

COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND LESBIAN EXISTENCE

Adrienne Rich

Originally published in 1980, when the relationship between lesbianism and feminism was the focus of much debate, this article questions the assumption that the majority of women are naturally heterosexual. Rich argues that heterosexuality is imposed upon women and reinforced by a variety of social constraints. She also suggests that rather than there being a simple divide between lesbian and heterosexual women, our experience can be located along a lesbian continuum.

Biologically men have only one innate orientation – a sexual one that draws them to women, – while women have two innate orientations, sexual toward men and reproductive toward their young.¹

I was a woman terribly vulnerable, critical, using femaleness as a sort of standard or yardstick to measure and discard men. Yes – something like that. I was an Anna who invited defeat from men without ever being conscious of it. (But I am conscious of it. And being conscious of it means I shall leave it all behind me and become – but what?) I was stuck fast in an emotion common to women of our time, that can turn them bitter, or Lesbian, or solitary².

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The bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible, could be illustrated from many texts other than the two just preceding. The assumption made by Rossi, that women are 'innately' sexually oriented only toward men, and that made

From A. Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, London: Virago, 1978.

by Lessing, that the lesbian is simply acting out of her bitterness toward men, are by no means theirs alone; these assumptions are widely current in literature and in the social sciences.

I am concerned here with two other matters as well: first, how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise; and second, **the virtual or total neglect of lesbian existence in a wide range of writings, including feminist scholarship.** Obviously there is a connection here. I believe that much feminist theory and criticism is stranded on this shoal.

My organizing impulse is the belief that it is not enough for feminist thought that specifically lesbian texts exist. Any theory or cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as a marginal or less 'natural' phenomenon, as mere 'sexual preference,' or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its other contributions. Feminist theory can no longer afford merely to voice a toleration of 'lesbianism' as an 'alternative life style' or make token allusion to lesbians. A feminist critique of compulsory heterosexual orientation for women is long overdue. In this exploratory paper, I shall try to show why.

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In her essay 'The Origin of the Family,' Kathleen Gough lists eight characteristics of male power in archaic and contemporary societies which I would like to use as a framework: 'men's ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically and prevent their movement; to use them as objects in male transactions; to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments.'³ (Gough does not perceive these power characteristics as specifically enforcing heterosexuality, only as producing sexual inequality.) Below, Gough's words appear in italics; the elaboration of each of her categories, in brackets, is my own.

Characteristics of male power include *the power of men*

1. *to deny women* [their own] *sexuality* – [by means of clitoridectomy and infibulation; chastity belts; punishment, including death, for female adultery; punishment, including death, for lesbian sexuality; psychoanalytic denial of the clitoris; strictures against masturbation; denial of maternal and postmenopausal sensuality; unnecessary hysterectomy; pseudolesbian images in the media and literature; **closing of archives and destruction of documents relating to lesbian existence**]
2. *or to force it* [male sexuality] *upon them* – [by means of rape (including marital rape) and wife beating; father–daughter, brother–sister incest; the socialization of women to feel that male sexual 'drive' amounts to a right;⁴ **idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, the media, advertising, etc.**; child marriage; arranged marriage; prostitution; the harem; psychoanalytic doc-

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3. *to command or exploit their labor to control their produce* – [by means of the institutions of marriage and motherhood as unpaid production; the horizontal segregation of women in paid employment; the decoy of the upwardly mobile token woman; male control of abortion, contraception, sterilization, and childbirth; pimping; female infanticide, which robs mothers of daughters and contributes to generalized devaluation of women]
4. *to control or rob them of their children* – [by means of father right and 'legal kidnapping';⁵ enforced sterilization; systematized infanticide; seizure of children from lesbian mothers by the courts; the malpractice of male obstetrics; use of the mother as 'token torturer'⁶ in genital mutilation or in binding the daughter's feet (or mind) to fit her for marriage]
5. *to confine them physically and prevent their movement* – [by means of rape as terrorism, keeping women off the streets; purdah; foot binding; atrophy of women's athletic capabilities; high heels and 'feminine' dress codes in fashion; the veil; sexual harassment on the streets; horizontal segregation of women in employment; prescriptions for 'full-time' mothering at home; enforced economic dependence of wives]
6. *to use them as objects in male transactions* – [use of women as 'gifts'; bride price; pimping; arranged marriage; use of women as entertainers to facilitate male deals – e.g., wife-hostess, cocktail waitress required to dress for male sexual titillation, call girls, 'bunnies,' geisha, *kisaeng* prostitutes, secretaries]
7. *to cramp their creativeness* – [witch persecutions as campaigns against midwives and female healers, and as pogrom against independent, 'unassimilated' women;⁷ definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female within any culture, so that cultural values become the embodiment of male subjectivity; restriction of female self-fulfillment to marriage and motherhood; sexual exploitation of women by male artists and teachers; the social and economic disruption of women's creative aspirations;⁸ erasure of female tradition]⁹
8. *to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments* – [by means of noneducation of females; the 'Great Silence' regarding women and particularly lesbian existence in history and culture,¹⁰ sex-role tracking which deflects women from science, technology, and other 'masculine' pursuits; male social/professional bonding which excludes women; discrimination against women in the professions]

