

PATRIARCHAL SEX

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Patriarchal sex (example 1): Four male undergraduates at Cornell University post on the internet the "Top 75 reasons why women (bitches) should not have freedom of speech." Reason #20: "This is my dick. I'm gonna fuck you. No more stupid questions."¹

Patriarchal sex (example 2): Rhonda was separated from her husband but was on generally friendly terms with him. One night he entered her home. For the next seven hours, he raped her. "It was like something just snapped in him. He grabbed me and said, 'We gonna have sex, I need to fuck'" (Bergen 1995, p. 125).

I begin with a working definition of patriarchal sex: Sex is fucking.² In patriarchy, there is an imperative to fuck—in rape and in "normal" sex, with strangers and girlfriends and wives and estranged wives and children. What matters in patriarchal sex is the male need to fuck. When that need presents itself, sex occurs.

From that, a working definition of what it means to be a man in this culture: A man is a male human who fucks.³

What I'm trying to do and what I'm not trying to do.

In this essay I want to analyze patriarchal sex and theorize about strategies for moving away from it. In simple terms, I want to think about how we males might stop fucking and stop being men.

I draw on the work of radical feminist theorists and activists, my research on pornography and sexuality, and my experience as a man in U.S. culture in the last half of the 20th century. I move without apology between personal narrative and reflection, and more formal scholarly writing. I reject the conventional academic obsession with

splitting off mind and body, reason and emotion, objective and subjective, scholarship and activism. One of the ways I know about the world is by living in it, and the knowledge I have gained has led me to a political position that makes certain actions on my part morally necessary. Decades of feminist and other critical work more than adequately justify this kind of engaged scholarship (e.g., Code 1991; Stivers 1992).

What follows is part of my long-term project of trying to make sense of a system into which I was born, a system that privileges certain people with certain attributes (e.g., white, male, heterosexual, educated—all of which I have or have had at one point in my life) and works to maintain the concentration of power in the hands of a relatively small group of people.

This essay is not a "men's studies" or "gender studies" project. It is a feminist-inspired project (see also, Jensen 1995a). I am a man working within feminist theory to try to understand the nature of oppression, specifically in this essay the nature of gender oppression and the role of sexuality in that oppression. My goal is to be a traitor to my gender, as well as to my race and my class. I routinely fail at this goal, though sometimes I get glimpses of what success looks like. I am fortunate to have the support of many feminist women⁴ and a few like-minded male colleagues.⁵ Integral to that support is their willingness to hold me accountable for my actions and words; the critique is a key part of the support.

Also, this essay is not an attempt to tell women what they should think or how they should behave. I am trying to talk primarily to other men about my struggle and what I have learned from it. I do this work both out of a yearning for justice for those oppressed in patriarchy (women, particularly lesbians, children, and to some extent gay men) and out of self-interest (the desire to live a more fulfilling life in a more just, humane, and compassionate world). I work both out of hope for the future and out of fear.

The fear.

"What's your problem—are you afraid of sex?"

That question has been posed to me often as I have been involved in anti-pornography work. For a long time, my answer was no, of course not. Me, afraid? I'm no prude.

I am not a prude, but I have come to realize that I am very much afraid of sex. I am afraid of sex as sex is defined by the dominant culture, practiced all around me, and projected onto magazine pages, billboards, and movie screens. I am afraid of sex because I am afraid of domination, cruelty, violence, and death. I am afraid of sex because sex has hurt me and hurt lots of people I know, and because I have hurt others with sex in the past. I know that there are people out there who have been hurt by sex in ways that are beyond my words, who have experienced a depth of pain that I will never fully understand. And I know there are people who are dead because of sex.

Yes, I am afraid of sex. How could I not be?⁶

A common response from people when I say things like that is, "You're nuts." Sometimes, when I'm feeling shaky, a voice in the back of my head asks, "Am I nuts?"

I have been doing research and writing on pornography and sexuality for about eight years (Jensen 1996, 1995b, 1994a, 1994b). In the past few years, I have been trying to figure out how to talk to people who think I am crazy and how to deal with my own fear that they may be right. I have been trying to understand why the attack on the feminist critique of patriarchal sex has been so strong and so successful, and how it connects to the backlash against feminist work on sexual violence.

