An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Loving Another Woman

The following is from a taped interview with a woman who talked about her love relationship with another woman. Both of these women, who requested anonymity, had previously had only heterosexual relationships; both are feminists. The interview was conducted by Anne Koedt.

QUESTION: You said you had been friends for a while before you realized you were attracted to each other. How did you become aware of it?

ANSWER: I wasn’t conscious of it until one evening when we were together and it all just sort of exploded. But, looking back, there are always signs, only one represses seeing them.

For example, I remember one evening—we are in the same feminist group together—and we were all talking very abstractly about love. All of a sudden, even though the group was carrying on the conversation in a theoretical way, we were having a personal conversation. We were starting to tell each other that we liked each other. Of course one of the things we discussed was: What is the thin line between friendship and love?

Or, there were times when we were very aware of having “accidentally” touched each other. And Jennie told me later that when we first met she remembered thinking, “abstractly” again, that if she were ever to get involved with a woman, she’d like to get involved with someone like me.

The mind-blowing thing is that you aren’t at all conscious of what you are feeling; rather, you subconsciously, and systematically, refuse to deal with the implications of what’s coming out. You just let it hang there because you’re too scared to let it continue and see what it means.

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Q: What did you do when you became aware of your mutual attraction?

A: We’d been seeing a lot of each other, and I was at her house for dinner. During the evening—we were having a nice time, but I remember also feeling uncomfortable—I became very aware of her as we were sitting together looking at something. There was an unusual kind of tension throughout the whole evening.

It was quite late by the time we broke up, so she asked me whether I wanted to stay over and sleep on her couch. And I remember really being very uptight—something I certainly wouldn’t have felt in any other situation with a friend. Yet, even when I was uptight and felt that in some way by staying I would get myself into something, I wasn’t quite sure what—something new and dangerous—I decided to stay anyway.

It wasn’t really until I tried to fall asleep, and couldn’t, that all of a sudden I became very, very aware. I was flooded with a tremendous attraction for her. And I wanted to tell her, I wanted to sleep with her, I wanted to let her know what I was feeling. At the same time I was totally bewildered, because here I was—not only did I want to tell her, but I was having a hard time just facing up to what was coming out in myself. My mind was working overtime trying to deal with this new thing.

She was awake too, and so we sat and talked. It took me about two hours to build up the courage to even bring up the subject. I think it is probably one of the most difficult things I ever had to do. To say—to in any way whatsoever open up the subject—to say anything was just so hard.

When I did bring it up in an oblique way and told her that I was attracted to her, she replied somewhat generally that she felt the same way. You see, she was as scared as I was, but I didn’t know it. I thought she seemed very cool, so I wasn’t even sure if she was interested. Although I think subconsciously I knew, because otherwise I wouldn’t have asked her—I think I would have been too scared of rejection.

But when I finally did bring it up, and she said she felt the same way, well, at that point there was really no space left for anything in your mind. So we agreed to just drop it and let things happen as they would at a later time. My main, immediate worry was that maybe I had blown a good friendship which I really valued. Also,
even if she did feel the same way, would we know what to do with it?

Q: *When you first realized that you were possibly getting involved with a woman, were you afraid or upset?*

A: No. The strange thing is that the next morning, after I left, I felt a fantastic high. I was bouncing down the street and the sun was shining and I felt tremendously good. My mind was on a super high.

When I got home I couldn’t do any kind of work. My mind kept operating on this emergency speed, trying to deal with my new feelings for her. So I sat down and wrote a letter to myself. Just wrote it free association—didn’t try to work it out in any kind of theory—and as I was writing I was learning from myself what I was feeling. Unexpectedly I wasn’t feeling guilty or worried. I felt great.

Q: *When did you start sleeping with each other?*

A: The next time we were together. Again, we really wanted each other, but to finally make the move, the same move that with a man would have been automatic, was tremendously difficult . . . and exhilarating. Although we did sleep together, it wasn’t sexual; just affectionate and very sensual. After that evening we started sleeping together sexually as well.

I guess it was also a surprise to find that you weren’t struck down by God in a final shaft of lightning. That once you fight through that initial wall of undefined fears (built to protect those taboos), they wither rapidly, and leave you to operate freely in a new self-defined circle of what’s natural. You have a new sense of boldness, of daring, about yourself.

Q: *Was it different from what you had thought a relationship with a woman would be like?*

A: Generally, no. Most of the things that I had thought intellectually in fact turned out to be true in my experience. One thing, however, was different. Like, I’d really felt that very possibly a relationship with a woman might not be terribly physical. That it would be for the most part warm and affectionate. I think I probably thought this because with men sex is so frequently confused with
conquest. Men have applied a symbolic value to sex, where the penis equals dominance and the vagina equals submission. Since sensuality has no specific sex and is rather a general expression of mutual affection, its symbolic value, power-wise, is nil. So sex with a man is usually genitally oriented.

Perhaps I wasn’t quite sure what would happen to sexuality once it was removed from its conventional context. But one of the things I discovered was that when you really like somebody, there’s a perfectly natural connection between affection and love and sensuality and sexuality. That sexuality is a natural part of sensuality.

