Women's Sexuality:
On the Socialist Feminist
Road to Discovery

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All feminist analyses recognize women's subordinate social position to men and attempt to examine this oppression, to explore its dynamics, and to use this analysis to fight for women's liberation. While the aims of feminism are ambitious, lofty and laudable, the progress towards these goals is slow, multi-directional and often immersed in confusion. Part of the problem lies in the nature of the beast; women's oppression is not experienced through one single dimension, but many: biological, sexual, economic, psychological, political, ideological and historical, to name the most common aspects of women's subordination. This oppression is pervasive and intransigent in some ways and yet characterized by numerous variations in others. As a result, feminists differ on how this oppression is to be understood, defined and challenged. This is especially the case regarding the issue of women's sexuality.

During the last two decades, feminists have led an often explosive and polarized debate on sexuality. Given the historical period we are living in it is not surprising that sexuality has become a focus of the contemporary women's movement. Currently, many industrialized capitalist societies, including our own, are restructuring previously-held regulations of sexuality, as exemplified in state and public attention to the issues of abortion, prostitution, pornography, gay and lesbian rights, AIDS, and most recently, reproductive technology. It is essential that feminists be made fully conscious of what is at stake in this period of transition and struggle. In order to assess the current potential for sexual liberation this paper will attempt to provide a cursory overview and assessment of some of the central themes which have emerged in the feminist sexuality debates to date. In order to take stock this paper will (I) explore the insights and weaknesses of the radical feminist contributions; (II) suggest how a socialist feminist perspective may create a better understanding of the issue; and (III) suggest possible questions and directions for future research. It shall be argued that radical feminism's ahistorical, apolitical and essentialist approach fails to appreciate how sexuality is socially, rather than biologically, constructed according to class, race, and gender interests of the historical moment. An understanding of the social context, which socialist feminism provides, allows for not only a more complete theoretical framework, but also a better understanding of the political moments ripe for a challenge to compulsory heterosexual domination. Thus, a socialist feminist analysis of sexuality will create both a more comprehensive and a potentially transformative politics.

1. Radical Feminist Contributions: 'Not Afraid to Raise Hell'

Radical feminists have led the debate on women's sexuality. They have been unafraid to create controversy by speaking out about their personal sexual lives—to recount the terrors of the sexual violence they have experienced and also to confess their red-hot desires that they have suppressed for so long. As a result of these courageous outbursts, radical feminists have developed two very important aspects of the sexuality debates. They have provoked conflicting notions of “sex as liberating” and “sex as oppressive” and they have also established a historically unprecedented claim that lesbianism can be an empowering female choice. These two conflicting views have created endless emotional debate. While some of this discussion has been insightful, other portions of the debate have produced simplistic and highly polarized views. Both of these radical feminist contributions to the sexuality debates shall be assessed in some detail in the following section.

a) Sex as Danger

Most of the radical feminist debate on sexuality has focussed on sexual violence. This position has changed very little since the pioneer effort of Susan Brownmiller's Against Our Will. In this pivotal book, Brownmiller argues that men's physiology leads them to rape at a whim and that this situation is pervasive across cultures, continents and time periods. Brownmiller believes that virtually nothing can be done to change this condition.1 Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, more recently acclaimed radical feminists, wholeheartedly accept this pessimistic debilitating perspective and have helped promote a popular anti-pornography
campaign, Women Against Porn. A Canadian version of this movement is Women Against Violence Against Women.2

This perspective of sex as dangerous was shared by many of our fore-sisters in the first wave of feminism. Many nineteenth century feminists who were concerned about sexual violence against women organized around a protectorist position, attempting to secure some measure of safety for women from male lust and aggression. As such these activists became protectors of the "fragile" and "passionless" female sexuality, and the moral custodians of male behaviour as they attempted to control alcohol, pornography and prostitution. There is a logic to this stance given the historical period in which these women lived, as a leading feminist historian, Judith Walkowitz, explains:

In a culture where women were often the victims of sexual coercion yet blamed for crimes committed against them, and where it was difficult even to conceive of female sexual agency as long as women lacked agency in other vital areas, defenders of women’s rights could and did regard the doctrine of female passionlessness, and male sexual self-control as a significant advance over traditional assumptions of a dangerous and active female sexuality.3

While radical feminists of yesterday and today who have argued that sex is dangerous have won certain important protections for women, there is often a severe cost attached to this position. First, there is an underlying essentialist view of male and female sexuality in this perspective. Sexual essentialism argues that sex is a natural, biological force that exists prior to social life and thus is eternally unchanging, asocial and transhistorical. Advocates of this position believe that female sexuality is naturally more emotional, intimate, nurturing and peaceful than male sexuality. It is the naturally violent nature of male sexuality which is blamed for women’s subordination. While most scholars would agree that sexuality is partly based on biological forces, this radical feminist view ignores the fact that male and female sexuality are to a great extent socially constructed and variable across class, race, ethnic, regional and national groupings and according to the historical moment. Radical feminism does not pay attention to the interests which have helped to shape, prescribe and repress certain sexual norms and practices. This school also ignores the fact that men and women have related to popular depictions of sexuality with varying degrees of acceptance, ambivalence, tension, conflict and antagonism.4 In short, it denies women any agency in the realm of the sexual.

