



Lesbian Nation

by Tina Gianoulis

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Lesbian Nation, a collection of essays published by feminist writer Jill Johnston in 1973, was an important early manifesto of lesbian feminist and separatist politics. The term "lesbian nation" became a rallying cry and a powerful symbol of solidarity for early political lesbians, who sought to transform what they saw as a patriarchal society that oppressed and excluded them.

Jill Johnston

During the early 1970s, Jill Johnston was a writer for the bohemian New York newspaper *The Village Voice*. She was also an exuberant feminist theorist, and an irrepressibly outspoken lesbian. Her book, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, included many pieces previously published in the *Voice*, and was dedicated "for my mother, who should have been a lesbian and for my daughter in hopes she will be."

The essays, with titles such as "There Wasn't a Dyke in the Land," "The Second Sucks and the Feminine Mistake," and "Amazons and Archedykes," articulated Johnston's incisive critiques of patriarchy and the straight feminist movement, spiced with outrageous humor, sex, and gossip.

Johnston's style was brash, passionate, and eccentric. With few sentence breaks and fewer paragraph breaks, her ideas seemed to spill out in a brilliant chaotic avalanche. As she writes in the essay "Love at First Sex," "I think I was so angry that I was conducting a one woman revolution through a very slow calculated but unrelenting exposure of myself in the guise of a literary code hopefully so challenging and fascinating and entertaining and difficult to read that any premature retaliation from a hostile society would be discouraged."

In the general climate of intellectual, political, and sexual excitement that was the early lesbian movement, Johnston's style of personal revelation, mixed with radical political theory, was immensely appealing.

Lesbian Separatism and Lesbian Culture

Among Johnston's radical ideas was one that would become the cornerstone of the lesbian separatist movement of the late 1970s: "All women are lesbians except those who don't know it."

Many early lesbian feminists found that their analysis of male-dominated society led repeatedly to the idea that lesbianism was the ultimate goal of feminism. These women believed that as women began to value themselves and other women, they would naturally begin to withdraw their emotional energies from men and focus them on lesbians.

While few may have believed in the possibility of an actual lesbian nation, many worked hard to create a separate women's culture that included women's literature and periodicals, women's music, women's bookstores, coffeehouses, restaurants, and festivals, a feminized non-oppressive language, and many other

institutions that focused solely on women and lesbians. This women's culture became the lesbian nation.

It is perhaps a tribute to the influence of Johnston's ideas and the lesbians who worked to create women's culture both before and after the publication of her book, that in 1976 "compulsory heterosexuality" was named as one of the crimes against women by the Brussels Tribunal on Crimes against Women.

Similarly, Johnston's writing inspired Canadian feminist academic Becki Ross to describe the Lesbian Organization of Toronto, an extremely active lesbian organization from 1976 to 1980, as "the house that Jill built."

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.