heterosexuality as a 'preference' or 'choice' for women—and to do the intellectual and emotional work that follows—will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists, but I think the rewards will be great: a freeing up of thinking, the exploring of new paths, the shattering of another great silence, new clarity in personal relationships."²

Sarah Hoagland distinguishes the use of heterosexuality as a tool of oppression by using the term *heterosexualism*. This set of practices, she explains, is not limited to choices around sexual partners but extends to an entire way of living that includes the economic, political, and emotional aspects of relationships, "in which both men and women have a part. . . . Heterosexualism is a way of living. . . . that normalizes the dominance of one person in a relationship and the subordination of another. As a result, it undermines female agency." She defines agency as "the power to act."³

In order to understand the implications of heterosexuality as a political tool, I find it useful to compare certain elements of the racial caste system to the gender caste system. The construction of white supremacy is similar in many ways to that of male supremacy. There are two groups polarized into dominators and subordinates; there is a vast, interconnected system of overt and covert coercion to maintain the hierarchy. Yet enforcing the caste system of gender differs from enforcing the caste system of race in at least one important aspect. To maintain white supremacy, the dominant caste prefers segregation in housing and intimate partnerships. De facto or de jure, whites claim certain neighborhoods, consigning people of color to other areas. Sexual relations between racial castes are discouraged (unless they are expressions of the dominators' privileged access). But in the gender caste system, members of the subordinate class of women are socially coerced to take a "partner" of the dominant class of men. Each woman then has an individual monitor, is under constant surveillance, and is subject to unlimited access. Under male supremacy, heterosexuality insures that women are, in essence, intimately colonized by the dominant class.⁴

Having been thoroughly trained to subordinate her needs to his, the heterosexual woman has few opportunities to experience her own power or to feel the surge of energy that comes from connection to other powerful women. The impact on possible unified action of women is devastating. In this way, we see how heterosexuality functions as the fundamental institution of male supremacy.

FIELD NOTE

Prevailing winds are constant, frigid,
fifty miles per hour from due north.

Learning from Inuits: Primary Relations with Men

Inuits are people who are indigenous to the arctic. To pursue our desire to raise orchids in our metaphorical arctic, it would behoove us to observe Inuit customs and tactics that demonstrate a few simple principles:

- ✿ You cannot deny that the arctic is hostile to entities accustomed to a warm climate.
- ✿ You cannot pretend the arctic is the tropics.
- ✿ You must accept the arctic's constancy if you are to survive.

If you understand these principles, you can learn how to meet your basic survival needs. If you do not, you will gradually freeze to death and not even know it.

The cultivation of female power under male supremacy takes a similar level of consciousness. To prepare for our own arctic venture, some principles to remember might be:

- ✿ We live in a male supremacist society.
- ✿ Male supremacy is aggressively and deliberately hostile to women and the expression of female power.
- ✿ It is within this context that we form and practice relationships.

Inevitably, individual men are microcosms of the larger misogynist climate. Interaction with men is hazardous for women because men who are born and reared in a male-supremacist, woman-hating culture such as ours have to some extent internalized those same values. At some level, men actually believe in them. Some men are nicer than others; some men are more violent than others; some men believe their superiority to

women is innate; other men eschew their gender privilege as false and constructed; still others are homosexual, people of color, or physically disabled. But all these men live daily in a society that is designed to benefit them on the basis of their gender. They will act out of their conditioning of male privilege unless they have consciously chosen to select other behaviors, just as women will act out their subordination until they reject it in favor of self-loving behavior. In this way, most of us are robots, mindlessly obedient to the culture of dominance and subordination.

"When women climb out of their roles and challenge the male role, men feel very threatened. They get scared. They'll feel like they are gonna die or they feel like they have to kill to defend themselves. Males are conditioned to equate power with the ability to conquer, to kill, dominate, exploit, oppress, annihilate" (Charlie Kreiner).⁵

Generally a woman coming to feminist consciousness—that is, a woman actively practicing self-love—will gradually remove herself from subjection to overt, grotesque woman-hating, such as a battering relationship or a psychologically and emotionally terrorizing one, economic dependency that is being used to control and manipulate her, sexual harassment on the job, or discrimination on the basis of gender. Then, if heterosexual, she begins to choose her intimate male partners more carefully, searching for men who are not threatened by female power. Trudging through miles of frozen tundra, she looks for a site for her greenhouse.