These are some of the methods by which male power is manifested and maintained. Looking at the schema, what surely impresses itself is the fact that we are confronting not a simple maintenance of inequality and property possession, but a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness, which suggests that an enormous potential counterforce is having to be restrained.

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Some of the forms by which male power manifests itself are more easily recognizable as enforcing heterosexuality on women than are others. Yet each one I have listed adds to the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable - even if unsatisfying or oppressive - components of their lives. The chastity belt; child marriage; erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature, film; idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage - these are some fairly obvious forms of compulsion, the first two exemplifying physical force, the second two control of consciousness. While clitoridectomy has been assailed by feminists as a form of woman torture,¹¹ Kathleen Barry first pointed out that it is not simply a way of turning the young girl into a 'marriageable' woman through brutal surgery. It intends that women in the intimate proximity of polygynous marriage will not form sexual relationships with each other, that - from a male, genital-fetishist perspective - female erotic connections, even in a sex-segregated situation, will be literally excised.¹²

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In her brilliant study *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*, Catharine A. MacKinnon delineates the intersection of compulsory heterosexuality and economics.¹³ [. . .] She cites a wealth of material documenting the fact that women are not only segregated in low-paying service jobs (as secretaries, domestics, nurses, typists, telephone operators, child-care workers, waitresses), but that 'sexualization of the woman' is part of the job. Central and intrinsic to the economic realities of women's lives is the requirement that women will 'market sexual attractiveness to men, who tend to hold the economic power and position to enforce their predilections.' And MacKinnon documents that 'sexual harassment perpetuates the interlocked structure by which women have been kept sexually in thrall to men at the bottom of the labor market. Two forces of American society converge: men's control over women's sexuality and capital's control over employees' work lives.'¹⁴ Thus, women in the workplace are at the mercy of sex as power in a vicious circle. Economically disadvantaged, women - whether waitresses or professors - endure sexual harassment to keep their jobs and learn to behave in a complaisantly and ingratiatingly heterosexual manner because they discover this is their true qualification for employment, whatever the job description. And, MacKinnon notes, the woman who too decisively resists sexual overtures in the workplace is accused of being 'dried up' and sexless, or lesbian. This raises a specific difference between the experiences of lesbians and homosexual men.

A lesbian, closeted on her job because of heterosexist prejudice, is not simply forced into denying the truth of her outside relationships or private life. Her job depends on her pretending to be not merely heterosexual, but a heterosexual woman in terms of dressing and playing the feminine, deferential role required of 'real' women.

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Given the nature and extent of heterosexual pressures - the daily 'eroticization of women's subordination,' as MacKinnon phrases it¹⁵ - I question the more or less psychoanalytic perspective (suggested by such writers as Karen Horney, H.R. Hayes, Wolfgang Lederer, and, most recently, Dorothy Dinnerstein) that the male need to control women sexually results from some primal male 'fear of women' and of

women's sexual insatiability. It seems more probable that men really fear not that they will have women's sexual appetites forced on them or that women want to smother and devour them, but that women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional – therefore economic – access to women *only* on women's terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix.

