

Institutional Discourse on Sexuality: Lafayette College, 1970 – 2014

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On June 27, 1969, the Board of Trustees voted in support of coeducation here at Lafayette. And in September of 1970, 146 women became the first female students to attend Lafayette College ("Lafayette: Coed in 1970"). The current project is an exploration of the institutional discourse on sexuality, from January 1970 (a semester after the first women arrived) to present day. This research was conducted through the digital archives of *The Lafayette*, the college's weekly newspaper.

A search of the term "sexuality" from January 1970 through May 2014 yielded 120 page hits. After viewing each page hit and consolidating my research into larger thematic groupings, I decided that the best approach for this paper would be as follows: I will first provide a brief timeline of hits on sexuality in *The Lafayette*. More central to this paper, however, will be the arc of discourse regarding sexuality at the institution, as evinced through speakers invited to campus. Following this exploration, I seek to examine what is missing from the written and recorded (via *The Lafayette*) discourse on sexuality: who is silent, and why is that invisibility powerful?

In a Foucauldian moment of my own, I decided this was an important undertaking. Without examining the structures of power, what shapes and maintains discourse, nothing can change. Speaking about power in power's own terms accomplishes nothing – one merely circulates in the perpetual system of reification. But stepping outside of that system and asking why – why is this important? Who is talking, and why are those individuals the ones with power? – These questions shed new light on institutional discourses. I hope that this paper illuminates the progression of understandings of sexuality, from this big and ill-defined issue of society ("the human sexuality") to something individuals shape and maintain, a unique property of each unique individual.

For Lafayette, I hope this paper offers some insight into immense power of the written word. Once something has been transcribed, its power intensifies. The articles I have read for this paper are the real opinions and beliefs of students that once attended this school, of speakers who once presented here, of faculty, staff, and administration who witnessed the transformation of an institution's discourse on human sexuality.

Mapping Sexuality at Lafayette – A Brief Timeline

In the timeframe under consideration, the first mention of the term sexuality in *The Lafayette* occurs October 16, 1970. In an article entitled "Women and Society: Inequities of a System," the American woman's situation is described as dependent on "selling her sexuality" ("Women and Society", 1). This very first mention of sexuality immediately invokes the image of woman as defined by media representations and expectations of the feminine form. While the article serves as a catalyst in the discussion surrounding Women's Lib, it fails to problematize (or even generate further discussion around) the rigidly defined roles for, and expectations of, women.

Other early mentions of sexuality reference *the human sexuality*, this broad categorization in which all of society is enmeshed, lacking, however, in understanding regarding individualized experiences and incarnations of sexuality. The December 4, 1970 issue of the school paper has a front-page article entitled "Council Approves Institution of Human Sexuality Seminary." The next seven hits on the term sexuality all relate directly to the approval and implementation of this seminar, some of the details of which are as follows: "the seminar will cover the anatomy and physiology of sex, and the many aspects of the interpersonal and intergroup dynamics of the sex role in personal adjustment and society" ("Council Approves Seminar", 1). The next week's issue discusses more logistical details. The seminar will be coeducational, yet led by six male

authority figures from campus. How is it that a seminar on the forever-vague human sexuality, for both male and female students, can be satisfactorily led by six male authority figures? This raises important considerations about the mechanisms of power at work within Lafayette as an institution.

Power is frequently rendered invisible by the commonality of its form. Specifically in relation to sexuality and power, Foucault suggests that we as a society must, "account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said" (11). So in this conversation about the establishment of a new seminar on human sexuality at Lafayette College, it is important to consider who is speaking – in this case, six male figures from campus; their positions and viewpoints, or what is lacking – for instance, why were no women chosen to aid in the facilitation and successful implementation of this coeducational seminar? These issues are not discussed in any hits surrounding the discussion of the Human Sexuality Seminar.

As time progressed, so too did the discourse surrounding sexuality here at Lafayette. The 1980s brought about discussions around sexual harassment, including changes to the official institutional policy, and the implementation of peer counseling and educational programs on sexuality. An article from November 19, 1982 states that the primary purpose of such programs is "to create an atmosphere in which sexuality concerns can be comfortably discussed. This atmosphere will be accomplished by educating peer counselors on reproductive health and contraceptive information to both men and women about sexuality, and aid individuals in making responsible decisions about their contraceptive choices" ("Peer Counseling," 8). Implicit in this

peer education programming is the hetero of sexuality, for education regarding reproductive health and contraceptives overwhelmingly suggests heterosexual intimacies.

