

# Ascribing Sexual Orientations

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to suggest a somewhat different approach to the contemporary discussion of human sexual orientations. Instead of examining the nature of sexual orientation itself, it discusses the meanings of ascriptions of sexual orientation. (The discussion is confined to cases where the subject of ascription is female.) The paper begins with a survey of some prevalent ways of interpreting ascriptions of sexual orientation. It then comments on the variations in their meanings, and considers what the speaker is doing when uttering such an ascription. It concludes with some comments about an apparently anomalous sexual orientation, bisexuality.

My interest in the ascription of sexual orientations arose, in part, from three observations which I made over the course of the past year.<sup>1</sup> First, in my investigations of ethical issues pertaining to reproductive technology, it became very clear that access to such processes as *in vitro* fertilization and artificial insemination by donor is regulated and limited by means of the physician-enforced stipulation that the female candidates for these technologies must be heterosexual. Elsewhere I have documented and evaluated the arguments which have been offered on behalf of these stipulations.<sup>2</sup> What also interested me, however, were questions about what it is to be heterosexual, and how one is to know whether any person (including oneself) is heterosexual.

My second observation occurred at a conference on women and sexuality in the fall of 1985. Feliculously entitled "Coming Together," the conference offered various workshops designated as being for heterosexual women, for lesbian women, and for bisexual women. Undaunted by the labels, I attended workshops of all three kinds; it was not clear to me just how one was to know where one belonged. In some respects the most interesting of the three was a workshop for bisexual women, entitled "Bisexual Women: Do We Really Exist?". On encountering this apparently existential doubt, I was inclined to ask myself what it is to be bisexual, and how one is to know whether any person (including oneself) is bisexual.

Finally, my third observation occurred after meeting a physician who is also an abortion rights activist and a feminist therapist. When I mentioned to a mutual friend that I had met this woman, the friend informed me that the woman is, or identifies herself as, a lesbian bisexual. On hearing this apparently bifocal identification I wondered

what it is to be a lesbian (let alone a lesbian bisexual), and how one is to know whether any person (including oneself) is one.

I was troubled, then, by both ontological and epistemological problems: What is it to be lesbian or heterosexual or bisexual? How does one know whether a person is lesbian or heterosexual or bisexual? Part of the difficulty which I faced with these questions arose from the fact that most other people did not seem to see them as problems.<sup>3</sup> Certainly those who are willing to discriminate against certain women on the grounds that they are not heterosexual appear to find no difficulty in ascribing heterosexuality to some women and not to others. Similarly, the women at the sexuality conference, most of whom identified themselves as feminists, apparently had no difficulty in ascribing a sexual orientation to themselves, and sometimes to other women as well.

After a great deal of thought, I was still unable to arrive at definitive answers to the ontological and epistemological questions. I now believe that it is a mistake to attempt to answer these questions without first responding to a more fundamental one: the question of meaning. The more basic question is conceptual in nature: what is meant, or what might be meant, by saying that an individual is (or is really, no matter how she might appear) heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual?<sup>4</sup>

This is not just a simple matter of definition. For all feminists, "the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action."<sup>5</sup> Investigation of the meaning of ascriptions of sexual orientation provides an indirect approach to understanding the nature of sexual orientations and

their ethical, political, and ontological underpinnings. Hence, it is important to consider the ways in which these sexual ascriptions might be interpreted, the contexts in which they are employed, the emotional baggage they carry, and the functions they possess. Additional light can be cast upon their meaning by considering the sorts of things the speaker may be doing when uttering them: such things as condemning or commending; describing or hypothesizing or prescribing; and choosing, or failing or refusing to choose, a political stance or a worldview. In addition, it is necessary to take account of those contexts where ascriptions of sexual orientation are used frequently, where they really seem to matter, as well as, just as significantly, those in which they are resisted, and those in which they are considered inappropriate, or are simply not used—contexts in which, for example, an individual's being heterosexual appears to "go without saying."

Hence, in this paper I discuss the meaning, or more accurately the meanings, or families of meanings, of ascriptions of sexual orientation. In order to reduce some of the complexities of the subject, I shall confine the discussion to cases where the subject of ascription is female. While I do not assume that there are innate or essential differences between sexual orientations in males and sexual orientations in females, I believe that there are important differences under patriarchal capitalism in the ways in which sexual orientations are expressed, understood and conceptualized in women and in men. To say that a woman is heterosexual is not the same as saying that a man is heterosexual. And, to say that a woman is lesbian is not the same as saying that a man is homosexual. (As Adrienne Rich points out, "To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality...is to deny and erase female reality once again"<sup>6</sup>.) As a feminist I am committed above all to understanding women's experience; for these reasons I shall concentrate on the meanings of ascriptions of sexual orientation to women.

