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CHANGING FROM HETEROSEXUAL TO LESBIAN IDENTITY:

A THEORY OF FLUID SEXUALITY

by

Amy J. Pett

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

This is both an empirical and a theoretical study. It is an empirical study of heterosexual women who reconstructed themselves as lesbian in adulthood. The empirical study will show that in order to do this the women I interviewed had to see beyond the culturally imposed binary of masculine/feminine to understand that a "feminine" "woman" such as themselves could love and desire another "feminine" "woman" and make a life with her. They had to reconstruct both "lesbian" and "woman," so that lesbian could also be a "feminine" woman not just a masculine one, and so that a "woman" could also be a lesbian, that is, a female who loves and desires other women. They also had to reconstruct their sexual desire so that it included desire for women, and to reconstruct some of their feelings for women so that they "were" desire.

The theoretical study will argue that individuals are not inherently gendered and either hetero-, homo-, or bisexual, but rather are omniform and omnisexual, having the potential to be and have and do everything. But in daily practices that involve a complex interplay of individual psyche and patriarchal society, the omniform individual

both constructs itself and is constructed as having one unified and unchanging gender and one unified and unchanging sexual orientation. This reduction of gender and sexual omneity to the masculine/feminine binary is the way patriarchal society constructs and reproduces unified gender and sexuality to support, enforce, and reproduce patriarchy. Through these daily practices of social/psychic construction and reconstruction, patriarchal society disguises the social and political nature of gender and sexuality as personal, private, and "natural." In this way, women's gender and sexuality support the patriarchal ruling order, in which men are dominant and women subordinate.

Chapter 1

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study takes a constructionist theoretical perspective claiming that women's gender and sexuality, as we know them, are not natural and biologically determined, nor are they exclusively personal and private. Rather, they are constructed and reconstructed in daily practices and are inherently social and political.¹ This study will demonstrate that the process of construction involves a complex interplay of psyche and patriarchal society. The study will also argue that bodily sex is a similar construction, although based on anatomy; that the meanings and importance we ascribe to it are social and political, not natural fact.

The study further argues that gender and sexuality are made up of separate and often contradictory components that can combine to create any number of unities, but nevertheless are constructed by psyche and patriarchal

1. See Lorber, 1994, a comprehensive account of the social construction of gender. For accounts of the social construction of sexuality, see Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Rubin, 1975; Laws and Schwartz, 1977; Foucault, 1978, 1986, and 1988; and Weeks, 1985 and 1986.

society as one monolithic unity. Although these components are constructed as fixed in adulthood,² they can and do change throughout the life course, not just in childhood and adolescence.

In addition, the study assumes that women's gender, sex, and sexuality, **as we know them**, support and reproduce the ruling orders of heterosexism, patriarchy, and sexism, just as they are reproduced by them.

Body and Mind, Individual and Society

Gender, sex, and sexuality have their sources in both the body and the mind, the individual and the culture. I am not suggesting another version of the "natural" individual's repression by society or the body's domination by the mind (Freud 1930; Marcuse 1955), but instead propose that individual and patriarchal society, body and mind, work together in a complex interrelation to create, or construct, what are called (and experienced by the individual as) "natural" and personal sexuality, sex, and gender.

2. In fact, in many accounts of personality development, adulthood is marked by the fixing of these components; an individual is an adult when experimentation and exploration are over and "true identity" is "found."

The interrelation of body and mind, individual and society that I propose is similar to the interrelation proposed by Winnicott when he asserted that there is no such thing as a baby, there is only the mother and baby dyad, because a baby could not exist without a mother (Winnicott 1967). I argue that body/mind and individual/society are not separable except heuristically; neither side of what have been posed as these oppositions can exist without the other. There is no live human body without a mind, or mind without any live human body; there is no individual without a society, or society without an individual.

It is difficult to talk about the body/mind or individual/society unity because our society and culture so emphatically separate them that we have no words for these unities. There are unities that our culture permits and even requires, and thus there are words for them. For example, "family" is a word for the combination of parents and children, and for several generations linked by blood and/or marriage. There is no specific, single word for the combination of two women and a biologically unrelated child, although the lesbian/gay movement is working hard to

have them called a "family" too. Two of the many other unities for which there is no single word in English are a girl and her cat, and a person and the food that she has just eaten.

Just as it is difficult to describe, and therefore to conceive of, body and mind or individual and society as unities, it has been difficult to conceive of sex, sexuality, and gender as separate and distinct instead of as a unity -- sex/sexuality/gender. In fact, they are complexly linked and interactive, forming a variety of complicated, dynamic unities. But for purposes of analysis, it is useful to consider them separately, since they have for so long been seen as comprising a single, monolithic unity.

What About the Body?

Contending that gender, sexuality, and sex are socially and psychically constructed does not deny the existence or the importance of the body -- its biological systems and physical sensations. The body provides the material for which the construction creates the meaning. The body houses sensations which are defined and interpreted by the psyche and patriarchal society. A man

is sexually aroused by the sight of a woman's breast not because of anything inherent in the material breast, but because it has been defined by complex social and historical processes and ongoing social practices as erotic. A woman's hand probably does more things to his body to physically arouse the man, but a glimpse of a hand is usually not sexually exciting.

It is certainly true that most men's bodies produce sperm and most women's bodies produce eggs, carry the fetus until it is developed enough to be born, and produce milk on which the infant can live for some time. Concluding from these facts that women should stay home and be full time caretakers of children or that women should form intimate exclusive life-long emotional, sexual, financial, and legal partnerships with individual men, are the social and cultural constructions. Further reasoning from these physical facts that male and female, masculine and feminine, are mutually exclusive, diametrically opposed, and complementary basic principles into which all living things and many concepts can be divided is also a social construction, as is the conclusion that these are the two most important categories into which people can be divided

and by which they can be defined.

Contending that sexuality is constructed does not deny that sexual excitement is experienced physically, that "the sex act" is a physical event, or that the body is intimately involved in sexual activity. Again, it is the meanings that are constructed.³ The feelings involved in an orgasm are experienced in the mind as well as the body, and it is the mind, using language and concepts that come from the culture, that says this is not just a pleasurable experience, but a profoundly meaningful one. The fact that "normal" reproduction requires a man's sperm, which is delivered through his penis, to unite with a woman's ovum which can be found in her uterus, does not also mean that the physical event called orgasm must occur with the man's sperm-carrier inside the passage to the woman's ova-holder, or that only by that route is orgasm "normal." That link, between reproduction and "normal" sexual activity, is a construction that enforces heterosexuality.

Arguing that gender, sexuality, and sex are socially

3. In fact, as Roslyn Wallach Bologh suggests, the more saturated with meanings an event is, the more cultural significance it must have. Hence the meanings can be analyzed for their social and political significance.

and psychically constructed does not deny the body, it denies the "naturalness" or inevitability of the meanings that have been attached to the body and its events. Our relationship to or experience of our bodies is mediated by a consciousness that is socially/politically constructed and developed, and that loads some body parts and experiences more heavily with meaning than others. In that way, the meanings are more powerful than bodily sensation; they tell us which physical sensations are important, which bodily events have significance beyond our bodies, and which are shameful.

Further, arguing that gender, sexuality, and sex are constructed is not contending that they are not "real." It is, instead, arguing for the power of the mind and society and saying that they are at least equal to the power of the body and the individual. A pulse rate elevated by the idea of kissing is no less "real" than a pulse rate elevated by the actuality of kissing. The power of the idea can have as many consequences as the power of the material experience. The meanings we make of the anatomical differences between the sexes are what is emotionally and conceptually powerful, not the physical differences

themselves. It is the meanings that affect our social relations.

Social/Psychic Constructions

In this complex interplay of patriarchal society and psyche, the process of construction is also complex, resulting from and simultaneously creating a powerful, pervasive sex and gender order.⁴ Social construction (or more accurately, social reproduction) of the sex/gender order takes place constantly through ongoing daily practices and processes.⁵ The sex/gender order is reproduced as a social or cultural "fact" as it is constructed anew with each individual as she is born into the culture, develops, matures, and goes about her everyday life. Psychic construction also takes place constantly in the ongoing meaning-producing and symbol-making/reading activities of the individual's dynamic unconscious. Because this sex and gender order is hegemonic, it exerts power deep inside the psyches of individuals, so deeply that its rules and requirements seem to be personal,

4. See, for example, Connell, 1987, and Cocks, 1989.

5. See, for example, West and Zimmerman, 1987, and West and Fenstermaker, 1995.

private, and "natural," despite the ongoing everyday work of socially re-producing it. The sex/gender/sexuality order becomes personal and private through internalization (of people, ideas, relational styles, and linguistically-conveyed thought structures). It also becomes personal and private through socialization, (through learning about social rules, structures, and expectations from individuals and institutions). The complex interaction of these psychodynamic and cognitive processes is the link between inner and outer, individual and society.

This interaction does not operate on the Freudian model of Parsonian analysis (Parsons 1954, 1964; Parsons and Bales 1955). Freud's is an inherently unsocial model because it is based on a psychoanalytic theory of the individual as a closed system of hydraulic drives. Any psychoanalytic theory based on drives, as Freud's is, posits an individual who only acts cooperatively out of fear of punishment, but whose basic motivation is self-referent satisfaction of instinctual drives. The Freudian individual is not basically social, thus the Freudian model is a dead end for social analysis (Greenberg and Mitchell

1983)⁶. Instead, the social/psychic construction process I will describe operates on principles from psychoanalytic theories that see individuals as motivated by a desire for relationship: object relations theory.

Social/psychic construction begins at birth. It operates through events as intimate as the way the infant is handled by its caretakers, and through means as impersonal as language. It works through routes as subtle as the patterns of relating to others found in the baby's family and as blatant as the rules for behavior enforced at school. The sex/gender/sexuality order is conveyed as covertly as the subliminal messages in television ads and as overtly as the advice in "Dear Abby." The messages are as contemporary as popular songs and as ageless as old wives tales. These sex/gender/sexuality rules come at us from everywhere: near and far, parent and president, whispers and newspaper headlines.

The foundational assumptions of the ruling sex/gender/sexuality order are:

6. Some aspects of Freudian theory, however, are very valuable for my analysis. I draw, with gratitude, on his understanding of the dynamic unconscious and the processes of internalization.

- o There are two, and only two sexes
- o These two sexes are complementary and opposite
- o Every individual is either one sex or the other, and no one is neither or both
- o This is the natural order
- o No one has a choice about her/his sex
- o Whatever sex one is, one desires the other sex
- o Sexual desire is a powerful natural force unchanged by history and culture, although its expression is controlled by society.

Some important secondary assumptions which follow from the foundational assumptions about Nature and "the natural" include:

- o Anyone who is not either one sex or the other is defective and abnormal
- o The natural order is the best and most moral order
- o It would be unnatural and immoral to have a choice about one's sex
- o It would be unnatural and immoral not to have any sexual desire
- o If one does not desire the other sex, one is defective and abnormal

o It would be unnatural and immoral to have a choice about one's sexual desire.

The sex/gender/sexuality order is enforced throughout the life course, as constantly, ubiquitously, and persistently as it is taught. Violations of its rules are noted and punished by doctors, friends, police officers, haircutters, babysitters, lovers, teachers, psychotherapists, parents, children, rabbis and ministers, sales clerks, and strangers on the street. Reminders of the rules come from all of patriarchal society's institutions: religion, the judiciary, the economy, the polity, the media, the arts, and the schools. Such an overwhelmingly complicit set of practices and processes (and the list is by no means complete, merely suggestive and indicative) is what the term "hegemony" seeks to convey.

The Construction of Gender

Gender is the combination of emotional, cognitive, and embodied qualities considered "feminine" or "masculine." These qualities are socially and psychically, consciously and unconsciously, constructed as a particular individual's personal attributes beginning at his/her birth. They are

constantly created and recreated in daily activities. Not only are gendered attributes constructed, but they are enforced, reinforced, and deployed by all the most powerful institutions of patriarchal society and carriers of the culture.

The ruling assumption about gender qualities is that they are the "natural" consequences of differently sexed bodies, rather than human potentials that are socially and culturally required of people with one kind of sexed body and prohibited for people of another kind of sexed body. Thus, there is a layer of constructions to support the assumption that the development of certain human qualities by some people and not by others -- that is, gender -- is "natural." If the human qualities that distinguish an individual of one sexual body type from an individual of another sexual body type were "natural" and biologically based, they would not have to be taught and enforced, especially not to the degree that they are. Something biologically natural, such as breathing, usually takes place without the involvement of society's most powerful institutions and culture's most influential media.

There may be some sexually linked behavioral

differences, but for these to be salient as such, their meanings must be constructed and elaborated. Gender helps to construct, enforce, and deploy in women⁷ something called heterosexuality, as will be discussed further below. Heterosexuality is based on the idea of two "naturally" different and complementary kinds of people who together sexually reproduce the species. There are, in addition, many other constructions of "the natural" that are attached to sexual reproduction, and gender is one of the most powerful.

The Construction of Sexuality

Four of this patriarchal society's ruling assumptions about sexuality (that is, genital activities, interests, images, fantasies, practices, identifications, and the relationships with others involving these activities, interests, images, fantasies, and practices) are:

- o That sexuality is a natural force, driven by an overwhelming, irrational, biologically-fuelled need that is constant through history and across cultures.

7. This study examines women only, because men and women are so different, especially in their gender and sexual development.

- o That sexuality is private, as opposed to political, and lodged within the individual instead of in the society.
- o That each individual has a "true" sexuality waiting to be awakened and discovered.
- o That sexual desire is a thing, a truth, about our "self" that helps constitute our "identity" and is different from other feelings and needs we may have about other individuals.

These ruling assumptions are the major theoretical constructions of human sexuality. Through the lens and language of these assumptions we understand our sexual experiences (that is, our bodily, genital experiences and sensations, the anatomical sex differences among people, and the relationships we have in relation to them). The assumptions are constructed, maintained, and enforced on the social level through "scientific explanations" of sexuality, medical explanation and treatment, legal injunctions, religious law and "values," and cultural expectations and enactments. Again, all of these practices suggest -- ideology to the contrary -- that sexuality is not "natural."

Sexuality thus defined has served to maintain the

patriarchal order and has been inextricably linked to gender; both have maintained the "naturalness" of heterosexuality, which in turn has supported and enforced patriarchy. In a patriarchal world in which men control economic, political, and cultural resources, that men and women desire each other sexually makes women's desire for men seem biologically rooted in nature and makes women's "need" to serve men and please them in the private sphere of the household seem an extension of women's "nature." With the increased economic independence of women, this patriarchal order has been changing. In addition, the assaults of feminism and the gay and lesbian liberation movement have undermined the legitimacy of patriarchal social arrangements. Some of these changes will be discussed in detail below. Women have been constructed by patriarchy as dependent on men, who have been defined as naturally superior and dominant. Heterosexuality, in turn, eroticizes and naturalizes patriarchy, providing a motivation for women to participate in their own subordination and a justification for it all as "natural." Women are supposed to desire only men. Sexuality is constructed as a natural force that brings men and women

together to reproduce the species. Men and women are seen as "naturally" (biologically) opposite and complimentary, each necessary to complete and fulfill the other, as each is necessary for sexual reproduction. Patriarchy thus eroticizes the relationship between dominant and subordinate individuals, teaching women to desire the gender that has power over them and over society, and teaching men to desire the gender that is subordinate. In patriarchy, to be attractive to men, women have to be "feminine," that is, they have to behave in a weak, submissive way and convey admiration and desire for men's strength. This is how patriarchy makes women reproduce and reinforce their own subordination. It is patriarchy that makes heterosexual sex the only acceptable sex, and it is only within patriarchy that women's exclusive heterosexual desire reproduces the patriarchal order. In patriarchy, heterosexual sex can take on the meaning of a man conquering or overpowering a woman whose desire makes her a willing object of conquest, who desires to be conquered. "Heterosexuality literally vivifies and enlivens patriarchy; the production of heterosexual desire is a process of making patriarchy desirable in an emotional and

palpable way."⁸

These assumptions are taken in by the individual through both personal and social media and they then help to provide the emotional and intellectual meanings the individual makes of her experiences, emotions, and sensations.

The Construction of Sex

The sexed body appears to be the last essential, the final barrier to deconstruction. There seems no arguing with the body. Or is there? First of all, accounts of the body have varied through history and across cultures. This is not only because of developing "scientific" knowledge of the "actual" body, but because of political and cultural assumptions in which that knowledge is constructed. In classical Athens, the view of nature held that male and female bodies were the same, except that male bodies were more perfect: hotter, dryer, calmer. Although a great deal was already known about physical structures of the genitals and reproductive organs, "science" taught that a woman's genitals were the same as a man's, except turned inside

8. Roslyn Bologh, personal communication, June, 1995.

out. The vagina was an inside-out penis, and the ovaries were interior versions of the testicles. Laquer (1990) has described the development from this view of the sexed body to the contemporary one, which holds that male and female bodies are radically different, different in the profoundest possible way. I contend that this sexed body is also a construction. Male and female are polarities that represent ideal bodies; the actual bodies of material men and women are not in fact always so clearly male or female. There are individuals who are genetically male (XY) but who have genitals that appear to be female. This kind of development is the result of the fetus's inability to respond to androgens.⁹ At puberty, people with this disorder will develop female secondary sex characteristics and be indistinguishable from genetic females, except that they will not be able to conceive and bear children because they lack any internal reproductive organs, male or female. (But given the great strides being made in reproductive technology, who knows what may be possible in the future for people with disorders like these.)

9. Androgen insensitivity syndrome. See Money and Ehrhardt, 1972, pp. 108-111.

An individual like this was identified in 1967 at the European Track and Field Championships, when women athletes were first subjected to genetic checks to make sure that they weren't men passing as women and unfairly competing against women. One of the people who "failed" the genetic test was a Polish sprinter who had always assumed she was a woman and never had any evidence to the contrary. She was found to have male chromosomes and some internal male organs and was barred from competing (Carlson 1988). This has happened to women Olympic athletes as well, and to women competing in other athletic events (Carlson 1991).

Another sex development syndrome produces infants who appear to be girls but who develop penises around puberty. There are unusually high rates of children with this syndrome in a few families in the Dominican Republic (Imperato-McGinley, Peterson, Gautier, and Sturla 1979, and Herdt 1990), and, according to anthropologists, they are referred to by a word that means "penis at twelve."

While this kind of development is unusual, it does happen "naturally"; that is, by itself, without human intervention. In fact, interventions are now in use to "correct" these unusual developments. Kessler (1990) has

documented how decisions about sex are made by doctors treating newborns with ambiguous genitals. The factor that controls whether these infants are designated boys or girls is not their chromosomes or their internal reproductive organs, but whether or not a convincing penis can be constructed. If it can, the babies will be called boys and chemical and surgical interventions will make them mostly male. If not, they will be called girls, and chemical and surgical interventions will make them mostly female.

In less extreme ways, there is such a tremendous variation in size, shape and functioning of the sex and reproductive organs and secondary sex characteristics that bodily sex is in fact not so clear cut as we might think. Some women have breasts which are smaller than those of some men. Some men's penises are so small that they are very similar to the clitorises of some women whose organs are very large. Some women rarely or never menstruate, do not lactate, or are unable to become pregnant. Some men do not produce sperm, or produce sperm that is not capable of uniting with ovum. In some cultures, variations in bodily sex such as the ones discussed above are not only viewed as "natural," but are considered a third sex, that is neither

male nor female but rather, both.¹⁰ And in our culture, there is a budding transgender movement that is seeking recognition of some kind of third gender.

Thus, we see that two and only two opposite and complementary sexes, diametrically opposed to each other, are an ideal, not a biological actuality. A binary of bodily sex is necessary, however, to maintain and enforce exclusive heterosexuality and patriarchy. Exclusive heterosexuality is impossible without two and only two opposite and complementary sexes to naturalize it. And domination by men cannot be justified if there is ambiguity of the sexed body and, therefore, ambiguity about who is a "man" and who a "woman." The domination/subordination complementarity of patriarchy is justified and naturalized by the complementarity of the sexed body. The body is constructed as sexed, just as the personality is constructed as gendered and the individual is constructed as sexual. The details of these constructed sexes, genders, and sexualities vary through time and across

10. See, for example, Trumbach, 1991; Wikan, 1977; and, for an excellent collection, Herdt, 1994.

cultures, although in our culture they are constructed as natural, intimate, and personal.

In the dissertation that follows I will present an empirical study and theoretical analysis that expands on and elucidates these assertions. In the empirical section, we will see actual women in the mid-1990s, struggling with constructions and reconstructions of both cultural and personal gender and sexuality. The theoretical section will offer an explanation of the empirical observations based on the theoretical assumptions outlined above.

Chapter 2

EMPIRICAL STUDY AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

In this study of women who became lesbian in adulthood, my first goal was to support my theory that sexuality is a social/psychic construction (not natural fact).¹¹ My second goal was to see whether these case studies shed greater light on the social/psychic construction and reconstruction of gender and sexuality. My overriding aim was to consider the political importance of this process of reconstructing gender and sexuality in light of my theory that all such constructions derive from the political relations of patriarchy, the naturalizing of patriarchy by eroticizing it.

I wanted to understand what the women experienced, what they thought about their experiences, and how they made sense of these experiences for themselves. In order to achieve that goal I solicited study participants who had "changed" and interviewed 14 of them. The interviews were long and open-ended. I asked the women to tell me their

11. The argument that sexuality is natural serves social and political ends, as discussed in Chapter 1.

stories, starting wherever seemed appropriate to them. After they finished telling their stories, I asked questions first to amplify what they said in their stories, and then to elicit specific information about their experiences of gender and sexuality. At all times I tried to use their language and ask about their experiences as they described them. I taped the interviews and then transcribed them myself. This meant that I listened to each interview as many as eight or 10 times, and read each one many more times. Once I felt that I had really heard and understood what each participant said she experienced, I tried to make sense of each story individually and then of all of them as a group. The aim was to get as close as possible to the experience the individual described -- the phenomenology of it. Of course it is impossible ever to know exactly what another experiences because we cannot know, much less duplicate, all their prior experiences and meanings. Words (and silences and body language and non-verbal sounds) used to convey experience only convey meanings about experience, often disguised (erroneously) as the experience itself. But words, silences, body language, and non-verbal sounds are all that we have with which to

communicate and try to share our feelings. So in the interviews I frequently asked the participant to explain or amplify what she had said. And then I listened to and later read the words over and over to take in as closely as possible what her experience was, to her.

My second goal was to understand the broader theoretical implications of what the women experienced; the meaning of their experience. In order to achieve that goal I read and re-read the transcripts of the interviews, trying to understand what they were saying about their experiences and the meanings they made of them, which became the grounds for the meanings I made of them. In this section, I will summarize my understandings of what the participants said in their interviews about their experiences and meanings. (A further goal, which will be addressed in a later section, is to use these understandings to theorize about the social and psychic construction of gender and sexuality.)

I began with the taken-for-granted notion of a lesbian, a woman who loves and "desires" other women. I knew I was going to challenge the idea of a lesbian as a particular kind of woman, one who was "born that way" and

somehow "discovered" her true identity or sexual orientation. What I did not realize was that I was also going to challenge my personal understanding of what a lesbian is and what the change from heterosexual to homosexual is about. I had thought a lesbian was very simply a woman who sexually desires women and that the change from heterosexual to homosexual was a change in sexual desire; I learned that "what a lesbian is" is very complex and that the change from heterosexual to homosexual was not necessarily driven by sexual desire at all. In addition, I have come to challenge the idea of identity (including gender and sexuality) as something that can ever be fixed. I have come to understand that desire itself is a construction, as are the objects and forms of desire; that "interest" in women can be constructed and experienced as (and therefore, actually be) a wide variety of things (such as artistic appreciation, friendship or comradeship, feminist practice, political solidarity, sexual desire, romantic love), depending on psychic and social context, and cultural and political meanings.

I had expected that the participants' experiences would be like mine: that they would say they had changed

from heterosexual lives and identities to lesbian lives and identity out of a combination of dissatisfaction with life with a man and a sudden and surprising sexual and romantic attraction to a woman. I expected to be able to write about how the participants' sense of themselves as women and as sexual beings had changed after they "changed." I expected to get information that would support my theoretical claim that gender and sexuality are constructed and not inherent personal attributes based in biology. I certainly didn't expect what I found. I was led, ultimately, to a new level of understanding because what I heard these women saying didn't make any sense to me based on the understandings I had at the outset.

The Puzzle

The women I interviewed had all volunteered for my study of women who had changed. Many of them, however, said near the beginning of their interviews that they hadn't really changed, that they had "always" been interested in women. Some of them said they had been aware for some time that they were attracted to or interested in women, but didn't act on that attraction because they hadn't known there was such a thing as a lesbian, because

lesbianism was so forbidden, because it was "unthinkable," because they had no role models, had never seen a lesbian. Others said they hadn't known they were interested in women at the time, but once they became lesbians, when they looked back on their lives they realized either that they had always been lesbians or had always been interested in women. I was initially very confused by the assertion that they hadn't known about lesbians, because all but one of the women came out after Stonewall,¹² at a time when I thought lesbian images were more available in the culture. I couldn't understand why the women I interviewed hadn't seen the lesbians. It was even more confusing in the cases of the women who at first said that they hadn't known about lesbians but later in their interviews talked about having seen pictures of lesbians in books, having read The Well of

12. The Stonewall Rebellion in New York City's Greenwich Village occurred in 1969 when drag queens and butch lesbians fought police who made a routine raid on the gay and lesbian Stonewall bar. The melee that followed is generally seen as the start of the gay and lesbian liberation movement in the United States.

Loneliness,¹³ or having seen women who were rumored to be lesbians, and knowing they "weren't like that." If they had read about lesbians, I wondered, why didn't they know they themselves were lesbians, and how could they possibly say they didn't know there was an alternative to heterosexuality? And, if they had always been interested in women, why did they think they weren't like the lesbians they read about?

What I heard these women saying didn't make any sense to me. I found no guidance in the empirical or theoretical literature. Symbolic interactionist theory¹⁴ could explain how women who already desired other women came to identify themselves as lesbians, sometimes by redefining lesbians to include themselves. Social constructionist¹⁵ theory could

13. (Hall 1928) The earliest well-known novel about lesbians available in the U.S. For most women over the age of about 45, this was their introduction to lesbians. It depicts a tormented woman who is "masculine," the classic "invert," who wishes she could be "normal" and asks only for acceptance.

14. Such as Plummer 1975, 1981; Schur 1984; Gagnon and Simon 1967, 1973; and Ponse 1978.

15. For example, Foucault 1978, 1986, 1988; Weeks, 1977, 1980, 1985, 1987; Halperin, 1990; McIntosh, 1968; Plummer, 1981; Reback, 1986.

explain how the culture came to define a woman who desired women as a special kind of person called a lesbian, who had certain historically and politically ordained characteristics, and thus how an individual woman in a particular culture might understand and enact her desire for women. Lesbian identity development theory¹⁶ would explain how the individual woman who desires women comes to think of herself as a lesbian and to acquire that public and private "identity." None of those theories problematize desire, ask what a woman's desire for another woman is or how it is constructed. Those theories start with the desire and then explain identity. They see desire as inherent, even if they don't all see gender that way. Even the theorists of the history and construction of sexuality¹⁷ start with desire and theorize changing explanations, meanings, and names for that desire. But very few of the women I interviewed started with an

16. For example, Sophie, 1986; Lewis, 1984; Elliott, 1985; Kahn, 1991; Cass, 1979.

17. For example, Duberman, Vicinus, Chauncey, 1989; Chauncey, 1984/85; Faderman, 1981, 1991; Foucault, 1978, 1986, 1988; Gagnon and Simon, 1987; Greenberg, 1988; Halperin, 1990; Caplan, 1987; Newton, 1984; Kitzinger, 1987; Weeks, 1977, 1980, 1985, 1986, 1987.

experience of sexual desire for women. A psychoanalytic approach to understanding these women would talk about the sources of their desire for other women. Whether classical,¹⁸ object relational,¹⁹ or feminist,²⁰ psychoanalytic theory might say that they had always desired other women but hadn't been able to acknowledge it because of the social and psychic taboos against homosexuality. Most psychoanalytic theory of whatever school, would find the source of a woman's desire for other women in her relationship as an infant with her mother.

18. See, for example, Freud, 1905, 1920, 1924, 1933; Greenson, 1968; Abraham, 1927; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1970; Fenichel, 1934; Jones, 1927, 1932; Stoller, 1973, 1974, 1985a, 1985b; Mitchell, 1975; Mitchell and Rose, 1982.

19. For example, Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983; Jacobson, 1968; Fast, 1984.

20. For example, Chodorow, 1978, 1979, 1987, 1989, 1994; Schwartz, 1986; Dinnerstein, 1976, Benjamin, 1988.

The Answer

Eventually I realized that when many of the women said they hadn't known about lesbians, what they meant was that they hadn't known about lesbians like themselves: women who looked like "women" and were not "masculine." Therefore, they could not know or imagine any identity or role available for "women" who were attracted to other "women." They couldn't experience attraction or sexual desire until after they had "become" lesbians. And they couldn't become lesbians until they had reconstructed the notion of a lesbian to include a "feminine" woman like themselves.

Although none of them articulated it, the women's stories showed that in order to make these re-constructions they had to step out of the binary model on which the hegemonic sex/gender/sexuality order is based. This model poses two dichotomous, complementary, mutually exclusive sexes and genders, who can desire only each other; it requires any romantic and erotic couple to contain one of each of the only two possible sorts of people who are attracted to and desire each other based on their complementarity. In cultural representations of lesbian couples, the binary model is maintained by the assumption

that every couple contains a "masculine" woman and a "feminine" woman. Although this arrangement is tabooed, because women are not supposed to be masculine, it is not unthinkable, the way a couple made of two "feminine" "women" has been unthinkable.²¹ For the women I interviewed, two "feminine" women who loved and desired each other had been not only taboo, but literally inconceivable, unknowable, unimaginable. These women, therefore, had no way to understand their "interest" in women as sexual and romantic. They couldn't experience desire for women, much less act on it. The women I interviewed, who had always thought of themselves as "feminine" "women," couldn't become lesbians until they reconstructed "lesbian" to include "feminine" "women" as well as "masculine" women. They couldn't imagine desiring other "women" who were really "women" like themselves, or feel that desire, until they reconstructed the erotic to include interactions between two "feminine" persons, as well as between a "feminine" person and a "masculine"

21. It was unthinkable, that is, until very recently, with the construction of the category "lipstick lesbians," who are traditionally-feminine-looking women, all dressed- and made-up, and paired with each other.

person.

Stepping out of the binary model was accomplished by many of the participants by reconstructing the idea of a lesbian and reconstructing the idea of a woman.

What I found in my empirical study of women who became lesbians in adulthood was that they redefined a feeling about women as desire after they had become lesbians. And they couldn't become lesbians until they had reconstructed the notion of a lesbian -- a woman who desires ("feminine") women -- to include a "feminine" woman like themselves. What I finally understood was that until the women I interviewed were able to transcend the binary model of gender and sexuality they couldn't imagine or experience desire for women, much less act on it. What I came to realize was that the women I interviewed, who had always thought of themselves as "feminine" women, couldn't become lesbians until they reconstructed lesbian to include both "masculine" and "feminine" women who desire "feminine" women. They couldn't imagine desiring other women until they reconstructed the erotic to include interactions between two "feminine" persons, as well as between a "feminine" person and a "masculine" person.

What is important and new about my empirical study is that piece: the understanding of the power of the hegemonic gender order over the construction of sexual desire (such that a feminine woman desiring a feminine woman was inconceivable, could not be experienced, much less known as desire); and the understanding of how the women I interviewed managed to break out of the hegemonic order and transcend the binary model by redefining categories. This study delineates a political and psychic process of change in what has been seen as the most intimate, personal, and fundamental part of the individual: her gender and sexuality.

The Elements of Change

The **reconstruction of "lesbian"** was for most of the participants a process in which they expanded the cultural construction of "lesbian" as a masculine woman to include a woman like themselves, who feels she is more "feminine." This reconstruction was most often accomplished by getting to know or reading about lesbians and seeing that they were not all masculine or paired with a masculine woman. This process was experienced by the women not as reconstruction, but as going from a state of not knowing to a state of

knowing. What they didn't know was that they "desired" women and/or that they could make a life with women.

Their **reconstruction of "woman"** involved expanding the cultural concept of woman as a female who sexually and romantically desires a man, and builds her life around him, to include also a female who sexually and romantically desires a woman, and build her life around her. For some of the participants, this reconstruction is also an expansion of woman as someone who is passive, weak, and powerless (or "feminine"), to include someone who is active, strong, and powerful (or "masculine"). Some of the women had to do this so they could become agents of change and actors in their own lives. These reconstructions of woman were accomplished in a variety of ways that will be detailed below, but include meeting strong women and lesbians and being exposed to feminism.

In addition to transcending the binary model, these women also had to step outside the patriarchal order. The processes that made these 14 women able to do that were: becoming empowered; finding a women's culture that valued and celebrated the female, as opposed to the patriarchal culture which denigrated and subordinated them; and being

able to see past the hegemonic sex/gender/sexuality order to a world of other possibilities.

The hegemonic sex/gender/sexuality order, like any other hegemonic order, is like a giant tent set over our world.²² Because it completely surrounds us, and always has, we cannot see it; it seems to be the natural universe, the way things are, and the way they will always be. It also makes the ruling discourse seem the only way to think or talk about the world. But no hegemonic order is air tight and leakproof. Sometimes it is possible to lift the edge of a tent flap just the smallest bit. But that can be enough to see beyond the tent, outside of our "natural world," to other worlds beyond, other ways of being, other ways of thinking and talking about the world. Many of the women I interviewed did just that. **Lifting the tent flap** of the patriarchal order was for them part of their process of stepping outside of the sex/gender/sexuality order and "becoming" lesbians. Some of the many and diverse events that lifted the tent flap for the women I interviewed were: living as adults in unconventional gender roles, being

22. With special thanks to Rabbi Donna Berman, who talked to me about a world under a dome many years ago.

sexually abused as children, or becoming feminists and taking a critical stance toward the hegemonic order.

The processes of **empowerment** and **entering a woman-centered sphere** were for most of these women a long and complex journey of growth and personal development. I define empowerment as coming to see that one has choices, can be an active agent in one's own life, and has the right to her desires and needs; and learning how to act effectively to these ends. (In a patriarchy, empowerment is "masculine," and "femininity" boils down to a lack of empowerment.) Empowerment can come through therapy or other self-exploration, feminist consciousness raising, the acquisition of a valued skill, or accomplishing something difficult or intimidating. "Empowerment" is something that happens within the individual woman. It is different from reconstructing woman, which has to do with redefining the category woman. Empowerment and reconstructing woman are linked both conceptually and operationally: some women became empowered through their reconstruction of woman, others reconstructed woman after they were empowered, as will be shown below. Empowerment is not necessarily linked to becoming lesbian. Many heterosexual women become

empowered and some lesbian women never do. For many of the women I interviewed, however, empowerment and becoming lesbian were tied together.

By "entering a women's sphere," I mean coming into a place, group, or way of thinking that puts women and women's experiences at the center; that values women; that allows women to escape, however temporarily and ephemerally, the influence and presence of men. This could be women's studies classes, women's music or art, women's spirituality, or feminist activities. A women's sphere, where the female is the norm, can become the context or culture in which a woman's self can develop more fully (as opposed to the patriarchal culture, where the male is the norm) and lesbianism can be an accepted expression of womanhood. Before the second wave of feminism, and for women leading more traditional lives, a women's sphere could be an informal group of women, the traditional daytime world of women at home whose husbands are at work. These traditional women's spheres usually lack the self-conscious valorization of women's experiences that the former ones generally have, as well as the political theory, but for some of the women I interviewed, they

provided access to the possibility of loving and building a life around women. For most of the women I interviewed, the processes of empowerment and entering a women's sphere most often included a close friendship with another woman, involvement in a women's group of some kind, psychotherapy, feminism, and/or women's studies courses. Some of the women had to become empowered before they could reconstruct "lesbian" and "woman," and others became empowered through the reconstruction itself. They did not formulate this process as leaving behind many patriarchal values and institutions, but that in fact is what they did.

