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# Coming Out and Relational Empowerment: A Lesbian Feminist Theological Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## **About the Author**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper, in four parts, explores “coming out” as a relationally empowering movement into both increased personal authenticity (a desire for mutual relation) and a posture of public and professional deviance (a willingness to risk rejection). The first part, a discussion of heterosexism as a structure of alienated power, examines the social context in which lesbians and gaymen are self-disclosing. In the second part, erotic power is presented, theologically, as a sacred relational resource which enables and secures the coming out process. The third part is a reflection on ambiguities and tensions in the coming out process. The final part examines how the coming out process (as an affirmation of erotic power, a movement in relational authenticity and resistance to alienated, nonmutual, power-relations) becomes a paradigm for healing and for the healing relationship between therapist and patient.*

## **Setting context, acknowledging limits**

The words of Audre Lorde, Black lesbian feminist poet and theorist, spoken in the context of her struggle with cancer:

Of what have I ever been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself... while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words. And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that, while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gives me great strength.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. (1977/1984, p. 41)

Lynn, a 36-year-old student, and I sat and shared memories of having crept furtively out of our seminary dorms fifteen years apart — I in 1971, Lynn in 1986 — to find our ways, alone, to meetings of the Daughters of Bilitis and, once there, of having slipped in as invisibly as possible, taken seats as close to the door as possible, and tried as hard as possible to convince ourselves that we couldn't possibly be one of “them” — those lesbians.

Winding our way out of isolation can be a touching and empowering process. Lynn said,

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<sup>1</sup>Parts of this lecture are adapted from *Touching our strength: The erotic as power and the love of God* by Carter Heyward. Copyright 1989 by Carter Heyward. Used with permission of Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., San Francisco.

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“Coming out has been for me learning to experience myself as a woman who receives energy from other women. Coming out has helped me establish my identity as a relational person.” She noted, “I couldn’t have done it alone,” though she was quick to add that she spent her whole first year in seminary avoiding the very people she wanted most to be around. She and Patricia, a lesbian priest currently working in New York, confessed that, for the first year or two they were in seminary, they would cross to the other side of the campus to avoid running into me as I walked from my home to my office.

Diane, a doctoral student and formerly a chaplain at Brandeis, who is here tonight on this panel, tells me that some fifteen years ago she freaked out when she came upon the essay on lesbianism in the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The article was called, “In Amerika, They Call Us Dykes,” and, at age 16, Diane wasn’t ready for this.

Coming out as lesbians — recognizing and naming ourselves as women whose primary erotic energy is generated in relation to women — is, in heterosexist society, a process laden with risk: emotional, physical, relational and professional. It can be also a revolutionary, empowering and, from a theological perspective, profoundly sacred process.

### **Appreciating connections between us in our work**

I want to acknowledge here at the outset the courageous, pioneering work of the Stone Center — the clinicians, theorists and staff, without whom we wouldn’t be here tonight. I want to thank especially my good friend and colleague, Jan Surrey, who this year is teaching a course with me on “mutuality” at the Episcopal Divinity School. Together, we are learning more and more about connections between the emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual and political dimensions of our lives. I am deeply mindful also of a woman who has been for so long an inspiration to me and to so many of us — Jean Baker Miller, a remarkable resource of a clear and gentle wisdom. I recognize the contributions of Nanette Gartrell and Lennie Kleinberg, lesbian therapists who have spoken in this Colloquium in years past; our lives and our work are linked. In this presentation I am especially appreciative of Lennie Kleinberg’s work on “lesbian identity disclosure” (1986). And I am grateful to my perceptive colleague and friend, Peg Huff, a pastoral psychologist who introduced me to Jan Surrey and to the Stone Center’s work and who herself is attempting to integrate basic presuppositions of feminist liberation theology and the Stone Center’s self-in-relation approach to psychology. My thanks to

each of you, and others, for inviting me to speak tonight and to all of you for coming out to this occasion.

### **Our limits**

Before moving into the body of my talk, I want to say a word about the limits of what I and we can do here tonight. An important tenet of feminist liberation theory is that we recognize that our knowledge is limited by the particularities of who we are. White women, for example, cannot construct theory “for” or “about” women of color. More exactly, we can construct it, but, in a racist society, it lacks intellectual credibility and the power of moral suasion for and among most women of color and for those white women who catch the deceptive nuances of white racism in our own work. The best we can do is to speak for ourselves — of our own lives and work and commitments and learnings — and listen carefully to others.

To acknowledge that there are limits to what a white, southern, Christian lesbian can know about “relational empowerment” in no way diminishes the value of what I can contribute to this ongoing study. It serves simply to ground and secure my words. Such an acknowledgement does not render me “separate” from people of color, northerners, Jews or heterosexual women. Rather, it may help strengthen our awareness of our differences and our commonalities as we struggle together toward realizing our power as women...as humans...as earth creatures.

And so, I invite you to hear what I and we do not say, as well as what we do; to notice who is not here, as well as who is; to recognize what is being left out, as well as what is being included — and to remember as much of this as you can.

### **Structure of presentation**

This presentation has four parts: First, I shall discuss heterosexism as a structure of alienated power, for coming out cannot be understood as an empowering relational movement unless we recognize the alienation out of which lesbians and gaymen, especially lesbians, are coming. Second, in order to establish further the context of coming out, I shall speak of the erotic power which enables us to come out, as a sacred resource available to all. Third, I shall reflect on some ambiguities and tensions in the coming out process, drawing from my own experience. Finally, I shall comment briefly on what I see to be some critical implications of the coming out process for healing in women’s lives and, in particular, for the relationship between women healers and women who