



“Who and Where Are We?”

My Own Story

In 1964, when I began work at the University of Minnesota, there simply were no publicly defined lesbian or gay faculty. Perhaps faculty were able to declare their sexual orientation on a few campuses in California or New York City. In the overwhelming majority of cases, however, such faculty were silent, reluctant to risk credibility and jobs by announcing their sexual identities. This self-monitoring, based on homophobic displays at the national and local levels, as in the political efforts of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee and in the routine raiding of gay bars, allowed universities and colleges to avoid even thinking about the needs or concerns of lesbian and gay faculty.

At the time of my arrival, the English department employed two unmarried women and one unmarried man. Rumor had it that one of the unmarried women and another woman shared a secluded river house an hour and a half from the university. The unmarried man was elegant and had three or four close friends in other departments who, like him, were officially “single,” and who, like him, traveled to England or Europe at least once a year for a more relaxed and open life.

Of the six assistant professors hired that fall into the English department, I was one of the two women. This fact seemed miraculous to me, since so few women were placed at major research universities. When I asked the other new woman, also

unmarried, to have lunch with me at the faculty dining club, she refused, saying: "Oh, I don't want to be seen at lunch with another single woman; I'm hoping to find a husband."

Efforts to make some kind of alliance with the tenured woman living on the river were equally daunting. Since neither of us was capable of speaking the "I" word, our social moves were opaque at best. Rather than reaching out to me, she seemed somehow threatened by my presence in ways I did not understand. Our offices were located in such a way that it was impossible for her to enter or leave without passing my door. One Friday afternoon when we were both still at work, she poked her head in my door to ask if I might read a poem given to her by a young male student in her modern poetry class and let her know on Monday what I thought of it. I spent too much of my weekend deciding how to respond and went to work prepared to discuss the merits and weaknesses in that rather tortured lyric which did, however, possess some effective imagery for the student's feelings about his girlfriend.

When I approached my colleague in her office, she barely looked up from what she was doing to listen to my comments. I tried to offer a mix of praise and suggestion for improvement, calculated to show her the seriousness with which I had taken her request and that I was trying to earn her warmth. When I finished, she leaned back slowly in her chair, poker-faced to the end, and said, "Oh, do you really think so? I found it sophomoric in the extreme."

I felt dismissed and demolished, consigned to some outer realm of cretonic readers. I would only much later comprehend that this woman feared I might encroach on the acceptance she had won for herself. Her need to establish permanent distance between us may well have been to keep herself inside the functional parameters she had established. The older patriarchs of the department admitted her to their sanctum in large part because she presented herself as "one of the boys" who could drink more than they could at extended lunch hours in downtown hotels, curse as vividly, and win regularly at their weekly smoke-filled poker marathons.

Genuine kindness and understanding came my way from the elegant unmarried man, though his carefully imposed silence about his own life and our shared terror of being "found out" by

colleagues left powerful omissions in our contact. Besides these immediate colleagues, I knew only one other unmarried woman in those early years. She was a full professor in another department in the College of Liberal Arts. We met after I was delegated by my chair to serve on a collegewide curriculum committee, and we liked each other from the start. However, she was so intense that she frightened me. One evening when the committee had met later than usual, she invited me to go for a drink. I refused before I knew what I was doing. Instinctively I withdrew from an invitation I was sure was for more than a whiskey sour; this woman, so senior to me professionally, was the subject of ominous rumors. After my rebuff, she never again extended herself, most likely for fear she had mistaken whatever silent cues I had sent out that we might both be lonely lesbians. A few years after I met her, she left the University of Minnesota to become an academic administrator at another midwestern university. A few years after that, she committed suicide.

Aside from these tortuous encounters, I was convinced for some years that there were no other lesbians or gay men at the University of Minnesota. Two decades later, Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* resonated deeply in me as she discussed women's hiding the fact of their radical mastectomies behind prosthetic breasts. Like them, none of us working at the university could find each other because, like them, we were in hiding, making heroic attempts to pass for heterosexual, usually being thought of as pathetically neuter.

Far from being neuter, I came to Minnesota with my lover, a woman who left her established life behind her to make a home with me and to pursue a graduate degree in counseling. Though very much in love, we each occupied a closet of considerable depth. Not even comfortable calling ourselves lesbian, we certainly had no intentions that anyone else do so. Consequently, we seldom saw one another on campus and then only in locations unassociated with either of our official domains. Our commitment to isolation prevented us from making efforts to find any other lesbians.

However, at some point during our second year in town, I became aware that my partner's academic advisor had had a somewhat older woman companion for many years, though they both

maintained utmost secrecy. They never attended official university functions together or spoke of their shared household or personal lives. If my partner mentioned her summer vacation, her advisor might do likewise, both speaking as if they traveled alone.