Reconstruction of gender and sexuality were also part of the process of "becoming lesbian" for most of the women I interviewed. A reconstruction of their own sex and gender, this involved seeing that their gendered behavior and attributes, and their sexual desires and behavior were different from those required by the patriarchal order, or different from what they had thought they were. Some of the women reconstructed their sexuality and gender through actually experiencing them change. This could have been the result of successfully violating gender norms, having a lesbian sexual relationship and enjoying it, and/or doing

something they had considered impossible for them as women to do. Reconstructing their gender and sexuality was a conscious process for some of the women, but not all. For some it was a very "natural" transition, and for others it was an extremely difficult one. Some feel that they have changed and others say they have not changed, and some struggled in their interviews with this question, many contradicting themselves either consciously or unconsciously.

I was especially puzzled by the women who said they had not changed, because I had recruited participants who had changed from heterosexual to lesbian. It was, therefore, very confusing to me when women who had volunteered saying that they met all my criteria, said at the beginning of their interview that they had not changed. I eventually realized, however, that what they meant when they said they had not changed was that their inner experience had not changed; that inner sensing being that we think of as our "self" did not feel different to these women. The participants felt that although their identities and the way they lived their lives had changed, their inner selves had not. Many talk about how "right" it

felt to have a sexual relationship with a woman, and some talk about how "wrong" it had felt to have a heterosexual relationship.

One of the most interesting aspects of the participants' reconstruction of their gender and sexuality was their experience of themselves as more feminine, more womanly, or more pleased to be women than when they were heterosexual. This **enhanced sense of womanhood** is a powerful and meaningful contradiction of the ruling order's construction of woman as heterosexual and feminine (in relation to men or a masculine other) but lesbian as masculine and not woman, and demonstrates how radical an act it was for these women to change their identities and lives from heterosexual to lesbian as adults.²³ Having stepped out of the binary that constructs only complementary, mutually exclusive pairs of sexes, genders, and sexualities, with woman as weaker and dependent -- and in that way feminine -- these women could be both lesbian and womanly, transcending even the butch/femme dichotomy,

23. This enhanced sense of womanhood also stands in contradistinction to the ruling order's construction of lesbians as masculine and not women.

with "womanly" including strength, competence, and power, but not necessarily "femininity."

A noteworthy finding in these interviews was that half of the women (seven) reported being sexually abused as children. Of these, one was sure she had been physically and emotionally abused, and she and her therapist believed she had probably also been sexually abused. For another, the abuse was her seduction at 16 by a young woman who hired the participant to babysit. The participant later in therapy labeled the seduction a rape. At the very least, sexual abuse can problematize all sexual activities for the survivor, and can certainly make her wary of men if her abuser was a male. In addition, women who look analytically at their abuse as adults, especially in the context of feminism or therapy, may come to see it as integrally connected to the naked fist of both the enforcement and the consequences of the patriarchal system.

As I reviewed the interviews, I realized that these women must have had very powerful motivations to give up the heterosexual privilege from which all had benefitted. These motivations, revealed but not articulated in most of the stories, include falling in love with or meeting a

special woman, feminist politics, and/or dissatisfaction with the power imbalance of heterosexual relationships.

The most striking feature of these stories, however, is the vital role feminism played in many of the processes involved in the women's change from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity and life. Some of the women were feminists, others were not. But all of them lived in a world which was altered by feminism. Whether it was feminism's political analysis or personal consciousness-raising process or the merely superficial headlines that made their way into the popular culture, feminism's message reached most of these women. That message was that there is a patriarchal system in which we all live that produces, enforces, and maintains male domination, and that part of that domination is constructing women as weak, passive, and male-directed.

Although the relationship between feminism and lesbians has been a rocky one,²⁴ the two are inextricably

24. NOW and other feminist organizations, as well as many individual feminists, went through a period of distancing themselves from lesbians, most often in response to men's (and some women's) assertions that all feminists were lesbians. As more and more women came out and became

(continued...)

related. Feminism strengthens lesbians, and lesbians strengthen feminism. Before the second wave of feminism, lesbians were seen as invert, women who were "really" men: "masculine" (that is, independent, strong, powerful, actors in their own lives) and attracted to other women.²⁵ The feminist analysis and critique of patriarchy²⁶ described a force that created men and women as respectively dominant and submissive. Feminism attributed to patriarchy and subordination the construction of woman and of the feminine as dependent, weak, powerless, passive, appeasing, placating, self-sacrificing, and deferential. Feminism encouraged women to be independent, strong, powerful, and actors in their own lives, and therefore reconstructed woman in many ways that were important to the women I interviewed in coming to their lesbian identities.

(...continued)

lesbians, this attitude has changed a great deal, although it still remains in some places.

25. See, for example, Faderman, 1981, 1984, 1991; Newton, 1984; Chauncey, 1984/85; and Trumbach, 1991.

26. For example, Bologh, 1990; Chodorow, 1978; Cocks, 1989; Connell, 1987; Dinnerstein, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Rich, 1980; Rubin, 1975; Scott, 1988; Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b; among many, many other outstanding works that form the foundation upon which this study stands.

Feminism validated women who broke with patriarchal, hegemonic images of women. What earlier was experienced and defined as a failure to be feminine and hence abnormal or "queer" for a woman was now, with the rise of second wave feminism and its analysis of patriarchy and the patriarchal construction of gender, seen not as failure but as something positive, something valued, and hence something to be proud of and valorized. Feminism validated the rejection of "femininity" as a display of subordination. By implication, if to be feminine, that is, deferential and subordinate, is essential to being attractive to men, then heterosexuality itself is implicated in women's subordination. Thus, the feminist analysis of gender relations, conceived in terms of patriarchy, implicitly legitimized both the "failure" to be feminine and the questioning (and critique and rejection) of heterosexuality. Becoming lesbian could now be valorized as a rational response to patriarchy -- a feminist political act. Thus, feminism has been very important for lesbians who have come out since the second wave began.

In their turn, lesbians provide a model for feminists

of a life independent of the male gaze, a life in which women do not defer to men and refuse many debilitating gender stereotypes. Lesbians have extended the feminist analysis of patriarchy to include the production, enforcement, and maintenance of heterosexuality. Thus, lesbians free feminists to refuse to defer to men, to question the "naturalness" of traditional heterosexuality, and to explore ways that sexism works to enforce heterosexuality.²⁷

One result of the interplay between lesbianism and feminism was the notion, of the woman-identified-woman: a woman whose allegiance is to women; who looks to female, rather than male models; and whose primary emotional involvements are with women. The woman-identified-woman was offered by lesbians as the ultimate feminist; she represented a middle ground between lesbian and heterosexual women, a connection to lesbianism that straight feminists could claim and both could valorize. Through the woman-identified-woman, lesbian and straight

27. I am grateful to Roslyn Wallach Bologh for the ideas expressed above about the relationship of feminism to lesbianism.

feminists could feel related; they were all part of the same continuum.²⁸

Equally important are some of the effects of the gay liberation movement which since Stonewall has worked to remove the medical and moral stigma from homosexuality both among professionals and in the popular culture. These two powerful political movements, feminism and gay liberation, have produced a construction of lesbian that can be womanly and not deviant. Without feminism, it is possible that at least some of the 14 women I interviewed never would have identified as "lesbian" at all. It is interesting to note that lesbian feminism had a very different effect on some "masculine," or butch, lesbians according to Henry Rubin (personal communication). In his study of female-to-male transsexuals, Rubin found that in response to the lesbian feminist valorization of women-identified-women, the people he interviewed who had been feminists and butch lesbians (and already didn't feel much like women) came to feel that they weren't really lesbians. Eventually, Rubin said, they began to think of themselves as female to male

28. See Rich, 1980.

transsexuals. Other butches had a similar experience, although they did not change their sex. One wrote about "...the '70s, when feminists seemed fiercely determined to wipe out any traces of '50s role-playing among gay women...lesbian-feminism made butches and femmes outlaws in their own communities. For decades it's been anathema for most of us to say clearly, 'I prefer a woman with broad shoulders and short hair who knows how to fuck,' or, 'I want a woman who wears lipstick and looks hot in a little black dress that shows off her tits'" (Califia 1992).

While most of the elements of change discussed above are present in most of the stories,²⁹ in each story one is more salient than the others. The most common theme of the individual stories is the reconstruction of lesbian. Six of the 14 stories are stories of reconstructing lesbian. The second most common theme is entering a women's sphere. Four of the stories are about entering a women's sphere. The next most common themes are empowerment and reconstruction of gender and sexuality. Two stories

29. Some elements did not apply to some women. Where appropriate, I use the women's quotes to show how and why a particular component didn't play a part in their story.

emphasize each of these two themes.

The Interviews

The interviews were conducted between February, 1993, and July, 1994, and took from one to three and a half hours. Most of them were conducted in the participants' homes; one was at my house; one was at the participant's office; and one took place in the library of the university where the interviewee works.

The interviews were very loosely structured with open-ended questions. First I asked each participant to select a name or code for me to use instead of her own name. Those who wanted to use their own names, or who did not pick another name were assigned a name by the researcher. I then asked each participant to tell me the story of her change from heterosexual to lesbian, and to start wherever seemed appropriate to her. I tried to ask no questions until she had finished her narration, but sometimes I had to inquire for clarification or because the participant had stopped before the end of the story. When they completed their stories, I first asked questions seeking clarification or amplification of the events in the story, then questions about information that seemed to be missing

from the story. Finally, when I felt that I understood the story, I asked specific questions about the participants' experiences and views of gender and sexuality. In the discussion that follows, I will be using quotes and information from the participants' stories mainly, and will note when I use their answers to my later questions. The reason for this is that I am primarily interested in how the women construct their own experience, and tried to let them use their own words and concepts in telling the story at the outset. The goal of this study is to find out what the participants experienced and what meanings they make of their experience.

The Participants

I interviewed 14 women for this study. They live in a variety of urban, suburban, and rural areas in the Northeast. I found some through personal contacts, some were recruited with a notice posted at a lesbian social event in a small city, and some were suggested by people I interviewed. The participants range in age from 35 to 67, and had been self-identified and living as lesbians anywhere from 7 months to 30 years. Their ages at coming out ranged from 27 to 47, and their coming out dates range from 1963 to 1993. Their self-described racial/ethnic identities include African-American or Black; Jewish; WASP; Eastern European; Western European; and Mediterranean. There are women from working class, middle class, and upper middle class backgrounds. Two had never been married. The rest had been married anywhere from 1 1/2 years to 27 years. Five have no children, including the two who had not married. The other nine have between one and three children each, and five have grandchildren.

The Stories

In the sections that follow, I have grouped the

stories according to their main themes: reconstructing lesbian, entering a women's sphere, empowerment, or reconstructing gender and sexuality. Within each woman's story I have indicated where the participant's narrative illustrates each of the seven themes: reconstructing lesbian, reconstructing woman, lifting the tent flap of the patriarchy, empowerment, entering a women centered sphere, reconstruction of gender and sexuality, and enhanced womanhood. Many of the sections of narrative I use to illustrate a particular theme also contain other themes as well. As I will discuss later, these elements are often intertwined in the story and experience of the individual women; they are separate and distinct only conceptually. I will now describe each woman, present her story as she told it,³⁰ and analyze the story she told.

30. Each story is an edited transcript of the story section of the interview. I have left out false starts and hesitation words and phrases such as "uh" and "you know" or "like." Elision marks indicate a comment of substance that has been removed. These were in all cases either unrelated to the story, or repetitions of something that had already been said. All editing was done with the goal of presenting a clear narrative in the speaker's own words and style.

Chapter 3

RECONSTRUCTING LESBIAN

Many of the women I interviewed had to reconstruct "lesbian" before they could comprehend their feelings about women. Their understanding of "lesbian" was originally a masculine woman or, perhaps, a "normal" woman who was sexually attracted to masculine women. Most often these reconstructions were accomplished either by knowing or reading about lesbians. The stories in this section were told by Brook, MLK, CJ, Kathleen, Ann, and Jessie, for all of whom the primary theme was reconstructing lesbian. This was the most common primary theme of the women I interviewed.

Brook: "I Knew I Loved Women"

I met Brook through a friend of a friend, who told her about my study. I interviewed her in her office at a university in the northeast where she is studying and teaching women's studies. Brook is a large black woman with very short grey hair who was wearing purple the day of the interview. She is 58 years old and grew up in a major Northeastern city. Her mother was West Indian and her

father was an African American from the south. Brook was the sixth of seven children. Her father died when she was 2 and she and her siblings were raised by their mother. Her father was an intellectual and he and her mother ran a rooming house. Brook's parents were very political, supporters of the Garvey Africa movement, and had friends of many different races and nationalities. After her father died, her mother worked as a maid until she died at 59. Brook quit college after two years and a huge fight with her mother, to become a professional actress. She toured with a repertory company until she married at 25. She and her husband had three children, but the first-born died in a car accident just before his fourth birthday. Her husband had a child from his first marriage, and they also raised a foster child. And they have a granddaughter. Brook and her husband ran a cultural center in another Northeastern city. When she was about 37, in 1974, Brook began reading feminist literature and became an ardent feminist. About three years later, around 1977, she fell in love with a close woman friend. She has identified as a lesbian ever since. When she was 44, she and her husband separated and she moved to another city to live with her

present partner.

Brook says she had always loved women and never loved men, but could only become a lesbian when her feminism and lesbianism came together in an affair with a feminist.

"I didn't like men. I always knew that. I mean as a kid I never really had a crush on a guy. There was a certain period when I was about 11 or 12, when my friends started doing that, and passing the notes and talking about them...and I used to pretend, I'd make up whichever one I was supposed to like, to pass a note to or something, but I really didn't care for it and I was always angry when they started drifting away. Then, as I was a teenager and I had another set of friends...and I had I'd say about three girlfriends, and as each one of them started in that dir[ection], I would get angry. Cause I knew I was getting left again, and I really had no interest in these guys, although I would go out with one once in a while. [Acting] was my life." As Brook told her story, after she quit college to work as a professional actress she was in a company that toured in Europe. "So I traveled around and performed until I was 25...the man whom I had met in acting school before I left...he kept saying, 'I'll wait for

you...I'll wait for 10 years.' I said, 'I don't know if I'll stop acting or if I won't.'... We were traveling around Italy...he wrote me every single day, so that if I got to a town, there might be three letters waiting. But you see, it was intimidation. I didn't realize that until years later, what kind of assault that was, because everybody in the troupe that I was traveling with...they'd say, 'Wow. You've got somebody that devoted to you, and I've been alone all these years and I'm always looking.'...It was a pressure because I really wanted freedom to examine and explore. And I didn't get that...I came back...because my best friend got married...we had promised to be each other's maid of honor....And that's when I kind of got stuck. I never left again. And sure enough, he and I were married the following October. 1961...But after about 10 years I really wanted to leave. For one thing, I was becoming politicized. We had drifted apart personally, staying together because we had this wonderful enterprise...But I was totally dissatisfied, I had been dissatisfied really all my life with my relationships with men. He was just the least offensive of them; a man who was so in love with me that I could do

anything I wanted and he would support me in anything I wanted. So that was the best that I could get...And he was fun, had a wonderful sense of humor, and great personality...And so we had a good time, but after a while it soured, for many, many personal reasons.

Reconstructing Lesbian³¹

"But all through my life I had had little relationships, little flings and flirtations with women. So I knew I loved women. I simply didn't think of it as an identity that really was at the base, the core of me. I had no problem with it, I didn't feel any great angst because I had this little affair with a woman. Oh no, it was all part of me. But at 40, I fell in love with a woman. I had also about three years earlier started reading feminist literature and kind of looking into this stuff, and the woman I fell in love with was a woman who had been my friend for 18 years...we came together around feminism. And eventually we fell in love and started having this mad, the love affair of my life...But eventually what happened was I...ended the marriage in 1980." I asked Brook if she knew when she was young that there were other women who loved women and there was a name for them. "I actually found a book, like everybody else, The Well of Loneliness, and I knew that it was too weird

31. This section is primarily about reconstructing lesbian, but other themes can be heard in it. This is true for all the named sections in these interviews.

for me, but I did know that I didn't want to be with guys. I knew that I was a lesbian, even though that wasn't the term. I didn't use that term. One time when I was in high school...[a friend's cousin] told her that he didn't like me because I was a bull dagger. And she told me about it, and I got totally furious, but I knew on some level it was true. I think I was maybe about 15. Maybe 16." When I asked her if she had short hair then or dressed in a boyish way, she answered, "No, actually I had quite long hair then, [but] I think he never saw me drooling or dripping around guys." Brook described a woman she was touring with in an acting company when she was about 19. "This woman that I had had a little suspicion about, because...she was dressed in this trench coat and a hat, like the detectives, and I looked at her and for the first time she looked like a guy, and I said, 'hmm.' So, I fiddled around with her and had a little seduction there...So I had had that little affair, and once the gig was over, that was the end of it...And then when I was 30 I had another affair with a woman...who was just this total, total, total dyke. No politics at all. Neither [the actress] nor this later one had any politics, so I really couldn't connect with them,

beyond being physically attracted to them. So, I always knew. And then later...I met this woman who did have politics and had been in the Army and we kind of connected. We worked briefly together. And we decided not to have an affair because we really wanted, each of us wanted a friend who knew who each other was. So that was it. Over the years I always knew. So I never had any doubt. That's why when it all came together with the feminism and the lesbianism it was very natural to me and I said, 'Oh,' and I felt relieved. So, that's why I knew I had to leave the marriage and have a life and live out where I could really be myself...I fell in love with this woman at 40, two years later I met Ellen, the woman I'm with now, I met her in '79...I had by then been with this other woman lover for two years and we were on the way out. So that was it."

I said to Brook that it sounded as if she was saying she had always been a lesbian, and asked if she had known that. "Oh, I knew it. I knew it because I also had experiences with women. That one experience with a woman was satisfying in the sense that she was a wonderful lover, but we had nothing else in common. She was fun and all that kind of stuff, but we had nothing in common. But she

was a wonderful lover so that I knew how it maybe could be, but it was never complete until my woman lover at 40."

Resisting Patriarchy

Brook added to her story later in the interview, "When I started coming into feminism I realized that the youthful part of me that had known I was a lesbian, that was searching for people like myself, and had gotten frustrated in, where in the world was I going to find them? I actually made a couple of attempts and I didn't know how to locate them. I didn't even know how to know what I was looking for. I mean, then wasn't now, of course. I know of two different times when it happened. One was in about 1958...I went to...a particular woman that I knew...I was saying things like, I felt like all my friends were getting married and I didn't like guys, and I was kind of fishing around. And she'd say, 'Well, you'll be all right. You're just socially awkward and you'll learn how to talk to guys.' And then I'd say, 'Well, I don't even like 'em. I don't want to know how to talk to 'em. I really like girls.' And she said, 'Oh, well we all go through that,' that kind of thing. And I know I was right about her, and then I started hearing rumors even after I had had this

sense, but she wouldn't cop to it. And then another time...the fall of '59. I went again...because by then Craig was in hot pursuit. And I knew this was going to be my best bet to have any kind of life with somebody who wasn't gonna totally oppress me and want me to play this woman role. All this of course is unarticulated. I can look back and see what I was doing. And I went back again and I went to her house...And I even talked about the fact that Craig wanted to marry me, and I didn't want to get married. But she says, 'Well he's a nice guy,' that kind of thing. So she wasn't doing anything different than the heterosexual women were doing. And I finally just gave up...and I finally said [to myself], 'Well what is the matter with you, why can't you be satisfied with this?' And that's what I did. So I knew, and the thing about it is I always knew. When I was a kid, I knew I had a crush on my counselor at camp, when I was 11. I was always falling in love with my teachers. I never was in love with a guy. So I knew that I loved women."

I asked Brook if she was a tomboy when she was a kid. She said, "I think so. I mean I roller skated and I played ball, but we all did that. I don't know anything that I

did any more than any of the other girls did except that I didn't like to play with dolls, and those kinds of games. But most of the kids that I hung around with skated and jumped rope and boys jumped rope and played dodgeball too. My brother's a great double-dutch jumper. So there was no real difference. We kind of played interchangeably. The difference was that when, at the age of 12 and 13, they started getting all, 'that way' about each other, I didn't do that. And I was mad about it because it started changing the dynamics of whatever little group activities we had. Then they started pairing off and...over the period of one summer I realized it had all changed." I asked Brook if by then she knew that she was different and loved women. She answered, "Well, yeah. I mean in the sense that I always knew that being around my girlfriends was the fun. And that girls were fun and boys were boring."

Reconstructing Sexuality

Then I asked Brook if her experience of her sexuality changed from when she lived a straight life to when she became a lesbian. "I was always in a position where if a guy wanted to have sex with me I was always very

protective. In fact, we used to tell each other how to dress when you went out with these guys, so they couldn't get to you...I wore tights with leotards on top. Leggings or slacks, just totally unavailable. When I started having sexual forays I was 22. And the first guy that I had sex with was totally curiosity. And I was very calculated about it...and I was very conscious when I decided to have sex with this particular guy. I did it because I had no emotional investment in him. There had been a guy a couple years before that I was real physically attracted to, who was very handsome and very smart, and very exploitative. And I knew that. And I almost had sex with him one night at a party. And I was really glad, because he actually couldn't get in, I mean I was so virginal and so tight he couldn't get in. And I was happy about that, because what that meant was that I had a chance then to kind of get my guard back up. And I didn't go out with him any more...That's because I was scared I might really get involved...So what happened with the guy that I eventually had sex with is that I liked him, he was okay, he seemed like somebody that I could experiment with and not get emotionally involved with and not get hurt by. So I did

that quite deliberately...But sexually, I can't say that I was ever aroused by any of them until I was 40. I mean I had come to the conclusion that all this business about how wonderful sex and love and everything was just a crock. Until I fell in love with my friend. And we just had a wonderful incredible physical affair. Fabulous. I never had understood that it would be like that." Then I asked if her ideas about gender and sexuality changed. "Well, yeah, in the way that I always felt acted on when I was having sex with guys. Totally, I mean I was totally passive and not that interested to be active in it...It certainly changed. When I was with women it was totally different, it was reciprocal in every way and you end up feeling that a hand on your skin was totally different. [Women are] tenderly soft and wonderful. You know the boniness and the hairiness of the men's bodies and all, I just was totally turned off, and had no idea how it could be the other way. So that the discovery of that was endlessly wonderful."

Reconstructing Gender

I asked Brook if her sense of herself as a woman changed when she changed. She said, "No because I think I

had been so successful in so many ways, the only thing that wasn't fulfilling was being totally able to be myself with another person. But no, my sense of who I was as a woman, I can't say that really changed."

Entering a Women's Sphere

I asked Brook what it took for her to decide she was going to live as a lesbian; was it falling in love? "Yeah. It was falling in love as a conscious feminist and a lesbian. Because the politics was what brought me to the point of even getting in love with that friend that I had known for years as not a feminist. The two of us then came to a realization, when I was 40 and she was about 46, that the two of us, in different ways, had come to feminism. So it was our talking about feminism that even led us to the point of falling in love." I said, "It sounds like you're saying that it was feminism that made it possible for you to come out." Brook answered: "Oh yeah. To actually recognize my identity as a lesbian was feminism. Before that, I was a woman who used to have affairs with women. I wouldn't have constructed, okay, this is your identity which you have basically been covering over with heterosexuality. Before I was just a woman. I don't think

I identified myself as heterosexual period. But a woman who also has affairs with women. That's how I would have constructed it then...[But now,] I just know for me the connection that allows me to really be totally involved with a woman that has to be there, she has to have the consciousness. In fact, when I was attracted to women even when I thought I was straight, it was always to a woman who was already a lesbian, and who was already out, and was visibly identifiable as a lesbian. My friend that I fell in love with was the first heterosexual woman that I ever fell in love with. You know, I had already loved her as a friend."

Analysis

Brook tells a story of reconstructing lesbian through feminism in a process that began in early adolescence and didn't come to fruition until age 40. Brook's reconstruction of lesbian was a two-stage process. In the first stage she recognized her dislike of men and her anger in early adolescence when her girlfriends "drifted away" to boys. She also recognized her desire for the (always lesbian) women to whom she was attracted in her youth, and had affairs with several of them. She felt she had nothing

in common with them, however, and didn't recognize these feelings and behavior as something that she could build an identity or life around. What she knew a lesbian to be was not someone she could imagine being: it was too "weird" and, probably, too masculine. This first reconstruction of lesbian provided a foundation of experience on which her ultimate reconstruction of lesbian could build. When Brook discovered feminism, with its political analysis of patriarchy and valorization of women, she had a way to understand her feelings about women. Her choice was no longer between being a "bull dagger" and being a "woman." Feminism's analysis allowed her to reconstruct lesbian so she could feel like a woman but love another woman and make her life with a woman. Without feminism Brook feels she has nothing in common with a woman lover, perhaps because Brook "isn't attracted to heterosexual women" and feminism makes a woman "not heterosexual." Brook tried to "lift the tent flap" of the ruling order when she went to the woman she thought was a lesbian for help in resisting heterosexuality and keeping her freedom instead of marrying. Although she "didn't even know how to know" what she was looking for, and didn't fully articulate her

reluctance to marry, she knew she wasn't going to be happy with what she was supposed to do. Even though Brook didn't get what she wanted-- knowledge about what she wanted and support for her resistance-- she retained her sense that there was another way, and married a man who would allow her to continue resisting "the woman role" and some degree of male domination by not totally oppressing her. Brook reconstructed her sexuality with the first woman she fell in love with, when she experienced sex as something to be actively enjoyed rather than something to be defended against. For Brook, the women's sphere she entered was feminism, without which she said she could not have recognized her identity as lesbian. That Brook didn't have to reconstruct her gender to become lesbian may have to do with Black culture's idealization of strong women, as opposed to Euro-American culture's idealization of weak women. Thus, feminism's role in Brook's coming out wasn't about strength, but was about valuing women, and, more importantly, women's relationships with each other. Feminism made it possible for Brook to see herself as a "woman" who loved and desired other women, rather than as a man or a bulldagger.

MLK: Found the Perfect Mate

I had met MLK through my work. We got to know each other and gradually shared some of our life stories: I told her about my recent involvement in a lesbian relationship, and she told me about her falling in love with a woman many years before. When I asked if I could interview her she said yes enthusiastically. MLK is a smiling 55 year old who moves comfortably in her overweight body. We conducted the interview in the warm and attractively decorated living room of the house she shares with Sharon, her partner of 17 years, and her partner's 18 year old son. We sat facing each other, I on a couch and MLK on a rocking chair, and the tape recorder on a large coffee table between us. MLK had a complicated early life. Her parents divorced when she was three, and she lived with her mother, then at boarding schools, and then with her Methodist grandparents in a midwestern city. They sent her to a Catholic school. After her mother died, she came east to Brooklyn, N.Y., to live with her alcoholic father, stepmother, and stepsister, who were Jewish. She also had a half brother, her father's son from his first marriage. She said all these families were middle class. MLK identifies as Jewish. She writes

grants at a social service agency to earn her living, and writes fiction in her spare time. At the time of the interview, her three children were 35, 33, and 31, and she had one grandchild. MLK went to college for two years and then dropped out. She got married in 1957 at about 20. After her children were born she went back to school and got a bachelor's and a master's degree and began working on her doctorate. It was in graduate school in 1968 that she met Sharon and they became very close friends. Sharon was also married and about seven years later had a son. MLK was about 30 and Sharon about 24 when they met. Each of them was involved in an affair with a man not her husband, and feeling disaffected in her marriages. In the early 1970s, MLK and her husband and children sailed their small boat across the Atlantic. MLK was the navigator on that trip. When they got back to the U.S., MLK and her husband separated and divorced. She spent some time picking up men in bars, then had an affair with one man. In 1976 she realized that she was in love with Sharon. She gathered her courage and told Sharon about her feelings. They became lovers and a few months later realized that they wanted to live together. Sharon left her husband and the

two women began sharing their lives.

MLK describes her change as falling in love with someone who just happened to be a woman.

MLK began her story this way. "I don't think I ever thought of myself as anything other than tremendously attracted to boys. And certainly whatever other relationships...that had any kind of sexual involvement in them were with men. I'm not sure whether I would have had a lesbian relationship if it hadn't been for Sharon." She said that when she and Sharon became friends they were very close. She said that they agree that "If we had been male and female we would have known then that we were in love, but we weren't, so we didn't." She told about a night that they sat together for hours, talking about their lives. "I guess it's the kind of thing that you do with a lover, but...we never thought of it in those terms at all." Later, when MLK had returned from the trans-Atlantic sail and left her husband, she and Sharon began spending time together again.

MLK said, "I don't know what it was but I remember one day just standing there and suddenly what I realized was that I wanted to hold her. That more than anything in the

world it just hurt not to hold her. And I said something to her and she said, 'So why don't you?' And I did. And we had often said 'I love you.' It was the kind of thing we had accepted, that we were loving friends." A few days later, MLK said: "I told her that I loved her, and she said, 'You always have,' and I said, 'Yes, but there's a different quality to the love.' And I told her I was really scared cause this could mean the end of the friendship that I'd had with her and I didn't want to lose that. And I had no reason to feel that she reciprocated it. And then she said, 'Why are you sitting so far away from me?' And it wasn't easy after that, but we knew we were in love with each other, and I guess it was about a month or so later when we decided that we wanted to live together. And there've been some rough times. There certainly were the first few years. Not so many any more."

Reconstructing Lesbian

MLK said it was difficult for them to call themselves lesbians then "...because for us lesbian meant that you preferred women, that you wanted to be sexually involved with women. And what we felt was that that wasn't the issue, the issue was that we were in love with each other.

And the term is no longer foreign to us cause I guess it doesn't quite mean that [now], it just simply, we're two women who are in love with each other and have a sexual relationship with each other." I asked her how she had explained the events with Sharon to herself at the time they became lovers, since they didn't think of themselves as lesbians. "I thought I was in love with a woman...And I knew the world would call me a lesbian, but I did not necessarily think of myself as one. But I didn't have any difficulty with that, it was more a matter of kind of the wonder of simply loving someone, and the fact of loving is really the issue." While she was telling her story, MLK speculated, "And whether or not such a love would have been possible if we had been alive in the '50s, for instance...Is it something in the air of our society that says sexual relationships do exist and are acceptable and are a part of the normal human condition? Does the psychiatric association saying that homosexuality is not a deviant behavior,³² finally filter down to two people sitting in a car on a Monday night?...I think that it

32. When the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its diagnostic manual.

probably doesn't change what the feeling is, I think it probably only changes whether or not you are going to castigate yourself for the feeling or whether you're going to act upon the feeling." MLK said she thought she and Sharon would have ended up being lovers in the 1950s too, after a lot more talk.

MLK described an event in her childhood that led her to find out about lesbians. When she was about 11, she said, someone came to the door selling Chinese-style pajamas for children, which MLK really liked. But her mother told the salesman, "My daughter doesn't like girl things." MLK said to me, "I didn't know what the hell she was talking about. And I went back inside and I said, 'I want them. I don't know what she means.' I had a muff when I was a kid and I loved it, and I absolutely adored my petticoats...Loved to wear Mary Janes, and what was she talking about? I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. And so I started asking people what would people mean when they were talking about people who didn't like the things other girls liked. Nobody said anything to me. So I went to the library and I just started looking through books until I found books on sexuality and I

started reading about lesbians. And discovered that that's what my mother had meant, that she had thought I was a lesbian...You know what it used to be when you looked up a word in the dictionary and you didn't know what it meant and then you had to look up another word and another word and another word. So, I started reading all these books on human sexuality. And I started reading all these descriptions about lesbians and lesbian behavior, and they were really horrific kinds of descriptions. I mean we're talking about Gestapo, you know, Brunhilde...all kinds of dark side depravity...So I said, 'This is not for me... this is not what I'd like'...So I got hold of Well of Loneliness...And I read it, and I thought, 'This is sick'...It wasn't the sexuality that I thought was sick, it was the despair, it was the depression, it was the self castigation that I thought was so awful...So I was pretty sure that I wasn't interested in being a lesbian. And then I guess by the time I got to be about 12 or 13 and I started going out with guys and we started dancing and I liked dancing, and I liked their ears against my cheek, and I liked them to kiss me and I liked being kissed."

Near the end of the interview I asked MLK if there was

anything else I should have asked about or that she would like to tell me to help me understand her experience better. She told the following story. "Well, listening to you I was thinking as I, as one of the questions you asked before, about what made me change. The mother of a friend of...my son's, and I and a group of people that she hung out with became fairly close during the early months...after I came back from my trip. And she was a lesbian, she was bisexual, actually, but she was a political lesbian. And it was her political lesbianism that led her to lesbian relationships, sexual relationships. And I had more occasion I think to be surrounded by women who were lesbians then, in those couple of months, than I ever had before. And I liked these women...and spent a good deal of time with them. And so I suspect that that reduced some of my sense of distaste and horror. And made me see lesbians as not the other as I had thought of before and not as part of that book that I had read in the library when I was 11 years old. And not as Well of Loneliness either. So when I suddenly had that urge to call Sharon I suspect that I [was] in a better position to not resist it than I would have been

otherwise."

I asked MLK if something had to change in her to be able to fall in love with a woman. She said yes, but that she wasn't really sure what it was. She continued:

"Several months earlier I had been talking to a friend about feeling some kind of distaste about homosexuality and thinking, that's not a likely possibility. Cause she was talking about a friend of hers who'd become involved much to her surprise with a homosexual relationship.

And...there was almost a kind of a physical sense I had about it that that would not be a possibility. So something happened, I don't know what happened...What I feel very strongly is that it was as if all the things I wanted to be as a lover in the broadest sense, physically, emotionally, psycholog[ically], I was suddenly able to be. And all the things that I wanted and needed from a lover were vouchsafed me. It was as if some fairy godmother had come and taken me to the ball."

Empowerment

I asked if the change had affected how she felt about herself. "I don't know which is cause and which is effect...To initially come to Sharon and tell her that I

loved her was probably an extraordinarily brave thing to do...because I risked losing someone who had been one of my closest friends. But it was also a real smart thing to do because I got Sharon. So, in that sense I remember feeling real good about it and feeling as if I had gone out there and I had fought the lions, and I had beaten them. So it was really up there. And part of the reason that that was possible was cause I had crossed the ocean...The sense that I had learned a skill...I had spent so much of my life being afraid I couldn't do things, and being told I couldn't do things."

Reconstructing Sexuality

I asked her to compare making love with a man and making love with a woman. She said, "Well, making love with a man is probably much more a matter of being overwhelmed, at it's best. Otherwise it's a matter of being non-effective. But...I don't know what it's like [making love with women], I only know what it's like making love with Sharon. In which case it's always complete. It's always awesome. And it's never possible to disengage in the middle and not be there, I don't think. And it certainly is with a man." When I asked if her experience

of her sexuality had changed from when she was married to when she was with Sharon, she said, "In a relationship with a man there is a place I was supposed to have, and a behavior I was supposed to do. And...there were prescribed areas that I had to be very careful of lest I damage the manhood of the man I was involved with. There was a role I was supposed to play, and I can remember being afraid that I wasn't doing it right, whatever it was that I was doing...There was something very freeing about being a woman making love to another woman because we had no idea what we were doing to begin with. There was no preconceived notion. We had never seen movies about what we were supposed to do. We had never read books about what...we were supposed to do or what position we were supposed to be in. And we didn't see it all over TV, with people swooning away and having that to compare our behavior with. So we just kind of flubbed our way through until we worked out what it is that we wanted to do, and it's like it doesn't matter whether it's right or wrong. Cause who the hell knows, cause nobody's telling anybody...when sexuality is carefully defined by a society, and society doesn't particularly define what the roles

[are] of two women in bed with each other, that may be the reason that if, to that extent, I suppose there is a freeing up, a change in some kind of sexuality."

I asked if loving a woman was a choice or was discovering her true self or becoming a new person. MLK answered, "Ah. I don't think it was as drastic as that. I guess for about 4 or 5 months after we became lovers each of us continued to have a male lover at the same time. I think part of that probably stemmed from an initial assumption that we wouldn't be able to give up our heterosexual relationship...And [at] some point, I just didn't want to be involved with anybody else except Sharon and she felt the same way...It came as a gradual realization that we were hooked on each other and that the other sexual relationships were painful, were debilitating in some kind of way. So was there a change in our perception of ourselves? Yeah."