I shall not, however, attempt to survey all of the possible or historical meanings and uses of ascriptions of sexual orientation. Instead, I want to explore the terrain somewhat informally, without attempting to achieve premature closure on the subject. I shall, therefore, survey some current theories about the meanings of ascriptions of sexual orientation, and add some thoughts of my own. In the end I hope to contribute to ways of interpreting these ascriptions which have some theoretical and empirical justification consistent with a contemporary feminist perspective. Most of the discussion will focus on the terms "heterosexual" and "lesbian," leaving, for reasons that will become apparent later, discussion of the term "bisexual" to the end.

## I

Heterosexuality for women is not simply a matter of sexual preference, any more than lesbianism is. It is a matter of orientation of attention, as is lesbianism, in a metaphysical context controlled by neither heterosexual nor lesbian women.<sup>7</sup>

Like Marilyn Frye and many others, I prefer to use the word "orientation" rather than "preference." The reason is that the term "preference" suggests the simple expression of a desire or choice, as if heterosexuality, lesbianism, and bisexuality were not much more than "lifestyles" freely assumed and knowledgeably accepted.<sup>8</sup> Of course they might be, or some of them might be, but I do not want to begin by assuming that this is the case. As I shall suggest later, the term "orientation" has advantages of its own.

It is important to distinguish sexual orientation both from biological sex and from gender, that is, masculinity and femininity. This point might seem obvious to late twentieth-century feminists, but it has not always been. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both psychologists and the individuals whom they studied tended to conflate sexual orientation with gender. Concerning a community of lesbian women in the 1920s, for example, Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough write that they "tend[ed] to believe that they were different from other women, and these differences they saw in terms of their qualities of masculinity."<sup>9</sup> Because of the conflation of gender and sexual orientation, a heterosexual woman was thought to be a woman who assumed the appropriate gender role as a feminine woman; a lesbian woman was a woman who rejected her gender role, and wanted to be a male.

This conflation is tied up, historically, with the tendency to equate heterosexual with "normal," "natural," and "healthy," and lesbian with "abnormal," "unnatural," or "sick." Today it is perpetuated in scientific studies of lesbianism which still assume that lesbianism, viewed as "deviance" from one's gender role, cries out for scientific explanation, whereas heterosexuality, being normal, does not.<sup>10</sup> In this context, to say that a woman is lesbian is to say, in part, that she is the victim of certain causative factors (perhaps in her hormones or her family); whereas to say that a woman is heterosexual is to deny the occurrence of any special sexually-related events in her personal history.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, these connotations of sexual ascriptions also persist outside of scientific studies. As Marilyn Frye remarks,

Popular images of the lesbian and the gay man are images of people who do not fit the patterns of gender imposed on the sexes. She is seen as a female who is not feminine and he is a male who is not masculine.<sup>12</sup>

These connotations are used to denigrate lesbian women and to keep heterosexual women in their place.<sup>13</sup> To refer to a woman as a lesbian is to negatively evaluate her, perhaps to blame her, and to attempt to exert control over her, by calling upon the spurious historical connections between sexual orientation and gender, "deviance" from which is standardly considered to be inappropriate. Only persistent feminist criticism can help to make it clear that sex, gender, and sexual orientation are not inextricably linked; that gender and sexual orientation may vary independently of one another, and that stereotyping by gender or by sexual orientation is morally opprobrious.<sup>14</sup>

The most obvious but rather limited meaning of ascriptions of sexual orientation derives from the sex of the person with whom one engages in sexual activity. Thus, a woman who is heterosexual engages in sexual activity with men; a woman who is lesbian engages in sexual activity with women; and a woman who bisexual engages in sexual activity with both women and men. This is the usual approach to defining the terms within standard scientific studies,<sup>15</sup> and it is presumably in this sense that women seeking access to reproductive technology are required to be heterosexual.

For a number of reasons such an interpretation renders elusive the meanings of lesbian and heterosexual. First, individuals do not always engage in sexual activity just with members of one sex exclusively, yet there may be important reasons (to be discussed later) for describing them as heterosexual or lesbian. Moreover, a woman might significantly be called or identify herself as lesbian or heterosexual even if she is celibate. Thus, the meaning of the ascription seems not to be entirely dependent upon the actual occurrence of sexual activity. Might it then be dependent at least upon an historical fact: having (at some time or times) engaged in the appropriate type of sexual activity? Apparently not, for some women have identified themselves as lesbian or heterosexual long before they acted upon that identification. On the other hand, some women engage in sexual activity with women (or with men) and do not therefore identify themselves as lesbian (or as heterosexual); such a relationship may sometimes merely be seen as involvement with a particular individual and not as indicative of attraction to members of that sex in general.<sup>16</sup> It would be inappropriate to classify an individual's sexual orientation on the basis of her past behav-

our without reference to what she has felt or done since then.