Here's one tentative explanation: It is too scary to be afraid of sex. To go too far down the road with the radical critique of sexuality means, inevitably, acknowledging a fear of patriarchal sex. And if all the sex around us is patriarchal, then we are going to live daily with

that fear. And if patriarchal sex seems to be so overwhelmingly dominant that it sometimes is difficult to believe that any other sex is possible, then maybe we are always going to be afraid. Maybe it's easier to not be afraid, or at least to repress the fear. Maybe that's the only way to survive.

But maybe not. Maybe being afraid of sex is the first step toward something new. Maybe things that seem impossible now will be possible someday. Or maybe we will find that we won't need what we thought we needed.⁷ Maybe being afraid is the first step out of the fear and into something else that we cannot yet name.

Expanding the working definition of patriarchal sex.

I was born in 1958 in a small city in the upper Midwest to white parents who, after some years of struggle, settled into the middle class. I went to a Protestant church and public school. I had friends, mostly other boys. We talked about sex and we begged, borrowed, and stole pornography. I watched a lot of television and went to a lot of movies. I had a G.I. Joe doll and toy guns. I played sports. I was a quirky kid in some respects, physically smaller than most and a bit of an egghead from an early age. Maybe my family was a little more emotionally abusive than most, but maybe not. In many regards, I grew up "normal." And I got a normal education in sex.

Here is the curriculum for sex education for a normal American boy: Fuck women.

Here is the sexual grammar lesson I received: "Man fucks women; subject verb object" (MacKinnon 1989, p. 124).

The specifics varied depending on the instructor.

Some people said, "Fuck as many women as often as you can for as long as you can get away with it." Others said, "Fuck a lot of women until you get tired of it, and then find one to marry and just fuck her." And some said, "Don't fuck any women until you find one to marry, and then fuck her for the rest of your life and never fuck anyone else."

Some said, "Women are special; put them on a pedestal before and after you fuck them." Others said, "Women are shit; do what you have to do to fuck them, and then get away from them."

Most said, "Only fuck women." A few said, "Fuck other men if you want to."

The basic concepts were clear: Sex is fucking. Fucking is penetration. The things you do before you penetrate are just warm-up exercises. If you don't penetrate, you haven't fucked, and if you haven't fucked, you haven't had sex. Frye (1992, p. 113) defines this kind of heterosexual, and heterosexist, intercourse as, "male-dominant-female-subordinate-copulation-whose-completion-and-purpose-is-the-male's-ejaculation." That is sex in patriarchy.

All the teachers (parents, friends, ministers, celebrities, pornographers, movie directors, etc.) tend to agree on the one primary rule about sex in patriarchy: You gotta get it. You have to fuck something at some point in your life. If you don't get it, there's something wrong with you. You aren't normal. You aren't really alive. You certainly aren't a man.

When I was a kid, I'm not sure I really wanted to fuck anyone. But eventually I figured out that if I didn't learn to do it, I was going to be an outcast. So I learned, though later than most of my peers.

My first sex was with pornography. I was about six years old the first time I saw it. For the next two decades, it was part of my life on an irregular basis. I had sex with women in person, and I had sex with women in magazines and movies (masturbating to pornography is a way of having sex, of sexually using the women in it). As far as I can tell from research and conversations with men, I had a fairly typical sex life. I learned to like being in control. That was part of the appeal of sex with pornography: I had control over when I used it, and I was in control of the women in it (Jensen 1996). That was part of the appeal of sex with women: I was the man, and I was in control because men "naturally" take control of sex. Once the details of access with a

particular woman were negotiated, I was in control. Patriarchal sex practices vary from person to person, from attempts at more egalitarian interaction to the sadomasochistic. My preferred practices, on the surface, leaned more toward the egalitarian, but when I think about my sexual history I can connect every practice to a need for control, either of the woman or of the woman's pleasure.