Sexual Abuse

Later in the interview, the subject of how she experiences her sexuality came up again. MLK said she thinks of herself as a more sexual being now, but still thinks of her body as separate from her self. This is how

she explained that: "There's a piece...I will tell you this at this point. Sharon is the first person I ever told it to, and I suppose that's significant. I was sexually abused as a child by a favorite uncle. And I knew it, this isn't a matter of something that came to me later on. I knew it at the time. I never told anybody. I never told my husband in all the years I was married to him...I think I never believed it had any effect on me. I think I believed I was fine. I guess it was about a year or so ago that I started to write about it. I'm working on a novel about it which I did a reading of. Talking about it, writing about it, has also increased my whole sense of my own sexuality and it freed me in that sense. I laughed before when I said something about liking pants. I understand very well why I like pants, cause my uncle [Tommy] didn't like me in pants. He wanted me in a skirt all the time, which he carefully got me rigged up in every time we went driving in his car. And my grandmother carefully got me dressed up for Uncle [Tommy] because she used to flirt with him, he was her son, and she used to flirt with him. She thought he was so cute."

Analysis

MLK's story is one of reconstructing lesbian twice. First, in order to declare her love to Sharon, she had to reconstruct lesbian from the image that had physically repelled her just a few months before: the unhappy invert, the despairing man in a woman's body, despised by herself and the rest of the world, who asked only for tolerance -- the cultural image of lesbians she had found in the library at age 11. MLK explains this change as a result of the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual two years before and her spending time with a group of lesbians whom she liked and enjoyed. Her second reconstruction of lesbian took her many years, until she was able to identify herself and her lover Sharon as lesbians instead of as two people who happened to be women and were ideal mates. This time, MLK had to reconstruct lesbian from someone who is driven by sexual desire to someone driven by love. The constructedness of love, romance, and sexual attraction is clear in MLK's statement that if she and Sharon had been male and female, they would have known much earlier that

they were in love: what she didn't know, she had no words for; what she had no words for, she was unable to understand or act on.

For MLK, empowerment was also a two-stage process. She became empowered by her successful navigation across the Atlantic, and that made her able to declare her love to Sharon. Doing that, and having it turn out well, further empowered her, made her feel that she had "fought the lions and I had beaten them."

MLK first reconstructed her sexuality when she wanted to hold Sharon, even though just a few months earlier she had been repelled by the idea of a homosexual relationship. She reconstructed it again when she realized that there were no rules she was aware of about how two women were supposed to make love, unlike the rule and role laden scripts for heterosexual sex. (If she and Sharon had been involved in the lesbian community or had even been readers of lesbian/feminist literature, they might have felt less free to make up their own sexual behavior as a result of

the "sex wars"³³ and other debates about appropriate lesbian sexual activities.) MLK also reconstructed her sexuality when she realized that she didn't want to remain heterosexual and retain her male lover while she had an affair with Sharon because the relationship with a man was neither pleasurable nor necessary and the relationship with Sharon was all she wanted. MLK believes that her sexual abuse played a role in her reconstruction of gender as a woman who prefers to wear pants.

33. Passionate debates about pornography and sexual practices such as s/m, butch-femme roles, and penetration. See, for example, Rich, 1986, and Vance, 1984.

CJ: "I Didn't Know Any Lesbians"

I met CJ through her roommate, Iris, whom I had interviewed the week before in the same place, their kitchen. CJ is a shapely 35 year old with short wavy hair. Her national heritage is half Italian and half western European. She is a technical specialist. CJ is the oldest of six children and grew up in a small Northeastern town not far from where she was living at the time of the interview. Her mother stayed at home until CJ was about 13, old enough to take care of her younger siblings at night, and then the mother got the night-time factory job she still has. The father worked in sales. CJ spent a lot of time taking care of the other children, and then when her father was disabled for 10 years before he died she also took care of him. He died two years before the interview, when CJ was 33. CJ was never married, but had several long-term relationships with males during her time as a heterosexual. When the last one broke up, about nine years ago, CJ felt burnt out on relationships with men. Around that time, when she was about 27, she met a lesbian, the first one she was aware of knowing, and they became lovers. CJ has lived as a lesbian ever since.

CJ said her change was the result of falling in love with a woman, but that she had been interested in women long before that, and just didn't think relationships with them were possible for her.

When she was straight, she had told one of her male lovers that she was also attracted to women. "I didn't tell him, 'I think I'm a lesbian, I only want to be with women.' That's not the way it appeared to me. I simply knew that I thought I was attracted to him and I was reasonably satisfied with our sexual relationship. But I also had feelings of attraction toward women, and he thought that was kind of cool. And so in that relationship, I really allowed myself to have those feelings and think about it and explore it a little bit. And in fact we decided that we would answer an ad, and try and have another woman be with us and experiment with a sexual relationship with another woman. So we actually answered an ad, got a couple of responses, which he let me choose between. I picked someone that I thought sounded nice, we talked on the phone a few times. And the woman didn't show up...And I think I called her once after that, but she wasn't interested and eventually Sam and I broke up. So

that never happened. But in...the brief period after Sam, for the first time I dated a lot of people, all men...But I still had the idea that I wanted to have an experience with a woman. Which I thought I would like. So I answered some ads that had been placed by couples who were looking for a woman to be with them. And I answered about three of them...and in each case I met the guy who wanted to sleep with me, and the wife was nowhere in the picture. And each one of them said, 'Well, let me just get to know you first, and then my wife will join us.' So that didn't happen. But I still didn't know any other way to meet women. I didn't know I knew any lesbians. If I did, I didn't know it. I wanted to have some experience with a woman, but I just felt like I couldn't figure out how to do it. Every attempt I made was thwarted. And I still, at that point, the most I would have said about myself was that I was bisexual. Because I had had reasonable sexual relationships with men." After that, CJ said, she had a few more relationships with men, the last one she felt was the best she ever had. But he broke up with her, which was "devastating." She continued her story. "So I felt very burnt out, on all these relationships with men. And didn't

care if I ever went out with anybody ever again. [laugh]

Then [I met a woman] who, over the course of several weeks, I discovered was a lesbian. And I thought, this is the first lesbian I've ever met, that I know of. And we liked each other a lot and started to get closer. Started doing things together socially. And finally it occurred to me, and I started to feel very attracted to her. And I thought that she had been a lesbian for a long time. And she seemed to be attracted to me...And so finally one night, we did something together, as we often did, and I invited her to stay over. She did stay over, and we slept together that night. And it was very strange for me, because I was shocked to find that it was not a very natural and easy thing for me to do. The whole time, I just felt very inhibited, I felt very not free, that it was not okay, what I was doing. Although intellectually, I was completely convinced that it was absolutely fine. But I couldn't even believe that she wanted me to touch her. It was so hard. I still can't even believe, considering how long I had wanted that to happen, what a profound experience it was, and how much feeling it evoked in me and how much fear it evoked in me. So that the next morning I was crying on my

best friend's shoulder. Not crying with regret, but crying with sort of surprise, and just feeling very overwhelmed. And I wasn't sure if we would start a relationship then, or if this was going to be an isolated incident...but she was very sweet, and very supportive, and we did get together again and after two or three times together, then it became very normal and easy and wonderful to me. And it wasn't just wonderful, it was like, wonderful. Really wonderful. Really wonderful. I was in my glory. I was absolutely thrilled. Because it was so sweet. I just couldn't even have imagined that it would be so wonderful. So we had a relationship for about a year. And I started for the first time thinking of myself as lesbian. And actually just after the first week, I started thinking that way, and Sarah, the woman that I was involved with, would say to me, 'Now, don't jump the gun here. Just, you know, it's only a week, there's no need to rush anything.' And I was saying, 'No, no, no, I really feel that way. That's how I really feel. I like this. I like this better. This is great.' So we stayed together for about a year and I've only been involved with women since then. And very rarely, occasionally, I'm attracted to a man. But the way I think

of it now, is, I think that chemically I'm bisexual, but emotionally and socially, I'm completely a lesbian. Because emotionally and socially, I like women better, much, much better. So that's how I've come to understand myself...I would have done it sooner if I could have figured out how."

Reconstructing Sexuality

I asked CJ if, when she said it was so sweet and wonderful to be with Sarah, did she mean sexually, or in other ways as well. "Both ways. Sexually, I couldn't believe how, it was much better than the fantasy even had been. It's very hard to explain what is sweet and wonderful about sex...but everything about making love with a woman was just so sweet, I had never been that physically close to a woman. I mean, you can't get that physically close to yourself. It was just a shock to me that another woman's body was so appealing to me. Like every inch of it. And then emotionally it just felt more intimate than anything I'd ever done, by a mile." Later, she said, "...once I became a lesbian, once I actually had this relationship, and found out I wasn't struck dead or whatever it was I feared somehow. Then I was much more

open to hearing my own desire, to perceiving my own desire for other women and...since becoming a lesbian I can desire a woman more fully, more quickly. It sort of rushes over me a little faster, more powerfully than it would back then. And there is also the element of knowing what it really would be like. And furthermore that it really could happen. That sort of adds to it."

Resisting Patriarchy

I asked CJ to talk some more about her statement that she is chemically bisexual but emotionally and socially lesbian. "Well, I never had any problem being turned on by a man. Nor being turned on by a woman. Although when I was younger probably it was men who turned me on more often. Probably because that's what I was open to. Although women turned me on sometimes too. But now it's much more often women that turn me on than men, but occasionally, I'm not revolted by the idea of sex with men. It's just not as special. It's just not as sweet. But then in terms of the relationship, even when we're not talking about sex, if I have the choice of hanging out with a group of women or hanging out with a group of men it's the group of women that I want to hang out with. Just the ways of

relating and the things that are important and all that stuff meshes much better with women for me."

CJ said she thinks everybody is attracted to their own sex and the other sex. So I asked her what she thinks stops everyone from being bisexual. She answered, "Well, there certainly is a tremendous taboo against homosexuality and why it's there, I don't know...But I see how deep it is because I thought that I was free of it, until I tried to perform the act. And then found myself really stymied for a while. So I know that it's really very deep. It's sad. And it's because it's so deep and powerful, even my family, I wouldn't tell my father. When I think about why aren't people that way, all I have to do is think for one minute about how I imagine my father would react, and I never told him. And I imagined him reacting with disgust and hatred and saying very hurtful things to me. And odds are that's exactly what would have happened. So, if that's what's gonna happen to you, that's a pretty good incentive."

In answer to a question about her sense of herself as a woman, CJ said, "I have always felt comfortable with how feminine I feel. I haven't always felt that I could be as masculine as I wanted to be, but I'm using that very

loosely. I feel now more than I felt when I was straight, that I can be all the ways that I am. So one way that I am some of the time is feminine. But I also have a lot invested in being a competent person, being able to do things, physical things, being able to fix a table. I'm pretty mechanical, and I like being able to be that way. And I also like sometimes being in a caretaking role, but not like taking care of a little baby, but being able to be in charge sometimes, in a way that I didn't feel as free to be that with men. I didn't feel that some of the time I could be in charge, and make decisions about things, although, I didn't intentionally suppress that side of myself, but somehow it didn't feel comfortable and now I feel like I can be all the ways that I am. Which I like."

Reconstructing Lesbian

I asked CJ if she was more attracted to women, or more frequently attracted to women since she became a lesbian. "Well that's an interesting question. I don't know if it's changed or if I've just been more aware of it. Intermittently all through college, I was aware of it from college on, [I] have been attracted to women very strongly sometimes, and the difference is that back then when it

happened I thought of it as something unrealistic. I remember particularly in college, sitting in my classes and looking at...somebody in my class who was very attractive to me like, at the hair curling behind her neck or something. And I'd be sitting there trying to study, thinking about this little tendril of hair back there. And it was a wistful sort of desire. It didn't seem like it was anything realistic, or anything that I could do anything about, so...I would think of it as, 'Oh darn, there I go, having those feelings again. Well, better go back to my boyfriend.' So I think the pull was always there." Later I asked CJ if there was anything I hadn't asked that she thought I should know about her to be able to understand her experience. "I think an interesting thing is the time when I was in college and I was looking at other women and it was a wistful feeling. Why didn't I have any clue that that was something that I could explore more? I just think it's odd that I just took it in stride." Later, she said, "I didn't think that it was appropriate for me to want that...this was college, so I was looking at women who were very beautiful, and feeling like there wasn't a chance in hell they were gonna be ever

interested in being with women, or being with me. It was just that remote. It was that I could never tell them, they'd never be interested, that it was just completely a moot point. Because they were straight and it's weird to have these feelings, I guess, although I didn't think that specifically...But I guess I was sort of thinking, this is weird. Other people don't have to suffer through these feelings...I don't know, maybe actually, somebody that wants a really nice sailboat and has to drive by the river every day and glance over and look at these beautiful sailboats and drive the little Datsuns down the road. You know, it was like, this is my life, my life is little Datsuns, that over there is something wonderful that I'll never find any way to get."

So I asked if when she went to college there weren't some butchy-looking girls that she could identify as lesbians who were interested in women. "But I never, I wasn't, that would have turned me off. That would have been very scary to me. In fact, I didn't identify with that at all. I mean, if I saw really butchy looking women, right now, now I'm much more open-minded about it, but it wasn't appealing to me. In fact it was the opposite of

appealing to me. I didn't want to be like that, I didn't feel like that, if anything that would have kept me away from that group. That was something else, that's gotta be something else, cause that's not my exper, I'm as normal as I am, everybody that sees me...thinks I'm straight, and I'm not straight, but I'm also not that. I didn't know that I could be the way I was and not be straight. It just, that's right, that's probably all I knew of lesbians, at all, was angry looking women who were kind of rude and abusive and wore ties. And the women that I was looking at in class had little tendrils of hair here, and whatever little thing just caught my fancy."

I asked CJ why she identified as lesbian just a few days after her first sexual experience with a woman. "I think it was that I realized that I could live this way. That I could do this. If I wanted to do this, I could do this. And it was not only as good as I might have hoped, it was much, much better. So I understood that I could do it, it wasn't just some crazy notion that didn't in reality turn out to be workable or good for me or...maybe some tiny part of me thought that I was never sure I had these feelings but until I could experience it, I just wasn't

sure that it would be right for me or whatever. But then it just felt so right and it seemed so pleasant and so wonderful that there was just no need for men. There was just no need any more. I could see in that short time that everything I needed and wanted was here."

I asked if CJ thought that she had changed, discovered her real self, exercised a capacity that was always there, found a new capacity, or something else. She answered, "Well I think that I finally explored a capacity that was already there...If I had just gotten involved with women before I ever got involved with men, I don't know that I would have felt as comfortable as I do, because I almost feel as if I owed it to somebody, like society or my family, I owed it to somebody to take a shot at the quote normal way. And after several very intense relationships with men I felt like, okay, did my duty, I tried it your way, and I like this better...they definitely gave me the confidence to feel that it was okay to be with women and that it was okay to choose being with women as a lifestyle and as the way I wanted to be."

Reconstructing Sexuality

I also asked CJ if her experience of her sexuality

changed after she became a lesbian. "I did not have orgasms with men. I believe retrospectively that that is because I was a little naive about...what would make me have an orgasm. I mean the only thing I knew that would make me have an orgasm was masturbating...On the other hand, with women, I've always had orgasms, right from the start. And that's in part I think, the women I've been with have all been with women much longer than me. I've always been the less experienced one. Until my current relationship...Also I was much more passive with men than I am with women now. Sex with men was more like something they did to me...That's kinda how I wanted it. I didn't really want to do anything to them except occasionally when I had to...Sex with women for me is just very much more intense than it was with men because there's a tremendous melding of feeling and sexuality together. The emotional intimacy plus the sexuality makes more powerful and more transcending sort of sexual experiences."

Reconstruction of Gender

I asked CJ if her views of what gender and sexuality are changed when she changed. She answered, "Well, I think if you had asked me before when I was straight if I thought

homosexuality was okay I would have said, 'Yes, absolutely.' And yet, when I had that first experience it was very difficult for me, which revealed that I had a lot of feeling about it, a lot of fear, or confusion about it. I don't think I quite realized certainly how like normal people homosexual people are. I think I thought it was much more of a them and us kind of a, although I didn't think of myself as straight, but I just thought that gay people must have a very different lifestyle in most ways and now I feel that that's not true, that the difference is very small"

Analysis

CJ's is a story of reconstructing lesbian, similar to Brook's and MLK's, except that she was unable to have a sexual relationship with a woman until she met a lesbian whom she knew was a lesbian. That made it possible for her to imagine lesbian sex, to understand her desire, and to act on it. Almost immediately after she did, CJ identified as a lesbian and knew that everything she wanted and needed was there. CJ reconstructed lesbian in several ways. She saw that she didn't have to be masculine to have relationships with women, and that she didn't have to have

relationships with masculine women. She discovered that she could have sexual relationships with the kind of beautiful women she had wistfully desired in college and thought were completely unavailable to her. This reconstruction allowed her to be sure that the feelings she had had for women were real; finding a name for the feelings and acting on them were what made them real to her. CJ reconstructed her sexuality in three ways. First, she became orgasmic with women. Second, she became active instead of passive as she had been with men. And third, she said that now that she knows she can have sex with a woman, and what it is like, she recognizes her feelings about women as sexual desire and experiences those feelings more strongly and powerfully. And CJ's description of this change in her understanding of her feelings about women as desire and then feeling them more powerfully once she knew she could have sex with a woman and what it was really like shows us a little about the construction of desire.

CJ resisted the patriarchy in three ways: first, and most important, by experiencing the powerful taboo against sex with a woman and doing it anyway and seeing that she wasn't punished and could enjoy it; second, by knowing that

there were masculine parts of her personality that she was uncomfortable expressing as a heterosexual; and third, by seeing that she enjoys being with women socially and emotionally much more than being with men. CJ's reconstruction of gender, which began with her first and very difficult sexual experience with a woman, was profound, and a very powerful experience: she now feels that an acceptable part of being a woman can be to be homosexual; that a lesbian is not very different from a "normal" woman.

Kathleen: "I Always Knew I Was Gay"

Kathleen heard about my study from a friend and called to volunteer. It turned out that she lived just down the street from me. We met for the interview in my kitchen. Over cups of herb tea, with the tape recorder on the table between us, Kathleen told me her story. She was 36 years old, an attractive woman with dark shoulder length wavy hair. She has a doctorate and is a college professor. Her national background is German and Irish and she grew up in the midwest. She has two younger brothers. Her father was a company president and her mother was a housewife. Kathleen got married when she was 27 and came out when she was 28. She and her husband divorced then, and Kathleen has lived a lesbian life ever since.

Sexual Abuse

At the beginning of the interview, when Kathleen was answering my question about the family she grew up in, she said it was dysfunctional, briefly described her parents, and then said, "The real dirt was that I was molested by a neighbor for a year or something like that, and I was only

five. And my parents never knew what was happening, and I didn't tell 'em till I was nine or ten, and thank god we moved away from it...but it wasn't until I came out as a lesbian that I tapped into the abuse and the dysfunction that went on at home. So when I went to therapy to say, 'I'm a lesbian but I'm married,' we also opened up the other can, and went into the childhood abuse."

Kathleen said she always knew she was gay but didn't know how to be a lesbian. Here is how she told her story:

Reconstructing Lesbian

"I always knew that I was gay, ever since I was really really tiny I always knew that I was gay. And that was really difficult because the abuse took place when I was five...I would go back and wonder, why am I gay? And so part of the answer to that was, well because I was molested by a man, so this made me gay. And so I got all caught up in, why am I gay, and finally decided that didn't make any difference. That I was never going to be able to tell why. But it was just okay. So I always knew it, but I couldn't see it anywhere. I didn't see any women that were gay. No role models. The only thing I knew was to go to the library and I did that a few times. I'd go to the library

and look through the books. And I'd see some photographs of women, but they were older women and they didn't look like women. And I was a young person at that time of my life, and that was scary. So going to the library still didn't give me what I needed...I slept with my best friend. And of course the next day she said, 'We didn't do anything.' She had a boyfriend at the time, so I think she was just experimenting with herself. But for me, it was like, I was ready to move in with her. And so then I still didn't come out because...it ruined the friendship, cause...she didn't want to be friends anymore, and it was devastating. So then I just sort of went into my own little shell and thought, wow, you know, what am I gonna do? Here I am, I have these feelings for women, but there's nothing around me that's telling me it's okay, or that there's other women like this. And so I think I still felt isolated, and that it was just me. That happened like my senior year of college. And then when I went on to graduate school to get my master's degree, one of my professors led me into some poetry by Adrienne Rich. So I started to really study her work. And I just fell in love with it because, yes, here it is. And I could find it in

poetry, through her writing, and so I made my master's thesis...based on one of her poems...And so, that was my therapy, in a way, was to just focus on this poetry and do a [dramatic] interpretation of the poetry...So then after that happened I got my first teaching job...and I met this guy, and we were friends and I had these feelings and I had some gay books...And I thought, well maybe if I got married, cause it was time to get married, cause I was 27. I grew up in a Catholic family and I was getting some pressure from my parents about, 'When are you gonna meet somebody?' And I was at a stand-still in my life. The master's degree was done, I wasn't really sure I wanted to stay in academia and go on for my doctorate at that point, I still had the gay feelings, but I wasn't attracted to anybody, no mad crushes at that point in my life. And I was just like in a slump. And he was my best friend...I knew that he probably wanted to be involved in a romantic sort of love relationship, so I pursued that with him and we ended up getting married. And I thought by getting married I'd get rid of all these feelings...So when I got married I threw away all my gay books. I thought, okay, I'm really gonna give this a try. And, it didn't work.

What had happened is I ended up getting another teaching job, and I met a woman there who saw a copy of Rubyfruit Jungle³⁴ on my bookshelf at work...And she basically followed me around and encouraged me to hang out with her. And so we ended up getting involved. While I was married. So, here I was married and having this affair with this woman. And so it was through that affair that I realized that I gotta do something about this...And so I went to therapy and I was working with this social worker, and I had my parents and myself meet with her and I came out to them through that process...And they both cried and my father said he was ashamed of me...After that it...took a while to get the divorce...I continued to get really involved with the women's community...And once I could get into the community I could see that there was a whole world out there of us, and women's music seemed to help me a lot too...I ended the affair with the other woman, and then I met somebody else. And she was very much in touch with the community and women's music, and women's culture. And so she kind of turned me on to all of that. And then that's

34. A lesbian novel by Rita May Brown, published in 1973.

when I was convinced that this is home and this is where I belong and that this is okay."

I asked Kathleen what made it possible for her to commit herself to a lesbian life when she did, but not when she was younger. She said, "I think the fact that I met another lesbian is what really convinced me. Cause I slept with my best friend and I had read Rubyfruit Jungle, I had done Adrienne Rich's poetry and all that, but I still hadn't met a woman who was really another lesbian. And so when I met another lesbian, and then through her I understood that there was a women's book store, and at the women's book store there were all these lesbians. And they had a Friday night support group, and anywhere from 20 to 30 women that would show up on a Friday night. And that's what really convinced me that this is something that I think I can do now."

In response to a question, Kathleen amplified on her statement that she was always interested in women. "I never, never knew a time when I wasn't. [From age] five on. You see...when the abuse was happening, when I was in school...and the teacher would be talking and I would always be like in another world. I wasn't present. I was

fantasizing. And the fantasies always involved another little girl. They never involved a boy. So that's when I made that connection, and I never lost that." I asked Kathleen if she thought as a child it was okay to be having fantasies about girls. "Well," she said, "it's kind of hard to say because I don't think I understood what it was. But I also felt kinda like I was a jerk anyways. I was really down on myself because of all the abuse. So it's really hard for me to separate...anything I would have been thinking I probably felt bad about. But, there was this part of me that just didn't know what it meant. All I knew is that I was different. I was different because I was being abused, because I had these feelings for women, so they were all lumped in together."

Kathleen had said a number of times that she hadn't known there were lesbians, had never seen any lesbians, even in college. She went to a very large state university in the late 1970s, so it was surprising to hear that lesbians were so invisible then. I asked her more about this, and she said: "I never remember seeing any. In fact, it was funny because maybe five years ago I met a woman who had just gotten a doctorate from there, and I'm like, 'Wow,

is there lesbians there?' And she said, 'Well, yes, there's a whole group, and there's a bar.' It's a fairly decent sized city. I was just amazed because when I was there I don't remember seeing anything. I don't remember seeing a gay and lesbian group, I didn't hear about any bars." I asked if she looked for them. "I don't think I was looking hard enough, no. Definitely not. I was more comfortable with going to the library and getting tons of information...I remember filling up my trunk with books, literally. And stacking these books by my bed. And that's all I did was read these books. They were all kinds of books on lesbians, and being gay, some of it was really scientific, another was literature and poetry, non-fictional. In terms of resource materials there did seem to be enough to fill up my trunk anyways."

I asked Kathleen how the reading affected her and the way she thought about herself. She said, "I still felt pretty lost, and I think a part of me felt like, 'Boy, well this is really nice but it's all idealistic. It didn't seem like a reality to me...Somehow, I didn't make a connection through all that reading, that lesbians really existed in reality. It's really weird, isn't it?" And at

the end of that year, Kathleen said, was when she did the play on the Adrienne Rich poem. "And, gosh, it's really funny, because I showed that to the public, and there was a pretty good amount of people there, and there were a lot of feminists there that I could identify with, but I couldn't find a lesbian anywhere. Not that I could see, but she probably was there but I couldn't see her, you know?"

I asked Kathleen if she had any thoughts while she was doing the play about how it related to her. She answered, "Yeah, I knew that it was a part of me, and that somehow I wanted it to be part of my life, and the way that I felt comfortable doing that was by [producing a play]. You see, because a [play] is real but yet it's not. It's not like I was making a real commitment to it yet, but I was partially. There was a wall." I asked Kathleen if when she was producing the play she knew the word lesbian yet, and if she by then thought she was one. "Yeah. I knew the word by then. I think I definitely knew I had the potential to be one. I don't think I identified myself with that term yet. But I knew that it was, see it was right here [points to about 10 inches in front of her face]. Just like the [play], it was all like right here, but it wasn't

integrated inside me, it was hanging out here. But it was close, much closer than it [had] ever been. Cause before it was way out there, it was really far, and now it was like just hanging out right here. But it wasn't necessarily in my system yet."

I asked Kathleen how she felt when she was finally introduced to the lesbian community, what that experience was like for her. "Oh, wow. Well I remember when I first was at the book store there were two women working, and they were very butchy. And I remember getting really afraid. I remember feeling frightened by that, and thinking oh, my god, don't tell me this is the only thing out there. And so then it was after that I realized, like in the Friday night [support] group, not all the women looked like that. That there were all different kinds of women at that group.

Entering a Women's Sphere

"[But,] oh, god. It felt great...for the most part it was a high experience. And I loved it. And I just wanted to experience more and more. I wanted to experience the music, the festivals, everything that was, the women's dances, the support groups. I even changed my therapist to a lesbian therapist cause I felt like I really needed that. I needed someone to understand who I was. So it was very positive. And I just wanted more. I wanted to find more and more of it. I just wanted to be overwhelmed with it. It's like finding a treasure. After many years."

Once she came out, and found the lesbian community, I asked Kathleen, did that change the way she thought about her past? She responded: "Yeah, I felt like I was beginning to really accept myself for the first time on some level. Cause I hadn't accepted myself period, and now here was finally a channel to help me accept myself. I mean, I couldn't imagine if I wasn't a lesbian, if I had just stayed heterosexual because I wasn't a lesbian. I don't know if I would have ever really accepted myself because of the abuse and all that self hate. And I really felt that by accepting the fact that I was a lesbian, it

helped me to love that part of me [the part that was abused]." I asked her how that worked, and she said, "There was something about being part of a woman's community and culture that felt loving and safe. I mean even with a room full of strangers it felt safe. And because of that I think I was able to go back and take that child in through that. And without that I don't know if I would have ever been able to do that."

Reconstructing Woman

When I asked how she explained her feelings about women to herself in adolescence, she said: "Actually, I just thought of something that was really pretty profound and I can't believe I left it out. But I know I always felt like if I was a boy it would be a lot easier." I asked, "From the time you were a kid?" She said, "Yeah. And probably even more so as a teenager, because that's when you're really coming to life. And I can remember many times of having these mad crushes and couldn't do a damn thing about it, cause, knowing that the girl on the other end has this crush on a guy. And feeling like, gee, if I was a boy my father would pay more attention to me, I could bond with my brothers more, I probably wouldn't be abused,

and I could have all these girls that I wanted. So that was a running theme." I asked if there was any way she expressed this wish. She said, "Well, I guess a little bit because I was a tomboy, and I hung out with my brothers and I'd play ice hockey with them and basketball and baseball and go fishing with them, and they always included me with all the boys." I asked Kathleen if this feeling concerned her at all at the time. "Yeah," she said. "it did, but I never knew what to do about it. I never did anything about it. I think what I did is I just sort of numbed myself out about it, cause I didn't know what to do. It was overwhelming, in a sense. It was like I almost felt like I was in the wrong body. Cause none of it made any sense in this body. And nothing out there told me that it made sense until I was much older."

Enhanced Womanhood

I asked Kathleen if she still ever wished she were a male. She said, "No. Not any more...I don't know, I guess maybe sometimes I still, not so much anymore, but, not that long ago, I'd say maybe five years ago or something I think I might still [have] had that feeling. Especially with relationships that didn't work out, or if I found myself

being attracted to somebody who's just, completely not gonna ever be available because she's straight, that maybe it would be easier. But for the most part now I don't really, I feel much better about being a female and I'm happy that I'm a female." When I asked what made that big change, Kathleen responded with a sigh, "I think what made the change is having relationships with women, with lesbians, is what really made that change for me. That I don't have to be a male to attract a woman."

Analysis

Kathleen's story is the story of a long process of reconstructing lesbian so that it matched who she felt she was and explained her experience and feelings. It wasn't until she met a lesbian, someone who made her lesbianism obvious by pursuing her, that Kathleen was able to see one. And it wasn't until she found a women's community that included all kinds of women living lesbian lives that Kathleen could see that some lesbians were like her and that she could live a lesbian life too. Then Kathleen could reconstruct lesbian to include a woman like herself, someone who was young and looked like a woman. Going to a lesbian therapist helped Kathleen reconstruct lesbian by

understanding who she was. When she was younger, Kathleen had wished she were a boy so she could have girlfriends. Once she realized that she could be a lesbian and have girlfriends, Kathleen was able to reconstruct woman to include someone who loved women and was loved by them, and then to be happy to be a woman. Feminism also enabled her to reconstruct woman, by giving her a theoretical construct in which it was not only acceptable but desirable for women to make lives with women. She also became empowered through feminism, which valorizes powerful women. Kathleen's real entry into a women's sphere came after she identified as a lesbian, and discovered the women's and lesbian community. The major result of her entry into a women's sphere was to make her feel safer so she could deal with her childhood sexual abuse.

Ann: "It Was Right for the First Time in My Life"

I posted a notice about my study at the regular lesbian dance in the small Northeastern city to which I had moved. Ann introduced herself to me that night. She said "I'm a lesbian and I have two kids and I love being a lesbian and I love being a mother." I interviewed her in the kitchen of the house her son and his girlfriend rent, where she was then living. It was a small house on a two-lane state highway. Ann is a lively 51 year old woman, petite and trim. She made us tea, and we sat at the kitchen table with the tape recorder between us. Ann's mother was Irish and her father was Italian, one of 11 children. She grew up in a housing project in a Northeastern city and said her family was the only one there that seemed to have all the material things. She said her father spoiled her and her brother, and her mother was prim and proper. Ann eloped in her senior year in high school, when she was 17, and she and her husband had three children, who were 33, 31, and 28 at the time of the interview. There is also one grandchild. Ann's husband had a blue collar job with a national company, and

eventually they bought a 200 year old house in a small town. Ann and her new next door neighbor, a married woman with five children, became best friends. Within a year and a half, in 1972, they had "admitted" they were in love with each other and had become lovers. In 1987, the relationship ended. It took Ann a long time to recover from the break-up, but she never considered leaving the lesbian life.

Ann says her change took place because she fell in love with a woman and realized that "it was right for the first time in my life."

Reconstructing Gender and Sexuality

When I asked Ann, as I asked all the participants, to tell me the story of the change she experienced, and to start wherever she wanted, she began this way: "Well I really think that I had an idea that there was something different about me when I was like 10 or 11 years old. I had a little thing like maybe some little girls do, I had a best friend and a couple times we played mommy and daddy, you know, 10 or 11. Maybe it was 9, I don't know. But you know I never heard the word gay or lesbian until I was 21, and I was already married four years and already had two

children...In this Italian family everything, my life revolved, everything social, everything was, and I just, I never even heard the word. I guess I knew what it meant but it never came in my life. If you didn't go to college at the time you got married....And I ended up getting married when I was 17 years old. And just because I wanted to get away from the house...I was not in love with my husband, I loved to compete with men...and I do that well. But I didn't know anything. And then my husband was transferred to [Sheffield] in like 1970 or '71...and I moved in and maybe two weeks after we moved in she and her husband came over to introduce themselves. She never said a word. She's very quiet...and I thought to myself, 'Boy, she doesn't seem like she's any person I'll be friendly with.' I can remember saying that...but then...we got to be friends and for a good year and a half we were best friends. We didn't do anything, I mean, I just absolutely adored her. And she me. And then one day...she called me over, and she played the record 'The Twelfth of Never.' And it was like I absolutely knew what she was saying, and from that moment on, we admitted that we were in love with one another. And with her five and me with my three

children, and that's how it started. And it was right for the first time in my life. I said, 'Wait a minute. Now I understand.' It wasn't clear what I was trying to understand, mind you. There was something missing inside of me, and there was something not right, I didn't feel honest with the world but I didn't know why. And when we came out to one another and it all happened that just changed my whole life. Just changed my whole life. And then we were in a relationship a long time. Nine years, while we were both married...I had a little store...and then I got [Dot] into the business, we stayed married, and near the end she couldn't continue a double life. I couldn't either but, my God, this was all so new to both of us, and we were with kids. We thought we were the only two gay women in the world. So, then I closed the store, I divorced my husband...her divorce took longer than mine... Then we moved in together, we bought a house. And we lived there about seven years, eight years, and she wasn't happy because once she came out to her family they sort of disowned her. And her only identity was as a mother. We both had problems. I think now as I look back we were two half people trying to be whole. We were very madly in love

for a long time. It's taken me a long time to get over her."

Reconstructing Lesbian

I asked Ann what she thought was happening when she had such strong feelings for [Dot]. She answered, "I just felt right. I felt whole. I felt this is me...I can't explain it to you...Of course we thought we were the only two gay women in the world, but for me it was so natural [a] transition. I could not go back for all the tea in China, for all the money in the world. I am a lesbian, I'm proud of it, my kids know it, and it's right for me." I asked if she thought of herself as a lesbian right away. "Yes. And I love saying the word." Later, she commented, "And once I started to know that I was a lesbian, it's given me a freedom to think differently, to act differently, to stick up for my sisters." She added, "I always stood up for what I believed, to a degree. But I just felt that I could start seeing where women were being put down... when I acknowledged myself as a lesbian."

I asked if Ann thought she would have come out even if she hadn't met Dot. "Eventually. It might have taken longer. I was terribly unhappy married. I hated having

sex with him. Although I'm a sexual person, a sexual being. Yeah. Because if it wasn't her it would have been somebody else...I had once tried to divorce him and he came back on his hands and knees and, you just didn't get divorced at the time, and I was not happy. We were both miserable. Cause he knew something was missing with me, and I knew something was, and I always preferred women. I love competing with men, but I have strong feelings about women and there's no big deal to it, I just knew I was a lesbian and it just felt right and I said, 'This is what it's all about. This is who you are.'

When I asked Ann if she thought she was always a lesbian and just didn't know it, she replied, "Absolutely. I absolutely believe that. I just didn't know...But so help me goodness, in my family there was, it was like predicted, I was either going to go to school or get married. And I just followed what spoken rules were. And, basically I married my husband cause I had to get out and see the world."

Reconstructing Woman

When I asked Ann if her sense of herself as a woman changed after she changed, she said, "I always kind of took

care of myself...I fought for the things that I wanted...I always saved enough for me...I was in tune with myself, I've always played more than I have worked. I've always taken the time to enjoy things. So, I have more of identity." I asked if she felt successful as a woman when she was straight. "Yeah, I still did in a way because, I'm much more extroverted in some things and my ex-husband would let me do whatever I wanted to do. So I mean I just took over. I was always more in control."

