

What We're Rollin Around in Bed With Sexual Silences in Feminism: A Conversation toward Ending Them

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This article was derived from a series of conversations we entertained for many months. Through it, we wish to illuminate both our common and different relationship to a feminist movement to which we are both committed.

The Critique

In terms of sexual issues, it seems feminism has fallen short of its original intent. The whole notion of "the personal is political" which surfaced in the early part of the movement (and which many of us have used to an extreme) is suddenly and ironically dismissed when we begin to discuss sexuality. We have become a relatively sophisticated movement, so many women think they now have to have the theory before they expose the experience. It seems we simply did not take our feminism to heart enough. This most privatized aspect of ourselves, our sex lives, has dead-ended into silence within the feminist movement.

Feminism has never directly addressed women's sexuality except in its most oppressive aspects in relation to men (e.g., marriage, the nuclear family, wife battering, rape, etc.). Heterosexuality is both an actual sexual interaction *and* a system. No matter how we play ourselves out sexually, we are all affected by the system inasmuch as our sexual values are filtered through a society where heterosexuality is considered the norm. It is difficult to believe that there is anyone in the world who hasn't spent some time in great pain over the choices and limitations which that system has forced on all of us. We all suffer from heterosexism every single day (whether we're conscious of it or not). And as long as that's true, men and women, women and women, men and men—all different kinds of sexual combinations—must fight against this system, if we are ever going to perceive ourselves as sexually profitable and loving human beings.

By analyzing the institution of heterosexuality through feminism, we learned what's oppressive about it and why people cooperate with it or don't, but we didn't learn what's *sexual*. We don't really know, for instance, why men and women are still attracted to each other, even through all that oppression, which we know to be true. There is something genuine that happens between heterosexuals, but which gets perverted in a thousand different ways. There *is* heterosexuality outside of heterosexism.

What grew out of this kind of "non-sexual" theory was a "transcendent" definition of sexuality where lesbianism (since it exists outside the institution of heterosexuality) came to be seen as the practice of feminism. It set up a "perfect" vision of egalitarian sexuality, where we could magically leap over our heterosexist conditioning into mutually orgasmic, struggle-free, trouble-free sex. We feel this vision has become both misleading and damaging to many feminists, but in particular to lesbians. Who created this sexual model as a goal in the first place? Who can really live up to such an ideal? There is little language, little literature that reflects the actual sexual struggles of most lesbians, feminist or not.

The failure of feminism to answer all the questions regarding women, in particular women's sexuality, is the same failure the homosexual movement suffers from around gender. It's a confusing of those two things—that some of us are both female and homosexual—that may be the source of some of the tension between the two movements and of the inadequacies of each. When we walk down the street, we are both female and lesbian. We are working-class white and working-class Chicana. We are all these things rolled into one and there is no way to eliminate even one aspect of ourselves.

The Conversation

CM: *In trying to develop sexual theory, I think we should start by talking about what we're rollin around in bed with. We both agree that the way feminism has dealt with sexuality has been entirely inadequate.*

AH: Right. Sexual theory has traditionally been used to say *people have been forced to be this thing; people could be that thing.* And you're left standing in the middle going, "Well, I

am here; and I don't know how to get there." It hasn't been able to talk realistically about what people *are* sexually.

I think by focusing on roles in lesbian relationships, we can begin to unravel who we really are in bed. When you hide how profoundly roles can shape your sexuality, you can use that as an example of other things that get hidden. There's a lot of different things that shape the way that people respond

—some not so easy to see, some more forbidden, as I perceive S/M to be. Like with S/M—when I think of it I'm frightened; why? Is it because I might be sexually fascinated with it and I don't know how to accept that? Who am I there? The point is, that when you deny that roles, S/M, fantasy, or any sexual differences exist in the first place, you can only come up with neutered sexuality, where everybody's got

to be basically the same because anything different puts the element of power and deviation in there and threatens the whole picture.

