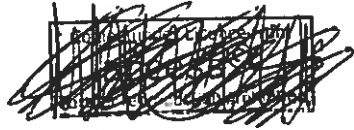


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Lesbian 'Sex'¹

1987

The reasons the word 'sex' is in quotation marks in my title are two: one is that the term 'sex' is an inappropriate term for what lesbians do, and the other is that whatever it is that lesbians do that (for lack of a better word) might be called 'sex' we apparently do damned little of it. For a great many lesbians, the gap between the high hopes we had some time ago for lesbian sex and the way things have worked out has turned the phrase 'lesbian sex' into something of a bitter joke. I don't want to exaggerate: many lesbians are having gratifying erotic lives. But in our communities as a whole, there is much grumbling about "lesbian bed death," especially in long-term relationships.² I want to explore the meanings of the relative dearth of what (for lack of a better word) we call lesbian 'sex.' These meanings connect in interesting ways with other aspects of the feminist discussion of what (for lack of a better word) we call "sexuality," and "sexuality" is clearly very significant in the webs of meaning and force which keep patriarchy going.

Recent discussions of lesbian "sex" frequently cite the findings of a study on couples by Blumstein and Schwartz³ which is perceived by most of those who discuss it as having been done well, with a good sample of couples—lesbian, male homosexual, heterosexual non-married and heterosexual married couples. These people apparently found that lesbian couples "have sex" far less frequently than any other type of couple, that lesbians couples are less "sexual" as couples and as individuals than

anyone else. In their sample, only about one third of lesbians in relationships of two years or longer "had sex" once a week or more; 47% of lesbians in long term relationships "had sex" once a month or less, while among heterosexual married couples only 15% had sex once a month or less. And they report that lesbians seem to be more limited in the range of their "sexual" techniques than are other couples.

When this sort of information first came into my circle of lesbian friends, we tended to see it as conforming to what we know from our own experience. We were not surprised to hear that we "had" less "sex" than anyone else or that in our long-term relationships we "had sex" a great deal less frequently than other sorts of couples. This seemed to pretty much fit our knowledge of ourselves and of each other. But on more reflection, and looking again at what has been going on with us in our long-term relationships, the nice fit between this report and our experience seemed not so perfect after all.

It was brought to our attention during our ruminations on this that what 85% of long-term heterosexual married couples do more than once a month takes on the average 8 minutes to do.⁴

Although in my experience lesbians discuss their "sex" lives with each other relatively little (a point to which I will return), I know from my own experience and from the reports of a few other lesbians in long-term relationships, that what we do that, on average, we do considerably less frequently, takes on the average, considerably more than 8 minutes to do. Maybe about 30 minutes at the least. Sometimes maybe about an hour. And it is not uncommon that among these relatively uncommon occurrences, an entire afternoon or evening is given over to activities organized around doing it. The suspicion arises that what 85% of heterosexual married couples are doing more than once a month and what 47% of lesbians couples are doing less than once a month is not the same thing. And if they are not doing the same thing, how was this research done that would line these different things up against each other to compare how many times they were done?

I remember that one of my first delicious tastes of old gay lesbian culture occurred in a bar where I was chatting with some other lesbians I was just getting acquainted with. One was talking about being busted out of the Marines for being

gay. She had been put under suspicion somehow, and was sent off to the base psychiatrist to be questioned, her perverted tendencies to be assessed. He wanted to convince her she had only been engaged in a little youthful experimentation and wasn't really gay. To this end, he questioned her about the extent of her experience. What he asked was, "How many times have you had sex with a woman?" At this, we all laughed and giggled: what an ignorant fool he was! What does he think he means by "times"? What will we count? What's to *count*?

Another of my friends years later, discussing the same conundrum, said that she thought maybe every time you got up to go to the bathroom, that marked a "time." The joke about "how many times" is still good for a chuckle from time to time in my life with my lover. I have no memory of any such topic providing any such merriment in my years of sexual encounters and relationships with men. It would have been very rare indeed that we would not have known how to answer the question "How many times did you do it?"

If what heterosexual married couples do that the individuals report under the rubric "sex" or "have sex" is something that in most instances can easily be individuated into countable instances, this is more evidence that it is not what long-term lesbian couples do...or, for that matter, what short-term lesbian couples do.⁵

What violence did the lesbians do their experience by answering the same question the heterosexuals answered, as though it had the same meaning for them? How did the lesbians figure out how to answer the questions "How frequently?" or "How many times?" My guess is, for starters, that different individuals figured it out differently, to some degree. Some might have counted a two or three-cycle evening as one "time" they "had sex"; some might have counted that as two or three "times." Some may have counted as "times" only the times both partners had orgasms; some may have counted as "times" occasions on which at least one had an orgasm; some may not have orgasms or have them rarely and may not have figured orgasms into the calculations; perhaps they counted as a "time" every episode in which both touched the other's vulva more than fleetingly and not for something like a health examination. For some, to count every reciprocal touch of the vulva would have

made them count as "having sex" more than most people with work to do would dream of having time for; how do we suppose those individuals counted "times"? Is there any good reason why they should not count all those as "times"? Does it depend on how fulfilling it was? (Was anybody else counting by occasions of fulfillment?)