A second concern of this approach is its depiction of pornography and rape as the two most important tools that men use to maintain their power over women. While no feminist would ever wish to make light of either of these aspects of sexual violence, the radical feminist argument lends no context to a viable discussion of these issues. With regard to rape, this position confuses men’s social power with physiological facts. Men do not rape simply because they have penises as Dworkin would suggest. Rather, the prevalence of rape stems from a variety of economic, political and ideological practices which create men’s power over women which then allows men to sexually abuse women without fear of severe penalty. Pornography is also viewed as the enemy of women’s sexual freedom. Advocates of this perspective conflate pornography and violence against women and thus miss many of the other causes of sexual violence or mere sexism in our society. There is also much confusing evidence about the relationship between users of pornography and violence against women which is ignored as a result of radical feminism’s essentialist view of sexuality. This stance also promotes the belief that pornography depicts all of male sexuality. As a result of these simplistic associations, they are able to condemn all male sexuality as violent.5

As the issues of pornography and rape have shown, the sex-as-danger position produces overly simplistic understandings of male and female sexuality and crude solutions to complex social problems. These feminists have appealed to the state for increased censorship of violent pornography (i.e., the Minneapolis Ordinance) and for more police protection on the streets as a way to curb male sexual violence. This political strategy does much to encourage the view that women are helpless victims, that men are the enemy and that the state is a loyal protector of female virtue. Such a position can lead feminists to agree with other social agencies to restrict female desire to zones which are protected and privileged in a culture—such as the shelter for traditional marriage and the nuclear family. While many radical feminists would not agree to these particular solutions, others are working for the elimination of sexual violence with social groups who do desire these ends.

b) Sex as Pleasure

Some radical feminists have devised alternative solutions to the problem of female sexuality. The three leading radical feminists of the late 1960s Germaine Greer, Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone all agreed that sexual freedom was a fundamental prerequisite to women’s liberation. Greer’s answer was abandoning oneself to hot heterosexual conquests and she was critical of others who did not share her “more is better” attitude.6 Firestone, on the other hand, believed the solution was to rid women
of reproductive worries so they could enjoy heterosexual relations without fear of pregnancy. Kate Millett had an entirely different perspective. She concentrated on lesbianism as the answer and described in her semi-biographical work Sita the intense sexual desires she discovered in an unequal lesbian relationship. Lesbianism became very fashionable during the late 1960s as radical feminists began to denounce heterosexual relations as dangerous and argued that “lesbianism is the theory and lesbianism the practice.” Lesbianism was viewed as a rebellion against all heterosexuality, for all heterosexual practices were assumed to be violent or at least unequal. Feminist separatists such Jill Johnston and Ti-Grace Atkinson argued that women should not under any circumstances indulge in “fucking the oppressor.” This perspective momentarily silenced straight women from speaking about their sexual pleasures and produced a hierarchy of politically correct sexual practices.

In order to make the lesbian alternative more popular to all feminists, Adrienne Rich invented the term “lesbian continuum” which embraced a wide range of woman-identified experiences which includes

... forms of primary intensity between and among women; including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support.

This transhistorical and social, rather than sexual, notion of resistance to heterosexuality was popularized in the 1970s. Feminist historians followed Rich’s lead and explored women’s resistance to heterosexuality in a broader, social and asexual sense. Lillian Faderman in her book *Surpassing the Love of Men* conducted an extensive study of women’s friendships from the Renaissance era to today. Many other writings about lesbianism have focussed on the bonding of women and very few have talked about sex.

Rich’s definition of lesbianism is extremely problematic for several reasons. First, this asexual reductionist definition does not allow women to speak about what is unique in a lesbian experience and thus limits the erotic. Second, in romanticizing the notion of resistance to heterosexual violence Rich makes it impossible to define what are the conditions that allow for successful resistance. Third, Rich’s concept of lesbian continuum is essentialist; she reinforces the belief that men and women have fundamentally opposing sexual natures and that the latter tends to be passive or asexual. Fourth, this transhistorical and transcultural version of lesbianism undervalues the important historical developments and changes in material conditions which allow some women to establish a distinct lesbian identity while others do not have such a privilege. Finally, Rich believes that compulsory heterosexuality is the key to women’s subordination and assumes that all heterosexual relations are coercive or compulsory relations. Targeting heterosexuality as the key mechanism of male dominance romanticizes lesbianism and ignores the actual quality of individual lesbian or heterosexual women’s lives. In short, Rich’s work has a disturbing lesbian separatist tone, implying that as soon as women stop sleeping with men they will destroy the institution of compulsory heterosexuality and hence gain their liberation.

Because of these concerns regarding Rich’s depiction of female sexuality as “soft mists of tenderness and mutual nurturing,” radical feminists have begun to opt for a more explicitly sexual model. Some feminists believe that the sex-as-danger feminists have done a disservice to women by increasing their sexual terror and despair. They claim that women’s material lives have undergone significant changes since the time of their 19th century sisters. Now women have better access to wage labour, contraception, abortion, and the possibility of economic independence from men. As a result of women’s increased material autonomy, these feminists claim that women are in a position to explore their sexuality in more visible and daring ways. They argue that feminists should repudiate any theoretical analyses, legal restrictions or moral judgements that stigmatize sexual minorities for in doing so they limit the sexual freedom of all. Instead, they wish to reclaim control over female sexuality and demand the right to practice whatever gives women pleasure and satisfaction.

