vative and militaristic. Delaney’s poets were anarchists, unwilling to spend their talents striving to control history, other people, or sexual behavior itself. He championed the queer and disenfranchised, created women who were as unpredictable as they were fearless and men who came close to breaking my heart with their vulnerability and stubborn grappling with their own desires. He suggested with every sketch, moreover, the profoundly complicated interactions that mark all sexual exchanges. Delaney’s ability to treat queer sexuality is still unsurpassed; for my adolescence, it was a revelation.

I’ve talked to many women, both heterosexual and lesbian, about their adolescent attraction to science fiction. I’ve tried to draw them out about the ways in which it affected their concepts of the sexual. It is amazing to me how many women have told me that science fiction is where they put their sexual imagination. One of my old lovers, for example, who never saw any of the soft-core lesbian pulps before her coming out, swears instead by the sexually aggressive and sexually matter-of-fact women she found in science fiction.

“They gave me the idea,” she told me, reminiscing about her own adolescent fantasy life. For her, as for me, the hidden message was clear. It didn’t have to be the way everybody said it was. It could be different. You might be able to have sex with plants or intelligent waterfalls or friendly machines—or women—and not have it be a social or moral catastrophe. Once out, that’s a secret that could change everything, and has.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in the New York Native in 1985.

Public Silence, Private Terror

I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there.

Audre Lorde*

What drew me to politics was my love of women, that agony I felt in observing the straightjackets of poverty and repression I saw people in my family in. But the deepest political tragedy I have experienced is how with such grace, such blind faith, this commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and reactionary.

Cherrie Moraga**

Her voice on the phone was a surprise, not only because the call had come late in the evening, or even because she was so reluctant to identify herself. She had never been a friend, only an acquaintance, another lesbian whose writing I had admired but whom I’d spoken to less than half a dozen times in all the years we’d been aware of each other’s existence. There was, also, the too-present memory of the last time I’d seen her, the way her eyes had registered, stared, and then avoided mine. I’d recognized in her face the same look I’d been seeing in other women’s faces for all the months since the Barnard Conference on Sexuality (which my friends and I referred to

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Florida. Over the months I had talked again and again to people who were sure they were sick, criminal, and doomed—all for desires I believed glorious and completely understandable. But I was a long way from Tallahassee, and nothing seemed as simple as it had back then. Worse, I didn’t know this woman well enough to be having this conversation. I didn’t know what to say to her. I didn’t even know what she had been doing, or imagining doing.

I listened to her, and thought about an old lover whose terror had been huge. She’d liked to imagine herself held down, unable to reach the mouth that hovered over her until she had to beg for it— that mouth, that release. I started to tell the voice on the phone that story, how I noticed that when we made love, my lover’s mouth worked and worked but never made a sound, how gradually I’d teased her and comforted her, teased her some more and reassured her again, until finally she had let go and roared her passion.

“She was so afraid,” I said, “so certain that she was a terrible, sick person. When it all came out, though, there was not that much to it, nothing to match those years of knotted-up silent grief. It’s usually like that, you know. We’re rarely as terrible as we believe ourselves to be.”

Silence answered me and stretched out. I pushed my hair back, waiting, wondering if I was saying the absolutely wrong thing. Maybe she really was doing something terrible, maybe she was even a bit sick. What did I know? Maybe she needed serious help. Maybe her desire was to slice pieces of herself off and feed them to her cat. What good was it for me to tell her about someone she didn’t know, someone who, after all, had a desire that was relatively easy to satisfy, that didn’t demand much of anyone else or herself except the strength to put it out. What lover would refuse to pin her down and tease her? What friend would call her sick for that?

“I’m not an expert,” I finally said, “not a sex therapist. Sometimes I think the only thing I understand is myself, and that not very well—just a few of the ways I’ve fucked myself over, let myself be fucked over, invited it or cooperated with it.” Talk to me, I wanted
to say. I can’t say anything if you don’t give a little.

‘I’ve been putting stuff inside me,’ she whispered. I just about dropped the phone in relief. All right, what was she putting inside her, and inside her where? But she wouldn’t give me that. Quickly it became clear she would not be able to stand having said even that much. I knew that after this phone call she would never speak to me again. She would always feel herself vulnerable to me, imagine I knew more than I did—all her secret thoughts, what she did alone in her bed in the dark—and she would believe I had somehow betrayed her, or would have she when the chance arose.