I learned of this relationship primarily through observation. My partner's advisor owned a foreign sedan, unmistakable on a campus where most of us drove Fords or Chevrolets if we were buying American or Volkswagens or used Volvos if we preferred imports. In the late afternoon, I often parked near the advisor's building, waiting for my lover to emerge from another day of seminars, practicums, and office interviews with faculty. If she were later than 4:30, when the university closed the administrative offices where the advisor's companion worked as a high-level administrator, I saw the sleek car glide past me to pause briefly outside the adjacent building as a gray-haired, well-dressed woman hurriedly got in. Being both a good amateur sleuth and a lesbian desperate for assurance that we were not the only ones on campus, I concluded that these women were a couple.

The first time I asked my partner if she thought her advisor was "like us," she flatly denied any such possibility. But the more she described conversations she had with her advisor, the surer I became that I was right. I also became sure that the advisor sensed that her advisee was like her and that she was trying to make contact in the most convoluted codes imaginable. Perhaps because my lover was nearly the age of her advisor, perhaps because her advisor found my lover as appealing as I did, perhaps because she had also been watching as closely and had seen us together to confirm her hunches—whatever her reason, this deeply closeted woman eventually invited my partner to tea, adding that she should feel free to "bring a friend." After much debate about whether she should go alone or with me, we decided to make the trip together. Looking back, I see that decision as a tiny coming out on my part. At the time, it felt both dangerous and exciting.

The actual tea was inevitably awkward since no one acknowledged either their own or the other relationship. The two older faculty women hesitated to ask me questions about my work or department; I felt constrained from inquiring about their professional lives because they were so senior to me in academic terms and because they were in fields that were unfamiliar to me.

We chatted haltingly about sports and about visits to Lake Superior. The advisor talked with my lover about possible job opportunities for her as an older woman candidate while the advisor's partner and I remarked on the unusually colorful autumn outside their sliding patio doors. When we left, I was exhausted from participating in an afternoon full of simultaneous intensity and opacity.

During all the years between that strained afternoon and this advisor's retirement, we were thrown together periodically through committee work. Though she was always cordial, a tense reserve made it impossible for her to be of any assistance to me as a junior faculty member. In the absence of heterosexual senior women and in the unexamined presence of sexism, I had no mentors of either sex or any sexual orientation.

In this context I became mute as a teacher, a potential scholar, and a colleague. In my literature classes, I avoided texts and topics that might lead to any whisper of homosexuality. My writing was bland and ineffectual. Relationships with colleagues progressed nicely up to a point, but then stopped as if we had come up against a brick wall. My inability to mention my private life kept our conversations on a superficial, impersonal level. Those who liked me and suspected I was a lesbian were too polite to break the silence. Those who did not like me and suspected I was a lesbian watched closely, hoping to catch me in some glaring mistake. A third group, who ignored me altogether, seemed not to suspect that I had a sexual or emotional life at all, since I was neither married nor interested in dating men. Encased in silence, I nonetheless made my way in the academy, succeeding in the classroom and governance structure, while languishing as a scholar and person.

Design of the Project

Originally I had proposed to write a straightforward autobiography, tracing my 30-year trajectory as a case study for theorizing about the country at large. Very early on, however, I decided such an exclusively personal slant was too limited to reflect the immense variety within the world of gay and lesbian faculty. I decided to augment my own story with narratives taken from other faculty around the country whose long-term employment in their field gave them a perspective from which to judge change. I knew how

to execute this project because previous training as a literary critic had taught me the structures and functions of narrative form.

The more questionnaires I read, the more I wanted to enlarge the portion of the book that did not relate directly to my own experience. I decided to use myself as frame rather than as center, to organize the book around aspects of academic life experienced by anyone working in such an environment. Because I was interested in studying change over time, I decided to focus on those with many years in their field. I sent the questionnaire to faculty who had worked at least fifteen years in a North American college or university. I focused on the impact of being gay or lesbian on three aspects of academic life that seemed to me to determine any faculty member's success and satisfaction. These themes are pedagogical choices, friendships and associations with colleagues, and research or intellectual development.

Whatever limitations there may be in Freud's theories, he was correct in asserting that happiness and fulfillment depend in large part upon our ability to find satisfaction in the realms of love and work. Institutions of higher learning in the United States usually emphasize the pursuit of knowledge as well as the development of all its citizens' full potential. The presence of lesbians and gay men on college and university campuses has long been undeniable and considerable, among students, staff, and faculty. Unmasking what it has been and is like to make our way in this context seemed to me especially important, because I knew from my own story the difficulty of integrating love and work. If others in similar situations could share their academic histories, surely we would have a compelling and revealing story.

I was encouraged in such hypothesizing by a letter I received early in the questionnaire collection phase. It came from a much younger colleague who had seen a call for volunteers on the Internet, been disappointed that her years in the academy fell far short of my 15-year minimum, yet was eager to encourage me to tell some of the complex truth about our experiences as scholars and teachers:

I personally believe that academe is one of the most difficult places to be out because though we are often enveloped by a (supposedly) liberal environment, heterosexism has an insidious way of permeating that seemingly accepting exterior and striking at the core of people's deepest fears.