

Radical Sense
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Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying (1975)

These notes were first read at the Hartwick Women Writers' Workshop, founded and directed by Beverly Tanenhaus, at Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York in June 1975. They were published as a pamphlet by Motherroot Press in Pittsburgh, 1977; in *Heresies: A Feminist Magazine of Art and Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1; and in a French translation by the Québécois feminist press, Les Editions du Remue-Ménage, 1979. It is clear that among women we need a new ethics; as women, a new morality. The problem of speech, of language, continues to be primary. For if in our speaking we are breaking silences long established, "liberating ourselves from our secrets" in the words of Beverly Tanenhaus, this is in itself a first kind of action. I wrote *Women and Honor* in an effort to make myself more honest, and to understand the terrible negative power of the lie in relationships between women. Since it was published, other women have spoken and written of things I did not include: Michelle Cliff's "Notes on Speechlessness" in *Sinister Wisdom* no. 5 led Catherine Nicolson (in the same issue) to write of the power of "deafness", the frustration of our speech by those who do not want to hear what we have to say. Nelle Morton has written of the act of "hearing each other into speech" [Nelle Morton, "Beloved Image!", paper delivered at the National Conference of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, California, December 28, 1977]. How do we listen? How do we make it possible for another to break her silence? These are some of the questions which follow on the ones I've raised here.

(These notes are concerned with relationships between and among women. When "personal relationship" is referred to, I mean a relationship between two women. It will be clear in what follows when I am talking about women's relationships with men.)

The old, male idea of honour. A man's "word" sufficed - to other men - without guarantee.

"Our Land Free, Our Men Honest, Our Women Fruitful" - a popular colonial toast in America.

Male honour also having something to do with killing: *I could not love thee, Dear, so much/Lov'd I not Honour more*, ("To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars"). Male honour as something needing to be avenged: hence the duel.

Women's honour, something altogether else: virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband. Honesty in women has not been considered important. We have been depicted as generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And we have been rewarded for lying.

Men have been expected to tell the truth about facts, not about feelings. They have not been expected to talk about feelings at all.

Yet even about facts they have continually lied.

We assume that politicians are without honour. We read their statements trying to crack the code. The scandals of their politics: not that men in high places lie, only that they do so with such indifference, so endlessly, still expecting to be believed. We are accustomed to the contempt inherent in the political lie.

To discover that one has been lied to in personal relationships, however, leads one to feel a little crazy.

Lying is done with words, and also with silence.

The woman who tells lies in her personal relationships may or may not plan or invent her lying. She may not even think of what she is doing in a calculated way.

A subject is raised which the liar wishes buried. She has to go downstairs, her parking meter will have run out. Or, there is a telephone call she ought to have made an hour ago.

She is asked, point-blank, a question which may lead into painful talk: "How do you feel about what is happening between us?" Instead of trying to describe her feelings in their ambiguity and confusion, she asks, "How do *you* feel?" The other, because she is trying to establish a ground of openness and trust, begins describing her own feelings. Thus the liar learns more than she tells.

And she may also tell herself a lie: that she is concerned with the other's feelings, not with her own.

But the liar is concerned with her own feelings.

The liar lives in fear of losing control. She cannot even desire a relationship without manipulation, since to be vulnerable to another person means for her the loss of control.

The liar has many friends, and leads an existence of great loneliness.

The liar often suffers from amnesia. Amnesia is the silence of the unconscious.

To lie habitually, as a way of life, is to lost contact with the unconscious. It is like taking sleeping pills, which confer sleep but blot out dreaming. The unconscious wants truth. It ceases to speak to those who want something else more than truth.

In speaking of lies, we come inevitably to the subject of truth. There is nothing simple or easy about this idea. There is no "the truth", "a truth" - truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.

This is why the effort to speak honestly is so important. Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler - for the liar - than it really is, or ought to be.

In lying to others we end up lying to ourselves. We deny the importance of an event, or a person, and thus deprive ourselves of a part of our lives. Or we use one piece of the past or present to screen out another. Thus we lose faith even with our own lives.

The unconscious wants truth, as the body does. The complexity and fecundity of dreams come from the complexity and fecundity of the unconscious struggling to fulfil that desire. The complexity and fecundity of poetry come from the same struggle.

An honourable human relationship - that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word "love" - is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.

It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation.

It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity.

It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us.

I come back to the questions of women's honour. Truthfulness has not been considered important for women, as long as we have remained physically faithful to a man, or chaste.

We have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps, glaze finger and toe nails, wear clothes that emphasised our helplessness.

We have been required to tell different lies at different times, depending on what the men of the time needed to hear. The Victorian wife or the white southern lady, who were expected to have no sensuality, to "lie still"; the twentieth-century "free" woman who is expected to fake orgasms.

We have had the truth of our bodies withheld from us or distorted; we have been kept in ignorance of our most intimate places. Our instincts have been punished: clitoridectomies for "lustful" nuns or for "difficult" wives. It has been difficult, too, to know the lies of our complicity from the lies we believed.

The lie of the "happy marriage", of domesticity - we have been complicit, have acted out the fiction of a well-lived life, until the day we testify in court of rapes, beatings, psychic cruelties, public and private humiliations.

Patriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood and through silence. Facts we needed have been withheld from us. False witness has been borne against us.

And so we must take seriously the question of truthfulness between women, truthfulness among women. As we cease to lie with our bodies, as we cease to take on faith what men have said about us, is a truly womanly idea of honour in the making?

Women have been forced to lie, for survival, to men. How to unlearn this among other women?

"Women have always lied to each other."

"Women have always whispered the truth to each other."

Both of these axioms are true.

"Women have always been divided against each other."

"Women have always been in secret collusion."

Both of these axioms are true.

In the struggle for survival we tell lies. To bosses, to prison guards, the police, men who have power over us, who legally own us and our children, lovers who need us as proof of their manhood.

There is a danger run by all powerless people: that we forget we are lying, or that lying becomes a weapon we carry over into relationships with people who do not have power over us.

I want to reiterate that when we talk about women and honour, or women and lying, we speak within the context of male lying, the lies of the powerful, the lie as false source of power.

Women have to think whether we want, in our relationships with each other, the kind of power that can be obtained through lying.

Women have been driven mad, "gaslighted", for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience. The truth of our bodies and our minds has been mystified to us. We therefore have a primary obligation to each other: not to undermine each others' sense of reality for the sake of expediency; not to gaslight each other.

Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other.

There are phrases which help us not to admit we are lying: "my privacy", "nobody's business but my own". The choices that underlie these phrases may indeed be justified; but we ought to think about the full meaning and consequences of such language.

Women's love for women has been represented almost entirely through silence and lies. The institution of heterosexuality has forced the lesbian to dissemble, or be labeled a pervert, a criminal, a sick or dangerous woman, etc etc. The lesbian, then, has often been forced to lie, like the prostitute or the married women.

Does a life "in the closet" - lying, perhaps of necessity, about ourselves to bosses, landlords, clients, colleagues, family, because the law and public opinion are founded on a lie - does this, can it, spread into private life, so that lying (described as *discretion*) becomes an easy way to avoid conflict or complication? Can it become a strategy so ingrained that it is used even with close friends and lovers?

Heterosexuality as an institution has also drowned in silence the erotic feelings between women. I myself lived half a lifetime in the lie of that denial. That silence makes us all, to some degree, into liars.

When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her.

The liar leads an existence of unutterable loneliness.

The liar is afraid.

But we are all afraid: without fear we become manic, hubristic, self-destructive. What is this particular fear that possesses the liar?

She is afraid that her own truths are not good enough.

She is afraid, not so much of prison guards or bosses, but of something unnamed within her.

The liar fears the void.

The void is not something created by patriarchy, or racism, or capitalism. It will not fade away with any of them. It is part of every woman.

"The dark core", Virginia Woolf named it, writing of her mother. The dark core. It is beyond personality; beyond who loves us or hates us.

We begin out of the void, out of darkness and emptiness. It is part of the cycle understood by the old pagan religions, that materialism denies. Out of death, rebirth; out of nothing, something.

The void is the creatrix, the matrix. It is not mere hollowness and anarchy. But in women it has been identified with lovelessness, barrenness, sterility. We have been urged to fill our "emptiness" with children. We are not supposed to go down into the darkness of the core.

Yet, if we can risk it, the something born of that nothing is the beginning of our truth.

The liar in her terror wants to fill up the void, with anything. Her lies are a denial of her fear; a way of maintaining control.

Why do we feel slightly crazy when we realise we have been lied to in a relationship?

We take so much of the universe on trust. You tell me: "In 1950 I lived on the north side of Beacon Street in Somerville". You tell me: "She and I were lovers, but for months now we have only been good friends". You tell me: "It is seventy degrees outside and the sun is shining". Because I love you, because there is not even a question of lying between us, I take these accounts of the universe on trust: your address twenty-five years ago, your relationship with someone I know only on sight, this morning's weather. I fling unconscious tendrils of belief, like slender green threads, across statements such as these, statements made so unequivocally, which have no tone or shadow of tentativeness. I build them into the mosaic of my world. I allow my universe to change in minute, significant ways, on the basis of things you have said to me, of my trust in you.

I also have faith that you are telling me things it is important I should know; that you do not conceal facts from me in an effort to spare me, or yourself, pain.

Or, at the very least, that you will say, "There are things I am not telling you".

When we discover that someone we trusted can be trusted no longer, it forces us to reexamine the universe, to question the whole instinct and concept of trust. For awhile, we are thrust back onto some bleak, jutting edge, in a dark pierced by sheets of fire, swept by sheets of rain, in a world before kinship, or naming, or tenderness exist; we are brought close to formlessness.