So an ascription of sexual orientation is not necessarily a way of referring to a person's sexual behaviour; nor is it always a way of referring to the sex of her sexual partners. Such an interpretation excludes an important component of women's sexuality: our sexual feelings and erotic attachments. In a patriarchal culture, whom one has sex with is not necessarily an indication of one's sexual desires, and a woman who, for example, regularly engages (or must engage) in heterosexual activity may not necessarily feel the appropriate attraction to men.

The possibility of this divergence in some women's lives between sexual desire and sexual activity seems to suggest that ascriptions of sexual orientation ought realistically to be interpreted in terms of women's own erotic feelings and attractions. That is, they should primarily be defined not from the outside but from within, from the point of view of a woman considering her own sexual orientation. So, for example, to say that a woman is heterosexual is to say that she experiences erotic attraction primarily (or perhaps exclusively) to men.

In making that interpretation, however, it is important to avoid adopting an essentialist view of sexuality: in this case, the view that what we feel is the key to who or what we really are. Sexuality is socially constructed, that is, it is "a social, not a biological phenomenon."<sup>17</sup>

Although sexuality, like all human cultural activity, is grounded in the body, the body's structure, physiology, and functioning do not directly or simply determine the configuration or meaning of sexuality... The social construction of sexuality...encompass[es] the very way sex is conceptualized, defined, labeled, and described from time to time and from culture to culture.<sup>18</sup>

While it must certainly be acknowledged that sexual attractions and erotic feelings often may be experienced as natural or inherent within women, nevertheless, sexual desire and attraction are as much cultural artifacts as are gender roles. (This is a theme about which I shall say more in the next section.) Hence, although erotic attraction is an important way of interpreting ascriptions of sexual orientation, erotic feelings should not be understood as being revelatory of what one really is. In general, the search for meanings for ascriptions of sexual orientation ought not to imply a search for a "fixed sexual 'essence' or 'nature' that lies buried beneath layers of social ordering"<sup>19</sup> in each of us.

## II

Erotic attraction is an important part of the meaning of ascriptions of sexual orientation, but it cannot be the whole story for it fails to take account of the asymmetry of ascriptions of heterosexuality and lesbianism. As my earlier remarks about the negative connotations of "lesbian" suggest, these ascriptions have different functions and effects, are predicated upon different assumptions, and involve different evaluations. Adrienne Rich expresses it this way: "Any theory or cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as...the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations[] is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its other contributions."<sup>20</sup>

Many feminist theorists have attempted both to deal with the asymmetry of these ascriptions and to develop the anti-essentialist view of sexuality by introducing the concept of choice, particularly in connection with lesbianism. To identify another woman or oneself as lesbian, then, is to refer to the making of a deliberate choice. Such a choice is said to be not just "sexual" but also "political."<sup>21</sup> According to this view, to refer to a woman as a lesbian is not merely to describe the results of a personal decision or the manifestation of a cultural phenomenon; it is to describe "a commitment to women as a political group, which is the basis of a political/economic strategy leading to power for women."<sup>22</sup>

The manifestation of this choice, it has been suggested, may even be independent of any actual physical contact; sexual orientation in this interpretation is a matter of one's social behaviour or even one's worldview, not one's overt sexual practice. According to Blanche Wiesen Cook, for example, "Women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently, are lesbians,"<sup>23</sup> even if they do not interact sexually with women. Cook points out that a man and a woman who love each other, look into each other's eyes, and are inseparable are regarded as heterosexual, even if they never "consummate[]" their love in the acceptable (or unacceptable) sexual manner."<sup>24</sup> Hence, she says, two women who do likewise should also be considered to be lesbian. The ascription of sexual orientation is thus gradually divorced both from sexual behaviour and even from specific erotic attraction. Instead it becomes more literally a matter of orientation, that is, the focus of one's alignment, bearings, and inclination in life.

This view is endorsed by Rich, who suggests that what she somewhat contemptuously calls "sexual lesbians" (in other words, those who interact sexually with women)

may be male-identified, that is, allied socially, politically, and intellectually with men, and therefore not lesbian in the sense of forming their primary relationships with women.<sup>25</sup> Even if women such as these refuse to sleep, eat, or speak with men, they may "still be psychically enthralled to maleness."<sup>26</sup> Rich argues instead for a reformation of ascriptions of lesbianism: she introduces the concept of the "lesbian continuum," that is, "a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman."<sup>27</sup> In Rich's view, women who do not identify themselves as lesbian may nevertheless during the course of their lives "mov[e] in and out of this [lesbian] continuum."<sup>28</sup> To be a lesbian is to be a woman who loves women, who refuses to comply with the behaviour demanded of women, who refuses to define herself in relation to men.<sup>29</sup>

By the same token, heterosexuality is not similarly regarded by these theorists as a choice; at least, it is suggested, we cannot assume that it is. Instead Adrienne Rich argues that it is the result of institutionalized coercion: "[F]or women heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force."<sup>30</sup> Here the more negative connotations of the term "orientation" seem relevant: to be heterosexual is then a matter of one's adjustment, adaptation, accommodation, habituation and conditioning in life.