Reconstructing Sexuality

I asked Ann if her experience of sex changed when she changed from a man to a woman lover. "Actually it did, but not probably as positive as you would think it would be. It wasn't. She had her hangups. I know it's supposed to be a natural thing, but society doesn't make it natural...I love sex, and always did. We had more problems with it. That affected my self esteem. So, in the beginning it was a little bit hard, and then we kind of got through that hurdle. But it wasn't as easy as people think. I can say for me, that I couldn't go back to a straight sexual encounter. I love what I feel with women. And the sex is good and I feel good, but it wasn't an easy transition."

Then I asked if sex with her husband had been good. "At times, yes. Only when he orally kissed me. Not the true sexual act. I just can't. That's the way I feel. You know what I mean? And oh, this is embarrassing. But, yeah, he was, he tried to be a very good lover. We didn't have sex a lot because I, even though he was an emotional lover. So I didn't always have it for him, but physically, he could make me come...when we did have sex, but I didn't, near the end I couldn't fathom it, no matter how much sexual pleasure, it just was not there. I'd rather go and be a hermit."

Later, Ann said, "I could always be a flirt, I could always flirt because I grew up in that straight world. I flirt now, but in a different way, and it's just with women and I just couldn't go back to the way I was before. There's no need to...I was flirting with men to see if I could flirt with them, to see if I could maybe turn them on or something. I just started dating a little bit. And there's this one woman that I flirt with, but it's so entirely different. I'm not trying to get the best of her, or anything. It's a different, it's a playful thing. It's intimate sharing, it's so different than flirting with a

guy. Because I really, deep down didn't want to be, I just could. And it's just different. It's almost like a triumph. I don't even think triumph if I'm flirting with a woman. If anything, I want her to feel as good as I'm feeling at that moment. And it's a playful kind of flirting. It's so different than the other."

Enhanced Womanhood

I asked Ann if after she came out, her sense of what it was to be a woman, or her sense of femininity, changed. "I felt more like a woman than I ever did before," she said. "The opposite sex always liked me...But I felt more of a woman when I came out as a lesbian. Absolutely. Down to my core. Down to my absolute core. I felt more of a woman...It just felt so natural to me. When I was trying to be a straight woman, and trying to do the things, when you're doing something that you're really not, you just don't feel right. And I knew I loved the company of women...I just feel more like a woman, I feel more real, more in touch with other women, so proud of it..."

Resisting Patriarchy

Ann also talked about the things she was glad she didn't have to do any more, now that she is a lesbian.

"I'm a very adaptable person, so I can adapt to a lot of situations. And in the straight world I've adapted and it's like, I don't want to be adapting any more. So I could handle myself in the straight world. My father came from six [brothers], I have all uncles. Most of my cousins, there's 42 of 'em and I think 38 of 'em are males. And I loved to play and compete. Why? Because, that gave me the freedom to be who I was...it gave me a chance to be myself, because I wasn't that little princess. I wanted to play baseball, I wanted to play golf, I wanted to do these things. So there is that bond with the male society. But...women need me and I need them more than I do men." When I asked what other things she was glad now that she didn't have to do with men, Ann replied: "A certain amount of competing. Having to try to always prove myself. I don't have to do that. I'm still going after what I want, but I'm just not competing the same way as I did before. Cause I just don't involve myself with men that much anymore...But it was ~~always grinding~~, always grinding, to try to be better, to show 'em that I was as good as them, and I don't have to do that."

Analysis

Ann's story is about reconstructing lesbian as a woman like herself after she and her neighbor became lovers. She then understood her sexual unhappiness with her husband as caused by the fact that she was a lesbian. Ann had already reconstructed woman as strong, capable, and in control when she lived in the man's world of her family, and later as an adult when she competed in work and play with men. For Ann, adapting to the straight world was acting like a man, competing and winning. But this behavior also constituted a resistance to the patriarchy because it violated patriarchal gender norms. Because of this experience, Ann was able to lift the tent flap and understand that people weren't really the way the patriarchy said they were. Acting like a man was also how Ann achieved and maintained her sense of empowerment. One of the ways Ann reconstructed her sexuality after she became a lesbian is shown in her comments about flirting. She had seen sexuality with men as having to do with conquering and triumph, while sexuality with another woman has to do with intimacy, play, and making someone feel good. She also saw

her heterosexual sexuality as something she did, not because she wanted to, but just because she could do it successfully. She reconstructed her gender as well. When she identified as heterosexual, she felt she had to compete constantly with men to prove that she was as good or better than they were, and now that she is a lesbian, she doesn't have to do that. All this makes it understandable when Ann says that she felt "more of a woman" when she became a lesbian than she had before: when she was living a straight life she felt she had to be masculine, to prove herself, her strength and competence, in relation to men. Being a woman with women, doing what felt right to her instead of "trying to be a straight woman," being who she was, allowed Ann to feel more like a woman. Ann entered a women's sphere when she identified as a lesbian and found a community of other women, her "sisters," and a lesbian political analysis of male domination.

Jessie: "I Didn't Have Any Role Models"

Jessie heard about my research from someone who saw my notice at the lesbian dance. She called to volunteer and I walked the few blocks from my apartment to hers. We sat and talked on a couch in her home workroom with the tape recorder on the floor at our feet. Jessie is 42 years old, with short brown hair. She has a professional master's degree but does body work in her home and at a community center in the small Northeastern city where we both live. Her national heritage is Polish: her father was a farmer who also worked for the state, and her mother had escaped from a Nazi concentration camp during World War II and immigrated to the U.S. at the end of the war. Jessie thinks her mother was Jewish, but said her mother never talked about her past. Jessie has a twin sister and a younger sister. They grew up in a little rural town in the Northeast and spent most of their free time with their father's extended family on the family farm. She said she spent time with her father to avoid her mother's verbal and physical abuse. She added that she thought her mother had sexually abused her as well, but she wasn't sure of that.

Jessie became blind when she was 19 years old and was married when she was 21. After several emotionally devastating miscarriages, she and her husband adopted a son from another country. Their marriage had been deteriorating for a long time when Jessie and a woman friend became lovers in about 1978. Jessie was about 27 years old then. A few years later she had an affair with another woman and started to think of herself as a lesbian. About 10 years after her affair with the first woman, Jessie and her husband separated and she began living a lesbian life.

Jessie describes her change as the result of getting in touch with her past and present feelings about women in therapy and other self-exploratory activities and then acting on those feelings.

Reconstructing Lesbian

Early in the interview, when Jessie was talking about her growing up and explaining why she got married, she said: "I really wanted children and...there was this social worker...I am absolutely sure without a doubt she was a lesbian. And I was just beginning to maybe get into that...I might be a lesbian. And she just really did

everything she could to push me away from that, didn't even want to explore it...so I was convinced, well, I want to have kids, so you get married, have kids. And I liked this guy well enough...I thought I loved him at the time...I think looking back on it now...I've probably always been a lesbian but didn't know what to call it and didn't have any role models...there were just no role models growing up. And everything I ever had heard about women being with women or lesbians or anything was, watch out, you're gonna be jumped. And the women that I knew in town that were lesbians, or everybody knew were, were always kind of the stereotyped butch-femme thing. And so I just didn't know who, what, where or how. But I know now. We get opportunities."

I asked Jessie how she discovered she was a lesbian. She said she went to a conference for her work, and was paired as a roommate with a friend of hers. "It was funny because Meg was just coming out too, just had gotten in touch with what was going on...so we started talking and I don't know what I said, I made some smart remark, and she was already in bed. She says, 'Well, yeah? Come on over.' So I did. And next thing you know, there we were. The rest

is history. And we talked about it the next day and I says, 'You okay?' And she says, 'Yeah, I'm fine, how are you?' I says, 'Well, it was like coming home.' It was. And I just knew from there, there were no other questions really to be answered except I knew that the marriage was on the rocks and it wasn't a long time till ending. But I guess in a way I was sorry that I'd wasted that many years of my life. I'm also aware if we had ended it sooner [my son] wouldn't be in my life, and he is very dear to me."

Reconstructing Gender and Sexuality

I asked Jessie what she thought after her first sexual experience with a woman, what she said to herself just before she fell asleep that night. "This was wonderful. It felt like coming home. It really did. I wasn't thinking. There was nothing to think except that it felt really right and wonderful and I was just going with it. I just thought, 'Jees, so here it is. This is what I've been experiencing, this is what I've been feeling. But, now what am I going to do about it?'"

I asked Jessie if, when she thought about those feelings, she put the name lesbian on them. "I started to. Because especially when I was with [her second woman

lover], because I was blind, we read a couple of books together. One of 'em was, it was a stupid story, in a way, but it sort of made sense...It was called Wives Who Love Other Women. Something like that. It was a book she found in the library. [We] read that and some other lesbian material. And I really started identifying with the characters and feelings big time. And she was too. She hadn't been married, but she had been in relationships with men up until that point too. We bounced a lot of thoughts and conversation off each other for a while."

Empowerment

Jessie said, "After the last miscarriage I just really started to get more in touch with myself and my feelings and I was doing post-graduate work and doing a lot of women's studies. And I was really starting to get in touch with the real me, so to speak, and my feelings. And as I did more of the meditating and journeying and getting in touch with myself and I was seeing my therapist still too, I think I had just started to really get empowered to maybe just stand up and acknowledge who I was or what I was."

Reconstructing Woman

When I asked Jessie if becoming a lesbian changed the

way she felt about herself as a woman, she answered, "Yeah. I think in the beginning I felt like most married women do, like, is that all there is? And it wasn't very exciting, that's for sure. And I'm aware of my part in that too. But I was a student at the time too, and I liked that. I had a lot of college friends, and we did a lot, whether it was study sessions, or just rapping and stuff like that. But...I don't think I had too much self worth. I knew the potential was there to have it, but it wasn't there. And I didn't feel like I really had a reason to have to have it. And I have to say a couple of my professors were pretty instrumental in that because they were lesbians and they were out and I thought they were real exciting and wonderful because they were really into it up to their ears, whatever the cause was. And I thought that was great. And I thought I could really get into that and be part of that, and I did to some degree, and enjoyed it. As I finished college though, I was living out in the country and I think I just had this continuing feeling of being nowhere in my life...I liked being a woman, I've always liked being a woman. I didn't like some of the prescriptions that the patriarchy put on us. But I did

like being a woman. And acknowledging my lesbianism, I thought that was really great. I was really empowered by that."

Entering a Woman's Sphere

As she told her story, Jessie observed how important her women friends were to her. She started by talking about her friends coming to her after another miscarriage. "I got an awful lot of support from all my female friends, most of which, looking back now, were lesbians, and some of which I knew they were and some I didn't know they were until later." Then, after her last miscarriage, she was taking women's studies courses, and she got involved in a number of organized women's groups. "There were always women around. My friends. And we were always doing things...We were always either hiking or skiing... just getting together for meetings...there were quite a few women around."

Enhanced Womanhood

I asked Jessie if her feeling about what it meant to be a woman changed or stayed the same. "Stayed basically the same, but then I became more aware of how much power we

have, how much we can have, and it's like, there's so many of us and we outnumber them, but why are men taking over the world? I became very empowered as a woman and I felt even better that I was one of the chosen, one of the few chosen to be a woman. I think I enjoyed being a woman much more than I ever did once I acknowledged my lesbianism. It's like we can celebrate who we are and what we are with each other and with ourselves."

Resisting Patriarchy

Then I asked Jessie if when she was straight she felt that she was the kind of woman she was supposed to be, and if that was different now that she is a lesbian. "Well I thought I was the kind of woman I was supposed to be. [But it] became pretty clear that I wasn't the kind of woman 'they,' meaning most of the patriarchy, society, wanted me to be. I just wasn't really this demure, nice little housekeeping type woman. I always had a lot to say and I said it." I asked, "And what about now? Do you feel like you're the kind of woman you're supposed to be now?" Jessie replied, "I feel like I'm who I want to be. Yeah. I have to admit. I'm still growing. I mean life is for growing, the minute you stop you die."

Analysis

Jessie started trying to reconstruct lesbian when she talked to a social worker about her feelings about women a year or so before she got married. Like Brook, she was probably looking for an explanation for her attraction to women and for help in resisting heterosexuality. And like many of the other participants, she had no role models for alternatives to heterosexuality except for butch and femme lesbians who seemed alien to her and her attraction to women. She continued the reconstruction after her marriage, as she "got in touch" with her feelings for women. She went to bed with a woman for the first time and felt she understood what it was she had been wanting. The reconstruction process was completed as she and her second woman lover read lesbian books together and Jessie identified as a lesbian. She reconstructed her sexuality when she decided that sexual feelings about women were what she had been feeling all along, and that she had always been a lesbian, but just had not known it. Jessie's empowerment was, like many of the women in the study, accomplished through women's studies, introspection, and therapy, and, again like many of the women, she was further

empowered by "acknowledging" her lesbianism. Jessie reconstructed woman through women's studies courses, having strong women friends, knowing lesbians, and having strong and politically active feminist professors. After these experiences, she saw women as valuable people who could be strong, and learned to value her variance from gender norms. The experiences also gave her the tools to understand the patriarchal hegemony and see that there was another way to live. Jessie entered a women's sphere in women's studies and with her friends, who were more supportive of her than her husband was, and more active and fun to be with. Once she identified as a lesbian, and also as a result of these other processes, Jessie felt more powerful as a woman, more valued in a culture that celebrates womanhood.

CHAPTER 4: ENTERING A WOMEN'S SPHERE

Many of the women I interviewed had entered a women's sphere some time before their change. By women's sphere I mean an activity or group defined by and usually focused on women. Some examples of women's spheres are: consciousness raising groups, women's spirituality activities, women's book discussions, women's studies classes or programs, feminist activities, and women's music. The effect of an involvement like this is to focus the participant's attention, often for the first time, on women instead of men or man; to put the individual in a setting in which women and their attributes are valued instead of denigrated; to encourage participants to think of themselves as women; to put women in the center. Ultimately, such activities can make the functioning of the patriarchy apparent. Entering a women's sphere can provide a context or culture in which being a woman is the norm and being a lesbian makes a lot of sense. Many women find these effects empowering and often politicizing. Janie, Silvy, Maggy, and Iris told stories in which entry into a women's sphere was their main route to a lesbian identity.

Janie: Part of a Larger Transformation

Janie is a rail thin 48 year old fine artist who supports herself doing commercial art. We have known each other, though not well, since we were in high school. We were brought together again by a mutual friend, and in our conversations, discovered that we had each recently fallen in love with a woman and divorced our husbands to live lesbian lives. When I asked Janie if I could interview her, she readily agreed. The interview took place in her new apartment, her first home alone. It was a bright, airy three rooms on the second floor of a private house in an upper middle-class east coast suburb where we both grew up and still lived. The walls were white, there were no curtains at the windows, and it was furnished sparsely. Janie described her family as New England Protestant, stiff upper lip, not emotional, and not particularly warm. Her parents were both college graduates, and her mother came from a long line of graduates of one of the Seven Sister Colleges. When Janie was in junior high school, her mother painted her room in the college colors. Janie didn't like the school because she thought it was too big, but the question became moot when she got pregnant at 16 by a boy

she thought she was in love with, and they married. They had two children and were divorced after six years. Janie then went to local colleges at night, while her mother babysat. She earned a teaching degree, and, at 30, got her first job outside the home, teaching in another part of the state for about four years until she moved in with the man she was dating and whom she married two years later. They eventually came back to our home town. They were married for 13 years before Janie left him to "pursue a loving relationship with a woman." By that time Janie's two sons were grown and she had one grandchild.

Janie described her change as a result of a larger change that had begun when she was about 40.

Entering a Woman's Sphere

"It was a definite transformation. It seemed like an overnight transformation, but obviously it really wasn't. I was going through a very emotional time in my life a couple of years ago. And there were a lot of things happening. I was in therapy, and...affirmations that I wrote down...there were a couple of them, and they were, one, I wanted to experience myself profoundly as a woman, and I didn't know what that meant, I just knew that I

wanted to get in touch more with who I was as a woman, not as a human, and not as an emotional being or whatever, but that sense of what it means to be a woman. And the other one was that I wanted to experience my essence. And I don't know what that is, either, necessarily. It was just those things came to me, and they were coming out in my art, too...a lot of my drawings dealt more and more with a female theme. I remember my husband at the time said (in a satirical deep voice) 'Why are you drawing so many vaginas?' (laugh) I think he was very threatened by it...And it was that sense of exploring, whether it was the physical, the emotional, whatever, it was coming out in my art, and I knew that at the time the marriage was unsatisfactory; it wasn't bad, but it wasn't good, it was just that there was that sense of it wasn't right, it wasn't fulfilling. At this time, that's when I had my art show...That to me was so affirming, of me as a person, and also me as a woman, because there were so many women who found it uplifting, so it was that sense of really doing something for myself and doing something for other women. I wasn't really sure what that was, but I knew that it was very important in my life. At the same time too, I was

facing a medical problem, fibroid tumors, and I had to have a hysterectomy. So it was all these female-oriented things coming at the same time, and also I was in a very close relationship with a woman. It wasn't sexual. I didn't consider it that way at the time, but we were very close. I'd never had a really close girlfriend, and this woman was so important to me as this whole, you know, it's like all the planets were lining up. (laugh) And she was there for me as I was going through all this emotional turmoil and upheaval in my marriage. That later on did tend to take a sexual focus in the sense that she was pursuing me, she was actively pursuing me. But it was one of those things that starts to unfold, the whole picture of my life at that time.

Reconstructing Woman

"So facing the hysterectomy to me felt like a tremendous transition in my life. It was one of those passages. And a threshold of some kind, whether it's birth, or menstruation or motherhood or whatever, here's one of those inevitable things. I was going to stop menstruating and to me that was really significant as far as being a woman, because how do you define yourself as a

woman? Is it that you have breasts and a vagina, or is it that you can give birth? Is it that you menstruate? What are all these things? So anyway, the birth, the creativity was coming to an end, a definite end, and I wanted to make the most out of that transformation. I love myths, my art is involved in myths, and to me this was mythic, it was mythic proportions. I was on this journey and here was one of those steps. So I decided I was going to get the most out of it. If I had to undergo this radical surgery, I was going to take it as far as I could go and make it a transformation, make it an obvious transformation. So the day before the surgery I cut my hair, and I cut it really, really short. And that was part of it, because I had waist-length hair. And I had it cut to almost crew cut length. Since then I've read about the women's mysteries at Pompey, and one of the rituals in the initiation was cutting your hair off...[The initiation was into] The Mysteries (with emphasis, almost satiric), whatever those are. And I feel very closely connected to those, to The Mysteries. I can't be too specific. It's a very spiritual thing for me...it has... meaning that I pinpointed, what it is for me. Very personal. And it has to do with being a

creative woman. And it comes out in my art, it comes out in my spirituality, it comes out in the people that I choose to surround myself with, and my interest in goddess. So the hysterectomy, the art show, to me it was like I really was revealing a lot of myself...So in a way that was a coming out before I came out. There was my soul hanging on the wall.

Reconstructing Lesbian

"And it was very shortly after the hysterectomy that I had a pot luck at my house and it was for women only, and it sort of gathered momentum and more and more people were coming to it. And the interesting thing was, I was not aware of lesbians in my life, but if there were 15 people there, at least half of them were lesbians. And I was sort of surprised to see how closely I guess I related to them, how comfortable I was in that circle. And it was shortly after that, I guess that was in April and then by August I was in relationship with Susie. So it was like I stepped through and then there was no turning back. It became just an obvious choice. And it hasn't been that long, it's only a year and a half ago. What I found about it was that the women's community, the lesbian community, is so supportive

and so embracing, and it's like being a member of a secret society. And to me that's exciting. I love that. It's becoming less secret, I think. In the '90s its a little more acceptable to be a lesbian, or at the very least to be bisexual. It's almost becoming in. But it is this society, a woman's secret society. And it sure is a well-kept secret. I always had a sense, after I made the transition, that if women only knew, they wouldn't be wasting their time, you know, trying to fit. It's like the square peg in the round hole sort of thing. It just seems so obvious, but it sure took a lot to get there; to get to a point that in hindsight seems so perfect and so true and so real and, so, anyway. That's sort of it in a very small amount of time."

When I asked Janie to talk about her close friendship with a woman before her change, she said that they spent a lot of time on the phone, "Just being close and talking about intimate, very very intimate things about our marriages, about ourselves as women, about being attracted to women. And it was definitely a flirtation that was going on there too. But there was just such a wonderful sense, something I'd never felt before. And it really

opened me up to that notion that, hey, this [feeling love for a woman] is wonderful and it feels good and it's acceptable. I think those thoughts may have occurred to me in the past but it was always like, well, you don't even give rise to them because they're unacceptable." She said she and that friend "had the common bond that we were women. I mean that's like the bottom line that only another woman can really understand it." Janie decided not to have a sexual relationship with that friend. At the time she thought it was because she was still married. "I think in retrospect it's really that I was not as physically attracted to her as I might have thought. She opened the door for me to step through, but it wasn't to have a physical relationship with her...I was attracted to the idea, but not necessarily to her."

Empowerment

In answer to the question of how she experienced herself as a woman before she changed, Janie said: "Most of my life I've been in and out of depression. And it seems to me that I experienced myself as someone who needed taking care of, who needed protection from...depression, from feeling scared and isolated and all those things. And

to some degree my two husbands did that, whether it was financial or emotional or whatever. Part of the change has been that now I am alone, and feeling powerful alone...I did feel quite powerless and sort of locked into that role." I asked Janie which came first, empowerment or identifying as a lesbian. "I think there's a little bit of both, but I think that I was already becoming empowered before I made that choice...I feel like I made the choice out of strength, you know, not like, 'Oh, well, this didn't work, so I'll try something else...Maybe they'll accept me," kind of thing...It just fell into place...it wasn't an overwhelming lightening bolt, it just was the obvious next step."

Janie said that she had felt weak as a woman. "There was no strength around the idea of being a woman." I asked Janie how she experiences herself as a woman since her transformation. She said, "I know I feel stronger. I feel more viable somehow...I feel like I've taken my rightful place in the universe...I feel like I have so much more in my bag of tricks, in my sense of who I am and that I am a force to be reckoned with. And [that] I have power, that I have creativity, I have a community that supports me as a

human being. And it's comforting, it feels very safe. I feel safe in the world."

Toward the end of the interview, when I asked if she thought becoming a lesbian earlier in her life would have been as empowering, she said, "Coming to the decision is very powerful, that act of deciding is a very powerful act...you can celebrate it and feel a sense of power from it. For me the power was in the transition."

Reconstructing Sexuality

In a discussion of how she felt about her body since her change, Janie also talked about how she felt about women's bodies in general. "I've always been attracted to women's bodies. I mean I've always found them very beautiful, whether that's a particularly womanly thing or an artistic thing. I would rather draw them, I would rather sculpt them, I would rather look at them than [at] men's bodies. They're lovely...There is a tremendous sense of mystery and I feel elevated in the human form being in a relationship with a woman. There is that sense of, you're making love to a woman and it's almost like making love to yourself. It's very high, and it's so otherworldly. So I feel more at home in my body and a sense that whatever my

body is doing, it's doing what it's supposed to."

Reconstructing Gender

I asked Janie whether she feels more or less feminine since becoming a lesbian. She replied: "It's funny, I used to think that I was very masculine, having been a tomboy and all of that...The change has put me in touch with how feminine I am [and] I'm surprised that it would do that. I thought, based on my stereotype of what lesbians were, they were all the dyke, masculine...and everyone that I have mentioned the fact that I thought I was masculine to, they laugh at me...they say that, 'Well, you're just so feminine, you could never be considered masculine.'" So it's made me realize that I really am very feminine, that I'm not this horsey kind of clumping along sort of masculine kind of woman. And it's an interesting revelation. I like it. I like feeling feminine, and I also like knowing that I'm not out of place in wearing something that might be typically feminine...I don't have to feel like I'm putting on a costume...I guess when I was heterosexual to me it was empowering to feel masculine...Because I felt like I was in that world. And that was the only way that I could be in that world and

maintain a sense of power or self, and now I can just go all out and be frilly and feminine." At another point in the interview, Janie said: "You don't really know what you're supposed to be as a woman, and now I feel like I've taken my rightful place, that this is what it's all about and if other people knew they would certainly do it too...I had little sense of self before this in my heterosexual life. And now I have such a broader sense of what it is to be Janie, a woman."

Enhanced Womanhood

I asked Janie if her view of womanhood or what it means to be a woman had changed when she changed. She answered, "I think before I used to define myself through what I thought was the eyes of the man...I just feel more valid somehow...it used to matter a lot what men thought of me. It doesn't matter any more...Now it's more, who am I? What are my thoughts, what are my feelings, what do I stand for, and not, is it acceptable...So I just feel more valid as a human being, as a person."

When asked how she explains her change to herself, Janie responded, "I feel safer...I just feel more myself. I feel safer being a woman. I don't feel like I have to

compete...The dynamics for me when I'm with a man is that I have to compete somehow...I just feel safer in a community that accepts you as a female human...That being a female is valid and exalted in a society that's very patriarchal."

Sexual Abuse

I asked if there was anything else she thought I ought to know or that she'd like to tell me that I hadn't asked about. Janie responded by saying, "Well, the one thing that occurs to me, and I think it's important, is that while I was in therapy...through this transition, I was coming to terms with the fact that I had been sexually abused, sexually molested once as a very young child, and I think that played a very important role in this change. Coming to terms with that. And I did recognize that the word 'safe' kept coming up. I think that what's important is while it wasn't the only catalyst, it was an important part of the puzzle of who I am and what my choices are. So...for what it's worth, that's part of the tapestry."

Resisting Patriarchy

Toward the end of the interview, Janie told the following story about one of her responses to her hysterectomy. "When I went through the hysterectomy, I

said that I wanted to get the most mileage out of this transformation, and I told [the doctor] I was going to take my uterus, I wanted it back. And, [this] male doctor was like, 'Are you crazy? What good is a uterus? It produces a couple of children, for the most part it gets you a lot of blood and a lot of pain. How come you define yourself by this organ?' And, my comment basically was, 'You're talking just like a man.' I said, 'This is very empowering, this is part of my body, this is the realm of creativity in its grandest sense, and I'm going to reclaim it and I'm going to have a proper burial for it.' And it's that sense of, I feel more female and more feminine and more in touch with myself as a woman than I did when I had the darned thing. Because, of course, I chose. I did get it. They put me through such red tape to get it back. I had to go to a funeral home, have them pick it up. I had to pay \$200 to reclaim what is mine and, as I understand it, that is ridiculous. It should have just been mine...When I got home from the funeral home with it there was my copy of Woman of Power, that magazine. It had just arrived, but there was an article in it by a woman...who talked about reclaiming her uterus after a

hysterectomy...Anyway, I got it home and it was frozen, of course, because they do pathology on it. Kept it in the freezer, broke up with my husband, and he said, 'Now don't forget to take that thing with you.'...I knew that I wanted to bury it...[in a special place]. I did not want to do it with my husband...I didn't take it out of the freezer until the following summer, when Susie and I could go...and I buried it...I packed it in a little ice cooler... because I didn't want it to start to defrost. But then when I buried it, I took it out of the container... Fascinating looking organ. Actually looked like a large heart. And I buried it with all sorts of pomp and circumstance...I made it up. It was my own ritual...It was just something that I needed to do."

Analysis

Janie's is a story of identifying as a lesbian after entering a women's sphere, a largely self-conscious transformation in which "sexuality" was only a very small part. When she turned 40, Janie had accomplished what society required of her, the patriarchally-defined tasks of getting and keeping a man, and bearing and raising children. Now she could turn to herself and her own inner

life. And when Janie looked within for her creativity and spirituality she found a world of women. In these circumstances, heterosexuality looked much less rich and interesting, and further from Janie's heart than involvements with women. She faced her hysterectomy from a women's sphere rather than the patriarchal world and, instead of seeing the end of her ability to bear children as the end of her life, the way many women living traditional lives do, she saw it as a passage of "mythic proportions." She made it part of the story she was constructing about valorizing the female and reconstructing and celebrating womanhood. This is how she reconstructed woman from the patriarchal, male-centered definition she had labored under for the first half of her life, to a woman-centered definition that valued the female. One way Janie resisted the patriarchy was with her haircut, which she experienced as marking her as one who has distanced herself from the patriarchy. Her women-only party was a celebration of her move to a woman's sphere, along with her art show, "a coming out before I came out." When she realized that at least half of the women at her party were lesbians and that she related closely to them and felt

comfortable in that circle, she was reconstructing her old idea of lesbian, and seeing that she could adopt a lesbian identity and live a lesbian life. She saw that lesbian and woman, as now reconstructed, were no longer incompatible with each other or with her "self." Her successful reconstruction of lesbian is demonstrated by her statement that she had formerly thought of lesbians as masculine, but no longer does. When Janie discovered the lesbian community, she lifted the tent flap and saw that there were other ways to be besides the one she had always known and another culture, in which her experience as a woman was at the center, the female was the norm, and she was profoundly validated as a woman. She was empowered before she made her change, and then having made the choice, she became even more empowered by making the transition; by the process of changing. Another important part of her empowerment was leaving the patriarchal definitions of women and adopting the lesbian and feminist definition in which strength is very much valued. Her comments about how she has always found women's bodies beautiful show a process of reconstructing her sexuality, and coming to see her esthetic enjoyment of women's bodies as sexual desire.

Her sexual comfort with her woman lover is another reconstruction of sexuality.

Janie's reconstruction of gender is clearly described, and fascinating. She feels more feminine as a lesbian, in a women's sphere, because she has moved out of the male gaze. Once that move is made, being a woman becomes something to be celebrated rather than regretted or apologized for. Janie is a myth maker and ritual builder. Women's myths and ritual are important parts of her conscious transition and her new life. Her marvelous story of retrieving her uterus and burying it is the very powerful story of remaking meanings through creation of ritual. For someone who values the spiritual, as Janie does, this is an effective way to resist patriarchal meanings and imperatives and make a life outside of the hegemonic gender order. In the particular case of a hysterectomy, Janie has made a valued passage out of something patriarchy has constructed as a kind of death, the end of a woman's usefulness and desirability. For Janie, navigating that passage left her feeling "more feminine and more in touch with myself as a woman."

Silvy: "I Fell in Love With a Woman"

Silvy is a petite 67 year old woman known to the lesbians in her small Northeastern city as the friendly organizer of popular lesbian social events. She seems to know all the regulars and to quickly get to know the newcomers. She often introduces people she thinks will have something in common. When I first met her, Silvy discovered that we had been students in the same university system and that I was almost a neighbor of her former brother-in-law. I told Silvy about my study in the hopes that she would introduce me to some people to interview. She volunteered herself, immediately. We met a few days after Thanksgiving in her warm and cluttered kitchen, and Silvy fed me tea and cake and told her story. She is Jewish and grew up in the Bronx and Queens. Her father was a "professional man" who didn't make much money. She was married at 23 to a physician and they had two sons. They moved to the Northeastern city where her husband practiced his specialty and was very successful. They had a "lovely home" there and a summer house at the beach. Silvy was unhappy with him, and left him once, but returned in a week

after panicked phone calls from her parents. When she was 36 years old she fell in love with a 23 year old woman she met in the League of Women Voters. The two became lovers in 1963, a week before President John Kennedy was assassinated. With their husbands they were often a foursome for evening socializing, and the two women spent mornings in bed together, after their husbands and children had left for the day. This went on until 1976, when Silvy's lover left her husband. Shortly afterwards, Silvy left her husband. They each got apartments in the same complex, although Silvy's was only for show. She really lived with her lover and her lover's children, although they were not out at all to anyone. Silvy's sons are now 41 and 42, and she has five grandchildren.

Silvy says she changed because she fell in love with a woman who was interested in her, after several strong attachments to women friends who were not sexually available to her.

Reconstructing Gender and Sexuality

She told me how she realized that she was in love with Beryl one evening when she had expected to see her and then wasn't able to. "I realized that I was terribly bereft.

And I realized that I was so deeply in love with this woman that I didn't think that my life was ever going to be the same...It was terrible. I got up from the dinner table and ran in tears to the bedroom. I just couldn't bear it, being away from her...I still remember standing and watching the snow drift down and thought my not-so-easy-but-assumed-to-be-forever life was never going to be the same...And I declared myself to her...I simply got up one morning, took my children to...school and rushed to her apartment and knocked on the door...And she opened the door and it was her living room-bedroom, and she was in bed, which was about three feet from the front door...And I simply fell into bed with her. I told her I was in love with her, and I thrust a book...a philosophic inquiry into love...And I started reading relevant passages to her. I must have been very confused. And she was delighted...And we embarked upon this very solemn, dedicated relationship with each other. And it went on until she left her husband and I left mine." I then asked Silvy what she thought it meant at the time when she realized that she was in love with Beryl. She said, "I thought that meant there were no solutions whatsoever. None. I was doomed. I was damned.

This was going to make everyone suffer." Once they became lovers, Silvy said, "There was poetry...It made it much more satisfying to be able to be actively loved in lovemaking and to be able to make love and want to bring somebody great satisfaction. I never knew what that was with my husband."

Entering a Woman's Sphere

I asked Silvy if her views of what gender and sexuality are changed when she began having a relationship with a woman. She responded, "I always had crushes on women. They didn't stop in marriage, but it's simply that you assimilate it into your life cause it was such a powerful taboo that there was never any question of acting on it. So I would know other women in suburbia of my age, with young children, and we would pick up on each other's signals, we knew there was a powerful attraction. We would meet and look into each other's eyes, and all that. But never speak anything. This was in the early '50s. I had two relationships like that. When I speak of looking into each other's eyes romantically, this was only with a woman when she knew I was leaving. Her eyes it seemed to me were

brimmed full of tears, and I'm very decorous, I couldn't rise to that emotional pitch. But with a woman whom I was in love with and used to fantasize about, I realized, she abruptly stopped seeing me and went into therapy. She hated her husband...So we were in love, there was no question about it, but we never breathed a word of it. She simply stopped seeing me...And gave no explanation. Went into therapy and ultimately moved away with her husband. Because that's the way she dealt with it. Whereas women would deal with it usually, I think...they'd pursue their good works together. And there were intimacies. I mean, emotional intimacies that were so taboo that they almost weren't a problem. Because the taboo removed the problem in a sense."

Resisting Patriarchy

She said later in the interview, "Looking back on it, it was all rather wild. But we met in the '60s, which was not a favorable time for women in the middle class to be discovering that they were in love with other women. People weren't acting out then...But once she was free there was no way that I could, by this time it was the '70s, the female, feminine revolution, how do we refer to

that? The change in consciousness that occurred. So although it was very difficult for me to leave my husband I did that. And took an apartment because even then appearances had to be kept up." She added, "When women started confiding in each other they discovered that they really didn't feel that they had bought into the culture, and women started leaving their husbands in increasing numbers and having the taboo relationships [with women]. But if the so-called revolution hadn't occurred they'd simply be believing that the women who did that were in some way deviations. But that's just personal, because the women I went to school with are in no more fulfilling relationships with their husbands than I was...They're frustrated, unhappy... What I mean is, it's entered the culture. There was even a Woody Allen movie in which it was a sort of standing joke in the movie. His wife had left him for another woman...and she was going to expose him in a book."

Enhanced Womanhood

I asked her whether being in an intimate relationship with a woman changed her experience of herself as a woman, her sense of femininity. "I felt more of a woman with her

than I did with him because...I think women can assume both roles. I felt like a great lover. I was never the great lover with my husband. Sex with him was a terrible chore...[With her] it was a wonderful role...I was both lover and loved one. Completely fulfilling. So I felt intensely female...My life was transfigured and opportunities were enriched for role-playing, I suppose, for doing what women can't do usually, take the active role, initiate and embroider, have a sentimental relationship."

Reconstructing Lesbian

I asked her what made the difference for her between those earlier unexplored relationships and her affair with Beryl, why she was able to act on her attraction to Beryl. "The resolve probably not to lose this one. There was a loss from the other, not of a kind that would disturb my life greatly, but with this one I was compelled to tell her of my feelings cause they were tormenting me. And she was an active lover. I came to her...And she received me. But she was delighted." I asked what it was that gave Silvy the courage to directly approach Beryl when she hadn't been able to do that with earlier women she was attracted to.

"Well this woman didn't reject me. The other one, rejected me...There was certainly that. I'm sure that was it...So, why I became this woman's lover is that she said yes....And oddly enough the woman who had tears in her eyes, who was an amateur poetess and who probably loved me...and I liked her greatly. I wasn't in love with her. Years later she wrote me a letter and told me she was a lesbian...And she sent me a picture of her with the young dykey woman, they were both in leather and on motorcycles. So I wrote back to her telling her indeed I was living a lesbian life. So that was a good example. I mean, she was the...county poetess of the year or something like that, and my age exactly. And used to send me passionate love poems that had been written to women whom she couldn't address this to. That they were sent to me is a form of wooing. But it was never overt."

