



Woman-Identified Woman

by Tina Gianoulis

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"It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution," wrote Charlotte Bunch in 1972, articulating the principle of the woman-identified woman that would be cornerstone of lesbian activism in the 1970s.

Although the concept of the woman-identified woman is particularly associated with the ferment of the late 1960s and 1970s from which it grew, it continues to be an important element in the consciousness of many lesbians, especially those who lived through those decades.

As the spirit of rebellion began to break through the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s, several important liberation movements began, drawing strength from and offering inspiration to each other. The civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the women's movement, and gay liberation all influenced each other in significant ways. Nowhere is this influence more clearly seen than in the interrelationship between the feminism and the lesbianism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which gave rise to the concept of the woman-identified woman.

The Interrelationship of Feminism and Gay Liberation

The women's liberation movement that began to gain strength during the late 1960s challenged the idea that women were naturally subservient to men. At the same time, the gay liberation movement, which exploded into mainstream awareness with the Stonewall riots in the summer of 1969, began to challenge the idea that homosexual identity was a shameful secret. Influenced by both of these emerging political forces, many young women began for the first time to feel proud of their identities, both as lesbians and as women.

Many feminists felt that for too long women had been defined only in relationship to men, as daughters, girlfriends, wives, and mothers. These women felt that many of the "personal" problems in their lives had roots in a male-identified system that demeaned women and kept them isolated from each other. By breaking silences and speaking together in "consciousness-raising" groups, many women began to seek political solutions to their personal problems.

Although many feminists were heterosexual and even homophobic, many of those who were prominent in the women's liberation movement were lesbians. A movement focused on advancing the rights of women inevitably attracted many lesbians, though many remained closeted. In addition, the vibrant connections and stimulating discussions of the women's liberation movement created fertile ground for intimate connections among women. Out of this exciting dialogue arose a new phenomenon: the political lesbian, who recognized her attraction to other women through the ideals of feminism.

Within the gay liberation movement, though there were many lesbians who did not identify with women's liberation, many other young lesbians were also feminists. These feminist dykes often felt more connection

to straight women than they did to gay men, who they felt could be as misogynistic as straight men. These lesbian-feminists, as they called themselves, began to develop a political analysis of female-ness that did not define women in terms of men.

The Woman-Identified Woman

The "woman-identified woman" defined herself without reference to male-dominated societal structures. She gained her sense of identity not from the men she related to, but from her internal sense of self and from ideals of nurturing, community, and cooperation that she defined as female.

The love, sexuality, and energy of the woman-identified woman were focused on herself and other women, rather than on men or male institutions. In a society that despised and belittled women, many lesbian-feminists felt that loving oneself and other women was the most radical act a woman could perform.

Lesbian Separatism

The radical politics that led to the growth of the idea of the woman-identified woman culminated in lesbian separatism, where lesbians tried to focus their emotional and physical energy on lesbians alone.

Separatism led to many contradictions, particularly for the mothers of sons, and eventually most lesbians rejected separatism as a viable life style. However, the concept of the woman-identified woman is still important to many lesbians who came of age during the early 1970s.

Indeed, the hard-won pride of identifying as a woman makes it difficult for many middle-aged lesbian-feminists to appreciate the deconstruction of gender that became such an important part of the politics of young queers at the turn of the twenty-first century.

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