When I started to realize that, I realized I was in trouble. When I realized that most everyone around me was in trouble, I started to get scared. When I got real scared, I stopped having patriarchal sex. That meant I stopped having sex with other people, including the people in pornography. At first, I didn't do this consciously. I just found it more and more difficult to have sex. At some point, I consciously made a decision to quit. As I began to understand more about how deeply I had been trained in the rules of patriarchal sex, it became more clear that I would have to stop participating in that system. I would have to stop fucking. I could no longer pretend that I was "working it out" by trying to put into practice new ideas about sex. Patriarchal sex was too deeply rooted in my body and my psyche. Before I could reconstruct my sexuality, I needed time to deconstruct, free of the pressure to have sex.

The radical feminist critique.

By the time I came to understand that I wanted, and needed, to stop having patriarchal sex, I had a framework within which to understand what was happening to me. Radical feminist critiques of pornography and patriarchal sex gave me a vocabulary, a way to make coherent in words what was happening in my body and mind. That made it possible, though by no means easy, to begin the process. Many feminist activists and theorists have contributed to this critique (Cole 1989; Dworkin 1981, 1987, 1988; Jeffreys 1990; MacKinnon 1987, 1989; Russell 1993). Here's my summary:

Men in contemporary American culture (I make no claim to cross-cultural or historical critique; I am writing about the world in which I live) are trained through a variety of cultural institutions to

view sex as the acquisition of pleasure by the taking of women. Sex is a sphere in which men (by this I don't mean that every man believes this, but that many men believe this is true for all men) believe themselves to be naturally dominant and women naturally passive. Women are objectified and women's sexuality is commodified. Sex is sexy because men are dominant and women are subordinate; power is eroticized. In certain limited situations, those roles can be reversed (men can play at being sexually subordinate and women dominant), so long as power remains sexualized and power relations outside the bedroom are unchanged.

Summed up by Andrea Dworkin (1987, p. 63):

The normal fuck by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation; colonializing, forceful (manly) or nearly violent; the sexual act that by its nature makes her his.

One of the key sites in which these sexual values are reflected, reinforced, and normalized is pornography. Domination and subordination are sexualized, sometimes in explicit representations of rape and violence against women, but always in the objectification and commodification of women and their sexuality (Dworkin 1981, 1988; MacKinnon 1987, 1993). This results in several kinds of harms to women and children: (1) the harm caused in the production of pornography; (2) the harm in having pornography forced on them; (3) the harm in being sexually assaulted by men who use pornography; and (4) the harm in living in a culture in which pornography reinforces and sexualizes women's subordinate status.

In a world in which men hold most of the social, economic, and political power, the result of the patriarchal sexual system is widespread violence, sexualized violence, and violence-by-sex against women and children. This includes physical assault, emotional abuse, and rape by family members and acquaintances as well as strangers. Along with the experience of violence, women and children live with the knowledge that they are always targets.

Attention to the meaning of the central male slang term for sexual intercourse—"fuck"—is instructive. To fuck a woman is to have sex with her. To fuck someone in another context ("he really fucked me over on that deal") means to hurt or cheat a person. And when hurled as a simple insult ("fuck you") the intent is denigration and the remark is often prelude to violence or the threat of violence. Sex in patriarchy is fucking. That we live in a world in which people continue to use the same word for sex and violence, and then resist the notion that sex is routinely violent and claim to be outraged when sex becomes overtly violent, is testament to the power of patriarchy. In this society, sex and violence are fused to the point of being indistinguishable. Yet to say this out loud is to risk being labeled crazy: "What's wrong with you—are you afraid of sex? Are you nuts?"

The wrong ways out of this problem.

1. All women and most men I've met are against rape. That is, they are against those acts the law defines as rape. But most aren't against fucking, because fucking is sex and how can you be against sex, which is seen as natural? This view is summed up in the phrase "Rape is a crime of violence, not of sex." But rape is a crime of sex; to de-sex rape is to turn away from the possibility of understanding rape. This is not to say that men don't seek power over women through rape and that the power isn't expressed violently; it is to acknowledge that men seek power over women through sex of all kinds, including rape.