The means of assuring male sexual access to women have recently received searching investigation by Kathleen Barry.¹⁶ She documents extensive and appalling evidence for the existence, on a very large scale, of international female slavery, the institution once known as 'white slavery' but which in fact has involved, and at this very moment involves, women of every race and class. In the theoretical analysis derived from her research, Barry makes the connection between all enforced conditions under which women live subject to men: prostitution, marital rape, father-daughter and brother-sister incest, wife beating, pornography, bride price, the selling of daughters, purdah, and genital mutilation. She sees the rape paradigm – where the victim of sexual assault is held responsible for her own victimization – as leading to the rationalization and acceptance of other forms of enslavement where the woman is presumed to have 'chosen' her fate, to embrace it passively, or to have courted it perversely through rash or unchaste behavior. On the contrary, Barry maintains, 'female sexual slavery is present in ALL situations where women or girls cannot change the conditions of their existence; where regardless of how they got into those conditions, e.g., social pressure, economic hardship, misplaced trust or the longing for affection, they cannot get out; and where they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation.'¹⁷

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[P]art of the problem with naming and conceptualizing female sexual slavery is, as Barry clearly sees, compulsory heterosexuality.¹⁸ Compulsory heterosexuality simplifies the task of the procurer and pimp in world-wide prostitution rings and 'eros centers,' while, in the privacy of the home, it leads the daughter to 'accept' incest/rape by her father, the mother to deny that it is happening, the battered wife to stay on with an abusive husband. 'Befriending or love' is a major tactic of the procurer, whose job it is to turn the runaway or the confused young girl over to the pimp for seasoning. The ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry, is a tool ready to the procurer's hand and one which he does not hesitate to use, as Barry documents. Early female indoctrination in 'love' as an emotion may be largely a Western concept; but a more universal ideology concerns the primacy and uncontrollability of the male sexual drive.

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Barry's hypothesis . . . clarifies the diversity of forms in which compulsory heterosexuality presents itself. In the mystique of the overpowering, all-conquering male sex drive, the penis-with-a-life-of-its-own, is rooted the law of male sex right to women, which justifies prostitution as a universal cultural assumption on the one hand, while defending sexual slavery within the family on the basis of 'family privacy and cultural uniqueness' on the other.¹⁹ The adolescent male sex drive, which, as both young women and men are taught, once triggered cannot take responsibility for itself or take

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no for an answer, becomes, according to Barry, the norm and rationale for adult male sexual behavior. [. . .] Women learn to accept as natural the inevitability of this 'drive' because they receive it as dogma.

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[W]hatever its origins, when we look hard and clearly at the extent and elaboration of measures designed to keep women within a male sexual purlieu, it becomes an inescapable question whether the issue feminists have to address is not simple 'gender inequality' nor the domination of culture by males nor mere 'taboos against homosexuality,' but the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economic, and emotional access.²⁰ One of many means of enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly into view from time to time only to become submerged again. **Feminist research and theory that contribute to lesbian invisibility or marginality are actually working against the liberation and empowerment of women as a group.**²¹

The assumption that 'most women are innately heterosexual' stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for feminism. It remains a tenable assumption partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic, partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and 'innately' heterosexual. **Yet the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness.** To take the step of questioning heterosexuality as a 'preference' or 'choice' for women – and to do the intellectual and emotional work that follows – will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists, but I think the rewards will be great: a freeing-up of thinking, the exploring of new paths, the shattering of another great silence, new clarity in personal relationships.

III

I have chosen to use the terms *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum* because the word *lesbianism* has a clinical and limiting ring. *Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include 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. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support, if we can also hear it in such associations as *marriage resistance* and the 'haggard' behavior identified by Mary Daly (obsolete meanings: 'intractable,' 'willful,' 'wanton,' and 'unchaste,' 'a woman reluctant to yield to wooing'),²² we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology

which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of *lesbianism*.

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has, of course, included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain.²³

Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through 'inclusion' as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again. Part of the history of lesbian existence is, obviously, to be found where lesbians, lacking a coherent female community, have shared a kind of social life and common cause with homosexual men. But there are differences: women's lack of economic and cultural privilege relative to men; qualitative differences in female and male relationships – for example, the patterns of anonymous sex among male homosexuals, and the pronounced ageism in male homosexual standards of sexual attractiveness. I perceive the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly female experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences. Just as the term *parenting* serves to conceal the particular and significant reality of being a parent who is actually a mother, the term *gay* may serve the purpose of blurring the very outlines we need to discern, which are of crucial value for feminism and for the freedom of women as a group.²⁴

As the term *lesbian* has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in 'the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,' and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which 'makes us 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.'²⁵

[. . .]

