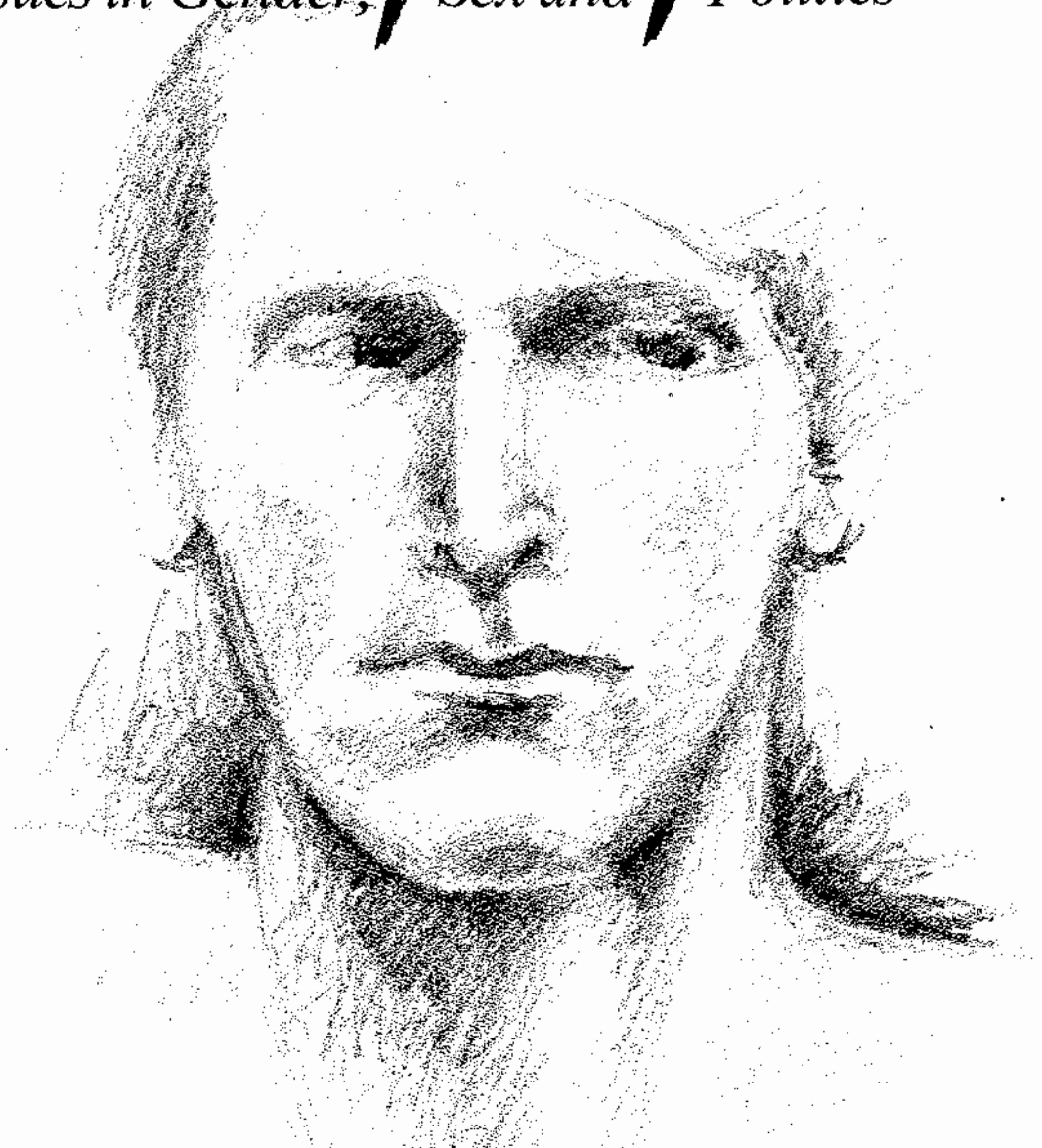


#19 • Spring/Summer 1988 • \$4.50

Changing Men

Issues in Gender, Sex and Politics



Abortion and Male Sexuality • Wild Men and Warriors
Gays and Pornography • Male Rape
Bisexual Marriages • AIDS in the Workplace

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His Sexuality, Her Reproductive Rights

By Richard Newman © 1987

Your lover on the phone is very excited.