I think people, men and women, want to believe that rape is violence-not-sex because to acknowledge that rape is sex requires that we ask how it is that so many men can decide that rape is an acceptable way to get sex. Rape is not the result of the aberrant behavior of a limited number of pathological men, but is "normal" within the logic of the system. When sex is about power and control, and men are socially, and typically physically, more powerful than women and children, then sexual violence is the inevitable outcome. As Dworkin (1976, p. 46) argues, "Rape is no excess, no aberration, no accident, no mistake—it embodies sexuality as the culture defines it."

This does not mean that every man is a rapist in legal terms. It means that we live in a society in which men, both legally designated rapists and non-rapists, are raised with rapist ethics (Stoltenberg 1989). Raping is a particularly brutal kind of fucking, but the difference between "deviant" rape and the "normal" fuck is often difficult to see (MacKinnon 1989). Timothy Beneke (1982, p. 16), looking at how metaphors frame sex as an expression of male power and conquest, concludes:

[E]very man who grows up in America and learns American English learns all too much to think like a rapist, to structure his experience of women and sex in terms of status, hostility, control, and dominance.

So, the conventional view is that rape can't be about sex and has to be about violence, because if it's about sex then each one of us has to ask how deeply into our bodies the norms of patriarchal sex have settled. Men have to ask about how sexy dominance is to them, and women have to ask how sexy submission is to them. And if we think too long about that, we face the question of why we're still having patriarchal sex. And if we face that question, we may have to consider the possibility of stopping. And if we aren't having sex, then we have to face the dominant culture's assumption that we aren't really alive because we aren't having sex.

2. Women aren't victims, some say, and radical feminism has tried to turn women into victims by focusing on the harms of patriarchal sex.⁸ This is a deceptively appealing rhetorical move. When members of one class (women) identify a way that members of another class (men) routinely hurt them, those who are hurt are told they are responsible for the injury because they identified it. If women would stop talking about these injuries, the logic seems to be, then the injuries would stop. This strategy seems popular with some women and lots of men lately. I understand why men take this stance; it relieves them of any obligation to evaluate their own behavior and be responsible. And I understand why women don't want to see themselves as always at risk of men's violence and sexual aggression. But saying you aren't at risk because you don't want to be at risk doesn't take the risk away.

What does the word "victim" mean? Dworkin (1990, pp. 38-39) writes:

It's a true word. If you were raped, you were victimized. You damned well were. You were a victim. It doesn't mean that you are a victim in the metaphysical sense, in your state of being, as an intrinsic part of your essence and existence. It means somebody hurt you. They injured you. ... And if it happens to you systematically because you are born a woman, it means that you live in a political system that uses pain and humiliation to control and to hurt you.

Understanding one's victimization is not the same as playing the victim. Acknowledging that women often are victimized is not an admission of weaknesses or a retreat from responsibility. Instead, it makes possible organized and sustained resistance to the power that causes the injuries. By clearly identifying the victimizers (most always men) and the system within which the injury is ignored or trivialized (patriarchy), political change becomes possible.

We live in a world in which some people exercise their power in a way that hurts others. It has become popular to pretend the injuries are the product of the overactive imaginations of whiners. White people routinely tell non-white people that racism is not a big problem and that if the non-whites would stop complaining, all would be fine. Rich people tell poor and working people that there is no such thing as class in the United States and that if we all would just work hard together everything would be fine. Straight people tell lesbian and gay people that if they would just stop making such a public nuisance of themselves everyone would leave them alone and things would be fine. But things aren't fine. We live in racism. Poor and working people are being crushed by a cruel economic system. Heterosexism oppresses lesbians and gays. And men keep fucking women.

Why try?

If patriarchy is this dominant and patriarchal sex this colonizing, one might ask what hope there is in resistance. Would it not make more sense to go along and get along?

No system, no matter how overwhelming and oppressive, is beyond challenge. Borrowing a metaphor from Naomi Scheman, we can think of patriarchy as being like concrete in the city. It covers almost everything. It is heavy and seemingly unmovable, and it paves the world. But the daily wear and tear produces cracks, and in those cracks, plants grow—weeds, grass, sometimes a flower. Living things have no business growing up out of concrete, but they do. They resist the totality of the concrete.