Q: How is sex different with a woman?
A: One of the really mind-blowing things about all this has been that it added a whole new dimension to my own sexuality. You can have good sex, technically, with a woman or a man. But at this point in time I think women have a much broader sense of sensuality. Since she and I both brought our experiences as women to sexuality, it was quite something.

Another aspect of sexuality is your feelings. Again, this is of course an area that has been delegated to women; we are supposed to provide the love and affection. It is one of our duties in a male-female relationship. Though it has been very oppressive in the context that we’ve been allowed it, the ability to show affection and love for someone else is, I think, a fine thing—which men should develop more in themselves, as a matter of fact. Love and affection are a necessary aspect of full sexuality. And one of the things I really enjoy with Jennie is this uninhibited ability to show our feelings.

Q: Is the physical aspect of loving women really as satisfying as sex with a man?
A: Yes.

Q: You’ve been together a while now. What’s your relationship like?
A: Once we got over the initial week or so of just getting used to this entirely new thing, it very quickly became natural—natural is really the word I’d use for it. It was like adding another dimension to what we’d already been feeling for each other. It is quite a combination to fall in love with your friend.
We don’t have any plans, any desire, to live together, although we do see a great deal of each other. We both like our own apartments, our own space.

I think one of the good things we did in the beginning was to say: Let’s just see where it will go. We didn’t say that we loved each other, just that we liked each other. We didn’t immediately proclaim it a “relationship,” as one is accustomed to do with a man—you know, making mental plans for the next ten years. So each new feeling was often surprising, and very intensely experienced.

Q: What would you say is the difference between this relationship and those you have had with men?

A: Well, one of the biggest differences is that for the first time I haven’t felt those knots-in-the-stomach undercurrents of trying to figure out what’s really happening under what you think is happening.

I think it all boils down to an absence of role-playing; I haven’t felt with Jen that we’ve fallen into that. Both of us are equally strong persons. I mean, you can ask yourself the question, if there were going to be roles, who’d play what? Well, I certainly won’t play “the female,” and I won’t play “the male,” and it’s just as absurd to imagine her in either one of them. So in fact what we have is much more like what one gets in a friendship, which is more equalized. It’s a more above-board feeling.

I don’t find the traditional contradictions. If I do something strong and self-assertive, she doesn’t find that a conflict with her having a relationship with me. I don’t get reminded that I might be making myself “less womanly.” And along with that there’s less self-censorship, too. There’s a mutual, unqualified, support for daring to try new things that I have never quite known before.

As a result, my old sense of limits is changing. For example, for the first time in my life I’m beginning to feel that I don’t have a weak body, that my body isn’t some kind of passive baggage. The other day I gritted my teeth and slid down a fireman’s pole at a park playground. It may sound ordinary, but it was something I had never dared before, and I felt a very private victory.

Q: Given the social disapproval and legal restrictions against lesbianism, what are some of the external problems you have faced?

A: One thing is that I hesitate to show my affection for her in public. If you’re walking down the street and you want to put your
arm around someone or give them a kiss—the kind of thing you do without thinking if it is a man—well, that's hardly considered romantic by most people if it's done with someone of your own sex. I know that if I were to express my feelings in public with Jennie, there would be a lot of social intrusion that I would have to deal with. Somehow, people would assume a license to intrude upon your privacy in public; their hostile comments, hostile attitudes, would ruin the whole experience. So you're sort of caught in a bind. But we have in fact begun to do it more and more, because it bothers me that I can't express my feeling as I see fit, without hostile interference.

Q: What made you fall in love with a woman?
A: Well, that's a hard question. I think maybe it's even a bit misleading the way you phrased it. Because I didn't fall in love with "a woman," I fell in love with Jen—which is not exactly the same thing. A better way to ask the question is: How were you able to overcome the fact that it was a woman? In other words, how was I able to overcome my heterosexual training and allow my feelings for her to come out?

Certainly in my case it would never have happened without the existence of the women's movement. My own awareness of "maleness" and "femaleness" had become acute, and I was really probing what it meant. You see, I think in a sense I never wanted to be either male or female. Even when I was quite little and in many ways seemed feminine and "passive"—deep down, I never felt at home with the kinds of things women were supposed to be. On the other hand, I didn't particularly want to be a man either, so I didn't develop a male identity. Before I even got involved with the women's movement, I was already wanting something new. But the movement brought it out into the open for me.

Another thing the movement helped me with was shedding the notion that, however independent my life was, I must have a man; that somehow, no matter what I did myself, there was something that needed that magical element of male approval. Without confronting this I could never have allowed myself to fall in love with Jennie. In a way, I am like an addict who has kicked the habit.

But most important of all, I like her. In fact I think she's the healthiest person I have ever been involved with. See, I think we were lucky, because it happened spontaneously and unexpectedly
from both sides. We didn’t do it because we felt compelled to put our ideological beliefs into reality.

