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Separating Lesbian Theory from Feminist Theory

Cheshire Calhoun

Heidi Hartmann once said of the marriage of Marxism and feminism that it “has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: marxism and feminism are one, and that one is marxism.”¹ Lesbian theory and feminism, I want to suggest, are at risk of falling into a similar unhappy marriage in which “the one” is feminism.

Although lesbian feminist theorizing has significantly contributed to feminist thought, it has also generally treated lesbianism as a kind of applied issue. Feminist theories developed outside of the context of lesbianism are brought to bear on lesbianism in order to illuminate the nature of lesbian oppression and women’s relation to women within lesbianism. So, for example, early radical lesbians played off the feminist claim that all male-female relationships are dominance relationships. They argued either that the lesbian is *the* paradigm case of patriarchal resister because she refuses to be heterosexual or that she fits on a continuum of types of patriarchal resisters.² In taking this line, lesbian theorists made a space for lesbianism by focusing on what they took to be the inherently feminist and antipatriarchal nature of lesbian existence. Contemporary lesbian theorists are less inclined to read lesbianism as feminist resistance to male dominance.³ Instead,

1. Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” in *Feminist Frameworks*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenberg, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), p. 172.

2. On the former, see, e.g., Charlotte Bunch, “Lesbians in Revolt,” in her *Passionate Politics, Essays 1968–1986* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1987); and Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992). Regarding the latter, see Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum,” in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender, and Scholarship*, ed. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

3. For instance, Jeffner Allen states in her introduction to the anthology *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, ed. Jeffner Allen (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1990), “The primary emphasis of this book is *lesbian* philosophies and cultures, rather than lesbianism considered in relation to or in contrast to, patriarchy, or heterosexuality” (p. 1).

following the trend that feminist theory has itself taken, the focus has largely shifted to women's relation to women: the presence of ageism, racism, and anti-Semitism among lesbians, the problem of avoiding a totalizing discourse that speaks for all lesbians without being sensitive to differences, the difficulty of creating community in the face of political differences (e.g., on the issue of sadomasochism [s/m]), and the need to construct new conceptions of female agency and female friendship.⁴ All of these are issues that have their birthplace in feminist theory. They become lesbian issues only because the general concern with women's relation to women is narrowed to lesbians' relation to fellow lesbians. Once again, lesbian thought becomes applied feminist thought.

Now, there is nothing wrong with using feminist tools to analyze lesbianism. Indeed, something would be wrong with feminist theory if it could not be usefully applied to lesbianism in a way that both illuminates lesbianism and extends feminist theory itself. And there would surely be something lacking in lesbian thought if it did not make use of feminist insights. My worry is that if this is all that lesbian feminism amounts to then there is no lesbian *theory*. Lesbian theory and feminist theory are one, and that one is feminist theory. What more could one want?

When Hartmann complained that Marxism had swallowed feminism, her point was that because traditional Marxism lacks a notion of sex-class, and thus of patriarchy as a political system distinct from capitalism, it must treat women's oppression as a special case of class oppression. Marxism is of necessity blind to the irreducibly gendered nature of women's lives. A parallel complaint might be raised about feminist theory. To the extent that feminist theory lacks a concept of heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals as members of different sexuality classes and thus of heterosexuality as a political structure separable from patriarchy, feminist theory must treat lesbian oppression as a special case of patriarchal oppression and remain blind to the irreducibly lesbian nature of lesbian lives.

Lesbian feminism is for several reasons at high risk of doing just that. First, the most extensive analyses of heterosexuality available to feminists are those developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Charlotte Bunch, Gayle Rubin, Adrienne Rich, Monique Wittig, and Kate Millett.⁵ Heterosexuality, on this account, is both product and essential

4. See e.g., the recent anthology, Allen, ed., *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*; as well as Sarah Lucia Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1990); and Janice G. Raymond's *A Passion for Friends* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

5. Charlotte Bunch, "Lesbians in Revolt," "Learning from Lesbian Separatism," and "Lesbian-Feminist Theory," all in her *Passionate Politics*; Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic

support of patriarchy. Women's heterosexual orientation perpetuates their social, economic, emotional, and sexual dependence on and accessibility by men. Heterosexuality is thus a system of male ownership of women, participation in which is compulsory for men and especially for women. The lesbian's and heterosexual woman's relation to heterosexuality on this account is fundamentally the same. Both experience it as the demand that women be dependent on and accessible by men. Both are vulnerable to penalties if they resist that demand. Thus heterosexuality is equally compulsory for heterosexual women and lesbians; and compulsory heterosexuality means the same thing for both. There is no specifically lesbian relation to heterosexuality.

Second, lesbian feminists have had to assert their differences from gay men and thus their distance from both the political aims and the self-understanding of the gay movement. The gay rights movement has suffered from at least two defects. On the one hand, in focusing on lesbians' and gays' shared status as sexual deviants, the gay rights movement was unable to address the connection between lesbian oppression and women's oppression. On the other hand, it tended to equate gay with gay male and failed to address the patriarchal attitudes embedded in the gay movement itself.⁶ Making clear the difference between lesbians and gay men meant that lesbian feminists' focus had to be on the experience of lesbians in a patriarchal culture, not on their experience as deviants in a heterosexist culture.

Third, the fact that to be lesbian is to live out of intimate relation with men and in intimate relation with women encourages the reduction of 'lesbian' to 'feminist'.⁷ Early radical feminists were quite explicit about this, claiming that lesbians are the truly woman-identified women. Contemporary lesbian feminists, recognizing that lesbians may share patriarchal attitudes toward women, resist such grand claims. But even if lesbian feminism is no longer at risk of equating being lesbian with being a "true" feminist, the danger remains that it may equate 'lesbian issue' with 'feminist issue'. If what count as lesbian

in Women," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review, 1975); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1969); Rich; Wittig, *The Straight Mind*.

6. See, e.g., Marilyn Frye's critical assessment of the gay rights movement in "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement: Another View of Male Supremacy, Another Separatism," in her *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing, 1983); as well as John Stoltenberg's "Sadomasochism: Eroticized Violence, Eroticized Powerlessness," in *Against Sadomasochism*, ed. Robin Ruth Linden et al. (San Francisco: Frog in the Well, 1982).

7. Charlotte Bunch, e.g., observes that "lesbianism and feminism are both about women loving and supporting women and women revolting against the so-called supremacy of men and the patriarchal institutions that control us" ("Lesbian-Feminist Theory," p. 196).

issues are only those visible through a feminist lens, then lesbian issues will simply be a special class of feminist ones.

