

# WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION

Women's History Month 2005

**NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible.**

(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Susan C Turell PhD Dept. WMNS  
Course Number and Name WMNS 490 Semester completed Spring 2004  
Title of Nominated Work Heterosexuality: Observing & Re-evaluating a Compulsory Institution

**CATEGORY:** Sampson:  
Undergraduate Research Paper ☒ See \_\_\_\_\_  
Undergraduate Project \_\_\_\_\_ Olson \_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate \_\_\_\_\_ Kessler \_\_\_\_\_  
Turell \_\_\_\_\_  
Belter \_\_\_\_\_

## STUDENT INFORMATION:

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**\*\*WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.

TO: WMNS Awards Committee Judges

FROM: Susan C. Turell

January 26, 2005

It may appear odd to nominate two works by the same student: Katie Bowman. However, once you read her papers, I hope you will agree that she is an exceptional young feminist scholar and both papers deserve serious consideration for an award. I'll leave it to the judges to make the difficult choice. Both these papers were completed for the WMNS 490 (Feminist Theory) class in spring 2004. Her first paper, "Heterosexuality: Observing and re-evaluating a compulsory institution" addresses how sexual orientation, and heterosexuality specifically, is analyzed through the filters of several feminist theories. Examining this topic arose from her question (shared by many others) of how to be a heterosexual feminist. Her ability to analyze and synthesize key theoretical ideas and then apply them to this question exceeds the skill of many graduate level students, much less an undergraduate student. Most of the ideas in her paper were not directly addressed in class discussion or the text; her conclusions are based on her ability to apply her knowledge of the theory to her topic. And she does so exceptionally well.

Her second paper nominated for an award, "Adrienne Rich: Exploring multiplicity of self identity and its relevance to the works of others", was also outstanding. Katie read Rich's *Blood. Bread and Poetry* in its entirety, and distilled its themes and ideas to compare to excerpts from other feminist authors and theorists. She expertly identified Rich's key themes and was able to discuss them within the language of others' writings. Katie is gifted in her ability to move between authors, using each person's language both to describe their ideas but also to contrast and connect to those of Rich's. She is able to clearly describe ideas within and between, while staying true to the authors' use of language. To be able to so clearly direct the reader between ideas and writers is a talent, one that is not found often in undergraduate students.

## **Heterosexuality: Observing and Re-evaluating a Compulsory Institution**

Although heterosexuality is easily ignored and often compulsory for nonfeminists, it is an exceptionally controversial and complex topic for those involved in the various methods and perspectives of feminist discourse. Among the theories explored in Rosemarie Putnam Tong's text, *Feminist Thought*, there are divided perceptions of whether or not heterosexuality is an acceptable orientation for feminist women to practice. A common question one might ask herself upon entering the sometimes cumbersome realm of feminist theory is, "Can I be a heterosexual feminist?" Although there is no conclusive answer to this question, many feminist theories address the issue of heterosexuality and offer some useful insight. Some of the feminist theories—namely liberal, radical-libertarian, psychoanalytic and existentialist—encourage or, at the very least, tolerate heterosexuality; while other theories, like radical-cultural, socialist, gender, postmodern, and ecofeminism discourage heterosexuality. The remaining theories—multicultural and global—either somewhat disregard heterosexuality or seem to accommodate for essentially any sexual orientation.

Of the feminisms that tolerate heterosexuality, there are a few that actually assume heterosexuality as the norm, allowing little room for any other sexual orientations. These heterosexist ideologies seem to not only tolerate heterosexuality, but they appear to embrace it and perpetuate it as normal and sometimes preferable behavior for women. One example that closely parallels these ideals is liberal feminist thought. Being primarily concerned with an equal playing field and equity of opportunity, this feminism assumes that female/male relationships are among the most important

cornerstones for identifying sexism. This theory assumes that women are and always will be living their lives relative to the lives of men in economic, social, political, and intimate partnerships. For example, Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, is somewhat of a poster-child for liberal feminism. Even though the book has been important for feminism, it identifies "the woman problem" from a perspective that is clearly heterosexist. She, like many other liberal feminists, have been (perhaps rightfully) accused of working too closely within heterosexuality when making feminist observations, leading to an idea that heterosexuality is normal for all women. These heterosexist attitudes not only exclude non-heterosexual women, but they seem to subtly promote heterosexuality because of their inability to acknowledge any other kind of sexual orientation.