Audre Lorde was one of the first to speak out about female desire in her historic 1978 essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” At the same time she was attacked for being anti-feminist in valorizing the erotic. Other feminists however, began to divulge their own erotic experiences and a flood of pro-sex literature resulted, including the first Samois booklets (Samos is a support group for lesbian feminist sadomasochists in San Francisco); a special sex issue in *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*; *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*; *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*; and *Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions*. The latter two omit the extremes of the pro-sex debates that were printed in the earlier collections (i.e., the Samois and Women Against Pornography articles). The purpose of these pro-sex collections was to create a new conception of women’s sexuality that is pro-expression, anti-repressive, race-aware, class-sensitive, and historically-conscious. There was a new attempt to be conscious of previous omissions, gaps and silences in our understanding of women’s
sexual practices and fantasies.

During this exploration of the multiplicities of sexualities, sadomasochism, butch/fem, and bisexual relationships were addressed along with sexual fantasies. Each of these were contentious as feminists struggled to recognize and reject their own sexual biases for having white, middle class assumptions about the ir/respectability of certain types of sexual relations. The sadomasochist (S/M) debate has been one of the most explosive in the pro-sex camp. Pro S/M advocates such as Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia believe all practices should be acceptable because the participants are women who are conscious of the power imbalances they are acting out. In this sense, S/M practitioners are merely acting out a fantasy. Others feel S/M advocates are anti-feminist, arguing that such fantasies should be kept in line, and women should strive for what is believed to be a more "natural" sexual practice (i.e., equal consensual sex). In return the pro-S/M forces accuse the latter camp of being essentialist by assuming there is one natural all-gentle and loving sexual practice for feminists and by rightly declaring all other practices as "unnatural." The S/M debate has unfortunately become polarized between two camps who both feel they have cornered the market on appropriate sexual practice. It is also unfortunate that the debate about S/M was raised as a lesbian issue when the practice is suspected to be more prevalent amongst heterosexuals. This suggests that the debate should be broadened and discussants should examine their own sexual biases.

The butch/fem debate is just as polarized as the S/M debate. Joan Nestle spoke out about her painful experience as a fem for over 25 years at the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality and her words stimulated discussion and exploration of this issue. She examined both sexology and literature and discovered that "fems have been seen as a problem through the debates both by those who never pretended to be our friends and now by those who say they are our comrades." Even lesbians who have lived in satisfying butch/fem relationships have denounced them in public.

Part of the reason S/M and butch/fem relationships are so contentious in the feminist community is a result of an ambivalence regarding the role of fantasy and power in sexual relationships. Because of feminists' long-standing fear of heterosexual fantasies which call for the degradation of women in everything from the most violent pornography to the subtly misogynist soap operas, feminists have tended to perceive no fantasy which involves the giving or taking of power as safe. They have thus been afraid to explore the relationship between fantasy and reality.

Bisexuality is another contentious issue facing the pro-sex community. Feminists often ignore this aspect of sexuality, asserting that the main topics for debate are lesbian and heterosexual practices. Others consider bisexuality as destructive to the lesbian community for they perceive that these women "dabble" in the sexual pleasures of lesbianism but avoid the pain because they are able to return to the security of heterosexuality. Still others believe bisexuals to be frivolous by nature and would eventually disappear if heterosexuality lost its primacy in our society. By forcing bisexualy-inclined women to choose between a lesbian and a heterosexual identity, feminists are re-affirming the division between "natural" and "deviant" that was first established by sexologists.

A brief exploration of S/M, butch/fem, bisexual relationships and the role of fantasy suggests that there are many disturbing assumptions underlying the pro-sex debates. Although pro-sex advocates demand the right of all women to practice whatever gives them pleasure, in reality, they generally assume that all women desire sexual relationships which consist of fully consenting equal partners who negotiate in order to maximize one another's sexual pleasure by any means which guarantees equal power relations. As a result this pro-sex camp is as essentialist in its perception of female sexuality as the sex-as-danger advocates. It is only when these feminists are confronted by other women who practice unequal sexual activities (such as S/M and butch/fem) that the essentialist nature of the pro-sex perspective becomes apparent. Too often white middle class feminists feel they have the market on sexual experience; they become angry when other women assert themselves and want to identify around a different experience and interpretations of it. It is this clash between different sexual experiences which forms the basis of disagreement over S/M, butch/fem and bisexual relationships. It is a struggle over definitions and who has the power to define feminist sexual experience.