I grabbed that phone like it was a lifeline. Did she know there was a group, a lesbian group, she could go to? No, but even as I repeated the address I knew she wasn’t writing it down. I could hear her urge to run and hide, recognized with certainty that whatever she did, she wasn’t ready to talk to people—not about this tender stuff. Well, did she have any books about sex?

‘I’m sure you’ve seen Sapphistry,’ I said, ‘but I could loan you some others, or you could buy them if you wanted.’

She probably wouldn’t want to see me, I thought, but if she had the titles she could get them herself in a store where no one knew her. There was so little to recommend, though. How few feminists write anything useful about sex, I told myself for perhaps the hundredth time.

‘Seen what? Sapphistry?’

I made myself talk quietly, slowly. What I really wanted was to start yelling—not at her, but kicking furniture, screaming in frustration.

‘That’s Pat Califia’s book from Naiad Press. It’s good, very clear with lots of practical information, especially about what’s dangerous and what’s not.’

‘Oh.’

I caught the recognition in her voice. She’d heard that name before, read some review that had growled indignation about all that s/m stuff and probably reinforced all her own sexual terrors. If she really was pushing something into her cunt or ass, it didn’t matter that Sapphistry was one of the few books to tell her what was involved in plain and simple terms, that wouldn’t play into all the guilt and self-hatred she was carrying. Odds were, the same friend who had told her she was sick had told her all about Pat Califia.

Suddenly, she had to get off the phone. Her cat was getting into the garbage. She thought she heard someone at the door. It was an excuse and we both knew it. Then the phone went silent. I sat holding the receiver until the hum broke into a howl. I put it down and moved to wrap myself around my lover, so angry I couldn’t speak, couldn’t even say, ‘It was another one of those terrible phone calls.’

I began receiving those late-night phone calls after I got caught up in the Barnard Sex Scandal of 1982. A year earlier I had helped organize the Lesbian Sex Mafia, a group intended for ‘politically incorrect’ women, and began to do public speaking on sexuality, in part to help that organization succeed. In addition, I had started publishing my fiction and essays on incest, family violence, and sexuality. The combination of activities had made me increasingly question what, at that time, was the dominant feminist ideology on pornography. I did all this without thinking too much about the possible results—though I knew it was dangerous to be too public as a pervert or too visible as a feminist who did not think pornography the prime cause of women’s oppression. Still, when I found myself accused of being a pawn of the patriarchy, an antiemissary for an antifeminist writer, and a pimp for the pornographers, I was surprised and unsure how to reply.

For years I had struggled to share with other women the rage with which I began my work as a lesbian and feminist activist—outrage at anybody telling me what I would and would not be allowed to do with my life. Always this struggle had been equally about sex and class, about shattering the silence imposed on us concerning our terrifying sexual desires and the powerful details of the different ways in which we engage the world. When I helped organize the Lesbian Sex Mafia, I felt very much in that tradition, and for all my
uncertainties and fears about what might happen to me and the women who would work with and join such an organization, I was convinced that this was a continuation of the politics I had been engaged in for a decade.

The Lesbian Sex Mafia was to be an old-fashioned consciousness-raising group whose whole concern would be the subject of sex. To be sure that we would remain focused on our own outrageoussness, we chose our deliberately provocative name and concentrated on attracting members whose primary sexual orientation was s/m, butch/femme, fetish specific, or otherwise politically incorrect. We drew more women from the lesbian bars than the feminist movement, but we deliberately brought back the principles of CR (using xeroxes of guidelines from 1973 that I found in my files). We insisted that within the group we would make no assumptions, no judgments, and no conclusions. We began by asking each other what it would be like to organize for our sexual desire as strongly as we had tried to organize for our sexual defense.

The failings of the Lesbian Sex Mafia largely recreated the failings of earlier CR groups. With the emphasis on sharing stories, it was hard to move toward taking any group action, or toward a public, political identity. Some members felt frustrated with this, while others wanted the group to concentrate only on meeting the private needs of its members. There were limits on how the latter could be achieved. Integrating new people was extremely difficult, partly because everyone was hesitant and afraid and consequently defensive. The membership tended to focus on individuals who had already come to some state of self-acceptance more than on those who were still completely unsure of their sexual orientation or desires. The kind of fearful young woman who called me might never have come back after an initial orientation, and some women who did come expected the group to provide them with an instant source of sexual satisfaction or adventure. They tended to get bored with all the talk and business. Absolute emphasis on privacy and confidentiality also presented many barriers to public action. The Lesbian Sex Mafia became one more example of public silence, though we intended it to provide a measure of safety rather than another locus of fear.

