



Separatism

by Andrew Matzner

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While some in the glbtq community have struggled for integration into mainstream society, others have chosen to separate themselves from it. In this context, the term "separatism" refers to the process by which a minority group chooses to break away from a larger group. At the same time, "separatism" may be used to describe how members of a group (no matter how marginal) prevent those designated as "outsiders" from joining it. Thus, separatism refers not only to attempts to create alternatives to straight society, but also to exclusionary practices within the glbtq community itself.

The "Gay Ghetto"

Before Stonewall, oppression forced many lesbians and gay men to large cities, where the privacy, anonymity, and population density allowed substantial alternative subcultures to develop and flourish.

After Stonewall, with the creation of businesses, social services, saunas, restaurants, and other venues that served a predominantly gay or lesbian clientele, "gay ghettos" began to appear in large cities. Some bars and clubs that catered to gay males restricted patronage so that, either implicitly or explicitly, women were excluded. Similarly, lesbian bars tended to exclude men, both straight and gay. In addition, drag queens sometimes found themselves excluded from business venues or political groups by gay men who were uncomfortable with gender nonconformity or by lesbians who objected to drag on political grounds.

Lesbian Separatism

In the early 1970s, after encountering misogynistic attitudes and practices in the gay liberation movement and anti-lesbian discrimination in the women's liberation movement, some lesbian feminists decided to create spaces over which they themselves had autonomy. By ending their dependence on and contact with men, and by forming communities based on the privileging of lesbian identities (which could be political as well as sexual), these women developed separatist cultures in urban, suburban, and rural settings. In seeking to minimize their contacts with men, lesbian separatists created women-only communes and houses, political groups, and businesses, as well as women-only events, such as music concerts and poetry readings.

Lesbian separatists subscribed to a "radical feminist" philosophy that views gender difference in terms of essentialism. Unlike the liberal feminists of the mainstream women's movement, who argued that gender was a social construction, lesbian separatists contended that the differences between men and women are rooted in nature. Thus, women naturally possessed a female energy characterized by its warmth, nurturing, and pacifist qualities. On the other hand, due to their male energy, men were hard-wired to be aggressive, competitive, and destructive. Because men could not, or would not, ever change their ways, lesbian separatists believed that it was necessary for women to exclude them from their lives.

Lesbian separatist feminists also excluded male-to-female transgendered people from their communities and other women-only spaces. For authors such as Janice Raymond and Mary Daly, male-to-female

transsexuals should not be considered women, but instead agents of the patriarchy. According to this line of thinking, biology is destiny, because a biological male, even if a transsexual, will always possess masculine energy and privilege.

In the 1970s, a number of high-profile incidents occurred in which MTF transsexuals were purged from lesbian communities. For example, in 1973 Beth Elliott, who was serving as Vice President of the San Francisco chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, was outed as transsexual and forced to resign her post. Likewise, in 1977 rumors circulated that Sandy Stone, a recording engineer for Olivia Records (a women's music company), was transsexual. After threats of a boycott from lesbian separatists, Olivia management asked Stone to resign.

By the mid-1980s, many lesbian separatist communities began to fracture around issues of race, class, and gender expression. Critics from both within and without the communities charged that radical feminist ideology held the white, middle-class woman as its standard, and that, in particular, the needs of women of color were ignored. Debates over sexuality, role playing, and who should be considered a "true" lesbian also polarized women-centered communities, and contributed to their decline.

Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is a popular week-long separatist event that takes place every summer on private land in Hart, Michigan. In 1991, concert-goer Nancy Burkholder was ejected by staff from the festival grounds on the suspicion that she was a male-to-female transsexual. It turned out that the festival's organizers had an unwritten policy regarding the exclusion of MTF transsexuals from the yearly event.

The controversy over Burkholder's expulsion led to debates within and between the lesbian and transgender communities regarding what constitutes a "real" woman. The festival promoters argued that only people who are biologically female and who have lived their entire lives as women should be eligible to attend. The festival policy thus excludes both male-to-female transsexuals (regardless of their identification as women) and female-to-male transsexuals, as well as female-bodied people who do not necessarily identify as "women."

In 1992, festival organizers made their ban on transsexuals explicit by stating in their promotional materials that only "womyn-born womyn" were permitted to attend. In protest of the policy, a small number of women at that year's festival set up an information table and provided literature about gender issues to attendees.

Beginning in 1993, and for several years afterwards, transgender activists and their allies set up their own site--dubbed Camp Trans--across from the entrance to the festival and advocated for transsexual inclusion in the festival. However, in spite of protests, festival organizers have refused to modify the "womyn-born womyn" policy.