Not only is the pro-sex position essentialist, it is also based on a notion of liberal individual autonomy. These advocates believe women are more repressed in their sexuality than men and believe this repression is the fundamental cause of women's sexual unhappiness. They perceive the solution as individual sexual liberation. Female sex manuals such as Lonnie Barbach's *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality* and JoAnn Loulan's *Lesbian Sex* assume that the discovery of sexual pleasure is an individual journey; they completely deny the importance of external social forces governing sexuality. There is no sense that sexuality is a social and collective process as well as an individual identity and that individual freedom to imagine and act is simply not enough to erase a history of sexual repression.
I would argue that both the sex-as-danger and sex-as-pleasure approaches reveal the shortcomings of the radical feminist view of heterosexism and heterosexual privilege. Both positions neglect historical and socioeconomic analyses in favour of essentialist definitions of sexuality. These definitions also tend to universalize male and female sexuality based on white, middle class, and Western industrialized norms. The sex-as-danger school emphasizes the pervasiveness of male sexual violence and views male and female sexuality as polarized opposites. The sex-as-pleasure school emphasizes individual autonomy, assuming that sexuality is a natural force that has been suppressed by social regulation and that the discovery of sexual pleasure is an individual journey with lesbian separatism being a solution equally available to all. These understandings ignore the fact that male and female sexuality are to a great extent socially constructed and vary across class, racial, ethnic, regional and historical periods, and instead see sexuality as static. The former perspective denies all men and women agency and the latter rejects any collective struggle. Another concern with both these approaches is their reductionism. They both tend to equate all male sexuality with violence and assume that heterosexism is the only form of women’s oppression. This denies any possibility of mutually pleasurable sex between men and women. It also trivializes the many other aspects of women’s subordination that are not sexual in nature. For example, radical feminists’ depiction of women’s wage work tends to focus on only the sexual aspects of this work (i.e., sexual harassment, sexual objectification) and tends to deny all other equally oppressive aspects of this labour (i.e., job segregation, low wage, type of work conducted). In short, this essentialist and ahistorical perception of heterosexism distorts radical feminists’ ability to search its possible origins, intervening factors and solutions.

II. The Socialist Feminist Road to Discovery

Given the insights but also the limitations of research conducted by the radical feminists it seems vital that socialist feminists undertake an analysis of female sexuality. Generally the Left has not been terribly concerned with the heterosexism of social relations within contemporary capitalist society or about the struggles of sexually oppressed minorities. The Canadian Left has been no exception to this general rule. During the 1970s the Left’s reluctance to pursue a sexual politics resulted in a split between the gay movement and the Left as well as a division between the gay movement and feminists. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, sexual politics in Canada were seen as a lesbian and radical feminist issue with only marginal inter-

est shown by socialist feminists, and even less by heterosexual socialist men. Socialist feminists either followed the lead of radical feminists or more often abstained from the debate entirely. Only a small number of them became involved in elaborating an alternative strategy. As socialist feminists began to recognize the centrality of sex, they tended to desexualize it to questions of biological reproduction, as seen generally in the domestic labour debate.

It is only since 1982 that Canadian socialist feminists have become involved in the sex debates. Three prominent socialist feminists (Varda Burstyn, Mariana Valverde and Lorna Weir) became active in the anticensorship struggle and argued that increased state surveillance of sexual representation was not the remedy for the sexism of heterosexual pornography. But these women are the exception to the rule, as most socialist feminists do not speak about sexuality. Weir suggests that the reason for this is twofold. First these scholars have attempted to align with liberals and civil libertarians in opposing state regulation of sexuality and second, the class reductionism of much of Canadian socialism views sexuality and sexual regulation as directly managed and controlled by capital. As a result of the socialist feminist tendency to avoid the issue of sexuality, thus allowing radical feminists to predominate, the current debates within the women’s movement have, in Mariana Valverde’s words “generated a lot of heat and not necessarily very much light.” Because of the meagre contributions of socialist feminists to sexuality debates, this section of the paper shall be a tentative survey into the questions which need to be examined for a socialist feminist approach to sexuality rather than a list of the achievements to date.22

a) Historical Materialism

First, a socialist feminist perspective of sexuality would adopt the historical materialist method. This would require an historical exploration of the institutions which regulate sexuality, and the confrontations and resistances of these regulations. Unlike their radical sisters, socialist feminists realize that lesbianism and heterosexuality have existed throughout human history but have varied immensely in their social organization. A historical materialist analysis of sexuality would grant agency to its subjects. As such, women would not be perceived merely as victims of a dominant ideology espousing compulsory heterosexuality (as many radical feminists suggest) but rather they would be considered actors, struggling and challenging these social inequalities and creating change. A socialist feminist exploration of sexuality would also want to situate the emergence
of lesbianism in relation to a broader shift in class, gender and social organization. This would include examining how some middle class white women gained the economic resources which allowed them to live separately from men and to begin a public lesbian culture, in much the same as some gay males did at an earlier period because of their advantageous economic resources.23

b) Capitalism and Women's Sexuality

Second, a socialist feminist perspective on sexuality would explore the relationship between sexuality and capitalism. This as yet has not been adequately theorized. Since capitalism was built on pre-existing social forms which were redefined in order to conform to the dynamics of capitalist development and according to class, gender and race struggles, it would be important for a socialist feminist perspective on sexuality to address how pre-existing sexual notions were adopted and adapted by capitalism. (For example it would be vital to explore how Western Christianity's definition of sexuality as family-centred and reproductive was transformed into a more commercialized sexuality where sexual relations were expected to provide personal identity and individual happiness somewhat apart from reproduction). It is also important to explore how meanings of sexuality have differed according to class and how the dominant white middle class meaning has affected the way other groups are seen and see themselves. For example, how has this dominant ideology of sexuality encouraged the portrayal of some women workers as promiscuous and deprived, hence justifying the sexual domination of working class women by employers (i.e., through sexual harassment) and by men more generally (i.e., through prostitution). As well, it is vital to examine the relationship between capitalist production and reproduction. Here Michele Barrett suggests that through a series of struggles at the end of the 19th century, productive work was separated from reproductive work and this greatly transformed the family household, gender divisions of labour and also sexual regulation. This resulted in a redefinition of women as the "fragile sex" who must always be protected, even against their own will. This new understanding of female sexuality helped to ensure the introduction of a family wage and protective legislation which guaranteed to keep women out of competition with male workers.24 Thus, the family ideology which originated in precapitalist times was subsequently redefined to meet the changing needs of capital and of male workers. Despite the fact that most women work today, this family ideology continues to justify job segregation along with wage and promotion discrimination.