The liar may resist confrontation, denying that she lied. Or she may use other language: forgetfulness, privacy, the protection of someone else. Or, she may bravely declare herself a coward. This allows her to go on lying, since that is what cowards do. She does not say, *I was afraid*, since this would open the question of other ways of handling her fear. It would open the question of what is actually feared.

She may say, *I didn't want to cause pain*. What she really did not want is to have to deal with the other's pain. The lie is a short-cut through another's personality.

Truthfulness, honour, is not something which springs ablaze of itself. It has to be created between people.

This is true in political situations. The quality and depth of the politics evolving from a group depends in very large part on their understanding of honour.

Much of what is narrowly termed "politics" seems to rest on a longing for certainty even at the cost of honesty, for an analysis which, once given, need not be reexamined. Such is the deadendedness - for women - of Marxism in our time.

Truthfulness anywhere means a heightened complexity. But it is a movement into evolution. Women are only beginning to uncover our own truths; many of us would be grateful for some rest in that struggle, would be glad just to lie down with the sherds we have painfully unearthed, and be satisfied with those. Often I feel this like an exhaustion in my own body.

The politics worth having, the relationships worth having, demand that we delve still deeper.

The possibilities that exist between two people, or among a group of people, are a kind of alchemy. They are the most interesting thing in life. The liar is someone who keeps losing sight of these possibilities.

When relationships are determined by manipulation, by the need for control, they may possess a dreary, bickering kind of drama, but they cease to be interesting. They are repetitious; the shock of human possibilities has ceased to reverberate through them.

When someone tells me a piece of truth which has been withheld from me, and which I needed in order to see my life more clearly, it may bring acute pain, but it can also flood me with a cold, seasharp wash of relief. Often such truths come by accident, or from strangers.

It isn't that to have an honourable relationship with you, I have to understand everything, or tell you everything at once, or that I can know, beforehand, everything I need to tell you.

It means that most of the time I am eager, longing for the possibility of telling you. That these possibilities may seem frightening, but not destructive, to me. That I feel strong enough to hear your tentative and groping words. That we both know we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us.

The possibility of life between us.

SISTER OUTSIDER

Essays and Speeches

by

Audre Lorde

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Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*

THERE ARE MANY kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence.

It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power.

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values

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this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. So women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters.

But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.

It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society is to encourage excellence. But giving in to the fear of feeling and working to capacity is a luxury only the unintentional can afford, and the unintentional are those who do not wish to guide their own destinies.

This internal requirement toward excellence which we learn from the erotic must not be misconstrued as demanding the impossible from ourselves nor from others. Such a demand incapacitates everyone in the process. For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion,

we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness.

The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible. Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision — a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered.

Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex. And the lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do. For instance, how often do we truly love our work even at its most difficult?

The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need — the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. But this is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.

As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them.

The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects — born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because

of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. "What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunrunner?" In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic — the sensual — those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a hand-maiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born. The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether

it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.

That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*.

This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it.

I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

We have been raised to fear the *yes* within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to

suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women.

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

And yes, there is a hierarchy. There is a difference between painting a back fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.

This brings me to the last consideration of the erotic. To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.

In order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized. The need for sharing deep feeling is a human need. But within

the european-american tradition, this need is satisfied by certain proscribed erotic comings-together. These occasions are almost always characterized by a simultaneous looking away, a pretense of calling them something else, whether a religion, a fit, mob violence, or even playing doctor. And this misnaming of the need and the deed give rise to that distortion which results in pornography and obscenity — the abuse of feeling.

When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.

The erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before.

But this erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively european-american male tradition. I know it was not available to me when I was trying to adapt my consciousness to this mode of living and sensation.

Only now, I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.

For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

When did you begin to put the pieces together? Perhaps when you put the pieces back together you are putting yourself back together. We assemble something. Feminism is DIY: a form of self-assembly. No wonder feminist work is often about timing: sometimes we are too fragile to do this work; we cannot risk being shattered because we are not ready to put ourselves back together again. To get ready often means being prepared to be undone.

In time, with work, things begin to make more sense. You begin to recognize how violence is directed: that being recognized as a girl means being subjected to this pressure, this relentless assault on the senses; a body that comes to fear the touch of a world. Maybe you learn from that, from what that repetition does; you realize retrospectively how you came to take up less space. You might express feminist rage at how women are made responsible for the violence that is directed against them. Feminism helps you to make sense that something is wrong; to recognize a wrong is to realize that you are not in the wrong.

Becoming feminist: how we redescribe the world we are in. We begin to identify how what happens to me, happens to others. We begin to identify patterns and regularities. Begin to identify: this sounds too smooth. It is not an easy or straightforward process because we have to stay with the wrongs. And think about feeling: to direct your attention to the experience of being wronged can mean feeling wronged all over again.

We need to attend to the bumps; it is bumpy. You had already sensed something amiss. Maybe it was an uneasy feeling at first. As Alison Jaggar describes, "Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger, or fear may we bring to consciousness our 'gut-level' awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice or danger" (1996, 181; see also Spelman 1989). A gut has its own intelligence. A feminist gut might sense something is amiss. You have to get closer to the feeling; but once you try to think about a feeling, how quickly it can recede. Maybe it begins as a background anxiety, like a humming noise that gradually gets louder over time so that it begins to fill your ear, canceling out other sounds. And then suddenly it seems (though perhaps it is not sudden) what you tried so hard not to notice is all you can hear. A sensation that begins at the back of your mind, an uneasy sense of something amiss, gradually comes forward, as things come up; then receding, as you try to get on with things; as you try to get on despite things. Maybe you

do not even want to feel this way; feeling wrong is what brings a wrong home. Attending to the feeling might be too demanding: it might require you to give up on what otherwise seems to give you something; relationships, dreams; an idea of who it is that you are; an idea of who it is that you can be. You might even will yourself not to notice certain things because noticing them would change your relation to the world; it would change the world to which you exist in relation. We have to stay with the feelings that we might wish would go away; that become reminders of these things that happened that made you wary of being at all.

Perhaps there is just only so much you can take in. Perhaps you take in some things as a way of not taking in other things. As I have been putting a sponge to my own feminist past, I remembered another conversation. It was with a teacher of mine at university, Rosemary Moore, who taught the first feminist classes I took: Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in 1988; Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in 1989. I hadn't thought about this conversation for a long time, though it is probably not true to say that I had forgotten it. I asked her whether my essay for the course had to refer to women or gender. Her answer was that it didn't but that it would be surprising if it didn't. Why did I ask her this question? I had come to university hoping to study philosophy. I was especially interested in what I called "scepticism," philosophies that proceeded by doubting what is as a way of questioning what's what. Sadly, philosophy at Adelaide University was pretty much straight analytical philosophy and scepticism was dismissed as self-refuting in the first lecture of Philosophy 101. To study the kind of work I was interested in, I ended up in the English literature department because there they taught what was referred to as "theory." And I chose the women's writing courses not because I was interested in feminist theory (even though I was passionate about feminism) but because I was interested in critical theory. I was interested in how we know things, in questions of truth, in perspective and perception, in experience and subjectivity. I wanted to ask how I know that what I see as green is what you see as green; those sorts of questions were my sort of questions.

Yes: I chose women's writing because I wanted to do critical theory. Our teacher was engaged with and by Lacanian psychoanalysis. If we began there, that wasn't what kept my attention; it was 1980s feminist literary theory and from there, feminist philosophy of science and feminist epistemology. I ended up writing my first feminist essay for that course.² So why did it happen this way around: from critical theory to feminist theory, given that I thought of myself as a feminist and had been such an outspoken feminist growing up?

I think there was only so much feminism I could take in. I had thought that to be philosophical or to ask questions about the nature of reality was not to do feminism: that feminism was about something particular not general, relative not universal, that feminism was about questioning and challenging sexual violence, inequality, and injustice and not the nature of reality as such. I did not understand that feminism was a way of challenging the universal. I did not appreciate how questioning sexism is one of the most profound ways of disrupting what we take to be given and thus learning about how the given is given. Feminist theory taught me that the universal is what needs to be exploded. Feminist theory taught me that reality is usually just someone else's tired explanation. So if in my introduction to this book I suggested that feminist theory is what gets you there, to the classroom, we might note how feminist theory can be what gets you out of there. By this I mean: I thought I wanted to be in the theory class; feminist theory taught me that that was not the class for me. Feminism is my theory class.

We learn also: how we recognize sexism or racism here can be a way of not recognizing it there. A location can be a reduction. Becoming feminist involves a process of recognizing that what you are up against cannot be located or reduced to an object or thing (which could then be discarded so we could start up again). The process of recognizing sexism was not smooth or automatic. I had multiple false starts because there was so much I resisted: I could take feminism in only bit by bit. Maybe there was only so much I could take in because it meant recognizing that I had been taken in. You can feel stupid for not having seen things more clearly before. You have to give up on a version of yourself as well as a version of events. And maybe we need to remember how hard it is to acknowledge that a world is not accommodating you because of the body you have. I didn't want feminism to be everywhere, as I didn't want to encounter these limits; I wanted there to be places to go where I could just leave my body behind.

If becoming feminist is not a smooth process, if we resist what we encounter because it is too much to take in, this is not to say when we do let go it is just difficult. When you begin to put the pieces together, it can feel magical: the wonder of the clicking moment, when things that had previously been obscured begin to make sense, when things fit into place. You blink and the world reappears: clarity can feel magical. For me reading feminist theory was a series of continuous clicks. And later, teaching women's studies was such a delight as you can participate in other people's clicking moments: what a sound it makes; how important it is that this sound is audible to others.

Finding feminism can be empowering as it is a way of reinhabiting the past. It is personal. There is no question: it is personal. The personal is structural. I learned that you can be hit by a structure; you can be bruised by a structure. An individual man who violates you is given permission: that is structure. His violence is justified as natural and inevitable: that is structure. A girl is made responsible for his violence: that is structure. A policeman who turns away because it is a domestic call: that is structure. A judge who talks about what she was wearing: that is structure. A structure is an arrangement, an order, a building; an assembly.