The most striking failure of the Lesbian Sex Mafia, however, was that none of us predicted the kind of attack and vilification that accompanied the April 23, 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality or the speakout on politically incorrect sex we organized to take place the next day. Concentrating on supporting each other and understanding our own issues, we had not seriously prepared to deal with critics who would be horrified at our behavior as lesbians, never mind queer queers. While the forum fulfilled its intended function as an event at which we could talk about our pleasure, rage, and fear about sex, where we could exchange information with women who, although they would never come to a Lesbian Sex Mafia meeting, had equally embattled concerns about sexuality, it proved an extremely painful lesson in how effective and public the terror around sexual behavior could become.

In the months following the speakout, the Lesbian Sex Mafia underwent a complete reorganization. I was distracted by first dealing with an outburst of publicity within the feminist press and then a series of personal crises. One of the most painful of these was the publication of the June 1982 issue of off our backs, which described in great detail a sexual encounter between me and two other women in a lesbian bar, using the kind of language I would have expected from conservative or religious moralists. Over and over again I found myself having to talk to strangers and be stubbornly, bluntly explicit about what I did in bed, what I did not do, and why. The alternative did not appear to be silence but death itself. I was fighting to keep my straight job at a publicly funded arts organization which had received a series of anonymous phone calls demanding that I be fired, while invitations to speak, publish, and edit were systematically withdrawn. By the fall of that year even the Lesbian Sex Mafia reflected the virulence of the onslaught by censoring me for the publicity the speakout had produced. As one of the primary organizers I was held responsible for endangering the confidentiality of members, and in-
stead of protesting, I withdrew my membership. It was not until several years later that I received an apology and reinstatement as a founding officer.

And throughout that year there were those phone calls—quizzical, rude, and painful—from women I barely knew, who somehow felt I had become a kind of public resource to whom anything could be said and of whom anything could be asked. Worse, by far, were the calls and letters from old friends who suddenly had the need to be extremely clear about the limits of their friendships.

Even for those of us with backgrounds as political activists who thought we had some handle on sexual anxiety and its variations in this society, the revelations of shame, fear, and guilt that occurred after the Barnard Sex Scandal and the period of public controversy that was its aftermath—since labeled the Sex Wars—were simply overwhelming. The women who kept talking and working as publicly identified sex radicals, or pro-sex feminists, began to engage in an expansive conversation that was in no way safe but was powerfully revealing. Most of it reminded me of the discussions we had held in the Lesbian Sex Mafia, and convinced me that very few people in our society believe themselves normal, think that their sexual desire and behavior is like anyone else’s. Women talked about years of celibacy, self-hatred, rejection, and abandonment by lovers, helplessness after rape or incest, social censure and street violence, family ostracism, and—overwhelmingly—the fear of what our desires might mean. I went through a period of involuntary withdrawal in my relationships that took me right back to when I was first working out my response to childhood incest. It became impossible to let anyone, no matter how trusted, touch me in an intimate way, and for almost a year I became completely nonorgasmic. There was a kind of painful irony in being such a publicly recognized sex radical who could not have sex, and who dared not acknowledge that condition until it was past.

I thought a lot about the early discussions in the Lesbian Sex Mafia as time passed. In spite of all we had done to set up the group
to avoid judgments and to provide unqualified support for diversity, there had still been a depressingly persistent need for people to be reassured that they were not sick or crazy or dangerous to those they loved. The strength of the group had been the strength of consciousness raising itself, that frank revelation of the common personal experience and the lies that are uncovered when we show ourselves as vulnerable and human creatures, both needy and hopeful. We had worked at turning our fears and experiences into a source of insight rather than confusion. That we could feel any measure of safety while being so vulnerable had been a constant source of energy and power. Every forbidden thought that was spoken enriched us. Every terrible desire that we shared suddenly assumed human dimension, and our meetings had been full of warmth and laughter. I watched a similar thing begin to happen with post-Barnard organizing and the creation of F.A.C.T. —the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce. We wanted to talk truth about sex, wanted to understand without fear of censure, and most of all, we wanted to know that our lives were neither a betrayal of our beliefs nor a collusion with all we had fought to change in this society. None of us became antifeminists, though many of us were accused of being that, and all of us share a conviction that sexuality is not a distraction but a vital issue in any political organizing. For me, the struggle came down to an inner demand that I again look at sexual fear from my own perspective, without giving in to the impulse to hide, deny, or wall off desire itself.