Liberal feminist thought seems to revolve around the perceptions and observations proposed by white, middle class, privileged, married, heterosexual women. Liberal feminism works within the long-standing and widely popular (compulsory) system of heterosexuality in order to observe women's oppression and prescribe heterosexual-favoring tactics of solvency.

Although liberal feminist theory establishes that there are certainly some flaws of heterosexuality that devalue and oppress women, the theory does not propose any kind of upheaval or movement away from heterosexuality. Instead of overturning a male-favoring system of heterosexuality, this theory tends to promote working within our male-oriented heterosexual setting to make practical changes to benefit women, like trying to make women's educational and economic opportunities equal to those of men.

It seems then, that liberal feminists tolerate and, to varying degrees, promote heterosexuality in their pursuits of naming and dealing with the oppression of women.

Another feminism that fails to acknowledge the fact that heterosexuality might/should not be normal or preferable behavior for women is Marxist feminism. Some critics of this feminism argue that Marxist theory fails to distinguish the problems of men from the problems of women. Much of Marxist ideology revolves around economics, the problems of capitalism, and classist oppression rather than sexist oppression. This theory identifies women as a class, but says very little about the social, sexual, or relational circumstances that make women into a class. Rather, it focuses on women as a mere economic group and leaves out some crucial factors to answer *why* women are in that class and *who* put them there. Marxist feminism doesn't say that there is a problem with men domineering and oppressing women within the constructs of capitalism. Instead, it argues that women and men are both oppressed thanks to capitalism.

Since Marxist feminism seems to deal more with economics than sexism, it seems to disregard the question of heterosexuality. Because it fails to address heterosexuality as a problem for women, it is perpetuating the heterosexist status quo. It does not recognize (and if it does, only vaguely) that female oppression differs from male oppression in capitalism, so the idea of heterosexuality as an oppressive institution for women is ignored. Although Marxist feminist theory approaches the topic of alienation and its special effects on women, it does not seem to place any kind of responsibility or blame on men; and it assumes that working within heterosexuality is the logical way to deal with oppression.

Heterosexist feminist thought is also apparent in psychoanalytic feminism. Much of what is said relating to psychoanalysis is loosely based on Freudian theory. Freud's ideas are all deeply rooted in family relationships, mothering, and childhood repression, all of which assume that there was, at some point, a heterosexual relationship involved. Freud's ideas about childhood sexuality often include some kind of "polymorphic perverse" examination of both sexes. As children grow up, they experience all sorts of various sexual urges, acting on them freely in a non-heterosexist way. As the children turn into young adults, Freud claims that "normal" people develop into heterosexual people, while so-called sexually "underdeveloped" people make up an immature, diseased, and hopeless non-heterosexual population. His ideas deal with heterosexuality being the norm and the ideal, thereby promoting it as some kind of psychological goal.

Other psychoanalytic thought is similarly based on heterosexual relationships. For example, the debated issue of dual parenting that is often proposed by psychoanalytic feminists assumes that there are two parents: one female (mother) and one male (father). The hope of dual parenting is to incorporate female and male qualities to raise better children. The problem here is that not all families consist of two parents, and of those that do, these parents are not always paired with members of the opposite sex. So, psychoanalytic ideals of dual parenting pertain only to heterosexual families, perpetuating the supposed status quo of heterosexuality.

Another pertinent aspect of psychoanalytic thought is the quest for androgyny. From this perspective, psychoanalysts propose that positive female and male traits can be combined, creating a more preferable androgynous prototype person. In this case, the ideas of sex and gender no longer have to parallel each other. One can be either a female

or a male by biology, but can possess equal numbers of female and male traits, creating a much more vague line of what it means to be female and what it means to be male. As such, sexual orientation becomes less relevant. Sexual orientation would be in flux, and all forms of different sexual expression—including heterosexual—would be acceptable for women.

A similar androgynous value is held among radical-libertarian feminists. Radical-libertarians contend more articulately than psychoanalytic feminists that there “should not necessarily be a connection between one’s sex (male or female) and one’s gender (masculine or feminine)” (Tong, 1998, 49). Surrounding this fluid continuum of gender and sex is, once again, an acceptance of polyamorous behavior, encompassing all kinds of sexual orientations.