Finally, the historical circumstances that gave birth to lesbian feminism had a decided impact on the direction that lesbian feminism took. The first major lesbian feminist statement, "The Woman Identified Woman," was a direct response to Betty Friedan's charge that lesbians posed a "lavender menace" to the women's movement.⁸ In Friedan's and many National Organization for Women (NOW) members' view, the association of feminism with lesbianism, and thus with deviancy, undermined the credibility of women's rights claims. Threatened with ostracism from the women's movement, the Radicalesbians argued in "The Woman Identified Woman" that lesbians, because they love women and refuse to live with or devote their energies to the oppressor, are the paradigm feminists.⁹ The political climate of the 1970s women's movement thus required lesbian feminists to assert their allegiance to feminist aims and values rather than calling attention to lesbians' differences from their heterosexual sisters. It was neither the time nor the place for lesbians to entertain the possibility that heterosexuality might itself be a political system and that heterosexual women and men, as a consolidated and powerful class, might have strong interests in maintaining a system of heterosexual privileges. In affirming their commitment to opposing patriarchy, lesbian feminists instead committed themselves to a specifically feminist account of the interests motivating the maintenance of a heterosexual system: men have patriarchal interests in securing sexual/emotional access to women, and heterosexual women have complicitous interests in securing access to a system of male privileges. This move effectively barred lesbian feminists from asking whether heterosexual women and men have, as heterosexuals, a class interest in constructing heterosexual sex as the only real, nonimitative sex, in eliminating historical, literary, and media representations of lesbians and gay men, in reserving jobs, public accommodations, and private housing for heterosexuals only, in barring lesbians and gay men from access to children in the educational system, children's service organizations, and adoption and artificial insemination agencies, in reducing lesbianism and homosexuality to biologically or psychodevelopmentally rooted urges while propagating the myth of a magical heterosexual romantic love, and in securing for the married heterosexual couple exclusive pride of place in the social

8. For brief historical discussions of this event, see Shane Phelan's "The Woman-identified Woman," in her *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and Terralee Bensinger's "Lesbian Pornography: The Re/Making of (a) Community," *Discourse* 15 (1992): 69–93.

9. Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt et al. (New York: Quandrangle, 1973).

world. Nor could or did lesbian feminists ask whether these privileges taken as a set could provide a sufficient motivating interest for maintaining a heterosexual system even in the absence of patriarchy.

For all four reasons, treating sexual orientation on a par with gender, race, and economic class—that is, as a distinct and irreducible dimension of one's political identity—may not come naturally to lesbian feminist thinking. But separating sexuality politics from gender politics is exactly what must happen if there is to be a specifically *lesbian* feminist theory rather than simply feminist theory applied to lesbians. A lesbian feminist theory would need, among other things, to focus on what is distinctive about the lesbian's relation to heterosexuality, to the category 'woman', and to other women. That is, it would need to put into clear view the difference between being a lesbian who resists heterosexuality, being a woman, and loving men rather than women and being a feminist who resists the same things.

In what follows, I will be arguing that, like patriarchy and capitalism, or white imperialism, patriarchy and heterosexual dominance are two, in principle, separable systems. Even where they work together, it is possible conceptually to pull the patriarchal aspect of male-female relationships apart from their heterosexual dimensions. In arguing for the conceptual separability of the political structure of heterosexuality from patriarchy, I hope to establish two main points. First, lesbianism ought not to be read solely as resistance to patriarchal male-female relationships. One misses a good deal of what it means to live life as a lesbian as well as much of the political significance of lesbian practices by doing so. Second, even if empirically and historically heterosexual dominance and patriarchy are completely intertwined, it does not follow from this fact that the collapse of patriarchy will bring about the collapse of heterosexual dominance.¹⁰ Heterosexual society may simply adapt to new social conditions. Thus it is a mistake for feminists to assume that work to end gender subordination will have as much payoff for lesbians as it would for heterosexual women. Only a political strategy that keeps clearly in mind the duality of the heterosexual-patriarchal structure, as well as the potential for conflict between feminist and lesbian strategies, could have such a payoff.

In making this argument, I will take the category 'woman' and the institution of heterosexuality in turn. My aim in both cases is to illustrate the difference between being a lesbian and being a feminist, between lesbian politics and feminist politics, and to sketch the directions that I think lesbian theory would need to go in order to make a

10. I thank Ann Ferguson for pointing out that capitalism and patriarchy are empirically and historically intertwined, even if conceptually separate, and for suggesting that the same might be true of the heterosexual and patriarchal aspects of male/female relationships.

space for fully lesbian theorizing within feminist thought. I begin with the category 'woman'.

THE LESBIAN NOT-WOMAN

Monique Wittig ends "The Straight Mind" with this sentence: "Lesbians are not women."¹¹ Wittig denies that 'man' and 'woman' are natural categories, arguing instead that the two sex-classes—men, women—are the product of heterosexual social relations in which "men appropriate for themselves the reproduction and production of women and also their physical persons by means of a contract called the marriage contract."¹² Thus, "it is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary."¹³ Lesbians, however, refuse to participate in heterosexual social relations. Like runaway slaves who refuse to have their labor appropriated by white masters, lesbians are runaways who refuse to allow men to control their productive and reproductive labor within a nuclear family. Thus Wittig observes, "Lesbianism is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation ('forced residence,' domestic corvée, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual."¹⁴ What I want to highlight in Wittig's explanation of what bars lesbians from the category 'woman' is that it claims both too much and too little for lesbians as well as reads lesbianism from a peculiarly heterosexual viewpoint. To say that only lesbians exist beyond sex categories (in Wittig's particular sense of what this means) claims too much for lesbians. If to be a woman just means living in a relation of servitude to men, there will be other ways short of lesbianism of evading the category 'woman'. The heterosexual celibate, virgin, single-parent head of household, marriage resister, or the married woman who insists on an egalitarian marriage contract all apparently qualify as escapees from the category 'woman'.¹⁵

11. Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, p. 32.

12. Monique Wittig, "The Category of Sex," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, p. 6.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

14. Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, p. 20.

15. This point has been made by a number of authors, including Marilyn Frye ("Some Reflections on Separatism and Power," in *The Politics of Reality*) and Kathryn Pyne Addelson ("Words and Lives," *Signs* 7 [1981]: 187–99).

Although Wittig does remark that runaway wives are also escaping their sex class, she clearly thought that lesbians are in some special sense *not women*. But her own analysis does not capture lesbians' special deviancy from the category 'woman'. There is indeed no conceptual space in Wittig's framework for pursuing the question of how a heterosexual woman's refusal to be a woman differs from a lesbian's refusal to be a woman. It is in that failure that she claims too little for lesbians. Because lesbians and heterosexual resisters must have, on her account, the same relation to the category 'woman', there can be no interesting differences between the two. This, I think, is a mistake, and I will argue in a moment that lesbians are in a quite special sense not-women.

