



## Radicalesbians

by Linda Rapp

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The Radicalesbians was a short-lived but important group in the history of the lesbian and feminist movements. Its collectively-written "The Woman-Identified Woman" is a provocative manifesto that challenged all feminists to reconsider their conception of lesbians and lesbianism.

The group, which formed in New York in 1970, at first used the name Lavender Menace in reaction to a remark by Betty Friedan, then president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), that lesbians constituted a "lavender menace" to the progress of the women's rights movement.

A number of the original members of the Lavender Menace--Rita Mae Brown, Lois Hart, Barbara Love, and Ellen Shumsky among them--had previously belonged to the Gay Liberation Front, but had left because they felt that the organization placed a much higher priority on advancing the rights of gay men than those of lesbians.

Although feminist groups had a less than stellar record on lesbian issues at that point, the members of the Lavender Menace believed that they might make better progress by working from within the women's movement rather than through the male-dominated gay rights movement. Several of the Lavender Menace women, including Brown, Cynthia Funk, and March Hoffman (later known as Artemis March), began traveling to feminist conferences, where they urged support for lesbian rights.

The Lavender Menace chose the opening session of the Second Congress to Unite Women, held on the evening of May 1, 1970 in New York, to bring the issue to the fore.

At the suggestion of Lavender Menace member Martha Shelley, the women had written a paper explaining the importance of lesbians to the women's liberation movement. Karla Jay, who also belonged to the Lavender Menace, identifies Hoffman as the "chief author," but the document was very much a group project, with a number of others helping to craft the statement.

"The Woman-Identified Woman" begins "What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion."

The writers asserted that both homosexuality and heterosexuality are categories created by a male-dominated culture and that "in a society in which men do not oppress women . . . [both] would disappear." Although the document called upon women to "see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love," its purpose was not to divide women on the basis of their sexual orientation but rather to unite them in the common cause of valuing themselves for themselves, not for how they are defined by or with respect to men.

The Lavender Menace members placed copies of their manifesto on all the seats in the school auditorium where the women's congress was meeting, and then they staged a dramatic event. As the session was about to begin, they doused the lights. In the darkness seventeen women wearing lavender T-shirts with

"LAVENDER MENACE" stenciled on them rushed in and formed a line in front of the stage.

When the lights came back on, the Lavender Menace women announced their intention to discuss lesbian issues, and they invited others to join them. The Lavender Menace had planted some of its members in the audience to respond to this call in an apparently spontaneous display of support. The precaution proved unnecessary, however, because, as Lavender Menace member Jennifer Woodul recalled, "as soon as the floor was taken, women by droves began to come up on stage."

Kate Millett, a chairwoman of the New York NOW chapter who was to preside at the opening meeting, had been informed by the Lavender Menace of the plan, and she encouraged the women of the Congress to listen to them.

In the initial two-hour session the Lavender Menace members spoke of lesbianism and heterosexism. Over the next two days of the conference there were debates and workshops on lesbian issues. An all-women dance was also held.

At the final assembly the Lavender Menace proposed a series of pro-lesbian resolutions that were adopted by the Congress. The Lavender Menace also called upon conference participants to join consciousness-raising groups, and some fifty women did so.

The Lavender Menace subsequently changed its name to Lesbian Liberation and finally to Radicalesbians. Throughout its existence the group was committed to being non-hierarchical in structure and to making decisions by consensus. Inevitably, however, certain people took on *de facto* if unacknowledged leadership roles, causing resentments that prompted others to leave. In addition, the requirement of consensus on Radicalesbians decisions proved an impediment, as achieving unanimous opinions was often difficult.

The Radicalesbians believed in absolute female separatism and refused to associate with men or with women who did not cut their ties to mainstream heterosexual society. They even denounced their recent ally Millett as a "collaborator."

The Radicalesbians intolerance for gay and heterosexual men, bisexuals, and heterosexual women came to disturb certain members. Some, like Love, drifted back to the Gay Liberation Front or on to other organizations.

Brown and Funk, two of the Radicalesbians' key members moved from New York to Washington, D. C., where Brown would be among the founders of The Furies collective.

By the end of 1971 attrition had taken a heavy toll, and the Radicalesbians soon disbanded.

Despite the Radicalesbians' short existence as an organization, they have, in Jay's words, a "mythical stature" because of their bold action at the Second Congress to Unite Women, which was instrumental in bringing greater visibility to lesbians in the feminist movement. In addition, their "Woman-Identified Woman" is a classic document in lesbian-feminist history.

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