

Introduction

The statement I am reading has been prepared by the members of Lesbians At Barnard:

¶ "The idea of a forum was presented to L.A.B. by Nancy Miller, Women's Studies Chair, in response to the articles published in the Barnard Bulletin last semester. At that interview we expressed our need to be recognized as a legitimate minority group on campus.

¶ "Lesbians At Barnard is a political and social collective consisting of about 30 active members. Though this presentation was done collectively, members of L.A.B. do not always agree with each other, nor do they presume to represent the views of all Lesbians on campus. The material from the transcript about to be read came from taped discussions and notes taken for the Bulletin articles and additional L.A.B. meetings.

"Six faculty members will be reading the transcript: Professors Sue Sacks and Giselle Harrington, Education; Professors Larry Aber and Wendy McKenna, Psychology; Professor Dennis Dalton, Political Science; and Dean Wendy Fairey. The readers do not represent specific characters except for Professor Harrington acting as the Bulletin reporter.

"One of the purposes of faculty participation is to preserve the anonymity of those L.A.B. members who can not publicly be identified as Lesbians. Heterosexism in society is a major problem which coerces Lesbians into invisibility to protect themselves. Heterosexism and homophobia operate on many different levels, from the personal to the public: Gay men and Lesbians risk rejection, alienation, and hostility. In extreme forms this is manifested by physical violence, parental disownment, loss of job, expulsion from school and eviction.

"Another reason for asking faculty to read the words of students is

2

that these faculty members can represent others at Barnard--other faculty, administrators and students, all of whom are part of the Barnard world the Lesbian students inhabit. The oppression of Lesbians goes hand in hand with uneasiness or hostility from others. We wanted to institute a little role reversal: those who are not Lesbian students can experience what it feels like to be one through the participation of faculty. And we hope that by having our words spoken by others, the universality of our experience of being oppressed because of who we are will be underlined.

"At the end of the presentation, L.A.B. invites questions and comments. For this purpose, Professor Miller will serve as Moderator. Please direct your questions to her and she will open them for discussion by whoever would like to address the issue.

"L.A.B. would like to thank Nancy Miller and the Women's Studies Department for offering us this opportunity to voice our views. We especially want to thank the professors actively participating in today's forum. In addition, we would like to thank those of you who have shown your interest in the Lesbian experience at Barnard by attending. L.A.B. hopes you will find the presentation edifying and enjoyable and that it will open up a continuing dialogue between Lesbians and the rest of the Barnard community.

Sp 1. W. Fairrey

2. S. Sachs

3. G. Harrington

4. D. Dalton

5. W. McKenna

6. L. Aber

THE LESBIAN EXPERIENCE AT BARNARD
Women's Studies/L.A.B. forum
2/21/83

REHEARSAL
11:00
DEANERY MON.

* For info. about
rehearsal Monday
contact each other
or L.A.B. members
Pat Moniscalco or
Stacey D'Erasmus

678-1059

(INTRODUCTION)

Speaker 3: From the Barnard catalogue:

Harrington

"Barnard students benefit from an atmosphere in which women currently comprise approximately 50% of the tenured faculty and are well represented on all levels of the administration. These women serve as important role models for our students who in turn are encouraged to assume leadership functions while on campus which equip them for similar roles later in life."

Speaker 1: I'm a senior and I've never known a professor who was a lesbian and could be out publicly.

Fairrey

Speaker 2: Isn't that a pretty strong statement about how the administration feels about lesbianism and how comfortable the faculty feels about coming out?

Sacks

Sp. 3: Well, I talked to a member of the administration about doing these articles . . .

Harrington

Sp. 4: What did she say?

Dalton

Sp. 3: She was sort of sympathetic, but there was not that much she could say. I think she'd be endangering her own position by saying something drastic . . .

Harrington

Sp. 5: You mean like saying that lesbians are okay? (sarcastic)

McK

Sp. 3: I mentioned the Scholar and the Feminist Conference Diary and asked whether the lesbian content was a factor in its confiscation.

Harrington

Sp. 6:

Aber

Barnard's not too keen on acknowledging and supporting the lesbian population -- they seem to think that it would hurt admissions if they were even to admit the existence of lesbians at Barnard. Especially now that Columbia's going co-ed.

Sp. 3:

Harrington

Well, she agreed on most issues . . . "Yes, there is anti-lesbian graffiti in the bathrooms. Yes, there is discrimination." She'd heard about problems in the dorms, but not recently.