Bisexual Exclusion

People who identify as bisexual have faced exclusion in both the heterosexual and lesbian/gay communities. Many heterosexuals regard a person who indulges in even a single homosexual episode as "gay" or "lesbian," regardless of the individual's self-definition. At the same time, some lesbians and gay men have criticized those who identify as bisexual as being too homophobic to fully come out of the closet, or as cowardly for not wanting to abandon their heterosexual privilege. Bisexuality is often regarded by gays and straight alike as simply a denial of homosexuality or as a transitional stage before coming out as a homosexual.

Because they were often viewed as "indecisive," "morally weak," or "confused," bisexuals were not welcome among many social groups, particularly gay and lesbian activists who believed that bisexuals could not be

fully committed to gay liberation because of their ties to "the enemy." Even to this day, many gay and lesbian organizations only pay lip service to bisexual issues. This situation has led to the creation of social and political groups devoted strictly to bisexual concerns.

Transgender Exclusion

Separatism also exists within the transgender community itself. Virginia Prince, who pioneered the development of an organized movement of transvestites during the 1960s and 1970s, believed that the definition of a transvestite was a heterosexual man who enjoyed wearing women's clothing in order to access his feminine side. One of Prince's main concerns was to emphasize that cross dressing did not necessarily correlate with homosexuality.

Prince wanted to reassure the wives of transvestites that their husbands were not gay. Accordingly, she advocated that gay cross dressers (whether identifying as transvestites or drag queens) be excluded from transvestite social and support groups. Even today, transvestite groups influenced by Prince often restrict membership based on sexual orientation. In addition, with a membership that tends to be white and middle-class, organized transvestite support and social groups have generally not been interested in outreach to those who are sex workers, who are from the working and lower classes, who are people of color, or who are women.

Trans-exclusion and the GLBTQ Community

Transgendered and gender-variant people have often faced exclusion from events and marches organized by the lesbian and gay community. For example, the Gay Games of 1994, which took place in New York, initially had very restrictive rules regarding the participation of transgendered athletes, who had to prove that they had had sex reassignment surgery or had been living full time with hormones in their chosen gender. Athletes who identified or presented as transgendered, but did not meet these requirements, were not eligible to participate.

Transgender activists protested this policy, which led the Gay Games organizers to rescind their standards and allow unrestricted participation. In 1998, however, the organizers of the Gay Games, held in the Netherlands, reinstated the stringent rules regarding transgender participation, and refused to alter them, in spite of renewed protests.

Transgendered people also had to fight to be included in the 1994 New York City march commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Plans by the organizers of the celebration to minimize the presence of transgendered participants was ironic, considering the major role transgendered people played in the Riots themselves. It was only after protests by the Transexual Menace activist group that parade organizers agreed to be trans-inclusive. However, transgendered people had been struggling to be included in pride marches since the early 1970s, as many lesbian and gay activists felt that public displays of gender variance only served to alienate straight observers and embarrass the gay rights movement.

Since the 1970s transgender and gay and lesbian activists have struggled over exclusionary wording in proposed employment non-discrimination policies. Such bills typically propose making workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation illegal. Transgender leaders have fought for the inclusion of gender identity or gender expression in this type of legislation, but with relatively little success.

For example, in 1971 the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) introduced a bill to the New York City Council that was designed to protect homosexuals from discrimination. Although drag queens such as Silvia Rivera were active supporters of the GAA, the authors of the bill excluded transgendered people from its protection. This led transgender activists to break away from GAA and form their own organizations.

One of the most important pieces of anti-discriminatory legislation has been the proposed federal

Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). Although transgender activists worked on the bill's wording with its congressional sponsors and with members of the lesbian and gay community, due to concerns by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) trans-inclusive language was removed shortly before the bill was introduced in Congress in 1994. Thus, while the bill asked for protections based on sexual orientation, it lacked any language that would provide workplace rights for transgendered people.

Similar exclusionary practices also occurred at the state level during the mid-1990s. For instance, in 1995 transgender activists in Oregon were dismayed to learn that their lesbian and gay colleagues had excised trans-inclusive provisions from a bill at the last minute.

In response, transgender activists spent the late 1990s lobbying HRC and other lesbian and gay organizations to reconsider their exclusion of transgendered people in policy formation. These efforts resulted in an increase in transgender inclusivity, and in 2003 ENDA was finally modified by its sponsors to cover transgendered people.

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