



Lesbian Feminism

by Elise Chenier

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In the United States, Canada and Britain, lesbian feminism was the dominant ideology among politicized lesbians during the 1970s and 1980s. Based on the premise that lesbianism and feminism were inextricably linked, the two words were often hyphenated.

Lesbian feminism offered a trenchant critique of patriarchy and the institutionalization of heterosexuality, and claimed that its political impact resided in resistance to male domination. Put into practice, lesbian feminism quickly evolved into a personal style that influenced everything from hairstyles, clothing, and even sexual behavior. Overall, its influence was enormous, though with mixed results.

Origins

In the social and political ferment of the late 1960s, lesbians emerged as one of many social groups seeking liberation from oppression. Those who joined gay liberation groups were often frustrated by sexist attitudes among the predominantly male membership. The mainstream feminist movement proved equally unwelcoming. Though many lesbians filled the ranks of feminist organizations, they were openly discouraged from becoming part of the public face of the feminist movement.

In 1970 the issue came to a head when Betty Friedan, the President of the National Organization of Women (NOW), characterized advocates for the inclusion of lesbian issues in NOW's platform as a "lavender menace." Gloria Steinem responded by arguing that feminism was a revolution, not a public relations movement; and in 1971 NOW members voted overwhelmingly to affirm the legitimacy of lesbian oppression as a concern of feminism.

Woman-Identified Woman

However, Friedan's 1970 remark elicited an immediate response from a group of women who first called themselves "Lavender Menace" but later came to be known as "Radicalesbians." Their short manifesto *The Woman-Identified Woman* is generally recognized as the first articulation of a lesbian-feminist politics.

Its authors claimed that lesbians and lesbianism are of central, rather than peripheral, importance to the feminist movement. The woman-identified woman, they contended, undermines patriarchy by withdrawing her energy from men, by affirming a connection with other women, and by validating women on their own terms, independent of men. So long as women seek the approval of men and male institutions, they argued, they cannot become autonomous human beings.

Significantly, the authors regarded the categories lesbian and homosexual as by-products of heterosexual patriarchy, not an expression of an essential identity. They believed that if the sexual oppression of women did not exist and one lived true to one's feelings, such categories would be rendered meaningless.

The Woman-Identified Woman and other works that followed established the primacy of sexuality in

feminist theory and practice. Lesbian feminists were able to draw upon the wider feminist movement's efforts to politicize private activities such as domestic labor, child care, and birth control. They extended their analysis to include not only a positive re-evaluation of female homosexuality but also a trenchant critique of heterosexuality.

For example, popular *Village Voice* journalist Jill Johnston's highly influential book *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (1973) described romance as "dope" and monogamy as a means to trap women into a permanent condition of domestic slavery, a process captured by the sardonic observation: "It begins when you sink into his arms, and ends with your arms in his sink." Johnston urged all women to reject femininity and its corollary passivity, to refuse monogamy, and to be more aggressive in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. It was her contention that such actions would enable women to discover their true autonomous selves.

Political Lesbians

Conceding that sexual attraction cannot be politically mandated, lesbian feminists emphasized lesbianism as a political choice. "Political lesbians" were not required to have sex with other women, but it was expected that they remain celibate. Influenced by Anne Koedt's political analysis of vaginal versus clitoral orgasms, lesbian feminists urged lesbians to refrain from or at least minimize vaginal (and presumably other types of) penetration, and similar "male-stream" acts, including the consumption of pornography.

Lesbian feminists also adopted an aesthetic style intended to signal their rejection of femininity and materialism. Short hair, jeans, work boots, and plaid shirts became *de rigueur*, particularly among younger urban women. Liberating for some and oppressive for others, the style effectively expressed lesbian feminists' commitment to the repudiation of heterosexual and class privilege.