Sp. 1:

Fairey

What else did she say?

Sp. 3:

Harrington

She said "I think Barnard is striving to give support to its diverse population. There are support services, but they're not public."

Sp. 4:

Dalton

First of all, what "support services" is she talking about and if they're not public, how is anyone going to know about them?

Sp. 5:

McK

Isn't she just protecting her job by not saying anything?

Sp. 6:

Aber

She has to protect her job and everyone has to protect their job and so nothing is said and that's discrimination.

Sp. 3:

Harrington

I asked her about what she thought the role of the College should be in regard to its students. She said the emphasis is on academic excellence. The college is not providing a model for how you should live your life.

Sp. 1:

Fairey

But what about when Beverly Sills spoke and told us that you need 75 hours in your day for your man and your child and your career? And what about the president toting her baby around campus to every possible public occasion?

Sp. 2:

Sacks

They go out of their way to get minority speakers, but they don't go out of their way to get lesbian speakers.

Sp. 4:
Dalton

And if they did get a speaker who was a lesbian, it would be nice if she talked about being a lesbian along with whatever else she's talking about.

Sp. 5:
McK

The list for commencement had these people on it like Julia Child and Phil Donahue. They'd never consider Adrienne Rich or Audre Lorde.

Sp. 6:
Aber

They say they want someone who represents the largest part of the community.

Sp. 1:
Fairley

Beverly Sills?

Sp. 2:
Sacks

How many opera singers do you know?

Sp. 4:
Dalton

One thing I'd like the administration to say to the faculty is that you cannot say homophobic things in the classroom. They don't dare say racist or anti-Jewish things, because they'd catch hell from the administration! That should be a given about homophobic statements, too, but it's not!

Sp. 5:
McK

But not talking about it at all is just as bad as saying something derogatory.

Sp. 6:
Aber

Yeah, they even talk about Virginia Woolf without talking about her lesbianism.

Sp. 1:
Fairley

Well, I had this one professor who went on for a whole class about how Joyce thought it was important not to be homosexual, that homosexuals can't write, they don't have creative ability and on and on. I went up to her after class and I said, come on, you don't really believe that homosexuals can't be creative -- especially since there's such a large number of writers, artists, and thinkers who have been and are gay.

Sp. 2:
Sacks

What about E.M. Forster?

Sp. 1:

Fairrey

Right. I named a million people, I said what about Aristotle, what about Plato, what about Socrates? And she said Aristotle was married and everyone knows Socrates had some woman who came in and beat him up every night . . .

Sp. 4:

Dalton

I didn't know that.

Sp. 1:

Fairrey

And besides, she said, no one really knows if they were gay.

Sp. 5:

McR

What about all those "beautiful youths"?

Sp. 1:

Fairrey

So I said, "What about Virginia Woolf?" And she said "Nobody really knows if she was a lesbian." And I said, "Give me a break, she never slept with anyone but Vita Sackville-West" and she said "Well, Woolf was hardly sexual at all."

Sp. 2:

Sacks

Well, I know someone who went to her advisor to have her program signed and she was taking the Lesbian Literary Tradition and the professor said, "Oh, come on, you know there is no lesbian literary tradition."

Sp. 4:

Dalton

You know, this kind of denial discourages academic freedom on the part of the students because there are a lot of topics that are incredibly pertinent and interesting related to lesbianism, but if you approached your professor with them you'd be told it's not valid or it's not an issue.

Sp. 5:

McR

It discourages intellectual growth because it discourages challenge -- an avenue of thought really gets closed off.

Sp. 6:

Aber

My phys. ed. teacher specifically instructed me not to talk about lesbianism in class because "not everyone would be comfortable with it," according to her.

Sp. 3:

Harrington

How does Barnard's atmosphere compare to society in general?