On the wall over my desk I hang pictures, clippings, and notes to myself. It is crowded with fantasy images, lists, and ideas, even love letters several years old. The picture of the young woman in a black lace dress and feathered hat has been up there almost as long as the samurai woman sweeping her long sword into the sunlight. Each inspires me, though in very different ways. Some days I want to become one or the other of them. Some days I want to write the story of how they become lovers. Other days I can’t stand to look
at them at all and turn instead to notecards pinned up between the pictures, reading the words over and over to myself, knowing I have not yet exhausted all I need to learn from them, that what I am engaged in is nothing less than my own explication of what it means to be a lesbian, the kind of lesbian I am, in this time and place.

The quote from Adrienne Rich’s introduction to the reprint of her essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” is pinned next to the paragraphs I copied from Barbara Smith’s short story, “Home,” so that the words follow each other and echo an idea that has been worrying me for a long time.

*There has recently been an intensified debate on Female sexuality among feminists and lesbians, with lines often furiously drawn, with sadomasochism and pornography as key words which are variously defined according to who is talking. The depth of women’s rage and fear regarding sexuality and its relation to power and pain is real, even when the dialogue sounds simplistic, self-righteous, or like parallel monologues.*

Adrienne Rich

*I knew when I first met her that it would be all right to love her, that whatever happened we would emerge from this not broken. It would not be about betrayal. Loving does not terrify me. Loss does. The women I need are literally disappearing from the face of the earth. It has already happened.*

Barbara Smith

I keep wanting to take down the card that holds Adrienne Rich’s words so that I can file them away and no longer have to think about the fact that it is certainly fear that has dominated the debate on female sexuality, that it is fear that has provoked the shouting, name-calling, and rejection. I am tired of trying to understand why peo-

ple fall into self-righteous hatred, but the card stays up for just that reason: to remember the human dimensions of the debate. The quote from “Home” serves the same purpose, but it also reaches my own fear, going deeper still to a level of desire I have known since I first realized what it would mean to my life to be queer. Home is what I have always wanted—the trust that my life, my love, does not betray those I need most, that they will not betray me.

“You confuse the two,” a friend once told me. “When we talk about love, we are not necessarily speaking of sex. When we talk about sex, love is not at issue.”

Is that true? I ask myself and read the cards over again. Sexuality. Sex. Rage. Fear. Pain. Love. Betrayal. Home. These are the words that have scored my life. I have always been trying to understand myself, to find some elemental sense of a life that is my own and not inherently wrong, not shameful, not a betrayal of those I love most. At thirteen it was the simple issue of just being a lesbian; at twenty it was the kind of woman I wanted to touch and to be touched by; at twenty-five it was the realization of what kind of touch felt like sex to me. None of it has ever been easy. Throughout my life I have felt that I was fighting off some terrible, amorphous confusion about sex itself, what I have a right to do or want, what was dangerous and what was vital, and most fearfully of all, what would make the women I loved literally disappear from my life.

Beneath the quotes from Adrienne Rich and Barbara Smith, held by a pin that positions a picture of my younger sister and her two children, is a line I have written out for myself, the beginning of an article I started long ago and could not finish. The tears of sex are real, it reads. The awful vulnerability of the individual exposed physically and emotionally—and we are too often betrayed by our own desires or the failures of our lovers. Betrayal again, I notice, and this time failure. It does not appear that I am so very much different from the woman who called me. We are both stumbling over our private fears, worrying at desire from the downhill side, not speaking to the trust and joy I know we both are seeking.

*Sign, V. Summer 1980
Grief should not be where we have to start when we talk of sex. But the idea of a life in which rage, physical fear, or emotional terror prevents even the impetus of desire—that is the image that haunts the discussion for me. The thought that we could all be forced to live isolated in our own bodies, never safe enough to risk ourselves in naked intimacy with others, rides me like an old nightmare from my childhood: a dream of silence, cold hands, and suspicious eyes.