If we consider the possibility that all women [. . .] exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not.

We can then connect aspects of woman identification as diverse as the impudent, intimate girl friendships of eight or nine year olds and the banding together of those women of the twelfth and fifteenth centuries known as Beguines who 'shared houses, rented to one another, bequeathed houses to their room-mates . . . in cheap subdivided houses in the artisans' area of town,' who 'practiced Christian virtue on their own, dressing and living simply and not associating with men,' who earned their livings as spinsters, bakers, nurses, or ran schools for young girls, and who managed – until the Church forced them to disperse – to live independent both of marriage and of conventual restrictions.²⁶ It allows us to connect these women with the more celebrated 'Lesbians' of the women's school around Sappho of the seventh century B.C., with the secret sororities and economic networks reported among African women, and with the Chinese marriage-resistance sisterhoods – communities of women who refused marriage or who, if married, often refused to consummate their marriages and soon left their husbands, the only women in China who were not footbound and who, Agnes Smedley tells us, welcomed the births of daughters and organized successful women's strikes in the silk mills.²⁷ It allows us to connect and compare disparate individual instances of marriage resistance: for example, the strategies available to Emily Dickinson, a nineteenth-century white woman genius, with the strategies available to Zora Neale Hurston, a twentieth-century Black woman genius. Dickinson never married, had tenuous intellectual friendships with men, lived self-convented in her genteel father's house in Amherst, and wrote a lifetime of passionate letters to her sister-in-law Sue Gilbert and a smaller group of such letters to her friend Kate Scott Anthon. Hurston married twice but soon left each husband, scrambled her way from Florida to Harlem to Columbia University to Haiti and finally back to Florida, moved in and out of white patronage and poverty, professional success, and failure; her survival relationships were all with women, beginning with her mother. Both of these women in their vastly different circumstances were marriage resisters, committed to their own work and selfhood, and were later characterized as 'apolitical.' Both were drawn to men of intellectual quality; for both of them women provided the ongoing fascination and sustenance of life.

If we think of heterosexuality as *the* natural emotional and sensual inclination for women, lives such as these are seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived. [. . .] But when we turn the lens of vision and consider the degree to which and the methods whereby heterosexual 'preference' has actually been imposed on women, not only can we understand differently the meaning of individual lives, but we can begin to recognize a central fact of women's history: that women have always resisted male tyranny. A feminism of action, often though not always without a theory, has constantly re-emerged in every culture and in every period. We can then begin to study women's struggle against powerlessness, women's radical rebellion, not just in male-defined 'concrete revolutionary situations'²⁸ but in all the situations male ideologies have not perceived as revolutionary – for example, the refusal of some women to produce children, aided at great risk by other women;²⁹ the refusal to produce a higher standard of living and leisure for men [. . .] We begin to observe behavior, both in history and in individual biography, that has hitherto been invisible or misnamed,

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behavior which often constitutes, given the limits of the counterforce exerted in a given time and place, radical rebellion. And we can connect these rebellions and the necessity for them with the physical passion of woman for woman which is central to lesbian existence: the erotic sensuality which has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience.

Heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women. Yet everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty. 'Compulsory heterosexuality' was named as one of the 'crimes against women' by the Brussels International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in 1976. Two pieces of testimony from two very different cultures reflect the degree to which persecution of lesbians is a global practice here and now. A report from Norway relates:

A lesbian in Oslo was in a heterosexual marriage that didn't work, so she started taking tranquilizers and ended up at the health sanatorium for treatment and rehabilitation. . . . The moment she said in family group therapy that she believed she was a lesbian, the doctor told her she was not. He knew from 'looking into her eyes,' he said. She had the eyes of a woman who wanted sexual intercourse with her husband. So she was subjected to so-called 'couch therapy.' She was put into a comfortably heated room, naked, on a bed, and for an hour her husband was to . . . try to excite her sexually. . . . The idea was that the touching was always to end with sexual intercourse. She felt stronger and stronger aversion. She threw up and sometimes ran out of the room to avoid this 'treatment.' The more strongly she asserted that she was a lesbian, the more violent the forced heterosexual intercourse became. This treatment went on for about six months. She escaped from the hospital, but she was brought back. Again she escaped. She has not been there since. In the end she realized that she had been subjected to forcible rape for six months.