We need structure to give evidence of structure. To catalog instances of violence is to create a feminist catalog. I think one of the reasons I find the project *Everyday Sexism* so important and compelling is that it shows how the cataloging of instances of sexism is necessarily a collective project.³ The project involves the creation of a virtual space in which we can insert our own individual experiences of sexism, sexual violence, or sexual harassment so that we show what we know: that this or that incident is not isolated but part of a series of events: a series as a structure. These recent feminist strategies have revived key aspects of second-wave feminism; we are in the time of revival because of what is not over. Consciousness-raising was also about this: reaching a feminist account, as an account for oneself with and through others, connecting my experience with the experience of others. We need a deposit system to show the scale of sexism. When there is a place to go with these experiences—and feminism is about giving women places to go—the accounts tend to come out: a “drip, drip” becomes a flood. It is like a tap has been loosened, allowing what has been held back to flow. Feminism: the releasing of a pressure valve.

Feminism can allow you to reinhabit not only your own past but also your own body. You might over time, in becoming aware of how you have lessened your own space, give yourself permission to take up more space; to expand your own reach. It is not necessarily the case that we take up this permission simply by giving ourselves permission. It does take time, to reinhabit the body, to become less wary, to acquire confidence. Feminism involves a process of finding another way to live in your body. We might learn to let ourselves bump into things; not to withdraw in anticipation of violence. Of course I am describing a difficulty; I am describing how ways of resolving problems can enact the problems we are trying to resolve. We know we are not responsible for resolving the problem of violence; changing how we relate to the world does not change the world. And yet in refusing to withdraw, in refusing to lessen how

much space we take up, in insisting on taking up space, we are not receiving the message that has been sent out. In order to put the pieces together, you cannot but get the message wrong, the message that makes a wrong a right. No wonder then, as I explore later, to become a feminist is to be perceived as in the wrong.

As we begin this process of putting ourselves back together we find much more than ourselves. Feminism, in giving you somewhere to go, allows you to revisit where you have been. We can become even more conscious of the world in this process of becoming conscious of injustices because we had been taught to overlook so much. A world can flood once we have let it in, once we have unlocked the door of our own resistance. Feminism too can become a flooding experience: one book read that leads to another, a trail that leads you to find feminism, more and more feminism, new words, concepts, arguments, models: patriarchy, phallocentrism, rape culture, the sex-gender system. In finding feminism, you are finding out about the many ways that feminists have tried to make sense, already, of the experiences you had, before you had them; experiences that left you feeling all alone are the experiences that lead you to others. We still have sorting to do: some of these ways of making sense make more sense to you than others. But I will always remember that feeling; a sense that there are others like you out there, that you are not on your own, that you were not on your own. Your own difficult history is written out in words that are sent out. I often think of reading feminist books as like making friends, realizing that others have been here before.

Even if you still feel pain, frustration, and rage, even if you feel these feelings more as you have given them more attention, they are directed in a different way. Knowledge is this achievement of direction. Your feelings are directed neither at some anonymous stranger who happened upon you (or not only), nor toward yourself for allowing something to happen (or not just), but toward a world that reproduces that violence by explaining it away.

Lesbian Nation

The Feminist Solution

by Jill
Johnston

"Lesbian Nation is the most important book to come out of the women's movement for some time.... What comes through most is the wonderful woman—in some of the most moving personal narrative written by a woman since women started writing."

—KATE MILLETT

collect her in our bus because she must have so carefully and at such great pain and sacrifice arranged a little plot of peace and a functional framework for herself. I mean we'd like her in the bus, but how do you start saying you're a dyke even to another dyke when there wasn't a dyke in the land who thought she should be a dyke or even that she was a dyke and out there in lots of outposts of amerika that's the way it still is, still growing up unconscious in amerika.

II. A NICE WELL-BEHAVED FUCKED-UP PERSON

I was way ahead of myself with my genealogical solution. Such solutions come at the end of the line when the real world seems totally improbable. I had however intended to pass blithely over a dozen years hoping nobody would notice. The fifties was the bleakest decade of all and not particularly worth telling except what there was in it to illustrate the total failure of sexual identity for thousands of nice young dykes like myself trying to become responsible adults. I say thousands because I know now what I didn't then that I was one of many and in fact all if it's true as I very often think it is that all women are lesbians. Whether you think so or not you have to agree there was no lesbian identity except a criminal one so it is almost impossible to estimate the numbers who might have been had there been any social recognition of the state and who were but who were guilty and unacknowledged. The conspiracy of silence prevailed. Identity was presumed to be heterosexual unless proven otherwise and you couldn't afford to be so proven and so for all social purposes we were all heterosexual. There was no lesbian identity. There was lesbian activity. For most of us the chasm between social validation and private needs was so wide and deep that the society overwhelmed us for any number of significant individual reasons: not running off

at 20 or so with yr one true love forever like the ladies of Ilongolen; not being able constitutionally or by naivete or distaste or poor location to become a bar dyke; not falling by chance into a fugitive salon a la paris in the twenties and colette and rene vivien and romaine brooks and radclyffe hall and the like. Those were three good reasons. For all three I was one of those who didn't make it. Phyllis Birkby came up from north carolina and somehow encountered a little society of new york city dykes but I didn't and I never went looking for one either. I went straight to columbia and the dance studios and the book stores and museums in further pursuit of my education and accomplishments. My life as a sexual somebody almost literally hung in the balance for at least five years. I was going to say my sexual identity but I don't think that's accurate. As I said we were all heterosexually identified and that's the way we thought of ourselves, even of course when doing otherwise. By hanging in the balance I mean I wasn't moving toward women or men and neither sex was doing very much about me either. The identity that concerned me clearly was that which came from the command of techniques and information—work identity. The important thing was doing things. The question of identity really was not a question. I was born a female, that was clear. Other distinguishing characteristics were assets or embarrassments I didn't seriously contemplate in between doing things if there was any in between. By that time I was dimly aware that as a female I was not receiving preferential treatment but the awareness was too dim to affect my undertakings by halting my progress in any way or by making me smarter and thus less likely to fall down hard when the momentum of my activities met the institutional prejudices of my male society. Basically I accepted my lot as a person. I made no political classification of myself whatsoever. A person was white and middle class but I didn't think of it that way either. A person was what we all were and we would do the best we could and if we didn't do so well it was just a failing as a person and that was all.

Equipped with that dazzling generalization I was prepared to take on the world, which reminded me often enough that as a person apparently I left something to be desired. The word my mother had for it was unstable. I was unstable. Whatever it was it was all my mother's fault. Whatever went wrong it was her fault. The way we all had was to blame our parents for everything. I never talked about myself except when I was in trouble and then it was to say it was all because my mother had made these terrible mistakes. The project of course was never to be in trouble. Most people I knew contrived never to be in trouble. If they were they never told me about it and you didn't read about it in the papers. The people in the papers didn't exist. The people who existed were the people you knew or the people walking down the street, these people lived day to day living normal natural lives and nothing ever went wrong. It was quite a fiction. Somehow I was the only person I knew who was ever in trouble. Even when my friend Sally Brinsmade who married Billy Bramlette was obviously in trouble when Billy left her for somebody else I refused to see her as being in trouble. For that reason I suppose such a person like Sally would go to a psychiatrist which is what she did. Nobody liked hearing about anybody else's troubles because you weren't supposed to have any. That's how I see it now looking back at it. I imagine nobody thought I was in trouble either. The fact is we were all in a whole lot of trouble but we didn't know it. The fifties was no time for a woman and new york city was the worst place. But for all we knew the fifties was no special decade. The war was over so what. We had no national or global or even city local consciousness. We just didn't care. We were good women in that respect. And we were instinctively correct not to care too. I mean we were so remote from the sources of power that to care would have been foolhardy in the extreme. Caring is an emotion impelling action and action was out of the question so all we could conceivably care about was immediate personal survival. We were abysmally unconscious of political affairs. I didn't

even know that men ran the world. Men were people so people ran the world. All we were intent on was personal gratification and survival. It seems important now to realize that it was for this reason we were terrified of being in trouble, for to be in trouble was to fail *personally*, there was at that time absolutely no political significance to being in trouble. To admit failure was to ostracize oneself as a transgressor just short of the criminal element proper by virtue of not actually being in jail. The conspiracy of silence made us all guilty of personal troubles by which we suffered isolation in all but the communion of work. What you did share was a common interest in some medium. As artists or apprentice artists we had common cause for complaint in our economic struggles, but even the political significance of our economic plight was obscured to us, and so this was a personal struggle too, there was no way to make things any better because we had no collective complaint. Really there was nothing to do but to consider men and marriage and the liberal arts and avoid as many evil people as possible. We were all people and people were good and evil. This assessment of people was how you got along, how you figured things out, how you summed up your day—did they treat you alright. My mother always used to say was so and so nice to you. The relative niceness of everybody was the essence of reality. Besides the sheer expenditure of energy in doing things. You went along doing things and expecting people to be nice. As soon as somebody was not nice you were in trouble. New York City was not a nice place so I was in trouble as soon as I got there. I had nightmares and claustrophobia and chest pains and constipation and paranoia and daily harassments and weekly disasters and yearly major catastrophes. I still think the others survived better than I did but I know that isn't necessarily true and they might well have thought the same of me. That any of us survived at all is the fact worth pondering. I'm convinced that if the others *were* surviving better than me it was because they were better prepared to cope than I was. I think they were