It was a nightmare I used to believe was common to all lesbians, but one I thought had grown less powerful in our everyday lives. It was the fear behind our politics, a unifying and radicalizing perception that we did not need to voice because we all knew it so well. The experience of having the meaning of our love and desire for women twisted, misused, or totally denied seemed to me central and basic to feminism in the same way that our politics itself was supposed to rest in the actual lived experience of women who must name for themselves their needs, hopes, and desires. But I never wanted fear to be the only impulse behind political action. As deeply as I wanted safety or freedom, I wanted desire, hope, and joy. What, after all, was the worth of one without the other?

Those notes hang on my wall and watch me as relentlessly as the pictures of my lovers, sisters, and fantasy figures. I cannot answer them, or tear them down, or ignore them, because in trying to write about sex, I am always faced with the fear that any conclusion I make will betray someone. If I outline, even if only for myself, a new understanding of how our desire for sex is used against us, some face always stares back unsatisfied. If I demand my right as a lesbian to examine and explore my relationships with other women as sources of both passion and grief, I am flat up against it again. I can imagine faceless heterosexual feminists unable to understand any human relationship not rooted in the dynamics of male-female interaction, as well as the lesbians who will tell me that I am betraying them by putting such information out for perusal and possible use by men or nonfeminists. Even lesbians who will dismiss me because my life is nothing like theirs, the springs of my passions strange or frightening to them.

It is difficult, in fact, for me to frame any questions about sex without getting caught up in endless considerations of the meaning of the acts, sometimes quite astonishingly philosophical, political, and spiritual treatments of meaning that I cannot bring back down to the level that interests me most—my everyday life. All the impassioned rhetoric serves no purpose but to lead to greater obscurity if it does not originate and flow from an examination of the specific: how we all actually live our sexuality. Without that detail, I have concluded, there are no valid generalizations to be made about sex and women’s lives except for the central fact that we are all hungry for the power of desire and we are all terribly afraid.

The hardest lesson I have learned in the last few years is how powerful is my own desire to hang onto a shared sense of feminist community where it is safe to talk about dangerous subjects like sex, and how hopeless is the desire. Even within what I have thought of as my own community, and worse, within the tighter community of my friends and lovers, I have never felt safe. I have never been safe, and that is only partly because everyone else is just as fearful as I am. None of us is safe because we have not tried to make each other safe. We have never even recognized the fearfulness of the territory. We have addressed violence and exploitation and heterosexual assumptions without first establishing the understanding that for each of us, desire is unique and necessary and simply terrifying. Without that understanding, and the compassion and empathy that must be part of it, I do not know how to avoid those acts of betrayal. But it is one thing for me to confront my own fear of those different from me—whether they are women of color, middle-class women, or heterosexuals—and entirely another to demand of other feminists that we begin again with this understanding. Yet that is exactly what I want to do. I want to once again start by saying that as women we don’t know enough about each other—our fears, our desires, or the many ways in which this society has acted upon us. Nor do I want to give ground and allow sex to be exempted from the discussion.
As feminists, many of us have committed our whole lives to struggling to change what most people in this society don’t even question, and sometimes the intensity of our struggle has persuaded us that the only way to accomplish change is to make hard bargains, to give up some points and compromise on others. What this has always meant in the end, unfortunately, is trading some people for others.

I do not want to do that.

I do not want to require any other woman to do that.

I do not want to claim a safe and comfortable life for myself that is purchased at the cost of some other woman’s needs or desires. But over and over again I see us being pushed to do just that. I know for myself how easily I used to dismiss heterosexual desire. Oh, I was kind about it, gently patient, but I used to look at heterosexual feminists with a kind of superior disdain, wondering how long it would take them to realize the hopelessness of their position. Crawling headfirst through the eye of a needle didn’t seem to me half as difficult as dragging a man through your life. I took as whole cloth the notion that feminism is the theory, lesbianism the practice, and only a childhood of enforced politeness kept me from preaching that conviction to the less enlightened. I made no connection between such expectations and the kind of pressure to reform myself that had hurt me so badly for so many years.

