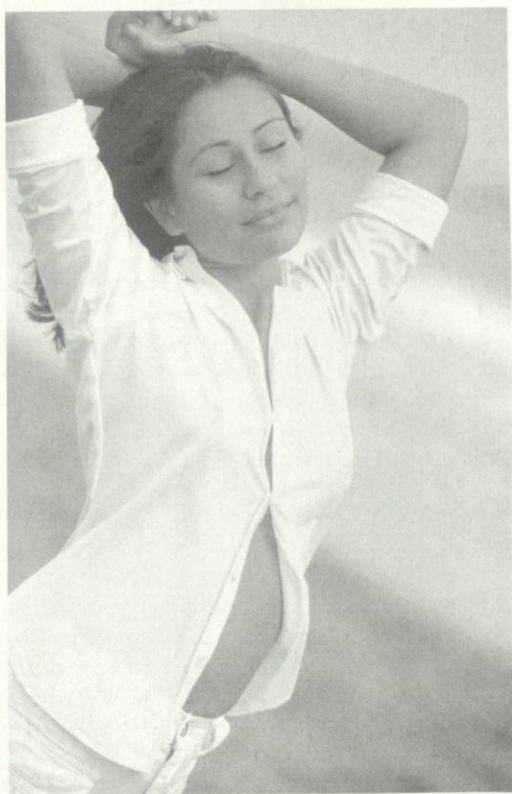
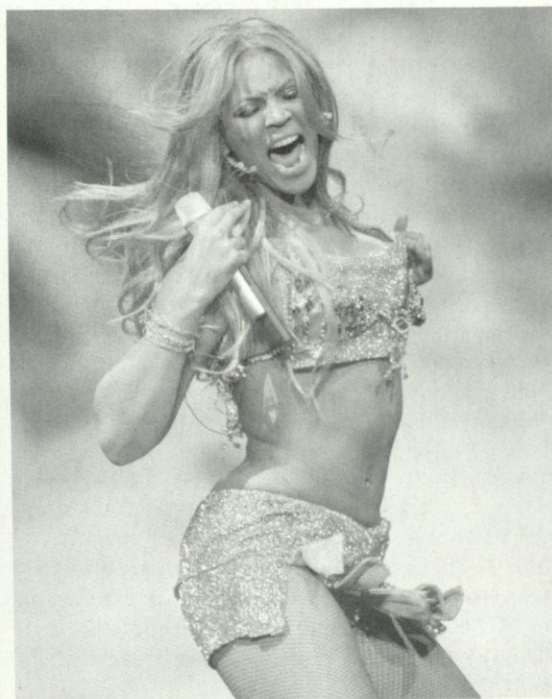




Women's Sexuality

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Sexual attitudes and behaviors vary considerably from society to society and across historical time periods (Caplan 1987; Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997; Weeks 2010). Sexuality is both instinctive and also learned from our families, our peers, sex education in school, media and popular culture, negotiations with partners, and listening to our own bodies. At the same time, there is a need for accurate information about women's sexuality, and there are many constraints on it. Over the course of our lives, sexuality may take different forms and take on different degrees of significance.

This chapter focuses on women's experiences of sexuality, the meso- and macro-level forces that shape our personal experiences, and the ways that women are defining sexuality for themselves. As you read this chapter, think also about the social construction of male sexuality.

The Erotic as Power

Black lesbian poet, teacher, and activist Audre Lorde discussed the power of the erotic in the broadest way in her now classic essay (Reading 20). She described the erotic "as our most profoundly creative

source," noting that women have been "taught to separate the erotic . . . from most vital areas of our lives other than sex." By contrast, she wrote: "When I speak of the erotic . . . I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women: of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives." Lorde saw the distortion and suppression of the erotic as one of the ways that women are oppressed under patriarchal institutions and cultures, and concluded: "Recognizing the power of the erotic in our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world."

As Audre Lorde argued, dominant U.S. culture takes a limited view of the erotic, reducing it to sexuality, and restricted notions of sexuality at that. By foregrounding her perspective in this chapter we make this explicit. Also, we recognize that sexuality can be a source of restriction and vulnerability for women as well as a source of power, affirmation, and self-definition. Many women are claiming the right to sexual pleasure on their own terms, despite the distortions, contradictions, and double standards of patriarchal cultures regarding women's sexuality.

What Does Sexuality Mean to You?