How should this use of the concepts of choice and coercion be evaluated in connection with ascriptions of sexual orientation? Some critics have pointed out that the view that heterosexuality is compelled implies that it is not innate in women; such a claim is compatible with the theory that sexuality is socially constructed. At the same time, however, some of Rich's claims seem to imply that she believes that lesbianism is innate. She refers, for example, to "the lesbian in me" and in every woman, the lesbian who is there even before one wholly "knows" that one is a lesbian.<sup>31</sup> Thus Rich sometimes appears to reverse the standard presupposition that it is lesbianism, not heterosexuality, which calls out for a special explanation, by assuming that lesbianism is in certain ways more natural. This assumption is, surely, yet another version of sexual essentialism,<sup>32</sup> and it can be avoided only by emphasizing that although lesbianism and heterosexuality develop through quite different processes of acculturation, the lesbian continuum is a social phenomenon to which women are not born but in which we learn, to a greater or lesser degree, to participate.

Ann Ferguson argues that Rich's view conceives of lesbian identity as "transhistorical phenomenon," when in fact it should be seen as "a historical phenomenon, not applicable to all societies and all periods of history."<sup>33</sup> Instead, according to Ferguson, an individual cannot be said to have a sexual identity or orientation without the presence of a community of others who think of themselves as having that identity.<sup>34</sup>

This claim relies on too literal an adherence to the concept of choice in connection with sexual orientation, an adherence which implausibly distorts the meanings of the ascription of lesbianism. It generates a peculiar chicken-and-egg problem about the origins of sexual identification. What comes first: the self-identified lesbian or the lesbian community? Can there be such a community without self-identified lesbians? It seems implausible to say that before the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, when self-conscious lesbian communities developed, lesbians did not exist. Yet Ferguson's reliance on the concept of an explicit choice commits us to saying that, not so long ago, there were no lesbians—and presumably no heterosexuals, either. I suggest that the meanings of the term "lesbian" and "heterosexual" which are necessary to the making of such a claim cease to be very useful, because they sever entirely the terms' connections with erotic attraction.

Ferguson also argues that, even in contemporary terms, "it is not meaningful to conjecture that someone is a lesbian who refuses to acknowledge herself as such. Taking on a lesbian identity is a self-conscious commitment or decision."<sup>35</sup> Consider the following case. A self-identified lesbian woman once said, in regard to her apparently heterosexual mother, "She's a real closet case herself." The woman was suggesting that, although her mother had had no opportunity or encouragement to identify herself as a lesbian (and perhaps would even repudiate the label if presented with it), nevertheless, the conditions of her mother's life and her social interactions made it plausible to identify the mother as a (potential?) lesbian. I do not believe that that ascription is, as Ferguson's claim implies, a meaningless one. Such an ascription does not lay claim to revealing the woman's inner essence or "true identity"; it is not making a metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality, but it does say something important about the woman's feelings and practices which is not at all captured by saying that she is heterosexual, or by saying, implausibly, that she has no sexual orientation, or that categories of sexual orientation are just not applicable to her. In Rich's terms, the woman is part of the lesbian continuum.

The concepts of the lesbian continuum and of compulsory heterosexuality enrich our interpretations of lesbianism and heterosexuality by acknowledging both the asymmetry of ascriptions of lesbianism and heterosexuality and the social construction of sexuality. Nevertheless, while the making of a self-conscious choice, particularly within the context of a self-conscious community, may very well be a sufficient condition for identifying oneself or another woman as lesbian. It is not, I suggest, a necessary condition. In the next section I shall say more about the concept of choice, this time in connection with ascriptions of heterosexuality.

### III

So far I have suggested that to ascribe a sexual orientation is not necessarily to refer to a person's behaviour or to the sex of her partners. Instead it is sometimes better understood as referring to erotic feelings, providing that these are not taken to reveal the individual's sexual essence. It may also say something about individual choice and social compulsion. I want to conclude my discussion by extending some of these ideas a little further.

#### *Heterosexuality and Choice*

Can the concept of choice be linked with heterosexual orientation?