I cannot pinpoint what changed all that for me, made me see the absurdity of such a theory. I know that a piece of it was my relationship with my sisters. While I could imagine some theoretical stranger deciding that rational lesbianism was the solution, I could not face my baby sister—with her children, her half-tamed boyfriend, and her hard-won self-respect—and try to convince her that she’d be better off in a lesbian collective. Once when we’d stayed up talking almost all night, and she’d told me she thought her fellow was sleeping around, and I’d admitted that yes, that woman I’d told her about had hurt her almost more than I thought I could stand, she had put her hand on mine, squeezed and said, “I know that pain.” She was telling me the truth, she understood me, and I knew, too, that all the things wrong in her life would not be solved by her trying to be something she was not.

My understanding of what feminism meant changed even more from reading and listening to the many women who contributed to This Bridge Called My Back. It was a matter, then, not only of looking at the personal racism that blights all our lives, but of examining the institutional racism that shapes our convictions of who is or can be right, and what it is that we really know as feminists. In a very real sense, Bridge gave me a new way to look at my life because it was so full of the lives of women who, while they were very different from me, voiced the same hopes, the same desperate desires to change what any of us is allowed. While addressing the very real ways racism tears at all of us, the writers spoke again and again of joy, of love, of power, of lives shared and things accomplished. They offered a vision that struggle between white women and women of color did not have to be framed in terms of betrayal, that just as Barbara Smith had written, we might “emerge from this not broken.” If we could hope for this across the barriers of color and class, why not across sexuality and gender? And if the writers in Bridge could make themselves vulnerable while still insisting on a shared vision of feminism, I believed that I had a responsibility to do the same.

Bridge also raised the question of the difference between politics and personal style—a complicated, critical, and painful issue that no one has addressed sufficiently. Part of the power of the writers’ voices lay in how different they were from what I had come to think of as the same old, slightly distant, and carefully respectable aura of feminist theory. Here were all kinds of women speaking of their real lives, not abstract generalities, not shielding or obscuring anger or impatience. I thought of all the meetings I had attended, the papers I had read, where the dominant tone was academic, polite, and distant, while the undercurrent was personal and vicious: the urge I had to say, Can we stop a minute and talk about what is really going on here?

When Cherríe Moraga wrote of how, “with such grace, such blind faith, this commitment to women in the feminist movement
grew to be exclusive and reactionary, she was talking specifically about racism and the tendency to ignore or misinterpret the lives of women of color. While her words made me look at my own fears, avoidance, and racism, they also enabled me to see that I had the same criticisms of the movement around the issues of class and sex. Moreover, just as I was terrified of addressing my own racism, so, too, other women were afraid of stepping into the deep and messy waters of class and sexual desire. If we get into this, what might we lose? If we expose this, what might our enemies do with it? And what might it mean? Will we have to throw out all the theory we have built with such pain and struggle? Will we have to start over? How are we going to try to make each other safe while we work it through?

My first response to these questions was that it was too hard, too deep, too frightening. It was only when I took my second breath that I began to think of going ahead anyway. We learn prejudice and hatred at the same time we learn who we are and what the world is about, at the same time we learn our fundamental convictions about sex. The real choice is whether we will simply swallow what we are given, or whether we will risk our whole lives shaking down and changing those very bottle-fed convictions.

Essential political decisions are made not once, but again and again in a variety of situations, always against that pressure to compromise, to bargain. I have found that in my slow reassessment of my politics, the most telling factor has been the gap between the rhetoric of lesbian feminism and the reality of my own life. It didn’t matter how many times I was told I was oppressed as a woman. That fact did not satisfactorily answer many of the contradictions of my life. Simple answers, reductionist politics, are the most prone to compromise, to saying we’re addressing the essential issue and all that other stuff can slide. It is, in reality, people who slide.

Throughout my life somebody has always tried to set the boundaries of who and what I will be allowed to be: if working class, an intellectual, upwardly mobile type who knows her place, or at least the virtues of gratitude; if a lesbian, an acceptable lesbian, not too

forward about the details of her sexual practice; if a writer, a humble, consciously female one who understands her relationship to more “real” writers and who is willing to listen to her editors. What is common to these boundary lines is that their most destructive power lies in what I can be persuaded to do to myself—the walls of fear, shame, and guilt I can be encouraged to build in my mind. Like that woman who called me, I am to hide myself, and hate myself, and never risk exposing what might be true about my life. I have learned through great sorrow that all systems of oppression feed on public silence and private terrorization. But few do so more forcefully than the systems of sexual oppression, and each of us is under enormous pressure to give in to their demands.