"Congratulations!" she says. "You're going to be a father! I just got back from the doctor and she tells me I'm pregnant. Isn't that great?" Your heart sinks. You want to scream, "What do you mean, 'Isn't that great?'" You want to tell her to have an abortion.

Or she calls and her voice is slow over the phone, and she has a hard time getting the words out. Finally, she tells you, "I'm pregnant." "Why so glum?" you ask clatedly. "That's wonderful!" She replies, "I want an abortion."

Or she calls and tells you she's already had an abortion. She says she feels guilty for not telling you first but she was afraid. You hang up screaming "Murderer!" into the phone.

Or she tells you she's pregnant and doesn't know what to do. Neither do you. This is the first time the subject has come up.

Abortion: Whose Rights?

These scenarios, each perfectly understandable in its own context, raise questions about the rights of both men and women in relation to the fetuses we create together. Can a man claim a fetus as half his? Can he say that if his lover aborts it against his will, she violates his bodily and reproductive rights? Or can he claim that if he does not want to have a child, she has no right to carry the pregnancy to term? On the other hand, can the woman claim that, since *she* carries the fetus and his body is no longer involved, the man's claims are irrelevant?

An important difference separates these two sets of claims. The man's claim assumes power over the body of the woman. Although his active par-

ticipation in the reproductive process is finished, he believes that his feelings about having children are enough to keep the woman from doing what she wants with her body. The woman's claim, however, involves no such power over the man. She merely states that since the sex act is over, he has no bodily and/or reproductive rights to exercise. She refuses to acknowledge his claim to power over her, and instead asserts her right to her own autonomy.

Women's liberation concerns precisely this right of women to their own independence without regard for patriarchal ideas of who, what or how women should be. Women's liberation, in other words, concerns woman-centeredness, or "gynocentrism." In the situations described above, the woman's claim concerning her right to abortion is based on a woman-centered sexuality in which her relationship to her own body is more important than her relationship to the man. The man's claims grow out of an hierarchical sexuality in which the woman's body — because of her relationship to him — becomes an object over which he has control. Her body becomes a part of him the way anything we acquire becomes in some way a part of ourselves.

If we men want to redefine the nature of our reproductive and sexual relationships with women, we must look, not to the women, but to other men. From men comes the possibility of a male-centered, male-defined heterosexuality in which our relationships to ourselves and each other become primary. Developing these relationships should command our attention with some urgency because any hopes we have of real and complete male liberation depend on our ability to live our lives without recourse to the possession/oppression of a subservient other — the role into

which we coerce the women of our culture.

The politics of abortion seem to me a good place to start defining this male-centered sexuality. This is because the issues concerning women's reproductive choice and men's role in the reproductive process ultimately involve understanding the boundaries between male and female sexualities.

Relinquishing Male Privileges

We can begin with what is probably a radical assumption in our culture, an assumption that we shouldn't have to mention at all: that women are fully adult human beings, fully capable of making responsible life decisions. They do this not only within the context of the female community but also, along with fully adult and fully capable men, within the context of the human species. Second, we can recognize a simple biological fact: men do not get pregnant. Because the physical processes of pregnancy, abortion and childbirth are experienced only by women, it is only common sense that the final decision to experience either childbirth or abortion should rest with no one but a pregnant woman. (Just imagine how unreasonable it would be if women decided when and whether men should undergo vasectomy operations.) I accept this right of women to reproductive choice as a fact inaccessible to argument; it simply is, and demands nothing more of me and other men than our full awareness and acknowledgement of this right. To the extent that we lack this awareness, or that we fail in our acknowledgement, we can not enter fully into egalitarian relationships with women.