Basically, heterosexuality means men first. That's what it's all about. It assumes that every woman is heterosexual; that every woman is defined by and is the property of men. Her body, her services, her children belong to men. If you don't accept that definition, you're a queer—no matter who you sleep with...<sup>36</sup>

This statement might be criticized for implicitly ascribing an unjustified privilege to lesbianism, and for assuming that to be heterosexual is to fail to live up to feminist principles.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, from the point of view of some lesbian feminists, "heterosexual feminists remain objects of suspicion, for their acceptance depends upon how completely they conceal or renounce heterosexual desire."<sup>38</sup> It is a mistake to summarily dismiss all heterosexual women's experience by denying that some women may

have actively chosen, rather than fallen into, a life of heterosexual marriage and children;...and that, in their heterosexual relationships, they have control over their own sexuality and share equally in the enjoyment of and participation in their sexual relationships.<sup>39</sup>

I am not saying here only that some heterosexual women may lead exceptional lives in the sense that their relationship with their man (or men) is experienced as egalitarian and uncoercive; I am saying that there is an important sense in which a woman can genuinely and sanely choose to be heterosexual, although the conditions and opportunities for that choice may be rare. Beyond the claim that heterosexuality is innate (which seems to be a false essentialist claim) and the claim that heterosexuality is coerced (which is probably true to at least some degree in the majority of cases) there is a third possibility: that heterosexuality is or can be chosen, even—or especially!—by feminists.

In what cases, then, might it be correct to say that a woman has genuinely chosen her heterosexuality? Charlotte Bunch's statement provides a crucial insight into the paradoxical answer to that question. For a heterosexual woman, to start to understand the institution of heterosexuality and the ideology of heterosexism is already to start to leave standard heterosexuality behind. For part of what is customarily meant by the ascription of heterosexuality is its unconscious "perfectly natural" character.

Anne Wilson Schaefer claims that, in general, women do not view the world in sexual terms.

First, we do not categorize individuals and situations according to their sexuality. Second, we do not assume that each and every relationship must be sexual, nor do we view everything we do and everyone we meet as having some sexual significance. In fact, women do not define the world in sexual terms.<sup>40</sup>

Sometimes, however, instead of being enlightened, this refusal or inability to categorize in sexual terms may be a form of blindness. Marilyn Frye has pointed out that in discussions of sexual prejudice and discrimination one may often hear a statement such as "I don't think of myself as heterosexual," presumably said by a person who engages in heterosexual activity.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, such persons often perceive lesbians (and gay men) as being unnecessarily preoccupied with their sexuality, unable to stop talking about it and flaunting it to the world.

Heterosexual critics of queers' "role-playing" ought to look at themselves in the mirror on their way out for a night on the town to see who's in drag. The answer is, everybody is. Perhaps the main difference between heterosexuals and queers is that when queers go forth in drag, they know they are engaged

in theatre—they are playing and they know they are playing. Heterosexuals usually are taking it all perfectly seriously, thinking they are in the real world, thinking they *are* the real world.<sup>42</sup>

The person whose sexual practice is heterosexual and who honestly and innocently states that she does not think of herself as heterosexual shows herself most clearly to be heterosexual in the standard sense. Paradoxically, then, for a woman to firmly and unambiguously affirm her heterosexuality may already be to begin to leave it behind, that is, to cease to be heterosexual in the unthinking unconscious way she once was. She ceases to participate wholeheartedly in the heterosexual institution. When that sort of reflection takes place, I believe the woman can start to more genuinely choose her heterosexuality. She can explore her own personal history and determine how and when her sense of the erotic became separated from women and connected to men.<sup>43</sup> She can, in a way, begin to come out as heterosexual, not in the heterosexist fashion that almost all heterosexuals, male and female, ordinarily mark their heterosexuality, but rather in terms of an informed and self-aware feminist evaluation of her life as a heterosexual,<sup>44</sup> renouncing as far as possible the privilege accorded by heterosexuality,<sup>45</sup> and recognizing both the oppression lesbians undergo and the affinities she shares with lesbian women. She thereby chooses to be heterosexual as a matter of sexual practice but not as a matter of the exclusive heterosexist alignment or orientation of her life.

### *Lesbianism and Sexual Practice*

As far as the ascription of lesbianism is concerned, I want to suggest that it is a mistake to purge the term entirely of its connections with actual sexual practice. Admittedly, there appears to have been a good political basis for the separation of lesbian sexual orientation from purely sexual practice.