c) Sexuality and Gender

It is difficult to untangle the relationship between women's sexual oppression and the organization of gender. Despite this problem, lesbian feminists have made a greater attempt to do so than gay liberationists. The latter group tends not to mention the link between gender and sexuality although it is a very important one.25 But feminists differ on how exactly to connect the two sites of oppression.

Some feminists tend to link sexuality and gender at the ideological level suggesting that sex is governed by ideas and sexual practices which are able to shift with changes in the ideological climate. For example, advocates of psychoanalysis search for a systematic account of how the sex and gender rules of family life come to be inscribed into an individual's psyche and instill in the individual the sense that sexuality and gender are intimately related. This account does attempt to move beyond the reductionist Marxist and radical feminist (sex-as-danger) positions. Whereas Marxist theory often attributes sexuality and gender to the needs of capitalism and radical feminists account for sexuality and gender as a result of male aggression, psychoanalysis provides an account which is not reductionist and perhaps may help explain women's acceptance of these two sites of oppression.26 Psychoanalysis can also account for women's sexual fantasies which may reproduce the dominant/submissive relations that they rationally would hope to avoid.27 Nancy Chodorow, for example, attempts to explain why heterosexual relationships are not inevitable for women. She suggests that since a girl's primary relationship is with a woman (usually her mother), the development of her heterosexuality requires her to transfer her primary affections from a woman to someone of a different sex.28 While this analysis does suggest that heterosexuality is not as natural or inevitable as some would claim, these psychoanalytic accounts tend to be very problematic for they are highly idealistic and universal. Psychoanalysts should examine the material and historical structures that limit gender and sexuality at any given moment. They should also compare the psychic structures across culture, class, race and family formations other than the monogamous nuclear unit in an effort to assess which features of psychosexual development are universal.29

When assessing the link between sexuality and gender it is impossible to avoid an acknowledgement of the association between women's sexuality and biology, especially with respect to reproduction. Until recently there were severe sanctions against both men and women who practised non-reproductive sexual relations. Men were arrested for conducting same-
gender sex. Women’s same-gender sex was generally overlooked but instead women who attempted to dissociate heterosexual activity from procreation (i.e., employing contraception or abortion) were penalized. Times have changed and non-procreative heterosexual activity has gained increasing tolerance, and sexuality has acquired considerable autonomy from gender. Despite this progress a connection can still be drawn. Unwed mothers and sexually-active single women are still socially frowned upon; women are expected to have only serious sexual relations whereas men are encouraged to “sow their wild oats.” The fact that the anti-abortion forces have become a full-scale social movement suggests that gender identity is still deeply bound to a social system which supports the linking of female sexuality to pregnancy, marriage, childrearing and homemaking. “When a woman can choose to terminate a pregnancy because she does not wish to be a mother—the links are exposed as social constructions and non-inevitable.” Thus the relationship between women’s sexuality and reproduction is a complex one, partly justified by biology but mainly constructed by external societal forces.

In order to better assess the link between gender and sexuality, the feminist scholar Gayle Rubin suggests that academics should analytically separate the two. In doing so she believes they will gain a greater appreciation for how political, economic and social forces attempt to fuse them. While Rubin raises important questions about the relationship between sexuality and gender she fails to acknowledge that gender remains the primary determinant of human sexual experience since it cuts across divisions of class, race, religion, and sexual preference. Despite this concern, it is important for feminists to separate gender and sexuality and to demand material changes that shall enable women to experience sexuality less attached to and formed by gender.

d) Racism and Women’s Sexuality

Up to this point the sexuality debates have consisted of mainly white middle class feminists confessing their personal fears, fantasies and activities. Many women of colour have been reticent to become involved in the sexuality debates because their sexual oppression is often quite distinct from that of their white sisters.

Imperialism has been a major factor in the sexual oppression of women of colour for it provided a pervasive ideology of femininity that was racist. Racist stereotypes of non-white women as either sexpots or asexual beings aided in the perpetuation of women of colour as objects for male pleasure. Visible minority women have consequently been very concerned about respectability in an attempt to free themselves from a heritage that tended to place them at the disposal of white men’s sexual demands. As a result, women of colour have to this day very few positive images of their sexuality and femininity and often strive to achieve a “white” self-definition (i.e., straighten their hair, lighten their skin). These women also have a different relationship to the commercialization of women’s sexuality. Their sexuality is not objectified and packaged as a commodity to the same extent as their white sisters. As a result, they remain invisible within the everyday messages of the dominant ideology.

