

INTRODUCTION

THE FAMILY SILVER is an unusual collection of essays. It is at once an intensely individual and emotional set of reflections and a more general sociological study. These essays were written as a collection and are intended as a contribution to feminist scholarship and feminist teaching, to the ethnographic tradition in sociology, and to emerging scholarship in lesbian and gay studies. I also intend them to be emotionally moving personal reading. *The Family Silver* draws on my particular life experiences—as a woman, a lesbian, a teacher—in order to contribute to our understanding of female gender. In previous work, I have studied others, and it seems to me that it is far easier to look at others and think one sees what is occurring than to look at oneself and try to see themes, explanations, interpretations, to offer stories that are both true and acceptable. When one looks at oneself, the picture becomes more complex, more intimate. The easy answers disappear.

In *The Family Silver*, I start by describing my specific experiences and then develop insights about gender from a careful consideration of them. I build my interpretations from the ground up, very much in the tradition of an ethnographer (rather than by beginning with more general ideas and then applying them). The book thus has an emergent,

discovery-like character. It moves back and forth between events and insight, between emotion and thought. My experiences are never uninterpreted, and I often interpret them closely. Because these essays draw on my internal emotional life and deal with issues of sexual preference, they result in a study that is intimate far beyond my prior works, and beyond what is usually found in the social sciences and considered acceptable in academic discourse. The intimacy of the essays is their central challenge.

It is not, however, their only challenge. *The Family Silver* focuses on female gender, on how women organize social life, and on how lesbianism encourages us to value the female in ourselves. My quest for understanding is shared with other feminist scholars. Over the past few decades, feminists have sought to increase our substantive understanding of women and to experiment with how we go about producing our knowledge, seeking to free it from male definition. A desire to create our own unique forms of expression—to describe women's experiences in ways that reflect women's voices and visions, and that faithfully depict particular social realities—has become important not only among feminists, but also in branches of the traditional disciplines, in new fields such as lesbian and gay studies, and in African American and other specialized group studies. In all these areas, one assumption is that a field of knowledge that looks at previously forbidden choices, ways of being, or overlooked aspects of experience, that seeks to revolutionize our knowledge in some way, had best attend to the forms it uses in doing so, so that it does not simply reproduce an old hierarchy.¹

Structured in a way that contributes its own form of expression, *The Family Silver* is organized in three parts. The first section contains a set of highly personal essays that draw the reader into my relationships with friends, lovers, and family. The second part moves to institutional settings, where I try to understand how my gender has affected me as a teacher in universities and in an academic career. In the third section, I describe a course I taught on women and organizations, and I take the reader along in the learning process. Here the ideas that organize the entire volume are spoken of in general terms, providing a kind of summary, or a way to reflect back on the earlier sections of the book. One

could read this book back end first, but my approach is to speak more personally at the start.

In following my stories, the reader will be in a position of puzzling through situations, much as I was as I wrote each essay. At times, the reader may take a different route than I do, and may think of her own experiences and make up her own interpretations concerning gender. She may come to different conclusions, be surprised by the twists and turns of my inner thinking, be discomforted by what are for me familiar facts of my intimate life, or be overwhelmed by my attention to pain and vulnerability. But the point is to follow along, to use these essays to help see how gender operates in one's own life. None of us can speak for all women, but we can certainly share our different kinds of insights and borrow understandings from one another where that seems helpful.

I do make generalizations about the situation of women in these essays, but never lightly. I do this because it helps me interpret my own life experiences and because—although I claim no universality—I think similarities exist among different women's experiences, despite crucial differences of race, class, culture, and more. I think similarities appear because women occupy subordinate statuses in our various contexts, and because we have had certain types of functions through history, some associated with reproduction and physical attributes, and others not. I think that lesbianism, too, is both a similarity and a difference. It reflects a desire that many women have, but that only some of us commit our lives to; and among lesbians, each of us interprets herself in a distinct way. A similarity/difference dilemma runs through all my stories. At one moment, the reader may feel a difference among women, or between her life and mine; at another time, a similarity may seem more prominent. Both are useful to consider.