more realistic about themselves as women. I know they thought of themselves as people the way I did, but women people did have a destiny as women, that was understood, and these other women I knew appeared to be pleased about or resigned to their expected orientation toward men and marriage. Sally Brinsmade was already married. Betty Jones was married. June somebody was married. Melissa stopped dancing and went to vermont and got married. Pauline Koner was married. Ruth Currier was always involved with a man somehow. So was Pat Christopher. Lucy Venable I think wanted to be if she wasn't. It went like that. And since I had come up to new york from north carolina prepared by my decrepit impressive englishman to be turned in the proper direction of social neurotic expectant womanhood I should have been doing the same but I wasn't. My natural vocation of women was still not utterly squashed. No sooner had I left the old englishman than I fell in love with Ruth Currier. That was all very well, but it was a classic of unrequited love of the tragic lesbian variety, Ruth was no north carolina dyke and in fact there just weren't any dykes in new york that I could see so there weren't any. Much less myself. It was the perfect nothing affair to finish me off as a dyke. It was so nothing that I never expressed my feeling or ever once seriously tried to do anything about it. So for me there was not only no lesbian identity but no lesbian activity either. I was very active in the best western tradition of sublimation. Studying dancing reading, and working at any dopey job to keep myself going, rushing from university to dance studio to job to book stores to museums and to coffeeshops to read and back to my rented rooms like an activity machine. I had become a sexual nobody. Moreover I really didn't know where I was going, what I was doing all the things I was doing for. Dancing was exciting and challenging but if somebody had asked me what I really planned to do with my life I wouldn't have said dancing and I didn't have any other idea either. Possibly the culture had already closed in on me and my strongest if inarticulated feeling

was that I was doomed for men and marriage. I don't know. Certainly I was finished off as a dyke. I was so finished in that respect I was climbing into bed sometimes with any repulsive man, no man sexually seemed better than repulsive, the boyfriend of a roommate or some stranger in a coffeeshop, it didn't matter, there was no reason not to, there was actually now that I think of it every reason why I should have considering that every woman I knew in new york seemed inclined that way and there wasn't the slightest indication of anything out of the ordinary except for the queer males and for the first time in my life I was surrounded by every cultural persuasion of heterosexual identity, not least of which was the unnerving and taken for granted daily lowdown assaults by the public freaks. There was no end to this sort of harassment. Men everywhere were extremely insulting making remarks at you out of their car windows, whispering obscenities passing you along any street, sidling up to you on busses, feeling you up in the movies, goosing you on subways, pulling their pricks out at you in restaurants, I wonder that none of us complained, but none of us did, we might even have assumed such attention to be flattering, if not outright dangerous. If anybody else questioned this behavior I never heard of it. You might say to a friend there was this *horrible* man who did such & such and that was the end of it. The horrible man just being of course an evil person. We knew some evil women after all. Evil women didn't assault you in this manner but we didn't differentiate the types of evils to arrive at any sort of classification and discrimination in other words any rudimentary feminist analysis or consciousness. Nor did we associate all this public freak behavior with our private voluntary encounters although I for one had every reason to. I was beginning to get myself in a whole lot of trouble. I think now and I've said regarding myself retrospectively in some heroic light that I was engaged in a great battle single-handed against all of society with not a word spoken by me or anyone in my defense, a silent unconscious warfare, until I lost,

without even having known that there was a battle or anything to win or lose. So what are we coming to. To the story of the end of my real world as a busy person. To the story of the traumatic confrontation between me and the male corporation. To the story of the end of these stories in a melodramatic genealogical solution. I have to make it clear that I was not at all prepared to deal with society at large. I still think most of the others were prepared. None of them seemed to come from such an exclusively woman centered background as I did. I had undoubtedly a culturally imposed internalized low opinion of myself as a female, if from no other source but from the original one of my mother and my grandmother who were self sufficient but abandoned women, women abandoned in the sense of living through whatever complex combination of circumstances without the support and recognized status of the male provider and protector, yet by virtue of these same demoralizing origins I was a female of a certain uninhibited chauvinism about my identity as female or person uncorrupted by male influence. I think thus I was even more aggressive than the others about being a person, a person being that idealized transcendent member of human animalkind long before or after the corruptions of political sexual discrimination. Anyway I'm fond of thinking I was a delinquent and outrageous adolescent in boarding school because I didn't have the super-ego daddy in me and that later on the same license served me well in being in turn a rebellious critic, an innovative writer, a revolutionary lesbian. That's getting way ahead of myself. I see me now in the effort of memory back in the fifties moving into the sixties a hopeless case in new york city. I had met the male corporation and I was knuckling under. My complete naivete was the measure of my inability to cope. I had after all been nothing much more nor less than the beloved daughter of my mother and my grandmother and the various woman centered institutions I attended although hardly sympathetic to my every whim did have a tendency to reinforce my sense of myself as a noticeable entity.

Everybody was my mother and my grandmother in the expanding theatre of activities and reactions. The main thing was doing things and attracting enough supportive attention to make the doing appear to be as worthwhile to others as it was to me. I appealed to various audiences who would hold up a mirror to my image by reflecting me themselves in their own reactions. The symbiosis of me and my maternal parents was the internalized model. The mother and her child must be the original theatrical pair. Performer and audience in reality the same person. I didn't think any of that out. Like anybody I was on automatic computer and the plug in or the combination in my particular set like I suppose many another nice young dyke was just totally out of synch with the general social computer which was perhaps located in new york city. My last feeble claim to be a dyke was rapidly evaporating in the unexpressed and unrequited romance of the Ruth Currier affair. My first claim had already been seriously deflected by the old man in north carolina. If there was at one time some shade of doubt as to my heterosexual identity it was now gone in the overwhelming phallic city of the world. Naturally the conflict of my inside potential identity and the pressures of normal regular society out there resulted in some serious trouble. It was one thing going along rushing from one activity to another pursuing my education and accomplishments, in the process it was impossible apparently to ignore the demands of sex and intimacy and the invisible inaudible but omnipresent commands of the corporation to shape up and make the conventional marriage. I know that's what was happening. My destiny was out of my hands. I didn't seem to be doing anything by any choice or influence of my own. Even the activities themselves seemed to be carrying me along of their own accord and there was no sensible reason why any activity would stop and go veering off in a different direction until it just as unaccountably stopped again and resumed in some new mystifying guise or other. But worst of all of course was the alarming lackadaisical

aspect of my private encounters with men. Out of these encounters occurred my downfall. I took no precautions and I turned out to be a real fertile myrtle, one screw and I was done for. The first time wasn't so bad. This Tony somebody who was actually a boyfriend of my then roommate took moral and financial responsibility for his part in the accident and saw me through this my initiation into the abortion racket. It wasn't so bad. Still, it was sordid and upsetting and depressing. And the second time was the end. It should've been the end of me too. In a sense it was. It was the beginning of my being one who was an old defeated dyke who gave up and married a man. It was the beginning of my saying silly things such as well I'll have to do it the right way, I'd have to find the right sort of a man and do it all properly, things like that. I said it and that was the beginning of it happening. Saying it is imagining wanting it and it was the first time in my life it seriously occurred to me that I had a destiny as a reproductive woman. At last my social destiny as woman had made a conspicuous impression on me. I was a woman like other women, these accidental pregnancies proved that, and since my education and accomplishments were not proving anything in particular beyond being educated and accomplished, and since I was virtually finished off as a dyke, and the culture with its insistent persuasions of heterosexual identity by which a woman is defined as wife and/or whore had by that time easily closed in on me, I was going the way of all women—the grave of marriage and the hell of motherhood. And toward that end I got myself into the worst sort of trouble. The second abortion was an interminable bloody and dangerous and humiliating affair. For my friendly rapist I had chosen the most bizarre character, an Oswald somebody who materialized suddenly up around columbia as a friend of a few of my friends there, claiming an obscure noble french lineage and a fascinating life as poet and adventurer. In reality as it turned out he was a pathological liar and imposter who hailed from a little immigrant ghetto in brooklyn. Now here was an evil person.

Here was your genuine evil person. Right inside your door in your private spaces in living awful color, no better than those public freaks whose daily harassments at least didn't send you to the hospital in an ambulance. That's how I ended up. Carried out on a stretcher into an ambulance. Not that this particular last act form of my second error was the fault of this particular villain. But a villain he was. Whose moral flabbiness compounded my desperate situation of accumulating confusion and terror and ruination to whatever remained of my self respect as a person getting along in the big city without any trouble. I was about to become a bona fide failure. I was involved in so much trouble it was no longer the sort of trouble you could keep to yourself. I had not exactly kept my troubles to myself, but I had not spread them abroad either. But here I was almost in the kind of trouble that gets in the papers. I might have become one of those people in the papers who don't exist. The only people who existed were the people you knew and somewhat the people walking down the street. There were three kinds of paper people who didn't exist: the men who ran the world, the movie stars and sports heroes, and the murderers and rapists and suicides. Possibly I was the closing the gap. I think really I was an overprotected white middle class not unprivileged young female experiencing life at more drastic levels than losing a boarding school soccer game or arriving as a troubled student in a strange new state lonely for her first two women. I mean I had never even seen a dead person. The photos of nazi victims in wheelbarrows just didn't mean anything to me. The novels or movies of tragedies for me were all a fiction. I could cry over them, but what did they have to do with me really. In truth I was involved in a great extended personal tragedy, the perversion of my original identity as a woman's woman in the phallic subliminal persuasions of the biggest baddest city in the world, but I didn't know it so it was a fiction just like the fictions of death and disaster in the papers and the movies and the novels. I should correct that word identity. There was