CM: *Exactly. Remember how I told you that growing up what turned me on sexually, at a very early age, had to do with the fantasy of capture, taking a woman, and my identification was with the man, taking? Well, something like that would be so frightening to bring up in a feminist context... fearing people would put it in some sicko sexual box. And yet, the truth is, I do have some real gut-level misgivings about my sexual connection with capture. It might feel very sexy to imagine "taking" a woman, but it has sometimes occurred at the expense of my feeling, sexually, like I can surrender myself to a woman; that is, always needing to be the one in control, callin the shots. It's a very butch trip and I feel like this can keep me private and protected and can prevent me from fully being able to express myself.*

AH: But it's not wrong, in and of itself, to have a capture fantasy. The real question is: Does it actually limit you? For instance, does it allow you to eroticize someone else, but never see yourself as erotic? Does it keep you always in control? Does the fantasy force you into a dimension of sexuality that feels very narrow to you? If it causes you to look at your lover in only one light, then you may want to check it out. But if you can't even dream about wanting a woman in this way in the first place, then you can't figure out what is narrow and heterosexist in it and what's just play. After all, it's only one fantasy.

CM: *Well, what I think is very dangerous about keeping down such fantasies is that they are forced to stay unconscious. Then, next thing you know, in the actual sexual relationship, you become the capturer, that is, you try to have power over your lover, psychologically or whatever. If the desire for power is so hidden and unacknowledged,*

it will inevitably surface through manipulation or what-have-you. If you couldn't play capturer, you'd be it.

AH: Part of the problem in talking about sexuality is it's so enormous in our culture that people don't have any genuine sense of dimension. So that when you say "capture," every fantasy you've ever heard of from Robin Hood to colonialism comes racing into your mind and all you really maybe wanted to do was have your girlfriend lay you down.

But in feminism, we can't even explore these questions because what they say is, in gender, there is a masculine oppressor and a female oppressee. So whether you might fantasize yourself in a role a man might perform or a woman in reaction to a man, this makes you sick, fucked-up, and you had better go and change it.

If you don't speak of fantasies, they become a kind of amorphous thing that envelops you and hangs over your relationship and you get terrified by the silence. If you have no way to describe what your desire is and what your fear is, you have no way to negotiate with your lover. And I guarantee you, six months or six years later, the relationship has paid. Things that are kept private and hidden become painful and deformed.

When you say that part of your sexuality has been hooked up with capture, I want to say that absolutely there's a heterosexist part of that, but what part of that is just plain dealing with power, sexually? I don't want to live outside of power in my sexuality, but I don't want to be trapped into a heterosexist concept of power either. But what I feel feminism asks of me is to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

For example, *I think the reason butch/femme stuff got hidden within lesbian-feminism is because people are profoundly afraid of questions of power in bed. And though everybody*

doesn't play out power the way I do, the question of power affects who and how you eroticize your sexual need. And it is absolutely at the bottom of all sexual inquiry. I can't say to you, for instance, I am trying to work through being a femme, so I won't have to be one anymore.

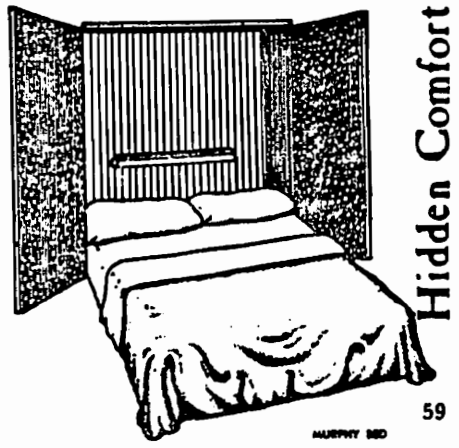
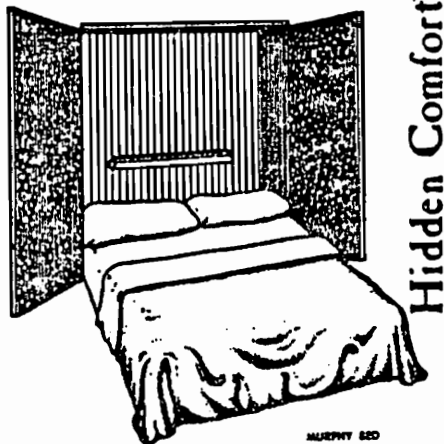
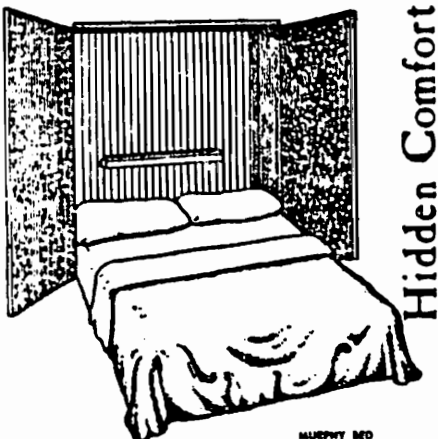
CM: *But what is femme to you? I told you once that what I thought of as femme was passive, unassertive, etc., and you didn't fit that image. And you said to me, "Well, change your definition of femme."*