Not only do radical-libertarian feminists utilize androgynous values to support various sexual orientations, including heterosexuality, they also grant women the choice to be heterosexual based on pleasure. Based on Ann Koedt’s work, radical-libertarian feminists agree that, “Since a woman does not *need* a male body to achieve sexual pleasure, she should not engage in sexual relations with a man unless *she* wants to” (Tong, 1998, 69). This sentiment requires women to make a conscious choice to be heterosexual, rather than complying with heterosexuality unknowingly or compulsorily. So, the decision to be heterosexual is not at all denied to women here; it is simply molded into more of a deliberate choice.

Choice is crucial for many theories because it is the essence of power and consciousness raising. Multicultural and global feminist theory dwells on this idea. If women are completely conscious, informed, and aware about their choices, whatever

decision they make should be competent. Identity is also a huge decider of choice. Multicultural and global feminists agree that the interweaving of identity plays a huge role in women's level of consciousness; therefore it would seem that interactions of women's identities affect the choices women make. If a woman possesses awareness and consciousness of different aspects of her identity—race, class, sexual orientation, etc—she should be able to make competent decisions based on those factors. Of equal importance in decision-making is the ability to recognize factors of difference and discuss them with other women. Factors of difference can strengthen female relationships and decisions when they are out in the open. With all of this in mind, it seems logical that multicultural and global feminists would accept heterosexuality as a part of the multiple self. Heterosexuality could also be considered a competent decision a woman makes based on consciousness and awareness. In addition, it could be considered a harmless difference among women that should yield discussion and strengthen female dialogue. Thus, it would appear that heterosexuality is an acceptable choice from this perspective.

Existentialist feminists also emphasize the idea of choice, but not necessarily directly based on the decision of heterosexuality. Simone de Beauvoir proposes the idea that if men want power and women are a threat, then men must control women to maintain the power. Thus, men become the subject, while women become the object or the “other.” The aforementioned choice, then, is a responsibility women have to transcend otherness to overcome oppression. This does not require a woman to make a choice to deny heterosexuality; rather, it requires women to recognize their objectification and otherness and constructively overturn it. Some ways women can transcend otherness is through going to work, becoming an intellectual, embracing



socialism, and freeing women's selves from their bodies. Transcending otherness does not include transcending heterosexuality, so it is possible—in the tradition of existentialist feminists—to accommodate heterosexuality and still be feminist.

Postmodern feminists utilize this idea of otherness, but in a way that takes quite a different spin on heterosexuality. Postmodern feminist thought proposes that otherness certainly does exist for women, but that it should not be an obstacle for women to overcome. Instead, postmodern feminism suggests that women embrace otherness, because it provides a view from the margins that is much more advantageous than it would be if it were transcended. This perspective of otherness changes the concept altogether; instead of otherness being something to transcend, it becomes a virtue. Otherness, according to postmodern feminists, makes women superior to those not in the position of the other. Therefore, instead of conforming to de Beauvoir's somewhat patriarchal standards, like linear work, intellectuality, and rationalism, postmodern feminists take a non-conforming role. Perhaps part of this role would be to eliminate heterosexuality. This is further explored in postmodern ideas about symbolic order.

Symbolic order is loosely defined as internalizing the order of society (patriarchal society) and then (un)willingly reproducing it. Postmodern feminists believe that symbolic order does not work well for women. It inhibits the ability of women to deviate from patriarchy. Giving in to symbolic order is giving in to the patriarchal code. So, in this case, heterosexuality becomes more problematic. Since heterosexuality is one type of symbolic order that is compulsorily internalized and reproduced by women, it is one way to perpetuate the oppression of women. Therefore, it seems imperative that

heterosexuality is rejected by women if there is to be any hope of deviating from the symbolic order of patriarchy.

Postmodern thought discourages heterosexuality, but other feminist theories adamantly oppose heterosexuality for feminist women. Radical-cultural feminism is one such theory. Feminists involved in radical-cultural dialogue conclude that it is better to be feminine than masculine. This means that the importance and value of the female qualities like interdependence, community, sharing, body, and emotion greatly exceed male qualities of autonomy, mind, rationality, and reason. Female characteristics are valued at a much higher degree than male ones. Therefore, radical-cultural feminists “instruct women to keep their feminine characters free of poisonous masculine additives” (Tong, 1998, 49). This essentially means that women are to be free of heterosexuality. Women should not make themselves available to men, because the essence of maleness is rotten and easily ruins the essence of femaleness. Heterosexuality, then, becomes a forbidden path of corruption and flaw. According to radical-cultural feminists, women should stay away from men, period, based on the inferiority of the male character. Radical-cultural feminists attack the institution of heterosexuality even more directly when they blame it for the promotion of further female oppression. Tong claims that radical-cultural feminist theory asserts, “Heterosexuality is about male domination and female subordination setting the stage for pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, and woman-battering” (Tong, 1998, 65). So, not only are these feminists contending that heterosexuality destroys female virtues, they also argue that it allows for all kinds of additional atrocities towards women. Heterosexuality is, to radical-cultural feminists, a way to promote and perpetuate sexual objectification. Men are always on