Many feminists are now beginning to at least theoretically consider the fact that there’s no reason why one shouldn’t love a woman. But I think that a certain kind of experimentation going on now with lesbianism can be really bad. Because even if you do ideologically think that it is perfectly fine—well, that’s a political position; but being able to love somebody is a very personal and private thing as well, and even if you remove political barriers, well, then you are left with finding an individual who particularly fits you.

So I guess I’m saying that I don’t think women who are beginning to think about lesbianism should get involved with anyone until they are really attracted to somebody. And that includes refusing to be seduced by lesbians who play the male seduction game and tell you, “you don’t love women,” and “you are oppressing us” if you don’t jump into bed with them. It’s terrible to try to seduce someone on ideological grounds.

Q: Do you now look at women in a more sexual way?
A: You mean, do I now eye all women as potential bed partners? No. Nor did I ever see men that way. As a matter of fact, I’ve never found myself being attracted to a man just because, for example, he had a good physique. I had a sexual relationship with whatever boy friend I had, but I related to most other men pretty asexually. It’s no different with women. My female friends—well, I still see them as friends, because that’s what they are. I don’t sit around and have secret fantasies of being in bed with them.

But there’s a real question here: What is the source, the impetus, for one’s sexuality? Is it affection and love, or is it essentially conquest in bed? If it’s sex as conquest in bed, then the question you just asked is relevant, for adding the category of women to those you sleep with would mean that every woman—who’s attractive enough to be a prize worth conquering, of course—could arouse your sexuality. But if the sexual source lies in affection and love, then the question becomes absurd. For one obviously does not immediately fall in love with every woman one meets simply because one is able to sleep with women.

Also, one thing that really turns me off about this whole business of viewing women as potential bedmates is the implied possessive-
ness of it. It has taken me this long just to figure out how men are treating women sexually; now when I see some lesbians doing precisely the same kinds of things, I'm supposed to have instant amnesia in the name of sisterhood. I have heard some lesbians say things like, "I see all men as my rivals," or have heard them proudly discuss how they intimidated a heterosexual couple publicly to "teach the woman a political lesson." This brings out in me the same kind of intense rage that I get when, for example, I hear white men discussing how black men are "taking their women" (or vice versa). Who the hell says we belong to anyone?

Q: Do you think that you would have difficulty relating to a man again if this relationship broke up? That is, can you "go back" to men after having had a relationship with a woman?

A: It's an interesting thing that when people ask that question, most often what they're really asking is, are you "lost" to the world of what's "natural"? Sometimes I find myself not wanting to answer the question at all just because they're starting out by assuming that something's wrong with having a relationship with a woman. That's usually what's meant by "go back to men"—like you've been off someplace wild and crazy and, most of all, unsafe, and can you find your way home to papa, or something. So first of all it wouldn't be "going back."

And since I didn't become involved with a woman in order to make a political statement, by the same token I wouldn't make the converse statement. So, sure I could have a relationship with a man if he were the right kind of person and if he had rejected playing "the man" with me—that leaves out a lot of men here, I must add. But if a man had the right combination of qualities, I see no reason why I shouldn't be able to love him as much as I now love her.

At a certain point, I think, you realize that the final qualification is not being male or female, but whether they've joined the middle. That is—whether they have started from the male or the female side—they've gone toward the center where they are working toward combining the healthy aspects of so-called male and female characteristics. That's where I want to go and that's what I'm beginning to realize I respond to in other people.

Q: Now that you've gotten involved with a woman, what is your attitude toward gay and lesbian groups?
A: I have really mixed feelings about them. To some extent, for example, there has been a healthy interplay between the gay movement and the feminist movement. Feminists have had a very good influence on the gay movement because women’s liberation challenges the very nature of the sex role system, not just whether one may be allowed to make transfers within it. On the other hand, the gay movement has helped open up the question of women loving other women. Though some of this was beginning to happen by itself, lesbians made a point of pressing the issue and therefore speeded up the process.

But there is a problem to me with focusing on sexual choice, as the gay movement does. Sleeping with another woman is not necessarily a healthy thing by itself. It does not mean—or prove, for that matter—that you therefore love women. It doesn’t mean that you have avoided bad “male” or “female” behavior. It doesn’t guarantee you anything. If you think about it, it can be the same game with new partners: On the one hand, male roles are learned, not genetic; women can ape them too. On the other, the feminine role can be comfortably carried into lesbianism, except now instead of a woman being passive with a man, she’s passive with another woman. Which is all very familiar and is all going nowhere.

The confusing of sexual partners with sexual roles has also led to a really bizarre situation where some lesbians insist that you aren’t really a radical feminist if you are not in bed with a woman. Which is wrong politically and outrageous personally.

Q: Did the fact that lesbians pushed the issue in the women’s movement have a major effect upon your own decision to have a relationship with a woman?

A: It’s hard to know. I think that the lesbian movement has escalated the thinking in the women’s movement, and to that extent it probably escalated mine.

But at the same time I know I was slowly getting there myself anyway. I’d been thinking about it for a long time. Because it is a natural question; if you want to remove sexual roles, and if you say that men and women are equal human beings, well, the next question is: Why should you only love men? I remember asking myself that question, and I remember it being discussed in many workshops I was in—what is it that make us assume that you can only receive and give love to a man?