No system of power can obliterate all resistance. All systems yield space in which things can grow. I have seen resistance to patriarchal sex grow, even flourish, in the cracks. I have friends, the people who helped me sort these things out and move forward, who continue to survive and grow in resistance to patriarchal sex. In my life I have met few people interested in this project of resistance, but it doesn't take many people for me to feel as if resistance is worthwhile. But I also seek more than just a few friends who are scattered around the country. I would like to be part of an epistemic community in which these questions can be explored.

Epistemic communities.

What kind of investigation is required for confronting patriarchal sex? I am not after THE solution to the problem. At times, I am not entirely sure about the questions. Lorraine Code (1987, p. 165) suggests that when epistemology is construed as a quest for understanding, the appropriate question becomes not "What can I know?" but "What sort(s) of discourse does the situation really call for?" It is from conversation and the sharing of richly detailed narratives that understanding, not definitive answers, can begin to emerge.

While we are all individually accountable for our actions, the effort to understand sexuality is not solely an individual task; we have a responsibility to create collectively the tools for this investigation. As Code (1987, p. 245) suggests:

Thinking individuals have a responsibility to monitor and watch over shifts in, changes in, and efforts to preserve good intellectual practice. ... In principle, everyone is responsible, to the extent of his or her ability, for the quality of cognitive practice in a community.

Such community can be difficult to form and maintain. Pressures from the dominant ideology, combined with the routine human failings, can make the task seem overwhelming. My experience is that there are different levels of community at which different levels of conversation can happen. I have done most of this work in a fairly small group that includes a core of five to ten trusted friends, colleagues, and students (fellow students when I was in graduate school, and on rare occasions now, students whom I meet as a professor). Beyond that, I sometimes meet others with similar interests and convictions with whom I have important, though perhaps not ongoing, conversations. There is no recipe for how these conversations develop and no criteria for whom I connect with. The conversations cross lines of, among other things, gender, race, age, and sexual orientation, though not without great effort and occasional stress.

But one thing that is constant for me in these conversations is an understanding—sometimes stated but often simply understood—that we won't have sex, now or in the foreseeable future. These kinds of conversations can involve strong emotions and physical responses, and it is easy to want to channel that energy into sex. Also, there are ways in which talking-about-sex can be a type of having-sex. It takes constant monitoring to reject patriarchy's rule and not engage in sex. But I believe it is essential to resist the imperative to have sex because we do not always learn more about our desire by acting on it. I believe that having sex and talking-about-sex in my core epistemic community would undermine progress. It would erode trust, not just between the people involved in the sex but in the whole community, and would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the conversation to continue.⁹ Such activity suggests that no matter how much one tries to redefine sexuality or talks about change, in the end we're all just interested in fucking each other.

Beyond those small communities in which we are likely to feel most safe in searching to understand sexuality, important conversations can, and must, go on in a larger context. This essay is one attempt to create an epistemic community; implicit (and now explicit) is an invitation for others to engage me in conversation. My search for community at this level happens at conferences, in the classroom, in anti-pornography and anti-rape public presentations, and in conversations with a variety of people I meet. Most often, I am sharing things I have learned in my core community with others and asking for feedback. These conversations are unpredictable but always, in some sense, productive for me.¹⁰

The work of women and men.

In her discussion of epistemic responsibility, Code asserts that "knowing well" is of considerable moral significance (Code 1987). On matters of sexuality, knowing well requires attention not just to what our desires are but to where those desires come from. To simply *know*, "This is what arouses me," without attempting to understand *why* it does is epistemically irresponsible. Code reminds us that it can be easier "to believe that a favorite theory is true and to suppress nagging doubts than to pursue the implications of those doubts and risk having to modify the theory" (Code 1987, 59).¹¹ Being epistemically responsible requires that we investigate those nagging doubts.

In this and other work, I tend to focus on the objectification, aggression, and violence that is central to the dominant construction of male sexuality in this culture. I believe this focus is proper, especially because I am a man and I work from my experience as a man. However, these questions about the construction of our sexuality are as crucial for women as men.¹² This does not mean I claim the right to tell women what their sexuality should look like. It means that we all must acknowledge that, to varying degrees, our lives have been shaped by patriarchy and men's values, and that we must examine the effects.

