Fall 1980

"Out" at the University: Myth and Reality

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Women, sponsored by the National Council of Negro Women, in Washington, D.C. Here they had the opportunity to meet Gerda Lerner, the editor of their text, as well as to hear Black women leaders they had discussed. They met and talked, too, with several young Black women who were studying women's studies in a New York high school.

In the final evaluation, most students said that discussion was the most meaningful part of the course. One student wrote that the course had helped her to "see that Blacks and women must work together for equality." Another observed that the class was enjoyable "even though there were no boys."

For me, the class was a rich and rewarding experience in which I saw young women challenge and grow in appreciation of their historical past. They shared with me priceless moments of understanding and insight into their personal experience which I am convinced will allow them to join with all women in the search for feminist meaning.

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Postscript: The ACLU Women's Rights Report, which is distributed nationally, carried an announcement on the course in its Fall 1979 issue, and indicated that additional information on the course curriculum was available. Several dozen inquiries were received, many of them from individuals interested in adopting the course for their own community. One of the more unexpected responses came from a Black male inmate at Reidsville prison in Georgia. He wanted to take the course. I am happy to report that the inmate has received the textbooks and curriculum and is busy studying. He has agreed to share his experience with his brothers at the prison and will help us with an evaluation when the course is completed.

"Out" at the University: Myth and Reality
By Toni A. H. McNaron

For the first eleven years I taught at the University of Minnesota, I stayed in the closet I'd fled to within the first month of recognizing my lesbianism.* During those years, I was awarded tenure quite early (the end of my third year); I won both a collegiate and an all-University award for outstanding teaching; I almost got a book on Shakespeare's last plays published; I was active in my regional professional organization. During those years, I experienced increasing pain at the dislike of my immediate superiors [sic] had for me, no matter what I did. I learned quickly that it was not helpful to talk of my devotion to teaching or about my hard-working, enthusiastic students. So I tried a variety of ways to win approval.

One year I spent over $1,000 throwing cocktail parties and feeding people elegant dinners; the next I was hardly ever seen at social functions. One year I served on numerous departmental committees; the next I refused all nominations. One year I went to every department meeting and spoke vigorously to the issues; the next I sat silent at those few meetings I attended. One year I frequented the faculty coffee lounge daily; the next I stayed inside my own office except to go to class or check my mail. Nothing worked. I was confused, angry, hurt, and exhausted.

During those same years, I was in one primary relationship for seven years, only to rush through five others in the next four years. All of them were essentially clandestine, full of the false excitement and real fear attendant upon such liaisons. I was significantly overweight and increasingly alcoholic; lonely and detached from my feelings and body at first, but eventually from my mind and spirit as well.

For a year or so, while I was in a state of transition, I taught courses and administered a new Women's Studies Program. Newly sober and out within the local lesbian community,** I remained hidden at my job. I was honest with students in my office if they needed me to be, and I told friends at school. But I held back from telling my chair-man or from coming out in classes or from sharing my work if the focus was lesbian. Being the Coordinator of Women's Studies did not help me resolve this split, since, like all such programs, we were trying hard to appease male heterosexist administrators all too ready to believe that "women's studies is a lesbian plot."

Finally, in the summer of 1975, I had to face the hypocrisy and ill-health of my position: I was teaching Introduction to Women's Studies and decided to make the history of the lesbian/straight split one of the issues to read about and discuss. Knowing I couldn't say "lesbians . . . they," I thought to invite a panel of younger community lesbians to talk directly from their lives. Then when I said "lesbian" in my lecture, I would use "we," letting students hear me or not, as they chose. Four friends agreed to participate, two others came to lend general support, and the students were assigned the relevant chapter in Sappho Was a Right-On Woman, dealing with the infamous scene in which Betty Friedan called lesbians a "lavender menace;*** and the Furies walked out of the New York chapter.

*I first acted on my feelings for women while in my initial months as a new teacher at an Episcopal girls' school in Vicksburg, Mississippi, I was twenty-one and the year was 1958. My employer, now the head of the Episcopal Church in America, threatened to fire me for "corrupting the youth." I denied my reality, kept my job, and made love with a wonderful young woman in a furnace room which had no window or light in it. Needless to say, "in the closet" has never been a metaphor for me.

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**I will always be grateful to the women of that community for their patience and unqualified support of me as I inched my way out of a very scared place.

***I noticed with genuine humor recently that I had gone off to my favorite grocery store in my bright purple T-shirt with its bold white lettering: LAVENDER MENACE. At the checkout stand, the young woman working that shift said, in apparent innocence, "I like your shirt."
of NOW. That morning, driving to campus, I realized that I couldn’t go through with the protective charade; so I came out that day, and no one left the room or the class. I didn’t touch ground for several days; but by the beginning of that fall quarter, I had slunk back into my musty closet. My pretext was the Women’s Studies Program, whose faculty was not eager for me to be declarative or assertive about my identity. Since the clearest negative cultural message I had internalized was that homosexuals are not fit to teach the young (or the old, I presume), I cooperated by silencing myself again.