And from Mozambique:

I am condemned to a life of exile because I will not deny that I am a lesbian, that my primary commitments are, and will always be to other women. In the new Mozambique, lesbianism is considered a left-over from colonialism and decadent Western civilization. Lesbians are sent to rehabilitation camps to learn through self-criticism the correct line about themselves. . . . If I am forced to denounce my own love for women, if I therefore denounce myself, I could go back to Mozambique and join forces in the exciting and hard struggle of rebuilding a nation, including the struggle for the emancipation of Mozambiquan women. As it is, I either risk the rehabilitation camps, or remain in exile.³⁰

Nor can it be assumed that women like those in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's study, who married, stayed married, yet dwelt in a profoundly female emotional and passionate world, 'preferred' or 'chose' heterosexuality. Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable,

in order to do what was expected of women, because coming out of 'abnormal' childhoods they wanted to feel 'normal' and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment. We may faithfully or ambivalently have obeyed the institution, but our feelings – and our sensuality – have not been tamed or contained within it. There is no statistical documentation of the numbers of lesbians who have remained in heterosexual marriages for most of their lives. But in a letter to the early lesbian publication *The Ladder*, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry had this to say:

I suspect that the problem of the married woman who would prefer emotional-physical relationships with other women is proportionally much higher than a similar statistic for men. (A statistic surely no one will ever really have.) This because the estate of woman being what it is, how could we ever begin to guess the numbers of women who are not prepared to risk a life alien to what they have been taught all their lives to believe was their 'natural' destiny – AND – their only expectation for ECONOMIC security. **It seems to be that this is why the question has an immensity that it does not have for male homosexuals.** . . . A woman of strength and honesty may, if she chooses, sever her marriage and marry a new male mate and society will be upset that the divorce rate is rising so – but there are few places in the United States, in any event, where she will be anything remotely akin to an 'outcast.' Obviously this is not true for a woman who would end her marriage to take up life with another woman.³¹

This *double life* – this apparent acquiescence to an institution founded on male interest and prerogative – has been characteristic of female experience: in motherhood and in many kinds of heterosexual behavior, including the rituals of courtship; the pretense of asexuality by the nineteenth-century wife; the simulation of orgasm by the prostitute, the courtesan, the twentieth-century 'sexually liberated' woman.

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IV

Woman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality. **The denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation** and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other*. The lie of compulsory female heterosexuality today afflicts not just feminist scholarship, but every profession, every reference work, every curriculum, every organizing attempt, every relationship or conversation over which it hovers. It creates, specifically, a profound falseness, hypocrisy, and hysteria in the heterosexual dialogue, for every heterosexual relationship is lived in the queasy strobe light of that lie. However we choose to identify ourselves, however we find ourselves labeled, it flickers across and distorts our lives.³²

The lie keeps numberless women psychologically trapped, trying to fit mind, spirit, and sexuality into a prescribed script because they cannot look beyond the parameters of the acceptable. It pulls on the energy of such women even as it drains the energy of 'closeted' lesbians – the energy exhausted in the double life. The lesbian trapped in the 'closet,' the woman imprisoned in prescriptive ideas of the 'normal' share the pain of blocked options, broken connections, lost access to self-definition freely and powerfully assumed.

The lie is many-layered. In Western tradition, one layer – the romantic – asserts that women are inevitably, even if rashly and tragically, drawn to men – [. . .] In the tradition of the social sciences it asserts that primary love between the sexes is 'normal'; that women *need* men as social and economic protectors, for adult sexuality, and for psychological completion; that the heterosexually constituted family is the basic social unit; that women who do not attach their primary intensity to men must be, in functional terms, condemned to an even more devastating outsiderhood than their outsiderhood as women. Small wonder that lesbians are reported to be a more hidden population than male homosexuals. The Black lesbian-feminist critic Lorraine Bethel, writing on Zora Neale Hurston, remarks that for a Black woman – already twice an outsider – to choose to assume still another 'hated identity' is problematic indeed. Yet the lesbian continuum has been a life line for Black women both in Africa and the United States.