An example: While having sex, a man finds it sexy to put a woman's arms behind her head and hold them down at the wrists, rendering her fairly immobile and intensifying the experience of intercourse for him. The man should consider: How did he come to develop this practice? What is it about rendering a woman immobile that feels sexy? Why does having control over a woman in such a manner intensify his orgasm? All of those questions are central to epistemic responsibility; to act morally, he needs to know. But what if the woman in that scenario also finds the practice exciting? What if the sensation of being unable to move her arms while having intercourse intensifies her sexual response? What is it about being immobile that feels sexy?

I believe women have the same epistemic responsibility as men. However, in a society where women are often blamed for being in some way responsible for the injuries that men inflict on them, such a call for epistemic responsibility can appear to be asking women to blame themselves for the ways in which they may have internalized patriarchy's values. But this is not about blame or guilt; it is about the search for understanding, for freedom. Just as pornography teaches men to rape, romance novels teach women to be rape victims. Just as fathers often instill rapist values in sons, mothers often teach daughters how to submit to the boys. I believe there are compelling moral and political arguments for men to change. It also seems clear that to survive, women must change.

Hetero and homo.

By the way, I am gay. I lived most of my 38 years as a heterosexual. I was once married, and I have a son. I am out, although what exactly that means for me—beyond a public rejection of heterosexuality and its institutions—is unclear at the moment. But gay-or-straight doesn't much matter. The question of resistance to patriarchal sex is just as important in the gay male world as it is for straight men. As far as I can tell, the majority of gay men fuck in about the same way as straight men do. We all received pretty much the same training. In fact, the term "fucking" is thrown around in many gay male conversations

with frequency and ease, in a celebratory way. Fucking is taken to be the thing that gay men do; some might even argue that if you aren't fucking, you aren't gay.

If that's the case, then I'm not gay. And I'm not straight. I'm trying to live in the cracks in the concrete.

Imagining not-sex.

In early versions of this essay, I wrote about the task of imagining what a new kind of sex, a non-patriarchal sex, might look like. I suggested that one of the main problems in this project of resistance is that we lack a language in which to imagine what that sex might be. I felt the need to imagine things beyond our experience, in words that we have yet to find.

I still believe that we lack the vocabulary to talk about this and that creative imagination is at the center of this project. But I no longer think that imagining a new kind of sex is crucial, or even helpful, at this point. I fear that a rush to fill the void left when one starts to disengage from patriarchal sex can ultimately keep us from moving forward; we risk trying to reconstruct before we have adequately deconstructed, before we understand enough about how the norms of patriarchal sex live in our bodies. Obviously, this is not like the flushing of a system to get the toxins out, not a mechanical task that has a clear beginning and end. I expect to struggle for the rest of my life to understand how patriarchy has shaped my identity and sexuality. If I waited for the magic moment of pure clarity to begin a reconstruction project, I would be waiting forever. But I want to guard against beginning the reconstruction process prematurely.

There is an important lesson in my rush to want to fill the void with new imagined conceptions of non-patriarchal sex. Although I claimed to have been willing to stop having sex for some period of time, my first instinct was to rush toward a reconstruction. That is, in trying to resist the imperative to have sex, I gave in to the imperative to create a new kind of sex so that I could have it. I told myself that because we are humans with bodies and needs for intimacy, that the

task of imagining something new was crucial. I do have a body, and I need love and intimacy. But the question remains: Would any sex I could imagine at this moment really be non-patriarchal? Have I disentangled myself from patriarchy enough to even begin that task?

The answer for me is clearly no, that I am not in a good position to imagine something new. That is my judgment about myself, and I don't pretend to have the answer for others. I come to this moment with a specific history that shapes what is possible for me. I do not know what is possible for others, and I expect that many men who share the values I describe decide to take other paths toward a similar goal. My point is not to persuade everyone that not-sex is their only option, but to suggest that it is a relevant question for everyone—that it is an option and that there is a compelling argument to be made for that choice. If we want to leave behind patriarchal sex, not only must we confront the likelihood that we might need to stop having sex for some period of time, but we must be willing to accept that we may not have any idea of what will take the place of patriarchal sex for quite some time. In other words, we have to be willing to live a life without sex for the sake of justice, for the sake of ourselves.