lesbian activity, no lesbian identity. Everybody understood identity. When you filled out application blanks for schools or jobs you found out who you were or who you could be. You were male or female, single married or divorced, protestant or catholic, old or young, white or black and anglo or jewish. And you had a name. Identity is what you can say you are according to what they say you can be. And not least of the categories of identity is that of sexual status under the law which allowed of no other orientation than that of heterosexuality. Lesbian identity was a criminal or non-identity. The conspiracy of silence was to prevent such an identity from emerging. Why certain dykes persisted in the fugitive life against all the social tacit evidence of their criminal definition and others like myself didn't is a question I still can't answer to any satisfaction, what I'm more certain of is that both types but I think especially the type that stopped doing it or couldn't get into doing it in the first place anyway both types were seriously dissociated from themselves. Both types being all women if you agree that all women are lesbians. On the general principle of the romance between the mothers and the daughters. That forgotten romance. The continuity of it or the recovery of it. I can't ultimately differentiate my oppression as a woman from my oppression as a lesbian. Whatever you think, and it's impossible to estimate the numbers who might ever have been and who might be now were it not for the fact that the law of man recognizes only a woman's prime commitment to him, we know it is essential to be an integrated person to be unified in the belief of the rightness of one's needs and interests and the doing of them. So in order to continue to be right you had to pretend you were and in this way any natural dyke like myself was in a state of internal dissociation over what you thought you were and what you were doing or wanted to be doing, and then even if you gave up wanting what you were once doing and you were now merely wanting you were still dangerously dissociated from yourself in the sense that you were repressing your potential identity and

your real needs and interests. Looked at in this way every lesbian was a sick person. The internalization of the taboo was so great that you didn't think you were what you wanted or were doing. In the sense that every woman is separate from herself is she ill. For all daughters once primally attached to their mothers it is a general social illness to be turned in the direction of a prime commitment to the fathers. I'm way ahead of myself. As it is it isn't easy just to think back into how I was as a very active unconsciously conflicted person in new york city. I had plenty of warning in the form of symptoms but that's as far as I got: troubles and chest pains and claustrophobia and constipation and paranoia. And the confirmation of myself as an unstable person turning into a failure. Clearly something had to happen, and it did. I think I nearly died significantly enough in the apartment of my friend Ruth Currier with whom perhaps I was still secretly in love anyway I happened to be in her place hemorrhaging over the spontaneous delivery of this four and a half or five month old fetus after a couple of weeks of visiting one of these abortionists who attach a device to the cervix to somehow electrically induce labor and I thought I was done for. This was the upshot of the Oswald affair. Nobody was around so while I was bleeding to death I managed to call the hospital bureau which arrived with all their emergency and towaway equipment and that's how I became a kind of public casualty in a city depot, it was very embarrassing. I had made a grand personal demonstration of my inability to cope. My mother was turning out to be right about me. And it didn't help matters to blame her either. And I didn't go to a shrink which was the obvious recourse in such melodramas as mine. That's what new york was all about. An army of head doctors just waiting for everybody at the natural end of the line. But I was far from finished with myself. The final touches involving of course a man and marriage, the real thing. Never mind that I went on to break my foot and later suddenly stop dancing for no apparent reason and unaccountably take a musty job sorting out

clippings and photos in the dance collection of the public library from which I was predictably fired and to become more completely than ever an isolated and alienated struggling young lost white middle class female unprotected in a big city. Never was a person so clearly driven into the desperate expedient of marriage as the illusory solution to a problem I didn't know was much bigger than me. Some people say now but why did you do that and what can I say, I didn't know what else to do and that was always a thing to do in fact a basic thing to do, it was all around you, and I suppose since I had embarrassed myself, I had to legitimize myself, and nobody seemed so happy as when a person especially a woman was making the contract called marriage. Thus I entered the final phase of my complete capitulation to the male corporation. And I picked a perfect male dope to make sure I did it up fine. To tell the truth I just picked the first handsome intelligent sounding male that came along after I knew there was nothing else to do. Handsome and intelligent didn't mean a thing. Four years and two kids later I might as well've made a cross atlantic solo flight in a balloon for all my marriage meant as a solution to anything whatsoever. To be fair however I should say it performed an extremely important function: it brought me back to my lesbian senses. It was about time. As it turned out I'd made the perfect choice. The marriage was an exercise in violence interrupted by short periods of violence. I had made certain that nothing short of a desexualized rhubarb for a male specimen would ever please me again. That I survived to ever think the thought was one of the minor social miracles of the day. I should've won a lavender heart for survival. By the time I was through I had experienced all new york had to offer short of jail. If I had arrived in new york a sort of institutional domestic geranium unfit even for walking down the street at last I resembled somewhat those heartier indigenous weeds growing up through the cracks of the broken sidewalks. I suppose you think I had it all together by this time. Well certainly I didn't. I had the sense to fall in love

with a woman again, and I had something called Experience, the novels and movies of tragedies were not such a fiction to me any more, and I was by then embarked at last on an activity I enjoyed that had some social personal direction to it and that was writing; but I was still a private person, still an individual with no political sense of myself whatsoever and thus responsible for all my actions in that awful ultimate sense of democracy and the freedom of choice or enterprise and upward mobility that made even that oldfashioned concept of fate an obsolete one, I mean there was not even fate to blame for yr troubles, and I was for a short but interminable time an impoverished tenement bound stranded mother of two with a typewriter and a few assorted salvation army dishes and a beatup escape vehicle for which you sacrificed food money if you needed the gas, and a palpable physical reminder of yr disaster in those periodic paralyzing attacks in the chest which drove you to the nearest emergency clinic and a bunch of x-rays that suggested you were a case for the shrink. Moreover, I wasn't through with men yet. Naturally I was under the impression that the character I married was just one of those bad people, so I had had a piece of bad luck, and I might do better the next time or if there was no next time I knew there were better deals around and I could agree with my friends in the popular psychology of the time that I was just a masochist and had *chosen* the agent of my defeat, something like that. Now I think it's true that on the scale of boys the one I chose was a particularly bad one, I mean at least there were those who were restrained in their violence by the gentleman's code of manners about never hitting a lady and all, and who were older than a sexually demanding explosive 21 & so forth; but I had not the slightest idea that marriage in itself was just a bad deal for a woman and that from that point of view it wasn't that the bloke I married was so terrible as that I was constitutionally unable to submit to my proper role as woman in the contract, I was ill prepared for such a role, I didn't know what it was, as I've said the

exclusively woman centered life of all my early years had given me a certain uninhibited chauvinism about my identity as female, and although this identity was drastically at odds with the social discrimination against my sex, I remained oblivious to what that discrimination meant in terms of innate inferiority and the behavior required to suit that preconceived notion of myself, and as such a female ran straight up against the role-playing aggression of a young male whose chauvinism was, unlike mine, socially cultivated and sacrosanct. I had grown up it seems in a kind of fugitive hothouse of a matriarchy. The word chauvinism may be inaccurate to describe the feeling I emerged with. I don't know. I don't recall emerging with any specific attitude of being *superior* to the man, nobody audibly put men down, it's just that we went on as if men didn't exist more or less, I had no occasion to observe and to feel their privilege, so I think my chauvinism was people chauvinism, I met the male world with a naive sense of equality, that pure sense of nature antecedent to the corruptions of culture in its political sex race and class discriminations. The young male I married was not the individual I thought he was so much as an excellent representative of the system at whose hands I had already been diminished. But once again, not understanding any of this, I had failed personally, still all out of whack with myself and society. I'd like to've skipped over these dozen years without anybody noticing. It was a dismal time and there wasn't much help for us. The feminist revolution was still a few years away, gay liberation even more remote. There *was* something however, and that was the cultural revolution of hip and beat and black jazz and the twist and the drugs: all the incipient makings of drop-out and the later radical left and a woman's movement. And I almost forgot—I was becoming a writer! And I had fallen in love with a woman again! There was devastation, but there was hope. Most hopeful of all was leaving behind me that overall fifties monochromatic peck&peck and lord&taylor life of skirts and *blouses* and the entire wasp outfit of proper well educated sensible young

women who never had a good time but who functioned superbly, who were responsible and dedicated artists or whatever they were, always in control of themselves meaning if they were in trouble you never noticed it, the main thing was *appearances*, and I was incapable of keeping them up, so at last I met some other floundering disorganized people. Who were having a good time!

My port of entry into the wild sixties was the leftover beat generation on east broadway where new york's original jewish ghetto was still flourishing. Ferlinghetti's east broadway. I don't know where ginsberg and corso and burroughs were by then, and I never met ferlinghetti, but here was a far out scene of people mixed up with the poets and painters in making "Pull My Daisy" with script by kerouac and whirling around themselves in the slums with thrift store finery and the new underground culture, whatever that was for anybody. The new happenings. The new choreography. The new paintings not yet called pop or op. The new music. The new mixed media. It was very exciting. And my wasp thing was at last contaminated first hand by the children of the children of new york's great population of disenchanting immigrants. These people I met were the sons and daughters of some real original amerikan outsiders and they were getting it on culturally with another group of outsiders—the amerikan blacks, and as a misplaced person with a forgotten history of rebellion of my own, the halcyon years of boarding school delinquency, I could relate to all this chaos and craziness. I became a beatnik in thrift store gear. I became an impromptu entertainer at loft parties. I had joined the historical company of eccentric bohemians now called beats or hipsters. Apparently I was so overwhelmed by my new life that I outdid everybody in the sheer extent of conceivable silly exploits. I was delighted with my new reputation and seized every opportunity to enhance and enlarge the scope of it. It was just like boarding school with the added

complexity of poverty and mudderedness and a serious involvement in writing. It didn't solve a thing sexually, even if I was in love with another woman, but at least I was running around again and acting as if the whole world was my mother and my grandmother in the original expanding theatre of performance and reactions. Sexually in fact this little society of crazy artists and beautiful spunky women was as straight as any other in new york city, straighter for that matter than the uptown world of dancing I came from in which at least many males were queer and kinky even if they didn't say so. So I remained as heterosexual as ever, not unlike the earlier days when I would climb into bed for no good reason with any male dope who really wanted to while being secretly mad for a woman in another hopeless quest for an unattainable object. The difference being that I was encouraged by the more expressive histrionic nature of this new society to be a little assertive about my needs and to risk something in the folly of exposure as I went down finally in one more battle against straight society and my own heterosexual identity. The difference also being that these people didn't condemn me outright, they were modern bohemians after all, and they conceded the possibility of being queer if you could just get to it, I think they were exasperated by my own unresolved conflict, they allowed for an individual solution, that is if it was maintained as strictly individual, and they could say well this friend of ours was fucked up somehow and this is what they have to do and so be it. In any event there wasn't much point in secrets among these people. Unlike the wasp they didn't come from families that made big pretenses over things. They yelled and scrapped and loved their way through life, everything surface and up front. If this second wave of beat and ripoff was colorful and exciting the life was also desperate and precarious and the troubles of everybody were just as declared and manifest as the daily good times and the celebrations of the parties. Here was a more integrated kind of existence. My odyssey as a dissociated person was coming to a

close. It would not be through or within this milieu of hippiedom that I would sort out the discrepancies of my life, but it was through them that I moved on to the next, the concluding phase of an untenable conflict and a highly personal spiritual solution in the shattering experience of schizophrenia, that time of going catholic for a couple of days and of going better than that with some grand creation of a genealogical explanation, a kind of holding tactic until the revolution began and concrete external social support was at last at hand. Nobody should wonder why I turned into a revolutionary lesbian. I had done practically everything there was to do. My case was a paradigm for a revolutionary consciousness.