AH: My fantasy life is deeply involved in a butch/femme exchange. I never come together with a woman, sexually, outside of those roles. Femme is active, not passive. It's saying to my partner, "Love me enough to let me go where I need to go and take me there. Don't make me think it through. Give me a way to be so in my body that I don't have to think; that you can fantasize for the both of us. You map it out. You are in control."

It's hard to talk about things like giving up power without it sounding passive. I am willing to give myself over to a woman equal to her amount of wanting. I expose myself for her to appreciate. I open myself out for her to see what's possible for her to love in me that's female. I want her to respond to it. I may not be doing something active with my body, but more eroticizing her need that I feel in her hands as she touches me.

In the same way, as a butch, you want and conceive of a woman in a certain way. You dress a certain way to attract her and you put your sexual need within these certain boundaries to communicate that desire... And yet, there's a part of me that feels maybe all this is not even a question of roles. Maybe it's much richer territory than that.

CM: *Yes, I feel the way I want a woman can be a very profound experience. Remember I told you how when I looked up at my lover's face when I was*



making love to her (I was actually just kissing her breast at the moment), but when I looked up at her face, I could feel and see how deeply every part of her was present? That every pore in her body was entrusting me to handle her, to take care of her sexual desire. This look on her face is like nothing else. It fills me up. She entrusts me to determine where she'll go sexually. And I honestly feel a power inside me strong enough to heal the deepest wound.

AH: Well, I can't actually see what I look like, but I can feel it in my lover's hands when I look the way you described. When I open myself up more and more to her sensation of wanting a woman, when I eroticize that in her, I feel a kind of ache in my body, but it's not an ache to *do* something. I can feel a hurt spot and a need and it's there and it's just the tip of it, the tip of that desire and that is what first gets played with, made erotic. It's light and playful. It doesn't commit you to exposing a deeper part of yourself sexually. Then I begin to pick up passion. And the passion isn't butch or femme. It's just passion.

But from this place, if it's working, I begin to imagine myself being *the woman that a woman always wanted*. That's what I begin to eroticize. That's what I begin to feel from my lover's hands. I begin to fantasize myself becoming more and more female in order to comprehend and meet what I feel happening in her body. I don't want her not to be female to me. Her need is female, but it's butch because I am asking her to expose her desire through the movement of her hands on my body and I'll respond. I want to give up power in response to her need. This can feel profoundly powerful and very unpassive.

A lot of times how I feel it in my body is I feel like I have this fantasy of pulling a woman's hips into my cunt. I can feel the need painfully in another woman's body. I can feel the impact and I begin to play and respond to that hunger and desire. And I begin to eroticize the fantasy that *she can't get enuf of me*. It makes me want to enflame my body. What it feels like is that I'm in my own veins and I'm sending heat up into my thighs. It's very hot.

CM: *Oh honey, she feels the heat, too.*

AH: Yes, and I am making every part of my body accessible to that woman. I completely trust her. There's no place she cannot touch me. My body is liter-

ally open to any way she interprets her sexual need. My power is that I know how to read her inside of her own passion. I can hear her. It's like a sexual language; it's a rhythmic language that she uses her hands for. My body is completely in sync with a lover, but I'm not deciding where she's gonna touch me.

CM: *But don't you ever fantasize yourself being on the opposite end of that experience?*

AH: Well, not exactly in the same way, because with butches you can't insist on them giving up their sexual identity. You have to go through that identity to that other place. That's why roles are so significant and you can't throw them out. You have to find a way to use them, so you can eventually release your sexuality into other domains that you may feel the role traps you in. But you don't have to throw out the role to explore the sexuality. There are femme ways to orchestrate sexuality. I'm not asking a woman not to be butch. I am asking her to let me express the other part of my own character, where I am actively orchestrating what's happening. I never give up my right to say that I can insist on what happens sexually. . . . Quite often what will happen is I'll simply seduce her. Now, that's very active. The seduction can be very profound, but it's a seduction as a femme.