During the telling of her story, Silvy talked about what makes a woman a lesbian. "The more I hear of lesbian life the more I'm convinced that we're all somewhere on the spectrum dictated more by chance than by genes. Experience and our cultural backgrounds, rather than any intrinsic qualities lesbians have because lesbians are just like

other women, except that they are led to trust women rather than men." I asked why some women become lesbians and others don't. She said, "I think there's probably a component of imagination that perhaps bourgeois women are afraid to buck society. I really don't think it has much to do with genealogy. Because God knows, nobody in our family that I know of lived this way...Freud tells us that the normal transition from the bonding with women to attraction to men is what, 14 or so. And that gay women don't make this transition. But I don't know if my married friends make this transition either...And they're frustrated, unhappy."

Analysis

Silvy made her change from within the women's sphere in which many traditional women lived: the world of women at home during weekdays when men are at work. In this women's sphere were love, desire, and passion, expressed in friendship, companionship, and shared activities by many "heterosexual" women. Sexuality between women was strictly tabooed. Silvy was reconstructing her gender and sexuality when she realized that she was in love with Beryl and then became Beryl's lover. Her conviction that they were doomed

and damned reflects the cultural construction of lesbian of that time, 1963, six years before Stonewall and the year The Feminine Mystique was published. Silvy resisted patriarchal norms by leaving her husband; and by realizing that she, and women in general, were not really part of the patriarchal culture; and by viewing lesbianism as a political statement. All this was made possible, in part, by the feminist analysis. Her sense of womanhood was enhanced by her lesbian experience because she could play both roles of lover and beloved and feel "intensely female." Silvy has reconstructed lesbian from someone doomed and damned, to a normal woman with enough imagination to make her life with another woman.

Maggy: A gradual political progression

Maggy found out about my study from a notice I posted at a lesbian dance and called me to volunteer. We met at the library of the university where she teaches. A petite 45 year old with short red hair, Maggy was a thoughtful and interested participant. She grew up in a suburb of a major mid-western city. Her family was middle class white European, and her parents were divorced when she was 14. Her mother worked as a waitress and a bookkeeper. Maggy has two younger sisters. She dropped out of college to get married at 21 and was divorced three years later. She worked at various secretarial jobs and finished college. She was married again at about 35, also for about three years. She got married for the third time at 40, and was divorced about four years later. She has no children. During the time between her first marriage and her third divorce she lived in various urban, suburban, and rural parts of the U.S. She was living in a small town in the Northeast at the time of the interview. When she moved to the Northeast she already had a master's degree. She taught and worked on her doctorate. She had been a

feminist for a number of years, and then began teaching women's studies courses. About nine months before the interview Maggy had met a lesbian with whom she had first become friends. After a while she realized that she was sexually attracted to her, and the two soon became lovers. Maggy said she now identifies as a lesbian.

Maggy describes her change as the result of a gradual political progression: her feminism took her more and more into a female-oriented world where she got closer and closer to women and further and further from men.

Reconstructing Lesbian

"My best friend in the area, while I was going through the worst of my marriage, and the divorce, is a woman who is an out lesbian, and we'd been good friends for a couple of years. She was going through the end of a bad lesbian relationship. And her split-up [was] just about chronologically the same time as I was struggling with mine. And it was very helpful and very interesting, partially because she identifies herself as a butch dyke, very specifically. And very articulately. Her partner was definitely a more femme woman, and so with our two relationships, she actually could help me understand my

husband better because she had the more male view and I could help her understand her partner's side more, because it was more the wifely role. We were very close through those problems, as well as just enjoying each other thoroughly...And we're both radical feminists, which helped too. We did not have a [sexual] relationship...we talked about lesbianism, and heterosexuality, and homosexuality, I mean we talked it out for years. We talked about what makes a gay person different, and we decided actually not too much, often...We've also talked about how do you define a lesbian. And her definition is, you don't. She defines herself. But also...if you are living a so-called straight life...but in your heart you believe that you're a lesbian, or gay, what are you? Is it the lifestyle or is it the person? And also, if you have no sex life whatsoever, can you call yourself a heterosexual or can you call yourself a lesbian? And so we talked about all these philosophical issues. It was wonderful. But I had these years in my radical feminism and also with her, and we sometimes teased and called it, the education of Maggy...actually I think she would have liked a relationship, at the time. But I wasn't ready, I wasn't ready in a lot of ways. She would

often ask me, 'You are so female oriented in your life, in your philosophy, in your thinking, in your teaching, how can you be heterosexual?' And my answer was always, 'I don't know.' And I really didn't. I thought I was heterosexual, but I didn't know why except, well it was assumed that we were, the way we grew up in the '50s and '60s...But that relationship, although it wasn't sexual with her, was wonderful. She opened my mind a lot to some of the more subtle homophobia in our culture. Just the assumption that everybody is heterosexual...

"Then just last summer...there was a particular woman...that I was very struck with. And this [has] always been true about women...I see a woman...And I'm really struck with her appearance. And I think she's just very handsome or attractive, whatever you call it. And I admire her in a physical sense. I've never identified that as sexual before. But I've always recognized the fact that I really admire women who carry themselves well, who look confident, who look strong. And I always thought of that as a more feminist stance than gay. So there's this woman...who was very intriguing for many reasons, including physically. She was very interesting, and she seemed to be

my opposite in many ways. She's artistic, creative, flamboyant, all those things that I don't identify myself as. So there was a kind of mutual opposites attract, because as it turned out...she needed stability and structure, which unfortunately is more what I seem to represent...So we struck up a friendship...I think I knew she was gay...something had let me know, but she told me that she was very attracted to me. And then I think she quickly said, before I had time to say anything, 'But that's my problem, I'll deal with that.' And I told her that I thought I was a heterosexual and that we could have a friendship and so, okay, she agreed, and that's what we did for a couple of months. And so we got to know each other, thinking that there was nothing sexual involved, when actually it was, a bit. Not overtly. But there was attraction there. Definitely. Then...she went out of town for about 10 days and in that absence I thought a lot about her, and my attraction to her, and I realized more in her absence that it was more physical, and in fact, a sexual spark...I can't really tell you what it is about her that changed my attitudes and my life. And then when she returned, I picked her up at the train station, and there

was immediate reaction...And so we had dinner, and I took her home, and she leaned over and kissed me. And she was surprised that I didn't pull away, and I was surprised that I didn't pull away. But it made me realize my feelings more. And then it took off from there. It turned out that she has so many personal individual problems that it disintegrated. But I don't think it had anything to do with it being two women."

Entering a Women's Sphere

I asked Maggy why she thinks she changed. She answered, "I think a lot of it is kind of [a] political progression that my feminism takes me more and more into a female-oriented world. I got closer and closer to women, in all senses of the words, and I got more distant from men, and I have seen them increasingly as foreign objects. And just really have no desire to deal with them...So I think in a way it was kind of a gradual political thing...It also has to do with my close friendship with lesbians in making it a viable alternative for me. And then at the same time, conveniently, this very attractive woman who was attracted to me appeared and it seems to be a kind of coincidence of things." When Maggie had been

describing her growing up, she had said, "All my life has been a very female-oriented world," because of her father's departure from Maggie's mother and two sisters.

Resisting Patriarchy

Maggy had said, while telling me about her heterosexual life, that after her first two divorces, "I had this euphoric feeling, when I felt free." She described driving away from her second husband: "I remember that song from Flashdance, 'Oh What a Feeling,' came on the radio of the moving van. And I turned it up and the whole east coast must have heard it. I mean, I felt liberated again." In addition, she said, she loved living alone, "even though a lot of times when I did it was not a perfectly acceptable thing for a woman to do, live alone and admit she liked it."

I asked Maggy if her experience of her sexuality changed after she became a lesbian. "No...I've had fairly fulfilling sexual relations with men at certain times, but certainly my mood was not good last year after a third divorce. I started thinking of heterosexual lovemaking as invasive. And violent. And I don't mean that in, like I didn't consent. I don't mean it in a rape kind of

violence, just that maybe it's the invasiveness that seems violent. I also don't like the fact that most men seem to be so orgasm oriented, and women less so. So there's things I didn't like about heterosexual sex."

Reconstructing Gender and Sexuality

I asked Maggy if her sense of her gendered self changed after she changed, her sense of herself as a woman or as feminine. She said, "No, because I've never thought of myself as feminine. And I have never, never been very feminine...I've always tended toward more androgynous clothes."

In talking about her transition from a heterosexual relationship to a lesbian one, Maggie said, "Nothing seemed odd or unnatural, it just seemed a natural expression of what I was feeling. So it seems like the sex is an extension of my fondness feelings, and it to me was not like changing categories. It didn't seem revolutionary to me. It, as I say, seemed to be part of a progression of my life. It seemed to be the next logical step. It was certainly comfortable."

I also asked Maggy if her ideas about what gender and sexuality are changed when she changed. "Not then. I

would say they have changed during the previous couple of years with my friendship with the lesbian. So it's an awareness of lesbianism changed my attitudes tremendously. My own actions haven't yet."

Enhanced Womanhood

I then asked if her views of herself as a woman had changed. Maggie replied, "If they did, it was definitely for the better. And to be more full. I don't feel like anything got compromised. If anything, it's a greater fulfillment. As a woman. Also, it feels true, it feels honest."

Analysis

Maggie's is the story of entering a women's sphere, getting closer and closer to women, some of whom were lesbians, and then easily and naturally becoming lesbian. Maggie sees the whole progression as a political one. Also important in Maggie's story was the reconstruction of lesbian, which took place in her friendship and discussions with one particular lesbian. One way that Maggie reconstructed her sexuality was coming to see her liking the appearance of strong women as sexual attraction, and not simply feminist approval. Maggie was resisting

patriarchy when she realized that she had felt free and happy after her first two divorces, and that she was happier living alone than she was with any man, even though at that time women weren't supposed to enjoy being alone. She moved further away from the ruling sex/gender/sexuality order after her third divorce when, she said, she saw heterosexual sex as violent and invasive, a view that is in accord with a radical lesbian perspective on sex with men. The groundwork for these resistances was probably laid when Maggie resisted female gender norms of dressing, early in her adulthood. One result of all these resistances was lifting the tent flap and allowing Maggie to see that there was another way besides the patriarchal order. Her reconstruction of gender occurred well before her lesbian experience, when she became a feminist and learned to value resistance to femininity. She reconstructed her sexuality after her lesbian experience, seeing sexuality as an extension of fondness, rather than related to men. She finds with her lesbian identity an enhanced experience of being a woman.

Iris: "My life has flowed along"

Iris responded to a notice of my study posted at a lesbian dance. We met at the house on a small village green that she shares with two other women. Iris, who is 35, is lanky and has light brown hair in a braid down her neck. She owns her own small business. She is the fifth of six children of a factory worker and a butcher who had many financial worries. They lived in a suburban Northeastern town. Iris left home at 17 to go to a state university, where she studied the traditionally male field in which she now works and owns a small business. After college she worked for several firms in her field and got an MBA. She also married when she was 25 and was divorced five years later. At the time her marriage was coming apart she met a lesbian and they became lovers.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse was the first thing Iris talked about when I asked her to describe her family. She said, "Well, there was a lot of dynamics in my family. My father's an alcoholic. And there was a lot of stuff. He was also very abusive, he sexually abused all of his daughters, so there

were lots of interesting things going on in my family.

Never a dull moment."

Iris describes her change as the result of getting involved with a woman who was a lesbian, but said that she would have come out eventually, even if she hadn't met that particular woman.

"I had an experience when I was 12 years old, but I thought it was really dysfunctional. I mean the woman was 17 or 18. Not a healthy lesbian relationship. Kind of freaked me out I think. My oldest sister is a lesbian. So I grew up with that. She came out probably when she was in college and...I might have been 14 or 15. And I was always pretty accepting of my sister. I mean not really, at that point, I was seeing men and that sort of thing. And my family was very open about it. She could bring her lovers home and they could sleep in the same room. I think cause my family was so dysfunctional, hey, at this point what did it make a difference? So I'd always been really close to my oldest sister about it. My feeling was, whatever makes you happy. I never really cared one way or the other. She was happy and that's all that mattered. But there were a lot of things that started to happen to me. See it's hard

to say, because I've been abused so I don't know if I would have been a lesbian without that or not. I can't say because unfortunately the abuse started at 4 years old so there's no time frame there to even figure that out. So when I was going through a pretty tough time with the abuse, I was having memories and stuff, I started going to this incest group, and that's where I met that woman. The divorce came about six months later...There was so much going on in my life. I was trying to deal with the incest and the memories and just everything was going on. And my husband and I just weren't getting along, and I met this woman and she seemed very comforting and it seemed like a really wonderful thing to do...It started off sort of fairly harmless. I would just sort of go visit her and talk to her...until one day [my husband] went away on a business trip, so I invited her to come over for dinner and oh, one thing led to another, and she ended up staying over and, like, oh, wow...So we had quite the affair throughout the summer and I just decided that I wanted to have more, I wanted to have a relationship with her. So then we decided to get divorced." Iris and her first woman lover lived together for three and a half years until they broke up

about three months before the interview. "But I'm definitely gonna stay a lesbian, I enjoy it much more. Much more than being with men."

Entering a Women's Sphere

I asked Iris why she became a lesbian. "Well, first and foremost it felt safer to me. I just felt less threatened. Most women to me seem less threatening. Not all of them, but most of them are kind and courteous and at least think about your feelings and, I just feel better. It's hard to describe. I definitely felt just a lot happier than I had ever been. Like, wow, where have I been all these years?...I feel more comfortable around women. It's more of a sense of a community too, where people are willing to help each other out...I don't turn to my family for support. I was turning to my women friends for support...I've been the happiest I've been in a long time." I asked Iris if she thought she would have become a lesbian even if she hadn't met the woman who became her first adult lesbian lover. "I think so, I was headed in that direction. It may not happen quite as fast. I seemed to be hanging around women more and more. I mean even though I was working on my MBA and there were a lot of men in the

program I just seemed to always gravitate towards the women. I was hanging out with my women friends a lot more."

When she was responding to a question about changes she experienced after becoming a lesbian, Iris said, "It's not like there's before and after...It just seems like my life has all flowed along...It was more what people's perception of me was. And that's been changed more. I felt okay, my life was flowing along and, sure there was quite a bit of catalyst to have these changes happen, but, looking back on it, things just sort of flowed along. It didn't really seem like it came out of thin air, though people felt like it did."

I asked what there was in her experience or feelings that made it not come out of thin air for her. She answered, "I think cause of the relationship with my sister that I always felt somewhat connected in a way, and...I guess I think a lot of being a lesbian too is being real open-minded and into women's issues...My sister had always kept me open to all of those things, in that she would never let me get too closed-minded or let me forget about some of the things that were going on. So I always felt

sort of connected. Cause I would go and visit her and go off and do things in her life as being a lesbian, I'd...do those things with her. So I guess it just never felt too far away from me."

Reconstructing Woman

I asked Iris if her sense of herself as a woman changed when she became a lesbian. "Yeah, because I think when you're straight, at least my perception, even though I had a very good career, and at times I was supporting my household, people still define you in relationship to your partner. In my case it was my husband. They always think of you as having a man around, and needing help...Whereas now I'm much more independent and if I look to someone for help I'm looking to them for help because I know they have expertise in that, not just cause, my husband's there so obviously he should know how to like fix the car or take care of something with the house...I have to look to myself more to find solutions to things."

Resisting Patriarchy

I asked Iris if she felt like a feminine woman when she was straight. "No...I guess I think of being feminine and, maybe stereotype but, wearing dresses and makeup and

fussing with your hair and all that sort of thing. I mean I was into [her field], I've always had dirt under my fingernails and wore pants and work boots and always worked around men." I asked Iris if she felt comfortable about that. "Yeah, that was always okay with me. I always felt that I was who I was and I just never wanted to indulge in any of that. I was never brought up around that. One of my sisters, couple of my sisters were into it, but I just never ever got into it. So it always felt comfortable to me...not being very feminine, though I'm sure I do have some feminine qualities. I mean there have to be a few there somewhere." I asked what she thought they were. "Well, I suppose it means you don't have to dress up to be feminine, but I guess that's the only way I know how...well, like if I compare myself to [her first lover] I guess I did have a little bit more feminine qualities to me. Even though I don't dress up and wear makeup, and fuss with my hair. But normally I do pay somewhat attention to what I look like. Feminine, I guess I'd never describe myself that way."

Reconstructing Sex

I asked Iris if her experience of her sexuality

changed when she became a lesbian. "Yeah. I enjoy sex a lot more. I mean you always wonder, if you could have met a man who was more patient, or that sort of thing, who knows. You can only deal with the experiences that you've got. Cause it's sort of all wrapped up with the sexual abuse stuff. There were points I did have some trouble but [her first woman lover] was pretty patient and tried to help me work through them. Cause intimacy is not something that's very easy for me. So I'd say for the most part it was a lot better. I enjoyed it a lot more, definitely excited a lot more, cause it seemed like my husband, we got into the same old routine. Plus he wanted to experiment a lot which I didn't feel very comfortable with...I remember at different times through the relationship he wanted to have a little menage a trois with another woman, and so when people think about me becoming a lesbian, like I said, to me it doesn't really feel that far away, cause it was always on the fringes."

Empowerment

I asked if Iris's sense of what it meant to be a woman changed when she became a lesbian. "I think it definitely changed. I felt like I blossomed more. I felt that my

self as a woman, I felt like I had more to offer the world, because people weren't looking at me as, you know with a man. They were looking at me just as myself. That I am who I am, cause I guess that had been my whole life, I'd been with men for like 30 years. And I was like, oh, this is great. I'm a woman, and I have a lot to offer to the world, because I had come pretty far, at this point. But you know, people tend to view you as, what you're married and, isn't that wonderful? But in the relationship, I felt my career was going a lot further than his, I was making a lot more money, and I felt like I was in such a better place. But people don't look at that. It came down to, I felt like I had given more to the relationship...[When I became a lesbian] I just felt a lot stronger, I guess being in more supportive relationships I felt stronger to go off and to try my own business, and I feel just more and more confident in the things that I do...I think I started off this way as a teenager and got away from it a lot, though I tend to sort of, maybe hide behind my husband or other people...I just feel more confident [in] a lot of the decisions that I make or things that I do. I don't worry so much about how other people are gonna react, cause being

a lesbian, you've already gone and done something that people are really gonna, it's quite an eye-opener to some people. So I figure, hey, what the heck, at this point, anything else I do is probably mellow compared to that. So I think a lot more of my own personality that was sort of squelched is starting to come out a lot more...When I was in high school I joined a lot of groups, I was really active, and I would just go and meet people. Sure, I'm nervous like everybody else when you go in there, but after a while you meet somebody you get along with and then it's okay...So I feel a lot more confident about going out and doing those things." I asked Iris what happened to that confidence she had in high school. "It's like I got wrapped up in my husband there, he introduced me to all of his friends, and it just got sorta warm and cozy, so you didn't have to go off and meet, cause...when you go off and meet somebody new, or enter a new experience...There's quite a bit of nervousness there for a while, till you really feel comfortable."

Reconstructing Lesbian

I asked Iris to talk more about the relationship she had when she was 12 with a 17 year old girl. "I ended up meeting her through summer camp and I went over to her house and so we had a sexual relationship for a while. And that was good for a while. I knew there was 6 years difference, and there wasn't something quite right about it, but it certainly was enjoyable." I asked Iris what that relationship meant to her. "Feelings are always tough for me, so feelings? What are those? Well the sex was good, and it was somebody who paid me a lot of attention, and at 12 and 13 that's a wonderful thing. To have someone lavish love and attention on you and we would just have an enjoyable time talking and doing different things together."

I asked what Iris thought about what the two of them were doing. "It seemed okay. I mean after all the crazy things that were happening in my house, you just sort of fell in stride with different things. The only way I knew that it wasn't what was supposed to happen, cause she kinda when adults [were] around she would try to hide it. I mean I just sort of felt it. It wasn't probably completely

right."

When her sister came out, I asked, did Iris think she might be a lesbian too? Did it make her think about her experience with the girl from camp? "No because by that time I got involved with boys. And so I didn't think that I was gonna go off in that direction. And I think at that point too I wanted so much to fit in. Already I knew because of the incest I didn't fit in. And I think I was really striving to fit in. Cause just in talking to my sister I could hear that being a lesbian, you didn't always fit in. People didn't always accept it as my folks did. Cause she had a friend who, her parents threw her out of the house, and tried to beat her up, the whole nine yards, the whole horrible story that you hear...And I just really wanted to fit in, and had enough in my life, things going on where I knew I didn't fit in so wherever I could fit in I would try."

I also asked Iris if, looking back on it now, she thought that she had changed, had become what she was, or something else. "Yeah, I definitely think I just became more of who I was meant to be. It's hard though. I mean I do like to experiment and go out and try new things. So

who knows. If I had immediately, [after] that initial lesbian relationship had gone on to others, who knows, I probably still would have experimented with men too, I think. But I definitely feel that I would probably always come back to this. But there's times, you go back and forth about being a lesbian. I mean it's a tough row to hoe sometimes. Oh, people aren't always accepting of it...Not all of the people that I'm around know that I am, I don't feel like I should go shouting it to the world. So there [are] times that I want to just sort of crawl back into my cocoon and just say, 'Well maybe I can live with this, being heterosexual,' but there's a part of me that just feels so squashed, so smothered when I [am heterosexual]."

Analysis

Iris told a story of feeling different because she was sexually abused and her family was so dysfunctional, and trying to fit in by being heterosexual. She resisted the patriarchy by picking a field that is still traditionally male. Iris's entry into a women's sphere probably took place when she had the abusive sexual relationship with an older girl at 12. That relationship showed her both that

love and sex with a woman could be pleasurable and that such a relationship would be one more way in which Iris would feel she was doing something unhealthy that made her not fit in. That is the conflict about lesbianism that she continues to feel to the present; the conflict between enjoying a lesbian relationship and wanting to fit in. Iris had positive experiences in a women's sphere when she joined her lesbian sister at women's and lesbian events and activities and could experience the supportiveness of the women's community. She found her own women's sphere in an MBA program, even though most of the students were men, by spending more and more time with the women, whom she found more supportive and more pleasant to be with. Iris reconstructed her sexuality as a lesbian who enjoyed sex much more than she had with men. After she became a lesbian, Iris reconstructed woman as independent. She didn't have to grapple with the issue of femininity because she had never thought of herself as feminine, and never seemed to have a problem with that. Becoming a lesbian empowered her, giving her the courage to start her own business. It also gave her a sense of freedom because she feels nothing else she could do would be as potentially

condemnable by others as being a lesbian. Iris also feels that she has reclaimed the confidence she had when she was a teenager which she thinks was squelched by heterosexuality.

CHAPTER 5: EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is an important theme in most of the women's stories. For many, this process seemed essential in their change from heterosexual to lesbian. For others, it was a result of their change to claiming a lesbian identity and living a lesbian life. Lucy and Lorraine told stories in which empowerment was the central theme, the most important part of their journey to lesbian identities.

Lucy Brown: "Everything in my Life has Worked Towards Where I am Today"

Lucy saw the notice about my study at the lesbian dance and called to volunteer. I interviewed her in her apartment in a rural Northeastern town. A full-time college student, Lucy, 41, is a very happy-looking woman with short, light red hair. Her background is French and Polish. She grew up in a small Northeastern city, the next-to-the-oldest of eight children. Her father, a mechanic for a large corporation, was in and out of mental hospitals and her parents were divorced when she was 15.

Her mother stayed home. Lucy went to Catholic school and got married for the first time when she was 21. About six years later, when her first child was a year old, she and her husband were divorced. About a year after her divorce she met a man who was living with his three children by a previous marriage. She moved in with him and eventually married him. They had one child together. He became abusive and eventually Lucy left him and now lives with her two sons, ages 14 and 9. She is preparing for a career in the arts. About a year before the interview, Lucy had begun exploring the possibility that she was a lesbian. She became involved with her first woman lover about four months before the interview.

Lucy described her change as part of a long process that has been going on for most of her life.

"It's not something that kinda like all of a sudden happened. It's been happening my whole life, but I never paid attention to it. It simply was not allowed, it was inconceivable that I should be a lesbian and I simply couldn't even entertain the thought. I couldn't do it. It was against everything that I had ever been taught. So when I did have thoughts, I didn't even connect them and

when I did connect them, I was so ashamed of them I just dismissed them entirely from my life. But in therapy I had been looking at it, at whether or not I was a lesbian, for about...eight years. But every time I brought it up, I would say, 'But I don't want to talk about it.' And that's been going on for a long time. And finally, like two years ago, I finally began to look at it, but even then, it was like, why would I want to look at that? Why would I want to add another thing to my life. Who in their right mind would want to look at that? And so again, I put it aside. But I can remember loving my girlfriend intensely. I can remember I had a sleep-over and all I wanted to do was hold her. And because I wasn't allowed to, I cried...But I never ever looked at what that meant. It was simply a feeling. I was maybe a sophomore in high school...Another experience that I can recall was I had just gotten married the first time, I was maybe 22 at the time. And there was a girl that I worked for. Looking back, I think she was a lesbian. And I think that she was pursuing a relationship and I was having active fantasies, awake fantasies [of] making love to her. And at one point she called me, while I was fantasizing, and it scared the hell out of me. And I

just shut down completely, just dismissed her from my life, never had another meaningful contact with her. And then, through the years in therapy I'd bring it up but then dismiss it. And absolutely refuse to deal with it...It was simply impossible for me to deal with it.

Break With Patriarchy

And it wasn't until a year and a half ago that I really said, 'Well I'm tired of not looking, I'm tired of pretending, the least I could do for myself was look.'...Because it just kept coming around, and I wasn't happy with heterosexual relations. In the past five or six years, my friendships with women grew in intensity and I really became free to say to these women that I loved them...But then when I started looking at whether or not I was a lesbian, I wasn't even in relationship. I had no intention of being in a relationship...And so I started looking at it just from the idea of it felt like it might be a comfortable thing. And surprisingly enough, which I can't even believe I didn't mention this to you, but my brother was gay. My brother died this past December. He died of AIDS. He was 31...and so the issue of homosexuality had been in my family for like 10 years or

so. And it took me quite a while to accept that homosexuality is okay...to accept that what he was simply was. And eventually...I chose a therapist who was lesbian. Not to deal with those issues, but to deal with incest. And I chose her not because she was a lesbian, but because she was a woman." I asked Lucy if she knew the therapist was a lesbian when she chose her. "No, not when I chose her. But when I walked in I knew she was a lesbian, I just knew...But what happened in therapy was, when I did bring up, well, I want to look at whether or not I'm a lesbian, she didn't let me put it down as easily as my male therapist had. She really [said], 'Well maybe you oughta just look at why you don't want to look at it.' And so eventually I really did address some of my fears and...I started reading and I started finding out about what could I do if I were.

"And what I ended up doing was I went out to San Francisco to be with my brother and it was there that I first really looked at it. And I said to him, 'I think I might be a lesbian, but I...just haven't done a thing.'...I told him I wanted to meet all his friends. And I had a wonderful time. And I ended up telling his friends, so I

talked more with his friends about it and then they introduced me to some lesbians and stuff like that. And so it was a safe place for me to test, because I didn't have to live there. It was just last summer. So it was fun, cause San Francisco's wonderful. I mean it was really healthy for me to be there to test, because out there being gay is the norm. And that's what I needed. I needed to feel okay about it, and it was good. So I came back and I decided that what I'd had in my life, there was a lot that I really wasn't satisfied with. Being a Catholic sucked. In plain English. And I really needed just to leave it behind. I needed to make some changes in my friendships...And I needed to look at what would make me happy. And finding out about lesbian community was one of the things that I thought would make me happy."

Reconstructing Lesbian

Lucy said she began asking about the lesbian community with everyone she could think of who might know about it. She found out about a nearby lesbian dance. "It seemed to be a social kind of non-threatening environment, and so what I did was on Labor Day weekend, I decided that was it. I can't stand this any more. I'm just gonna do it. I'm

scared to death, but I'm gonna do it anyway.

"And so I drove down...all by myself. I went early. I walked in the door and I said to [the woman who runs it], 'Could you tell me a little bit about this place?' And she goes, 'Well dear, you know that it is a lesbian dance.' And I said yes, I knew that much. Well what she ended up doing was she introduced me to...all these women who turned out, they're the greatest. They're really nice people and I sat with them all night. I was scared to death. Really. It was such a shock. It took a while to get accustomed to the fact that women love women. I don't know how to explain that whole thing. I can remember my first dance. One of the women that I met the first night, she said to me, 'Well, you know, you have to do this. You have to get beyond this. You have to dance your first slow dance.'...And I got out there and it was like...what do I do? Where do I put my hands? And she told me later on that I danced like I was cardboard. Because it was so different. Well, she was big breasted too. And I had never danced with someone with breasts before...I was very, very distant, very stiff, very uncomfortable. But I loved being there. I love dancing. That was the draw for

me...so I would dance all the time to the fast dances. I would just be on the floor all the time...And so I met some people that way. Then what slowly took place was that...I wanted more. I wanted a relationship...And, I got involved in [a lesbian organization] and started doing some social things there and at college...and they had a counseling group for people that were addressing issues surrounding your sexuality. So I did that. And I met Grace. I'm in a relationship right now. And, have a lover. And that is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me in my whole life. It is my very first intimate relationship, my very first ever. And it's difficult to change from being heterosexual to being lesbian. I've come out to some of my sisters, I've come out to both of my children, I've come out to my important friends...And although it's difficult it's like the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. I just feel so good. It fits. It fits so well."

I asked Lucy why she changed from straight to lesbian. She said, "Because I wasn't happy...I didn't enjoy the thought of ever having another heterosexual relationship. I didn't want to."

Enhanced Womanhood

I asked her if her sense of herself as a woman had changed. "Absolutely," she said. "I just feel empowered. I really do. I feel like this is who I am and it's good and it's wonderful. I feel like a warrior woman. In my youth and early adulthood, I felt very intimidated, very insecure, very unworthy. And now, I feel really good about myself and I feel like I've planted my feet and I've said 'Yes, I am a woman, and I love who I am.' So, yes. My image of myself, my ideas, it's just been very thrilling."

Reconstructing Woman

As she was telling her story, Lucy said that in her early exploratory activities, before she met Grace, she "met a few people and I started considering whether or not to have relations... Fortunately, I used my head instead of my lust to determine whether or not to continue relationships and I chose to get out of them as soon as I felt that it was just not good. Which was new because in the past in my heterosexual relationships I ignored warning signs. Where now I was at a space where I was paying attention to my needs myself."

Resisting Patriarchy

I then asked Lucy what kind of things she had been afraid of in her past that she wasn't afraid of any more. "I was thinking about what the difference is between a heterosexual relationship for me and a lesbian relationship. And the difference is one of power. That in a heterosexual relationship, I never could feel that I had any power. I was always subjugated, I was always under, less than. Whereas in a lesbian relationship there isn't that...It's not a question of power, who has more, who has less...it's just relationship. It's not even so much that it's equal, it's just that that whole power thing is gone."

I also asked Lucy what kind of woman she thought she was when she was straight, and whether that had changed with her change to a lesbian life. She said, "I felt as a heterosexual, I thought I was an attractive woman, and it was important for me to be attractive. And that was more important than what I did for work. I was a good mother, that was very important, but who I was as an individual simply wasn't important. It mattered more who I was to others. Whereas now, how can I put that? It doesn't matter so much who I am to others, or, what I do. But who

I am to me."

Reconstructing Sex

I asked Lucy if her experience of her sexuality changed when she changed from straight to lesbian, and she said, "Absolutely. Well, I am having joy in sex. Before, I, well, now I'm kind of embarrassed. What came to mind kind of embarrassed me. But I feel okay talking about it. I think that I enjoyed masturbating more than I enjoyed having sex as a heterosexual. And, that has changed now, absolutely, 180 degrees, since I've become a lesbian. I'm amazed, I'm amazed at how wonderful it is, and no one could ever have told me, I wouldn't have believed it."

As she was telling her story, Lucy had said, "When I think about what it was like to have a heterosexual sexual relation, my feeling was, "You want me to do what?" And I was just really never satisfied...And I thought it was me. I thought there was something wrong with me. That somehow I wasn't enough, or I didn't give enough, I didn't do enough, I didn't know how to, or whatever. Not recognizing that it simply wasn't right."

Empowerment

I asked Lucy if her views of what being a woman is changed when she became a lesbian. "Yeah, but it wasn't only as a result of this change. Coinciding with my change into recognizing my lesbianism, I also am taking a minor in women's studies, and so I've been revolutionized. You know, everything was happening ideally, it's been such an awakening. Being empowered as a woman and recognizing that being a feminist is not a dirty word...that it's very empowering, that it's something healthy...I've had some really good instructors at college who are feminist, very strong feminists, and they've really presented their ideas rationally rather than emotionally. And, it's made a big difference in how I perceive feminists." Lucy also said, "It hasn't been isolated events, it's been this whole series of everything that's worked towards, everything in my life has worked towards where I am today." I asked her to talk more about that. She said, "Well, when I went through my first divorce I became extremely depressed. I don't know how I survived, looking back on it. I mean clinical depression. I gave away everything that meant anything to me, which is a sign of severe depression. I

was extremely isolated. My family is incapable of dealing with feelings. And so they were incapable of being there for me...So, that was when I began counseling, and I think that I decided at some point in that depression...that I wanted to live. And that that meant for me that even though I was afraid, I was going to deal with things. And that began my process of uncovering all the secrets in my life...And so it was a slow change from that point on of trying to do things in my life to make my life better. And it took years and years and years...it's been a slow process of opening up memories...and really looking at things for what they really are instead of...I had all these lies that I really believed. And so it was that dismantling of the lies. And one of the things that took me that long was to allow myself to feel. I disconnected from feelings and that took the longest to heal and to be allowed to feel my feelings...it was a process of recognizing that I'm okay. And I'm okay in my sexuality. Whatever that is. And, just accepting my feelings, just recognizing them and enjoying them. And it was a putting down of fear, too. I was afraid of life, I was afraid of everything. And it was just a slow putting down of fears.

Putting down of fear of looking into whether or not I was a lesbian. But it's been a process. And it wasn't an isolated thing, it wasn't just looking at whether or not I was a lesbian, it was looking at everything. For the longest time I thought that what I wanted, what I felt, what I needed wasn't valid. It was always what everybody else thought that I needed."

Analysis

Lucy's story is one of a long slow process of coming into her own and becoming empowered. It seems that looking at feelings of attraction to women was something she could only do after a considerable amount of empowerment had taken place. Lucy's empowering experiences, in addition to her therapy, were feminism and women's studies courses. Becoming a lesbian, Lucy feels, was the ultimate empowerment, resulting in her feelings of strength and power and happiness to be a woman. Lucy's reconstruction of woman involved a change from feeling that what was important for her as a heterosexual woman was to be attractive, to be a good mother, and to be what others wanted; to feeling that what is important as a lesbian woman is her work, who she is as an individual, and who she

is to herself. Lucy's break with patriarchy began when she realized how unhappy she was with relationships with men, and her friendships with women became more important and intense, and she got more comfortable about loving her women friends. Then, she chose a woman therapist who was a lesbian, and who urged Lucy to look at her feelings about lesbianism. The therapist surely also served as a model for a strong woman and a lesbian. Lucy's visit to her brother in San Francisco where she talked about her interest in women with him and with his gay and lesbian friends was an important route for Lucy to lift the tent flap and see that the ruling discourse of gender and sexuality isn't the only one possible. Her time with gays and lesbians in a place where she felt homosexuality was the norm showed Lucy that it was possible to live a lesbian life. She began reconstructing lesbian when she got back home and looked for the lesbians there. This was also a way for her to explore the possibilities of identifying herself as lesbian, and to see what that kind of life would be like in her home in the Northeast. When she got involved with her lover, Lucy claimed a lesbian identity and began living a lesbian life. She then began

reconstructing her sexuality as something exciting and joyful, which it hadn't been with men. Lucy feels she has left behind the power imbalances and struggles of heterosexuality; in doing so, she has stepped out of the patriarchy and the male gaze. In Lucy's story, becoming a lesbian is just one part, although an important one, of becoming empowered and validating herself and her desires.