Sexuality is one of the few recognized ways in our society for people to make intimate connections, especially for men, who typically are not socialized to express emotions easily. Historian Jeffrey Weeks (2010) notes that sexuality is

a transmission belt for a wide variety of needs and desires: for love and anger, tenderness and aggression, intimacy and adventure, romance and predatoriness, pleasure and pain, empathy and power. We experience the erotic very subjectively and in a host of often contradictory ways. (p. 2)

Shere Hite (1994) conducted extensive surveys of men's and women's sexual experiences and preferences. In her groundbreaking research into women's and men's attitudes about sexuality and love, she found that, for male respondents, dating and marriage were primarily about sex, and they often shopped around for varied sexual experiences. For the female respondents, expressing emotion through sexual intimacy and setting up a home were usually more important than they were for men. Hite attributed much of the frustration in heterosexual relationships to these very different approaches. Also, she saw women as "revolutionary agents of change" in relationships, working with men to renegotiate this intimate part of their lives. The following questions, from one of Hite's surveys, were written for women, but they are also relevant for men:

Is sex important to you? What part does it play in your life?

Who sets the pace and style of sex—you or your partner or both? Who decides when it's over?

Do you think your genital area and vagina are ugly or beautiful?

If you are sexually active, do you ever fake orgasms? Why?

What are your best sex experiences? What would you like to try that you never have?

What is it about sex that gives you the greatest pleasure? Displeasure?

Have you chosen to be celibate at any point? What was/is that like for you?

In the best of all possible worlds, what would sexuality be like?

Do you know as much as you'd like to know, about your own body? Orgasm? Conception and pregnancy? Safe sex?

Do your partners know about your sexual desires and your body? If not, do you ask for it or act yourself to get it?

(Hite 1994, pp. 17–22)

To discover what is sexually empowering for us, ideally women need a safe place and freedom from worries about being attractive and the risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. In addition, we need information on safer sex, access to reliable contraception, and open discussion with sexual partners.

For many teens, sex is a "rite of passage," an essential part of growing up. How "sex" is defined can vary; for example, many sexually active heterosexual teens do not count oral sex as sex. Magazine editor Susannah Indigo (2000) interviewed girls about their experience with sex play including masturbation, phone sex, and oral sex, which they jokingly referred to as "outercourse," as opposed to "real sex" or intercourse. Some young people pledge virginity before marriage but do not necessarily rule out sex play. Lee Che Leong (2004, p. 37), director of the Teen Health Initiative at the New York Civil Liberties Union, commented that "[t]he ranks of those 'saving themselves' by being blowjob queens are increasing as oral sex is on the rise" among teens of all racial groups. Similarly, only 20 percent of university students participating in a 2007 survey agreed that oral-genital contact constituted sex (Hans, Gillen, and Akande 2010). Freelance writer and blogger Cara Kulwicki (2008) argues that sex education means teaching about sex: "that sex is more than heterosexual intercourse and should be consensual and pleasurable for all participants" (p. 305).

Psychologist Lynne Segal (1994) and sociologist Pepper Schwartz (1994) described how some heterosexual couples negotiate sex to make it more egalitarian. Schwartz commented that in U.S. culture there is a commonly held belief that "male leadership and control is inherently erotic," that role differences between women and men and "the mystery of not knowing each other" make for a more exciting sex life (p. 70). But only some men,

Schwartz wrote, "perhaps those with strong mothers, or with a great respect for competence and intelligence, find equality compelling and sexy" (p. 78). And not all women "refuse to be an instrument in male orchestration" (p. 78). She commented that sexual passion is a Western ideal for marriage, although research shows that passion decreases over the length of a relationship. A long-term peer marriage that is intentionally egalitarian, she noted, may be better at providing romance and respect than providing passion as currently defined.

Cultural Messages about Women's Sexuality

Girls and women are barraged by a range of messages about sexuality. How do we decide what is true or right for us? What are the wider forces that shape these messages? The questions we raised in Chapter 2 about evaluating media messages are useful here.