- Sp. 1:
Jairry Compared to what? Wisconsin? What places do you mean?
- Sp. 2:
Sacks Compared to the rest of society, Barnard is adequate, but that's not saying much!
- Sp. 4:
Dalton I don't go around Barnard feeling so oppressed every day that I can't move or live. But there are these little digs once in a while that strike me and make me realize, "Hey, I'm a lesbian and a lot of people don't like that."
- Sp. 5:
McK It's not as if they have to walk around with a sign saying, "LESBIANS GO HOME," because if they did someone would probably say, "What lesbians?"
- Sp. 6:
Aber One thing I do know, Smith College coddles their lesbians. They have two lesbian houses and the faculty is very out.
- Sp. 1:
Jairry But Smith doesn't have a Women's Studies program which, I think, reflects on the administration. They're giving off a mixed message.
- Sp. 2:
Sacks Maybe Barnard is more comfortable being academically progressive -- it certainly isn't socially progressive. At least we have a good Women's Studies program.
- Sp. 4:
Dalton Yeah, but even Barnard's being academically progressive is sporadic. It really depends on the professor.
- Sp. 5:
McK I agree. Barnard is hardly what I'd call a radical feminist institution. I tell you, it's bullshit -- I think they're ambivalent about Women's Studies and if they're ambivalent about Women's Studies, forget it about lesbians.
- Sp. 3:
Harrington A lesbian friend of mine said that it's not possible to be a lesbian and not be political. How do you all feel about that?

Sp. 6:

Aber

Being a lesbian -- whatever way you come to it -- immediately, from the word go, brings you into conflict -- whether you want it to or not -- with the structure of things as they are, but what you choose to do after that is up to you.

Sp. 1:

Fairrey

I think it's dangerous to see lesbianism as a political statement, because it denies the sexuality of it.

Sp. 2:

Sacks

I think that being political is having some awareness of power relations that are larger than yourself. Bang! You become a lesbian and you're aware that you're totally ghettoized and that you might not want it to be that way.

Sp. 3:

Harrington

So what you're saying is that it's both political and sexual, whether or not you choose to see your lesbianism as a political statement.

Sp. 4:

Dalton

There are some people who don't see it as political at all. I've known a lot of women who really don't see their lesbianism as political.

Sp. 5:

McK

But there are some people who don't even consider sexuality as political. They think it has nothing to do with culture and nothing to do with bigger structures and nothing to do with what you were taught since you were this high. And if that's their choice, then by that criterion lesbianism isn't political and heterosexuality isn't political and sterilization abuse isn't political and the only thing that is political is . . . voting or something. I think it's in how far people want to take their analysis of what power is and how it's culturally enforced.

Sp. 6:

Aber

But it's very dangerous to say that it's all conscious and that it's a choice. That would imply that you can or should change your mind.

Sp. 1:

Fairey

It's not that you have a choice, it's more that no one has a choice unless you make one. In a society where you have enforced heterosexuality, you're assumed to be straight until proven gay. They look at you in the crib and say, "Oh, she's going to grow up and have a nice family, marry a doctor" or whatever. From the beginning it's imposed on you. I mean, you look at a little six-year-old girl, and nobody even thinks, "Well, she could be straight and she could be gay!" And if you said to them, "That little girl is gay," they'd look at you and say, "What do you mean she's gay? She's six years old!" They don't just think that she's neither, or even that she's sexual, really. They think she's straight in some little wonderful, innocuous, non-sexual way.

Sp. 3:

Harrington

I have a question. Do you think that being a lesbian closes off some career opportunities?

All:

(General laughter) "YES!"

Sp. 2:

Sacks

Name a career it doesn't close off.

Sp. 4:

Dalton

Politics, forget it.

Sp. 5:

McK

Education.

Sp. 6:

Aber

Business. It doesn't go over big on Wall Street.

Sp. 1:

Fairey

I'm not putting it on my law school application.

Sp. 2:

Sacks

If you can't even tell your parents, how can you tell your employer?

Sp. 4:

Dalton

And sports -- look at what happened to Billie Jean King. She lost her biggest advertising contracts -- they're so suspicious of women athletes anyway.

Sp. 5:

McK

And any unmarried woman is suspicious -- Barnard certainly isn't eager to push the image.

Sp. 6:

Aber

I'd like to see more talk about how great life is outside marriage and the family, outside the system.

Sp. 1:

Fairey

I've worked in the alumnae office and there are so many Misses who went to Barnard, you wouldn't believe it.

Sp. 2:

Sacks

It's not that all those Misses are dykes. But a big part of women's education has been turning out these strong women who stood on their own and maybe stood a little outside the system once they got out of college. Women's colleges have been proud of that achievement! It's about time that we lesbians were recognized as a part of that tradition of the strong women who are willing to stand up on their own!

(Applause. Lively and thought-provoking discussion.)