

Homophobia: Myths and Realities

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This essay will speak to homophobia and identify some of the basic institutions that help formulate our sexual politics and reinforce societal myths about lesbians. Homophobia is a social illness characterized by the fear of being defined as, associated with, mistakenly identified for, a homosexual. At the New York Association of Black Psychologists Fourth Annual Spring Conference, Yvonne Flowers defined homophobia to the conference as "an exaggerated fear of homosexuals." This exaggerated fear is based on myths propagated by those institutions that help shape our lives. Homophobia is suffered by heterosexual and lesbian women, and is one of the major causes of division within the feminist movement. Lesbianism is often used as a "discipline" on heterosexual women to keep them "in line" and under control.

Lesbianism will be defined here as an intimate relationship between women on the conscious level; elements of this intimate relationship being love, sensitivity, spiritual nurturing, validation of self, emotional and psychological growth.

A bird's-eye view of the sexual socialization of women in this society shows the kind of input our basic institutions have in determining the norms that govern acceptable behavior, which is not to be taken lightly by lesbian or heterosexual women. The family, the church and the school are the primary institutions that reinforce a "functional role theory" for women and interpret women's behavior as "female inferior negative" and, for lesbians, "deviant inferior negative."

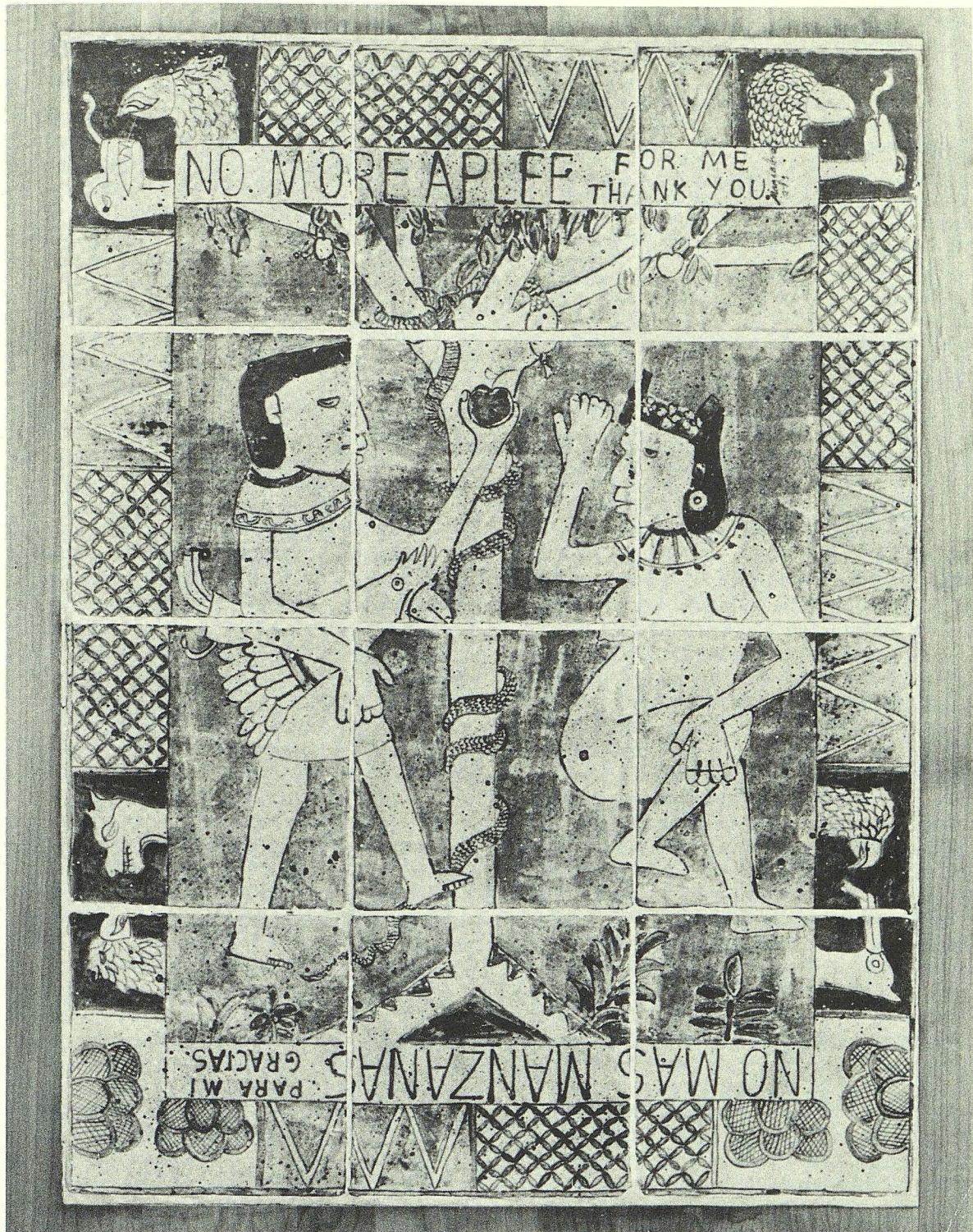
The home is the primary foundation for socialization, and it is crucial in the development of sexual awareness and acceptance of one's own sex. Here children are exposed to the views of parents and very early internalize them as their own. In children's play one can hear the tapes played back by children (i.e., "Good little girls don't do that"). Play is one of the ways a child forms a repertoire of the dos and don'ts of the already-existing society. The child continues to internalize and imitate the parents' views and behavior until other surrogate socializers are introduced, such as baby-

sitters, relatives, peer groups and other institutions. Elementary school educators define the goals that serve as a basic guideline for the school curriculum. One of the goals is to provide personal, social, moral, educational and vocational guidelines. The elementary school in this society has the responsibility of helping the six- to twelve-year-old learn the developmental task that goes with that age.