Stereotypes, Contradictions, and Double Standards

In advertising images and popular culture, sexuality is the prerogative of the young, slender, and able-bodied. Many of these images portray white women. Melba Wilson (1993) noted that racism and sexism converge in mainstream stereotypes of women of color as "exotic creatures of passion" (p. 66). Asian and Asian American women are stereotyped as "exotic flowers," overly promiscuous and at the same time submissive, sexually accommodating and focused on serving men. A 1957 novel, *The World of Suzie Wong*, also adapted for stage, film, and ballet, reinforced racist and sexist stereotypes of Asian women in its portrayal of a bar girl working in a hotel catering to British and U.S. sailors. Suzie Wong also personified another stereotype: the hooker with a heart of gold. The films *Slaying the Dragon* (1988) and *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded* (2011) provide an excellent critique of such stereotypes. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2004, p. 30) argued that ideas of pure white womanhood, developed as part of European national identity, "required a corresponding set of ideas about hot-blooded Latinas, exotic Suzy Wongs, wanton jezebels." She continued:

Civilized nation-states required uncivilized and backward colonies for their national identity to have meaning, and the status of women in both places was central to this endeavor. In this context, Black women became icons of hypersexuality.

These powerful stereotypes continue to be reinforced in media representations.

By contrast, women with disabilities and older women of all racial groups are stereotyped as sexless. According to the late Barbara Waxman Fiducia, an advocate for people with disabilities, and Marsha Saxton, a teacher of disability studies, women with disabilities have been socially isolated and discouraged from expressing their sexuality. In their *Disability Feminism: A Manifesto* (1997), they wrote: "We want our sexuality accepted and supported with accurate information" (p. 60). Among other disability activists, Lillian Gonzales Brown, of the Institute on Disability Culture (Honolulu, Hawaii), has conducted workshops on sexuality for women with disabilities, urging participants to explore their sexuality and to see themselves as sexual beings (see also Kaufman, Silverberg, and Odette 2003; Smith and Hutchison 2004; Wilkerson 2011).

Ads that use women's bodies to sell products also sell ideas of sexuality, especially heterosexuality. As sex objects, women are commonly portrayed as child-like or doll-like playthings. These images flow from and reinforce macro-level patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality based on the following assumptions: Heterosexuality is prescribed or natural for women and men, men are the initiators in heterosexual encounters, and men's sexuality is assertive and in need of regular release. In such scenarios a woman's role is to be modest and virtuous, to look beautiful, and, simultaneously, to lure men and to fend them off. Traditionally, a woman has been expected to remain a virgin until marriage, untouched except by her husband, and this attitude is still strong in some communities in the United States and around the world. Men's sexual activity is assumed and accepted; after all, "Boys will be boys." Girls may easily get a "bad reputation" and be condemned as "sluts." Writers Leonora Tanenbaum (2000) and Emily White (2002) found many reasons that girls are labeled this way: they may be early developers,

victims of rape, outsiders to the community, or targets of revenge. Some may be sexually active, but many are not.

This fundamental contradiction between encouraging men's sexuality and expecting women to be chaste has resulted in the construction of two categories of women: "good" women and "bad" women, virgins and whores. This double standard controls women's sexuality and autonomy and serves to divide women from each other. Growing up in a Mexican American community, Sandra Cisneros (Reading 21) writes that *la Virgen de Guadalupe* was the model held up to girls. The boys "were fornicating like rabbits," she writes, "while the Church ignored them and pointed us women towards our destiny—marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was *putahood*," being defined a whore. Writer and literature professor Gloria Wade-Gayles (1993) learned the same double standard, but women in her Memphis neighborhood also divided men into two categories: good men who cared for their wives and families, and "dogs" who "only want one thing." This latter category included white men who cruised through the neighborhood "in search of Black women who, they assumed, were naturally sensuous, sexually superior, and easy" (p. 84).

Julia Serano describes a predator/prey mind-set in which men are viewed as sexual aggressors and women as sexual objects (Reading 22). As well as the virgin/whore bind for women, she notes a similar double bind for men: "assholes" are men who fulfill the sexual aggressor stereotype; "nice guys" are those who refuse it. She argues that some men become "assholes" to get attention from women and asks why women are attracted to the bad-boy stereotype, and why "nice guys" are seen as desexualized and unmanly. She concludes: "A movement that refuses to render invisible and desexualize men who are not predators . . . would excite and attract many male allies."