So, for the time being, I want to imagine not-sex. I reject sex in the hope that someday, maybe in my lifetime and maybe not, I can find a way to be physically intimate outside of patriarchy. Maybe we will call it sex, maybe not. At this point, it's not a terribly important question for me.

This move to embrace not-sex may seem a drastic, or even silly, rhetorical move. But I think the gravity of the situation justifies the deployment of new language. As Susan Cole puts it (1989, p. 132):

We have a long way to go before we uncover the full extent of the damage. We may not see the full repair in our lifetimes and it may not be possible to chart the entire course for change.

I no longer trust myself to chart the course for change, to refashion sex into something I can trust. So, I seek not-sex, something different than what "sex" means in the dominant culture. I want

intimacy, trust, and respect from other people, and I hope that it is possible for those things to be expressed physically. But I don't want sex.¹³

To say that I don't want sex is not to deny my sexuality nor cut myself off from my erotic power, as Audre Lorde uses that term (see also, Heyward 1989). Lorde talks about the way in which women's erotic power is falsely cordoned off in the bedroom, made into "plasticized sensation," and confused with the pornographic (1984, p. 54). For Lorde, the erotic is a life-force, a creative energy:

those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings (1984, p. 56).

Lorde writes about expressing her erotic power in some ways that the culture does not define as sexual and others that the culture might call sexual; she writes of the erotic power flowing both in the act of writing a good poem and in "moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love." My expression of the erotic at this point in my life need not include such movement against the body of another. What is crucial is not channeling my erotic energy into sex, but finding other ways to feel that power. Lorde writes:

Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama (1984, p. 59).

To be more specific, what does it mean to say that in my intimate (broadly defined) relationships I want to tap my erotic power while practicing not-sex? Does it mean a ban on touch that produces an erection for me? A ban on touch of another person's body in areas that are typically sexualized (genitals, breasts, buttocks)? Is there any way to achieve not-sex intimacy that involves touch?

For me, not-sex is intimacy that resists or transcends oppression. In practice, that has meant different things with different people, depending on my relationship with them and the level of trust. For example, one female friend and I hug frequently, and I feel as if that

touch is not-sex and a loving intimacy. A gay male friend and I tend to hug when we greet and say goodbye, and each of us knows that if the other needed emotionally supportive not-sex physical contact we would provide it. But we are not routinely physical out of a commitment to not-sex. In both relationships, there is an erotic element; in neither case is it made sexual.

Masturbation is a more difficult issue for me in thinking through not-sex. I sometimes do it, though I am aware that the fantasies that fuel that masturbation are almost exclusively scripted by patriarchy. There is a difference between self-touch that is motivated by self-love, and self-touch that is rooted in those scripts. My struggle with this issue (not to be confused with adolescent guilt over masturbation) remains unresolved, and is one reminder that perhaps I am further from imagining a non-patriarchal sex that I once thought.

Jim Koplín once said to me that it is at the moment when a man can no longer achieve an erection—when all the old ways of sparking sexual pleasure have failed—that something new is possible. That moment, he said, may be the most creative point in our lives. "Impotence" becomes not a failure or a problem, but the point from which something new becomes possible. In this sense, I strive for impotency; that may be the point at which I am doing something more than shuffling characters in "the same weary drama."

Heat and light.

As I have said, I am not interested in writing a recipe book for non-patriarchal sex. I do not want to imagine new practices or create new rules for sex at this point in my life. But is there anything one can say about a new path, about where not-sex might lead me?

There is a cliché that when an argument is of little value, it produces "more heat than light." One of the ways this culture talks about sex is in terms of heat: She's hot, he's hot, we had hot sex. Sex is bump-and-grind; the friction produces the heat, and the heat makes the sex good. Fucking produces heat. Fucking is hot.