FIELD NOTE

Inuits have igloos. Orchids need greenhouses.

Assessing the Climate: Questions from the Field

To understand what is necessary to cultivate the orchid of female power in the arctic land of misogyny, we must carefully observe and realistically assess the climate itself. Women who attempt this feat return to the tropics with many questions, some of which I will address here.

✿ *Are men conscious that their behavior is frequently patronizing, abusive, controlling, violent, or hateful to women?*

Probably not. If they are, we must certainly avoid them, particularly if they have a weapon. The question of men's consciousness is frequently raised in our attempts to explain inexcusable behavior. We think, "Surely, if he understood the effect of what he is doing, he wouldn't do it," and this reasoning is somehow soothing to us. When such behavior has taken place in the company of others, we are sometimes compelled to turn to our friends and assure them (and ourselves), "He's not really like this." The man who practices woman-hating with conscious intent is much more predictable than the one who is reacting unconsciously to the culture's directives. There can be no mistaking or excusing the deliberate male supremacist, and thus he can be easily avoided without confusion or guilt.

It's the nice men who allow us to slip into denial, setting ourselves up to be hurt. A chilling rule coined during my early forays into the arctic is "If he can hurt you, he will"—meaning, if I go unprotected into an encounter or relationship with a man, he will eventually hurt me in some way, because that is what he is trained and directed by the culture to do. As harsh as it may sound, when I remember this rule and act accordingly, I find that my interactions with men improve remarkably. Compassionate men can appreciate that in a culture such as ours, a

woman's trust must be respectfully earned.

FIELD NOTE

The Hawaiian shirt is not appropriate attire for the frigid zone: we must pull out the oiled and fur-lined sealskin parka.

✿ *My father/husband/identist is different/supportive! "more feminist than I am." Aren't there exceptional men?*

No. The myth of the exceptional man is a product of denial. As stated earlier, none of us has escaped the conditioning of the dominant culture, which is male supremacist and woman-hating. (Firesome, isn't it?) To pretend that a few of us have escaped destroys our only opportunity to create authentic relationships that require men to confront and change their basic conditioning. Obviously, some men do distinguish themselves by working actively for gender justice and challenging male power abuse in themselves and other men. Their efforts make them seem exceptional, but it is precisely because they acknowledge and give up their unjust privilege.

FIELD NOTE

Always close the greenhouse door.

✿ *Are men educable?*

Certainly. This is evident because they have learned to practice dominance so well. The more pertinent question might be, Can men be re-educated? And my observation is that some of them can. Be wary, however, of men who are motivated to change solely to save a relationship. Their changes are superficial and will dissolve when the relationship appears secure. Also avoid getting rooked into being the teacher or trainer. This

is an inappropriate role for a woman and ultimately counter-productive. As women, we do not really know how a man deconstructs his sexist conditioning. He comes to consciousness as an oppressor; we come to consciousness as the oppressed. The curriculum for re-education is entirely different. Ultimately, to make authentic change, a man must take responsibility for his own education (just as whites must assume responsibility for unlearning racist behavior). A woman may significantly contribute to a man's re-education, however, by modeling self-love, which prohibits him from violating her and contradicts the dominant-subordinate paradigm.

FIELD NOTE

You cannot teach an iceberg how to melt.

§ *Can a woman ever trust a man?*

A woman can trust a man to be a man. She cannot trust a man to never hurt her. Under male supremacy, a woman's mistrust of men is a healthy and realistic attitude.

FIELD NOTE

The arctic is cold.

§ *Under these circumstances, how does one overcome hopelessness?*

By realizing that in accepting the truth of our plight we create the opportunity to address the actual problem. Hopelessness is the herald of pragmatism. While the possibility of safely cultivating female power in heterosexual relationships may be remote, it is through our courageous grasp of the real situation that we find creative and effective ways to progress.

FIELD NOTE

The arctic will always be cold.