Traditional cultural limitations on women's sexuality and sexual expression can divide younger women and older women in immigrant communities, as described by Nadine Naber in the context of Arab American communities (Chapter 3) and by human rights activist Surina A. Khan who struggled for many years to reconcile her queer and Pakistani identities (Reading 25). Mother and daughter, psychologist Shamita das Dasgupta and pediatrician Sayantani DasGupta, wrote:

As Asian women of two different generations, we attest to the politically divisive and psychologically unbearable situation in which we have been placed. As daughters, we are faced with the choice of rejecting our community and culture or destroying our sexual selves. As mothers, we can be exiled as destroyers of community culture or be our daughters' prison guards. (1996, p. 240)

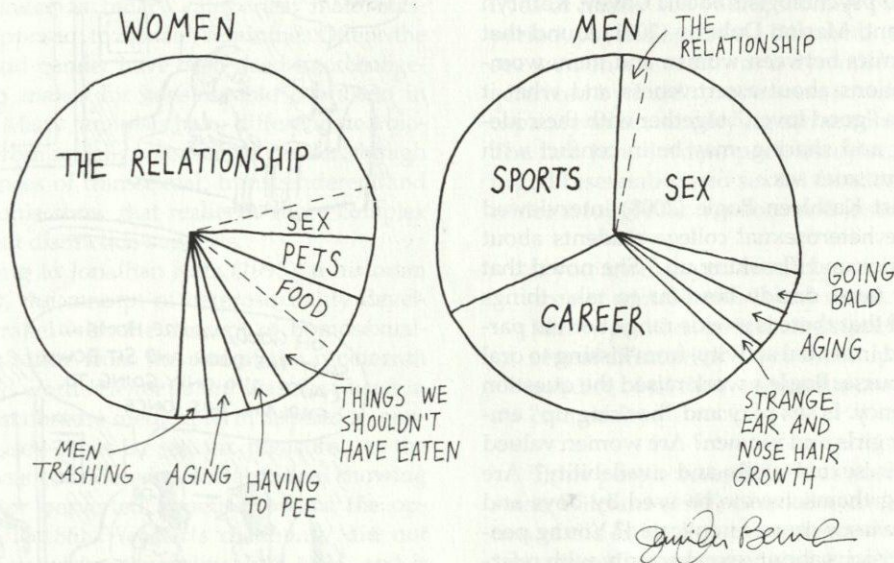
They understand the South Asian communities' control of women's sexuality as an attempt to resist cultural erasure in the United States and as a response to the racism of this society, as well as a result of patriarchal control within their own communities. They endorse Indian women's activism (against violence against women, and for gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights) as a way of creating a progressive South Asian space to "define our private selves as public and discover our collective power" (p. 241).

It is important to note that many girls and women experience sexual coercion and abuse—in childhood, as adults, or both (see Chapter 6). Some women struggle for many years with the devastating effects of sexual abuse on their confidence, trust, sexuality, and sense of themselves in the world. In Reading 34, Aurora Levins Morales refers to her childhood experience of sexual abuse and her path toward reclaiming "the wounded erotic." At the core of that process, she writes, is "blazing and untarnished aliveness."

Sexual Freedom, Hooking Up, Raunch Culture

In the 1960s and 1970s there was much talk of a sexual revolution in the United States, partly made possible by the availability of contraceptive pills for the first time. Women "on the pill" could be sexually active with men without the same fear of pregnancy as in the past. In practice, many feminists argued that this "revolution" was on men's terms (e.g., Segal 1994). Over the years there has been increasing discussion of women's own sexual needs and preferences (see, e.g., Boston Women's Health Book Collective 2005; Cox 1999; Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs 1986; Ensler 1998; hooks 1993; Johnson 2002; Muscio 1999; Rose 2003). Women's health advocate Rebecca Chalker (1995) described this

THOUGHT FREQUENCY AS PIE CHARTS



process as a "real woman-friendly sexual revolution in progress" (p. 52). Women's magazines and women's erotica have provided a forum for this discourse (e.g., Blank 2001; Bright 2000; Bruce 2001; Slugocki and Wilson 2000), as well as stars like Beyonce and Britney Spears who revel in their sexuality in public. In contrast to the double standard mentioned earlier, some women have reclaimed "slut" as a positive identification that emphasizes independence and sexual agency, and others have written of their own sexual experimentation (see, e.g., Johnson 2002; Walker 1995b; Wolf 1997).

Filmmakers and TV producers are also promoting ideas of women's sexual freedom, as in MTV's *Spring Break*, Comedy Central's *The Man Show*, or the video series, *Girls Gone Wild*, which features young women on spring break in vacation resorts or nightclubs who agree to show their bodies on camera in exchange for *Girls Gone Wild*-branded paraphernalia. These shows create a space to push the boundaries of what is acceptable.