From a sexual orientation perspective, the developmental task for age six to twelve is learning an appropriate sexual role. In the case of the female, sex roles are dictated in elementary school and many times go unchallenged as subtle sexist philosophies are interwoven into the curriculum. Even though most elementary schools are coeducational, some classroom and playground activities are sex-typed. A classic example: teacher to class, "I need a strong boy to move a desk. Mary, would you water the plants?" Elementary school reading books continue to designate woman's primary role as mother-homemaker, teacher, nurse and volunteer service worker, while defining man's role as breadwinner, doctor, lawyer, shopowner and politician. While the defined roles of women mentioned are not any less important than those given to men, they are limited and do not lend themselves to women participating in the major decision-making arena of society.

Secondary schools continue to propagate the "functional role theory" through sex education classes that deal only superficially with the needs of women to be sexually competent outside of the realm of motherhood. Undergraduate and graduate schools continue to operate under the "female negative inferior" philosophy in the areas of faculty distribution and student admission. Ann Sutherland Harris, in her essay "The Second Sex in Academe," quoted President Nathan Pusey of Harvard, reacting to the possibility of the draft reducing male enrollment: "We shall be left with the blind, the lame, and the women." Harris asserts that "the excuse for limiting its female undergraduate enrollment to 25% of the total is that there is insufficient accommodation for women."¹

The church has equal input into the sexual socialization of women. It asserts that woman,



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess. Stoneware tile.

created from the negative side of man, is responsible for the sins of the world and the pain of childbirth is a direct result of her cunning ability, intellectual inferiority and debasing nature. Consequently, she is constantly asking forgiveness for being a woman, being grateful for the inadequate space allotted her for religious administration and accepting her sexual inferiority as a divine act. The church

through its philosophy reinforces the “female negative inferior” image of women.

The church, coupled with the home and the school, laid the foundation for the existing societal myths about women, namely lesbians, who have defined themselves sexually outside the norm. These myths are used as a “discipline” on other women who even consider denouncing the “functional role theory” in ex-

change for personal happiness and fulfillment.
What are the myths about lesbians?

1. A woman is a lesbian because she possesses a natural defect.
("female negative inferior")
2. A lesbian is emotionally unstable, sexually frustrated, self-indulgent and morally degenerate.
("deviant negative inferior")
3. A lesbian is anti-revolutionary, hates men, suffers from penis envy and is a security risk.
("deviant negative inferior")
4. A lesbian wears men's clothes, is sexually aggressive and physically unattractive.
("deviant negative inferior")
5. A lesbian is afraid of men based on her past experiences and has inner conflicts because she needs a man.
("female negative inferior")

These myths about lesbians make up the symptoms of homophobia, whose basic element is fear. This unfounded fear produces a chain of defensive reactions that serve to alienate women from each other, thus weakening communication between women. Homophobia is suffered by lesbians and heterosexual women and is manifested in their oppressive behavior when addressing themselves to the lesbian lifestyle. It is not uncommon that the oppressed incorporate the values of the oppressor to maintain certain kinds of control. Women who subscribe to this behavior are said to be male-identified, in that they share the same views about women that men do. These women may fear a loss of sexual power or have unconsciously accepted the "female negative inferior" concept of themselves and act it out in their relationships with other women. In the corporate world the male-identified woman serves as a tool for stifling economic growth and creativity among women. One of the concerns of the Third World Lesbian Feminist Movement is the result of the socialization process that goes with upward mobility and its relationship to the oppressed becoming the oppressor, which takes its toll on Third World lesbian feminists.

One of the greatest fears of the homophobic heterosexual woman is to be remotely connected to a lesbian in word, action or deed. To her it may mean a loss of status among men, a destiny she cannot bear. It is the man who has defined her nature and given her a purpose in life. Homophobia serves as a defense mechanism for she may be paranoid about admitting to her own sexual experiences as a child and the implications of lesbianism. Her inner conflict relating to her sexual self may result in a

fanatical approach to heterosexuality, and she finds it easy to attach a moral judgment on lesbianism. The homophobic lesbian or heterosexual woman may doubt the political awareness and intellectual ability of lesbians in exchange for prevailing stereotypes. She may support competition as inherent in men, and limit her participation in a collective decision-making environment. She may also distrust the feminist movement, see it as counter-revolutionary, destructive, and may assist at some level in the attempt to sabotage the women's movement, based on fear and sexual contradictions.

Homophobia leaves a woman open to sexist manipulation, mind control, and can result in socioeconomic genocide for women.

Some of the prevailing myths about lesbians need to be put into the proper perspective. The lesbian suffers no more emotional stress, sexual frustration and inner conflict than her heterosexual sister. In fact much could be said about the maturity of the lesbian who relates to her sexual politics as having relevance outside of the "functional role theory." Third World lesbians, while not anti-race or counter-revolutionary, do question the role of the Third World woman in the revolution as it relates to the "female negative inferior" concept held by Third World men in the society.

While some lesbians do see themselves as sexually aggressive, their behavior cannot be linked to the high incidence of sexual violence suffered by women and young girls. All lesbians are not separatist, or feminist, or unattractive, or suffering from penis envy, or secretly craving for a man. A lesbian may or may not have had a meaningful relationship with a man. She may or may not wear men's clothing, or drive a truck, or spit between her teeth, or live in the Village, or wear purple.

The true lesbian sees herself no less than her male or female counterpart, but understands the implications of the distinct difference in the species as it relates to the spiritual development of the individual. One could say that the lesbian has turned "woman love" inside; subsequently the content became the form. She receives her emotional, psychological and spiritual nurturing from woman, and credits her highly developed sensitivity to that energy.