In these essays, I speak emotionally and as plainly as I can. Usually, academics speak in a more abstract or explicitly theoretical language, use a technical vocabulary, and refer often to work by other scholars. The academic style is designed to produce distance and to exclude emotion—to speak from above and outside an experience, rather than from within it. Although feminist writers often desire to be intimate and to celebrate women's subjectivities, in recent years, feminist work has

tended to merge back into the academic mainstream and to use theoretically distancing and abstract, or obscuring, language. Lesbian and gay studies, especially the literature of queer theory, has tended, also, to use complex and distancing language in an effort to become legitimate, in part to compensate for a subject matter that is hardly considered so. *The Family Silver* is more direct than much current work in these fields. Because it lacks camouflage, it may seem vulnerable. I hope it will be received protectively. I offer it as a reminder of our need for authenticity, or for speaking candidly about our experiences despite the risks involved.

Although I avoid academic jargon—whether a language of deconstruction or of structural functionalism—I am well aware that I am taking my place among other scholars.² In the academic context, there has been much recent debate over how we should talk about women, gender, and same-gender sexual relationships.³ To simplify somewhat, two basic camps dominate these debates. One consists of those who see gender in largely binary terms—whether as a social structural fact, or as a biological given—who see a world of women and men, of unequal opportunity and unequal people. This group includes many feminist social scientists, who view their task as describing and explaining the social reality of gender. The second group consists of those who argue that gender fluidity and ambivalence are the more underlying facts, that a binary view oversimplifies unstable and overlapping categories, and that cultural possibilities count more than social structure. Often, those in the second camp are from literary or humanistic disciplines and view the world as made up of texts, discourses, or systems of ideas.

Like those in the second camp—deconstructionists, postmodernists, queer theorists, and many feminists—I see much fluidity and complexity in the way that gender is enacted and defined. Definitions of gender vary across individuals, subgroups, cultures, and times. I see gender as socially constructed, something we create. However, I also have a profoundly sociological view of gender, which is to say, on the one hand, that I am not a biological determinist, and on the other, that I am not an absolute relativist. I view gender as a hierarchical form of social organization, a system in which superiority has traditionally been assigned to men and male ways, and inferiority to women and female ways. I think gender systems have a structural existence quite apart

from our ideas about them. We cannot change these systems merely by thinking them away. While each of us has a choice with regard to how we define our gender, the range of discretion available to us seems to me not very wide. I think that if we wish to change our gendered experiences and the structures that support them—so that women are less disadvantaged, and so that the principles that rule the world are less strictly male—we must first recognize the powerful hold gender has on us.

This book is very much about the hold of gender in an individual life. In it, I argue for acknowledging gender rather than denying it, and for valuing, rather than devaluing, both the inner realities of women and the outer ways that women do things. The book's title, *The Family Silver*, refers to women's ways, to the wealth women have and pass on to one another and try to keep from being stolen or melted down by men. There are many forms of women's wealth; family silver is one suggested by my own familial experiences and used here as a metaphor. I think women's wealth is like women, considered second best and "not as good as gold" in a world that values gold more highly, but it is our wealth and we have to learn to cherish and use it. My effort throughout this book is to cherish women's ways, to make them more visible in order better to value them.

In each of the essays, I speak personally, offering imagery from my own life. I refer to literature by others only in the endnotes and in the teaching chapters. My purpose in doing so is to demonstrate a process of developing insights from a consideration of one's own experience. The usual academic style is to take someone else's ideas and apply them to a situation one is studying, and to view an individual reality as not worthy enough to stand alone. Women's realities, especially, have been seen as unworthy. I wish to challenge that view. Women often struggle to give the inner emotional life external form, to put the unspeakable into words. I wish to contribute to that process and to encourage others to do so as well. My method is to speak about a level of experience just beneath the surface of what is usually seen, a level where feelings are highly important and where emotional evidence prompts complex interpretation.

Each of the essays in *The Family Silver* was written to stand as a complete statement. Because each reflects the events it describes, none of the

essays looks exactly like the others, and the whole has a very original shape. In each essay, I discuss events in depth; in some cases, I tell a step-by-step story. Such attention to detail seems to me especially important when discussing women's submerged experiences. Each essay merges personal and academic approaches and speaks of both public and private aspects of my life. Many of the stories that I tell are not the usual success story, and that may affect the reader's responses. It would be easier if I had written about triumphing over adversity, or about transcending the problems of my gender. But I have chosen to write about topics that are more difficult. Thus, I say things that are harder to hear.