Butch-Femme

Lesbian feminists also distanced themselves from butch and femme bar culture, the only other public lesbian culture then in existence. From a lesbian feminist point of view, butches were male-identified and femmes were trapped in passive female roles. Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon, Jill Johnston, and British author Sheila Jeffries criticized those who practiced butch-femme roles for "aping" heterosexual relationships. According to them, butch-femme roles perpetuated patriarchy and were therefore inimical to feminism.

Interestingly, butch and femme women called themselves *gay* since the term *lesbian* connoted for them mental illness. For lesbian feminists, however, *lesbian* had a proud etymology that deserved to be reclaimed. They were the first to use the word as a positive marker of a socio-sexual identity. Indeed, one of the most significant accomplishments of the lesbian feminist movement was to facilitate a network of social and political support that helped lesbians cope with the isolation, stigma, and legal problems that many homosexuals battled.

Over time, the sexual component of lesbianism became less and less relevant. For example, Charlotte Bunch's 1972 article "Lesbians in Revolt" set out to establish lesbian feminism as the basis for the liberation of all women. Bunch argued that "lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core," not because women were having sex together, but because they withdrew their energies from men. Bunch and others were influenced by other anti-oppression struggles, and believed the downfall of male supremacy would lead to the collapse of racism, capitalism, and imperialism.

In 1973, Bunch and Rita Mae Brown, along with others, founded *quest: a feminist quarterly*, which published from 1974 to 1984. Intended to encourage debate and develop theory, the quarterly became the premiere theoretical journal of lesbian feminism.

Joint Action and Lesbian Separatism

The complementary struggles of the women's, gay, and lesbian liberation movements occasionally led to joint action. One of the most significant of these was the successful lobbying of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) whose diagnostic and clinical practices pathologized homosexuals. As a direct result of all three groups' activism during the APA's annual meetings from 1971 to 1973, homosexuality was removed from the association's list of mental diseases.

Co-ordinated actions became increasingly rare, however. In 1972, Rita Mae Brown called for a fully autonomous lesbian-feminist movement. She described the difference between heterosexual women and lesbians as "the difference between reform and revolution." According to her, to love and support women was lesbian; to continue to pursue intimate relations with men was tantamount to collaborating with the enemy. Brown's public declarations marked the beginning of lesbian separatism, one of the two most significant strains of lesbian feminism.

What had begun as a response to NOW's exclusionary tactics quickly grew into a widespread ideological and cultural movement that enjoyed enormous appeal among lesbians in Canada, Britain, Scotland, and Australia. Though lesbian feminists outside of the continental United States tended to be on better terms with women's and gay liberation groups, the creation of a distinct lesbian-feminist consciousness that promised liberation through woman-identification inspired and influenced women around the English-speaking world.

In the United States and elsewhere, women began building the Lesbian Nation by creating a wide range of cultural industries where women's skills and talent could be nourished and promoted. Founded in 1973, Olivia Records produced and recorded some of the most popular lesbian-feminist artists including Holly Near. Some like Lorraine Segato performed for women-only crowds. Naiad Press (1973-2004) published and distributed lesbian fiction, poetry, and non-fiction. Collectively-run women's bookstores and volunteer-run community centers appeared in major urban areas.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was one of the most successful efforts to bring culture and politics together in a lesbian separatist venue. First staged in 1976, it runs every August on land purchased and maintained by a small group of lesbians. Thousands of women travel from around the world to camp during the festival.

Men are not permitted on the land, and participants are required to contribute to the festival's day-to-day operations by cooking, cleaning, or performing other tasks. They can also attend workshops on political and personal issues, and buy women-positive art and jewelry made by female artisans. Sliding scale fees are offered, and day care is provided, but male children over the age of 6 are cared for in a separate, sex-segregated area. This policy, along with decisions to exclude sado-masochistic practitioners and people not born biologically female, have been the subject of intense controversy in recent years. Nevertheless, popular cartoonist Alison Bechdel describes the festival as a "perennial utopia" for women.