Sociologist Gail Markle (2008) analyzed the "sexual scripts" embedded in the comedy series *Sex and the City*, an instant hit internationally, which broke new ground in its explicit discussion of women's sexuality. She argued that it is important

to examine media representations of women as a key site through which gender and sexual identities are constructed. In her analysis of the four characters' sexual encounters, she draws on sexual script theory, which argues that sexuality is not innate but learned through cultural messages. As successful thirty-something single women in Manhattan, their goal was to have sex like a man, characterized as "without feeling, for pleasure only, and with no commitment." Despite the fact that their many sexual encounters were much more likely to be recreational than relational, by the end of the six-year series all four were involved in committed relationships.

Markle noted that the sexual scripts in *Sex and the City* differed significantly from behavior women actually reported about their sex lives. Nevertheless, young women generally are much more sexually active than in the past. Journalist Paula Kamen (2000) saw young women choosing to be in sexual relationships—or not—very much on their own terms. Psychologist Lynn Phillips (2000) argued that young women are "flirting with danger" and struggling to negotiate and make sense of power differences around sexuality, and in some cases, sexual abuse and violation. For those who choose

to have sex with men, attitudes about condoms and women's ability to influence their partners to use them are important aspects of safer sex practices. New Zealand psychologists Nicola Gavey, Kathryn McPhillips, and Marion Doherty (2001) found that power dynamics between women and men, women's assumptions about assertiveness and what it means to be a "good lover," together with their ideals of giving and sharing, may be in conflict with their desire for safer sex.

Sociologist Kathleen Bogle (2008) interviewed mostly white heterosexual college students about sexual behavior and "hooking up." She noted that each person must decide how far to take things sexually, and that there is a wide range both in participation and in sexual activity, from kissing to oral sex to intercourse. Bogle's work raised the question of sexual agency. Is sex play and "hooking up" empowering for girls and women? Are women valued only for their sexual skills and availability? Are they allowing themselves to be used by boys and men, or is the issue more complicated? Young people make decisions about sexual activity with reference to their perceptions of what *everybody* is doing and what they believe is normal—ideas shaped by peer culture in the "campus sexual arena" (meso-level factors) and popular culture (macro-level factors). Bogle concluded that women have much more sexual freedom these days but that unwritten rules continue to limit their options. Both women and men reported a double standard in hooking up: women were much more likely to want a sexual encounter to develop into a relationship, and they were much more likely to get a bad reputation if they hooked up with too many guys.

As this discussion suggests, our individual behaviors are shaped by the wider social context. Many women want to throw off the "nice girl" image. They say, "We should be able to wear what we like and go where we like." Ideally, this should be the case, but individual behavior must be seen in relation to how boys and men are socialized to see women's sexuality in a sexist and sex-saturated culture. Journalist Ariel Levy (2005) examined the trend toward "raunch culture"—from women wearing skimpy outfits, T-shirts with a Playboy Bunny logo or PORN STAR across the chest, to lap dancing, pole dancing, "stripper aerobics" classes, and going to strip clubs and commercial sex parties (see Reading 23). She notes that women describe



these activities as fun, tongue-in-cheek, sexy, and empowering.

Levy discusses the overlap between sexuality and commercialism. In interviews she conducted, film producers, magazine editors, and club owners and managers argued that raunch culture is a sign that feminist goals have been met, that women have come so far we do not need to worry about objectification or misogyny, as mentioned in Chapter 1. They argued that "it was time for us to join the frat party of popular culture where men had been enjoying themselves all along" (p. 4). Levy questions whether "equal opportunity" sexual freedom in a sexist society is liberating for women and argues that "raunchy" and "liberated" are not the same. Women in the United States have far less political and economic power than men. Levy quotes Erica Jong, author of the 1973 novel, *Fear of Flying*, made famous by her idea that women may desire a consequence-free sexual encounter—the zipless fuck—who contends: "Sexual freedom can be a smokescreen for how far we *haven't* come" (p. 195).

Challenging Sex/Gender Binaries

As discussed in Chapter 3, U.S. society constructs sex and gender as binary categories: male/masculine as opposed to female/feminine. Often, the terms sex and gender have been used interchangeably, which makes for considerable confusion in discussion. Many feminists have differentiated biological sex from socially constructed gender, though the experiences of transsexual, transgendered, and intersex people show that reality is more complex than this neat distinction suggests.