CM: *What comes to my mind is something as simple as you comin over and sittin on her lap. Where a butch, well, she might just go for your throat if she wants you.*

AH: Oh yes, different areas for different roles! What's essential is that your attitude doesn't threaten the other person's sexual identity, but plays with it. That's what good seduction is all about. I play a lot in that. It's not that I have to have spike heels on in order to fantasize who I am. Now that's just a lot of classist shit, conceiving of femme in such a narrow way.

CM: *Well, I would venture to say that some of these dynamics that you're describing happen between most lesbians, only they may both be in the same drag of flannel shirts and jeans. My feeling, however, is. . . and this is very hard for me. . . what I described earlier about seeing my lover's face entrusting me like she did, well, I want her to take me to that place, too.*

AH: Yes, but you don't want to have to deny your butchness to get there. Right?

CM: *Well, that's what's hard. To be*

butch, to me, is not to be a woman. The classic extreme-butch stereotype is the woman who sexually refuses another woman to touch her. It goes something like this: She doesn't want to feel her femaleness because she thinks of you as the "real" woman and if she makes love to you, she doesn't have to feel her own body as the object of desire. She can be a kind of "bodiless lover." So when you turn over and want to make love to her and make her feel physically like a woman, then what she is up against is QUEER. You are a woman making love to her. She feels queerer than anything in that. Get it?

AH: Got it. Whew!

CM: *I believe that probably from a very early age the way you conceived of yourself as female has been very different from me. We both have pain, but I think that there is a particular pain attached if you identified yourself as a butch queer from an early age as I did. I didn't really think of myself as female, or male. I thought of myself as this hybrid or somethin. I just kinda thought of myself as this free agent until I got tits. Then I thought, oh oh, some problem has occurred here. . . . For me, the way you conceive of yourself as a woman and the way I am attracted to women sexually reflect that butch/femme exchange—where a woman believes herself so woman that it really makes me want her.*

But for me, I feel a lot of pain around the fact that it has been difficult for me to conceive of myself as thoroughly female in that sexual way. So retaining my "butchness" is not exactly my desired goal. Now that, in itself, is probably all heterosexist bullshit—about what a woman is supposed to be in the first place—but we are talkin about the differences between the way you and I conceive of ourselves as sexual beings.

AH: I think it does make a difference. I would argue that a good femme does not play to the part of you that hates yourself for feelin like a man, but to the part of you that knows you're a woman. Because it's absolutely critical to understand that femmes are women to women and dykes to men in the straight world. You and I are talkin girl to girl. We're not talkin what I was in straight life.

I was ruthless with men, sexually, around what I felt. *It was only with women I couldn't avoid opening up my need to have something more than an orgasm.* With a woman, I can't refuse to know that the possibility is just there

that she'll reach me some place very deeply each time we make love. That's part of my fear of being a lesbian. I can't refuse that possibility with a woman.

You see, I want you as a woman, not as a man; but, I want you in the way you need to be, which may not be traditionally female, but which is the area that you express as *butch*. Here is where in the other world you have suffered the most damage. My feeling is part of the reason I love to be with butches is because I feel I repair that damage. I make it right to want me that hard. Butches have not been allowed to feel their own desire because that part of butch can be perceived by the straight world as male. I feel I get back my femaleness and give a different definition of femaleness to a butch as a femme. That's what I mean about one of those unexplored territories that goes beyond roles, but goes through roles to get there.

CM: *How I fantasize sex roles has been really different for me with different women. I do usually enter into an erotic encounter with a woman from the kind of butch place you described, but I have also felt very ripped off there, finding myself taking all the sexual responsibility. I am seriously attracted to butches sometimes. It's a different dynamic, where the sexuality may not seem as fluid or comprehensible, but I know there's a huge part of me that wants to be handled in the way I described I can handle another woman. I am very compelled toward that "lover" posture. I have never totally reckoned with being the "beloved" and, frankly, I don't know if it takes a butch or a femme or what to get me there. I know that it's a struggle within me and it scares the shit out of me to look at it so directly. I've done this kind of searching emotionally, but to combine sex with it seems like very dangerous stuff.*

AH: Well, I think everybody has aspects of roles in their relationships, but I feel pretty out there on the extreme end. . . . I think what feminism did, in its fear of heterosexual control of fantasy, was to say that there was almost no fantasy safe to have, where you weren't going to have to give up power or take it. There's no sexual fantasy I can think of that doesn't include some aspect of that. But I feel like I have been forced to give up some of my richest potential sexually in the way feminism has defined what is, and what's not, "politically correct" in the sexual sphere.