FEMINIST POLITICS

Where We Stand

Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. This was a definition of feminism I offered in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* more than 10 years ago. It was my hope at the time that it would become a common definition everyone would use. I liked this definition because it did not imply that men were the enemy. By naming sexism as the problem it went directly to the heart of the matter. Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systemic institutionalized sexism. As a definition it is open-ended. To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism.

As all advocates of feminist politics know, most people do not understand sexism, or if they do, they think it is not a problem. Masses of people think that feminism is always and only about women seeking to be equal to men. And a huge majority of these folks think feminism is anti-male. Their misunderstanding of feminist politics reflects the reality that most folks learn about feminism from patriarchal mass media. The feminism they hear about the most is portrayed by women who are primarily committed to gender equality — equal pay for equal work, and sometimes women and

men sharing household chores and parenting. They see that these women are usually white and materially privileged. They know from mass media that women's liberation focuses on the freedom to have abortions, to be lesbians, to challenge rape and domestic violence. Among these issues, masses of people agree with the idea of gender equity in the workplace — equal pay for equal work.

Since our society continues to be primarily a "Christian" culture, masses of people continue to believe that god has ordained that women be subordinate to men in the domestic household. Even though masses of women have entered the workforce, even though many families are headed by women who are the sole breadwinners, the vision of domestic life which continues to dominate the nation's imagination is one in which the logic of male domination is intact, whether men are present in the home or not. The wrongminded notion of feminist movement which implied it was anti-male carried with it the wrongminded assumption that all female space would necessarily be an environment where patriarchy and sexist thinking would be absent. Many women, even those involved in feminist politics, chose to believe this as well.

There was indeed a great deal of anti-male sentiment among early feminist activists who were responding to male domination with anger. It was that anger at injustice that was the impetus for creating a women's liberation movement. Early on most feminist activists (a majority of whom were white) had their consciousness raised about the nature of male domination when they were working in anti-classist and anti-racist settings with men who were telling the world about the importance of freedom while subordinating the women in their ranks. Whether it was white women working on behalf of socialism, black women working on behalf of civil rights and black liberation, or Native American women working for indigenous rights, it was clear that men wanted to lead, and they wanted

women to follow. Participating in these radical freedom struggles awakened the spirit of rebellion and resistance in progressive females and led them towards contemporary women's liberation.

As contemporary feminism progressed, as women realized that males were not the only group in our society who supported sexist thinking and behavior — that females could be sexist as well — anti-male sentiment no longer shaped the movement's consciousness. The focus shifted to an all-out effort to create gender justice. But women could not band together to further feminism without confronting our sexist thinking. Sisterhood could not be powerful as long as women were competitively at war with one another. Utopian visions of sisterhood based solely on the awareness of the reality that all women were in some way victimized by male domination were disrupted by discussions of class and race. Discussions of class differences occurred early on in contemporary feminism, preceding discussions of race. Diana Press published revolutionary insights about class divisions between women as early as the mid-'70s in their collection of essays *Class and Feminism*. These discussions did not trivialize the feminist insistence that "sisterhood is powerful," they simply emphasized that we could only become sisters in struggle by confronting the ways women — through sex, class, and race — dominated and exploited other women, and created a political platform that would address these differences.

Even though individual black women were active in contemporary feminist movement from its inception, they were not the individuals who became the "stars" of the movement, who attracted the attention of mass media. Often individual black women active in feminist movement were revolutionary feminists (like many white lesbians). They were already at odds with reformist feminists who resolutely wanted to project a vision of the movement as being solely about women gaining equality with men in the existing sys-

tem. Even before race became a talked about issue in feminist circles it was clear to black women (and to their revolutionary allies in struggle) that they were never going to have equality within the existing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

From its earliest inception feminist movement was polarized. Reformist thinkers chose to emphasize gender equality. Revolutionary thinkers did not want simply to alter the existing system so that women would have more rights. We wanted to transform that system, to bring an end to patriarchy and sexism. Since patriarchal mass media was not interested in the more revolutionary vision, it never received attention in mainstream press. The vision of "women's liberation" which captured and still holds the public imagination was the one representing women as wanting what men had. And this was the vision that was easier to realize. Changes in our nation's economy, economic depression, the loss of jobs, etc., made the climate ripe for our nation's citizens to accept the notion of gender equality in the workforce.

Given the reality of racism, it made sense that white men were more willing to consider women's rights when the granting of those rights could serve the interests of maintaining white supremacy. We can never forget that white women began to assert their need for freedom after civil rights, just at the point when racial discrimination was ending and black people, especially black males, might have attained equality in the workforce with white men. Reformist feminist thinking focusing primarily on equality with men in the workforce overshadowed the original radical foundations of contemporary feminism which called for reform as well as overall restructuring of society so that our nation would be fundamentally anti-sexist.

Most women, especially privileged white women, ceased even to consider revolutionary feminist visions, once they began to gain economic power within the existing social structure. Ironically, rev-

olutionary feminist thinking was most accepted and embraced in academic circles. In those circles the production of revolutionary feminist theory progressed, but more often than not that theory was not made available to the public. It became and remains a privileged discourse available to those among us who are highly literate, well-educated, and usually materially privileged. Works like *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that offer a liberatory vision of feminist transformation never receive mainstream attention. Masses of people have not heard of this book. They have not rejected its message; they do not know what the message is.

While it was in the interest of mainstream white supremacist capitalist patriarchy to suppress visionary feminist thinking which was not anti-male or concerned with getting women the right to be like men, reformist feminists were also eager to silence these forces. Reformist feminism became their route to class mobility. They could break free of male domination in the workforce and be more self-determining in their lifestyles. While sexism did not end, they could maximize their freedom within the existing system. And they could count on there being a lower class of exploited subordinated women to do the dirty work they were refusing to do. By accepting and indeed colluding with the subordination of working-class and poor women, they not only ally themselves with the existing patriarchy and its concomitant sexism, they give themselves the right to lead a double life, one where they are the equals of men in the workforce and at home when they want to be. If they choose lesbianism they have the privilege of being equals with men in the workforce while using class power to create domestic lifestyles where they can choose to have little or no contact with men.

Lifestyle feminism ushered in the notion that there could be as many versions of feminism as there were women. Suddenly the politics was being slowly removed from feminism. And the assumption pre-

vailed that no matter what a woman's politics, be she conservative or liberal, she too could fit feminism into her existing lifestyle. Obviously this way of thinking has made feminism more acceptable because its underlying assumption is that women can be feminists without fundamentally challenging and changing themselves or the culture. For example, let's take the issue of abortion. If feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression, and depriving females of reproductive rights is a form of sexist oppression, then one cannot be anti-choice and be feminist. A woman can insist she would never choose to have an abortion while affirming her support of the right of women to choose and still be an advocate of feminist politics. She cannot be anti-abortion and an advocate of feminism. Concurrently there can be no such thing as "power feminism" if the vision of power evoked is power gained through the exploitation and oppression of others.

Feminist politics is losing momentum because feminist movement has lost clear definitions. We have those definitions. Let's reclaim them. Let's share them. Let's start over. Let's have T-shirts and bumper stickers and postcards and hip-hop music, television and radio commercials, ads everywhere and billboards, and all manner of printed material that tells the world about feminism. We can share the simple yet powerful message that feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression. Let's start there. Let the movement begin again.

ENDING VIOLENCE

By far one of the most widespread positive interventions of contemporary feminist movement remains the effort to create and sustain greater cultural awareness of domestic violence as well as the changes that must happen in our thinking and action if we are to see its end. Nowadays the problem of domestic violence is talked about in so many circles, from mass media to grade schools, that it is often forgotten that contemporary feminist movement was the force that dramatically uncovered and exposed the ongoing reality of domestic violence. Initially feminist focus on domestic violence highlighted male violence against women, but as the movement progressed evidence showed that there was also domestic violence present in same-sex relations, that women in relationships with women were and are oftentimes the victims of abuse, that children were also victims of adult patriarchal violence enacted by women and men.

Patriarchal violence in the home is based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force. This expanded definition of domestic violence includes male violence against women, same-sex violence, and adult violence against children. The term "patriarchal violence" is useful because unlike the more accepted phrase "domestic violence" it continually reminds the listener that violence in

the home is connected to sexism and sexist thinking, to male domination. For too long the term domestic violence has been used as a "soft" term which suggests it emerges in an intimate context that is private and somehow less threatening, less brutal, than the violence that takes place outside the home. This is not so, since more women are beaten and murdered in the home than on the outside. Also most people tend to see domestic violence between adults as separate and distinct from violence against children when it is not. Often children suffer abuse as they attempt to protect a mother who is being attacked by a male companion or husband, or they are emotionally damaged by witnessing violence and abuse.