The late '80s and 1990s brought about some serious discussion of the other in the standard sexuality dichotomy – homosexuality. An “Out of the Closet” column by a Lafayette student argues that socialization plays a central role in the acceptance or rejection of certain behaviors and displays. This student writes:

From infancy to adulthood, we are told the “correct” way to act and react to various stimuli, whether it be emotional or physical. There are rules that are set forth so adamantly that the slightest need to disobey them would result in fear and confusion. Then, when these rules are adhered to, society rewards and welcomes you. Some of the time it is easier to conform, but not without negative results. The longer one denies his or her true nature, the greater the resentment and rage is towards those who have broken down their barriers. Not too long ago homosexuality was seen by the medical profession as a sickness. It no longer is; however, homophobia is seen as such (“Out of the Closet,” 5).

This student’s declaration attests to the true and immense power inherent in classificatory systems. He argues that those within privileged sectors of the established order are quick to support that order, or at the very least, fail to question its legitimacy. While conversations surrounding homosexuality bring to light the non-privileged side of a dichotomy, it is possible that, “the critical discourse that addresses itself to repression come to act as a roadblock to a power mechanism that had operated unchallenged up to that point, or is it not in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it ‘repression’” (Foucault 10). Are homosexuals repressed? By discussing their repression, their inequality of opportunity, are they merely serving to reinforce their own second-class status? I would argue that, especially at this time in Lafayette’s history, the discourse around homosexuality was a back-and-forth, a struggle for equality, fought within the system. From a Foucauldian perspective, this fight can never be won.

An article published two years later references this column in an attempt to understand why we, as a society, cannot accept love between men or women as simply love, just the same as any other form. Writes the author:

Society hands values down to us left and right and one of them is the unfortunate belief that homosexuality is evil, perverted, disgusting, or some combination of the three. We ought to throw off the shackles of inconsistent societal values and take another look at homosexuality. With just a little effort, it becomes rather less threatening and rather more understandable. With a little more effort after that, it even becomes acceptable ("Looking Out," 5).

This effort he speaks of is the effort of escaping the dominant discourse. It is an attempt to understand, not merely from one's own perspective, but to holistically comprehend the views of all parties involved, their attitudes and beliefs as regards the issue at hand. Only through this type of opening up, a change in the language of authority, a denouncing of all things prescribed, can we ever be free.

In the timeline on sexuality, the mid '90s brought about more opinion pieces on homosexuality, many of which encouraged acceptance and more formal conversations amongst and between groups on campus. 1996 saw the implementation of Safe Zone programming, the goal of which was to "create an environment in which students can feel comfortable and able to discuss all avenues of sexuality and discover for themselves their true sexual identity" ("Talking about Sexuality," 2). Hits on sexuality in the early to mid 2000s grew sparse, but the same types of questions were still being asked. It seems as though new groups of students still sought answers to the same questions. For example, a 2011 article questions whether Lafayette is a gay-friendly environment, something students of previous classes and decades had been struggling to decide for themselves. As suggested in the article:

The LGBTQ community has a history of struggle in the public arena, and often students are afraid to express themselves or make their sexuality public knowledge for fear of exclusionary treatment. The name of the group [QuEST] embodies the core issue: Why

are homosexuality, bisexuality, or any sexual minority considered taboo and frequently met with hostility ("Campus Climate," 4)?

This commentary ties the experience of students at Lafayette to the experiences of sexual minorities in all sectors of society. Lafayette as an educational institution is just one context in which discourse is formed and reformed; the educational system as a whole plays a much larger role in the systemic organization of society at large.

In 2012, the Dean of Gender & Sexuality Programs position was created, in response to the results of a campus climate survey revealing that "there was not 'enough being done surrounding issues related to women and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students'" ("Position Created," 3). From this point on, hits on sexuality in *The Lafayette* all related to this position, and programs Gene Kelly was implementing on campus to address the needs of these minority populations.

Public Discourse: Sexuality as the Subject of Inquiry – Speakers at Lafayette College

The next section of this paper uses specific examples of speakers brought to campus, those deemed "experts" in their fields – able to talk about these issues from a stance of authority – in an attempt to understand the arc of discourse regarding sexuality at Lafayette. It is important to note that due to the nature of searches in *The Lafayette* digital archives, some speakers over the years have inevitably been omitted from analysis. The seven speakers/presentations being analyzed in this section of the paper came to my attention only through a search of the term "sexuality" in *The Lafayette* digital archives.