We have no idea how individual lesbians individuated their so-called "sexual acts" or encounters; we have no idea what it means when they said they did it less than once a month. But this raises questions for how the heterosexuals individuated and counted *their* sexual acts or encounters. I think many lesbians, when pressed to answer a question like "How many times a month do you have sex?" count times both partners had orgasms. That seems to them definitive enough. Did the heterosexuals who responded to these questions count only the times both parties had orgasms? Did the men count all the times they had orgasms, and the women count all the times they had orgasms? If so, one would expect the authors of the study to have noted a considerable difference between the reports of the women and of the men in the samples of heterosexual couples. In my experience, and by my reading of the predominant culture generally heterosexual pairs count as having had sex whether the woman had an orgasm or not. And in my experience and by my reading of the culture at large, heterosexual pairs might not count themselves as having had sex if all that was done was the man digitally stimulated the woman's clitoris until she had an orgasm. I think that if the heterosexual women counted "times" according to the standard meaning of "have sex" in English, they counted not according to their own experience of orgasm or even arousal, but according to their partners' orgasms and ejaculations. One wonders how heterosexual women would have individuated and counted the incidents of "having sex" in their relationships if they had not counted according to their partners' orgasms and ejaculations, or how they did count "times" if they did not count them this way. If the havings of sex by heterosexual married couples did take on the average 8 minutes, my guess is that in a large number of those cases the women did not experience orgasms. My guess is that neither the women's pleasure nor the women's orgasms were pertinent in most of the individuals' counting and reporting the frequency with which they "had sex."

So, do lesbian couples really "have sex" any less frequently than heterosexual couples? My own view is that lesbian couples "have sex" a great deal less frequently than heterosexual couples: I think, in fact, we don't "have sex" at all. By the criteria that I'm betting most of the heterosexual people used in reporting the frequency with which they have sex, lesbians don't have sex. There is no male partner whose orgasm and ejaculation can be the criterion for counting "times." (I'm willing to draw the conclusion that heterosexual women don't have sex either, that what they report is the frequency with which their partners had sex.)

It has been said before by feminists that the concept of "having sex" is a phallic concept; that it pertains to heterosexual intercourse, in fact, primarily to heterosexist intercourse, that is, male-dominant-female-subordinate-copulation-whose-completion-and-purpose-is-the-male's-ejaculation. I have thought this was true since the first time the idea was put to me, some 12 years ago.⁶ But I have been finding lately that I have to go back over some of the ground I covered a decade ago because some of what I knew then I knew too superficially. For some of us, myself included, the move from heterosexual relating to lesbian relating was occasioned or speeded up or brought to closure by our recognition that what we had done under the heading "having sex" had indeed been male-dominant-female-subordinate-copulation-whose-completion-and-purpose-is-the-male's-ejaculation, and it was not worthy of doing. Yet now, years later, we are willing to answer questionnaires that ask us how frequently we "have sex," and are dissatisfied with ourselves and with our relationships because we don't "have sex" enough. We are so dissatisfied that we keep a small army of therapists in business trying to help us "have sex" more.

We quit having sex years ago, and for excellent and compelling reasons. What exactly is our complaint now?

In all these years I've been doing and writing feminist theory, I have not until very recently written, much less published, a word about sex. I did not write, though it was suggested to me that I do so, anything in the SM debates; I left entirely unanswered an invitation to be the keynote speaker at a feminist

conference about women's sexuality (which by all reports turned out to be an excellent conference). I was quite unable to think of anything but vague truisms to say, and very few of those. Feminist theory is grounded in experience; I have always written feminist political and philosophical analysis from the bottom up, starting with my own encounters and adventures, frustrations, pain, anger, etc. (Sometimes it has ended up, no doubt partly because of this, a little provincial; but it has at least had the virtue of firm connection with someone's real life experience, which is more than you can say for a lot of philosophy, including a lot of feminist theory.) When I put to myself the task of theorizing about sex and sexuality, it was as though I had no experience, as though there was no ground on which and from which to generate theory. But, if I understand the terminology rightly, I have in fact been what they call "sexually active" for close to a quarter of a century, about half my life, almost all of what they call one's "adult life," heterosexually, lesbianly, and "autoerotically." Surely I have experience. But I seem not to have experiential knowledge of the sort I need.