Just as a vast majority of citizens in this nation believe in equal pay for equal work most folks believe that men should not beat women and children. Yet when they are told that domestic violence is the direct outcome of sexism, that it will not end until sexism ends, they are unable to make this logical leap because it requires challenging and changing fundamental ways of thinking about gender. Significantly, I am among those rare feminist theorists who believe that it is crucial for feminist movement to have as an overriding agenda ending all forms of violence. Feminist focus on patriarchal violence against women should remain a primary concern. However emphasizing male violence against women in a manner which implies that it is more horrendous than all other forms of patriarchal violence does not serve to further the interests of feminist movement. It obscures the reality that much patriarchal violence is directed at children by sexist women and men.

In a zealous effort to call attention to male violence against women reformist feminist thinkers still choose often to portray females as always and only victims. The fact that many violent attacks on children are perpetrated by women is not equally highlighted and seen as another expression of patriarchal violence. We know now

that children are violated not only when they are the direct targets of patriarchal violence but as well when they are forced to witness violent acts. Had all feminist thinkers expressed outrage at patriarchal violence perpetrated by women, placing it on an equal footing with male violence against women, it would have been and will be harder for the public to dismiss attention given patriarchal violence by seeing it as an anti-male agenda.

Adults who have been the victims of patriarchal violence perpetrated by females know that women are not nonviolent no matter the number of surveys that tell us women often are more inclined to use nonviolence. The truth is that children have no organized collective voice to speak the reality of how often they are the objects of female violence. Were it not for the huge numbers of children seeking medical attention because of violence done by women and men, there might be no evidence documenting female violence.

I first raised these concerns in the chapter "Feminist Movement to End Violence" in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, stating:

It is essential for continued feminist struggle to end violence against women that this struggle be viewed as a component of an overall movement to end violence. So far feminist movement has primarily focused on male violence, and as a consequence lends credibility to sexist stereotypes that suggest men are violent, women are not; men are abusers, women are victims. This type of thinking allows us to ignore the extent to which women (with men) in this society accept and perpetuate the idea that it is acceptable for a dominant party or group to maintain power over the dominated by using coercive force. It allows us to overlook or ignore the extent to which women exert coercive authority over others or act violently. The fact that women may not commit violent acts as often as men does not negate the reality of female violence. We must see both men and women in this society as groups who support the use of violence if we are to eliminate it.

A mother who might never be violent but who teaches her children, especially her sons, that violence is an acceptable means of exerting social control, is still in collusion with patriarchal violence. Her thinking must be changed.

Clearly most women do not use violence to dominate men (even though small numbers of women batter the men in their lives) but lots of women believe that a person in authority has the right to use force to maintain authority. A huge majority of parents use some form of physical or verbal aggression against children. Since women remain the primary caretakers of children, the facts confirm the reality that given a hierarchal system in a culture of domination which empowers females (like the parent-child relationship) all too often they use coercive force to maintain dominance. In a culture of domination everyone is socialized to see violence as an acceptable means of social control. Dominant parties maintain power by the threat (acted upon or not) that abusive punishment, physical or psychological, will be used whenever the hierarchal structures in place are threatened, whether that be in male-female relationships, or parent and child bonds.

Male violence against women has received much ongoing media attention (highlighted by real-life court cases like the trial against O.J. Simpson) but awareness has not led the American public to challenge the underlying causes of this violence, to challenge patriarchy. Sexist thinking continues to support male domination and the violence that is a consequence. Since masses of unemployed and working-class men do not feel powerful on their jobs within white supremacist patriarchy they are encouraged to feel that the one place where they will have absolute authority and respect is in the home. Men are socialized by ruling-class groups of men to accept domination in the public world of work and to believe that the private world of home and intimate relationships will restore to them the sense of

power they equate with masculinity. As more men have entered the ranks of the employed or receive low wages and more women have entered the world of work, some men feel that the use of violence is the only way they can establish and maintain power and dominance within the sexist sex role hierarchy. Until they unlearn the sexist thinking that tells them they have a right to rule over women by any means, male violence against women will continue to be a norm.

Early on in feminist thinking activists often failed to liken male violence against women to imperialist militarism. This linkage was often not made because those who were against male violence were often accepting and even supportive of militarism. As long as sexist thinking socializes boys to be "killers," whether in imaginary good guy, bad guy fights or as soldiers in imperialism to maintain coercive power over nations, patriarchal violence against women and children will continue. In recent years as young males from diverse class backgrounds have committed horrendous acts of violence there has been national condemnation of these acts but few attempts to link this violence to sexist thinking.

I conclude the chapter on violence in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* emphasizing that men are not the only people who accept, condone, and perpetuate violence, who create a culture of violence. I urge women to take responsibility for the role women play in condoning violence:

By only calling attention to male violence against women, or making militarism just another expression of male violence, we fail to adequately address the problem of violence and make it difficult to develop viable resistance strategies and solutions.... While we need not diminish the severity of the problem of male violence against women or male violence against nations or the planet, we must acknowledge that men and women have together made the United States a culture of violence and must work together to

transform and recreate that culture. Women and men must oppose the use of violence as a means of social control in all its manifestations: war, male violence against women, adult violence against children, teenage violence, racial violence, etc. Feminist efforts to end male violence against women must be expanded into a movement to end all forms of violence.

And it is especially vital that parents learn to parent in nonviolent ways. For our children will not turn away from violence if it is the only way they know to handle difficult situations.

In our nation masses of people are concerned about violence but resolutely refuse to link that violence to patriarchal thinking or male domination. Feminist thinking offers a solution. And it is up to us to make that solution available to everyone.

Men Explain Things to Me

REBECCA SOLNIT

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Men Explain Things to Me

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I still don't know why Sallie and I bothered to go to that party in the forest slope above Aspen. The people were all older than us and dull in a distinguished way, old enough that we, at forty-ish, passed as the occasion's young ladies. The house was great—if you like Ralph Lauren-style chalets—a rugged luxury cabin at 9,000 feet complete with elk antlers, lots of kilims, and a wood-burning stove. We were preparing to leave, when our host said, “No, stay a little longer so I can talk to you.” He was an imposing man who'd made a lot of money.

He kept us waiting while the other guests drifted out into the summer night, and then sat us down at his authentically grainy wood table and said to me, “So? I hear you've written a couple of books.”

I replied, “Several, actually.”

He said, in the way you encourage your friend's seven-year-old to describe flute practice, “And what are they about?”

They were actually about quite a few different things, the six or seven out by then, but I began to speak only of the most recent on that summer day in 2003, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, my book on the annihilation of time and space and the industrialization of everyday life.

He cut me off soon after I mentioned Muybridge. “And have you heard about the *very important* Muybridge book that came out this year?”

So caught up was I in my assigned role as ingénue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had

come out simultaneously and I'd somehow missed it. He was already telling me about the very important book—with that smug look I know so well in a man holding forth, eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own authority.

Here, let me just say that my life is well sprinkled with lovely men, with a long succession of editors who have, since I was young, listened to and encouraged and published me, with my infinitely generous younger brother, with splendid friends of whom it could be said—like the Clerk in *The Canterbury Tales* I still remember from Mr. Pelen's class on Chaucer—"gladly would he learn and gladly teach." Still, there are these other men, too. So, Mr. Very Important was going on smugly about this book I should have known when Sallie interrupted him, to say, "That's her book." Or tried to interrupt him anyway.

But he just continued on his way. She had to say, "That's her book" three or four times before he finally took it in. And then, as if in a nineteenth-century novel, he went ashen. That I was indeed the author of the very important book it turned out he hadn't read, just read about in the *New York Times Book Review* a few months earlier, so confused the neat categories into which his world was sorted that he was stunned speechless—for a moment, before he began holding forth again. Being women, we were politely out of earshot before we started laughing, and we've never really stopped.

I like incidents of that sort, when forces that are usually so sneaky and hard to point out slither out of the grass and are as obvious as, say, an anaconda that's eaten a cow or an elephant turd on the carpet.

The Slippery Slope of Silencings

Yes, people of both genders pop up at events to hold forth on irrelevant things and conspiracy theories, but the out-and-out confrontational confidence of the totally ignorant is, in my experience, gendered. Men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they're talking about. Some men.

Every woman knows what I'm talking about. It's the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence.

I wouldn't be surprised if part of the trajectory of American politics since 2001 was shaped by, say, the inability to hear Coleen Rowley, the FBI woman who issued those early warnings about al-Qaeda, and it was certainly shaped

by a Bush administration to which you couldn't tell anything, including that Iraq had no links to al-Qaeda and no WMDs, or that the war was not going to be a "cakewalk." (Even male experts couldn't penetrate the fortress of its smugness.)

Arrogance might have had something to do with the war, but this syndrome is a war that nearly every woman faces every day, a war within herself too, a belief in her superfluity, an invitation to silence, one from which a fairly nice career as a writer (with a lot of research and facts correctly deployed) has not entirely freed me. After all, there was a moment there when I was willing to let Mr. Important and his overweening confidence bowl over my more shaky certainty.

Don't forget that I've had a lot more confirmation of my right to think and speak than most women, and I've learned that a certain amount of self-doubt is a good tool for correcting, understanding, listening, and progressing—though too much is paralyzing and total self-confidence produces arrogant idiots. There's a happy medium between these poles to which the genders have been pushed, a warm equatorial belt of give and take where we should all meet.

More extreme versions of our situation exist in, for example, those Middle Eastern countries where women's testimony has no legal standing: so that a woman can't testify that she was raped without a male witness to counter the male rapist. Which there rarely is.