These different sexual experiences have affected women of colour’s political action around issues of sexuality. Whereas white feminists have been actively demanding control over their reproduction for the last century, women of colour have been visibly absent in these debates. One reason is that the 19th century feminists demanded reproductive control in the name of eugenics. As a result, white women of colour to this day may have easier access to abortion, they do not necessarily have more reproductive choice. For example, many women in developing countries have experienced forced sterilization and have also been the guinea pigs for several dangerous contraceptives, such as Depo Provera, whose use in Canada created much controversy. Women of colour have also been absent in the anti-pornography movement. Furthermore, they have generally opposed white feminists’ (and usually anti-sex) requests for greater police and court protection for women. As a result of their race and class, women of colour have experienced different types of sexual oppression and favour different political projects to control and define their sexuality than those advocated by their white sisters.

Because of many of these experiences, women of colour have been silent during much of the sexuality debates. Some of them have resented their white sisters’ recent focus on sexuality arguing that such discussions are luxuries they cannot afford to indulge in. Other women of colour, especially lesbians of colour, have begun to speak out but in ways that are distinct from white feminists. Most non-white women’s contributions to the sexuality debates have been found outside the academic debates in novels (by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Cherrie Moraga, and Audre Lorde). Greater attention will have to be paid to the variety of sexual oppression experienced by women according to class, age, sexual preference, and race if the sexuality debates are to come more than a white middle class exercise in free speech.
e) The Role of the State in Organizing Women’s Sexuality

While socialist feminists have spent considerable effort attempting to explain the state’s role in organizing gender relations, very little attention has been paid to the state’s activities regarding women’s sexuality. Only by examining the state and its social policies can we begin to expose the social organization of sexuality. Through a variety of government and quasi-governmental organizations, the state intrusively intervenes in the shaping of sexual norms and practices. Although the state tends to act more coercively and instrumentally in defining sexual boundaries than in other walks of life, it does remain open to challenge. In a democratic country the state must appear to be somewhat neutral and thus act somewhat autonomously from the powerful class, gender and race interests. Thus, the state balances and counter-balances forces, in its efforts to organize a heterosexual hegemony.

Despite the state’s need for legitimacy, it routinely intervenes in sexual behaviour at a level that would not be tolerated in other aspects of social life. Most people are unaware of the extent to which laws define the quantity and quality of sexual behaviour and the degree of penalty prescribed to those who practice illegal sex. These laws are notoriously difficult to dislodge once they are in place. Laws that deal with maintaining the boundary between childhood sexual innocence and adult sexuality are particularly harsh and do not distinguish between a brutal rape and the most gentle romance between a 21 year old and a 16 year old. Adults who deviate from the sexual norm are often not allowed contact with the young, are often declared unfit parents and are not permitted to enter the country. A lesbian couple is not allowed to legally marry or enjoy any of the same legal rights as a straight couple (such as inheritance, taxation, protection from testimony in court, acquisition of citizenship for a foreign partner, or even obtain health coverage for her partner). Dealings with many state and quasi state bureaucracies can be extremely frustrating and intimidating. The medical profession has an especially poor history in terms of its sensitivity to lesbian and prostitution issues. Many women have horrifying tales to tell about doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists and their brutal attempts to ‘correct’ the patient of her deviant sexual behaviour. Many landlords refuse housing to these women, employers screen them out in job interviews, and neighbours threaten to call the police—all subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination and harassment.

Families play a crucial role in enforcing sexual conformity and the state’s policies have encouraged this. Many state policies have ensured a vision of the family which is now outdated (a male breadwinner with dependent wife and children). This model has affected the state’s view of women’s sexuality. The welfare state has been one of the most important ways in which the state has persisted in constructing women’s economic, psychological and sexual dependence on men. For example, welfare state policies accept the nuclear heterosexual family form as the norm to which all citizens should be striving. Welfare state personnel and social workers assume deviant family forms create problems for children while they ignore the prevalence of these same problems within the nuclear heterosexual family form. Until recently the Family Benefits Act in Ontario cut off benefits to women who were living with a man regardless of the man’s ability or willingness to financially support the woman and her children. Such a benefit allowed social workers to police women’s sexual lives. Until recently, women in Ontario with dependent children under 16 years of age were classified automatically as unemployable because of their parenting responsibilities while a man in the same situation was required to seek employment. Thus the welfare state policies ensure that Canadian women are economically and psychologically dependent upon men and if this relationship breaks down the state ensures that the role of women in and outside the home shall be maintained.

As well as monitoring the sexual lives of women, the state also attempts to control the sexual standards of the entire family unit. The state holds parents responsible for upholding these sexual standards; only when the family fails does the state and other societal institutions intervene to uphold the ‘normal’ sexual practices and control deviancy. An example of this is the state’s reluctance to present information about actual sexual practices other than a very narrow heterosexual definition to youths in schools or on the silver screen despite the widespread representation of sexuality in the mass media and in popular culture. Thus the state deprives its citizens from learning about the actual sexual diversity within our society.