Lorraine: "It Was Very Natural Because I Was Such a Strong Feminist"

I met Lorraine in a women's group in a small Northeastern city. When she said that she had been married before she became a lesbian I told her about my study and asked to interview her. She said yes very willingly. We met at her home in a nearby town. It was a small house she shared with her 19 year old son and her partner of about four years, Arlene. We sat in a cozy study with our hot cups of herb tea. It was a nasty winter Sunday and Lorraine was nursing a bad back and I a cold. Lorraine had short grey hair and a quiet, distracted manner. She was 48 years old and described herself as a WASP. She worked as a technical specialist in the corporate world. Lorraine grew up in a midwestern city. Her parents had grown up on farms and hadn't gone to college. Her father worked for a small loan company and her mother was a homemaker. When Lorraine left for college at a midwestern state university she never came back, becoming estranged from her family during the turbulent '60s. However, they still have a relationship, and Lorraine talks with her mother on the phone almost

every week. After her bachelor's degree, Lorraine did most of a master's degree at another midwestern university, where she met and married her husband. They moved to a northeastern state around 1970 when he got a teaching job there, and then she got a master's degree in another field, had her son, and then began working in her new field. At the same time, she became very active in the feminist movement and was first a member and then a leader of consciousness-raising groups. Among the women in her feminist political activities were many lesbians, the first she had ever been aware of meeting. Eventually, around 1976, at the age of about 31, she became the lover of one of the feminist leaders. By that time, her marriage had come apart. A year later, she and her husband separated, and Lorraine's woman lover moved in with her. She has lived a lesbian life ever since.

Lorraine describes her change from straight to lesbian as "a very slow process" of political development from radical feminism in the '70s to a lesbian life.

Entering a Women's Sphere

Lorraine had begun her story by saying, "Well, I think my story is fairly common. In 1970 or so...I got involved

in consciousness raising...at first I was in a group and then I helped start groups." She added, "I identified myself at that point as actually a radical feminist."

Reconstructing Lesbian

She described how her relationship with Shirley developed. "It was very natural and very easy for me because I was such a strong feminist and had been for several years...The thought of being a lesbian was just very natural because of where politically I was. You know, it didn't seem like any transition at all. Because I was spending so much time being the token straight...I felt, I guess, a fair amount of support when it finally happened ...Shirley...was a very charismatic person...We used to joke about [the feminist organization] being incestuous, like, everybody had been her lover, wanted to be her lover, was her lover."

Reconstructing Sexuality

In answer to one of my questions, Lorraine said, "I don't know how long it took, actually. It's all very hard to say because I came out, then it was even a while before I told my ex-husband what was going on because I really didn't know what to say. I didn't know what it meant. You

know, I could go in and I could say, 'Well I'm sleeping with a woman,' and the next question, 'Well, what does this mean about us or our relationship?' and the answer is 'Well I have no idea.'"

I asked Lorraine how she was thinking about the change she was making when she split up with her husband. She said, "Actually, at the time that I came out with Shirley, I think I probably would have at least in some theoretical sense viewed myself as bisexual. Because I didn't see that the reason why I was leaving Dick was because of the sexual malfunctioning of our relationship...I knew that was not a function of the fact that he was a man, because I knew that I could have orgasmic sex with men, and it just wasn't with him. And so I looked at it as an emotional change, an emotional preference of being with women...but I wasn't defining myself tightly as a lesbian. I sort of thought I'm really probably bisexual, but our society and the way things are set up, I will probably want to express myself sexually with women because of the other things that I want in relationships...the emotional trust...although the thought of being with men has become so remote at this point, so distant that I can't imagine it...My choice to be

a lesbian, and to stay as a lesbian has been one of wanting the emotional closeness of a woman. So it's an emotional preference, rather than a sexual preference." I asked Lorraine when she stopped thinking of herself as bisexual and identified as lesbian, and why. She replied, "Well, what I did was probably more of a political statement, and that was probably very shortly after that."

Becoming Empowered

When I asked the questions about differences in how she felt about herself as a woman before and after her change, Lorraine explained that the real changes of that sort had come before. She said, "Becoming a lesbian for me was not an experience of coming into myself as a woman at all...If anything I suppose that the year it was more change was the year I was doing consciousness raising, and that may have been the time when I started to articulate more things and come into myself more, come into my own strength. That was two or three years before I came out."

Reconstructing Woman

I asked Lorraine if her sense of herself as a woman had changed when she did. She said that it hadn't. "I was always probably a fairly assertive and aggressive woman,

even when I was straight...and of course I had been a feminist for some years before I became a lesbian." She added, "I'm sure for some people that becoming a lesbian would be part of that whole process of finding themselves and developing themselves as strong women. I think that I was well on my way to that before this happened. It sounded like it probably [was] almost an aftereffect, if you will."

Resisting Patriarchy

I also asked Lorraine if there was anything political about her change from heterosexual to lesbian. "Well, yes," she said, "in the sense that I was a feminist and for once it sort of felt like my life wasn't going to be separated up, that there was this part where I was a feminist and off working with women on these things and here was the part that wasn't that, that was just another part. So I just sort of felt like I'd be able to live in the feminist realm all day long."

Lorraine said of her transition: "I think I slept walked, is how I made it from one stage to the other....If I really had thought about the enormity of the decisions I was making, I just sort of was doing the stuff without examining it a great deal...I know that visually the image

I had of myself was that I was walking along a very small ridge...And that it was a deep precipice on either side. I don't know what was down at the bottom or anything else, but that's all there really is to the image, was just that feeling of walking along a ridge." When I asked her how she felt then, she answered, "Well that's what I'm saying. That was the image, of being on that ridge. And of course that's scary, because really one false step and I would have fallen off, maybe on either side. I never really thought about the fact that there were two sides to this thing, but just sort of felt like there was this, some sort of thin line that I was walking along...But I really was not dealing a lot with my emotions, I probably wasn't dealing a lot with a lot of stuff. I'm not kidding when I say I was sleep walking. And I think people do that a lot. I think people sleep walk through a lot of their big, big changes in life, and then later they look back on them and they say, 'Wow, I did that,' or 'Gee, that was pretty amazing.' You know. 'I was so scared I couldn't even let myself know how scared I was.'"

I asked if the change felt like a choice to her or something she had no control over. Lorraine said, "No, I

feel very much that it was a choice. Yes. I mean, I was living in a certain way, and the fact that I was doing this sleep walking, I was making choices to move in a direction and I don't think I was denying responsibility for doing that."

Analysis

Lorraine told the story of a woman discovering feminism and becoming empowered and more independent through consciousness raising and a radical feminist analysis, and then choosing a lesbian life. Lorraine entered a women's sphere when she became a feminist and got involved in consciousness raising and feminist political activities. Her women's sphere was also largely lesbian, and in that environment she was able to reconstruct lesbian as something known and natural. Her reconstruction of sexuality was deciding that she was bisexual but would identify as lesbian for political reasons. Lorraine's empowerment came from consciousness raising, several years before she became a lesbian. That was also how she reconstructed woman as strong. Lorraine resisted patriarchy in her feminism, whose radical analysis served to lift the tent flap for her. She also resisted

patriarchy by experiencing her change as a choice, and by deciding to live in the feminist realm all day long.

CHAPTER 6: RECONSTRUCTING GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The women I interviewed had to reconstruct their own gender and sexuality in order to identify as lesbians. They did this in a variety of ways and at different times in their process of change. Debby and DMR tell stories in which reconstructing their gender and sexuality was the main task in their change from heterosexual to lesbian lives.

Debby: "I Couldn't Meet Anybody"

I met Debby through friends, and when I told her about my research, she said she had been straight before she became a lesbian and that I should interview her. It was many months later that I did so, in high summer under an awning in her sunny backyard. Debby is 49, an attractive dark-haired woman. Her ethnicity is half Mediterranean and half western European. Her family, she said, was upper class; her father a corporate executive and her mother a housewife. She has an older and a younger brother. The family moved around the country as the father moved up the corporate ladder, going from Texas to California to

Connecticut. She describes her family as very unemotional and distant. She was determined to get married, she said, because she wanted to have children. She met her future husband in her freshman year of college and married him on her graduation day, instead of attending graduation. He became a high school teacher and she also taught. Eventually she started a business in her home. They had three children who were at the time of the interview 22, 19, and 16. Debby's marriage deteriorated steadily after their third child was born. She realized that she was a lesbian when she was about 36, and around the time she turned 40 she began to look for a woman to be her true love. Two and a half years before the interview she moved out of the house in which her husband and children lived and got a divorce. About a year later she met Pat and they became lovers.

Debby said her change was the result of realizing she was a lesbian in her mid thirties, when she felt sexual desire for her best friend, but it took her more than 10 years to understand what that meant and to come out.

Reconstructing Gender and Sexuality

"I had a variety of friends and did a lot of things

and was always very busy and then I specifically got involved with another woman whose name is Diane...I really fell in love with her. That was the first lesbian experience, or feelings of sexual desire. I was always very emotionally attached, it was really a lot of intimacy with a lot of other women. But I really wanted to kiss her...And that was really the beginning that I linked the sexual part with the intimacy part that I already felt for her...I was best friends with her for 8 years. We played and went everywhere together, went on vacations together, but when we would go away I would always want to sleep in the same bed with her but she wouldn't let me...She would take me to the gay places, the lesbian places. Because that's what I started wanting to do...I was getting to play the lesbian...It worked until she fell in love with a man...And so she kind of dropped me as a friend...And then after I was no longer involved with her...I moved my sexual yearning onto another friend...who I had been in [the garden club] with for 10 years. And Polly and I were very very good friends, but as soon as I became more emotionally involved with her, the sexual part came up too...And she was really wonderful...She said, 'Well I love you too, but

I'm married and I feel like that would be infidelity.' And so she was respecting of my feelings, and didn't play with them. And didn't encourage me. But actually, in the end, I did say to her, 'I'm going to get a divorce and I'm going to go find somebody who can love me back.' We had like a little breakup, it had an ending. Because I really thought in the beginning that that was all I could ever really do, that was all I saw for myself. For many years it was just a continuation of yearnings and wantings. I was married, and I had three children, and, honestly, because I couldn't have it with [those friends] I just never realized this is what I need to do for myself...It didn't feel possible. The finding it out in the world, it just was beyond my imagination. But eventually it wasn't. I mean at some point, it became clear, I became strong enough...I think maybe it had something to do with just self esteem.

'[Debby], this is something you really want,' I remember thinking. I was 40. 'You have 40 more years. I'm only half there. I have a whole 'nother same amount of time yet to go. Why, that's enough time. Enough time to live a whole 'nother lifetime.' Talk about having a mid-life crisis. The age to me sounded like the most important

potential beginning, not anything like an ending. It just seemed like a huge open door. But then again, it took me a long time from then. This is what I did. First of all, I told Mark that I wanted to be a lesbian... I was really never very sexually involved with him...But I said, 'That's not going to be a part of our relationship.' And I told him he had to get in recovery [from his alcoholism] or that I definitely would get a divorce. But if he would get in recovery, I didn't necessarily care if we got a divorce, but I wanted him to know that I was not gonna spend the rest of my life with him, but I would be happy to maintain the home, and we could live together and we could be friends...'You can't tell me what to do any more. That's over now. You don't own me, the whole husband and wife, power-over relationship is finished...and, oh, by the way, I'm gonna go find myself a true love.' And so all that happened. He went into recovery that year, and then I went about trying to find a girlfriend. And it was just the most devastating experience of my life. It took me about three years to realize that no one that I would ever be attracted to was gonna want to be in a meaningful relationship...[with me]. I was married, I wore my wedding

rings, I thought I would just be able to find somebody who was just like me...wanted to be a lesbian who would want to give up all the convenience of a straight life. So it took me a long time, and painful too, because I couldn't meet anybody. I mean there wasn't anybody. I had a very hard time trying to find other lesbians, and when I did, I could never break into a circle of friends because I was, truly, that was unacceptable, what I was looking for...It wasn't anything normal like date a lesbian...I just didn't fit anywhere, and it took me so much of that trying to get the concept clear. That I needed to end this, I needed to get a divorce, and be a lesbian. Not be a straight woman with a girlfriend...And so that's what I did, that was two and a half years ago, that I actually moved, got a divorce...bought a home on my own, moved the business, and during that summer I met Pat...And I was also in a very big transition of...actually saying lesbian. Saying it at church, saying it to people."

I asked Debby what it meant to her when, as she said, she kissed Diane and knew she was a lesbian. "Well I don't think I used the word for a long time. It was the connection between the emotional bond and the physical. So

therefore I realized it wasn't enough to just have a girlfriend. That there was a whole life involved. I think it just connected me with the lesbian world. I mean, lots of women have good girlfriends. But they don't want to kiss. There's a line, or do you think that's true? I know it must be."

I asked Debby to talk about the seven years between when she told her husband she was going to be a lesbian and the time that she moved out. "Well I was trying to meet somebody. I didn't know how to be, I tried to be like a single person who was out on a date. Or to meet somebody. But then I didn't take my rings off. And...I thought that, oh, nobody would ever know I was a lesbian because I looked so straight. I thought about cutting my hair, but I didn't. See I thought nobody would ever know. How could I let somebody know? And so I tried to network with somebody I knew that knew somebody that was a lesbian...I mean I could just like 15 different women along the way, but nobody was ever a lesbian. I mean I never really could figure that out...I also met a lot of really weird people, which also made me think that there really wasn't anybody like me anywhere. I thought I was really the only regular

woman...You're the first other person I met that was anything like me, that became a lesbian later on. I'd never met anybody like that. Now that's amazing. And that's very hard to be the only one."

I also asked Debby if during her search for a lesbian lover she had read lesbian books and periodicals and tried to connect with the lesbian community. "Yeah. Yeah. All of the above. Every book that I knew, I would go to [a women's bookstore], I went to [a women's spirituality store], I signed up for dream workshops, for herbal workshops, I went on bike rides, I called up [a women's outdoor club] and [a women's bicycling group]. I did a couple of tries of everything. And I learned a little bit as I went along. I was old, older than most people. Most women were coupled. I met some very unhealthy people that I didn't like at all and I'd stop and I'd start over. I had a hard time meeting a wide variety of people...some women friends of mine were in a singing group. I used to be like a groupie and go to all their gigs. Sit at the little table on the side. So I went into that whole like bar music scene. Which didn't have anything to do with me. I tried going to a mother's group at the women's center...

which turned out to be women who were trying to get pregnant rather than women who were already mothers. I looked in [a women's newspaper]. I signed up for a million things. I went to a lot of different things. I went to a 40-plus group...I didn't meet anybody that I liked. And I stopped that completely. I did the athletic route. But I didn't really meet anybody my age. A lot of young jocks. And I don't really fit there. I went to a group... who were really basically lipstick lesbians,³⁵ in general, but you shouldn't make a generalization. But I didn't really fit in there. I really could have gone that way, if that was my only choice. Cause I could have put dresses back on and got a manicure and gone out for drinks. And gone to the clubs. But that's not really me. So to be just this, just you and me sitting here. I mean who would know, I just, I didn't see that. That wasn't visible to me. I started a whole group at my church and as far as I know I'm the only lesbian in the congregation here and there'll be, maybe others coming to the group, to the church now because

35. Lesbians who wear lipstick and other "feminine" accouterments and who are involved with other women like themselves.

there is somebody there now...I did a lot of things in [a nearby city] and I used to go to Al Anon meetings. I'd find all the lesbian Al Anon meetings. But I think people who go to Al Anon meetings in general I didn't like them. I mean I really didn't want to get into Al Anon meetings. I was just going to meet lesbians."

Debby also said, "I didn't just do it...I didn't just rush off and be a lesbian. One night I kissed Diane ten years ago. I knew then that's what I wanted...then I knew I was a lesbian. But then I knew that I wasn't ready to do the whole big shift."

Reconstructing Woman

I asked Debby if when she looks back on her life, she thinks she changed and became somebody different, or does she think this was always there and she just didn't acknowledge it or act on it. "I would say that it would always have been there. But I was so socialized into the expected life. If I had grown up in a family who encouraged free thinking or self expression or creativity perhaps it would have come out a lot earlier along the way. So it might have been lying there but I didn't learn how to express anything...for instance I was a phys ed major. My

mother will tell me, 'Oh, you were always in love, always your favorite teachers were gym teachers.' I always was very involved in different things like that. In college I was very good friends with a lesbian couple, but I didn't know they were. I didn't even know, but I can remember I used to go to their home...And their bathroom was upstairs, and I can remember looking in the bedrooms to try to kind of get a feel of, I thought they lived together but I never knew a le, I didn't know anybody. And I must have known a million lesbian women."

When I asked Debby if there was anything else I hadn't asked that I should know in order to understand her experience, she answered: "I think you and I are fortunate enough to be living in the beginning of an era where we could have successful out prideful lives. And I think just a few years ago the access to the lesbian world was very difficult. So that when I wanted to come out originally, and wanted to find other lesbians, so many people were in the closet and there was that lack of visible pride, I think that was really really hard to express my own self because didn't know where it was...So now maybe I've arrived and now that I'm proud and I'm here and I belong, I

can see it's everywhere around me. But that in-between time was, it was very hard, and I'm hoping that, visibility of us normal, of the regular everyday people that were in the world, gay and lesbian people who are in what seems to be the regular lifestyle, that there are places for all of us."

Debby also said, "I was just bent, my goal was to get married and have children. I don't think I opened my vision up to any other [possibility]...And I remember writing in my journal. 'I have a successful business, I make a very good living, I have a beautiful home, I have three wonderful children, I have a place in the community, I'm very well known and I have a place in my church...Why do I want, how can you want more? What more?' It was the definition of all that I would ever want...And then at some point it wasn't enough."

Analysis

Debby's story is about reconstructing her gender and sexuality so that she could desire and then find lesbians instead of hopelessly wanting to kiss her straight women friends. It took her a very long time to understand

herself as different from her straight friends, to reconstruct herself as Other. Debby spent her time in a women's sphere; first she had been home with her children and other women who were doing the same, and then she had a business in her home that brought her into contact with many women during the days while her husband was at work. Perhaps because of the intimate and intense friendships that are possible between women in a women's sphere, Debby expected to be able to act on her desire to kiss her girlfriends without finding different friends or giving up her heterosexual life. Even though she recognized that not every woman who has intimate friends wants to kiss them, it still took her a while to understand that many things would have to change for her relationships to encompass sexual intimacies. While Debby needed to get a divorce and become a lesbian before she could "find her true love," that wasn't always the case. We have seen that Silvy and Ann were able to find true love and conduct sexual affairs with women while they were married and living heterosexual lives. Brook, too, did this for a while. Whether it was the difference in historical period (Debby realized she wanted to kiss her friend around 1981 and Silvy came out in

1963 and Ann in 1972) or something else, Debby had to make what she called "the whole big shift," stop being a straight woman looking for a girlfriend, and become a lesbian. When she realized that, then she could divorce her husband and move into her own home. Once she did that, however, she still had to search hard to find lesbians who seemed enough like her that she could fall in love with one and live a lesbian life. Debby's reconstruction of her own gender and sexuality seems very tied up in class issues, or at least real lifestyle issues. Debby was the only participant who identified her family of origin as upper class. Although Debby had broken with her upbringing when she married a man who became a public school teacher, and then again when she started her home business, she was still living a life that looked from the outside like most suburban upper middle class women's lives. Part of her struggle to reconstruct her gender and sexuality seems to have been the effort to retain the outer shell of that life while changing its heart.

DMR: "I Finally Felt I Had a Choice"

DMR was a friend of Kathleen's, who agreed to participate in the study after I described it to her. We met in the living room of her apartment in a small Northeastern town. A tall Afro-American woman with an athletic build, DMR is 43 years old and is a mental health counselor and a graduate student. She grew up in a small industrial Northeastern city, the middle of three children. Her father was in the service, and she and her sister and brother lived with her mother's large family of 16. She considered most of her aunts and uncles like sisters and brothers because they were so close in age. Her father was in and out of her life. Her mother was a hard worker but had a major mental illness and committed suicide when DMR was about 21. DMR never married, but lived a bisexual life, having sexual and emotional relationships with both men and women. After she finished high school, DMR worked and went to college. At 27 she enlisted in the same branch of the armed forces that her father had served in. She served for five years, during which she had only relationships with men because she was afraid of getting

thrown out for homosexuality. When she returned to civilian life she resumed her bisexual activity, but with more emphasis on women. At 37 she decided that she was a lesbian and has been happy with that identity and life for the past six years.

DMR described her change as the result of learning in therapy that she could choose to be a lesbian; that she was not doomed to be one because of her early rape by a woman.

Sexual Abuse

"At the age of 16 I remember a cousin of mine introduced me to this woman to babysit, and this woman was a lesbian. And I did not know that, and it was a seduction sort of but, being my age at 16, would have been called statutory rape even though I was babysitting for her and that's when the seduction kinda, it's the rape started, the manipulation started, and I was just kind of led into the lesbian kinda lifestyle. Very scared and kinda pushed myself away from it. But then pushed myself into it and I was in it and out of it for a long time, until I was, actually, till I'm like 38 or 37. And that's only a few years back that I can actually say that I chose to be a lesbian. I felt okay with it. And I actually was

recovering from a whole lot of things, and that was one of my biggest freedoms that I had a choice. I finally felt I had a choice, I finally accepted that this woman raped me and I didn't have a choice, I never had a choice. And I was so confused for so long, not knowing, knowing and not knowing, knowing and not knowing, because of that incident. And I never was able to say that that was rape, except for a few years ago. But that was not a seduction, I sort of just go glorify it.

Reconstructing Gender and Sexuality

"Not that I hate men, I don't. It's that I do not have the deep special love, intimacy, that goes deep as it does with a woman, that goes deep; and that trusting that I have with a woman. Although I could trust a man to a certain extent, I can't go any further. I don't feel comfortable going any further with it. You know, a lot of it was physical. I question myself sometimes because of what happened. Then I don't question myself, because after that I did try to be with men, try to be really, very monogamous. I can count the men in my 40-odd years on my one hand that I've really been involved with. But it was never that special feeling that I get today with a woman.

It's not all women, but it's that feeling that I get more so with women than I do with men. And I connect better and the intimacy is just so special to me and I cherish that and I guess, I'm feeling whole with it...It's like it's still new because it's a whole trust stuff...and it's still with intimacy on all kind of levels."

When at the end of the interview I asked DMR if there was anything else that I hadn't asked about that I should know so I could understand her experience better, she said, "I just think it was harder for me as a black woman, black lesbian, it's more looked upon really bad in the black community, being gay. Really bad. I mean, it's like, people really get hurt, and tabooed really bad. So that it's really hard, I think, to come out at all. And I was lucky because I had a very loving family, but some people never come out. And...the rate of [gay and lesbian] suicide is probably higher in the black community than it is in the white communities..."

I asked DMR if she was involved for long with the woman who raped her. "I was involved with her for a while but what happened is that she was a bisexual. And here I am, 16, thinking that I'm in love, my first love. And it

was really tragic because I had found out that she was involved with a man, and in fact [with] another lesbian and it just tear me apart. Sixteen, in love. Like any other 16 year old. So I tried to commit suicide. I was that deep, because it was already awkward to me anyways, I couldn't tell anybody about this. It was a big secret to my friends, to my family...So I took a few pills and I got to the hospital, then my mom sent me to California. I was just about to graduate [from high school] so she didn't want anything to happen to me, she didn't want me to drop out of school and do all that. So she sent me to California. And I buried it. I buried it. I buried it....[When I came back here] I was 16 going into gay clubs...And I was toying with speed and stuff like that...I'm saying, wow, this is a completely different world...And at that point, I never had a chance to kind of explore being a heterosexual, really."

I asked if she had slept with men at that point.

"Yeah. Couple of times, not really, just, like play thing stuff. Not really deep, you know, not really, no. Well, I lost my virginity to this guy who I would, you'd probably consider that rape too cause I said, 'Nah, I don't like

this, it hurts me.' And he's like 16, he wouldn't get up, so I beat him up, get him off me. And he got off, but that was it. Then I said, 'Oh, I don't think so, this stuff is uh,' so I kind of stayed out of it, and maybe did it maybe couple of times. I never liked it because of that guy...but I liked guys. I thought they was okay...I guess everything started to fall in place in the last few years."

I also asked DMR what she thought about the sexual relationship with the woman who raped her when she was 16. "It was just real special. I thought it was a gift, it was beautiful, it was heaven, it was safe. I felt very safe; very safe, warm, I would have done practically anything for this woman."

I asked how old the woman was then, and DMR said she was about 27. I asked what it was about the relationship that made her feel safe. "She appeared to be very nurturing. More nurturing than my mother was. My mother didn't have that emotional nurturing, you know. She would do some things for me that were special. Not that my mother didn't, but my mother didn't have that like nurturing type. It was like more and more of an intimacy."

I then asked DMR if she had felt comfortable being in

a lesbian relationship, or felt that it was something she wasn't supposed to be doing. She said, " Oh, yeah. I felt that was a bad thing, that I shouldn't be doing this. But I liked it. But I knew that that was taboo. It was awful and, I'm like, 'whoa, if somebody ever found out,' you know, which my mother found out something was happening, so she just said, 'Oh, I don't think so, you're too young'...I felt at that point that I wanted to have more connection with women. It was stronger, when I came home...And I started going to the gay clubs but I also never really had a relationship with a woman. I just went to the clubs and once in a while I'd have some sort of relationship, but it would never last. And the women that I picked would be bisexual women...Today I think it was because it was safe for me. That I didn't have to commit to being a lesbian. And that's so, because they weren't either...or maybe they were doing the same thing I was, I don't know, saying they were bisexual cause they didn't want to say they was a lesbian. Who knows?"

I asked if she thought she would have been a lesbian anyway, even if the woman hadn't raped her when she was 16. She said, "Absolutely. Because I remember having feelings

for a woman, early on...I would look at the girls anyways, when I was 12 years old, something like that. Then I would say, 'Oh, don't do that.' In my mind, you're not supposed to do that. But I did...Like what the boys say, 'Oh, look at, she's nice.' I'm saying to myself, 'Yeah, she's nice.' So I believe I was born this way. It was just very confusing because it was so roughly, I guess, put to me in those terms."

Resisting the Patriarchy

I asked DMR if she was living a bisexual life then. She answered, "Sort of. Kind of. I would go out with guys and stuff, but I wouldn't really do it, I wouldn't have sex with them, not unless I really liked them, and it would take me a long time. So, when I was in the service...I had about two male friends that I had very occasional sex with. One of the guys he was married, and so he was safe, so I didn't have to commit to him. And...once about every six months I would see this guy."

I asked DMR to talk about when she decided that she was a lesbian. "I was tired of being two people. I'd say, 'I am not straight. Why am I doing this? What are you scared of?' I'm saying to myself. 'What are you scared

of? I mean, you drink, you do drugs and that stuff isn't good for you...you can't do that. And you running, what are you running away from?' I was coming to terms with who I was. I was coming to terms with my mother's suicide. I was coming to terms with everything. And that was it. And once I said, 'This is who I am. This is the lifestyle I want to live. I'm a lesbian, and my higher power, god, whatever, loves me who I am because I wouldn't have been, I wouldn't be sitting here.' And so I decided, I'm okay who I am. And I want to be, I feel good being a lesbian. I am lesbian."

I asked what had been keeping her from deciding to be a lesbian sooner, what was she afraid of. "Society. I think. Being fearful of not being accepted. I want to be accepted. But I want to be able to be myself too. And how to live a lesbian life, this life of my persuasion and also to integrate it with society. And to have as normal a life as I can. But to understand that there are people who are very homophobic... because of who I am, not just because I'm a lesbian, but then I'm a black woman also. And I'm an assertive person to boot. So I have to really be aware of those things that are surrounding me but also be okay and

work through some of this stuff. And I haven't worked through this, being a lesbian and I'm open to a certain degree. And when it calls for it, that's when I'll say that I'm a lesbian. When it's called for. A need to know. If you don't need to know, well, you don't need to know."

Empowerment

I asked what made it possible for her to finally decide that she is a lesbian. She said, "I think just me feeling good about who I was, finally. Looking at my life, and then looking at my mother's life, and stopping the cycle of low self esteem, self abuse, all that stuff. Alcoholism and drug stuff, all that stuff in my family. I'm saying, 'I can stop this, I have a choice. I don't have to go through this.' I asked for help and it was there, and then when I asked for it I got a sense of freedom. And then that sense of freedom has exploded, and permeated all through my life now, that I always had choices but when you're young as I was, and went through all the things I went through, and didn't know that you had a choice...But anyways, that's the sense of freedom when I was able to say that I had problems and I couldn't do it myself."

I asked DMR whether she thinks choosing to be a lesbian was making a choice or admitting who she was. "It felt like finally more I was admitting who I am. The change was being who I am. Who I always was. But the way I got to it I wasn't given a choice, the way I got to my sexuality was all screwed up."

Enhanced Womanhood

I asked DMR if she felt differently about herself as a woman since her change. "Yeah. I felt more that I could, and I do today, I could feel more honest about intimacy. Not afraid to talk about intimacy and how I feel. I feel good about being a woman, that's who I am. You know, woman, not a man, I'm a woman and, yeah, pretty happy, basically."

Analysis

It appears that DMR's story is of reconstructing her gender and sexuality so that she felt she could choose to be a lesbian rather than feeling condemned to it by a relationship she had at 16 that she now considers rape. This reconstruction is probably more difficult for many black women, because lesbianism is so powerfully tabooed in the black community. DMR was empowered by her work in

therapy, in which she came to terms with her whole life, including her mother's suicide, her early lesbian relationship, and her drinking and drug abuse. She came to see that first lesbian relationship as a rape, and abusive rather than loving, and realized that she had felt doomed to a lesbian life because of that rape. She came to understand her bisexual behavior as an attempt to fight what she saw as her lesbian fate. As she saw that she had choices in her other behaviors, she learned that she had a choice about whether or not to be a lesbian. Thus freed, she chose to be a lesbian and is very happy with that choice. In addition, she feels much more positive about being a woman than she had before her change.

Empirical Summary

In this discussion of the empirical study, we have examined the elements of the process of "change" from heterosexual lives to lesbian lives described by the 14 women I interviewed. The most striking feature of their stories was that they couldn't imagine or talk about a romantic/erotic relationship between two "feminine" "women" until they somehow were able to transcend the binary model of the patriarchal sex and gender order that imaged lesbian

as a "masculine" woman or a woman who desired "masculine" women. Until that happened, they were unable to have such a relationship themselves or to feel romantic love and sexual desire for a woman. Even though many of these women were aware of lesbians as "masculine" women, they felt they had no role models and couldn't see lesbians like themselves, "feminine" women who desired other "feminine" women. In the next section, I will discuss the theoretical implications of this empirical analysis.

Chapter 7

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

The women I interviewed at first couldn't imagine or experience romantic/erotic feelings about another "woman" because they understood lesbian as a "masculine" woman or a woman who desired "masculine" women. They did not think of themselves as "masculine" women, and they did not "like" "masculine" women either. They were under the sway of the ruling sex/gender/sexuality order's binary model, which posits two kinds of bodies, male and female. These two kinds of bodies are mutually exclusive, incommensurable, diametrically opposed, and complementary; each is incomplete without the other, together the two make a whole. Within the ruling order, the sexed body is seen to determine gender and sexual desire, and sexual desire can only be for the "opposite" sex. Even in same-sex erotic/romantic relationships, there must be a "feminine" and a "masculine" partner, one of whom is conceptualized as having the "wrong" body but the "right" desire. It wasn't until something made it possible for the women I interviewed to see past the binary model that they were able to have erotic/romantic feelings for another "woman."

And once they had those feelings, they "became" lesbian, and defined themselves as someone who had changed from heterosexual to lesbian. And yet, they told me, they hadn't really changed, and they had always been interested in women. They just didn't have any role models, didn't know there was such a thing as a lesbian.

The stories these women told demonstrate the power of the ruling order to define experience. Without a concept for "feminine women" loving and desiring other "feminine women," the women I interviewed couldn't love and desire the women they had "always liked."

Thus, we see that the ruling order's construct of opposites attracting and making a whole hides other possibilities, one of which is two "feminine" persons making an erotic and romantic pair. I suggest that there are many more possibilities covered over by the binary model of the ruling order; possibilities that cannot be conceived because they are not named. I suggest that what the hegemonic order is covering is a world of possibilities, a multitude of potentials.

The World of Omneity

Individuals do not have an inherent "gender" and

"sexuality." What they have instead are a body that is defined as either male or female (a sex) and is either close to or far from the ideal for that sex, and a multiplicity of attributes and interests, cognitive and creative potentials, physical and emotional urges, contradictions, curiosities, physical capacities for pleasurable (and painful) sensation, internalized forbidden and compulsory ways of relating, internalized objects and part objects, many (often contradictory) identifications, a vast variety of images of self and other, memories of pleasures and pains, and inarticulate associations with various body parts. "These disparate identifications, these various and shifting images of self and other; this chaotic and contradictory jumble of wishes and worries, this is in fact our characterological treasury" (May 1986, p. 188). Individuals want to have and to be everything, to do and to experience everything. This state could be called omneity, the condition of being all, and could be described as being omniform, of all forms and shapes. Freud noted the basic bisexuality of all individuals (1920, pp. 142-3). Kubie (1974, p. 370) discussed the desire to become both sexes: "...one of the deepest tendencies in human nature is to

attempt to identify with and to become both parents..."

Fast based her theory of gender identity development on the hypothesis that "...girls' and boys' early gender experience is undifferentiated and overinclusive...An early period of development occurs in which boys' and girls' self representations or identifications include both male and female, masculine and feminine characteristics..." (1984, pp. 11-12). And Bologh (1990) describes how both male and female children desire to be like both parents but are forced in patriarchy to renounce their desires to be like the parent of the other sex: "...the male child must renounce the desire to surrender to a loving, consoling father, while the female child can have this desire fulfilled but must renounce the other desire, to be like the figure of power in the outside world. The child must renounce one or the other desire" (p. 4). Out of these omniform beings are constructed gendered ones with gendered sexual desires, by the process of renunciation or suppression of those attributes that are defined as belonging to the "other" sex, and the definition of some "wants" as "sexual desires" and others as something else. The meanings we make of these gendered attributes and

"desires" come from the culture and from our individual psychodynamics.

But in our omneity, almost anything is possible. Men can be women, women can be men, and each can become both; the gender of sexual objects can be different from the gender of love objects; a masculine man can want to be treated "like a woman" by a feminine woman, a feminine woman can want to be treated "like a man" by another feminine woman, feminine men can dominate masculine men, an individual can become the (heterosexual or homosexual) sexual or romantic partner that their father wanted to have (or wanted to be) or the (heterosexual or homosexual) sexual or romantic partner that their mother wanted to have (or wanted to be), we can be mothered by our fathers, we can be the child of our children, individuals can be both men and women at the same time, or can be neither, and each of us can desire and seek everything.

This world of social and psychic fluidity exists now, hidden and fought against by the ruling sex/gender/sexuality order. In this world of omneity it may be that there is no man and woman, or even male and female, only individuals with infinitely expressible minds

and wants which are not limited by the shape of their genitals. Women who want to be men can take testosterone, grow beards and develop low voices. They can have their breasts removed, live as men (but decline surgery to construct a penis, saying that it is too expensive and generally unsuccessful because the penises tend to fall off), and declare, as one did to me, "You don't have to have a penis to be a man".³⁶ Men who want to be women can take estrogen and develop female body characteristics, including breasts. They can have cosmetic surgery to make them look more like women, but retain their penises (which have gotten smaller because of the estrogen). These people with both breasts and penises can live as women, identifying as lesbians and having female lovers (who also identify as lesbians). A person who is genetically male but anatomically female can refuse gendered pronouns, use a gender-neutral name, and identify as a third sex. The individuals described above all actually exist; I have met them.

It is certainly a world that goes beyond the hegemonic

36. Personal communication, May, 1995.

constructions of gender and sexuality, and even beyond the primary bisexuality described by Freud. When we look closely at men and women in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, we see that these binaries cover a world of multiplicity.³⁷ From the outside, a man and a woman in a couple look as if they uphold the hegemonic gender order: the man is six feet tall, has a beard, is wearing a sport coat and slacks, and is holding the hand of the woman, who is petite, has long curly blond hair and rounded breasts, is wearing a white lace dress, and is looking up into the man's eyes. This particular man is an illustrator and this particular woman is a carpenter. The man would like to work at home and raise several children. The woman wants to study architecture and eventually own her own construction company. In his sexual fantasies, the man is Tarzan. In her sexual fantasies she is a man who wants to be dominated. They have intercourse dog style, with the woman on her hands and knees and the man entering her from

37. The following descriptions cover the eight components of gender I have identified: bodily sex, core gender identity, gender role, gender ideal, sexual object, love object, sexual aim, and emotional aim. They are discussed more fully on page 306.

behind.