According to Jonathan Katz (1995), a historian of sexuality, the concept of heterosexuality developed in parallel with the concept of homosexuality, and both date from the end of the nineteenth century. The word *heterosexuality* was first used in the 1890s, an obscure medical term applied to non-procreative sex—that is, sex for pleasure. At the time, this was considered a deviant idea, showing “abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex” (p. 86). Webster’s dictionary did not include the word *heterosexuality* until 1934, and it gradually came into common usage in the United States as a “stable sign of normal sex” (p. 40). The binary is built in: heterosexuality involves desire for the “opposite” sex. Heterosexuality is so taken-for-granted that it is rarely questioned. As with other dominant dimensions of systems of power such as whiteness, wealth, and masculinity, heterosexuality has been much less scrutinized than homosexuality. Sociologist Chrys Ingraham (2004) argued that heterosexuality is a dominant institution that is much broader than sexuality. Many aspects of everyday life—marriage, family arrangements, work, income, and law—are organized along heterosexual lines.

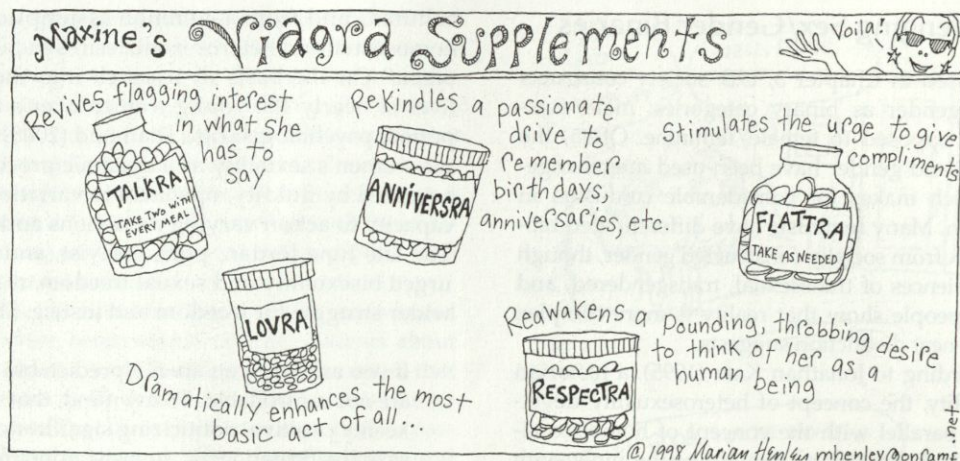
Lesbians and gay men have long challenged the legitimacy and “normalcy” of heterosexuality (see, e.g., Allen 1986; Boswell 1994; Cavin 1985; Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey 1989; Faderman 1981; Grahn 1984; History Project 1998). Bisexual people express and argue for greater fluidity in sexual desire and behaviors, what Kathleen Bennett (1992) called “a both/and option for an either/or world” (see also Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2003; Hutchins and Ka’ahumanu 1991; Ochs and Rowley 2005; Storr 1999; Weise 1992). Lisa Orlando (1991) noted that stereotypes about bisexuality have grown out of the fact that bisexuals are poised between what “appear as two mutually exclusive sexual

cultures” and from a common assumption “that homosexual and heterosexual desires exclude each other.” On the basis of research into the sexual lives of nearly 100 young women over a ten-year period, psychologist Lisa Diamond (2008) came to see women’s sexuality as a dynamic process characterized by fluidity, openness to variation, and a capacity to act on varying attractions and desires. The late June Jordan, poet, essayist, and scholar, urged bisexuality and sexual freedom as part of a wider struggle for freedom and justice. She wrote

If you are free, you are not predictable and you are not controllable. To my mind, that is the keenly positive, politicizing significance of bisexual affirmation: . . . to insist upon the equal validity of all the components of social/sexual complexity. (1992, p. 193)

Trans people complicate this even further. Riki Anne Wilchins (1997) pointed out the limited notion of the erotic entailed in hetero-homo dualism: “an entire Geography of the Absent—body parts that aren’t named, acts one mustn’t do, genders one can’t perform—because they are outside the binary box” (p. 167). Those who refuse to tailor their looks and actions to conventional categories—for example, butch lesbians, cross-dressers, drag kings and queens, and queers—are involved in something profoundly challenging and transgressive. Leslie Feinberg explains why she is proud to claim this identity (Reading 19). In this chapter, Wendy Somerson examines her experience as a queer dyke, noting that femininity tends to be treated as less valid, the “unspoken and unacknowledged Other of ‘gender transgression’” (Reading 24).