Cultural Feminism

Although cultural feminism, the second strain of lesbian feminism, veered in a different direction, its roots lay in some of the unwritten assumptions made by its more radical predecessor. The conviction that rejecting male culture and identifying solely with women would lead to the end of all forms of oppression was based on the belief that once unchained from patriarchy, women will emulate the utopian visions of anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist movements.

Among cultural feminists, this claim was largely theorized on the basis of women's assumed biological capacity to bear children. According to the logic of cultural feminism, the very act of raising children led women to prefer pacifism to war, was antithetical to the profit motive, and engendered unconditional love. In other words, women's superiority was a fact of nature.

Separatists may have advocated withdrawing women's energies from men, but only so as to bring down patriarchy and create a new society in its wake. By essentializing women's qualities as biologically determined, cultural feminists did not offer anything beyond the creation of a separate culture for women. In many ways, this was exactly what separatist feminists had so successfully accomplished. For this reason, one is often mistaken as the other.

American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich is most frequently associated with the cultural strain of lesbian feminism. Her writing on motherhood was highly influential among feminists of all political stripes, but especially important was her 1980 article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Rich's critique of heterosexuality continues to influence theories of sexuality today, but it was her construction of a lesbian continuum that gave voice to the new cultural feminism.

Unlike separatists who argued that "lesbian" was a political position strategically mobilized to undermine patriarchy, Rich and others characterized the lesbian continuum as a connection shared by all women across time and space, but which was undermined by men's demands upon their labor. Women could find strength, personal fulfillment, and, ultimately, liberation by reconnecting with women.

Although she later clarified her position in light of the critical response, Rich's continuum was widely interpreted to suggest that all women who had emotionally intimate relationships with other women could be considered "lesbian." This model can be found in the work of historian Lillian Faderman whose descriptions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American female companions as lesbians were criticized for obscuring the significance of physical intimacy in shaping experience and identity.

Reaction and Criticism

In time, lesbian feminists' claims of universal sisterhood came under increasing attack. Women of color and working-class women had long felt that race and class oppression, and the women who experienced them, were given little more than lip service by lesbian feminists.

Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) exposed how lesbian and other feminists had failed to understand the complexities of intersecting and multiple oppressions, and argued that the movement perpetuated the very race and class structures it purported to dismantle. These criticisms forced an important, though often fractious and painful, debate in feminist activist and intellectual circles, and ultimately led to the creation of new political strategies that rejected separatist politics for coalition-building efforts.

In the late 1970s, frustration with lesbian feminism's rigid sexual politics led to a series of watershed confrontations centered on sexual expression and transgender issues. Samois, a group of feminist sado-masochists, were refused the right to use the facilities at the San Francisco Women's Union. In response, Samois member Patrick Califia-Rice (then Pat Califia) publicly denounced lesbian feminist sexual politics as a form of sexual repression.

Shortly thereafter, a group of lesbian feminists attempted to shut down a conference held by a group of academics to explore ways of introducing more nuanced analyses of female sexuality, an action that gained the movement a reputation for intolerance and censorship. In the 1990s, male-to-female transsexuals and queer activists regularly protested against policies that prohibited non-biological women from joining or participating in "womyn-only" organizations and events.

Conclusion

Lesbian feminism had a tremendous impact on the personal and political experiences of more than one

generation of women. In 1972 a woman could be institutionalized for having sex with another woman; by 1973 she could buy lesbian records, read lesbian books, and attend women-only lesbian events. It is little wonder that many continue to identify with lesbian feminism.

But the internecine conflicts over racial and sexual politics forced lesbian feminism to confront its own ideological limitations. In the 1990s, a new generation of feminists calling themselves the "third wave" set out to preserve some of the movement's original insights while prioritizing anti-racist, anti-colonial, and queer- and gender-based theories and struggles. Despite these changes, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival continues to thrive, suggesting that a desire for "womyn-only" spaces persists. However, lesbian feminism is a political ideology that resonates among significantly fewer women today than it did in the 1970s and 1980s.

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