The first speaker I came upon in my search of sexuality was Dr. Michael Carrera. In a February 1983 issue of the student newspaper, a student author discusses Carrera's lecture entitled "Sexuality, Feelings and Relationships: The Impact of the 60's and 70's – What's Ahead for the 80's" ("Carrera Stresses Sexuality," 5). In his presentation, sponsored by the peer

education program SERCH (Students Educating on Reproductive and Contraceptive Health) and Delta Upsilon, Carrera suggests that "sex and sexuality are regarded by many as *the* major issues affecting every aspect of all men's and women's lives... [but] a healthy attitude toward sexuality ought to reflect the 'psychological, spiritual, cultural, intellectual *as well as* biological' aspects of our human identities" ("Carrera Stresses Sexuality," 5). Integral to Carrera's lecture was this understanding of sexuality as a broad and all-encompassing category, something that should, and indeed does, affect every other aspect of our identities.

In a connection back to the very first hit on sexuality that I came upon, Carrera notes the prevailing influence of the media on how we view ourselves and our bodies, determining what is appropriate and acceptable regarding displays of sexuality. The sex sold by television, magazines, and other media outlets is sex "in its most narrow form," (5) a sexuality that a majority of the American populace can never attain. Think here of Connell's hegemonic masculinity (1987), the ideal form of masculinity, the form which all men, in one way or another, interact with, whether in an attempt to emulate it or renounce it.

One of the last topics Carrera discusses is language, integral in the analysis of any discourse at any point in time. How we talk about sexuality, what we say and what contexts we speak in, "are suggestive of our attitudes and values, and usually unwittingly so" (5). Think back to the opinion pieces on love between two same-sex individuals, written by Lafayette students in the late '80s and early '90s, pieces which suggest that socialization aims to reify certain views about sexuality, namely dominant and hegemonic views. Language, especially formal, institutionalized language such as that employed at Lafayette College, is power. SERCH brought Dr. Carrera back to Lafayette two years later, where he noted that, "the area of sexuality is still the domain of unanswered questions" ("Carrera Lectures," 8). He suggested that sexuality is not

exactly well defined, but rather, is a code word, indicative of particular behaviors and sexual experiences or tendencies. He tasked Lafayette students with redefining sexuality, with broadening their understandings of the term beyond the domain of the bedroom, to understand that "sexuality is not only expressed through eroticism, but through body images and gender roles as well" ("Carrera Lectures," 8). And once again he spoke of language, this time invoking binary terms like slut/stud (sexual behavior), compulsive/efficient (organizational tendencies), and hysteria/outrage (expression of anger) to show that the terms in which we speak help to perpetuate societal standards regarding masculine and feminine performances ("Carrera Lectures," 8).

A May 1984 issue of *The Lafayette* speaks of Linda Lowry's discussion of the interdependence of love and lust. The article's author, in summarizing Lowry's presentation, suggests that, "a person who has a problem disclosing himself will invariably have a problem with intimacy and that, according to Lowry, will have a negative effect on that person's sexuality" ("Love or Lust," 4). This link between intimacy and sexuality is present regardless of one's sexual orientation or behavior. The article fails to mention sponsors for this lecture.

In October of 1987, in a lecture entitled "Notches on the Bedpost and Other Great American Sex Myths," Dr. Barry Burkhardt spoke to campus about issues of rape, masculinity, and sexuality ("Burkhardt Speaks on Date Rape," 1). In this article, Burkhardt suggests that, "What made a woman vulnerable [to rape] was her gender. Women are victimized because they were with the wrong person...they were 'too nice'" (1). Central to this analysis of date rape, its perpetrators, and its victims is the argument that "men are taught that masculinity relates to aggression. Someone, Burkhardt says, forgot to tell men that 'aggression has no place in human sexuality'" (1). Here it is again, *the human sexuality*. As an umbrella term to describe the

behaviors and actions of individuals in society, human sexuality is viewed as a force that is imposed upon us all. But "the way to reduce sexual aggression will require men to reject the fusion of sexuality and violence" (1), something once seen as integral to the definition and successful performance of manhood. Not only promoting, but actualizing equality between the sexes is Burkhart's suggestion for eradicating issues of sexual harassment, violence, and inequality between men and women ("Burkhart Speaks on Date Rape," 1).