§ *Is separatism the only solution to the predicament of heterosexual feminism?*

Well, it is one of the solutions. Separatism is the practice of limiting the oppressor's access to the oppressed, a basic right of self-determination. This practice exists on a continuum. One act of separatism is to require a man to wear a condom during intercourse—you are still very close but there is a boundary.⁶ Another is to claim a room of your own with a door that locks. Another is to leave a man who persists in violating you. Another is to walk out of a room where men are verbally demeaning women. I believe the cultivation of female power under male supremacy requires the practice of separatism to a lesser or greater extent, depending on the individual situation. Relief from constant exposure to men and male needs is necessary for a woman to perceive the depth of her innate female power, which she is conditioned to ignore, deny, destroy, or sacrifice. Time spent alone and in consciously constructed women-only space allows a woman to explore aspects of herself that cannot surface in the company of men.

FIELD NOTE

The purpose of a greenhouse is to simulate the tropics. Its seams must be tight. The prevailing winds of the arctic are persistent.

§ *Aren't you actually saying that to be a real feminist, a woman has to become a lesbian?*

No. I believe a "real" feminist is a woman who loves herself and expresses that love, and who acknowledges the admittedly depressing reality of how the ideology of male supremacy is designed to keep her from doing so. Lesbians are not necessarily more feminist than heterosexual women; in fact they may not be feminists at all. As emphasized previously, no one escapes

induction into the dominant-subordinate paradigm imposed by male supremacy. Lesbians, too, must work hard to create new ways of being in relationship. Avoiding men does not eliminate internalized oppression or unconscious obedience to oppressive values. However, it is important for heterosexual women to respect the fact that, metaphorically speaking, lesbians definitely log more time in the tropics. Knowing what we know about the hazards of the arctic climate, the positive effects of woman-loving on the cultivation of the orchid of female power cannot be disputed.

FIELD NOTE

To find a warmer climate, move closer to the equator.

Constructing a Greenhouse: Meeting the Needs of Orchids

To grow orchids in the arctic, we must build a greenhouse that will approximate a tropical climate and create a nurturing space while withstanding an aggressively antithetical environment. As an orchid requires rich soil, abundant sunlight and moisture, tropical temperature, structural support, and protection from hostile elements, the blossom of female power has specific and uncompromising needs. An effective greenhouse for the heterosexual feminist might consist of the following:

- ✧ participation in a consciousness-raising group of like-minded women to share experiences and strategies in the arctic;
- ✧ logging regular time in women-only space and spending time alone;
- ✧ practicing conscious acts of separatism and observing your reactions;

- ✧ becoming a skilled observer, and avoider, of the dynamics of male supremacy;
- ✧ keeping a journal to increase self-awareness;
- ✧ working actively in organizations that confront male power abuse and serve women who are harmed by it;
- ✧ never tolerating a male companion's violation of your being;
- ✧ maintaining a clear perspective and assessment of the pervasive influence of male supremacy and woman-hating on your intimate relationships;
- ✧ expecting the men you love and who love you to work actively to make the world safe for women, to be your allies against male power abuse, and to work for gender justice.

When heterosexual feminists deny the risks and dangers inherent in a woman's intimate proximity to men, they consign their female power to the icy tomb of cognitive dissonance—the ability to hold contradictory beliefs in the mind simultaneously without acknowledging the contradiction. Denial only benefits the oppressor. The goal here is to be wise and successful cultivators of our essential female power, wherever we are, whenever our companions of choice. Assess the relative challenge of your chosen situation and devise your strategy accordingly. For the heterosexual feminist, however, hoping for an early spring is not an option.

NOTES

- 1 Some curious facts about orchids. There are over thirty thousand wild species, and over seventy thousand hybrid species in existence (the

orchid being the apparent object of considerable fetishism in many cultures for eons). While the overwhelming majority of them appear in tropical climates, they actually grow all over the world, including seven varieties that have been found in the arctic. We might commend the peculiar persistence of these orchids. Orchids are half-epiphytes, clinging to the surfaces of other plants for support; but unlike parasites, their roots have no connection with the host plant. The name "orchid" comes from *orchis*, meaning "testicle" because some people, presumably male, found a similarity in shape. The ancient Greek physician Dioscorides used orchids in the treatment of male sexual problems and to help produce male children. I doubt if he was successful.

2 Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 51. Many of the fundamental ideas mentioned in this essay are articulated fully in this important work.