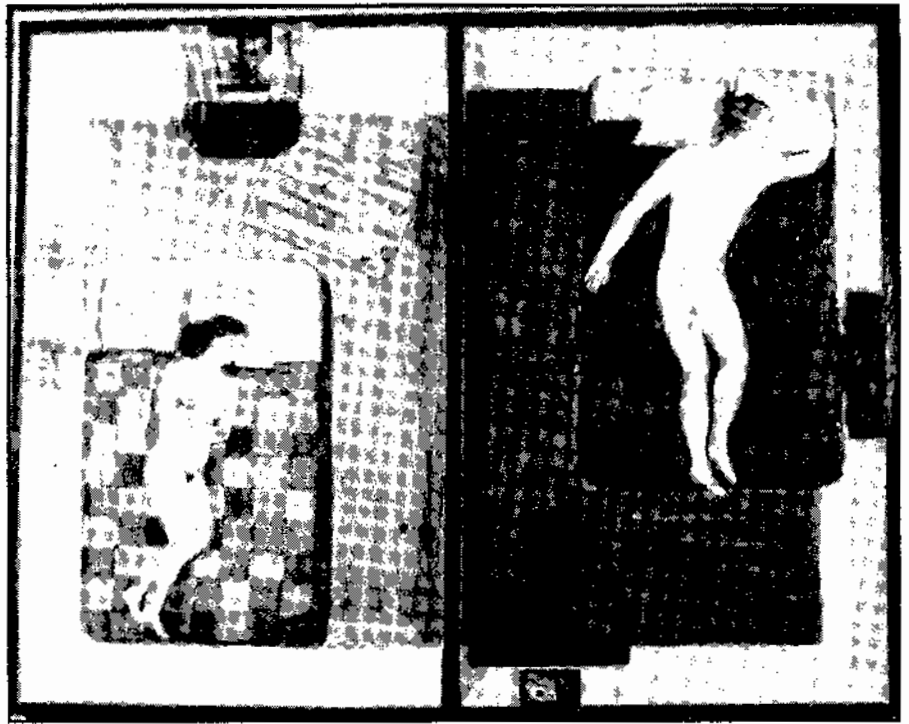
Probably most men would agree with a woman's "right to choose," but I wonder how many of us understand fully the implications of what we are agreeing to.

**The politics
of abortion is a good
place to start defining
a male-centered
sexuality.**

The politics of reproduction in our culture are such that women have functioned primarily as baby machines without their having much, if any, control over when or whether this function should be performed. Even today, despite the relative availability of birth control, many women—for religious, economic, social or family reasons—have children they can't afford, don't want or shouldn't have all because "that's what women do." The patriarchal institution of monogamous marriage has "privileged" the reproductive aspect of female sexuality by essentially enslaving women to the "duty" of having a family. We have created the notion that a woman without a husband and children lives, by definition, an unfulfilled life. In effect, women acquire fulfillment in a patriarchal culture by prostituting themselves, offering their bodies as sexual and reproductive machines serving the needs of men.

Such a hierarchical relationship between ourselves and women has deep implications for how men perceive our sexuality and our role in reproduction. By presuming to insist that women's sexual biology exists to serve male needs, we have, in essence, confined our reproductive role to one of control. We also have made it virtually impossible, for both men and women, to separate erotic sex from reproductive sex.

In an essay entitled "Erotica and Pornography," Gloria Steinem observed that human beings are the only animals who engage in erotic sex, in sex as "a way of bonding, of giving and receiving pleasure, bridging differentness, discovering sameness, and communicating emotion" (1). She also makes the point that the yoking together of erotic sexuality and reproduction, and the insistence that the breaking of this yoke is somehow obscene and pornographic, con-



"Bedroom Diptych," mixed-media, 36"x42", Julie Feferman 1982

stitutes a major strategy by which men use religious and political institutions to intimidate women into resisting women's liberation. If a woman, having conceived, can decide without recourse to any authority but herself whether or not to carry her pregnancy to term, she is a woman free to determine the who, what, when, where, why and how of her own sexuality. Her sexuality, then, becomes a part of her whole identity, and she can, at her will, explore whatever other parts of herself she chooses. Her life becomes woman-centered and the patriarchal power of the male collapses.

When the courts of this country granted women the right to abortion, women gained a sexual freedom previously lacking in their lives. However, in our male-dominated society, what the King can grant the King can also take away. Presuming to grant women a right which is intrinsically theirs merely reinforces the same old attitudes about female sexuality. Even though male-permitted abortion-on-demand allows women, married or not, a necessary option to unwanted pregnancy, it also gives men one more possible reason to insist that women make themselves sexually available to us. Further, if we don't like how they use this "privilege" we have "granted" them, we can take it away. For example, anti-abortionists use this strategy when they point to the rise in the number of teen-age abortions as a reason to make abortion against the

law. The fact that the right to abortion can be challenged in court and its availability restricted by law indicates how little of our actual privilege men have relinquished.