CM: *Oh, of course when most feminists talk about sexuality, including lesbianism, they're not talkin about Desire. It is significant to me that I came out only when I met a good feminist, although I knew I was queer since eight or nine. That's only when I'd risk it because I wouldn't have to say it's because I want her. I didn't have to say that when she travels by me, my whole body starts throbbing.*

AH: Yes, it's just correct.

CM: *It was okay to be with her because we all knew men were really fuckers and there were a lot of "okay" women acknowledging that. Read: white and educated. . . . But that's not why I "came out." How could I say that I wanted women so bad, I was gonna die if I didn't get me one, soon! You know, I just felt the pull in the hips, right?*

AH: Yes, really. . . . Well, the first discussion I ever heard of lesbianism among feminists was: "We've been sex objects to men and where did it get us? And here when we're just learning how to be friends with other women, you got to go and sexualize it." That's what they said! "Fuck you. Now I have to worry about you looking down my blouse." That's exactly what they meant. It horrified me. "No no no," I wanted to say, "that's not me. I promise I'll only look at the sky. Please let me come to a meeting. I'm really okay. I just go to the bars and fuck like a rabbit with women who want me. You know?"

Now from the onset, how come feminism was so invested in that? They would not examine sexual need with each other except as oppressor/oppressed. Whatever your experience was you were always the victim. Even if you were the aggressor. So how do dykes fit into that? Dykes who wanted tits, you know?

Now a lot of women have been sexually terrorized and this makes sense, their needing not to have to deal with explicit sexuality, but they made men out of every sexual dyke. "Oh my god, she wants me, too!"

So it became this really repressive movement, where you didn't talk dirty and you didn't want dirty. It really became a bore. So after meetings, we ran to the bars. You couldn't talk about wanting a woman, except very loftily. You couldn't say it hurt at night wanting a woman to touch you. . . . I remember at one meeting breaking down after everybody was talking about being a lesbian very delicately. I began crying. I remember saying, "I

can't help it. I just. . . want her. I want to feel her." And everybody forgiving me. It was this atmosphere of me exorcising this crude sexual need for women.

CM: *Shit, Amber. . . I remember being 14 years old and there was this girl, a few years older than me, who I had this crush on. And on the last day of school, I knew I wasn't going to see her for months! We had hugged good-bye and I went straight home. Going into my bedroom, I got into my unmade bed and I remember getting the sheets, winding them into a kind of rope, and pulling them up between my legs and just holding them there under my chin. I just sobbed and sobbed because I knew I couldn't have her, maybe never have a woman to touch. It's just pure need and it's whole. It's like using sexuality to describe how deeply you need/want intimacy, passion, love.*

Most women are not immune from experiencing pain in relation to their sexuality, but certainly lesbians experience a particular pain and oppression. Let us not forget, although feminism would sometimes like us to, that lesbians are oppressed in this world. Possibly, there are some of us who came out through the movement who feel immune to "queer attack," but not the majority of us (no matter when we came out), particularly if you have no economic buffer in this society. If you have enough money and privilege, you can separate yourself from heterosexist oppression. You can be sapphic or somethin, but you don't have to be queer. It's easier to clean up your act and avoid feelin like a freak if you have a margin in this society because you've got bucks.

The point I am trying to make is that I believe most of us harbor plenty of demons and old hurts inside ourselves around sexuality. I know, for me, that each time I choose to touch another woman, to make love with her, I feel I risk opening up that secret, harbored, vulnerable place. . . . I think why feminism has been particularly attractive to many "queer" lesbians is that it kept us in a place where we wouldn't have to look at our pain around sexuality anymore. Our sisters would just sweep us up into a movement. . . .

AH: Yes, we're not just accusing feminism of silence, but our own participation in that silence has stemmed from our absolute terror of facing that profound sexual need. Period.

