Dear Colleague:

I invite you to join with the planning committee and the Barnard Women's Center in working on "The Scholar and The Feminist IX" conference. Our purpose in the first and subsequent meetings is to identify the most pressing concerns for feminism. By focusing on sexuality, in this year's theme and, through discussion, to define questions and topics, we hope to set together a conference which will inform and advance the current debate.

Feminist work on sexuality begins from the premise that sex is a social construction, a cultural, racial, and political structure of the material world. Sex is not a "natural fact." Consistent feminist interest in sexuality as well as in recent activism on pornography and sexual violence, all ask questions about the place of sexuality in our theory and in our lives. Published materials do not fully exhaust the range of women's experiences; it is likely that women of different communities (based on sexual preference, race, class, and ethnicity) have not only different things to say but different ways they want to say them.

Some of the questions which have been raised in these works might inform our first discussion:

— How do women get sexual pleasure in patriarchy?
— Given the paradox that the sexual domain is a dangerous one for women, either as an arena of restriction and repression, or as a domain of experiment and resistance, how do women of various ethnic, racial, and class groups strategize for pleasure?
— What are the points of similarity and difference between feminist analyses of pornography, incest, and male and female sexual "natures" and those of the right wing?
— How we persist in questioning traditional sexuality and sexual arrangements in the current political climate?
— If not, when is a "good" time for feminists to do so?
— What is the political significance of the position outlined by Betty Friedan, which would juxtapose gay and lesbian rights and sexual nonconformity as issues marginal to feminist goals?
— What is the nature of the current conflict between the "social purity" and "libertarian" factions in the feminist community? What can be learned from similar debates during the first wave of feminism in the 19th century?

These are just a few questions. I'm sure you've already thought of many more.

Looking forward to seeing you at the first meeting.

Sincerely,

Carole S. Vance
Dear Diary, Tues. Oct. 6

In attempting to articulate feminist visions of sexuality we raised many questions and discussed a broad range of issues and topics:

- Was the "sexual revolution" a fraud for feminists? How do we interpret widespread celibacy among women during the early days of the movement?
- Is monogamy a suppression of sexuality? What accounts for the recent "de-sexualization" in lesbianism (i.e., emphasis on lesbianism as a political and social choice, rather than a sexual, erotic one)?
- Is it possible the gay/straight controversy was so emotionally loaded that feminists backed off from the issue of sexuality, or chose to confront sexuality as a highly abstract, political issue?
- Are these two positions--advocating free sex versus attempts to control male sexuality and sexual coercion--responses which are defensive?
- What are the similarities and differences between sexual debates among feminists in the 19th century and now? In the 19th century, the rejection of heterosexual domesticity in favor of social and professional autonomy led to a rather puritanical attitude toward sexuality on the part of many feminists, although other feminists allied with "free love" movements. Recent discussions about pornography seem to repeat these early debates.
- How did women's emancipation as a political movement become connected with sexuality?

Feminist views of sexuality presented by the women's health movement: in coupling sexuality with being "healthy" and having children, the health movement presents female sexuality as "positive" and "natural." Does the fact that a male health movement would most probably be unimaginable suggest that we believe male sexuality to be fundamentally not benign and not natural?

- What do we mean by compulsory pleasure? Isn't this a contradiction? Given the current power structure, must women's sexual pleasure always be in the service of men? For example, do orgasms by females in a heterosexual relationship merely affirm male power?
- What prevents men and women from having pleasure? Doesn't the current social structure discriminate against men also? It was agreed that we need to read more about male sexuality but there is a lack of good research.

- Why does it seem as if autonomy and nurturance are in opposition for both men and women? How is this acted out in sexuality?

- For some heterosexual and lesbian women, the ideology "the personal is the political" started out as liberating but became repressive, as women felt their personal lives were being scrutinized and judged by others.

- How can we insure within the movement a kind of pluralism vis-a-
vis sexuality? It was suggested there must be a continual dialectic between feminist theory and personal behavior, without degenerating into policing our own and others' behavior.

- We need to further understand lesbianism as political and/or sexual. For example, in the early days of the movement, separatist ideology proposed that all women are or could be gay; how then do we respond to heterosexual women who in fact discovered they are not gay? How do we respond to the fact that many gay women did come from a background in which they were heterosexual and extremely unhappy?

- How have the mores of lesbian sexuality changed from one generation to the next? For example, many in the younger generation opt for S/M with less conflict, or find it imaginable that self-defined lesbians have sex with men.

- Lesbian feminists have made tremendous gains: never before have so many women come out and has lesbianism been a political issue.

- On the issue of political correctness: no one feels politically correct. Who is politically correct? What is a politically correct sexual line?

- It is difficult to discuss sexual desire: risk of judgement; discussion becomes over-intellectualized and is not body-centered; possibility of feeling restrained unless one is in an atmosphere of intimacy and trust.

- In discussing sexuality there is a fine line between theorizing and setting norms.

- We need to have a conference which moves back and forth between the personal and the theoretical: on the one hand, depersonalized theorizing, barren of any personal referent, may be a defense against uncertainty and anxiety generated by the lack of an immediate answer to pressing questions; on the other hand, the revelation of personal experience, divorced from insight and theory, may lead to unwitting affirmation of gender roles.

- We need to know more about the variety of women's actual experiences. Present theory is based on our very narrow range of information about each other. Can the conference allow more information about the diversity of women's experience to emerge?

- Is it possible to have a "value free" space? Can sexuality ever be discussed apart from values?

READINGS