Black women have a long tradition of bonding together . . . in a Black/women's community that has been a source of vital survival information, psychic and emotional support for us. We have a distinct Black woman-identified folk culture based on our experiences as Black women in this society; symbols, language and modes of expression that are specific to the realities of our lives . . . Because Black women were rarely among those Blacks and females who gained access to literary and other acknowledged forms of artistic expression, this Black female bonding and Black woman-identification has often been hidden and unrecorded except in the individual lives of Black women through our own memories of our particular Black female tradition.³³

Another layer of the lie is the frequently encountered implication that women turn to women out of hatred for men. Profound skepticism, caution, and righteous paranoia about men may indeed be part of any healthy woman's response to the misogyny of male-dominated culture, to the forms assumed by 'normal' male sexuality, and to the failure even of 'sensitive' or 'political' men to perceive or find these troubling. Lesbian existence is also represented as mere refuge from male abuses, rather than as an electric and empowering charge between women.

[. . .]

[T]here is a *nascent* feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality.³⁴ But for lesbian existence to realize this political content in an ultimately liberating form, the erotic choice must deepen and expand into conscious woman identification – into lesbian feminism.

The work that lies ahead, of unearthing and describing what I call here 'lesbian

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the romantic – asserts to men – [. . .] In the in the sexes is 'normal'; or adult sexuality, and ted family is the basic asity to men must be, utsiderhood than their d to be a more hidden critic Lorraine Bethel, an – already twice an oblematic indeed. Yet oth in Africa and the

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existence,' is potentially liberating for all women. It is work that must assuredly move beyond the limits of white and middle-class Western Women's Studies to examine women's lives, work, and groupings within every racial, ethnic, and political structure. There are differences, moreover, between 'lesbian existence' and the 'lesbian continuum,' differences we can discern even in the movement of our own lives. The lesbian continuum, I suggest, needs delineation in light of the 'double life' of women, not only women self-described as heterosexual but also of self-described lesbians. We need a far more exhaustive account of the forms the double life has assumed. Historians need to ask at every point how heterosexuality as institution has been organized and maintained through the female wage scale, the enforcement of middle-class women's 'leisure,' the glamorization of so-called sexual liberation, the withholding of education from women, the imagery of 'high art' and popular culture, the mystification of the 'personal' sphere, and much else. We need an economics which comprehends the institution of heterosexuality, with its doubled workload for women and its sexual divisions of labor, as the most idealized of economic relations.

The question inevitably will arise: Are we then to condemn all heterosexual relationships, including those which are least oppressive? I believe this question, though often heartfelt, is the wrong question here. We have been stalled in a maze of false dichotomies which prevents our apprehending the institution as a whole: 'good' versus 'bad' marriages; 'marriage for love' versus arranged marriage; 'liberated' sex versus prostitution; heterosexual intercourse versus rape; *Liebeschmerz* versus humiliation and dependency. Within the institution exist, of course, qualitative differences of experience; but the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality, and in the absence of choice, women will remain dependent upon the chance or luck of particular relationships and will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives. As we address the institution itself, moreover, we begin to perceive a history of female resistance which has never fully understood itself because it has been so fragmented, miscalled, erased. It will require a courageous grasp of the politics and economics, as well as the cultural propaganda, of heterosexuality to carry us beyond individual cases or diversified group situations into the complex kind of overview needed to undo the power men everywhere wield over women, power which has become a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control.

NOTES

1. Alice Rossi, 'Children and work in the lives of women,' paper delivered at the University of Arizona, Tucson, February 1976.
2. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (1962), New York: Bantam, 1977, p. 480.
3. Kathleen Gough, 'The origin of the family,' in Rayna [Rapp] Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975, pp. 69–70.
4. K. Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp. 216–19.
5. Anna Demeter, *Legal Kidnapping*, Boston: Beacon, 1977, pp. xx, 126–8.
6. M. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston: Beacon, 1978, pp. 139–41, 163–5.
7. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1973; Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, New York: Dutton, 1974, pp. 118–54; M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Boston: Beacon, 1973, pp. 178–222.
8. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London: Hogarth, 1929, and Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938), New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966; Tillie Olsen, *Silences*, Boston: Delacorte, 1978; Michelle Gliff, 'The resonance of interruption,' *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture*, 8, 1979, pp. 29–37.