Reflecting on all that history, I realize that in many of its passages this experience has been a muddle. Acting, being acted on, choosing, desiring, pleasure and displeasure all akimbo—not coherently determining each other. Even in its greatest intensity it has for the most part been somehow rather opaque to me, not fully in my grasp. My "experience" has in general the character more of a buzzing blooming confusion than of experience. And it has occurred in the midst of almost total silence on the part of others about their experience. The experience of others has for the most part also been opaque to me; they do not discuss or describe it in detail at all.

I recall an hours-long and heated argument among some eight or ten lesbians at a party a couple of years ago about SM, whether it is okay, or not. When Carolyn and I left, she noted that in the whole time not one woman had said one concrete, explicit, physiologically specific thing about what she actually did. The one arguing in favor of bondage: Did she have her hands tied gently with ribbons or scarves, or harshly with handcuffs or chains? What other parts of her body were or weren't restrained, and by what means? And what parts of her body were touched, and how, while she was bound? And what liberty did she still have to touch in return? And if she had no

such liberty, was it part of her experience to want that liberty and experience tension or frustration, or was it her experience that she felt pleased or satisfied not to have that liberty...? Who knows? She never said a single word at this level of specificity. Nor did anyone else, pro or con.

I once perused a large and extensively illustrated book on sexual activity by and for homosexual men. It was astounding to me for one thing in particular, namely, that its pages constituted a huge lexicon of specific vocabulary: words for acts and activities, their sub-acts, preludes and denouements, their stylistic variation, their sequences. Gay male sex, I realized then, is articulate. It is articulate to a degree that, in my world, lesbian "sex" does not remotely approach. Lesbian "sex" as I have known it most of the time I have known it is utterly inarticulate. Most of my lifetime, most of my experience in the realms commonly designated as "sexual" has been pre-linguistic, non-cognitive. I have, in effect, no linguistic community, no language, and therefore in one important sense, no knowledge.

In situations of male dominance, women are a "muted" group inasmuch as women are for the most part excluded from the formulation and validation of meaning and thereby denied the means to express themselves. Men's meanings, and no women's meanings, are encoded in what is presumed to be the whole population's language. (In many cases, both the men and the women assume it is everyone's language.) The meanings one's life and experience can generate cannot come fully into operation without being encoded: they are fleeting, or they hover, vague, not fully coalesced, not *useful* for explaining or grounding interpretations, desires, complaints, theories. In response to our understanding that there is something going on in patriarchy that is more-or-less well described by saying women's meanings are not encoded in the dominant languages and that this keeps our experience from being fully formed and articulate, we have undertaken quite deliberately to discover, complete and encode our meanings. Such simple things as naming chivalrous gestures "insulting," naming Virginia Woolf a great writer, naming ourselves women instead of girls or ladies. Coining terms like 'sexism', 'sexual harassment' and 'incestor'. Mary Daly's *Wickedary*⁸ is a whole project of "encoding" meanings, and we can all find examples of our own more local encodings.⁸

Meanings should arise from our bodily self-knowledge,

bodily play, tactile communication, the ebb and flow of intense excitement, arousal, tension, release, comfort, discomfort, pain and pleasure (and I make no distinctions here among bodily, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic). But such meanings are more completely muted, less coalesced into discrete elements of a coherent pattern of meanings (of an experience) than any other dimensions of our lives. In fact, there are for many of us virtually no meanings in this realm because nothing of it is crystallized in a linguistic matrix.⁹

What we have for generic words to cover this terrain are the words 'sex', 'sexual' and 'sexuality'. In our efforts to liberate ourselves from the stifling woman-hating Victorian denial that women even have bodily awareness, arousal, excitement, orgasms and so on, many of us actively took these words for ourselves, and claimed that we do "do sex" and we are sexual and we have sexuality. This has been particularly important to lesbians because the very fact of 'sex' being a phallogocentric term has made it especially difficult to get across the idea that lesbians are not, for lack of a penis between us [as Alix Dobkin put it in a song lyric], making do with feeble and partial and pathetic half-satisfactions. (Asserting the robustness and unladylikeness of our passions and actions, some of us have called some of what we do "fucking.") But it seems to me that the attempt to encode our lustiness and lustfulness, our passion and our vigorous carnality in the words 'sex', 'sexual' and 'sexuality' has backfired. Instead of losing their phallogocentricity, these words have imported the phallogocentric meanings into and onto experience which is not in any way phallogocentric. A web of meanings which maps emotional intensity, excitement, arousal, bodily play, orgasm, passion and relational adventure back onto a semantic center in male-dominant-female-subordinate-copulation-whose-completion-and-purpose-is-the-male's-ejaculation has been so utterly inadequate as to leave us speechless, meaningless, and ironically, according to the Blumstein and Schwartz report, "not as sexual" as couples or as individuals as any other group.