Women's right to reproductive choice—if we men understand it fully—not only allows women freedom of sexual expression, both reproductive and erotic, it also leaves men with a minor biological role in the reproductive process. Full reproductive choice for women means they regain the control we previously enjoyed. If a woman, simply by having an abortion, can thwart a man's desire to have children, he loses a great deal of what men traditionally invest in having children to begin with.

Currently, male control of conception and childbirth functions to reinforce heterosexual notions of virility, self-worth and masculinity. Part of the traditional significance for men in the birth of a child is not only that we perpetuate ourselves, but that we *cause* it to happen. Take, for instance, the notion of "fathering" a son to carry on the family name, tradition or business. Also, it was common to blame the lack of a male child in the family on the wife's inability to produce one—as if her interference botched what the husband could, almost by himself, do all along. If women possess complete control over their reproductive biology—which unrestricted abortion on demand provides them—we men may perpetuate ourselves through the birth

of a male or female child, but that self-perpetuation takes place only by *permission* of the mother.

Male-Centered Heterosexuality

Merely acknowledging the reality of the male role in reproduction and thereby relinquishing our perceived right to control the process, however, accomplishes little more than an inversion of the present situation. The injustice of men controlling the biology of reproduction will find no remedy in the injustice of women's control over our emotional investment in having children.

I think we men need to redefine our relationship to reproduction, both symbolically and physically. We need to find a way of being sexual and reproductive that neither exploits others nor puts our sexual and reproductive fulfillment at the mercy of someone else's freedom of choice. We need to put ourselves — not the women (or other men) with whom we make love — at the center of our sexuality. Then we can begin to learn truly who we are as loving and vulnerable human beings.

To the degree that the primary power relationship in patriarchal society is between men and women, gay men, by virtue of their sexual choices, do not participate in one aspect of that relationship: they do not require/ask for the specifically sexual surrender of women. I do *not* mean that gay men, because they are gay, are not sexist. I do not mean that by definition relationships among gay men will not duplicate the sexual hierarchy of the dominant culture. Nor do I mean that the gay male community, simply by existing, subverts the connections between sexism and heterosexism. I *do* mean that relationships between gay men take place in a community which is defined by men in terms of men. Heterosexual men can begin to develop from this aspect of the gay male community a political/physical male-centered sexuality for ourselves that is analagous to the women-centered sexuality I discussed above. Because a male-centered sexuality asserts the primacy of our relationships with ourselves and other men, it will subvert the hierarchy of a heterosexuality organized around our possession and control of women.

Probably the most common and easily identifiable aspect of sexist culture is the physical/sexual objectification of women by men. Such objectification is, however, an aspect of any sexual relationship. It is reasonable that bed

partners like each other's bodies as bodies. A sexually defined power hierarchy reveals itself when the objectification becomes chronic and represents the entire relationship, or even just the entire sexual aspect of the relationship.

Of course, sexual objectification of men by men does not in and of itself avoid or subvert sexual hierarchies. A homosexual couple may fall quite conventionally into easily recognizable male ("dominant") and female ("submissive") roles. However, if it is the "idea" of the female which determines the hierarchical structure of the relationship, it is possible for each man to recognize himself, if only on a physical level, in the other. Since a chronic hierarchy can only be maintained by the denial of the basic sameness between the two lovers, such recognition will work to subvert the hierarchy.

***Male
heterosexual responsibility should begin with the realization that once we fertilize the egg — unless we have agreed beforehand with our partner on the consequences — what happens thereafter is beyond our control.***

Recognizing aspects of oneself in another human being and accepting that basic sameness as positive requires a certain amount of self-acceptance, of self-love. A male-centered sexuality will depend upon our claiming the primacy of our relationships with ourselves and other men. I can only love the man in other men if I love the man in me *as a man*. If this self-love becomes the basis for my life decisions, then my art, my science, politics, religion — everything I do, including my sexual activity, becomes an expression of my love for myself. My homo/autoeroticism gives my life its power, and I do not need to depend on someone else's surrender, male or

female, to tell me who and what I am. A community in which the primary motivating principle of human action is self-love would honor non-hierarchical social arrangements. The integrity of its communal structure would depend on a constant awareness of, and fidelity to, the basic sameness of each of its members.

