

MOVEMENT COMMENT

Voicing the Unspeakable

by Eve Zaremba

Is there such a thing as lesbian sexuality? Is it a discrete phenomena, a separate category of female experience? Is it an integral component of female sexuality, or a 'dysfunction'? Does the word 'lesbian' in this context indicate any more than society's disapproval of certain expressions of female independence? To what extent is it a physiological/emotional reality, to what extent a social/political label, to what extent both? What's the connection between lesbian sexual experience and the Women's Liberation Movement in the past decade or so?

I cannot possibly answer all these questions. Yet I am obliged to ask them. For I am in the throes of writing on lesbian sexuality for The Women's Press anthology of original essays on the Canadian Women's Movement. Wish me luck.

Raising the topic of lesbian sexuality with any group of women produces an interesting variety of responses.

One witty friend, not long 'out' after marriage to a nice man, threw up her hands at the enormity and complexity of the task. She compared defining lesbian sexuality with defining the class struggle. A frightful prospect. Finally she opined that 'lesbian' is only a social category of recent historical vintage having little to do with sexuality properly understood. Thus I was free to skip that aspect and concentrate on producing 2,500 trenchant words on female sexuality.

It is a fashionable platitude that we are all born undifferentiated 'sexual' creatures who, in a perfect world, would be equally attracted to both sexes throughout life. It is a pleasant idea with little to support it. Saying that we are 'sexual beings' means no more than that we all have a central nervous system, pleasure centres in the brain and erogenous zones on our bodies. True, but so what? This assertion leaves out most of what is important about human sexual reality.

It is common to lump lesbian sexuality with male homosexuality as if they were aspects of the same phenomena. This is what happens when all sexuality is understood in male terms. Male sexuality is totally penis-fixated. A penis is a necessary referent in all male sex, whether hetero or homosexual. It is a male physiological reality. For sexuality which is uniquely female, the penis is an irrelevance. That is our psychological reality.

Unless and until the concept of human sexuality is freed from its excessive penis-fixation, it will not encompass female, and therefore lesbian, sexuality.

The unique character of female sexuality is well understood by another friend, a life-long dyke. She was convinced that I was complicating matters unnecessarily. Her definition of lesbian sexuality was the epi-

some of simplicity: "Lesbian sexuality is when you are turned on by women," she said. She has been conscious since adolescence that she was attracted exclusively to women, never by men.

For my friend and women like her there is no sexuality except the lesbian-kind. However, many women are not consciously 'turned on' by anyone, and many more take years to allow themselves to think about women in this context. The experience of such women is fully as authentic as any other.

What makes some people sexually attracted exclusively to women while others, from apparently identical environments and backgrounds, are not? Why do women, after years of satisfactory married life with men, suddenly fall in love with women?

There is a theory around which claims that if only men weren't emotional vampires and/or pigs women would not be choosing women as sexual and emotional partners. In other words — nasty men create lesbians! This is an improvement on the old game of blame-the-parent — especially the mother — for inducing homosexual tendencies by being too strong or too weak, over-protective or uncaring, or whatever seemed to apply. An improvement but not much of one. Apart from its essential chauvinism (everything relates to the male) it just does not make sense. After all, there are always other men if one or two turn out to be duds. Some men are at least as nice as many women. The romantic fallacy — this one will be/is different — is pervasive. There is absolutely no social encouragement for lesbianism. The social and economic advantages of heterosexuality are enormous. Given all the above, it is absurd to imagine that women would freely choose

to live as lesbians unless there were some unique positive quality about the experience.

But I seemed to have strayed off topic, which is advertised as 'lesbian sexuality' not 'living as a lesbian,' two different if obviously connected things. And both different again from just plain sex.

'Living as a lesbian' must be understood as involving a social choice. It is possible to be a lesbian but not live as one. In spite of considerable barriers, this life choice has become a viable option in recent years for some women in western, urban societies. Elsewhere it is actively repressed or not a possibility for economic reasons. Only when women can be economically independent from individual men is living as a lesbian a real option. Living as a political lesbian, i.e. a politically conscious, active, 'out' lesbian, is almost entirely a product of the present Women's Movement, which created the conditions for it.

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'Sex' on the other hand is any overt sexual activity between women. Women who need not identify as lesbian, certainly need not 'live as lesbians' and indeed, need not

know the word! 'Lesbian sex' is, and always has been, more prevalent than conscious lesbianism or living as a lesbian.

Finally, lesbian sexuality is the most prevalent of all. It exists where there may be no sexual acts or any conscious social choice. It need not be expressed by any genital or other activity which would commonly be termed 'lesbian' or even 'sexual'. Lesbian sexuality exists among actively heterosexual and among celibate women as well as self-defined lesbians. Lesbian sexuality has a reality beyond these labels.

Lesbian sexuality lies in the realm of what Adrienne Rich calls the *unspeakable*:

"Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is buried in memory by collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language — this will become, not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable*". (from *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* by Adrienne Rich. Emphasis in the original).

It is Rich who has put words to the *unspeakable*. Her phrase 'primary intensity between women' is the most resonant expression on lesbian sexuality that I have come across. As Rich affirms, it is this "intensity which in the world at large was trivialized, caricatured or invested with evil."

That's as far as I have gone to date. Suggestions and comments are welcome as soon as possible. By the end of July it will be too late for the anthology but *Broadside* will publish letters on the subject no matter when they arrive. Write to Eve Zaremba, c/o *Broadside* PO Box 494, Station P, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2T1. Indicate whether it's for publication or not. Thanks.

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