There is no doubt in my mind that

the feminist movement has radically changed, in an important way, everybody's concept of lesbianism. Everybody across the board. There's not a dyke in the world today (in or out of the bars) who can have the same conversation that she could have had 10 years ago. It seeps through the water system or somethin, you know? Lesbianism is certainly accepted in feminism, but more as a political or intellectual concept. It seems feminism is the last rock of conservatism. It will not be sexualized. It's *prudish* in that way. . . .

Well, I won't give my sexuality up and I won't *not* be a feminist. So I'll build a different movement, but I won't live without either one.

Sometimes, I don't know how to handle how angry I feel about feminism. We may disagree on this. We have been treated in some similar ways, but our relationship to feminism has been different. Mine is a lot longer. I really have taken a lot more shit than you have, specifically around being

femme. I have a personal fury. The more I got in touch with how I felt about women, what made me desire and desirable, the more I felt outside the feminist community and that was just terrifying because, on the one hand, it had given me so much. I loved it. And then, I couldn't be who I was. I felt that about class, too. I could describe my feelings about being a woman, but if I described it from my own class, using that language, my experience wasn't valid. I don't know what to do with my anger, particularly around sexuality.

CM: *Well, you've gotta be angry. . . . I mean what you were gonna do is turn off the tape, so we'd have no record of your being mad. What comes out of anger. . . if you, one woman, can say I have been a sister all these years and you have not helped me. . . that speaks more to the failure of all that theory and rhetoric than more theory and rhetoric.*

AH: *Yeah. . . Remember that night you and me and M. was at the bar and*

we were talkin about roles? She told you later that the reason she had checked out of the conversation was because she knew how much it was hurting me to talk about it. You know, I can't tell you what it meant to me for her to know that. The desperation we all felt at that table talking about sexuality was so great, wanting people to understand why we are the way we are. CM: *I know. . . . I remember how at that forum on S/M that happened last spring, how that Samoia* woman came to the front of the room and spoke very plainly and clearly about feeling that through S/M she was really coping with power struggles in a tangible way with her lover. That this time, for once, she wasn't leaving the relationship. I can't write her off. I believed her. I believed she was a woman in struggle.*

And as feminists, Amber, you and I are interested in struggle.

*Samoia is a lesbian-feminist S/M group in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The Challenge

We would like to suggest that, in terms of dealing with sexual issues both personally and politically, women go back to CR groups. We believe that women must create sexual theory in the same way we created feminist theory. We need to simply get together in places where people agree to suspend their sexual values, so that all of us can feel free to say what we do sexually or want to do or have done to us. We do have fear of using feelings as theory. We do not mean to imply that feelings are everything. They can, however, be used as the beginning to form a movement which can *politically* deal with sexuality in a broad-based, cross-cultural way.

We believe our racial and class backgrounds have a huge effect in determining how we perceive ourselves sexually. Since we are not a movement that is working-class-dominated or a movement that is Third World, we both hold serious reservations as to how this new CR will be conceived. In our involvement in a movement largely controlled by white middle-class women, we feel that the values of their cultures (which may be more closely tied to an American-assimilated puritanism) have been pushed down our throats. The questions arise then: *Whose* feelings and *whose* values will be considered normative in these CR groups? If there is no room for criticism in sexual discussion around race and class issues, we foresee ourselves being gut-checked from the beginning.

We also believe our class and racial backgrounds have a huge effect in determining how we involve ourselves politically. For instance, why is it that it is largely white middle-class women who form the visible leadership in the anti-porn movement? This is particularly true in the Bay Area, where the focus is less on actual violence against women and more on sexist ideology and imagery in the media. Why are women of color not particularly visible in this sex-related single-issue movement? It's certainly not because we are not victims of pornography.

More working-class and Third World women can be seen actively engaged in sex-related issues that *directly* affect the life-and-death concerns of women (abortion, sterilization abuse, health care, welfare, etc.). It's not like we choose this kind of activism because it's an "ideologically correct" position, but because we are the ones pregnant at 16 (straight *and* lesbian), whose daughters get pregnant at 16, who get left by men without childcare, who are self-supporting lesbian mothers with no childcare, and who sign forms to have our tubes tied because we can't read English. But these kinds of distinctions between classes and colors of women are seldom absorbed by the feminist movement as it stands to date.

Essentially, we are challenging other women and ourselves to look where we haven't (this includes through and beyond our class and color) in order to arrive at a synthesis of sexual thought that originates and develops from our varied backgrounds and experiences. We refuse to be debilitated one more time around sexuality, race, or class.

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