Although the reader will find her own way through the volume and identify themes that seem meaningful to her, I want to comment briefly on each of the essays and some of their themes. "Gender Roles among Women" opens the collection and introduces the approach. My first attempt to examine gender in my own daily life, it reflects on a series of events that confused me about gender—experiences in which men acted like women, and women acted like men, and in which others mistook me for a man. I wanted to clarify my discomfort by asking, What is going on beneath the surface in terms of gender roles? "Becoming a Lesbian," the second essay, discusses a process of individual growth through intimacy with another woman. It suggests that lesbian relationships allow women to shed their male-defined skins and to develop their own ways of being women.

"The Family Silver" views gender in the context of my familial relationships. It tells a story of a time when my lover's aunt died suddenly and we went to Florida to clear out her apartment and settle her affairs. I soon found myself writing about that trip, and about my own female relatives and relationships among us, and things passed down across female generations—like silverware and a sense of responsibility and of female hardship, and a sense that women will improvise and triumph and find ways to do almost anything, a sense that we are, in fact, the invisible wealth we seek. The metaphor of the "family silver" soon seemed to unify this collection for me. Although all women do not have actual family silver, it is the idea behind this metaphor that seems important to me. Other objects, possessions, or qualities that are like family silver are suggested in the book. In "The Passing Down of Sorrow," I

discuss my relationship with my mother and how one very important thing she passed on to me was inner sorrow. I think that daughters often inherit sorrow, as well as strength, from their mothers as part of their femaleness.

In “Hurts of the System,” which opens the section on academia, I discuss the fact that, for twenty years, I have done academic work, but I have never been awarded a regular academic job. Why, I ask, and why is the hurt I feel so deep? What does this lack of institutional support have to do with my being a woman, and with the female, and unconventional, nature of my work? “Saying No to a Man,” the next essay, describes a situation in which I denied permission to a hostile male graduate student to take one of my classes. That action caused controversy among students and feminist faculty, and, in this essay, I try to understand what happened. Why was I so vulnerable, both to inner feelings of pain and failure, and to external attack? The consequences of saying no to men are discussed further in “Lesbian in Academe,” an essay about how my being a lesbian has influenced my academic career over time. I wrote this essay to consider the possibility that who I had, and had not, slept with had had more effect on my professional life than I wished to know.

The book concludes with a series of essays on classroom teaching that traces interpersonal dynamics, changes in student views, and the central ideas of a course called Women and Organizations. I encourage the reader to take the course vicariously as she reads this series. The first essay, “A Feminist Class,” presents the fundamentals, focusing on my attempts to overcome the students’ initial resistances to seeing gender. “Separatism” discusses my struggle to get the students to see the need for separate women’s organizations. “Desires for an Ideal Community of Women” suggests the deep wishes, on the parts of both the students and myself, that a feminist course be an ideal world and that we create, in all our female relationships, a more perfect and nourishing community. Themes of lesbianism recur through this entire series. How does my being a lesbian teacher increase my own fear? I ask. How does it affect what the students think of me?

Themes of feminist teaching and of women teaching women weave through all the essays, whether the teaching occurs in a classroom, a

family, or an intimate love relationship. I think that the effort of feminist teaching that many women are now engaged in is a way that women learn from each other to value female realities. Especially when it occurs within the male preserves of higher education, this teaching is often a difficult and vulnerable activity, yet I think it is extremely important. Like talks between mothers and daughters about what to make for dinner, or what to do when the relatives come to visit, it is one way that we pass down women's culture to one another across the generations, which returns me to this book's title—about the wealth of women, and women's work, and the ways we seek to be generous with our lives.

Here then is *The Family Silver*, a collection of lesbian-feminist personal essays written from 1991 through 1994. These essays were responses to circumstance, and they reflect very much the times in which they were written. Perhaps one day lesbians will no longer lose their jobs, and women students will not need to be taught to value themselves, and I will be more accepting of my choices. But for now, I think it is important to describe things as they are. At least, that is what I know how to do. I hope that the reader will be able to identify with some of my experiences. We each have our own pain, our own mothers, our own ways of finding comfort, our own struggles to be women in worlds of men and in our more intimate communities of women. We each have our own unique feelings about being women. Yet I hope there may still be identification across the differences, and that my stories may lead other women to tell theirs.