Finally, to equate lesbians' escape from heterosexuality and the category 'woman' with escape from male control is to adopt a peculiarly heterosexual viewpoint on lesbianism. The fact that heterosexuality enables men to control women's domestic labor is something that would be salient only to a *heterosexual* woman. Only heterosexual women do housework for men, raise children for men, have their domiciles determined by men, and so on. Thus, from a heterosexual standpoint lesbianism may indeed appear to offer a liberating escape from male control. But from the standpoint of a woman unaccustomed to living with men, that is, from a lesbian standpoint, lesbianism is not about a refusal to labor for men. Nor is heterosexuality experienced primarily as a form of male dominance over women, but instead as heterosexual dominance over lesbians and gay men. Nor is the daily experience of lesbianism one of liberation but, instead, one of acute oppression.

Because Wittig looks at lesbianism from a (heterosexual) feminist perspective, asking how lesbians escape the kinds of male control to which paradigmatically heterosexual women are subject, she misses the penalties attached to lesbians' exit from heterosexuality. Indeed, contrary to Wittig's claim, the lesbian may as a rule have *less* control over her productive and reproductive labor than her married heterosexual sister. Although the lesbian escapes whatever control *individual* men may exercise over their wives within marriage, she does not thereby escape control of her productive and reproductive labor either in her personal life with another woman or in her public life. To refuse to be heterosexual is simply to leap out of the frying pan of individual patriarchal control into the fire of institutionalized heterosexual control. Wittig's claim that "lesbianism provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely" vastly underestimates the coercive forces brought to bear on the lesbian for her lesbianism.¹⁶

16. Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," p. 20.

She may be unable to adopt children or be denied custody of and visiting privileges to her children. In order to retain her job, she will most likely have to hide her lesbianism and pretend to be heterosexual. She will likely be punished for public displays of affection. She may be denied the housing of her choice or be forced to move from her home as a result of harassment by neighbors. If she is "out," she will find herself alternately abused and subjected to lascivious interest by heterosexual men. Even if she is no longer at risk of being burned at the stake or subjected to clitoridectomy or electroshock, she may still be subjected to "therapies" that insist that she cannot be both lesbian and a healthy, mature adult. She will be labeled a dyke and scrutinized for symptoms of mannishness in her anatomy, dress, behavior, and interests. She will not see her lesbian sexuality or romantic love for another woman reflected in the public media. And both because there are no publicly accessible models of lesbian relationships and because such coercive pressure is brought to bear against lesbian relationships, sustaining a stable personal life will be very difficult. The lesbian may be free from an individual man in her personal life, but she is not free.

What these criticisms suggest is, first, that the political structure that oppresses heterosexual women is patriarchy; but the political structure that most acutely oppresses lesbians is more plausibly taken to be heterosexuality. Second, these criticisms suggest that heterosexual women's (especially heterosexual feminists') and lesbians' relation to the category 'woman' are not the same.

From a feminist point of view, the problem with the category 'woman' is not so much that there is one. The problem lies in its specific construction within patriarchal society. 'Woman' has been constructed as the Other and the deficient in relation to 'man'. To 'woman' have been assigned all those traits that would both rationalize and perpetuate women's lack of power in relation to men. Women are weak, passive, dependent, emotional, irrational, nurturant, closer to nature, maternal, and so on. This is to say that, from a feminist point of view, the problem with the category 'woman' is that 'woman' has been equated with subordination to men. The feminist task, then, is to rupture that equation. With the exception of early liberal feminists' recommendation of androgyny and possibly contemporary French feminists' deconstruction of 'woman', the feminist project has not been the elimination of the category 'woman'. Instead, the project has been one of reconstructing that category. That reconstructive project has had two phases within feminism. The first phase tried to reconstruct the category 'woman' so that it could no longer be used to rationalize male dominance. So, for example, some feminine traits were rejected, others, such as nurturance, were revalued and/or redefined, and some masculine traits (e.g., strength) were appropriated with or without

redefinition.¹⁷ The more recent phase has been devoted to reconstructing the category 'woman' employed within feminism itself so that it cannot be used to rationalize white, middle-class, college-educated, heterosexual, Christian women's dominance within feminism.¹⁸ This latter reconstruction has required the postulate of multiple categories of 'woman' to capture the intersection of gender with other political identities.¹⁹

The feminist experience of her relation to the category 'woman', thus, has been the experience of *being* a woman in a male dominant, as well as racist and classist, society, which imposes on her a conception of what it means to be a woman that she rejects. Her refusal to be a woman has extended only to refusal to be the kind of woman that a patriarchal, racist, and classist society demands that she be. And that refusal has gone hand in hand with claiming the category 'woman' (or categories of 'women') for herself and insisting on a woman-identified construction of that category.

This is not the lesbian relation to the category 'woman'. Although partly mistaken, I think, in her reasons, Wittig was correct to say that to be lesbian is to exit the category 'woman' altogether. It is to be ungendered, unsexed, neither woman nor man. This is because (here following Wittig) sex/gender is the result of institutionalized heterosexuality.²⁰ Heterosexual systems are ones that organize reproduction via *heterosexual* practice. That practice requires the production of two sex/genders so that sexual desire can be heterosexualized. It also requires that sex/gender map onto reproductive differences. Thus, within heterosexual systems, "intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire."²¹ Individuals who violate the unity of reproductive anatomy, heterosexual desire, and

17. Joyce Trebilcock neatly summarizes these reconstructive strategies in "Conceiving Women: Notes on the Logic of Feminism," *Sinister Wisdom*, vol. 11 (1979), reprinted in *Women and Values: Readings in Recent Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1986).

18. See, e.g., Marilyn Frye's "A Response to *Lesbian Ethics: Why Ethics?*" in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); and Elizabeth V. Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).

19. Spelman argues elegantly for the necessity of multiple categories in *Inessential Woman*.

20. I use 'sex/gender' rather than 'gender' throughout the argument that lesbians are not-women in order to avoid implying that what makes lesbians not-women is simply their gender deviance (e.g., their butchness or refusal to be subordinate to men). I want to stress instead that lesbians are not clearly female. It is sex deviance combined with gender deviance that I think results in lesbians' exit from the category 'woman'.

21. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 17.

gender behavior fall out of the domain of intelligible gender identity. At best, lesbians are not-women. That is, for them the closest available category of sex/gender identity is one that does not fit. Neither anatomy nor desire nor gender can link her securely to the category 'woman'. Within heterosexist ideology her anatomy itself is suspect. Much was made, for example, in the sexologists' literature of physical masculinity in the lesbian, including reports of an enlarged clitoris. The postulate of a biological basis of homosexuality and lesbianism continues to guide research today. And many lesbians' insistence on having been born lesbian reinforces such suspicions about anatomical differences from heterosexual women. In addition, her anatomy cannot link her to 'woman' because what lesbianism reveals is the fundamental lie that differences in male and female anatomy destine a difference in males' and females' sexual and social relation to females, that is, destine one to be functionally a man or a woman. The lesbian's female body in no way bars her from functioning as a man in relation to women. She shares with members of the category 'man' a sexual desire for and love of women. Also, the very traits that Wittig took to be definitive of 'man'—the enactment of masculine dominance over women, physically, psychologically, socially, and economically—are an option for her in a way that they are not an option for heterosexual women. The lesbian thus exits the category of 'woman', though without thereby entering the category 'man'.

Gender-deviant heterosexual women (i.e., women who resist patriarchal understandings of what it means to be a woman) do not similarly exit the category 'woman'. Gender deviance would result in not-woman status only if the content of the category 'woman' were fully exhausted by a description, such as Wittig's, of what it means to be a woman. I have been suggesting, on the contrary, that heterosexuality is a critical component of the category 'woman'. Heterosexuality secures one's status as a "natural" woman, which is to say, as having a body whose sex as female is above suspicion. Heterosexuality also guarantees a significant nonidentity between one's own and men's relation to women. The heterosexual woman will not have a sexual, romantic, marital, coparenting relation to other women; she will have instead a *woman's* relation to women. Thus even in her gender deviance, the heterosexual resister of patriarchally defined gender remains unambiguously a woman.

Because the lesbian stands outside the category 'woman', her experience of womanliness and its oppressive nature is not identical to that of the heterosexual feminist, who stands within the category 'woman', even if resistantly. Womanliness is not something the lesbian has the option of refusing or reconstructing for a better fit. It is a fundamental impossibility for her. To be a not-woman is to be incapable of *being* a woman within heterosexual society. The lesbian can thus be womanly

only in the modes of being in drag and of passing. And if she experiences womanliness—the demand that she look like a woman, act like a woman—as oppressive, it is not because womanliness requires subordination to men (although this may also be her experience). It is instead because the demand that she be womanly is the demand that she pretend that the sex/gender ‘woman’ is a natural possibility for her and that she pass as a woman. It is thus also a demand that she not reveal the nonexhaustiveness and, potentially, the nonnaturalness of the binary categories ‘woman’ and ‘man’.

The lesbian experience of her relation to the category ‘woman’, thus, is the experience of being a not-woman in a heterosexual society that compels everyone to be either a woman or a man and requires that she be a woman.²² It is also the experience of being oppressed by a womanliness that denies her desire for women, and of being deviantly outside of sex/gender categories. That deviancy is harshly punished. In an attempt to compel her back into the category ‘woman’, her lesbian desire and unwomanly relation to women are punished or treated. At the same time, she is denied the heterosexual privileges to which “real” women have access.

From a lesbian perspective, the category ‘woman’ is oppressive because, within heterosexual societies, that category is compulsory for all anatomically female individuals. Feminist reconstructions of ‘woman’ do not typically challenge compulsory sex/gender. They implicitly assume that ‘woman’ and ‘man’ exhaust the field of possible sorts of persons to be (even if it takes multiple categories of each to exhaust the taxonomy). Furthermore, insofar as lesbians are automatically and uncritically subsumed under the feminist category ‘woman’, feminist theorizing presumes that membership in that category is determined by anatomy and ignores the extent to which the femaleness of the lesbian body is suspect. The lesbian objection to being a woman is not met by admissions that the category ‘woman’ as well as what it means to be anatomically female are open to social construction and reconstruction. Nor is it met by the suggestion that there is no single category ‘woman’ but instead multiple categories of women. From a lesbian perspective, what has to be challenged is heterosexual society’s demand that females be women. For that demand denies the lesbian option. The lesbian option is to be a not-woman, where being a not-woman is played out by insisting on being neither identifiably woman nor man, or by enacting femininity as drag, or by insisting on switching gender categories and thus being a man, which within patriarchy means being dominant in relation to women and potentially also misogynistic.

22. Frye quite vividly describes the phenomenon of compulsory sex/gender in “Sexism,” in *The Politics of Reality*.

Failure to see the difference between feminist and lesbian relations to the category 'woman' may well result in mislocating lesbian politics and failing to see the potential friction between feminist and lesbian politics. I take the feminist critique of butch and femme lesbianism as a case in point. On that critique, both the lesbian appropriation of femininity by femmes (and more recently by lipstick lesbians) and the lesbian appropriation of masculinity through butch sexual-social dominance repeat between women the power politics and misogyny that typifies male-female relations in a patriarchal society. Julia Penelope, for instance, argues that "those aspects of behavior and appearance labeled 'femininity' in HP [heteropatriarchy] are dangerous for us. We still live *in* a heteropatriarchy and Lesbians who incorporate male ideas of appropriate female behaviors into their lives signal their acceptance of the HP version of reality."²³ In particular, the feminine lesbian confirms heteropatriarchy's acceptance of the feminine woman and rejection of any trace of mannishness in women.

From a feminist point of view there is no way of rendering politically harmless the appropriation of a role that requires sexual-social passivity and subordination, even if the appropriation is by a not-woman and even if she is not passive or subordinate primarily in relation to men. Here the argument against femininity in lesbians directly parallels the argument against the masochist role in lesbian s/m. The femme's and masochist's appeal to the voluntariness of their choices, the privacy of their practices, and the pleasure they derive from femininity and masochism, respectively, do not go all the way toward making what they do purely personal. Both femininity and female masochism acquire their meaning from what Penelope calls "heteropatriarchal semantics" as well as from the historical and material conditions of women's oppression. Those meanings cannot be dissolved at will.²⁴ To adopt either femininity or female masochism for oneself is to make use of a set of meanings produced through and sustained by men's oppression of women. It is thus to reveal one's personal failure to come to critical grips with the politics of women's position within patriarchy. Even if the femme's or masochist's personal choices are not political in the sense that they also publicly endorse femininity or masochism in women, they are still political in the sense that they make use of public meanings which are tied to gender politics.

23. Julia Penelope, "Heteropatriarchal Semantics and Lesbian Identity: The Ways a Lesbian Can Be," in her *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing, 1992).

24. For critical discussions of the meanings employed within s/m, see esp. Susan Leigh Star, "Swastikas: The Street and the University," in Linden et al., eds.; and Stoltenberg.