The old lesbian community was defined by a sexual difference. Lesbians were stereotyped as *only* sexual. It is understandable that many lesbians have reacted by counter-defining lesbianism as a political conviction.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, as Rich has pointed out, confining the term lesbian to strictly genital activities independent of female friendship has the effect of limiting the erotic itself. In female terms, she suggests, the erotic is not confined to any single part of the body or even solely to the body itself; it is a diffuse and omnipresent energy.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to insist upon the necessity of including sexual practice within the meaning of lesbianism. The reason can be found partly in the words of one woman quoted by Rich, who stated that if “the lesbian in us” was to become a figurative term—that is, detached from its connection with sexual activity with women—then “she, as a woman who had been oppressed for physically expressing her love for women, wanted another name for who she was.”<sup>48</sup> Feminists can retain the richness in the concept forged by its connections with “the self-chosen woman, the forbidden ‘primary intensity’ between women, and also the woman who refuses to obey, who has said ‘no’ to the fathers.”<sup>49</sup> We should also retain the connection with a forbidden, suppressed activity, with sexual practice that has in the past and the present subjected women to persecution and oppression for their “deviance.”

There is another reason. As Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga argue,

while lesbianism is certainly accepted in feminism, it's more as a political or intellectual concept. It seems feminism is the last rock of conservatism. It will not be sexualized. It's *prudish* in that way...<sup>50</sup>

Feminists ought not to fear, or appear to fear, sexual activity,<sup>51</sup> or be intimidated by the assumption that the presence of, or references to, explicit sexual activity will somehow detract from, or discredit, feminist practice and theory. Women's sexuality is something that feminists should proudly affirm and proclaim. Thus, with Ann Ferguson, I believe that

the possibility of a sexual relationship between women is an important challenge to patriarchy because it acts as an alternative to the patriarchal heterosexual couple, thus challenging the heterosexual ideology that women are dependent on men for romantic/sexual love and satisfaction. Therefore, any definitional strategy which seeks to drop the sexual component of “lesbian” in favor of an emotional commitment to, or preference for, women tends to lead feminists to downplay the historical importance of the movement for sexual liberation.<sup>52</sup>

### *Bisexuality and Binocular Vision*

I want to conclude with some remarks about ascriptions of that anomalous sexual orientation, bisexuality. I have said nothing about it so far in this paper, and that absence fully reflects its absence from most recent feminist discussions of sexuality. In fact, to judge from the feminist

debates, the category “bisexual” may be an empty set; it is no wonder that self-identified bisexual women at the Coming Together Conference wondered seriously whether they actually exist.

Adrienne Rich speaks scornfully of the “frequently heard assertion that in a world of genuine equality, where men were nonoppressive and nurturing, everyone would be bisexual.” According to Rich such a claim blurs the realities of women's sexual struggles; “it is the old liberal leap across the tasks and struggles of here and now.”<sup>53</sup> The chief difficulty with the glib claim that we are all really bisexual is just that it runs into the problem of sexual essentialism. Even Ann Ferguson, who relies very heavily on a belief in the social construction of sexuality, seems to fall victim to this view of bisexuality. “[I]f,” she says, “a girl's original love for her mother is itself due to the social fact that women, and not men, mother, then neither lesbianism nor heterosexuality can be said to be women's natural (uncoerced) sexual preference.”<sup>54</sup> She then refers approvingly to the hypothesis that “humans are basically bisexual or transsexual [whatever that means in this context] at birth.”

This assumes that enforced heterosexuality or acquired lesbianism somehow masks and represses our supposedly inherent bisexuality. However, “bisexual” is no more what we *really* are than is “heterosexual” or “lesbian.”<sup>55</sup> The only useful interpretation of the claim that we are all really bisexual is just that we all have the physical capacity for sexual interactions with members of both sexes. No one would dispute that, for the reason that it is not a very interesting or controversial claim; and it certainly tells us nothing whatsoever about a person's real or natural sexual orientation.

In feminist discussions, ascriptions of bisexuality, unlike ascriptions of lesbianism, are seldom seen as having any actual or potential social, political, or intellectual significance of a positive sort. For example, Joan Nestle criticizes scientists who categorize as bisexual what she calls the “fem lesbian.” According to Nestle, such a categorization strips such a person of all power and makes her into a foolish woman who can easily be beckoned over into the right camp.<sup>56</sup> Nestle is apparently willing, then, to interpret the ascription of bisexuality as connoting a moral and intellectual failure. Ann Ferguson goes even farther. In criticizing the ordinary definition of lesbian as “a woman who has sexual attractions toward and relationships with other women,” she complains that this meaning does not exclude practicing bisexual women.

Many women who have loved men and had sexual relationships with them come later to have sexual

relationships with women and to think of themselves as lesbians without bothering to consider the *metaphysical* significance of the distinction between being a bisexual who loves a woman and a lesbian who loves a woman.<sup>57</sup>

Apparently some sort of transcendental barrier separates bisexual women from the lofty reaches of true lesbianism. What these remarks clearly show is that in some feminist circles, at least, bisexual is almost as much a pejorative term as is lesbian in nonfeminist circles. Behind this language lie certain assumptions about the moral and intellectual inferiority of bisexual women. Self-identified bisexual women are found guilty of leading inauthentic lives.