So what is required for these changes to take place throughout society? It's been nearly 30 years since this lecture occurred, and equality between men and women has yet to be systemically implemented and actualized. While dialogue has opened up the possibility of equality, just talking about something does not make it happen. We require systemic, large-scale, massive change to ensure that Burkhart's vision becomes reality. Step one in this change: courage, the courage to speak up, to be an advocate, to question the system from which these harmful expectations of masculine and feminine behavior and display originated.

This system I speak of is not only the system wherein issues of inequality originated, but where the discourse for change originated as well. Certainly, Foucault would problematize this. By speaking within a system that grants us our power to speak, to voice our opinions, to claim dissenting views, are we merely serving to reinforce that system? And if we are able to escape the system, what happens next? What about those who have not been able to escape, who circulate routinely within the system, who fail to see that the system needs changing? I do not believe that there are correct answers to these questions; and as someone writing this paper within the system I am attempting to challenge, am I actually accomplishing anything?

Michael Kimmel, a theorist we read regarding the intertwining of masculinity and sexuality, gave a lecture at Lafayette in March of 1993. Kimmel suggested that contemporary

changes in sex roles are “based on a change in women’s expectations in the past twenty years” (“Men Need to Adjust,” 1). Because of these changes in women’s roles and expectations, Kimmel asserts, “men are confused about what it is to be a ‘real’ man” (1). Their definitions of manhood have always been defined in juxtaposition to the roles of women. But since “women have made the issue of gender visible, have changed their role in the work place, have addressed the relation between work and family, and have changed their sexuality,” men have been forced to reconsider their own positions (1).

Kimmel’s position on sexual harassment is particularly interesting, as he suggests that sexual harassment occurs in direct response to these changing roles of women in society. As men witness these changes, they experience firsthand the questioning of their power and authority; sexual harassment serves as a mechanism to reinstate the power of men over women, a gendered hierarchy. On a societal level, “changing roles in sexuality for women have forced men to consider their own sexuality...Men have ‘socialized deafness’ because they have been taught to take risks, to never say no. Women, on the other hand, have been taught that if they say ‘yes,’ they are sexually promiscuous” (“Men Need to Adjust,” 8). Women who say “yes” should not be labeled sexually promiscuous – for this to happen, however, men must understand that these changes to women’s roles and understandings of sexuality are a mere movement, a temporary change with temporary results. These changes are the first of many to come in the understanding of women’s expanding sexuality in relation to men.

In an April of 1993 Keynote Speech for Women’s History Month sponsored by a number of sororities, fraternities, and major departments on campus, Naomi Wolf spoke about the beauty myth to Lafayette’s campus. During her lecture, Wolf “spoke of the backlash against feminism, the problems that this repercussion has resulted in, and the ways that women can stand up and

fight back against the illusions of beauty and its place in society" ("Beauty Myth," 1). A thread that has woven itself systematically through discussion around sexuality in *The Lafayette* since the 1970s, beauty standards imposed by the media are absolutely absurd and unattainable. Wolf "voiced her displeasure with the media's role in the perception of the ideal woman... Because we have been accustomed to seeing such perfect bodies all the time, how we visualize sexuality has been contorted" (10). Today, much the same issues exist regarding the media's messages about beauty and sexuality for women. The Victoria's Secret fashion show, celebrity runway events, the over-sexualization of female news anchors – all of these serve to reinforce a standard of beauty that is quite impossible to attain.

In 2004, findings from *The Real Truth about Beauty: A Global Report*, instigated the launch of the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, "featuring real women whose appearances are outside the stereotypical norms of beauty" (Dove). In the second phase of their campaign, launched in 2005, Dove aimed to "debunk the stereotype that only thin is beautiful and it drove thousands of women to campaignforrealbeauty.com to discuss beauty issues" (Dove). This campaign for real beauty sought to expose the harmful effects of media representations of beautiful women, by providing "real" role models with which women were more likely to self-identify. Clearly, 20 years after Wolf's book *The Beauty Myth* and her Women's History Month Lecture here at Lafayette, women are still struggling to find ways to escape the media's impositions on beauty and female sexuality. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, however, is certainly a step in the right direction.