Nor, the feminist critic might add, can the appropriation of masculine dominance, aggression, and misogyny be rendered politically harmless. What the butch (as well as the sadist in lesbian s/m) confirms is the patriarchal equation of power with sexual dominance and superiority with masculinity. Janice Raymond's caustic remarks about lesbian s/m might equally express the feminist critique of butch-femme roles: "It is difficult to see what is so advanced or progressive about a position that locates 'desire,' and that imprisons female sexual dynamism, vitality, and vigor, in old forms of sexual objectification, subordination, and violence, this time initiated by women and done with women's consent. The libertarians offer a supposed sexuality stripped naked of feminine taboo, but only able to dress itself in masculine garb. It is a male-constructed sexuality in drag."²⁵

I have no intention of disagreeing with the claim that butch-femme role-playing runs contrary to feminist politics. What I do intend to take issue with is the assumption that feminist politics are necessarily lesbian politics. Judith Butler gives a quite different reading of the multiple appropriations of femininity and masculinity within the lesbian/gay community by butches, femmes, queens, dykes, and gay male girls. It is a reading that I take to be closer to a lesbian perspective, even if farther from a feminist one.

What the feminist critique omits is the fact that "Within lesbian contexts, the 'identification' with masculinity that appears as butch identity is not a simple assimilation of lesbianism back into the terms of heterosexuality. As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls. . . . As a result, that masculinity, if that it can be called, is always brought into relief against a culturally intelligible 'female body'. It is precisely this dissonant juxtaposition and the sexual tension that its transgression generates that constitute the object of desire."²⁶ It is also precisely this dissonant juxtaposition of masculinity and female body that enables the butch to enact a comedic parody of masculinity that denaturalizes the category 'man'. Heterosexual society assumes that masculinity is naturally united to the male body and desire for women. Similarly, it assumes that femininity is naturally united to the female body and desire for men. Butler argues, however, that gender identity is not natural but the result of continuous gender performances. One can be a man, for example, only by continuously performing masculinity and desire for women through a male body.

25. Janice G. Raymond, "Putting the Politics Back into Lesbianism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 12 (1989): 149–56.

26. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 123. For additional discussion of the creation of an apparently natural gender identity through repetitive gender performances, see Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

Heterosexual society sustains the illusion of natural gender identities—‘heterosexual man’, ‘heterosexual woman’—by outlawing alternative performances. The butch lesbian gives an outlawed performance. She performs masculinity and desire for women through a female body. The butch gay man similarly gives an outlawed performance by performing masculinity in tandem with desire for men through a male body. Such multiple locations of masculinity—on the heterosexual male body, the lesbian body, the gay man’s body—help create a condition in which “after a while, everyone starts to look like a drag queen.”²⁷ The categories ‘woman’ and ‘man’ cease to appear natural. Without such clearly natural or original gender identities, lesbians’ subordinate status cannot be rationalized on the grounds that lesbians are unnatural, imitative beings. And, one might add, the exclusively heterosexual organization of sexuality, romantic love, marriage, and the family begin to appear arbitrary.

Because challenging heterosexual dominance and compulsory compliance with heterosexual sex/gender categories depends on deviant performances that reconfigure the elements of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, Butler rejects feminist attempts to “outlaw” butch and femme lesbian identities.

Lesbianism that defines itself in radical exclusion from heterosexuality deprives itself of the capacity to resignify the very heterosexual constructs by which it is partially and inevitably constituted. As a result, that lesbian strategy would consolidate compulsory heterosexuality in its oppressive forms.

The more insidious and effective strategy it seems is a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves.²⁸

Terralee Bensinger gives a similar reading of butch-femme representations within lesbian pornography. Like Butler, she stresses the political significance of displacing “traditional heterosexual postures” of masculinity and femininity from their supposedly natural home on the heterosexual couple’s bodies to the lesbian couple’s bodies.²⁹ “The important thing here is that the reworking of these codes, within a lesbian context, de-naturalizes the illusion of a ‘natural’ heterosexuality (where such codes are ‘appropriately’ attached to female and male bodies in a sex/gender suture).”³⁰ In her view, however, the effective-

27. Quote of the week from Allan Berubé in *City on a Hill* 26, no. 30 (1992): 10. In “Sexism,” Frye similarly comments that “heterosexual critics of queers’ ‘role-playing’ ought to look at themselves in the mirror on their way out for a night on the town to see who’s in drag. The answer is, everybody is” (p. 29).

28. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 128.

29. Bensinger, p. 84.

30. *Ibid.*

ness of butch-femme representations depends not only upon the displacement of masculinity and femininity onto nonheterosexual bodies but also upon their shifting and ambivalent inscription on lesbian bodies. When elements of masculinity and femininity appear on the same body or shift back and forth between the bodies of the lesbian couple, gender is most fully destabilized and denaturalized.

But have Butler and Bensinger really responded to the *feminist* critique of butch-femme role-playing? I think not. A feminist might well raise the following objection: butch and femme lesbianism may indeed undermine heterosexual society. It does not follow, however, that butch-femme lesbianism undermines patriarchy. The original objection still stands: butch lesbianism leaves in place the patriarchal equation of masculinity with power and dominance, while femme lesbianism leaves in place the patriarchal equation of femininity with weakness and subordination. Butler's, and perhaps also Bensinger's, political program would at best simply replace heterosexuality-based patriarchy (male power), with masculinity-based patriarchy (masculine power). Under masculinity-based patriarchy, anatomical females and males would have an equal opportunity to appropriate masculine power over feminine individuals, who themselves could be either anatomically male or female.

What the disagreement between Butler and many feminists reveals is the fact that challenging heterosexual society and challenging patriarchy are not the same thing. The feminist political opposition to patriarchal power relations disables lesbians from effectively challenging heterosexual society. The lesbian political opposition to compulsory heterosexual gender performances disables feminists from effectively challenging patriarchal society. But neither Butler nor feminists who critique butch and femme lesbians see this. Both assume the *identity* of feminist politics and lesbian politics. This is simply a mistake. Heterosexuality and patriarchy are analytically distinct social systems, just as capitalism and patriarchy are distinct. Patriarchy can survive just as easily in a nonheterosexual society as it can in a noncapitalist society. Butch-femme culture is a case in point. On the flip side, heterosexuality can survive in a nonpatriarchal society. Heterosexual societies simply require that masculinity be united with a male body and desire for women and that femininity be united with a female body and desire for men. Heterosexual systems do *not* depend on femininity and masculinity being defined and valued the way they are in patriarchal societies. Matriarchies are heterosexual systems.³¹

Given this, one should expect that feminist politics and lesbian politics, though typically overlapping, may sometimes part company.

31. Wittig makes this point in "One Is Not Born a Woman," p. 10.

Moreover, when those politics do conflict, there is no reason to expect that feminist lesbians will or should give priority to feminist politics. Being a woman (or better, being mistaken for a woman) and being oppressed as a woman are often not the most important facts in a lesbian's life. Being a lesbian and being oppressed as a lesbian often matter more.