Marilyn Frye quotes Sarah Hoagland as suggesting that because there is no category of woman-identified-woman in the conceptual schemes of phallogocrities, a lesbian is “in the interesting and peculiar position of being something that doesn’t exist.”<sup>58</sup> The bisexual woman, I contend, is in a somewhat comparable position. Contrary to appearances, an ascription of bisexuality involves a sort of double negative, for it can be used, both by bisexual women themselves and by others, as a way of denying both heterosexuality and lesbianism. A woman who identifies herself as bisexual is disavowing wholehearted commitment to the institution of heterosexuality, but she also fails to be a “true” lesbian since she is not exclusively committed to women. Hence the self-identified bisexual woman appears to be declaring her independence from social control both by heterosexism and by the lesbian community. She seems to be trying to elude both sets of rules. Although she cannot entirely escape social prescriptions for sexual behaviour, she has (at least so far) no very established community within which to define herself and be defined.<sup>59</sup> She may be seen by heterosexuals as just experimenting; she may be viewed by lesbians as too fearful to come out. In these reactions we see a tendency which is just the opposite of that exemplified in the claim that we are all really bisexual; in this context, what is claimed is that no one is really bisexual, that in fact there are no real bisexuals.

There is another possible interpretation of the ascription of bisexuality; its positive implications have been overlooked and denied. Traditionally those who are sexually deviant have been deprived of access to power. However, this deviance, the turning aside from the established path, can be a potential source of insight as well. According to Marilyn Frye, to ascribe sexual orientation is to describe the individual’s orientation of attention.

The event of becoming a lesbian is a reorientation of attention in a kind of ontological conversion.<sup>60</sup> It is a

peculiar blessing both of gay men and of lesbians that in many ways we are both Citizen and Exile, member of the family and stranger. Most of us were raised straight; many have been straight, and many of us can and do pass as straight much of the time. Most of us know that straight world from the inside *and*, if we only will, from its outer edge. We can look at it with the accuracy and depth provided by binocular vision.<sup>61</sup>

That binocular vision is also attainable, surely, by a bisexual woman. I think that the woman who I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, who identifies herself as a lesbian bisexual, is deliberately acknowledging her own binocular vision. She is not necessarily an individual who is callously attempting to have the best and avoid the worst of both worlds; she may instead be a person whose experience can generate important insights for feminist theory and practice. This suggestion is not, of course, a claim for some sort of implausible epistemic privilege for bisexual women; it is simply a suggestion that feminists recognize the value and legitimacy of these women’s experiences. Indeed, that binocular vision to which Marilyn Frye refers should be treasured and nurtured wherever it is found—whether in lesbians or in bisexual women or even in heterosexual women who have recognized, evaluated, and reasserted their own heterosexuality—for it expands our understanding of what it is for women to be sexual. We should appreciate the honesty of feminists like Mariana Valverde, who now identifies herself as a lesbian but refers without regret to what she calls her heterosexual past: “I used to like men quite a lot, and am not completely immune to their charms even now.”<sup>62</sup> Although there are undeniably some significant and serious ethical problems connected with women’s sexual practices, pleasure and love shared by human beings ought not to be condemned *a priori*.

As I said at the beginning, in this paper I want to avoid premature closure on the subject of ascribing sexual orientations. So this paper has no very definitive conclusion but only some closing thoughts. I do not want to fall victim here to a pollyanna-ish vision of female sexuality, and I also do not want to trivialize the stigma and oppression which lesbian women in particular have experienced. The risks and dangers, joys and discoveries of coming out as a lesbian cannot be underestimated.<sup>63</sup> I wish, nevertheless, to suggest that there are important ways in which bisexual and even heterosexual women can also come out, at least within the context of a supportive and tolerant feminist community. A woman who identifies herself self-consciously (in the best sense of “self-conscious”) as lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, is saying something crucial

about herself. For a woman to ascribe to herself with full awareness a particular sexual orientation is to continue the process of creating, rather than merely discovering, her sexuality. Instead of engaging in the sort of mutual name-calling and denigration which has characterized some recent discussions of sexual orientation, feminists should be promoting and celebrating the type of self-transcendence involved in recognizing the many forms of women's sexuality.