The state, however, is not as impermeable as some scholars would suggest. Both the government personnel and structures can, on occasion be challenged. One must appreciate a political understanding of the state which recognizes the contradictions between and within the interests of capital, gender, heterosexism and racism. Such contradictions allow for real political and historical struggle which can result in changes in the state’s structure, policies and directions. Scholars who uphold this view of politics believe that the state acts as an organizer of hegemony within society. As such it becomes the site for the political organization of the dominant classes (meaning the ruling groups which represent capitalist,
sexist, heterosexist and racist values). It attempts to disorganize the subordinate classes while securing the unity of the power block. None of these interests are static but rather they change in response to political struggle and require continuous re-negotiation on the part of the state. This results in a state which can neither be totally responsible nor entirely resistant to subordinate demands. Instead it must create hegemonic compromise. The content of this hegemonic compromise varies according to the political and historical strength of the various societal groups.39

During the Mulroney era, one can observe how the Canadian state has moved to re-negotiate the sexual boundaries in a way that attempts to ensure the continuance of heterosexuality and the oppression of “sexual deviants.” In an attempt to diffuse the challenges of both the women’s and the gay and lesbian movements, the present government has made some concessions while simultaneously re-asserting its control over sexuality. Few victories have been won during this regressive period. Several provincial jurisdictions have now added sexual orientation to their human rights codes and a number of municipalities have also established some limited protection.40 The federal government in response to the Equal Rights Committee stated that it believes the Courts will interpret section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to include sexual orientation protection but as yet it has not been amended.41 The Supreme Court of Canada granted women control over their reproductive capacities in 1988 but the content of the new federal abortion bill contradicts the Court’s move.

At the same time as these important advances, the state has increased its hold on cultural production. In the last five years there has been escalating harassment of gays, lesbians, artists and sex workers. In 1986, Customs seized a precedent-setting $6,500 worth of books bound for a Vancouver lesbian bookstore. Everything from how-to sexual manuals, innocuous lesbian novels, to Tennessee Williams’ works have been seized by Canadian Customs officials while white violent heterosexual pornography passes across the Canadian borders without so much as a glance.42 If the ‘Tories’ most recent attempt at censorship, Bill C-54, had not died in the legislature, the policing of lesbian reading material would have escalated. The bill defined pornography to include portrayals of every sexual act as well as lactation, menstruation and masturbation.43 As well as direct policing, the government has transformed the sexual boundaries by slashing budgets and intrusively re-organizing publicly-funded cultural organizations such as the CBC, the NFB and arts councils. The recent federal budget clearly demonstrated the government’s attempt to silence the women’s movement for it cut funding to more than 80 women’s centres and three national feminist magazines.44

The state has also acted coercively to define the new boundaries of acceptable sexuality. There has been increased state-sanctioned and police-enforced management of sex-trade workers, prostitutes and other sexual minorities. Interestingly enough, the state has applied less coercion when attempting to control lesbians as opposed to gay men. As a result, lesbians have “existed in a limbo somewhere between invisibility and persecution.”45 While the state increases its use of coercive instrument against “deviant” sexual minorities it has also become attentive to a moral conservative mobilization around AIDS, against gay rights, feminist and progressive sex education in the schools.46 Also the state has been involved along with other societal institutions in encouraging heterosexist ‘common sense’ notions in our society. The state, family, medical professions, sexologists, psychologists, Church, school system, and media all play a role in persuading the public of the ‘common sense’ attitudes towards homosexuality and lesbianism which range from a belief that such sexual practices are a sin (as believed by many religions), unnatural (most common belief) or an illness (encouraged by the medical and psychiatric professions). Thus the state uses a variety of tools including consent, legitimation, denial, silencing and coercion to ensure this hegemonic compromise.47

Because of the state’s need to create hegemonic compromise there is always the possibility that women can make real demands for increased sexual autonomy. The sexuality debates have involved women in naming and defining their sexual experiences, thus illustrating that heterosexual practices within nuclear families is not the only alternative. At the same time, through the sexuality debates, sex-as-danger advocates invited the state to become actively involved in the re-defining of sexual boundaries, with some devastating effects. Other women, however, continue to resist and subvert the state’s regulation of female sexuality. Thus the state’s control over female sexuality is not complete but actually allows for continued struggle.

III. Future Horizons

The realm of the sexual presents an enormous challenge for socialist feminists for it is an intersection of political, social, economic, historical, personal, experiential, linking behaviour and thought, fantasy and action. While radical feminism has been responsible for pushing sexuality onto the political agenda, it has remained ahistorical, apolitical and essentialist
in its approach. Socialist feminism, on the other hand, appreciates how sexuality is socially constructed according to class, race and gender interest of the specific historical moment. As such, socialist feminism provides a more comprehensive, theoretical framework for both the study of and the transformation of current notions of female sexuality. As illustrated in section II, socialist feminists have only just embarked on this journey to explore the complexities of female sexuality. The need to pursue a socialist feminist theory of heterosexism and heterosexual privilege is especially necessary given the rising conservative mood. The 1980s has been an era of economic recession, unemployment and the increased marginalization of social minorities. In keeping with the times, the New Right has been attempting to reassert the nuclear heterosexual family in an effort to unite the old patriarchal trinity of marriage, sexuality and reproduction just at a time when reproductive technologies make the separation of the three a possibility.48 Previous liberal stances on pornography, abortion, homosexuality, and prostitution are now being contested again. If socialist feminists do not meet this challenge of the New Right and integrate sexuality into a comprehensive plan for human liberation the consequences may be disastrous for all women.