But what if our embodied connections could be less about heat and more about light? What if instead of desperately seeking hot sex, we searched for a way to produce light when we touch? What if such touch were about finding a way to create light between people so that we could see ourselves and each other better? If the goal is knowing ourselves and each other like that, then what we need is not heat but light to illuminate the path. How do we touch and talk to each other to shine that light? I'm not sure. There are lots of ways to produce light in the world, and some are better than others. Light that draws its power from rechargeable solar cells, for example, is better than light that draws on throw-away batteries. Likewise, there will be lots of ways to imagine non-patriarchal sex. Some will be better than others, depending on the values on which they are based. The task ahead is not just imagining something new, but being alert to how things that seem new can be rooted in old ideas.

Conclusion.

A possible response to this from other men (and women): "Not-sex. Striving for impotency. Are you crazy?"

Sometimes I wonder. But I don't think I am crazy. I feel as if I may be going sane.

Notes

1. A copy of the message was posted on several internet discussion lists and widely circulated, and criticized, in November 1995.
2. I don't use the word "fuck" without hesitation and concern. The word carries with it incredible violence, and I realize that it can feel assaultive to some people, especially women. But in this case I believe that it is the word that most accurately represents what I am trying to describe.
3. My focus will remain on heterosexual men and their sex with women, though much of what I will say here has relevance for gay men. More on that later.
4. Thanks specifically to Elvia Arriola, Rebecca Bennett, Donna McNamara, Nancy Potter, and Naomi Scheman for their roles in helping me understand these issues.
5. Thanks to Jim Koplín, a friend, intellectual partner, and colleague in the anti-pornography movement. Much of what I write here was first spoken by Jim and by me in conversation. I can no longer trace the origin of some of the ideas; many are as much Jim's as mine. His affection, support, and wisdom inform this essay.
6. There is another kind of fear that I believe most, if not all, men live with: the fear of not meeting the imagined standard of masculinity, of never being a skilled enough sexual performer to be a "real" man—the stud, the man in total control. That fear is real, as is the alienation from self and partner that results. However, the fear I am describing here is a deeper fear, a realization of how thoroughly sexuality in this culture eroticizes domination and subordination. More on that later.
7. This has proved to be the case in other parts of my life. I live without a car, a television, or meat. At earlier times in my life, I would have thought that impossible. Now I find my life immeasurably enriched by the absence of those things.

8. One popular female writer argues that such "victim feminism" needs to be replaced with "power feminism" (Wolf 1993). Another claims that radical feminists, or "gender feminists," have hijacked the women's movement and betrayed the real interests of women (Sommers 1994).

9. This is especially true when the sex happens across differences in status that reflect potential power imbalances, such as a large age gap, significant wealth or class gaps, and gender. Most devastating, I believe, is sexual contact between people in institutionalized roles of unequal power, such as student/teacher, client/therapist, parishioner/clergy, etc. I believe that sexual activity in such situations is always wrong.

10. I don't want to appear naive about this wider community. As troubling and divisive as these investigations can be in communities committed to feminism and liberatory politics, they can be dangerous in mainstream and reactionary political circles, where people may want to ignore or undermine a feminist analysis. My goal, and the goal of the feminists whose work informs my analysis, is the exploration and celebration of diversity, but the goal of those to the right is often the suppression of diversity. These political realities are important to consider. The kind of open discussion that is crucial to expanding our understanding may be safe in some contexts but not in others, and more safe for some than others. But it is important that the conversation continue.

11. This is not to say that every individual in every situation need engage in discussions about these matters. People whose sexuality is under attack by the established social structure—lesbians, gay men and, in some sense, many heterosexual women—might feel that social conditions make it unsafe to engage in such open discussion. For example, a lesbian high school teacher in a small town may not be able to be part of a discussion about sexual practices in that community. Still, the idea of epistemic responsibility does suggest we

should make whatever efforts are possible to pursue knowledge about sexuality and its social construction.

12. Thanks to Rebecca Bennett for reminding me of the importance of discussing this.

13. In response to a draft of this essay, Jim Koplin suggested that labeling this "not-sex" is reactive rather than inventive and offered alternative terms such as "body-play," "body-connection," or "creative touch." I understand his point, but I think that at this stage in my project I want to hold onto a clear break from sex. At some point in the future, I may shift to such language, but my gut tells me it is too early for me to do that.

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