WHICH HETEROSEXUALITY?

I said at the beginning that one main reason why 'lesbian issue' tends to collapse into 'feminist issue' is that the most well-developed model of heterosexuality available to lesbian feminist theorizing is one that takes heterosexuality to be both product and essential support of patriarchy. The Radicalesbians, Monique Wittig, Charlotte Bunch, Adrienne Rich, and more recently Marilyn Frye all take this view.³² On this feminist reading of heterosexuality, what defines heterosexuality is the requirement that women be in a dependent and subordinate relation to men. I have already argued that looking at heterosexuality this way results in claiming too much for lesbians. Lesbianism is mistakenly read as the quintessential form of feminist revolt. I intend to begin this section by expanding on the argument against reducing the institution of heterosexuality to (a part of) the institution of male dominance. I will then turn to Janice Raymond's and Sarah Hoagland's feminist attempts to avoid claiming too much for lesbians. Their strategy involves locating the political problem in a particular *style* of heterosexualist interaction rather than in heterosexuality itself. This strategy, I will argue, results in claiming too little for lesbians by denying that there is anything intrinsically political in lesbians' revolt against the rule of heterosexuality. I will conclude with a quite different reading of heterosexuality, one that I take to be closer to a lesbian view, if farther from a feminist one.

Heterosexuality as Male Dominance

Heterosexuality, in Wittig's view, is a political and economic system of male dominance. The heterosexual social contract (to which only men have consented) stipulates that women belong to men. In particular, women's reproductive labor, including both child rearing and domestic chores, belongs to men by "natural" right much as a slave's labor belongs to its master's by natural right. It is thus heterosexuality that enables men to appropriate women's labor and that supports a system of male dominance. In Wittig's view, lesbian refusal to be heterosexual challenges this system of male dominance because being lesbian funda-

32. Marilyn Frye, "Willful Virgin or Do You Have to Be a Lesbian to Be a Feminist?" in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing, 1992).

mentally means refusing to accept the "economic, ideological and political power of men."³³ Wittig's equation of lesbian resistance with feminist resistance is both obvious and explicit. She claims that to be a feminist is to fight for the disappearance of the sex-class 'woman' by refusing to participate in the heterosexual relations that created the sex-class 'woman' in the first place.³⁴ To be a feminist just *is* to be a lesbian.

In "Lesbians in Revolt," Charlotte Bunch similarly equates heterosexuality with male control over women's labor; and like Wittig, she regards lesbianism as a political revolt against a system in which neither a woman nor her labor belong to herself. "The lesbian . . . refuses to be a man's property, to submit to the unpaid labor system of housework and childcare. She rejects the nuclear family as the basic unit of production and consumption in capitalist society."³⁵ In Bunch's view, commitment to heterosexuality is necessarily a commitment to supporting a male world, and thus a barrier to struggle against women's oppression. "Being a lesbian means ending identification with, allegiance to, dependence on, and support of heterosexuality. It means ending your personal stake in the male world so that you join women individually and collectively in the struggle to end oppression."³⁶

At least two different objections might be raised to Wittig's and Bunch's implicit claim that one must be a lesbian to be a feminist. First, lesbianism only challenges male control of women in the family. But women's labor power is also extensively controlled in the public sphere through male bosses, absence of maternity leave, sexual harassment, the job requirement of an "appropriately" feminine appearance, insufficient availability of day care, sex segregation of women into lower paid jobs, and so on. As Ann Ferguson observes, enforced heterosexuality "may be one of the mechanisms [of male dominance], but it surely is not the single or sufficient one. Others, such as the control of female biological reproduction, male control of state and political power, and economic systems involving discrimination based on class and race, seem analytically distinct from coercive heterosexuality, yet are causes which support and perpetuate male dominance."³⁷ Moreover, given both the decline of male power within the nuclear family and of the nuclear family itself, one might well claim that the

33. Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," p. 13.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

35. Bunch, "Lesbians in Revolt," p. 165.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

37. Ann Ferguson, "Patriarchy, Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution," in Ann Ferguson, Jacquelyn N. Zita, and Kathryn Pyne Addelson, "Viewpoint: On 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence': Defining the Issues," *Signs* 7 (1981): 147-88, p. 159.

public control of women's productive and reproductive labor is far more critical to the maintenance of patriarchy than the private control of women's labor within the nuclear family.

While the first objection focuses on the way that lesbianism may not be the only or even most fundamental means of resisting patriarchy, a second objection focuses on the fact that the kind of resistance being claimed for lesbians in fact belongs generally to feminists. As an empirical generalization about heterosexual relations, it is true that men continue to exercise control over women's private and public work lives. As Wittig might put it, it "goes without saying" in the heterosexual social contract that women will assume primary responsibility for child rearing and domestic labor, that they will adjust their public work lives to the exigencies of their male partner's, and that they will be at least partially economically dependent on their male partner's income. But there are any number of ways of evading the terms of this contract without ceasing to be heterosexual. Thus the claim that heterosexual relations are male dominant ones is insufficient to support the claim that only lesbians are genuine resisters. Indeed, the heterosexual feminist who insists on a more equal partnership may resist patriarchy more effectively than many lesbians. As both Janice Raymond and Sarah Hoagland have argued, the importation of hetero-relations into lesbian relationships enables patriarchal ways of thinking to be sustained within lesbian relationships themselves.³⁸

Heterosexualism versus Heterosexuality

Both Raymond and Hoagland avoid equating 'lesbian' with 'feminist' by distinguishing heterosexuality from 'hetero-relations' (Raymond) and 'heterosexualism' (Hoagland). Within their writing, 'heterosexuality' retains its customary referent to sexual object choice. 'Hetero-relations' and 'heterosexualism' refer to the patriarchal nature of male-female relations in both the private and public spheres. According to Raymond, in a hetero-relational society, "most of women's personal, social, political, professional, and economic relations are defined by the ideology that woman is for man."³⁹ Hoagland similarly claims that heterosexualism "is a particular economic, political, and emotional relationship between men and women: men must dominate women and women must subordinate themselves to men in any number of ways. As a result, men presume access to women while women remain riveted on men and are unable to sustain a community of women."⁴⁰ It is, in their view, hetero-relationalism, not heterosexuality, per se, that subordinates women to men.

38. Hoagland.

39. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends*, p. 11.