In my third and final year as Coordinator, I made a serious effort toward my own integration: I proposed a Senior Seminar on “The Woman as Other and the Lesbian as the Other Woman.” At the Curriculum Committee meeting called to discuss courses, I heard the chair (a good lesbian friend in her own closet because untenured) object to my course, claiming that “students might be uncomfortable with that word in a course title.” It was my friend who was uncomfortable, and I again colluded in our joint self-denial and betrayal by my own shaky place, believing that our history is important, yet still holding to societal myths that we should at least have the decency to live quietly behind drawn curtains or in darkened bars. The pain of that meeting remains in me, long after the anger has gone.

I took a year’s leave-of-absence-without-pay to decide if I could ever work at the University of Minnesota (or any other university) and be healthy. Two women stand out as crucial to my decision to return: Florence Howe pointed out that by leaving, I greatly diminished the tiny pool of radical lesbian/feminists with tenure in America and that it is not easy to work as a lesbian/feminist (or indeed as any feminist) in a patriarchal place; Adrienne Rich gave me an afternoon of her time (in turn to her by Audre Lorde), symbol of clarity. I went back to the University, deciding that I must tell my chair that I intended to unify my private and public lives by teaching and writing from my lesbian/feminist perspective.

Since then, the fall of 1977, being out at the University has brought many benefits to me as a scholar and teacher and as a human being. I have successfully proposed and taught an upper-level course on American Lesbian Writers; I have written and published three pieces dealing with lesbian poetry and culture; I have served as a valuable resource person for my nonlesbian friends who want to include lesbian material in their courses; I have been a model for any woman wanting one. With the formation of the National Women’s Studies Association, I served as one of the four original Lesbian Caucus members and was the lesbian representative to the Midwest regional association. I have participated in two sessions on teaching lesbian literature at MLA and am about to be part of an exciting effort to introduce lesbian content into high school curricula in Minneapolis.

During the past three years, I have lost a lot of weight, and gained a measure of serenity as a recovering alcoholic. I have been able to see the men in my department as responding to me from their damaged psyches and having little to offer me that I value. I have begun to write more often and forcefully since I can speak in my whole voice. I have formed close bonds with two radical feminists in my department, finding that my openness about my private life is an invitation to them to share more about themselves.

A surprising aspect of my being open in the department and the profession has been the absence of increased hostility. In my myths and fantasies, I stayed closeted because ‘they’ would get me if I told them in words what they already knew. This fear is real for untenured lesbians, since the record of tenure’s being granted to lesbian/feminists on American campuses is grim. Of course, such women are given “logical” reasons for termination, but in a homophobic society, it is not simply paranoia to assume that such reasons cover the real one. Yet I was tenured after only three years and remained closeted for another nine. This process reminds me of Rosalind’s staying in male dress in As You Like It long after questions of safety have passed; she keeps her boots and breeches because she gets something for her extended disguise. Well, so did I, though nothing as enjoyable as her rewards. But I got to stay scared, only partially in touch with my power, ashamed at some deep psychological level, cooperating in what society most wanted me to be—a victim. As late as 1978, as I was walking to my opening lecture on “Lesbian Writers,” my fantasy reasserted itself. I felt the cold knot of terror in my stomach and imagined two plainclothesmen at my classroom door who would step from the shadows to arrest me for presuming to instruct the young in essentially “dirty” material. They were not there; and I wrote a poem about that fantasy.

I have finally disarmed the enemy in the most powerful way—I have taken away the words they could use against me by naming myself precisely and with pride. I expect to become ever more at ease with my voice as a literary critic. In fact, I have plans to teach a graduate seminar examining similarities and differences between feminist and lesbian/feminist perspectives on literature. My energy to write criticism is at an all-time high since declaring myself intellectually has put me in touch with my truest material.

Perhaps the most exciting gain for me as a radical feminist who is then also a radical lesbian is that I now live the political axiom I insisted upon for years. My lesbianism truly is no longer a matter of “sexual preference” (a term of diminution coined by liberals in their continuing efforts to accept various so-called lifestyles). Rather, my every idea/perception/opinion is colored by my woman-identified slant. I feel genuinely integrated for the first time in my life—my critical interpretations of literature are beautifully mingled with my best comprehension of sensuality and sexuality. I value my special eye as I read any work, by women or men, from the Renaissance or the Here and Now. I am a lesbian in my study and classroom as well as in my bedroom or kitchen, and no one can uncover me in any room whatever, because I no longer hide.