Credibility is a basic survival tool. When I was very young and just beginning to get what feminism was about and why it was necessary, I had a boyfriend whose uncle was a nuclear physicist. One Christmas, he was telling—as though it were a light and amusing subject—how a neighbor's wife in his suburban bomb-making community had come running out of her house naked in the middle of the night screaming that her husband was trying to kill her. How, I asked, did you know that he wasn't trying to kill her? He explained, patiently, that they were respectable middle-class people. Therefore, her-husband-trying-to-kill-her was simply not a credible explanation for her fleeing the house yelling that her husband was trying to kill her. That she was crazy, on the other hand....

Even getting a restraining order—a fairly new legal tool—requires acquiring the credibility to convince the courts that some guy is a menace and then getting the cops to enforce it. Restraining orders often don't work anyway. Violence is one way to silence people, to deny their voice and their credibility, to assert your right to control over their right to exist. About three women a day are murdered by spouses or ex-spouses in this country. It's one of the main causes of death for pregnant women in the United States. At the

heart of the struggle of feminism to give rape, date rape, marital rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment legal standing as crimes has been the necessity of making women credible and audible.

I tend to believe that women acquired the status of human beings when these kinds of acts started to be taken seriously, when the big things that stop us and kill us were addressed legally from the mid-1970s on; well after, that is, my birth. And for anyone about to argue that workplace sexual intimidation isn't a life-or-death issue, remember that Marine Lance Corporal Maria Lauterbach, age twenty, was apparently killed by her higher-ranking colleague one winter's night while she was waiting to testify that he raped her. The burned remains of her pregnant body were found in the fire pit in his backyard.

Being told that, categorically, he knows what he's talking about and she doesn't, however minor a part of any given conversation, perpetuates the ugliness of this world and holds back its light. After my book *Wanderlust* came out in 2000, I found myself better able to resist being bullied out of my own perceptions and interpretations. On two occasions around that time, I objected to the behavior of a man, only to be told that the incidents hadn't happened at all as I said, that I was subjective, delusional, overwrought, dishonest—in a nutshell, female.

Most of my life, I would have doubted myself and backed down. Having public standing as a writer of history helped me stand my ground, but few women get that boost, and billions of women must be out there on this seven-billion-person planet being told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives, that the truth is not their property, now or ever. This goes way beyond Men Explaining Things, but it's part of the same archipelago of arrogance.

Men explain things to me, still. And no man has ever apologized for explaining, wrongly, things that I know and they don't. Not yet, but according to the actuarial tables, I may have another forty-something years to live, more or less, so it could happen. Though I'm not holding my breath.

Women Fighting on Two Fronts

A few years after the idiot in Aspen, I was in Berlin giving a talk when the Marxist writer Tariq Ali invited me out to a dinner that included a male writer and translator and three women a little younger than me who would remain deferential and mostly silent throughout the dinner. Tariq was great. Perhaps the translator was peeved that I insisted on playing a modest role in the conversation, but when I said something about how Women Strike for Peace, the extraordinary, little-known antinuclear and antiwar group founded in

1961, helped bring down the communist-hunting House Committee on Un-American Activities, HUAC, Mr. Very Important II sneered at me. HUAC, he insisted, didn't exist by the early 1960s and, anyway, no women's group played such a role in HUAC's downfall. His scorn was so withering, his confidence so aggressive, that arguing with him seemed a scary exercise in futility and an invitation to more insult.

I think I was at nine books at that point, including one that drew from primary documents about and interviews with a key member of Women Strike for Peace. But explaining men still assume I am, in some sort of obscene impregnation metaphor, an empty vessel to be filled with their wisdom and knowledge. A Freudian would claim to know what they have and I lack, but intelligence is not situated in the crotch—even if you can write one of Virginia Woolf's long mellifluous musical sentences about the subtle subjugation of women in the snow with your willie. Back in my hotel room, I searched online a bit and found that Eric Bentley in his definitive history of the House Committee on Un-American Activities credits Women Strike for Peace with "striking the crucial blow in the fall of HUAC's Bastille." In the early 1960s.

So I opened an essay (on Jane Jacobs, Betty Friedan, and Rachel Carson) for the *Nation* with this interchange, in part as a shout-out to one of the more unpleasant men who have explained things to me: Dude, if you're reading this, you're a carbuncle on the face of humanity and an obstacle to civilization. Feel the shame.

The battle with Men Who Explain Things has trampled down many women—of my generation, of the up-and-coming generation we need so badly, here and in Pakistan and Bolivia and Java, not to speak of the countless women who came before me and were not allowed into the laboratory, or the library, or the conversation, or the revolution, or even the category called human.

After all, Women Strike for Peace was founded by women who were tired of making the coffee and doing the typing and not having any voice or decision-making role in the antinuclear movement of the 1950s. Most women fight wars on two fronts, one for whatever the putative topic is and one simply for the right to speak, to have ideas, to be acknowledged to be in possession of facts and truths, to have value, to be a human being. Things have gotten better, but this war won't end in my lifetime. I'm still fighting it, for myself certainly, but also for all those younger women who have something to say, in the hope that they will get to say it.

Postscript

One evening over dinner in March 2008, I began to joke, as I often had

before, about writing an essay called “Men Explain Things to Me.” Every writer has a stable of ideas that never make it to the racetrack, and I’d been trotting this pony out recreationally once in a while. My houseguest, the brilliant theorist and activist Marina Sitrin, insisted that I had to write it down because people like her younger sister Sam needed to read it. Young women, she said, needed to know that being belittled wasn’t the result of their own secret failings; it was the boring old gender wars, and it happened to most of us who were female at some point or other.

I wrote it in one sitting early the next morning. When something assembles itself that fast, it’s clear it’s been composing itself somewhere in the unknowable back of the mind for a long time. It wanted to be written; it was restless for the racetrack; it galloped along once I sat down at the computer. Since Marina slept in later than me in those days, I served it for breakfast and later that day sent it to Tom Engelhardt at TomDispatch, who published it online soon after. It spread quickly, as essays put up at Tom’s site do, and has never stopped going around, being reposted and shared and commented upon. It’s circulated like nothing else I’ve done.

It struck a chord. And a nerve.

Some men explained why men explaining things to women wasn’t really a gendered phenomenon. Usually, women then pointed out that, in insisting on their right to dismiss the experiences women say they have, men succeeded in explaining in just the way I said they sometimes do. (For the record, I do believe that women have explained things in patronizing ways, to men among others. But that’s not indicative of the massive power differential that takes far more sinister forms as well or of the broad pattern of how gender works in our society.)

Other men got it and were cool. This was, after all, written in the era when male feminists had become a more meaningful presence, and feminism was funnier than ever. Not everyone knew they were funny, however. At TomDispatch in 2008, I got an email from an older man in Indianapolis, who wrote in to tell me that he had “never personally or professionally shortchanged a woman” and went on to berate me for not hanging out with “more regular guys or at least do a little homework first.” He then gave me some advice about how to run my life and commented on my “feelings of inferiority.” He thought that being patronized was an experience a woman chooses to have, or could choose not to have—and so the fault was all mine.

A website named “Academic Men Explain Things to Me” arose, and hundreds of university women shared their stories of being patronized, belittled, talked over, and more. The term “mansplaining” was coined soon after the piece appeared, and I was sometimes credited with it. In fact, I had

nothing to do with its actual creation, though my essay, along with all the men who embodied the idea, apparently inspired it. (I have doubts about the word and don't use it myself much; it seems to me to go a little heavy on the idea that men are inherently flawed this way, rather than that some men explain things they shouldn't and don't hear things they should. If it's not clear enough in the piece, I love it when people explain things to me they know and I'm interested in but don't yet know; it's when they explain things to me I know and they don't that the conversation goes wrong.) By 2012, the term "mansplained"—one of the *New York Times's* words of the year for 2010—was being used in mainstream political journalism.

Alas, this was because it dovetailed pretty well with the times. TomDispatch reposted "Men Explain Things" in August 2012, and fortuitously, more or less simultaneously, Representative Todd Akin (R-Missouri) made his infamous statement that we don't need abortion for women who are raped, because "if it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down." That electoral season was peppered by the crazy pro-rape, anti-fact statements of male conservatives. And salted with feminists pointing out why feminism is necessary and why these guys are scary. It was nice to be one of the voices in that conversation; the piece had a big revival.

Chords, nerves: the thing is still circulating as I write. The point of the essay was never to suggest that I think I am notably oppressed. It was to take these conversations as the narrow end of the wedge that opens up space for men and closes it off for women, space to speak, to be heard, to have rights, to participate, to be respected, to be a full and free human being. This is one way that, in polite discourse, power is expressed—the same power that in impolite discourse and in physical acts of intimidation and violence, and very often in how the world is organized—silences and erases and annihilates women, as equals, as participants, as human beings with rights, and far too often as living beings.

The battle for women to be treated like human beings with rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of involvement in cultural and political arenas continues, and it is sometimes a pretty grim battle. I surprised myself when I wrote the essay, which began with an amusing incident and ended with rape and murder. That made clear to me the continuum that stretches from minor social misery to violent silencing and violent death (and I think we would understand misogyny and violence against women even better if we looked at the abuse of power as a whole rather than treating domestic violence separately from rape and murder and harassment and intimidation, online and at home and in the workplace and in the streets; seen together, the pattern is

clear).

Having the right to show up and speak are basic to survival, to dignity, and to liberty. I'm grateful that, after an early life of being silenced, sometimes violently, I grew up to have a voice, circumstances that will always bind me to the rights of the voiceless.

Adrienne Rich
Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying (1975)

Audre Lorde
Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power (1978)

Sara Ahmed
Feminist Consciousness (2017)

Jill Johnston
A Nice Well-Behaved Fucked-Up Person (1973)

bell hooks
Feminist Politics: Where We Stand (2000)

bell hooks
Ending Violence (2000)

Rebecca Solnit
Men Explain Things to Me (2008)