40. Hoagland, p. 29.

By distinguishing hetero-relations and heterosexualism from heterosexuality Raymond and Hoagland avoid exaggerating the feminist element in lesbianism. Both recognize the potential failure of lesbians to disengage from heterosexualism. Lesbians themselves may be misogynistic and may engage in the same dominance-subordinance relations that typify heterosexualism. Thus lesbian resistance to heterosexuality is not automatically a resistance to patriarchy. Because Raymond and Hoagland are sensitive to this fact, they are able to subject lesbian relations to feminist critique in a productive way. In addition, by recognizing that heterosexual women can redefine their relations to men in such a way that they both leave space for gyn-affectionate relations with women and refuse to participate in hetero-relations with men, Raymond avoids pitting lesbians against heterosexual women within the feminist community in a battle over who counts as a "true" feminist.

Their attempt, however, to avoid claiming too much for lesbianism comes at the cost of ultimately claiming too little for it. By putting the concept of hetero-relations or heterosexualism at the center of their lesbian feminism, both effectively eliminate space for a *lesbian* theory. Within their work, lesbian resistance to heterosexuality does not, in itself, have either political or conceptual significance. Whatever political significance lesbian personal lives may have is due entirely to the presence of or resistance to hetero-relations within those lives. The reduction of lesbian politics to feminist politics is quite obvious in Raymond's "Putting the Politics Back into Lesbianism."⁴¹ There, Raymond sharply criticizes lesbian lifestylers and sexual libertarians for failure to see that in advocating an anything-goes sexuality (including lesbian pornography and s/m) as the path to liberation, they are simply repeating the patriarchal image of woman as essentially sexual being. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, insofar as lesbian lifestylers advocate aggressive and violent forms of sexuality, they are simply putting a "male-constructed sexuality in drag."⁴² What I want to underscore in Raymond's critique is that putting politics into lesbianism means putting *feminist* politics into lesbianism. She does not demand that lesbians put resistance to heterosexuality and to lesbian oppression at the center of their lives. Thus she does not ask whether or not lesbian s/m promotes *lesbian* politics.

One important consequence of equating lesbian with feminist politics in this way is that lesbians who have suffered the worst oppression, for example, the 1950s butches and femmes who risked repeated arrest and police harassment, often turn out to be the least politically

41. Raymond, "Putting the Politics Back into Lesbianism." See also her criticisms of lesbian s/m in the chapter "Obstacles to Female Friendship," in *A Passion for Friends*.

42. Raymond, "Putting the Politics Back into Lesbianism," p. 150.

interesting from a feminist point of view. Shane Phelan's criticism of Adrienne Rich for marginalizing "real" lesbians who resisted heterosexuality and for giving nonlesbians who resisted dependency on men pride of place on her lesbian continuum applies generally to those who equate lesbian politics with feminist politics: "It becomes clear that the existence of these women [lesbians], those who have been targets of abuse for decades, is less interesting to lesbian feminists than the existence of women who never called themselves lesbians, never thought of themselves as such, and never faced the consequences of that. The sort of lesbian who laid the groundwork, built the urban subcultures, that allowed lesbians to find one another before feminism, is remembered primarily in the works of male historians. The relevant community is lesbian feminist, with the emphasis, curiously, on the feminist rather than the lesbian."⁴³

From a feminist point of view whose political yardstick measures only distance from patriarchal practices and institutions, butches and femmes, lesbian sex radicals who promote pornography and s/m, lesbian mothers, and married lesbians all fail to measure up. All are vulnerable to the charge of appropriating for women and between women the very practices and institutions that have served so well to oppress women. Yet it is precisely these women, who insist on the reality and value of romance, sexuality, parenting, and marriage between women, who resist most strongly heterosexual society's reservation of the private sphere for male-female couples only. From a lesbian point of view whose political yardstick measures resistance to heterosexuality and heterosexual privilege, they are neither politically uninteresting nor assimilationist.

Not only does this focus on heterosexualism rather than heterosexuality leave no space for understanding the inherently political nature of lesbianism, it also leaves no space for understanding the significance of specifically lesbian love. For instance, like Rich's notion of a lesbian continuum that includes both lesbians and heterosexual women, Raymond's "use of the term *Gyn/affection* expresses a *continuum* of female friendship" that includes some (but not all) lesbian love as well as friendships between heterosexual women.⁴⁴ In her view, it is in gyn/affection that women seize power from men and engage in a woman-identified act. Thus it is gyn/affection that is politically significant. Specifically lesbian sexual and romantic attraction to women is left without any politically or conceptually interesting place to be. Raymond is by no means the first or only lesbian feminist to marginalize lesbian love in favor of a form of love between women that is

43. Phelan, p. 69.

44. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends*, p. 15.

more directly tied to feminist solidarity. Bunch, for example, claims that “the lesbian, woman-identified-woman commits herself to women not only as an alternative to oppressive male-female relationships but primarily because she *loves* women.”⁴⁵ That this is not a particularized conception of love but rather feminist “love” of women as a class becomes clear in the way she connects lesbian love with class solidarity: “When women do give primary energies to other women, then it is possible to concentrate fully on building a movement for our liberation.”⁴⁶ In a more recent piece, Nett Hart similarly equates lesbian love with love of women as a class: “We love women as a class and we love specific women. We embrace the concept that women can be loved, that women are inherently worthy of love.”⁴⁷ In both Bunch and Hart, there is a conceptual slide from ‘love’ in the sense of a sexual-romantic love of a particular woman to ‘love’ in the sense of valuing and respecting members of the category ‘woman’. Although Raymond differs in being much more careful to keep the two sorts of love conceptually separated, all three prioritize love of women as a class. From a feminist point of view it is indeed the capacity to value members of the category ‘woman’ and to form strong primary bonds of friendship with many women that matters politically. But this is not lesbian love. Lesbians fall in love with, want to make love to, decide to set up a household with a particular other woman, not a class of women. It is for this particularized, sexualized love that lesbians are penalized in heterosexual society. Because of this, lesbian theory needs to move specifically lesbian love to the center of its political stage.

None of these remarks are intended either to undercut the value for feminists of work being done by lesbians or the need to subject lesbian practice to feminist critique. They are meant to suggest that a full-blown lesbian feminism cannot afford to reduce the political institution of heterosexuality to an institution of male dominance.

Heterosexuality as a Political System

I have been arguing so far that reading heterosexuality and lesbianism solely in relation to patriarchal gender politics fails to yield an adequate picture of lesbians’ political position. I turn now to an exploration of the thesis that heterosexuality is itself a political system that shapes our social structure as systematically as do patriarchal, racial imperialist, and class systems.