In the early feminist and lesbian movement days, many women slowly worked out a personal analysis about the omnipresence of silence—the impact on all our lives of the things that must not be said, and the social use of such strictures. AIDS activists extended the analysis until the cautionary Silence Equals Death achieved the status of tautology, self-evident and unquestioned. Looking again at our silences, the sources of our fears, is both a way to see where the greatest damage is being done, as well as an opportunity for coalition and shared understanding. I have seen that when I speak as a lesbian about my own struggles to understand and publicly acknowledge the full meaning of my love for women, straight women nod back at me. I have heard them reveal their own terrible secrets, their own impossible desires. For all of us, it is the public expression of desire that is embattled, any deviation from what we are supposed to want and be, how we are supposed to behave. The myth prevails that good girls—even modern, enlightened, liberal or radical varieties—don’t really have such desires.

A decade later, many of my questions from the early 1980s remain unanswered. I find myself continuing to wonder how our lives might be different if we were not constantly subjected to the fear and contempt of being sexually different, sexually dangerous, sexually
endangered. What kind of women might we be if we did not have to worry about being too sexual, or not sexual enough, or the wrong kind of sexual for the company we keep, the convictions we hold? I have not found a solution to my own impatience with the terms of the discussion about sex that persists among feminists, lesbian and queer activists, and radical heterosexuals. Not addressing the basic issues of sexual fear, stereotyping, and stigmatization reinforces the rage and terror we all hide, while maintaining the status quo in a new guise.

Instead of speaking out in favor of sexual diversity, most feminists continue to avoid the discussion. It is too dangerous, too painful, too hopeless, and the Sex Wars are supposed to be over anyway. But when women remain afraid of what might be revealed about our personal fears and desires, it becomes clear that the Sex Wars are far from over. When it is easier to dismiss any discussion of sexuality as irrelevant or divisive rather than to look at all the different ways we have denied and dismissed each other, the need to break the public silence still exists.

We have no choice. We cannot compromise or agree to be circumvent in how we challenge the system of sexual oppression. We dare not willingly deny ourselves, make those bad bargains that can look so good at the moment. I think, for example, of all those times we have pandered to this sex-hating, sex-fearing society by pretending, as lesbians, that we are really no different from heterosexuals; and by placing such a strong emphasis on statistics that portray lesbians as monogamous, couple- and community-centered, that so much more acceptable than those publicly provocative, outrageous, and promiscuous queers. Every time we articulate, as feminists, the need for reproductive freedom rather than abortion, talk about our right to control our bodies but do not go on to demand all that that might mean, and speak of morality as if that word did not stick in our throats with the memory of every lesbian ever attacked for the immoral acts we each enjoy, every time, I believe, we are in collusion with our own destruction.

Our enemies are not confused about this issue. In 1993, as in 1982, the preachers, psychologists, and politicians who want us to be the silent, frightened women they can control are not avoiding the issue of sex, the naming of deviants, the attacks on us as queers and perverts and immoral individuals. And it is as individuals that we are most vulnerable to them: individual lesbian mothers fighting for their children, individual lesbian teachers demanding their right to do the work they love, and individual lesbian citizens who want to live as freely and happily as their neighbors, whether they wear leather or all-cotton clothes, keep compost heaps or drive motorcycles, live with one woman for thirty years or treat sex as a sport and are always in pursuit of their personal best. All of us are vulnerable to individual attack. Sex is still the favorite subject of demagogues—they know how vulnerable we are.

I am certain that none of us wants to live with the fear, the sense of loss, betrayal, and risk that I worry at all the time. I know that many of us want what Barbara Smith described in her short story—the ability to love without fear of betrayal, the confidence that we can expose our most hidden selves and not have the women we love literally disappear from our lives. I know, too, that we cannot inhabit that safe ground easily. If we are not to sacrifice some part of ourselves or our community, we will have to go through the grief, the fear of exposure, and struggle, with only a thin layer of trust that we will emerge whole and unbroken. I know of no other way to do this than to start by saying, I will give up nothing. I will give up no one.

For my lovers, my sisters, the women who in the early eighties were afraid to speak to or be seen with me, and all those women who called me late at night to whisper their terrors, I make a promise: I promise not to lie and not to require anyone else to lie. I still offer that open book where I hope we can all write out our fearful secrets and sign them or not as we choose, to honor our secrets and break the public silence that has maintained so much private terror.

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