CONFERENCE STATEMENT
The Scholar and the Feminist IX:
Towards a Politics of Sexuality

The ninth The Scholar and the Feminist conference will address women's sexual pleasure, choice, and autonomy, acknowledging that sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency. This dual focus is important, we think, for to speak only of pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to talk only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.

This moment is a critical one for feminists to reconsider our understanding of sexuality and its political consequences. On the one hand, the feminist community has been engaged by intense discussion about sexuality. The debate has moved from women's right to have sexual pleasure detached from reproduction to sexual violence and victimization. Most recent issues include: the meaning and effect of pornography; sexual safety versus sexual adventure; the significance of sexual styles, for example, butch/femme; male and female sexual nature; and politically correct and incorrect sexual positions. On the other hand, the Right Wing attack on feminists' recent gains attempts to reinstate traditional sexual arrangements and the inexorable link between reproduction and sexuality. In doing so, the Right offers a comprehensive plan for sexual practice which resonates in part with women's apprehension about immorality and sexual danger. To respond convincingly, as feminists we cannot abandon our radical insights into sexual theory and practice but must deepen and expand them, so that more women are encouraged to identify and act in their sexual self-interest.

Behind feminist debates and the Right Wing's focus on sexuality, we think are social and political changes wrought by capitalist transformations and the women's movement during the 19th and 20th centuries, most notably the breakdown in the traditional bargain women made, and were forced to make, with men: if women were "good" (sexually circumspect), men would protect them; if they were "bad," men would violate and punish them. As parties to this system, "good" women had an interest in restraining male sexual impulse, a source of danger to
women, as well as their own sexuality which might incite men to act. Nineteenth century feminists elaborated asexuality as an option for "good" women, using female passionlessness and male sexual restraint to challenge male sexual prerogatives and the characterization of women as intrinsically sexual. Recent gains in the second wave of feminism call for increased sexual autonomy for women and decreased male "protection," still within a patriarchal framework. Amid this flux, women feel more visible and sexually vulnerable. The old bargain, which opposed sexual safety and sexual freedom, is breaking down, but women's fear of reprisal and punishment for sexual activity has not abated. For this reason, the sexual problematic has commanded the attention of feminist theorists in both centuries.

Feminist work on sexuality starts from the premise that sex is a social construction which articulates at many points with the economic, social, and political structures of the material world. Sex is not simply a "natural" fact. Although we can name specific physical actions (heterosexual or homosexual intercourse, masturbation) which occurred at various times and places, it is clear that the social and personal meaning attached to these acts in terms of sexual identity and sexual community has varied historically. In light of a wealth of material, we restrict our analysis to 19th and 20th century America, while retaining the notion of historical and cultural construction of sexuality. Without denying the body, we note the body and its actions are understood according to prevailing codes of meaning. Believing that biological sex is conditionable, we return to the question "What do women want?"—a question we can entertain now that it is we who are asking it.

Sexuality poses a challenge to feminist scholarship, since it is an intersection of the political, social, economic, historical, personal, and experiential, linking behavior and thought, fantasy and action. For the individual, it is the intersection of past, current, and future experience in her own life. That these domains intersect does not mean they are identical, as the danger of developing a feminist sexual politics based on personal experience alone illustrates. We need sophisticated methodologies and analyses that permit the recognition of each discrete domain as well as their multiple intersections. Despite the many interrelationships of sexuality and gender, we do not believe that sexuality is a sub-part of gender, a residual category, nor are theories of gender fully adequate, at present, to account for sexuality.

Feminist work on sexuality confronts three problems: 1) multiple levels of analysis, 2) limited data about women's experience, 3) overdeveloped theory, in light of limited data.

1) We talk as if information about sexuality comes from a single source, but in fact it comes from many sources: for example, sexual behavior and acts; inner, psychological experience; the public presentation of our sexual selves; sexual style; images and representations available in the culture; the place of sexuality in the discourse of the political community to which we belong; sexual ideology. When we compare the sexual situation between and within groups of women, it is important to remember that no conclusions can be drawn by comparing only one layer of sexual information without considering the others.

Within feminism, we find it easier and more politically correct to talk about sexual differences between women than sexual similarities. This is understandable, given our wish to acknowledge real diversity of experience and to insist on our visibility through difference from dominant groups, the same difference causing our long invisibility. We think it is important to simultaneously discuss women's similarities and differences, questioning whether the ac-
quisition of femininity and the conditions for its reproduction affect all women in a distinct way, cutting across sexual preference, sexual object, and specific behavior.

2) We base our theories on limited information about ourselves and, at best, a small number of other women. Given the complex grid of class, race, sexual preference, age, generation, and ethnicity, our personal experience can speak to but a small part of the sexual universe. Yet we wish to develop a framework inclusive of all women's experience. (Sexuality must not be a code word for heterosexuality, or women a code word for white women.) To do so we must make a renewed effort to talk with each other, agreeing to break the taboo that denies us access to information that lies beyond the boundaries of our lived sexual experience. Such is the only way to remedy our ignorance and avoid a sexual theory circumscribed by the boundaries of individual lives and idiosyncrasies.

3) We find it easy to say publicly: "Women want..." "Women hate..." "Women are turned on by..." "Women are afraid of..." "Women like..." However, we find it excruciating to say publicly: "I want..." "I hate..." "I am turned on by..." "I am afraid of..." "I like..." Clearly, our hesitation to make the private and personal become public and potentially political has significant implications. Our theory, as it stands, is based on limited facts marshalled by overdeveloped preconceptions. It is also clear that any discussion of sexuality touches areas of unconscious conflict and fear. Feminists have been remiss in failing to address the power of unconscious sexual prohibitions and the appeal of primitive myths and metaphors about the Child, the Good Girl, the Man and the Family. Unarticulated, irrational reactions wreak havoc in our own movement and at the same time are cleverly used against us by the Right.

Sexuality is a bread and butter issue, not a luxury, not a frill. Women experience sexual pleasure and displeasure in their daily lives, even as women in different communities and different situations may articulate and organize around these experiences in different ways. Sexuality cannot wait until other, more "legitimate" issues are resolved. The division between socio-economic and sexual issues is false; we reaffirm their intimate connection in domesticity, reproductive politics, and the split between public and private, fantasy and action, male and female. We cannot postpone the consideration of sexual issues until after the "revolution." Such a tactic implies a belief in a natural, unfettered sexuality which will emerge after more basic issues of production and redistribution are resolved. Feminists who oppose the biologized woman or man cannot put their faith in a biologized sexuality.

We see the conference not as providing definitive answers, but as setting up a more useful framework within which feminist thought may proceed, an opportunity for participants to question some of their understandings and consider anew the complexity of the sexual situation. Our goal is to allow a more discussion about the diversity of women's experiences to emerge. In morning papers and afternoon workshops, participants will consider the question: what is the status of sexual pleasure—in feminist theory and analysis and in the social world in which women live? and by so doing, inform and advance the current debate.

Much has been written about women giving and receiving pleasure; the conference is a step toward women taking pleasure and a contribution to envisioning a world which makes possible women's sexual autonomy and sexual choice.

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