Heterosexual Responsibility Redefined

Currently, male heterosexual responsibility usually consists of something like "don't get her pregnant unless you're ready to accept the consequences" (i.e., marry her, pay for the abortion). But women either get pregnant or they don't, *and we need to know what we're about if we take the chance that they might*. The basic assumptions are still the same. Since women exist as objects to fulfill male sexual and reproductive needs, traditional male heterosexual responsibility requires that, if we choose to use them, we maintain them properly.

Real male heterosexual responsibility requires that we be aware of and responsible for the consequences *for ourselves* of our own sexual activity, not the use to which we put women-as-objects. How many of us, for instance, can honestly say that before we became sexually involved with a woman we found out whether we agreed on what would happen if she got pregnant — *and then, based on that discussion, decided the extent to which we were willing to become physically involved with her*. I suggest this discussion as the very point at which male heterosexual responsibility starts.

That the physical facts of abortion and childbirth take place within an exclusively female community does not prevent men from having feelings and opinions about those facts. Nor should it prevent us from taking responsibility for what we think and feel. For instance, if a man who believes abortion is murder finds himself involved with a woman who explicitly says she will have an abortion should she become pregnant, that man has a responsibility to himself to *avoid completely* the possibility of her becoming pregnant.

Since he cannot question her right to an abortion, the moral dilemma if she gets pregnant is his, not hers. If she has an abortion because of his sexual involvement with her, he — according to his own ethic — implicates himself in a murder. Since he cannot hold the woman accountable for any beliefs but her own, the responsibility to say "no"

continued on p.47

Male Sexuality

continued from p.4

is his. The same reasoning would apply to a man who does not want to have a child and a woman who does not believe in abortion.

Male heterosexual responsibility should begin with the realization that once we fertilize the egg—unless we have agreed beforehand with our partner on the consequences—what happens thereafter is beyond our control. We need to start with what we can control: the extent and nature of our heterosexual relationships.

For heterosexual men, the idea that we can and must control only our own participation in our sexual relationships has many implications. It implies a new way of thinking about ourselves that is in direct opposition to the general stereotype of men as people whose sexual responsibility hangs

from our penises by a thread which breaks when we get hard.

It means we can tell a woman, "No, I don't want to fuck," out of fidelity to our own beliefs about abortion or our desire not to have children—not simply to avoid the fertilization of an egg.

It means that our choice of sexual partners and the character of our sexual relationships will be determined by our sexual biology (not a comfortable situation for anyone). One possible result is that men will discover a renewed interest in developing—for ourselves as well as our partners—truly safe and effective contraceptives, thereby rendering obsolete the question of abortion.

It means we can assert and explore the fullness of our own erotic selves by insisting that oral, anal and manual sex—or even non-genital intimacy such as massage—are not mere substitutes for or preludes to sexual intercourse. Rather, they are perfectly valid erotic acts in and of themselves.

Finally, it means that men will learn how true erotic fulfillment comes from within ourselves, as a result of understanding who we are, and not from

controlling who does what to whom and how often.

Richard Newman is a poet working as an adjunct writing teacher at the New York Institute of Technology, Old Westbury, Long Island, NY.

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Li Min Hua (a.k.a. Brother Thorn-in-the-Flesh, Louie Crew, and others) has published over 550 items. His new chapbook, *Midnight Lessons*, has been released by Samisdat. He has just ended 4 years of exile in Asia.

Bradford Evans is a poet and therapist who lives in Washington, D.C. He has recent and upcoming work in the *Mid-American Review*, *Fine Madness*, the *Laurel Review* and other literary magazines.

Stuart Friebert directs the writing program at Oberlin. He has published 10 books of poems (among them *Dreaming of Floods*, *Up In Bed* and *Uncertain Health*) and 4 volumes of translations.

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Clive Matson has published 6 books of poems. *Green Heart* is in progress, on coming into manhood. "Sailing (a true story)" was previously published by *Poetalk/Poemphlet*, *Veljeysviesti* and appears in *Shaved at Dawn* by Clive Matson and John Oliver Simon (Neon Sun/Aldabaran Review).