From the outside, a lesbian couple also appears to uphold the ruling order: a tall woman with muscular arms and a very short haircut, wearing a baseball cap, a tank top, shorts, and hiking boots, with her arm on the shoulder of an older, much shorter woman who is curvy and has shoulder-length hair, wearing long dangley earrings, a tank top, shorts, and hiking boots. The tall woman is a landscaper and the short woman teaches third grade. The tall woman's favorite sexual fantasy is that she is a boy being seduced by an older woman. The short woman likes to imagine that she is a man making love to a desirable, sexy woman. When the short woman performs cunnilingus on the tall woman, the tall woman imagines that she is receiving fellatio.

The short woman from the second couple meets the woman from the first couple; they become friends. The woman from the first couple begins to be attracted to the short woman and imagines that she is a man being dominated by a strong woman with a powerful sexual appetite. The short woman finds the woman from the first couple very desirable and sexy, and wants to make love to her. They finally become

lovers. The woman from the first couple eventually "becomes" a lesbian, gets a crew cut and finds a very tall, very butch partner who is a construction worker. Together they start a construction company. The short woman from the second couple remains with her original partner. Eventually the short woman becomes pregnant through alternative insemination and she and her partner happily raise their child.

Is the first relationship simply heterosexual, and the other homosexual? Are those terms of any use at all in thinking about these relationships? Can we apply the categories of masculine and feminine and the notion of a monolithic gendered identity to these people and their interactions?

This is the world of omneity, and we all live in it already. This variety is not a utopian fantasy, but already exists among and has been documented, at least in individuals who are seen as sexual and gender outlaws. As Joan Cocks (1989) says, outlaws serve both to mark the boundaries and to contest them. I will give a few examples of the kind of sexual and gender variation that has been documented.

Renee Richards, a physician and tennis player who had a sex change operation, was born Richard Raskin (Richards 1983). Before the surgery (which would remove the penis and testicles and create a vagina), Raskin had been taking female hormones so that his breasts had developed and his hips were rounded. He was also having his face and body hair removed by electrolysis. He often dressed in women's clothes and "passed" as a woman. Raskin's lover at that time was a gay man who knew Raskin as a man and said he had no sexual interest in women. Presumably, then, he was interested in Raskin as a man. In their sexual encounters Raskin insisted on the missionary position, with himself on the bottom, on his back, and his partner on top, facing him. Raskin was the recipient in anal intercourse, a difficult act to carry out in this position. Raskin said he wanted to be a woman, receiving a man's penis in her vagina. Raskin's partner apparently wanted to be a man, inserting his penis into another man's anus.

What was going on there? Was it a homosexual or a heterosexual encounter? Why? Could Raskin's encounter have been a heterosexual one while his partner's was homosexual? After the surgery, when Raskin became Renee

Richards, the affair continued for a while. The gay man was Renee Richards' first lover as an anatomical female. What was going on then? Was it a homosexual or a heterosexual encounter? Was the gay man still having sex with another man?

Another example of a sexual outlaw contesting the boundaries of our hegemonic gender order is the male to female transsexual who wants to be accepted as a lesbian (Feinbloom, Fleming, Kijewski, and Schulter 1976). Does it make sense when a "woman-born" lesbian refuses to have sex with such a person because the lesbian feels the individual is still "really" a man? Would it make sense for the "woman-born" lesbian to accept the male to female transsexual as a lesbian lover? Does it make sense for a man to have surgery to make "him" a "woman" and then claim to be a "lesbian" when before the surgery he could have had heterosexual sex with women? Is the desire for a woman the same when the individual is a "man" and then later when that individual has become a "woman" through surgery and taking "female" hormones? Is a "woman-born" lesbian who has a sexual relationship with a male to female transsexual a "lesbian" having a "lesbian" relationship? These are not

only theoretical questions. They affect the lives of actual people. Whether or not to admit male to female transsexuals to women-only spaces and events, and to lesbian spaces and events, and whether a lesbian in relationship with such a person is still "really" a lesbian, have been powerfully controversial issues for a number of years in the feminist and lesbian communities.

Another sexual outlaw challenging the hegemonic gender order is Kate Bornstein (1994). She is a male to female transsexual whose partner is a female to male transsexual in the midst of her transition. When the two began their relationship Bornstein had become a woman and was living as a lesbian, and her partner was still living as a woman and a lesbian. Bornstein claims that there are people who are neither men nor women, neither masculine nor feminine, such as herself.

Leslie Feinberg and her lover Minnie Bruce Pratt are also sexual outlaws. Feinberg³⁸ identifies as a very butch lesbian who is neither male nor female. Because of the difficulty she experienced in living such an ambiguity in

38. Author of Stone Butch Blues, 1993.

the 1950s when she was growing up, Feinberg had for a time taken male hormones in preparation for transsexual surgery, and had even had her breasts removed, but then changed her mind about the surgery. Her lover, Pratt,³⁹ had changed from heterosexual to lesbian in adulthood, after she had been married and had children, and now identifies as a femme but also feels that she doesn't fit into the usual gender categories. Feinberg generally wears men's clothes, and Pratt dresses in a "feminine" way. By both their appearance and their speech, Feinberg and Pratt raise questions about sex and gender categories. Feinberg is often "mistaken" for a man. In her book, Pratt describes the confusions observers experience when they see her and Feinberg together, often referring to Feinberg as "him" but sometimes addressing the two of them as "you girls."

Still another outlaw is the female to male transsexual who was appointed to the board of a women's organization before she began the change from female to male. Some members of the board think this individual should resign because it is a woman-only board. He has so far refused to

39. Author of S/HE, 1995.

step down.⁴⁰ Another female to male transsexual, when discussing what he missed about being a woman with women, said wistfully that when he was with a bunch of guys he couldn't talk easily about his experience of childbirth. And a person who identifies as "mixed gender" (or third sex) said that when she has sex with other mixed gender (or third sex) people she thinks of that as gay. But when she thinks of a "genetic woman" having sex with a male to female transsexual, that's lesbian.

In this world of omneity can be found the vision many feminists seek through deconstruction.

Instead of relegating all biological variants into the two categories 'male' and 'female' (with 'abnormal' absorbing everything that is 'left over'), this practice might enable us both to multiply the categories of sex and to detach reproduction from sex...Such a focus on the social construction of sexual identity goes beyond the more common understanding of social construction many feminists now endorse, because it deconstructs not only the relationship between women and certain social roles but also the very term 'woman' (Poovey 1988, pp. 59-60).

Gendering

Because sexuality is constructed to produce and enforce heterosexuality, it has long been understood as

40. Personal communication, March, 1995.

starting from an attraction between male and female, expressed as a natural attraction between man and woman, masculine and feminine. Masculine and feminine are constructions that became ideals, catch-alls which, taken seriously, have to include qualities or people that don't really belong in either polarity. Just as the racial categories black and white are constructions that categorize individuals who are both and neither "black" nor "white," so masculine and feminine are frequently applied to persons and qualities that are both and neither, and to gender attributes and behavior that are really gender-neutral. In addition, because individuals believe that a person should be either masculine or feminine, they try to alter their own behavior to be wholly one or the other. In the empirical section, we heard CJ say:

I have always felt comfortable with how feminine I feel. I haven't always felt that I could be as masculine as I wanted to be, but I'm using that very loosely. I feel now more than I felt when I was straight, that I can be all the ways that I am. So one way that I am some of the time is feminine. But I also have a lot invested in being a competent person, being able to do things, physical things...I'm pretty mechanical, and I like being able to be that way. And I also like...being able to be in charge sometimes, in a way that I didn't feel as free to be with men. I didn't feel that some of the time I could be in charge, and make decisions about things, although, I

didn't intentionally suppress that side of myself, but somehow it didn't feel comfortable and now I feel like I can be all the ways that I am. Which I like.

Gendering gives a name to a category of person -- feminine -- then defines the category and identifies attributes or ways of being that belong in that category. When an individual is born its sex is named and it is inserted into the gender order. Then the gendering process begins (in both the individual and those who encounter the individual). Gendering is a constant process of culture and people acting on an individual and the individual acting on itself and then on culture. West and Zimmerman (1987) describe "doing gender" as taking place within individual interactions, but gender is "done" on all levels from the most macro political/economic process to the most intimate intrapsychic process.

Doing Difference and Sameness

One of the things that is done by "doing gender" is constructing difference and sameness. In an earlier study (Pett 1989) I found that a number of the women I interviewed said their partner's sameness or difference in relation to themselves was something they liked and found sexually attractive. I suggest that in our culture, in

late capitalism, what has been constructed as important is difference and sameness, which have also been constructed as sexually exciting. So in an erotic encounter, what is salient is the play of difference and sameness, other and self,⁴¹ foreign and familiar. This brings us back to gender, which could be called the archetypal difference. The idea of the complementary polarity of masculine and feminine is real, as a powerful guiding metaphor. As Goldner said, gender is "a transcendent analytic category whose truth, though false, is central" (1990). What isn't real is the "naturalness" of the connection between male and masculinity or female and femininity: that is the construct; patriarchal society and omniform beings create the metaphor of gender, build a culture and a complex social system based on that metaphor, and then gender themselves, so we are both omniform and gendered.

"Constructing gender is a process, not an answer...as

41. It is interesting in this regard that the diseases most feared and focused upon in the present era, the ones that seem most frightening to us all, are the auto-immune disorders in which the individual's immune system fails to differentiate between self and other and attacks and destroys its own body's cells the way a healthy immune system attacks and destroys an invading other. These are metaphors for our time.

observers of gender we are also its creators" (Hare-Mustin and Maracek 1988, p. 462). The dialectic of gender is that the omniform being creates the gendered being who then rebels against her/his gendering. In the space of oscillation within the paradox of gender polarity/omneity is the enactment of gender, the dance between what is supposed to be and what could be. Muriel Dimen writes: "...gender is a force field of shifting contrasts..." (1990, p. 19); and, "...at the heart of gender is not masculinity or femininity, but the difference between them" (p. 9). I suggest that oscillation between poles is what is constructed in our culture as erotic; the play of difference and sameness, masculine and feminine, is what is defined as exciting;⁴² paradox itself is in this culture the ultimate erotic. Thus, what is at the heart of gender is desire for difference (and sameness) and the play of paradoxes between them. To that end, we enact gender; we gender ourselves and each other; we oppose and break down gender; then build it up again. As individuals, we struggle with the paradox of gender polarity/omneity.

42. See Kaplan and Rogers, 1984, for a similar idea.

Under patriarchal compulsory (exclusive) heterosexuality, people strive mightily and often at great emotional cost to be consistently either feminine or masculine. For our most intimate relations, we seek (usually unconsciously) an other who will both collaborate with us in our performance of gender and engage with us in our actual omnieity.⁴³

Perhaps the secret to that powerful chemistry that occurs between two people who are inexplicably attracted to each other has to do with an unspoken recognition that this particular other will conspire with our performance and at the same time recognize our omneity and help us enact many of those potentials.

Thus, although it is my position that masculine and feminine are constructions, not natural attributes of sexed bodies, they are one set of constructions that signal difference and sameness in our culture. Therefore, I cannot discuss sexual behavior or feelings without using

43. "The marital bond--whatever else it is--can be seen as having the consequence of more or less permanently attaching an audience directly to each performer, so that wherever the male or female goes, an appropriate other will be alongside to reciprocate the enactment of gender expressions. Pair formation creates a mutually captive audience" (Goffman 1977, p. 69).

masculine and feminine, since that is how we conceptualize, describe, and experience this kind of difference and sameness. These gendered polarities are inserted into or applied to all our worlds, but especially our sexual and romantic worlds.

Gendered Erotics

As an illustration, I will start with a person who has breasts, a vagina, and a clitoris and thinks of herself as "she." This self-identified woman loves the feeling of other soft breasts against her breasts, and she seeks erotic encounters with others she thinks of as she. This woman feels what she understands is "feminine." She is drawn to women who act as if they feel "masculine." But she likes to wear jeans and boots, and enjoys being with women who wear skirts and lipstick but act "masculine." In fact, that excites her sexually; she has an image in her mind of a woman with soft round breasts who wears boxer shorts under her frilly skirt and puts lipstick on before she goes out on her big motorcycle. This woman really wants to make love to women who have soft breasts, boxer shorts, frilly skirts, and motorcycles, and who act as if they feel "masculine." She has a fantasy of making a woman

like this swoon with desire. But she is afraid of many things, and loves women who look and act like the ones she wants to make love to, who are big and strong and not afraid of the dark, so they will protect her from her imagined demons. On the other hand, she makes a lot of money at a corporate job she loves, and she enjoys buying her partner lacy nightgowns and expensive soft leather boots. When they are in bed, she likes best to perform cunnilingus on her partner and for her partner to do the same for her. She also enjoys using a dildo on her partner, but doesn't like having one used on her.

Many of these interactions and the accessories or costumes involved are clearly copied from sexualized cultural images, including: jeans and boots, skirts and lipstick, a big motorcycle, a woman in a skirt on a big motorcycle, swooning with desire, big strong protectors, a corporate job, lacy nightgowns, buying lacy nightgowns for a sexual partner, soft leather, dildos. These multiple encounters with difference and sameness (both clear and blurred) are only the ones of which this woman is conscious. There are also interactions that replicate unconscious internalized object relations: perhaps

replaying a seductive father's successful efforts to sexually excite his young daughter; or reenacting a child's pursuit of a cold mother, trying to get the mother to hold her and soothe her; or an angry mother's efforts to punish her daughter; or a daughter's efforts to imitate her mother or to imitate her father.

Construction of Desire

When they are eroticized, these gendered wants are called sexual desires. Sexual desires are as much constructions as is gender, and are also constructed in both social and psychic processes. Other wants, such as for sweet food or smart friends, are not defined as sexual. While an individual can want many kinds of things, only some wants are eroticized, and, thus, experienced as sexual desire. And while an omnium of sexual desire is possible, what is constructed in this culture is a desire that is rigidly tied to heterosexuality, male dominance and female subordination, and a binary of masculine/feminine. Not only is the scope of desire (the wants that are called sexual desires) constructed, but the nature of desire (as attached to difference and sameness) is as well, in the service of the current hegemonic construction of sexuality.

I define sexuality as the collection of personal fantasies, fears, and meanings, and cultural meanings, sanctions, and prohibitions that accrue to sensations of bodily pleasure leading to genital orgasm in the post-modern, northern-hemisphere, late-capitalist individual, who sees this collection as containing some important truth about her or his inner self.

A serious lack in the social constructionist analysis of sexuality is its failure to problematize desire. These theorists appear to assume that desire is inherent somehow, inborn, almost "natural"; at least unquestioned. I propose, on the other hand, that desire is as constructed as everything else having to do with sex/gender/sexuality. What is inherent is the physical capacity for genital pleasure (sexuality), but this capacity is omniform. That is, sexual desire can be physically satisfied by many body parts and other material objects, doing many different things. Sexuality is constructed as an important, central personal characteristic. A particular sexual desire can be one of many possibly transitory sexual desires that are part of the individual's sexuality. Also inherent is the capacity to "want" and to "like" many things, behaviors,

and people. Some of these "wants" and "likes" are called "desire" and the pleasures they produce are called erotic.

It is my contention that what we desire, and sexual desire itself, are constructed out of our internalized object relations and the messages of our culture and patriarchal society in the same kind of complex interaction and intertwining of unconscious process and daily social practices. A feeling becomes desire when it is called desire. Before it is given that meaning, it is not desire. Thus, Janie's earlier appreciation of women's bodies was artistic, as she experienced it at the time, and became desire when she gave it the meaning of desire. When she couldn't imagine desiring women, she didn't desire them, she appreciated the esthetics of their bodies. When she could imagine desiring women because she could imagine herself a lesbian, she experienced desire for women, and expressed that desire in a sexual relationship with a woman. Likewise, Maggie's appreciation of women who looked strong was, when she was heterosexual, simply feminist appreciation, as she thought then. When she became a lesbian and experienced that appreciation as desire, it took on a new meaning and became desire, and led her, too,

to a sexual relationship with a woman. There is much fruitful work to be done on sexual desire, now that it is being disconnected from sex, gender, "nature," and heterosexuality. My analysis raises questions about the place of difference and sameness in sexual desire; about the role played in sexual desire by contradiction (such as a masculine woman, or a femme with a dildo, or a man playing the "passive" "feminine" role); the connection between the sexual desires of the individual and the sexual desires of her parents; and the interaction between the individual's unconscious "sexuality," cultural productions, and political/economic forces to create "personal" sexual desire.

Foucault said that in contemporary society sexuality is not repressed, but rather is constructed. The sexuality that is constructed is defined as a powerful natural force that is constant across cultures and through history, part of our most basic animal nature, almost irresistible.

Sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely. It appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students,

priests and laity, an administration and a population. Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies. (1978, p. 103)

Sexuality, then, is a vehicle for power relations, not a "natural" drive on a biological model. What this means is that Freud's theory of libido is not a scientific description of how people work, but rather one of the discourses through which modern sexuality has been constructed. Freud's theory naturalized sexuality at the same time that it deployed sexuality as something that lay behind almost all human behavior, thought, and emotion. Freud saw sexuality as the core of our being and the most important secret truth about our self. His theories also defined an individual's non-conforming sexual behavior as a sickness rather than a sin. As with most discourses, the Freudian sexual discourse served both progressive and regressive ends; it has both positive and negative effects for individuals. Thus, modern sexuality is constructed, maintained, and enforced as an almost undeniable drive that is a natural force. That sexuality is a construction, and is, as Foucault said, "an especially dense transfer point

for relations of power," and that it has often been used to control women and buttress men's "masculinity," is demonstrated in the changing constructions of female sexuality.

Changing Constructions of Female Sexuality

Laqueur (1990), for example, began his study of bodily sex when he realized that classical Greeks and early Europeans had been aware of the clitoris and had known that women have orgasms, but that the knowledge of both sexual organ and sexual response had disappeared in early modern times, only to have been resurrected in the 20th century. Ideas and ideals of female sexuality have undergone many changes in just the last few centuries. In the 18th century, women were seen as "carnal and depraved" (Peiss and Simmons 1989, p.6). In that period, "It is women, defined as sexual creatures by Rousseau, who have subsequently been seen as constantly tempting men away from the path of reason and morality" (Seidler 1987, p. 87). Also in the 18th century, the view of women as carnal temptresses, and as the property of men, legitimized male control of female sexuality. But in the 19th century, women were seen as basically asexual gatekeepers for men's

animalistic and uncontrollable sexuality. Women's maternal nature became a force for purity opposing the depraved nature of man.

By the 1850s sexual continence, limiting sexual activity to legal marriage and a reproductive goal, had become the dominant cultural ideal. Allowing women to set the pace in sexual activity was commonly seen as a means to the ideal. Women were thought to be characterized by 'passionlessness' and to be guided more by maternal instinct than sexual desire per se. Hence, they were expected to dampen the 'natural' male obsession with sex. Although contradicted by women's legal obligation to submit sexually to their husbands, the image of women as upholders of sexual restraint was a powerful element in Victorian culture (Simmons 1989, p. 159).⁴⁴

The first part of the 20th century marked a reaction to the view of women as passionless gatekeepers of male sexuality. The early sexologists writing then "discovered" female sexuality and re-evaluated male sexuality, producing the ideal of a woman whose "natural" sexuality could be awakened and unleashed only by a passionate but patient man. "The 'sexual brute' became the 'sexual blunderer.'...Twentieth-century writers...re-defined the

44. It must be noted that constructions of sexuality often vary by class within cultures and historical periods. The description above, for example, applies to the Victorian middle class.

nature of the brutality to stress male ignorance of women's sexual needs rather than aggression or cruelty. Women would enjoy sex, it was asserted, if men learned to nurture feminine sexual feelings" (Simmons 1989, pp. 162-163). While this rhetoric sounded liberatory for women, advocating as it did male consideration and understanding to awaken female sexuality, it nevertheless reinforced men's sexual domination. One sex advice book said the woman's vagina had to be "taught" to be sexual by the man (Jackson 1987, p. 67).

To be sure, women were now permitted to have sexual feelings and to experience sexual pleasure, but strictly on male terms. Female sexuality was defined and controlled in such a way as to destroy any potential autonomy and to harness it in the service of men. It was defined as passive in a far more fundamental sense than is usually implied: it was not merely that women were 'slow' to become aroused, or that they needed to be made 'ready' for coitus, or 'given' orgasms, but rather that female sexuality was seen as having no independent existence of its own. A woman's sexual instinct could only be awakened by, and satisfied by, a man... (Jackson 1987, p. 70)

In order to help husbands understand their wives' sexual needs, marriage manuals were produced in growing profusion starting between the wars. Borrowing heavily from the sexologists, but writing in language designed for the mass audience, these authors extended the discussion.

"Nature and tradition have decreed that man shall be the wooer, the pursuer, the huntsman. Man is the aggressor...adventurous, primitive man does not value highly an easy capture," wrote birth control activist Margaret Sanger in her marriage manual (1926). In sexologist Havelock Ellis's earlier version of this scenario, "The sexual impulse in woman is fettered by an inhibition which has to be conquered...Her wooer in every act of courtship has the enjoyment of conquering afresh an oft-won woman" (Ellis 1913, V I, p.3). Further, "to exert power...is one of our most primary impulses, and it always tends to be manifested in the attitude of a man towards the woman he loves" (Ellis, VIII, p. 82).

The construction of female sexuality implicit in all this was that women, while no longer passionless, were still not as easily or as powerfully aroused as men. Even the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s constructed a female sexuality in the service of men. A "liberated" view of female sexuality after the sexual revolution was of a desire perhaps as powerful as men's, although still defined by men as a hunger for the penis. The sexual revolution claimed a new morality in which nice girls not

only did it, but actively and powerfully desired it. Many feminists see it, however, not as liberating women for sex on their own terms, but as coercing them to have sex on the male's terms. The sexual revolution did not free women to be desiring subjects, but instead dictated a new form of female sexuality still subordinated to men's desire.

Thus we can see that, far from being constant through history, descriptions and meanings of women's sexuality have changed and changed back again. The reasons for these changes do not lie in a developing scientific understanding of "nature," but rather in changing political and economic conditions. Scholars researching the history of sexuality are doing important work studying the connections between changing attitudes about sexuality and historical events and conditions. Such work can be seen, for example, in Peiss and Simmons (1989); Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey (1989); D'Emilio (1983); Halperin (1990); and Weeks (1977).

Changing Constructions of Women Loving Women

Changing constructions of women who love women have also been documented. In the 18th and 19th century in the United States, for example, very intimate and passionate friendships between women were seen as appropriate and were

supported by the women's husbands and children (Smith-Rosenberg 1975), who often encouraged the two friends to take time away from home so they could be together. It was unremarkable for these friends to share a bed. And even though letters written by such passionate friends contain statements that sound to us now like declarations of sexual interest and relationship -- "I wanted so to put my arms round my girl of all the girls in the world and tell her...I love her as wives do love their husbands, as friends who have taken each other for life..." (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, p.58) -- it seems clear that these feelings were not seen as threats to or negations of conjugal loyalty and love. They were also not seen as abnormal or shameful. One of the main reasons for this is believed to have been that women, at least "respectable" middle class (white) women (Faderman, p. 152), were seen as asexual⁴⁵ or, at least as uninterested in sex except to gratify their husbands or to procreate. From around the

45. This is one of the important links between constructions of race and constructions of sexuality, and one of the major intersections of oppression. White women were constructed as passionless and pure against Black women who were constructed as profoundly passionate and wanton.

1890s through World War I, the supposed sexlessness of white middle class women permitted "Boston marriages" in which financially independent women made their lives together as couples between whom sexuality had no acknowledged role, although love and emotional passion were freely expressed (Newton 1984, pp. 283-284). By the late 19th century, however, passionate love between two women had been redefined as sexual and, because women were still not supposed to be independently interested in sex, as pathological. At the same time that the male homosexual was said to have been constructed (Weeks 1977), the mannish lesbian was born, and seen as an "invert," a male soul in a female body. "Feminine" looking women who loved women were viewed as the least pathological lesbians, those who merely responded to the "masculine types." This view persisted through the 20th century (Faderman 1991) until the 1970s, when the gay liberation movement succeeded in getting homosexuality depathologized by pressuring the American Psychiatric Association to remove it from the list of diagnostic categories. While lesbianism thus was officially depathologized by the mental health establishment, and, as MLK said, this change in attitude

may have "filtered down" to some ordinary people, the view of a lesbian as an "invert," a masculine person, hangs on. A number of the women in my study, surprisingly, only understood lesbian as a "masculine" woman, making it impossible for them at first to understand and experience their own feelings about women as sexual. The "feminine" women whom I interviewed didn't know they could be lesbians and have sexual, romantic relationships with other "feminine" women.

In the years since the APA voted that homosexuality was no longer pathological, same sex love was first defined as a sexual orientation, and then lesbianism was named by some lesbians as a political stance (Kitzinger 1987).

The "sex wars," clashes among views of women's sexuality, have been going on since the 1980s among feminists and lesbians. Some of the issues that have been contested have been pornography, butch/femme roles, sadomasochism, and the form of non-patriarchal or women-centered sexual activity.⁴⁶

A fascinating story which illustrates changing

46. See, for example, B.Rich, 1986, and Vance, 1984.

concepts of women's gender and sexuality is told by Lillian Faderman in her historical survey of romantic friendship and love between women (1981). In 1811, Miss Woods and Miss Pirie, two school mistresses in Scotland, sued the guardian of Miss Cumming, one of their students, for libel after the guardian told parents of the other students that the teachers had engaged in improper and criminal conduct. As was customary in 19th century schools, students and mistresses slept two to a bed, and Miss Cumming slept with Miss Pirie. She complained to her guardian that sometimes at night Miss Woods would get into their bed, climb on top of Miss Pirie, and shake the bed. The student also reported several conversations between the two women: "Oh, you are in the wrong place," Miss Pirie said, and Miss Woods replied that she knew she was but was doing it for fun. And, Miss Pirie said on another night to Miss Woods, "Oh, do it, darling" (p. 148). After these stories were told to the other parents, all the students were taken out of the school. The House of Lords heard the mistresses' libel suit and in 1819 found that the two women had indeed been libeled because it was impossible that anything unseemly could have been going on between two respectable,

middle class women in bed together. One judge is reported to have said, "according to the known habits of women in this country, there is no indecency in one woman going to bed with another." And another of the judges is quoted as asserting that while a man and a woman in bed together could be suspected of some improper sexual activity, and two men in bed together might also be suspected of an "unnatural intention," "a woman being in bed with a woman cannot even give a probability to such an inference. It is the order of nature and of society in its present state. If a woman embraces a woman it infers nothing" (Faderman 1981, p. 152). But while the judges ruled that without the presence of a man (a penis) there could be no misbehavior (sexual activity), the parents of the other students apparently agreed with the guardian that there could be sexual behavior between two women, and had been between the two school mistresses. This is an excellent example of the existence of several levels of reality and norms: the culture at that time apparently both knew and didn't know that women could be sexual together; female homosexuality both was and wasn't constructed at the beginning of the 19th century.

And, as the stories told by the women I interviewed demonstrate, the possibility of women loving women is both known and not known even today. Part of the process of "becoming" lesbian, even today, is "knowing" there is such a thing. My study suggests that at least for some women, "knowing" about lesbians is the issue, not which sex they "desire."

Becoming Lesbian

Some women "know" from the time they are children that they "desire" women and not men. A few of the women I interviewed talked about feeling this way. Others "discover" in adolescence or young adulthood that they love and desire women. Still others, including most of the women I interviewed, do what they are supposed to do, feel attraction to boys and then men, consolidate a heterosexual identity, and enact it, and then some time in adulthood, "fall in love with a woman," or define their feelings about women as sexual. Most lesbian identity development theories are based on a model of sexual "identity" that

exists and awaits discovery.⁴⁷ According to most of these theories, a woman who becomes a lesbian in adulthood was always a lesbian, but repressed or ignored her identity until she was older. These theories offer competing series of "stages" that women go through as they come to their lesbian identity. In some theories, stages include redefining lesbian as not other, and redefining the self as a lesbian.⁴⁸ Some of these theorists also analyze the effects of differing cultures and historical periods on the development of lesbian identity.⁴⁹

The difference between these theories and mine is that they rely on the notion of an inherent identity that can be discovered, and assume the pre-existence of homosexual desire. My theory attempts to explain the construction of a lesbian identity as part of the larger process of the construction of a unified "self." And it tries to explain the construction of a woman's desire for another woman as

47. See, for example, Monteflores and Schultz, 1978; Cass, 1979; Corbett and Morgan, 1983; Vance and Green, 1984; Lewis, 1984; Elliott, 1985; Sophie, 1985/6; Chapman and Brannock, 1987; Troiden, 1989; and Kahn, 1991.

48. For example, Reback, 1986, and Ponse, 1978.

49. Such as Reback, 1986, Defries, 1976, and Hess, 1983.

part of the larger process of the construction of sexual desire itself.

As we have seen from the interviews presented above, the ruling discourses provide no images or models of "feminine" women who like other women and aren't interested in men.⁵⁰ The only cultural images of women who like women are "lesbians," masculine women who aren't really women (and the only cultural images of women who like men are "feminine" women). Thus, for the women I interviewed and many others, sexual desire for women was invisible, and unknowable, literally inconceivable, and, thus, unfeeling.

Freud and Chodorow (in her early work) said that women have a basic bisexuality because of their primary bond with a woman (their mother), yet both seem to feel that heterosexuality in women is "normal" and nonremarkable.⁵¹ I argue that girls adopt exclusively heterosexual behavior

50. Or, for that matter, of "masculine" women who do like men.

51. Although in her most recent book (1994), Chodorow begins to question that formerly taken-for-granted assumption by noting that psychoanalysis offers no account of the development of heterosexuality, and does not provide grounds for pathologizing homosexuality.

because they are pushed to do so by the patriarchal culture and its norms that they have internalized, as well as the internalized object relations of their largely heterosexual parents. Otherwise, their basic omniscience would hold sway and they would continue to want to be and have everything, and would enact and fulfill a wide range of their potentials.⁵² But because of the compulsory exclusive heterosexuality of the culture, adolescent girls⁵³ will construct a heterosexual identity at adolescence unless they have a strong impetus not to, such as an inability to conform to gender roles (which would, additionally, allow them to understand themselves as lesbians, unlike the women in my study).

For some women who become heterosexual at adolescence, there is an opportunity to reconsider their choice later in

52. In fact, I suggest that the "silencing" and loss of confidence of middle school girls found in recent work by Gilligan and her colleagues (Gilligan 1991; Rogers and Tolman 1991; and Brown and Gilligan 1992) and researchers for the American Association of University Women (AAUW 1991) is a result of the necessity of renouncing omniscience and becoming "women" as defined by the culture.

53. Adolescent boys, of course, are also subject to compulsory exclusive heterosexuality. How this affects them and their development is an important question, but beyond the scope of this study.

life. Perhaps it comes after they have entered middle age and feel somewhat invisible to men,⁵⁴ or once they have proved they can be successful heterosexual women, or when they feel they have done their duty by having and raising children. Or it might come when they feel empowered enough to insist upon something just for themselves. This seems to have been the case for many of the women I interviewed, who changed to lesbian identities and lesbian lives in adulthood or at midlife, after identifying and living as heterosexual for a significant period of time. These women had all been able to lead successful heterosexual lives in adolescence and beyond. They were not so strongly attracted to other girls or repelled by boys that they couldn't have a heterosexual adolescence, dating boys and then men and eventually, perhaps, even marrying and having children. These women felt "feminine," identified as women, and were apparently seen as "feminine" "women" by the men in their lives. And they couldn't see lesbians except for the very masculine ones constructed by the ruling discourse.

54. See Heilbrun, 1991.

One of the things that my research demonstrates is that some counter-cultures may only be visible from within. That is, the only lesbians visible to straight people are the ones who announce themselves, are labeled, or "look like" lesbians. From her place on the outside of a lesbian world, Debby couldn't see any "regular" lesbians -- middle class, middle aged women who looked like her -- because they looked like straight women. If she had been at a "lesbian" event and seen women like herself, she would have known they were lesbians. And, in fact, the way she finally found her first lover and her first group of lesbian friends was at a gay pride march. In the supermarket or at the PTA meeting, "regular" lesbians were invisible. This is probably one reason why so many of the women I interviewed didn't become lesbians until they met one. They had to see women like themselves being lesbians to understand that they themselves could be lesbians too. This demonstrates the power of the hegemonic gender order, which says that "feminine" women can't desire "feminine" women, and lesbians can't be "feminine" women.

Somewhere in adulthood, when the pressure on them to be exclusively heterosexual "women" was much less,

something enabled the women I interviewed finally to understand that women like themselves could have and act on sexual and romantic feelings toward other women, make their lives with women, and love women. For some of them, getting married and having children were proof that they were successful women, or real women, or feminine women. For others, the same accomplishments were fulfillments of their social obligations. Having done those things, as Janie had, they could turn to themselves, asking not, "What am I supposed to do?" but, "Who am I?" For still others, having been heterosexual, and feeling that they had given it a sincere try, like CJ, they felt entitled to conclude that they wanted something different, and to reject a straight life for a life with women. And for still others, once their socially-defined sexual attractiveness to men had passed, often at around 50, they were freed from the necessity of what Heilbrun (1991) has called female impersonation and Riviere (1929) has called masquerade, the enactment of hegemonic femininity.⁵⁵ Women experience this

55. Hegemonic femininity and hegemonic masculinity are the gender enactments specified by the ruling sex/gender/sexuality order. See Connell, 1987.

time in many different ways. Some mourn their loss of attractiveness and biological fertility and feel they have no purpose left in life. Others feel freed by this turn of events and find a world of different things to do and ways to be (perhaps able at last to return somewhat to the world of omniscience of their childhood). Some of those women, like the ones I interviewed, find an alternative to heterosexuality and relationships with men.

A hegemonic order is extremely powerful but, at the same time, fragile. What made the women I interviewed able to see beyond the hegemonic order was often just the merest lifting of a flap of the patriarchal tent, so that they could see there was another world out there, other ways of seeing things, other sets of meanings. That small peek was all it took. The hegemonic gender order relies on common understandings and its ability to obliterate alternatives. The merest hint that there is another way can shatter the power and appearance of solidity and permanence of a ruling order. The two most common things that provided such a hint for the women I interviewed were feminism and entering a woman-centered sphere.

Feminism

The roles of feminism and of lesbians in reconstructing female gender and sexuality and reconstructing lesbianism cannot be overemphasized, and the results of the interactions between the two discourses have been powerful indeed. Lesbians provided feminists with a model of how women could live when they didn't defer to men, or build their lives around men. And feminists provided lesbians with a political, non-stigmatized rationale for such a woman. Most of the women I interviewed at least mentioned feminism and its influence on their lives. Whether it was Lorraine, who transformed her life within feminism, or Silvy, who suggested that she and her lover might never have left their husbands to make their lives together if it hadn't been for the feminism of others, the lives these women were leading when I interviewed them would have been almost unimaginable before feminism and its interactions with lesbianism to construct a strong, independent, woman-centered, "woman," and a non-deviant "lesbian" who is a woman.

We heard both Janie and Ann say they felt more

feminine or more of a woman once they became lesbians than they had when they lived heterosexual lives. Each gave the same explanation for this: when they were heterosexual, they were living in the world of men, and felt they had to compete with men in order to feel successful and comfortable. Janie didn't like feeling masculine, but may have needed to feel masculine in the world of men in order to feel safe there. Ann enjoyed being able to compete with men and to prove herself in relation to them. In a patriarchal culture it is men and the masculine that are valued and that form the norm or standard. Women who want to be heard, or who want to be able to protect themselves, or who want to be actors in their own lives, or who want to be able to violate gender norms, need to be able to stand up to men, to compete with them for power and privilege. In a patriarchal culture that values men and devalues women, being "masculine" is a way for women to feel that they count too; that they, too, are valuable and successful. For many, many women, feminism provided an alternative to this route to self-confidence and safety; turning the tables and valuing women and the "feminine." In a culture where women are valued, women can feel

"feminine" and still feel powerful, successful, and able to steer their own lives.