3 Sarah Lucia Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value* (Palo Alto, CA: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), 29. Hoagland's analysis of heterosexuality is brilliant.

4 For a definitive treatment of this concept, see Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Macmillan, 1987). The following three quotes are shockingly pertinent:

"The political meaning of intercourse for women is the fundamental question of feminism and freedom: can an occupied people—physically occupied inside, internally invaded—be free; can those with a meta-physically compromised privacy have self-determination; can those without a biologically based physical integrity have self-respect?" (123).

"Intercourse occurs in a context of a power relation that is pervasive and incontrovertible. The context in which the act takes place, whatever the meaning of the act in and of itself, is one in which men have social, economic, political, and physical power over women. Some men do not have all those kinds of power over all women; but all men have some kinds of power over all women; and most men have controlling

power over what they call *their* women—the women they fuck. The power is predetermined by gender, by being male" (126).

"How to separate the act of intercourse from the social reality of male power is not clear, especially because it is male power that constructs both the meaning and the current practice of intercourse as such" (127).

5 Charlie Kreiner, "About Men: A Conversation with Charlie Kreiner," *The Breitenbush Newsletter*, Winter-Spring 1990, 23. Kreiner is a practitioner of re-evaluation counseling who currently specializes in men's conditioning. I suspect he would take issue with my analysis.

6 Unless, of course, you are trying to get pregnant. If not, even if the woman uses birth control, using a condom reminds the man that he is responsible for his own body; here, its roles in conception and contagion.

Responses

As an editor trying to publish "feminist" (a word I didn't use) work at a mainstream publishing house (i.e., a hostile environment, for the most part), I have had wonderful opportunities, again, to observe the workings of what your readers understand as patriarchal conditions (and that others simply don't think about at all—*patriarchal* is not a word in common use) at work.

Publishing is an interesting place—where meanings are created and exploited. Some books try to help people make sense of their lives; others try to "force" a sense on people's lives that readers accept (creating financial gain for the publisher and a salary for the editor) or reject (causing the reverse). Some years ago, I signed up Andrea Dworkin's *Letters from a War Zone* and so had occasion to present—to colleagues, salespeople, etc.—radical feminism as something that readers would "accept." As you might guess, this was not easy. At lunch one day, I was having a conversation with one of my colleagues about rape. I suggested that she might be interested in Andrea's book and offered to get her a copy (then in manuscript form). She paused. "No," she said, "I just can't read that. I'm enough of a man-hater as it is. And look where it's gotten me!" (i.e., critical of most men and past partners; currently single and "looking"). "I can't let myself get any angrier. I can't read any further." She is in a state that many women are in, and I was grateful that she'd been honest enough to say more than just "No, thank you," the usual response of women when offered the opportunity to become more intimate with feminist thought in general and Dworkin's work in particular.

Unfortunately the benefits of having a feminist consciousness are not all that evident to most women. It's a state of mind to be detoured around, one that will take them even farther from where they want to be: in a loving, close, "good" relationship with a man. "We" know that's not necessarily true, and all the reasons why, but "we" haven't done a very good job, recently, of putting it into words. As feminists, we must find new and better ways to talk about the positives, the payoffs, of our "raised" consciousness; not just the problems we constantly run into on a daily basis in P.C. (patriarchal culture!). Or else . . . the arctic is going to stay, for the most part, deflowered.

Carole J. DeSanti, New York, NY

First I began thinking about tomatoes (à la orchids) and the fact that hothouse varieties do not have the taste and beauty of the naturally grown variety. . . . I think it is very difficult for women to move toward increasing self-love and empowerment while in a greenhouse, even though it protects them from the arctic of heterosexual relationships. It takes energy to maintain the protected environment—energy that detracts from growth (energy resources aren't infinite). Furthermore it is hard to get the greenhouse climate just right. While you are confined you also aren't free to move about and seek those places that would promote your growth. In other words, a greenhouse is an artificial environment.