I do not mean to deny that in patriarchal societies heterosexuality enables what Gayle Rubin called the “traffic in women.” I *do* mean to

45. Bunch, “Lesbians in Revolt,” p. 162.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Nett Hart, “Lesbian Desire as Social Action,” in Allen, ed., p. 297.

deny that heterosexual systems' only function is to support a system of male privilege. I suggest instead that heterosexual systems, whether patriarchal or not, function to insure reproduction by making the male-female unit fundamental to social structure, particularly, though not exclusively, to the structure of what might broadly be called the private sphere. That is, heterosexual systems assign the heterosexual couple-based family a privileged social status as the only legitimate site of sexuality, child bearing, child rearing, the care of individuals' physical and emotional needs, the maintenance of a household, and the creation of kinship bonds. It is because the purpose of heterosexual systems is to sustain reproduction that threats to that system—for example, the education of women, or homosexuality—inevitably evoke in Anglo-American history some version of the race suicide argument.

Heterosexuality then is not just a matter of the orientation of individual sexual desire. It is a method of socially organizing a broad spectrum of reproductive activities. Accordingly, the taboo on homosexuality does not simply outlaw same-sex desire. More basically it outlaws the female-female or male-male couple as the site of any reproductive activities.⁴⁸ Thus, if one wants a complete set of the regulations that constitute the taboo on lesbianism and homosexuality, one needs to look at all of the practices that directly or indirectly insure that the family will be built around a male-female pair. The social and legal prohibition of same-sex sex is only the tip of the iceberg of the systematic heterosexualization of social life.

This socially foundational status of the male-female couple gets ideologically expressed and reinforced through the language of naturalness: the individuals who make up society are taken to be naturally gendered as men or women, naturally heterosexual, and naturally inclined to establish a family based around the male-female reproductive unit. The alleged natural inevitability of gender differences, heterosexual desire, and heterosexually reproductive families enables heterosexual societies to take it for granted that “of course” the social, economic, and legal structure of any society will, and ought to, reflect these basic facts.

Social practices, norms, and institutions are designed to meet heterosexual systems' need to produce sex/gender dimorphism—masculine males and feminine females—so that desire can then be heterosexualized. Gendered behavioral norms, gendered rites of passage, a

48. This helps to explain why it is relatively easy to garner toleration of lesbianism and homosexuality as private bedroom practices, while attempts to sanction lesbian and gay parenting and marriages meet with intense resistance. I thank Mary Going for bringing me to see the critical importance of challenging the heterosexual couple-based family.

sexual division of labor, and the like produce differently gendered persons out of differently sexed persons. Prohibitions against gender crossing (e.g., against cross-dressing, effeminacy in men, mannishness in women) also help sustain the dimorphism necessary to heterosexualize desire.

Children and especially adolescents are carefully prepared for heterosexual interaction. They are given heterosexual sex education, advice for attracting the opposite sex, norms for heterosexual behavior, and appropriate social occasions (such as dances or dating rituals) for enacting desire. Adult heterosexuality is further sustained through erotica and pornography, heterosexualized humor, heterosexualized dress, romance novels, and so on.

Heterosexual societies take it for granted that men and women will bond in an intimate relationship, ultimately founding a family. As a result, social conventions, economic arrangements, and the legal structure treat the heterosexual couple as a single, and singularly important, social unit. The couple is represented linguistically (boyfriend-girlfriend, husband-wife) and is treated socially as a single unit (e.g., in joint invitations or in receiving joint gifts). It is legally licensed and legally supported through such entitlements as communal property, joint custody or adoption of children, and the power to give proxy consent within the couple. The couple is also recognized in the occupational structure via such provisions as spousal health care benefits and restrictions on nepotism. Multiple practices and institutions help heterosexual individuals to couple and create families and support the continuation of those couples and couple-based families. These include dating services, matchmakers, introductions to eligible partners, premarital counseling, marriage counseling, marriage and divorce law, adoption services, reproductive technologies, family rates, family health care benefits, tax deductions for married couples, and so on.

The sum total of all the social, economic, and legal arrangements that support the sexual and relational coupling of men with women constitutes heterosexual privilege. And it is privilege of a peculiar sort. Heterosexuals do not simply claim *greater* socio-politico-legal standing than nonheterosexuals. They claim as natural and normal an arrangement where *only* heterosexuals have socio-politico-legal standing. Lesbians and gay men are not recognized as social beings because they cannot enter into the most basic social unit, the male-female couple. Within heterosexual systems the only social arrangements that apply to nonheterosexuals are eliminative in nature. The coercive force of the criminal law, institutionalized discrimination, "therapeutic" treatment, and individual prejudice and violence is marshaled against the existence of lesbians and gay men. At best, lesbians and gay men have negative social reality. Lesbians are not-women engaged in nonsex within nonrelationships that may constitute a nonfamily.

It would be a mistake to think that legal prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or legal recognition of domestic partnerships would give lesbians and gay men any genuine socio-politico-legal standing. The legal reduction of lesbianism to mere sexuality which is implicit in "sexual orientation" legislation only reaffirms the heterosexual assumption that lesbianism cannot itself provide the site for the broad spectrum of reproductive activities. Only heterosexuality, which "everyone knows" is more than mere sexual desire, can provide this site in the form of the heterosexual couple. Because lesbianism is supposedly mere sex and not a mode of sociality, no fundamental alteration needs to be made in the social practices and institutions that constitute the private sphere. Domestic partnership laws fall in the same boat. They set up what amount to separate but allegedly equal spheres for heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals. Heterosexuals retain coverage by marriage laws. All other possible private arrangements are covered under domestic partnerships. The point of excluding lesbian and gay marriages from marriage law itself is, of course, to reaffirm heterosexual society's most basic belief that only the male-female couple constitutes a natural, basic social unit.

In short, unlike the heterosexual woman, including the heterosexual feminist, the lesbian experience of the institution of heterosexuality is of a system that makes her sexual, affectional, domestic, and reproductive life unreal. Within heterosexual society, the experience between women of sexual fulfillment, of falling in love, of marrying, of creating a home, of starting a family have no social reality. Unlike the heterosexual feminist, the lesbian has no socially supported private sphere, not even an oppressive one.

Failure to see the difference between the heterosexual feminist's and the lesbian's relation to the institution of heterosexuality may well result in mislocating lesbian politics. From a feminist point of view, sexual interaction, romantic love, marriage, and the family are all danger zones because all have been distorted to serve male interests. It thus does not behoove feminist politics to begin by championing the importance of sexual interaction, romantic love, marriage, and the (couple-based) family. But it does behoove lesbian politics to start in precisely these places. Her recognition as a social being, and thus as an individual with socio-politico-legal standing, depends upon the female-female couple being recognized as a primary social unit. That in turn cannot be done without directly challenging the reservation of the primary structures of the private sphere for heterosexuals. Just as the heart of male privilege lies in the "right" of access to women, so the heart of heterosexual privilege lies in the "right" of access to sexual-romantic-marital-familial relationships.