#### NOTES

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1. I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to Susan Sherwin's paper, "Philosophical and Feminist Methodology: Are They Compatible?," for reinforcing my convictions about the relevance of personal experience to feminist philosophy.
2. Christine Overall, *Ethics and Human Reproduction: A Feminist Analysis*.
3. With the exception of some feminist theorists (whom I will discuss later), who have worked on defining the term "lesbian." For example, Marilyn Frye, "To Be and Be Seen: The Politics of Reality"; and Ann Ferguson, "Patriarchy, Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution."
4. I concentrate on these three as primary examples of concepts of sexual orientation, and I do not refer to other possible terms denoting sexual orientation—such as "straight," "gay," "dyke," and "queer." These terms are, of course, important and interesting, but they carry additional connotations for which there is no room here to explore.
5. Rich, "It Is the Lesbian In Us...," p. 202.
6. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 80.
7. Frye, "To Be and Be Seen," p. 172.
8. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 83.
9. Bullough and Bullough, p. 904.
10. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 68.
11. Birke, "From Zero to Infinity".
12. Frye, "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement," p. 129.
13. Radicalesbians, p. 241.
14. Recent feminist discussion has attempted to recognize and appreciate the value of gender-role adoption within lesbian relationships. See Nestle, "The Fem Question."
15. Birke, "From Sin to Sickness," p. 76.
16. Elliott, p. 65.
17. Vance and Snitow, p. 127.
18. Vance, pp. 7-8. See also Rubin, pp. 275-277.
19. Bleier, p. 166.
20. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 63.
21. Birke, "From Zero to Infinity," p. 123.
22. Bunch, p. 68.
23. Cook, p. 738.
24. Cook, p. 739.
25. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 76.
26. Rich, "The Meaning of Our Love for Women," p. 229, fn. 4.
27. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 79.
28. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 82.
29. Rich, "The Meaning of Our Love For Women," p. 225.
30. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 79. Marilyn Frye claims, in one of her papers, that heterosexual women choose to be heterosexual ("A Lesbian Perspective on Women's Studies," p. 196). She neither explains what she means by "chooses" in this context, nor makes any attempt to reconcile the claim with Rich's theory about the compulsory nature of heterosexuality.
31. Rich, "It Is the Lesbian In Us...," p. 200.
32. Diamond and Quinby, p. 122.
33. Ferguson, p. 149.
34. Ferguson, p. 154.
35. Ferguson, p. 154.
36. Bunch, p. 69.
37. In fact, Bunch explicitly concedes that not all lesbians are feminists, and that one may make a political analysis of heterosexuality without being a lesbian. See p. 72.
38. Echols, p. 56.
39. Bleier, pp. 182-183. Cf. Ferguson, p. 159.
40. Schaefer, p. 47.
41. Frye, "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement," p. 147.
42. Frye, "Sexism," p. 29.
43. Frye, "A Lesbian Perspective on Women's Studies," p. 197.
44. Arnup, p. 55.
45. Gottlieb, pp. 238-239.
46. Newton and Walton, p. 248. Cf. Ferguson, p. 151, Newton's and Walton's emphasis.
47. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 81. Audre Lorde has written movingly of the erotic "as an assertion of the life force of women"; as "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" (Lorde, p. 55).
48. Rich, "It Is the Lesbian In Us...," p. 202.
49. Rich, "It Is the Lesbian In Us...," p. 202.
50. Hollibaugh and Moraga, p. 403. Hollibaugh and Moraga's emphasis.
51. Cf. Zita, p. 163.
52. Ferguson, p. 153. However, I do not share Ferguson's over-emphasis on arriving at an exclusionary list of necessary and sufficient conditions for being lesbian. See p. 155.
53. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," p. 68.
54. Ferguson, p. 159.
55. Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, pp. 113-114.
56. Nestle, p. 238.
57. Ferguson, p. 150, my emphasis.
58. Hoagland, quoted in Frye, "To Be and Be Seen," p. 152.
59. Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, pp. 115-116.
60. Frye, "To Be and Be Seen," p. 171.
61. Frye, "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement," p. 148, Frye's emphasis.
62. Valverde, "Beyond Guilt," p. 65.
63. See Stanley and Wolfe, *The Coming Out Stories*.

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## her search

She took art lessons  
 year by year  
 making her way across myriad canvases  
 and some were faces  
 meticulous tracings of  
 life's imprint on human flesh:  
 she struggled to crawl  
 beneath the lines and shadows  
 slither within the crevices  
 ride the undulations  
 in hopes of finding meaning  
 somewhere among the glittering eyes  
 set jaws—her husband's weariness  
 and vexation there on his  
 roadmap pastel face of high forehead  
 receding hairline. How many dishes he  
 washed and cleaning ladies he fired  
 no one knows.

Day after day she  
 painted to get in touch and failed  
 if not faces then  
 flowers quiet forgiving  
 photographic  
 luminous and inert  
 totally without personal  
 imprint, will or raging heart.

Then, her masterpiece:  
 there the living room  
 scene with seated sheep dog  
 gazing out the picture  
 window as the giant pine trees  
 shoulder away implacable pale yellow  
 neighboring houses  
 her longing to connect  
 as palpable as  
 present as the clear glass  
 through which the dog  
 peers.

Cornelia C. Hornosty  
 Ontario