ENDNOTES

* This paper was originally written for a course taught by Isa Bakker. Much thanks for her encouraging comments. While I am responsible for any errors or omissions I would like to acknowledge those colleagues and friends who urged me to submit this paper during a very difficult period in my life. Much heart-felt thanks to: Lorraine Code, Judith Weisman, Roberta Hamilton, Varda Burstyn, Leo Panitch, the Toronto Sex History Group, and especially to Karen Dubinsky, Eleanor Macdonald, Sandi Whitworth and most importantly, Janet Borowy who saw me through the worst.


11 In order to avoid the clinical definitions of lesbianism employed by the sexologists, Faderman chooses an asexual definition. She examines women’s diaries, letters, and writings in order to discover the intensity of emotional passion, mutual support and the degree of social recognition granted to these female friendships. She sees the concern with genital sexuality as a specifically male and modern concern and not applicable to most of the time period she is studying. Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantice Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present, William Morrow and Co., New York, 1981.


18 For an understanding of the enduring and satisfying butch/fem relationship enjoyed by Radclyffe Hall and Lady Una Troubridge see Richard Ormrod, Una Troubridge: The Friend of Radclyffe Hall, Jonathan Cape, London, 1984. Despite her personal happiness in this relationship, Radclyffe Hall denounces fems as betrayers in her infamous book, The Well of Loneliness, Falcon Press,
19 Mariana Valverde, Sex Power and Pleasure, op. cit., p. 201.
25 Ibid., pp. 60–61.
26 Jessica Benjamin develops a psychoanalytic explanation for the practice of sadomasochism. As with most psychoanalytic theory this article is ahistorical and lacking in socioeconomic context. Benjamin also assumes that patriarchy is the entire cause of the existence of S/M. Jessica Benjamin, "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination," Powers of Desire, op. cit., Snitow et. al. (eds.), pp. 280–299.
28 Barrett, op. cit., p. 61.
34 The majority of the non-fiction pieces in Pleasure and Danger are by women of colour whereas almost all the fiction pieces are by white women. Pleasure and Danger, op. cit., C. Vance (ed.).
35 David Sereda has written one of the most poignant songs about being 20 years old and gay called "Underage Blues" in his album Northland.
36 In Arnup's study of child custody law in Canada, she has discovered that the courts make a distinction between a lesbian whose lesbianism does not pose a fundamental challenge to the system and a lesbian who does (because she is open about her sexual orientation within her neighbourhood, or because she is part of lesbian group or even worse, a lesbian feminist organization). In other words, the courts are not willing to have the latter type of lesbian raise her child because she might not socialize her child according to the dominant values of society. Kathy Arnup, "Lesbian Mothers and Child Custody," Sexuality and the State, Atkinson Review of Canadian Studies, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 1984, pp. 35–40.
37 The Ontario Supreme Court ruled against Karen Andrew's attempt to gain provincial health coverage for her partner of 10 years.
38 When I worked in Kingston with women on Ontario Mother's Allowance benefits whose male partners were in prison these women were petrified of having their partner's possessions around their dwelling place. They were also afraid to consider leaving the relationship because if they met someone new they believed the neighbours would call their social worker and report them. This appears to me to be a blatant example of the state's ability to control women's sexual lives. While Brigitte Kitchen does examine the role of the Canadian welfare state in women's lives she does not focus adequately on its role in the regulation of women's sexuality. Brigitte Kitchen, "Women's Dependence," Sexuality and the State, op. cit., pp. 13–14. Margaret Little, "Mothers First and Foremost: A Socialist Feminist Analysis of Ontario Mothers' Allowance 1920–1990," Resources for Feminist Research, Heterosexuality Special Issue, Toronto, 1990, forthcoming.
Quebec was the first province to grant human rights to gays and lesbians followed by Ontario, Manitoba and the Yukon.

Kinsman, op. cit., p. 15.


The federal government recently restored full operational funding to the women’s centres across Canada for one year only. The feminist journals hurt by the budget were: Healthsharing, Canadian Women’s Studies Journal/lés cahiers de la femme, and Resources for Feminist Research/Decommentation sur la recherche feministe.


There are several recent events to suggest that neo-conservative organizations in Canada, Great Britain and United states are increasing their attacks on homosexuality and lesbianism. One recent Canadian example was the heated criticism by Right wing groups of the Gay Games held in Vancouver, August 1990. Among the protesters was Vancouver’s R.E.A.L. Women who used provincial Ministry of Tourism funds to decry lesbians and gays as people who engage in “disgusting, filthy practices” and AIDS victims as deviants “raping what they have sown.” Rites Magazine for Lesbian and Gay Liberation, Vol. 7, No. 2, June 1990, pp. 1 and 4.

Kinsman applies Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to heterosexual rule in a very insightful fashion; however, he focusses on the state’s regulation of lesbians and gays rather than on the state’s attempt to control all female sexuality. Kinsman, op. cit., pp. 32–33.

Burstyn is exploring the development of reproductive technologies and warns feminists that in the near future they may have to fight to maintain the link between their bodies and reproduction. Varda Burstyn, commentary, Historical Perspective on the Porn Wars Seminar, Eighth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, June 9, 1990. Also see forthcoming article, Saturday Night, Toronto, Fall, 1990.

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