During the 1980s and 1990s, younger people reclaimed the word *queer*, which for many older lesbians and gay men was a hateful and oppressive term (Bernstein and Silberman 1996). This is a broader definition of queerness, with an emphasis on experimentation and playfulness, and can include all who challenge **heteronormativity** (Gage, Richards, and Wilmot 2002; Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins 2002; Rodríguez 2003). What was defined forty years ago as a gay/lesbian movement has grown enormously in size, complexity, and visibility. The most inclusive current term may be LGBTQQI—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex. Leslie Feinberg (1998), Kate Bornstein (1995, 1998),



and Riki Anne Wilchins (1997) have argued that transgendered people are creating a broader space for everyone to express diverse genders and sexualities (see also Boylan 2003; Halberstam 1998, 2005). In the past fifteen years or so, TV shows featuring LG-BTQQ people such as *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* have attracted significant audiences. Diane Raymond (2003), professor of philosophy and women's studies, has argued that there are many ways to "read" these shows depending on viewers' own perspectives, and that, ironically, these queer representations may reinforce the "normalcy" of heterosexism. By contrast, Amy Jo Goddard describes the work of three New-York based performance artists—Imani Henry, Susana Cook, and Diyaa MilDred Gerestant—who address sexuality, gender, ethnic, and class identities in shows that are entertaining, challenging, and educational (Reading 70).

Theorizing Sexuality

Medical anthropologist Carole Vance (1984) summed up the contradictions of sexuality for women:

Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice. (p. 1)

As mentioned in Chapter 1, feminists have engaged in heated argument about women's sexuality and the possibility of genuine sexual agency in patriarchal cultures (see, e.g., Jaggar 1994; Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson 1983; Vance 1984). Marilyn Frye (1992) was skeptical that genuine sexual autonomy is possible for heterosexual women unless they are willing to be wild and undomesticated. Naomi Wolf advocated what she called "radical heterosexuality," recognizing that women would need financial independence, marriage would have to be very different, and both women and men would have to give up their "gender benefits" (Reading 5).

Gayle Rubin (1984) noted two strains of feminist thought concerning sexuality: one criticizing "restrictions on women's sexual behavior," denouncing "the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active," and calling for "a sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men"; the other considering "sexual liberation to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege" (p. 301). Feminist debate about sexuality, power, and violence has continued for many years, especially with regard to issues such as prostitution/sex work and pornography (see, e.g., Califia 2000; Cornell 2000; Dines 2010; Douglas 2010; Dworkin 1993; Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force 1992; Jeffreys 1997; Johnson 2002; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Levy 2005; Nagel 1997; Queen 2002; Russell 1993; Stan 1995; Strossen 2000; Whisnant and Stark 2004).

Many feminists have focused on sexual violence—both theoretically and through active participation in rape crisis centers and shelters for battered women—and understand that sexuality



can be a source of profound vulnerability for women (see Chapter 6). The late writer and activist Andrea Dworkin (1987), for example, argued that intercourse is inherently repressive for women, partly for anatomical reasons, but more because of unequal power relations between women and men. As a way of repudiating the eroticization of inequality, some feminists have argued that women's sexuality should be based on sexual acts that are safe, loving, and intimate, in the context of a caring, monogamous relationship. Others have seen this as a new restriction on women's freedom of expression (see, e.g., Duggan and Hunter 1995; Jaggar 1994; Johnson 2002; Leidholdt and Raymond 1990).

In her now-classic essay, award-winning poet and writer Adrienne Rich (1986a) discussed how social institutions like law, religion, philosophy, official kinship, and popular culture support what she termed "compulsory heterosexuality." She argued that patriarchy demands heterosexuality to keep women serving masculinist interests. For Rich, what needs to be explained is not why women identify as lesbians, but how and why so many women are heterosexual, because typically we first experience the

intimacy of emotional caring and physical nurture with women—our mothers or other female caregivers. In many cultural settings, women and girls spend time together, care for, and depend on one another, and enjoy each other's friendship—often passionately. Rich asks: Why would women ever redirect that search?

Lisa Orlando (1991) noted that the very notion of sexual identity is specific to our culture and time in history. Historian John D'Emilio (1984) argued that economic and social trends like the growth of cities, decreasing family size, the development of the contraceptive pill, and other reproductive technologies have created conditions "that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex" (p. 104). They have "made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men, and more recently, of a politics based on a sexual identity" (p. 104). On this analysis, sexual identity has a basis in macro-level circumstances as much as personal factors (D'Emilio and Freedman 1997), although cultural acceptance of lesbians and gay men has not always followed (see, e.g., Anzaldúa 1987;

Eng and Hom 1998; Leong 1996; Rodríguez 2003; B. Smith 1998; Trujillo 1991). Like many other writers, D'Emilio (1984) accepted that there have been same-sex partnerships for generations. However, he complicated this claim by differentiating homosexual behavior from homosexual identity and argued that only under certain economic conditions are homosexual identity and community possible. In her discussion of Northampton (Mass.) and San Francisco as cities with strong LGBTQI communities, Clare Hemmings (2002) noted that such communities both generate and require supportive locations to survive and flourish.