I sincerely question whether a woman can reach her full feminist potential in a heterosexual partnership (though I do think being heterosexual and not married may be somewhat different from being heterosexual and married). Escaping—partially or

totally—a heterosexual partnership isn't enough, but it is necessary for growth toward self-love (either get into the greenhouse or get to a place where the greenhouse isn't necessary). I tend to think right now that the more you escape oppressive institutions, the better your potential for becoming a self-loving woman. Since "feminist" isn't a dichotomous notion (there are qualitative differences among feminists), I have no trouble with heterosexuality coexisting with feminism. But I do think there are places of self-love that heterosexual feminists just can't reach because they have to spend time in greenhouses in a hostile climate.

Also, returning to the tomato analogy, there is some difference between hothouse and homegrown tomatoes. Eating hothouse tomatoes reminds me of what can be. I suspect my analogy is breaking down here, because I really do not want to view heterosexual feminists as "worse" than lesbian feminists in the self-love and oppression-resisting categories, and I really don't think they are. It's just that they are different, and awareness of those differences has potential for moving us all to a greater ability to live as self-loving women.

Thinking back on my own experience as a once-married, heterosexual feminist (and now a lesbian feminist), I found I had to leave the arctic greenhouse and move into an environment less fundamentally hostile to my feminism. As the political reality of my oppression became clearer to me (and I was in a marriage that even by many feminist standards would have been considered excellent), I saw oppression everywhere. When I saw it in places that I could do something about (like my marriage, which I could terminate) I had to do it. The arctic greenhouse helped

me to nurture enough self-love to see where I had to go. In that sense the greenhouse experience was a good one. It gave me a sense of direction about what I needed to change.

We all have to construct artificial environments to help us deal with patriarchy. I need a greenhouse to shelter me from the academic (academized) environment where I earn a living. Yet the oppression I feel in academia does not seem so pervasive and fundamental as the oppression of marriage. They are quite different in ways I haven't quite sorted out.

Thanks for this essay. Now I must tell you—I don't really like tomatoes!

Maeona K. Kramer, Sandy, UT

I differ with you on the question of "exceptional" men. I do not believe it is simply denial to believe "some men are different." Some men simply haven't been socialized properly to play their role as dominators, or circumstances have forced them to acquire very different traits. I know a man, for example, the eldest of four, whose parents were killed in a plane crash when he was a teenager. As a result he was forced into a nurturing role and has had many of the same experiences and problems women have—he gave up his career until late in life in order to care for others; he naturally thinks of others before himself; kids are drawn to him.

On the other hand, take me. As an only child, I, like many other only children, was not as thoroughly socialized to my gender role as those around me. In the famous Carol Gilligan/Rohlberg experiment where women don't give firm answers to the question, Should the man steal the drug for his sick wife?, I

was always in the steal-the-drug category. Women hurt other women all the time, yet I know at least one man who has not hurt another in eighteen years. That doesn't mean of course that these men don't slip occasionally into the privilege of the dominant culture. But their basic temperament is of a very different order. I know one man who sees sexist relationships around him more easily than half the women I know, including myself.

Yet your essay raises a more complex issue. Is it really wonderful to live in a state of constant pain, as one would if one thought like you? If you really believe men will always hurt you, I can't see any alternative but separatism. Masochism is not a solution. Women are stronger than that, really! They actually often have loving relationships with women and with men, where they are not in constant pain. We've been given this B.S. about "working at relationships." I've been in a relationship for fifteen years, and in that time have had maybe eight or nine intense arguments. For us, the world is where you fight. Home is the safe harbor. That this relationship happens to be with a man I regard as a fluke, since previously I was involved with women. Incidentally, I have always been the main wage-earner and in many ways the more powerful, though not necessarily the smarter or more psychic one. So I've thrown all categories out the window.

Margot Adler, New York, NY

You've hit the nail right on the head. I am appalled at the escalating violence against women. Several, just in northern Wisconsin, have been killed the last couple of years for trying to leave a relationship. This society, as it is now, provides no protection for women. They are always at the mercy of the stronger

sex, and more and more men are proving to have no mercy at all. I appreciate your list of things to do—they seem clear, concise, and possible!

As I grow older, I value more and more the closeness and sharing of communities of women. We should teach all of our daughters to look for and form these relationships for the strength they give.

E. M. Wheeler, WI

Internal Affairs
Prayers to the Moon
Women Respond to the Men's Movement (editor)

Fugitive Information

**Essays from a
Feminist Hothead**

Kay Leigh Hagan



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