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Fertility and Virility: A Meditation on Sperm

By Richard Newman ©1988

Any serious consideration by men of the right of women to reproductive choice, a right which eliminates the traditional power with which patriarchy invests biological fatherhood [see R. Newman, "His Sexuality, Her Reproductive Rights, CM #19], should leave us with a question: what are—or even are there—male reproductive rights? While the existence of male reproductive rights may seem self-evident, most discussion I have heard or read on this topic begins precisely where it should end: after the egg has been fertilized. Certainly men are justified in our concern over how women's reproductive rights will affect our relationship to biological fatherhood. However, to express that concern in terms which negate women's reproductive rights—namely, that the presence of our sperm in their bodies gives us rights over those bodies—is to deceptively re-label patriarchal power as "Male Reproductive Rights."

Biologically speaking, men provide the sperm which fertilizes the egg. Nothing more, nothing less. Therefore, it seems to me that our reproductive rights lie in the control we can responsibly exercise over our sperm, in our right to say to the women with whom we have sex: "This is my sperm. If I do not believe that you will do with it what I want to be done with it, I will not agree to put it in your body." However, to arrive at the place where this statement is more than a platitude, more than just a defensive response to women's reproductive choice, we must rethink male sexuality in order to redefine what it means to be a man.

Traditionally, women have had too much of men giving them our sperm. The conventional patriarchal view of childbirth as evidence of male virility (as opposed to fertility, a distinction which will become important later), coupled with the image of motherhood as that which would absolutely fulfill every woman's life, meant that sperm—from the male perspective—was a "gift" which every woman should be glad to receive again and again. The gift, however, was also a danger. If a man wanted to have sex with a woman, he had somehow to

convince her that, should she get pregnant, he would not abandon her. His patriarchal privilege to her sexual availability carried with it, for him, the specter of just about the only "power" which she could have over him: that, should she get pregnant, she and the child she carried were his responsibility. The social meaning of sperm, then, has hardly been a benign one. Both genders have had, within the context of patriarchy's sexual "ethic," good reason to fear the consequences of "unprotected" sex. Artificial birth control has certainly made it easier for men and women to have sex without worrying so much about pregnancy. But not even the pill with its nearly 100% effectiveness has done much to

Abortion threatens virility, not fertility.

alter our basic perception of sperm as, at worst, dangerous, and at best, an inconvenient residue of male sexual desire.

The Sexuality of Virility

But what are the consequences for men of this perception of sperm? Because such a perception relates our sperm only to the ova they fertilize and not to ourselves, it means that we live out our sexual lives, which means our entire lives, without any awareness of ourselves as biologically fertile, as beings inherently able to reproduce. Women, of course, carry and give birth to children, but children would not be possible without our sperm. Still, that does not prevent women from feeling their reproductive *capability* as a source of power. It is a power which derives from within themselves, which is defined by their bodies and so requires no Other to dominate.

Fertility lies as much in the potential as in the fact of reproduction. Virility lies only in having reproduced. Men, by privileging virility, by investing our sense of sexual validity in the effect our bodies can have on the bodies of women, have created a situation in

which our feelings of sexual self-worth *depend* upon the presence of women. Only when they give birth, or in the precautions they, and we, must take to neutralize our sperm can we see ourselves as fully sexual, fully human beings. Once women refuse to be present for us—as the women's movement has encouraged them to do—once they step outside the boundary of the authority we have claimed as ours, our power dissolves, our world seems empty, and we feel helpless to do anything about it.

And boundaries are precisely what I am talking about here. The fertilizing nature of sperm is dangerous—as opposed to simply a fact—only as long as no one sets a limit beyond which the sperm's potency is meaningless. The military aspect of our phallic symbolism grows directly out of the patriarchal concept that male sexual power transcends all boundaries, and that the places into which our power reaches become extensions of ourselves. Traditionally, women have functioned as sexual extensions of men, as objects for our use. However, with women's victory in claiming their right to reproductive choice, to *draw a physical line beyond which men have no power*, we have been faced with the loss not simply of the object that made possible our virility, but of the sexuality which depended on both.

Reclaiming Our Fertility

Since you can only lose something that is not yours to begin with, and since the fact remains that human beings are sexual by definition, men cannot lose that sexuality which inheres in our bodies, which is our birthright and which depends on no other for its existence. It is a sexuality rooted in the facts of our biology, in the rhythms of the penis, the fertility of our sperm, the fact that each hard-on, each orgasm, expresses the power of the male body to reproduce itself. It is a sexuality limited by the reality that our bodies end, both in space and in time. Therefore, it is a sexuality over which we have certain rights, one of those being the right to demand that anyone with whom we choose to share it must respect how we want the consequences of that sharing to be dealt with.