Our lives, the character of our embodiment, cannot be mapped back on to that semantic center. When we try to synthesize and articulate it by the rules of that mapping, we end up trying to mold our loving and passionate carnal intercourse into explosive 8-minute events. But that is the timing and the ontology of an alienated and patriarchal penis, not of the lesbian

body. When the only things that count as "doing it" are those passages of our interactions which most closely approximate a paradigm that arose from the meanings of the rising and falling penis, no wonder we discover ourselves to "do it" rather less often than do pairs with one or more penises present. Interpreting our desires and determining our acts by the rules of that semantic map, we have tended to discount, discontinue, never try, or never even imagine acts, activities, practices, rituals, forms of play, ways of touching, looking, talking, which might be woven into a fabric of our erotic experience.

There are many cultural and social-psychological reasons why women (in white Euro-American groups, but also in many other configurations and realizations of patriarchy) would generally be somewhat less clear and less assertive about their desires and about getting their satisfactions than men would generally be. And when we pair up two women in a couple, it stands to reason that those reasons would double up and tend to effect relationships in which there is a lowish frequency of clearly delineated desires and direct initiations of satisfactions. But for all the help it might be to lesbian bodies to work past the psychological and behavioral habits of femininity that inhibit our passions and pleasures, my suggestion is that what we have never taken seriously enough is the language which mutes our meanings.

My positive recommendation is this: Instead of starting with a point (a point in the life of a body unlike our own) and trying to make meanings along vectors from that point, we would do better to start with a wide field of our passions and bodily pleasures and make meanings that weave a web across it. I suggest that we begin the creation of a vocabulary that can encode and expand our meanings by adopting a very wide and general concept of "doing it." Let it be an open, generous, commodious concept encompassing all the acts and activities by which we generate with each other and thrills, tenderness and ecstasy, passages of passionate carnality of whatever duration or profundity. Everything from vanilla to licorice, from puce to tangerine, from velvet to ice, from cuddles to cunts, from chortles to tears. Starting from there, we can let our experiences generate a finer-tuned descriptive vocabulary that maps and expresses the differences and distinctions among the things we do, the kinds of pleasures we get, the stages and styles of our acts and activities,

the parts of our bodies centrally engaged in the different kinds of "doing it," and so on. Our vocabulary will arise among us as we explain and explore and define our pleasures and our preferences across this field, teaching each other what the possibilities are and how to make them real.

The vocabulary will arise among us, of course, only if we talk with each other about what we're doing and why, and what it feels like. Language is social. So is "doing it."

I'm hoping it will be a lot easier to talk about what we do, and how and when and why, concretely and in detail, once we've learned to laugh at foolish studies that show that lesbians don't have sex as often as, aren't as sexual as and use fewer sexual techniques than other folks.

¹ This essay was first published in *Sinister Wisdom*, vol. 35 (Summer/Fall 1988). It was first presented as a paper at the meeting of the Society for Women in Philosophy, Midwestern Division, November 13-15, 1987. It was occasioned by Claudia Card's paper "What Lesbians Do," which was published under the title "Intimacy and Responsibility: What Lesbians Do," as the Institute for Legal Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School Working Papers Series 2, No. 10. Carolyn Shafer has contributed a lot to my thinking here, and I am indebted also to conversations with Sue Emmert and Terry Grant. For more writing by lesbians on sex, see *An Intimate Wilderness: Lesbian Writers on Sexuality*, edited by Judith Barrington (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 1991).

² When I speak of "we" and "our communities," I actually don't know exactly who that is. I know only that such issues are being discussed in my own circles and in communities other than mine as well (as witness, e.g., discussion in the pages of the *Lesbian Connection*). If what I say here resonates for you, so be it. If not, at least you can know it resonates for some range of lesbians and some of them probably are your friends or acquaintances.

³ Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples* (NY: William Morrow and Company, 1983).

⁴ Dotty Calabrese gave this information in her workshop on long-term lesbian relationships at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, 1987. (Thanks to Terry Grant for this reference.)

⁵ In their questionnaire, Blumstein and Schwartz use the term "have sexual relations." In the text of their book, they use "have sex."

⁶ It was brought to my attention by Carolyn Shafer. See pp. 156-7 of my book *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983).

⁷ *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

⁸ I use the word 'encoding' as it is used in the novel *Native Tongue*, by Suzette Haden Elgin (NY: Daw Books, Inc., 1984). She envisages women

identifying concepts, feelings, types of situations, etc., for which there are no words in English (or any other language), and giving them intuitively appropriate names in a women-made language called Laadan.

⁹ Carolyn Shafer has speculated that one significant reason why lesbian SM occasioned so much excitement, both positive and negative, is that lesbians have been starved for language—for specific, detailed, literal, particular, bodily talk with clear non-metaphorical references to parts of our bodies and the ways they can be stimulated, to acts, postures, types of touch. Books about SM like *Coming to Power* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1982) feed that need, and call forth more words in response.