top; women are always on the bottom, subject to constant oppression. Clearly, radical-cultural feminists take a much less tolerant stance than their radical-libertarian sisters. Radical-cultural feminists believe that heterosexuality is the unhealthy root of female oppression and female objectification. They contend that women are better than men and should reject heterosexuality in order to hold onto that superiority.

Another perspective that believes in the superiority of women over men is gender feminism. This theory is based on the idea that the ethical virtues of women are better and more advanced than those of men. Female traits are thought to be morally better than male traits; therefore, there should be a reconstructed moral code that deviates from the male ethics of justice and instead embraces the female ethics of care. In this case, it is morally better to situate oneself among women than to situate oneself among men. It is crucial for women to utilize their superior moral code and therefore disassociate from the inferior male one. Perhaps—although this is never directly mentioned by Tong—the one fundamental way for women to maintain their superiority in ethics is to reject men through rejecting heterosexuality.

Socialist feminists, extending from Marxist roots, critique heterosexuality also, but for very different reasons. Socialist feminists agree that Marxist feminism poses some problems that must be attended to. As mentioned in the discussion on Marxist feminism, some of the (socialist) critiques of the movement are that the Marxist tradition does not recognize the differences between female and male oppression in a capitalist society. Socialist feminists recognize this void and make it their business to fill it. They do so by elaborating on the Marxist theory of alienation. They dwell more on the effects of alienation on women; and they identify some of the cause of this alienation as being

competition. In this case, it is not women's struggle against men that causes her alienation, but it is her struggle against herself and other women that causes her to feel alienated. Women are in constant competition with each other for the "male gaze" (Tong, 1998, 125). This suggests, although somewhat indirectly, that the elimination of competition with other women could come with the elimination of heterosexuality. If women did not feel pressed to compete with each other for men, there would be no problem of alienation. Alison Jaggar observes the effects of this: "Female friendship is often so strong among lesbian women because lesbian women are not each other's rivals for male attention" (Tong, 1998, 125). Therefore, women should reject heterosexuality in order to reclaim woman-centeredness and more important feminine ties.

Reclaiming woman-centeredness is also a key element of ecofeminism. Since women are often considered to be more earthly, close to nature, and bound to natural cycles and men want to dominate all of these things, much of this important woman-centeredness is lost. The oppression and hatred of women leads to the oppression and hatred of nature, and vice versa. Many ecofeminists, like Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, and Starhawk, argue that women should be linked to nature based on the inherent goodness of earthliness and natural cycling. In their opinions, women and nature are more important than men and male institutions. Women are superior in their knowledge of nature and their intuitive understanding and appreciation of natural processes. If women embrace nature, they are embracing everything that is good. If women embrace men and male-oriented institutions, they are embracing everything that is bad and destructive to themselves and nature. Therefore, from this perspective, it appears that heterosexuality would be a bad choice for women. To be heterosexual is to tie oneself to men rather than

to nature. It would lead to the destruction of women's intrinsically good relationship with nature.

Other ecofeminists—Simone de Beauvoir, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Karen Warren, Maria Mies, and Vandana Shiva—think that women should deviate from the link to nature based on the ideas that women should be higher than nature, and the link to nature perpetuates harmful dualism against women. Instead of focusing on the connection to nature, women should focus on transcending nature and fighting dualism.

Heterosexuality, in some respects, forces women to be closer to nature because it maintains a lot of the dualistic sentiment that women are close to earth and reproduction while men are close to rationality and labor. In fact, religious fundamentalists argue that heterosexuality *is* nature. So, if women participate in the institution of heterosexuality, it could mean that they are counteracting their attempts to deviate from nature; therefore, heterosexuality is an unfavorable option for these remaining ecofeminists.