And so we return to the statement with which I began: "This is my sperm. If I do not believe that you will do with it what I want to be done with it, I will not agree to put it in your body." As a reproductive right, this statement does not seem to amount to much. After all, what keeps a woman from agreeing and then going back on her word? That people are human, that the reality of being pregnant might actually, and for very legitimate reasons, change a woman's mind about what she intends to do with her pregnancy, is something no one can change. All that men *can* do is impress upon women how seriously we take our biological fertility, and how potentially dehumanizing of us is any decision on their part that does not respect our wishes. (If you think about it, this is the position women have always been in: What keeps a man from failing to take his responsibility should she get pregnant?) It does seem to me that a pregnant woman who knew her partner's feelings about having children before they had sex, who chooses against his wishes to have the child they both conceived, forfeits any right to hold the man accountable for that child; the decision to have the baby will have been hers alone. It is her absolute right to make that decision; but, in the situation I have outlined above, the right to sue him for support does not follow, since he would not have had sex with her if he had known she would choose to have the baby. (I also think that the man should *voluntarily* assume some responsibility for the child, not for sentimental reasons, but simply because no child should go in any way unprovided for.) In the case of a woman who chooses to abort a pregnancy she originally said she would carry to term, once men stop thinking of childbirth as proof of virility we may find that the fate of each individual sperm no longer carries the entire weight of validating ourselves as men: abortion threatens virility, not fertility.

Living Our Manhood

Sperm is not only the genetic product of our bodies, it is also the physical product of our masculinity. Just as patriarchal power enables men to deny the biological specificity of pregnancy and childbirth, and so deny women their womanhood, a woman who does not respect a man's feelings about his sperm denies him his manhood. And just as women have asserted the self-evident validity of their womanhood by reclaiming their sexual biology and

the right to determine its meaning, men too can begin to redefine our manhood. We can consciously claim our sperm and give it significance congruent with the limits of *our* lives, thereby changing the patriarchal meaning we have, until now, given it. The point is not to play tit for tat with so-



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cial/sexual power, nor to look for ways of blaming women for the same kind of power strategies of which men have been guilty. The point is to learn how to live our manhood in such a way that a statement like the one with which I began, because it grows from our deepest convictions about ourselves, will bespeak our own self-respect and, therefore, leave our female lovers no choice but to take us seriously.

But what does it mean to "live our manhood?"

It means to live fully *in* our bodies,

to commit our lives first to what we can know *of and with* our bodies. Just like a woman's body, ours also has a reproductive cycle, and we go through it, whether alone or with a partner, every time we orgasm. Nor does it matter that we do not ejaculate inside a vagina. For men, biologically speaking, there is no difference between erotic and reproductive sex. To accept this, to live it, to make it a part of the rhythm of our lives, is to alter irrevocably what it means to be a man; is to assert that men, simply by living consciously aware of the biological limits our nature imposes on us, are masculine. Masculinity becomes, then, not something we must prove *with* our bodies, but the perpetual condition *of* our bodies.

For example, men often feel threatened by lesbians. What lesbians themselves would probably call a simple lack of sexual interest is felt by some men as an active assault on our sexuality. To the degree that we allow ourselves to define our sexuality in patriarchal terms, the threat is real. Female homosexuality is a boundary which patriarchal power cannot cross except by force. However, once men begin to live our manhood as an inherent, self-evident quality, once we see ourselves as fully and reflexively sexual, someone else's lack of sexual interest—be they male or female—cannot threaten us because the *meaning* of our sex resides within ourselves, not in how another person sees us.

A sexuality so deeply grounded in a physical masculinity contains the potential for a new phallic symbolism, non-violent and non-hierarchical. Rather than a representation of sex as power, as existing within the dichotomy of potency and impotence, the positive-negative polarity of the hard vs. the soft penis, we might instead develop a symbolism of the continuum between dormancy and activity, of sexuality as an embodied process. Such a sexuality, because it would be self-contained, would not be predatory, would not require the subservience of another for its fulfillment. It would recognize that we are all embodied individuals; it would form its community with others who also live embodied lives; and it would always insist first on its own integrity, on being faithful to the body which shapes it and to which it, in turn, gives form.

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