This links to the experience of Surina A. Khan (Reading 25). Despite the fact that images of same-sex couples have been part of South Asian history and culture for hundreds of years, she notes that most people from South Asia do not have words for homosexuality and regard it as a Western phenomenon. This apparent paradox is what D'Emilio's distinction between behavior and identity helps to explain. Further, it may be useful to think of four categories: inclination, behavior, identity, and politics. One may have sexual inclinations but may decide not to act on them. One may engage in certain sexual behaviors but not adopt LGBTQI identity. One may identify as a lesbian or transgendered woman but not act on that identity in a political way.

Activism and Sexuality

Over the past decade or so, the internet has opened up spaces for "erotic excitement, enticement and entanglement at the click of a button" with sex chat rooms, news groups, bulletin boards, social networks, virtual sex and more (Weeks 2010, p. 107).

A number of online educational and activist organizations provide information for young people about sexuality and health (e.g., Go Ask Alice,

Scarleteen, Teenwire, and Youth Resource). Many informal networks, local groups, and national organizations support and advocate for lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and gay men, especially in urban areas. Some are primarily social groups; others are support groups that provide information and social connections. Still others focus on particular issues like sexual health, HIV/AIDS, parenting, police violence, religious oppression, or the situation of gays in the military. Others run journals, magazines, newsletters, bookstores, presses, churches, bars, coffeehouses, bands, sports teams, and theater companies; support political candidates for local, state, or national office; oppose city and state ordinances designed to limit LGBTQI rights; or raise funds for LGBTQI organizations. These various networks and organizations span a broad political spectrum. Some are overtly feminist; others are more closely aligned with queer politics. Examples include BiNet USA (Arlington, VA), Bi Women Boston, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (Athens, Ohio), Trikone: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered South Asians (San Francisco), Gender Equity Resource Center (Berkeley), New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy, the National Center for Transgender Equality (Washington, D.C.), the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce (Washington, D.C.), Unid@s: the National Latino/a LGBT Human Rights Organization (Washington, D.C.), Gender Education and Advocacy (www.gender.org), and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (New York, Buenos Aires, and Johannesburg). In addition, women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or transgender are active in antiracist organizing, rape crisis centers, shelters for battered women, labor unions, antimilitarist organizations, and women's studies programs where they link their knowledge and experiences of oppression based on sexuality with other oppressions.



Questions for Reflection

1. As you read and discuss the readings that follow, consider the questions raised by Shere Hite, listed on p. 174.
2. What are "the societal forces that wrench women's emotional and erotic energies away from themselves and other women" (Rich 1986a, p. 35), and which seek to teach us to see men as appropriate partners?
3. What advice would you give to high school students about sexuality?



Finding Out More on the Web

1. Review the information about sexuality and health given on one of the online sites mentioned in this chapter.
2. The World Wide Web is a significant new tool in the commodification of women. Type "Philippine women" or "Asian women" into your search engine and see what comes up.
3. Research an organization mentioned in this chapter. What are its goals, strategies, and activities?
4. Research the history of transgender experience in the United States. The following site has a useful glossary of terms: www.thefword.org.uk/features/2008/03/trans_101



Taking Action

1. Write in your journal or have a candid conversation with a friend about your ideas regarding sexuality. How do you recognize the power of the erotic as Audre Lorde describes it?
2. Analyze the way women's magazines and men's magazines discuss women's sexuality.
3. Look critically at the way women's sexuality is portrayed in movies, on TV, and in ads. What is being represented?
4. However you define your sexuality, participate in campus or community events to commemorate National Coming-Out Day (usually in October) or Gay Pride (usually in June).

T W E N T Y



Uses of the Erotic (1984)

The Erotic as Power

Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde (1934–1992) was an acclaimed writer and educator whose books included *Sister Outsider*, *The Cancer Journals*, and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. She held many teaching positions and toured the world as a lecturer, founding a sisterhood in South Africa and the St. Croix Women's Coalition. She published ten volumes of poetry, numerous essays, and won awards and honors, including being named New York State's Poet Laureate. She co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.