Woman-Centered Sphere

Another event in these women's lives that challenged the hegemonic gender order was spending time in a realm without men where they could see that there was a way different from the patriarchal culture. There are two kinds of women's spheres that were entered by the women I interviewed. One kind was a very traditional one: the weekday world of women who were not employed outside the home, while their children were at school and their husbands were at work. This was the world in which Silvy met Beryl, Ann met Dot, and Debby met both Diane and Polly. It was similar to the one described by Carol Smith-Rosenberg (1975) in that it was a world of women encountering each other in the course of doing women's work, a world largely ignored and discounted by men. While the husbands of Silvy, Beryl, Ann, and Dot might not have encouraged long trips away from home by their wives and their special friends, Ann and Dot's husbands apparently felt unthreatened by what they knew of the friendships, and Silvy's husband did for a while. Like the husbands in the

world Smith-Rosenberg described, these husbands did not imagine that their wives might be spending weekdays in erotic relations with other women. In this traditional women's sphere, as Silvy described, women had intense, intimate, and sometimes passionate relationships with other women. As Silvy said, the taboo usually made these relationships "safe" (that is, not overtly sexual), but occasional women found the courage to break the ban on sexual relationships with other women.

Most of the women I interviewed, however, entered a women-centered sphere that had in some way or another been created or made possible by feminism and its sequelae. Lorraine, Brook, and Maggie first became feminists themselves. MLK, Iris, Janie, and Jessie got involved with social groups of women, many of whom were lesbians enabled to be "out" by feminism. All of the women I interviewed except for Silvy and Ann had either associated with lesbians (or a lesbian) or read about lesbianism shortly before their change. Getting to know a lesbian (or lesbians) and reading about lesbianism served several functions for the women I interviewed. The most obvious was letting them see lesbians, see that they are "regular"

people like themselves, and see that they can feel comfortable with lesbians. Lesbians and lesbianism were normalized. Also, the participants then had role models, which a number of them had said they lacked when they were younger and wondering about their interest in women. In addition, they learned how to be lesbians by spending time with other lesbians or reading about them. While one learns to be heterosexual just by being in the culture, one has to look elsewhere to learn to be lesbian. These are familiar processes in symbolic interaction and labeling theories of lesbian identity formation,⁵⁶ and they were important to the women I interviewed.

As for the construction of a lesbian identity in the women I studied, a women's or lesbian sphere provides a cultural context in which the newly evolving lesbian can learn to value herself and her potential lovers and life partners as women. It is also a context in which new ways of living and relating, new rituals and new concepts that will serve in the woman's new life, can be learned. These are things that are very important in our lives, and women

56. See, for example, Reback, 1986, and Ponse, 1978.

who think about leaving husbands and traditional families, or who fear the hostility of their families of origin and friends when they come out, fear the loss of this important context in which they have lived for so long. Learning that there are alternatives to the traditional patriarchal family is important.

Through a variety of routes the women I interviewed became able to feel they were in charge of their lives, to have confidence in themselves, and to speak their feelings. That may be because they finally were able to reject the patriarchy, to say "no" to compulsory heterosexuality, understand their "liking" women as romantic love and sexual desire, and make their lives with women as lesbians. And it may be that any significant and difficult change in adulthood would have done the same thing. Janie said, "For me the power was in the transition," and I think that would be true for a lot of people, especially women, who had not before taken charge of their lives and been active agents in changing them. Whatever made them able to do it, extricating themselves from the heterosexual moral order was a lot of work.

Once they saw just a little beyond the hegemonic

gender order and felt more powerful, women I interviewed were able to reconstruct lesbian and woman, and then reconstruct their own gender and sexuality so that they could identify and live as lesbians. As we have seen in the empirical study, the construction and reconstruction process is both social and psychic and takes place on both the conscious and unconscious level. In order to understand it we must put it into the larger context of the construction of the self.

Construction of the Self

The Western conception of the self is of a bounded, consistent entity that becomes settled and doesn't change in adulthood except under extraordinary circumstances. I propose a different model of the self: one which is formed in relationships and a social and cultural context; a self that continues to grow and develop from birth to death. Like the post modern self,⁵⁷ in this model the self is not built around a "true" core identity but is rather constructed from the collection of potentials, abilities, subidentities and desires that Robert May called our

57. Sampson, 1985.

"characterological treasury" (May 1986, p. 188).⁵⁸ These building blocks of self are not necessarily consistent or permanent. In fact, they are often contradictory and may change frequently. Changing life circumstances and historical and cultural changes may make some more salient than others at different times. We are aware of some of them and unaware of others. We may, consciously and unconsciously, choose to ignore or stifle some while emphasizing and enacting others. Just as gender can be seen as a performance (Butler 1990) compelled by the culture, the self is also a performance -- equally compulsory, made up of bits and pieces of our "characterological treasury," and enacted for an audience made up of ourselves, our associates, the generalized other of Mead, and the political economy in which we live.

Another way of viewing the self is as an ongoingly reconstructed life story, or narrative. In order to make sense of our life and make the past coherent with the present, we understand our past anew each day and rewrite our life story with every change in our lives or our

58. And part of what I call the omniform, multi-potentialed self.

understanding of our lives. When "date rape" was conceptualized in the 1980s, many women began understanding experiences of unwanted sex with male acquaintances or dates in a new way, as a crime.⁵⁹ They then saw themselves as survivors of a crime instead of as women with poor judgement or bad luck. Along with that identity came a whole personality profile, self-help groups she could join, a vast discourse she could take part in, a new way for her to understand many of her feelings and attitudes, and new explanations for her inmost fears and desires.

In this view of the self, "becoming" a lesbian could entail a rewriting of one's life story. In this context, the statement, made by many of the women I interviewed, "I always liked women," can be understood in a number of different ways. One is seeing the statement as evidence that sexual orientation is inborn and unchanging, and that the speaker was just repressing her true nature or not acting on it when she lived a heterosexual life. Another view could be that people re-write their biographies as their lives and experience change. Or that present events

59. See Pett, 1994.

make us understand past events in new ways. "Liking women" can mean many things, from enjoying their company to wanting to make a life exclusively with them. The women I interviewed reconstructed desire for women from feelings they had previously understood differently. Janie, for example, reconstructed her preference for women's bodies from esthetic and artistic appreciation to lesbian sexual desire. Brook reconstructed her preference for the company of women from a feminist political stance to a sexual preference. Maggie reconstructed her attraction to strong-looking women from a feminist appreciation to erotic interest.

In our culture, the strength of the notion of an unchanging self is so great that individuals feel required to define any significant change (such as going from heterosexual to homosexual) as discovering one's true self or developing a truer self, rather than simply changing one's mind, or trying something new. In fact, it really is almost taboo in our culture to see sexual orientation as a matter of choice. Thus, many of the women I interviewed seemed at first to be saying that they had changed, found a new self. But then when they realized that was what they

were claiming, they backed off, and said instead that they had "really" always been lesbians and just hadn't known it; that they were not changing, but instead discovering their true self.

One example of the construction of a consistent and constant self is the construction of what is known as sexual orientation. As I said earlier, our characterological treasury includes a collection of wants defined as erotic, and emotional desires that are also contradictory and inconsistent, including "desires" for both sexes and for many sexual activities with many meanings. I expanded Freud's notion of the individual's basic bisexuality to the concept of the individual's omneity, or "desire" to have and be everything.⁶⁰ The developing individual may renounce, suppress, or decline to act upon the wants it learns are forbidden because they are erotic or emotional desires incompatible with its sex and gender. Or, the individual may find ways of satisfying those wants by redefining them (to both self and other) as something acceptable. In our present culture, one

60. See Kubie, 1974.

acceptable definition is a lesbian "identity"; a masculine woman (who is, therefore, not a "woman") who desires other women. Some wants can't come to consciousness because they are unmentioned, unconceived in the culture. For many of the women I studied, being a "woman" who loved and desired other "women" was inconceivable. Unarticulated by the culture, un-imaged and seemingly un-named, it was also impossible for these women to enact. They couldn't even experience "lesbian desire." One of the problems of sexual "identity" as constructed in our culture is that it constitutes a set of imperatives, such as defining lesbian desire as involving a masculine woman. While the move from defining homosexuality as pathology to defining it as an identity was at first liberating because it said homosexuality is not a sickness but simply another way to be, its description has become confining. As Seidman put it,

...through its cultural and institutional authority, science could inscribe in our bodies and minds a sexual/social regime -- one that made desire into an identity, one that made choice of sexual object into a master category of sexual identity, one that made sexual/social identities mutually exclusive...Indeed, the exclusive legitimation of homosexuality tended to reinforce a regime that defined sexual desire and identity by choice of sexual object, thus relegating

to a marginal and devalued status all other desires and sexual choices (1991, p. 181, 182).

Components of Gender

Both "sexual orientation" and "gender" are seen in this culture as monolithic and unitary but are in fact made up of separate and often contradictory components. Many of these components of gender and sexuality have already been suggested or identified in the literature, but until very recently the fact that they are separate, and not always consistent within a "normal" adult has not been addressed. For example, in "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," Freud wrote:

Publications on homosexuality usually do not distinguish clearly enough between the questions of the choice of object, on the one hand, and of the sexual characteristics and sexual attitude of the subject, on the other, as though the answer to the former necessarily involved the answers to the latter. Experience, however, proves the contrary: a man with predominantly male characteristics and also masculine in his love life may still be inverted in respect to his object, loving only men instead of women. A man in whose character feminine attributes evidently predominate, who may indeed, behave in love like a woman, might be expected, from this feminine attitude, to choose a man for his love object; but he may nevertheless be heterosexual and show no more inversion in respect of his object than an average normal man. The same is true of women; here also mental sexual character and object-choice do not necessarily coincide (Freud 1920, pp. 155-56).

Jones, too, saw some of the diverse components of sexuality and gender. In "The Early Development of Female Sexuality," he described two types of homosexual women: those who want to be accepted as a man by men, and those whose libido is centered on women. Of the second group, he wrote, "Analysis shows that this interest in women is a vicarious way of enjoying femininity; they merely employ other women to exhibit it for them" (1927, p. 446). In the last 20 years, as a result of the feminist and the gay and lesbian challenge to traditional views of gender and sexuality, researchers and theorists have begun distinguishing some of these components, and asserting that their inconsistency within the individual is not an indication of pathology (Grimm 1987; Suppe 1984; Williams 1987). Each writer, however, identifies a different few components.

My synthesis of their work suggests the following components of gender and sexuality: bodily sex, core gender identity, gender role, gender ideal, sexual object, love object, sexual aim, and emotional aim. **Bodily sex** is the individual's physical, biological sex (male or female), which is not always as unambiguous as one might expect.

Core gender identity is the individual's subjective perception of her gender. It doesn't imply acceptance of that gender or of the role assigned to it. A woman can know she is a woman (core gender identity) and wish she weren't, or reject the feminine role. **Gender role** is the behavior the individual exhibits that is viewed as appropriate either for men or for women. It involves both role and style. It can be a mix of both genders. **Gender ideal** is the gender the individual wishes to be (or identifies as). **Sexual object** is the gender(s) of persons to whom an individual is sexually attracted. **Love object** is the gender(s) of persons whom an individual loves, toward whom emotional passion is felt. Sexual object and love object are two components that are especially important in understanding women's sexuality and gender, as has been discussed above. **Sexual aim** is the physical, sexual acts desired by the individual. This is a redefinition of Freud's term, which simply applied to the "union of the genitals" and "release of the sexual tension..." (1905, p.15). I expand Freud's concept of sexual aim to refer to desires such as to penetrate or be penetrated, to be rough or gentle, and for involvement of

specific body parts. **Emotional aim** is analogous in many ways to sexual aim. It refers to the emotional goal of relationships, such as merging, maintaining separateness, seeking the love of an unattainable person, dominance or nurturance, mutuality, and surrendering to or taking charge of the other.

Each of these components develops separately (although complexly related to all the others and to the body) and they are not necessarily consistent within any one individual. That is, an individual's sex object may be male and her love object may be female, or her core gender identity may be female and her gender role may be male (Jones 1927, 1932; Grimm 1987; Suppe 1984; Williams 1987). These components are also not necessarily fixed throughout the life course. Not only can they change during childhood and adolescence, but at least for some women, they change in adulthood as well.

These components themselves are constructed out of much more amorphous and fluid characteristics. For example, bodily sex is not necessarily as unambiguous as we may think (Barbin 1980; Epstein 1990; Fausto-Sterling 1987; Kessler 1990; Laquer 1990; Money and Ehrhardt 1972; Spanier

1991). While an individual's bodily sex may be mixed, she can still present an overall impression of being a woman if she has the most important signs of femaleness, whatever they are in a given culture (Garfinkel 1967b; Kessler and McKenna 1978; Bolin 1988; Devor 1989; Richards 1983).

Similarly, an individual woman could see herself as lesbian, but specifically desire women who look like men. Writings by lesbians who desire very butch women indicate that what they desire is masculinity in a woman, not in a man. What does that mean about the sex of the sexual object? In fact, reports by butch and femme lesbians⁶¹ raise extremely interesting and provocative questions about the relationship between the sex and the gender of the sexual and love object and the sex and gender of the self.

Butch and Femme

Lesbians who do butch and femme are not replicating or imitating hegemonic masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality. They are engaged in a play with those institutions: they play with a masculine woman and a feminine woman enacting heterosexual desire and gender

61. For example, in Nestle, 1992.

roles. But the fact is never hidden that they are both women engaged in a relationship that is seen by the ruling sex and gender order as outlaw. Joan Nestle (1984) mentions a "...twenty-year-old fem who carried her favorite dildo in a pink satin purse to the bar every Saturday night so her partner for the evening would understand exactly what she wanted" (p. 233). This woman can in no way be described as imitating the hegemonic female in a heterosexual relationship. She can be seen as a rebel from the ruling order. She is going to be penetrated, but not by a man; she has the phallus, and isn't a man; she's looking for a butch, but comes equipped with her own penetrator.

A couple I know, who are femme and butch, got married. The butch is planning to be a Protestant minister. The femme is Jewish. Their wedding was officiated by a lesbian minister and a male rabbi. The butch wore pants and a vest, the femme wore a cream colored dress and cream-colored canvas shoes with thick lug soles. The Christian-Jewish ceremony included the Jewish tradition of breaking a wine glass; at my friends' wedding, however, it wasn't the groom who broke the glass, it was both women. And they

each vowed to take the other as a wife. The femme cried during the ceremony and the butch carried the heavy things before the event, but the butch was the one who looked forward to staying home with the children they talked about having; the femme wasn't interested in childcare.

These two women are not the only butches and femmes who play with the roles, occasionally exchange them, and enact contradictory ones. There is, for example, a saying from the '50s or '60s: "Butch on the streets, femme in the sheets." In another context, a contemporary butch got long-stemmed red roses from her partner on Valentine's Day. Rolling her eyes and laughing, she said sardonically: "Oh, I love it when she's butch."

These women, and many of the others who enact the butch/femme conventions, are playing with gender, playing with difference, and playing with difference and sameness of sex and love object. They are living an outlaw life, thumbing their noses at the patriarchy.

But within the ruling sex and gender order, the components of gender and sexuality are constructed (by patriarchal society and the individual together) as monolithic, consistent, and fixed. That is, out of a very

diverse set of components, consistent gender and sexuality presentations and identities are constructed by the individual and her patriarchal society. For many individuals, gender presentation and identity are also constructed as fixed, that is, as unchanging throughout the life course, even though the components may change through time.

Many Levels of Construction, Reconstruction

The constructions and reconstructions discussed in this dissertation take place on many levels. The reconstruction of lesbian, for example, takes place on the cultural, group, and individual levels. In the culture, we have seen lesbian change from unimaginable to an "inversion" to a "sexual orientation" to a political stance. Lesbian is also constructed and reconstructed by and among women who love women. An ongoing debate in the lesbian community which is joined in this study is the debate about whether lesbians are made or born. One woman who heard that I was studying women who changed from heterosexual to lesbian said to me, "Honey, we never change." And lesbian was reconstructed by many of the women I interviewed, who couldn't experience their feelings

for other women as desire until they had reconstructed lesbian to include a woman like themselves. This assertion runs counter to the view of lesbianism as an inherent quality of the individual and bisexuality as a defense against homosexual desire or an attempt to enjoy relationships with women while maintaining heterosexual privilege. What I am saying is that all sexuality is a construction, made out of a chaotic, omniform assortment of potentials and appetites and capacities for sensation. The differing experiences of having "always" been a lesbian and having "changed" to one in adulthood reflect differing times of construction over the life course, different historical periods, different peer-groups, different personal understandings, different personalities, and different gender enactments.

The reconstruction of woman also takes place on many levels: within the ruling discourse, among feminists, among lesbians, and within the individual.

In the ruling discourse, the traditional construction of woman has been challenged by the lesbian/feminist reconstruction. The traditional construction of woman is always in terms of men: someone who is weaker, softer,

gentler, subservient, passive, desirous of pleasing a man, and a sexual object. The lesbian/feminist construction of woman is independent of men: someone who is strong, assertive, powerful, active, and a sexual subject with her own desire. In the femme/butch enactments, there are role differences, but they are not the same as mainstream cultural gender differences.⁶² For example, femmes can have power, strength, and agency,⁶³ and butches are women (not men) and can be feminists. Among feminists and lesbians, there are two competing views of woman: the "essentialist" vs. the "constructionist" positions. The "essentialist" sees a female "essence" or principle in women that is different from the male "essence," is superior to it, and has been silenced by the patriarchal hegemonic order.⁶⁴ Essentialists are interested in identifying and valorizing women's ways, and substituting

62. See, for excellent examples, Nestle, 1984, 1992, Feinberg, 1993, and Platt, 1995.

63. And "non-feminine" qualities. One femme, for example, spoke proudly about her ability to take care of her own car by changing the oil and diagnosing its mechanical problems.

64. Such as, Mary Daly, 1978; Janice Raymond, 1979; Julia Penelope, 1992; Sarah Ruddick, 1989.

them for patriarchal ways. Constructionists⁶⁵ contend that almost all sex and gender differences are socially constructed by the patriarchal system. They say that these differences are insignificant, and that differences among women and among men are greater than differences between the two sexes.

There is a third view, that gender itself is constructed, and that there are a multiplicity of ways of being in the body that are limited by patriarchy. This view, which I share, is best represented by Butler (1990 and 1993), Bornstein (1994), Feinberg (1993), and Pratt (1995).

Sexuality is something that is constructed and reconstructed on many different levels. History of sexuality research shows that the meanings of sexual behavior have changed through time. Anthropological research has shown that the meanings also change across cultures. Social construction research has shown sexuality

65. For example, Shulamith Firestone, 1970; Sherrie Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, 1981; Anne Fausto-Sterling, 1986; Cynthia Epstein, 1988; Judith Lorber, 1994.

changing in our own time and culture.⁶⁶ My empirical research has also shown how sexuality changes within the individual based on her context and experience. Take away men and you remove the penetration and orgasm imperatives that define male, and patriarchal, sexuality.

Marilyn Frye (1988) has observed that lesbian sex is not precisely comparable to heterosexual sex, and that may be why research shows both that lesbian cohabiting couples have less "sex" than any other kind of couples, and that lesbians report greater satisfaction with their "sex" than any other group.⁶⁷ Frye suggests that lesbians may define (or construct) "sex" differently from straight people. In a heterosexual couple, "sex" is traditionally seen as a bounded event in which the man penetrates the woman with his penis and ejaculates. In this definition, what the woman does or feels, and what else the man does and feels are relatively irrelevant. But for lesbian couples, where there is no penis and its ejaculation to worry about, the definition of a "sex act" is cloudier. Frye says that

66. See, for example, Gagnon and Simon, 1987, on the changing scripts for oral sex.

67. See, for example, Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983.

lesbians do not require orgasms every time there is erotic physical contact and activity. But when they are asked how often they have sex, most people think of a bounded event in which there is at least one orgasm, so lesbians say they don't have sex very often. But when lesbians are invited to discuss their sex lives, they talk about having many erotic physical interactions with their lovers which are deeply satisfying to both. Many of the women I interviewed said they had not enjoyed and/or been orgasmic in heterosexual sex but that they were orgasmic and/or enjoyed sex very much more with women. Some said they hadn't felt sexual at all when they were living heterosexual lives. An obvious explanation for this is simply physical. Since having sex is defined in the ruling discourse as penetration and ejaculation by a penis, many men (and some women) think that is the "natural" way to have sex, that what makes a man have an orgasm "should" make a woman have one too, and that anything else is "abnormal" and "unnatural." Since women's vaginas have limited sensation and their clitorises are as sensitive as penises, women are unlikely to have an orgasm simply from stimulation of their vaginas. It is clitoral stimulation that causes most women

to have orgasms. In a lesbian couple, both participants know this, and so their activity will be organized for clitoral stimulation, although penetration may also be enjoyed. It is, therefore, not surprising that the women I interviewed found their lesbian sexual activities more satisfying than they had found their heterosexual activities. Add to that the fact that women are socialized to connect sexual desire with love, while men are socialized to connect sexual desire with conquest, and it is even more logical that women can make each other feel more loved and, therefore, more pleased sexually.

I contend that individuals are omniform beings who have the capacity to enact and desire and enjoy everything. Part of the relatively recent exercise of state power over lives, instead of over life or death (Foucault 1978), is this control through the construction of erotic desire and enactments, through the meanings and norms attached to the sexed body. Mutually exclusive, incommensurable sexes and genders signify and enforce heterosexuality. Heterosexuality signifies and enforces two mutually exclusive sexes and genders. This constructed and enforced difference legitimizes a system of dominance and

subordination in which men depend on and use women to provide both material reproduction and the "other" without which hegemonic masculinity could not be constructed and enacted.

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

The women in this study have demonstrated the constructedness of gender and sexuality in their stories of re-constructing their own gender and sexuality when they changed from heterosexual to lesbian lives. They told stories that revealed this construction and reconstruction in daily practices involving an interplay of psyche and patriarchal society. Their stories have also demonstrated the social and political natures of gender and sexuality, in spite of the women's experience of those things as private, personal attributes.

When the women I interviewed said that they had always been attracted to women but hadn't know there was such a thing as a lesbian, they were demonstrating the power of the ruling discourse which constructs "lesbian" as a "masculine" woman or a "feminine" woman who desires "masculine" women. This ruling discourse not only shapes

language,⁶⁸ but, more importantly, it shapes the meaning that the individual makes of her own experience, and it shapes her experience itself.

What the women I interviewed demonstrated was that they didn't experience or understand their feelings about women as sexual desire until they had a language in which to speak that desire (at first just to themselves), a context in which they could have (and know they have) desire.

But the context in which these women initially found themselves was one deeply steeped in (and thoroughly shaped by) the binary patriarchal model of man/woman, male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual. In this model, even homosexual relationships uphold heterosexuality; even "same-sex" relationships are between a "masculine" person and a "feminine" person. The women I interviewed had felt themselves to be "feminine" women, and the women they were interested in also appeared to them to be "feminine" women. Within the binary model, there was no way for these women to understand their interest in

68. So that "lesbian" means a "masculine" woman or a woman who desires "masculine" men.

"feminine" women as anything romantic or sexual. They could understand that interest as feminist approval as Maggie did, as esthetic appreciation as Janie did, or as close friendship as Debby did.

Thus, for the women I interviewed, changing from heterosexual to lesbian while feeling that they "hadn't really changed" was a radical act that required them to break the binary model of the ruling gender order so that they could imagine, and then experience, romantic erotic relationships between two "feminine" women.

Eight Elements of Change

In the empirical section, I identified eight elements in the stories the women I interviewed told about their changes. These elements are: reconstruction of lesbian, reconstruction of woman, lifting the tent flap of the patriarchy, empowerment, entering a woman-centered sphere, reconstruction of their own sexuality, reconstruction of their own gender, and enhanced sense of womanhood. All of the reconstructions discussed in the empirical section are reconstructions that broke the binary to allow more complexity, more shades of grey between the polarities of black and white. Those four reconstructions are intimately

connected with elements that appeared to make them possible: lifting the tent flap of the patriarchal order, empowerment, and entering a woman-centered sphere. And, they all appear to have produced the element of an enhanced sense of womanhood. I must emphasize, however, that these six elements are not stages of lesbian identity development; they do not happen sequentially or in a particular order. The women I interviewed went through a process very different from one of identity development as a progressive course of mastery of one stage that makes possible moving on to the next. Their process was also, most emphatically, not one of uncovering a true self that had been waiting to be discovered, or liberating a formerly repressed desire. The process I uncovered in the stories told by the women I interviewed was not a linear one. These elements happened differently to each woman. Some came before the actual change and some came after, the order varied from woman to woman. Some of the elements are related to each other, or conflated for some women and not for others. For some women, one element made another possible; for others, two elements happened at the same time, or were really the same element; for others still

those two elements were unrelated. And not every element was involved for every woman. Every element, however, is of theoretical importance in the understanding of gender and sexuality that I propose here.

Imagine, if you will, the self I described above: a collection of wants and fears, identifications and disidentifications, memories and fantasies, what May (1986) called our "characterological treasury." That treasury also includes potentials for pleasure and pain, joy and misery, attributes, interests, skills and talents, ways of being and experiencing in the world. These potentials make up the omneity of the individual; the ability to be and do and want all. The title that orders and names this collection is the individual's "identity."

The self that changed for the women in my study was something like that, and the elements of the change are changing definitions of categories, calling things by different names, reconstruction of meanings. When these women "changed," the title and hierarchy of the characterological treasury changed. But the actual content of that treasury remained--nothing needed to be discarded or added. Only the location or saliency of individual

items in the treasury changed; those that fit the changed "identity" were brought to the fore and emphasized, explored, elaborated. Those that didn't fit were tucked out of "sight," or renamed, or suppressed; but they never disappeared and can always be called to the forefront again, as Derr (1992), for example, in her study of lesbians who became heterosexual, has shown. For each woman, the order of events was different, the particular assortment in the treasury was different, and the way it was moved and redefined were different. What the women had in common was that they all responded to a call for participants in a study of women who had changed from heterosexual to lesbian in adulthood, and they shared at least some of these eight elements of that change.

I will now discuss these elements in terms of the social/psychic construction theory articulated and argued in this study.

Reconstruction of Category

Reconstruction of lesbian and reconstruction of woman are reconstructions of categories of persons. The reconstructions of these categories by the women I interviewed all involved breaking the binary in which the

categories had been embedded; the binary was either broken before the categories could be reconstructed, or the reconstruction of the categories broke the binary. One of the reasons the women I interviewed felt they had never seen a lesbian or didn't have a role model for enacting their interest in women was because the category "lesbian" was not "woman" and not "feminine," and they felt they were "feminine" "women." They did not understand or experience their interest in women as desire because there was no model for a woman like themselves desiring a woman like the ones in which they were interested, women with "little tendrils of hair" such as CJ described, not, as she also described, women "with ties and crew cuts," or "masculine" women. Their reconstruction of lesbian to include "feminine" women like themselves who desired other "feminine" women broke the masculine/feminine binary of romantic erotic relationships to make conceivable a feminine/feminine pairing.

Likewise, their reconstruction of woman involved a breaking of the masculine/feminine binary to include "masculine" qualities such as strength, power, and agency.

Reconstructions of Self

Reconstruction of gender and reconstruction of sexuality are reconstructions of the woman's self into a self that does not conform with prevailing social norms. For some of the women I interviewed, these reconstructions had occurred before their change, for others, after. For some, the reconstructions were necessary in order for them to be able to change, for others, the reconstructions could not take place until the women had "become" lesbian. The reconstruction of the woman's own gender was a personal redefinition of herself as a woman. Her new definition of a woman was someone who was strong and active, an agent in her own life. The reconstruction of the woman's own sexuality was a personal redefinition of her sexuality as active, desiring, and orgasmic. It was also a redefinition of desire, so that she experienced "desire" for other women, "lesbian desire." For some of the women I interviewed, this reconstruction took place when they were living as lesbians. For others, it happened before their "change," and was one of the things that made the change possible. While the women I interviewed experienced this

change in their sexuality as an intimate, personal change, I see it as a political change, part of their reconstruction of woman to include an individual who is "masculine" (when part of masculinity is seen as being sexually active, desiring, and orgasmic).

Challenging the Patriarchy

Two of the elements of the change from heterosexual to lesbian lives of the women I interviewed seemed to be specifically challenges to the patriarchy: empowerment and entering a women-centered sphere. Both of these elements violated patriarchal norms: one that women be in a subordinated, powerless position in relation to men; and the other that women's lives revolve around serving and pleasing men. In fact, it would seem that the first, powerlessness, might be necessary in order to assure the second, service to men. Each of these elements--empowerment and entering a women-centered sphere--were achieved in different ways.

Empowerment required some extraordinary event: psychotherapy, an accomplishment unusual for a woman, unusual support and encouragement, or a determination to make a change. The effect of empowerment was that the

women felt they could change their lives, try to get something they wanted, take charge of their lives, or try to do something that seemed to them to be difficult. Becoming empowered also gave the women I interviewed the strength and courage to live lesbian lives.

Entering a woman-centered sphere was for some of the women I interviewed the source of support and encouragement that made their empowerment possible. For others of the women, it was empowerment that enabled them to enter a woman-centered sphere in the first place. But for all of them, it happened before they changed from heterosexual to lesbian lives. The nature of the woman-centered sphere varied for the women I interviewed. For some it was an actual group of women; either a consciousness raising group, a women's studies class, or a social group of women. For others it was meeting lesbians. For still others, the woman-centered sphere was the traditional world of women at home, raising their children and doing their chores while their men were at work. Whatever the nature of the woman-centered sphere, it served to show these women that a world without men was possible; that a life with women was not only possible, but pleasurable and gratifying, perhaps even

more pleasurable and gratifying than a life with men. A woman-centered sphere also showed these women that women could be valued and admired, that they themselves could be valued and admired as women instead of feeling the inferiority that the patriarchy had often made them feel. In short, a woman-centered sphere allowed the women I interviewed to briefly step out of the patriarchal order and see that another world was possible.

In fact, all of these elements functioned as challenges to the patriarchal order because they broke the binary and overturned the gender order that subordinated women and made them feel powerless and without agency. And these challenges made possible, or constituted (or sometimes were made possible by) the eighth element in the process of change: lifting the tent flap of the patriarchy.

Lifting the Tent Flap

Lifting the tent flap of the patriarchy gave the women I interviewed just enough of a peek at the world outside the hegemonic gender order that they could see that other ways, other meanings, other orders are possible. And that tiny peek was enough to shatter, for them, the patriarchal, heterosexual hegemony and allow them to construct selves

and lives as outlaws. In many ways, this element was the one most completely social and psychic, because it took place on the very personal level of the individual's own perception and experience. But it is also a very powerful political act, one of the most radical political acts possible, because it illuminates and exposes an entire ruling order. This lifting of the tent flap is, I think, what that first goal of feminist consciousness raising was all about: making the personal political; seeing that women's most private and intimate experiences, feelings, and fears were in fact political.

While at first these stories of women who changed from heterosexual to lesbian lives might seem personal and idiosyncratic love (or sex) stories, or stories of the discovery of a lesbian identity, or stories of the surfacing of repressed desire, they are in fact very political tales about the power and frailty of a ruling order that makes heterosexuality appear natural and universal, makes sexual desire more important than other wants, and turns "attraction" into a fixed, limited sexual identity. At the same time, they are stories of the power and agency of the individual women to reconstruct their own

lives and identities, to see past a hegemonic order, thus smashing its power over them, and to participate in a profound post-modern re-writing of cultural meanings.

The Postmodern Moment

What is the vision I am offering? What is it that I see beyond the hegemonic order? This postmodern sex/gender/sexuality order; what is it? Is it utopia? A return to Eden? A world without repression?

What I see outside that tent is an opportunity to glimpse, perhaps only briefly, our human potential for multiplicity, our almost infinite variety, our countless possibilities. The opportunity is brief because in the dialectical process of meaning-making, a new set of meanings (whose makeup is unknown) is already under construction to replace the ones whose smashing I have documented in this study. These new meanings will help form and then ultimately serve the historical and political circumstances we are entering as we approach the new millennium. They will be part of a new hegemonic order that will then be our world, appearing "natural" and true, although in reality it will be a construction that is as powerful and frail as the present one. Eventually, another

generation of outlaws may challenge this new hegemonic order, pushing it to change and finally smashing it and making other new meanings and another new ruling order, and the dialectic of human social and political life will continue.

This postmodern moment we are now in, when the old order is giving way and the new one being created, is a very exciting time. While we are not preparing a return to Eden, because there is none, we are in the midst of making new meanings and building a new order. This new order could be a return to an earlier puritanism, a new conservative repression, as many fear. But it could instead be a more open, liberating order, that frees more of our human potential. The women I interviewed, the sex and gender outlaws I described, and many other individuals and groups in what is coming to be called "the gender community" are working to open up the space in which people can explore and enact sex/gender/sexuality. Some of the members of the gender community have both penises and breasts; many of them aren't saying what their genitals are. Growing numbers of them are saying that they are not "men" or "women," but a third category in between, that is

neither and both.

This process is similar to what has been occurring with respect to feminism. Many women who feel they have not been included in the "feminist" definition of "women" are pushing the boundaries of that definition. They are women of color, working class women, and third world women who are saying that they are women too, and no one else can speak for them; that the experiences of white middle-class Euro-American women are not the only women's experiences.

Individuals who were born "men" and have "become" "women" are insisting on being admitted into "women only" spaces. Individuals who were born "women" and lived as lesbian feminists, but are now living as "men" are challenging their exclusion from the lesbian feminist community. Some of these "women" have penises. Some of these "men" don't.

There is a growing number of people who identify as bisexual and want to be included in lesbian and gay political action. Many of them are saying that the categories heterosexual and homosexual are rigid binaries that need to be deconstructed so that people can be simply sexual, without being forced to claim and abide by an

"identity."

More and more people are coming to see that their own gender and sexuality are not unified and monolithic, but rather complex, mixed, and made up of many components. Some "women" who are in sexual/romantic relationships with "men," for example, are realizing that they are "attracted to" men who are "feminine," and that they, themselves, are "masculine." Some "women" have learned that while their sexual objects are "men," their love objects are "women." And many people have observed and are coming to enact the playful fun and erotic excitement of being both "masculine" and "feminine" in a relationship with another who is doing the same thing.

Many feminists fear this multiplicity. Even though feminism was one of the major forces challenging and breaking down the old categories of gender and sexuality, the possible loss of the category "woman" seems to threaten feminism. Who will be the subject of feminism if there is no such thing as a woman? This vexing but electrifying question is vital to both feminist theory and feminist politics. How we as scholars and as activists define woman is at the heart of many of the most heated academic and

political debates. It is the central feminist dilemma of the postmodern moment.

The feminist challenge to patriarchy (the rule of man over society and over woman) called into question the very category of woman, eventually enabling us to see first woman and then gender itself as a construction that ultimately serves to maintain patriarchy. Questioning patriarchy opened up the category "woman" to include ways of being human that had not been considered "feminine" and, therefore, permissible for "women." We "women" are no longer limited to traditional definitions of femininity. My study has shown how closely tied the traditional definition of "woman" is to sexual desire; and how constructed that desire is. Within patriarchy, to be a woman, to be feminine, has meant to be weaker, less powerful, less able, than men; femininity has meant the enactment of this deficiency and also the enactment of admiration for the greater strength, power, and ability of men. (These enactments also serve to reconstruct and maintain patriarchy.) Women's heterosexual desire for men has motivated them to enact femininity as a way of attracting men.

Just as feminist analysis and critique went beyond challenging the naturalness of patriarchy to challenging the naturalness of gender itself, my work goes beyond challenging the naturalness of heterosexuality to challenging the naturalness of sexual desire itself. Challenging the naturalness of sexual desire will enable us to examine a new set of potential desires that have until now been hidden in the sexual binary of heterosexual/homosexual orientation (with bisexual and deviant as the catchall categories for everything that doesn't fit the binary). We can now look at the complexity of human sex/gender/sexuality and begin to understand the multiplicity of possibilities contained therein. The components of gender I have identified, and the fluidity and complexity of sexual desire I have described, provide greater insight into the omneity of desire--the many combinations and permutations among all the components of sex/gender/sexuality that are possible--within the unity we presently call sexual orientation.

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