The last major lecture identified through my search of sexuality occurred in April of 2005. Sex therapist and professor Dr. Leonore Tiefer spoke on "the trend to commercialize products that claim to improve one's sex life, such as Viagra, on the market since 1998"

("Eliminating Viagra," 3). Tiefer rooted her lecture in discussions of unnecessary commercialization of sexuality, noting, "female sexual dysfunction (what the drugs and supplements [now on the market] claim to treat) is not a disease as much as a term created to capitalize on the frenzy to create unrealistic levels of desire. The market for these products is created by exploiting the people's sexual ignorance and creating impossible standards of performance" (3).

Seidman's chapter on the medicalization of sexuality also references the introduction of Viagra to contemporary American society:

To promote Viagra, Pfizer Inc. had to convince Americans that (1) they had a sexual problem, (2) it was not psychological but a physiological "medical" problem, and (3) this drug would deliver on its promise of sexual performance... The problem is that Viagra, both the drug and its sexual imagery, seems to encourage a narrow penis-and-coital-centered approach to sex. Viagra seems also to have the effect of reducing women's control over when to have sex. After all, once the man consumes the "blue pill" the performance begins, ready or not (162-3).

Thus the era of medicalizing sexuality is refreshed, capitalism reinforced, and women and men duped into believing that their lives, their performances, are not good enough.

In concluding her lecture, "Tiefer called for a strong comprehensive sex education concerning the psychological, biological, and social aspects of sex. She said we must also encourage consumer literacy about the media and advertisements' false portrayals of sexuality" ("Eliminating Viagra," 4). This type of comprehensive understanding is necessary in any societal undertaking, but is particularly crucial in capturing a more all-inclusive understanding of sexuality.

What themes, if any, run through this analysis of sexuality as presented through speakers brought to the institution over the years? An overarching emphasis on changing standards of sexuality prevailed, as did conversations around distortions and misrepresentations of healthy

sexuality. All of the speakers, in some form or another, argued that society largely shapes what individuals believe of themselves and their behaviors, and that it is our responsibility, our duty, to recapture and redefine sexuality in our own terms.

Where Do We Go? The Missing Link in the Discussion of Sexuality

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies... there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (Foucault 27).

In concluding this archival work on Lafayette's discourse on sexuality from 1970 to present day, I seek to examine the silences invisibly woven through this analysis – what is missing from Lafayette's institutional discourse on sexuality, and why is that an important consideration in and of itself? Over time, the spotlight of conversation regarding sexuality at Lafayette shifted – from dominant, implied heterosexuality to deviant homosexuality. The attention on homosexuality ranged from homosexuality as sin to homosexuality as love, just the same as any other iteration of love. But especially during more problematizing discussions of homosexuality, invisibility served to indicate power.

So why was homosexuality so heavily discussed? I would argue that its status as abnormal, or rather, the implied normality of heterosexuality, generated much of the discussion around sexuality at Lafayette. When it comes to power, "success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (Foucault 86). The same goes for dominant ideologies, the unspoken norm: in this case, the standard of heterosexuality. The power of heterosexuality can be seen through the one-sided exploration of homosexuality, a discourse without its equal-but-opposite investigation of normalized sexuality.

Lafayette's arc of conversation on sexuality relies on "instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to be sure), the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting), and the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate)" (Foucault 12). And within the realm of academia, education as institution, discourse assumes additional power.

Each and every major institution of society (from education to the family, media to religion) holds power. It is up to that institution and its constituents to decide how that power is manifest. In discussion of media representations of beauty, it is indeed interesting that blaming the media fails to actually blame the individuals responsible for creating and promoting such media representations. The media is protected, as any large institution of society would be, from questions of who hides behind the metaphorical curtain (my thought here is of the trickster wizard from *The Wizard of Oz*).

In the end, I found that hits on the term sexuality in *The Lafayette* were much more encompassing than I believed them to be prior to undertaking this research. In my four years here at Lafayette, I have witnessed the ever-conforming hive mentality. However, I have also beheld individuals take a stand for what they believe in, take a stand against prevailing notions of what's normal, what's fashionable, what's acceptable. I have seen my own experiences as somewhat outside or contrary to those of the "typical Lafayette student," have held views considered abnormal, and have attempted to situate myself as an individual outside the system. I have fought to escape the rigidly defined boundaries of appropriate behavior and display, have fought to have my opinions heard and treated with respect. I believe students writing in *The Lafayette* have done the same. Whether their views have served to reinforce the norms or challenge the status-quo,

students are opinionated, and sharing those opinions is what facilitates conversation, eventually instigating change.

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