

The Impact of Failed Lesbian Feminist Ideology and Rhetoric

Lesbian feminism was a radical feminist separatist movement that developed during the early 1970s with the advent of the second wave of feminism. The politics of this movement called for feminist women to extract themselves from the oppressive system of male supremacy by means of severing all personal and economic relationships with men. Unlike other feminist separatist movements, the politics of lesbian feminism are unique in that their arguments for separatism are linked fundamentally to lesbian identification. Lesbian feminist theory intended to represent the most radical form of the idea that the personal is political by conceptualizing lesbianism as a political choice open to all women.¹ At the heart of this solution was a fundamental critique of the institution of heterosexuality as a mechanism for maintaining masculine power. In choosing lesbianism, lesbian feminists asserted that a woman was able to both extricate herself entirely from the system of male supremacy and to fundamentally challenge the patriarchal organization of society.² In this way they privileged lesbianism as the ultimate expression of feminist political identity because it served as a means of avoiding any personal collaboration with men, who were analyzed as solely male oppressors within the lesbian feminist framework.

Political lesbianism as an organized movement within the larger history of mainstream feminism was somewhat short lived, although within its limited lifetime it did produce a large body of impassioned rhetoric to achieve a significant theoretical

¹ Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," (1971).

² Charlotte Bunch, "Lesbians In Revolt," *The Furies* (1972): 8.

presence. The lesbian feminist movement emerged amidst a liberalizing and revolutionary political climate in the wake of the tumultuous 1960s, an era characterized by widespread social change and the rise of radical political reform movements. Dormant feminist thinking was reinvigorated through works such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*³ and women's rights activists began organizing around women's issues as a means of breaking down gender barriers. These feminists began advocating for a radical restructuring of patriarchal society towards a system free of male supremacy in which women's social status was equal to that of men.

The lesbian feminist movement also emerged within the context of existing gay and lesbian movements. The 1960s saw increased mobilization and advocacy within the gay community with the development of homophile organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society.⁴ Dominant theorizing within these organizations conceptualized sexuality as a predetermined biological state as a means of rejecting the popular characterization of homosexuality as a mental illness or perversion.⁵ Lesbian feminism therefore asserted itself in the early 1970s in stark contrast to previous and existing lesbian groups working to achieve an equal status in the feminist movement. Homophile groups had attempted to gain acceptance in the women's movement primarily in promoting lesbianism as an innate sexual orientation determined by nature and other biological factors. This construction of lesbianism sought to eliminate homosexuality as a potential point of discrimination by posing lesbianism as a natural state of being rather

³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963).

⁴ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 22-29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

than as a choice, allowing lesbians to seek access to the women's movement by portraying themselves as being primarily like other women with fundamentally similar interests. Political lesbians confronted and challenged this ideology. They asserted that lesbians were in fact radically different than heterosexual feminists in their relationship to patriarchy and male supremacy.⁶ Unlike other lesbian essentialist groups who at the time were arguing for gay rights under the construction of homosexuals as a biological minority, lesbian feminists viewed lesbianism as a choice open to all women and as the ultimate weapon against a male-dominated society.⁷ Rather than blending into the feminist movement, lesbian feminists were standing out in a radical way.

These tactics were in part motivated by the tenuous position of lesbians in the political landscape of the 1970s. Although a burgeoning gay rights movement was breaking away from homophile thinking and rapidly developing across the country in the wake of the Stonewall riots June of 1969,⁸ it was primarily homosexual men who dominated this movement. As a result, this movement did little to integrate lesbian interests or feminist analysis into its rhetoric and goals.⁹ Lesbians were also frequently met with hesitation and hostility within the larger women's movement. Betty Friedan infamously described the lesbian community as the "lavender menace" of the feminist movement, referring to the perceived danger lesbians posed to the women's movement at a time when they were seeking a popular acceptance of feminism and its goals.¹⁰ Feminists had spent decades tirelessly defending themselves against accusations of

⁶ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 206.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁸ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 30.

⁹ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 211.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

lesbianism as a means of delegitimizing their demands, and were therefore reticent to publicly admit openly lesbian women into their community.¹¹

The beginning of the lesbian feminist movement is often marked by the presentation of the Radicalesbian's "The Woman-Identified Woman"¹² manifesto at the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970, challenging participants to confront discrimination against lesbians within the feminist movement and asserting the political nature of lesbianism.¹³ Their manifesto was the first to openly conceive of a lesbian as being defined primarily by a woman's feminist consciousness, stating that, "a lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is a woman who... acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and free human being than her society... cares to allow her."¹⁴ Lesbian feminist collectives such as The Furies, who published a widely distributed lesbian feminist newsletter of the same name in the first few years of the 1970s, further expounded upon lesbian feminist politics. However, the movement never developed much beyond the realm of grassroots organizing, consciousness-raising and conference presentations. By the mid- to late 1970s, the movement had begun to lose momentum and had all but evaporated by the 1980s with the removal of "self-defined sexuality" as a site of feminist intervention during the 1978 National Conference.¹⁵

In a contemporary climate hostile to essentialisms and choice-based approaches to sexuality, the radical lesbian feminist movement of the early 1970s holds an uncertain

¹¹ Hilary Allen, "Political Lesbianism and Feminism – space for sexual politics?" *M/F* 7(1982): 17.

¹² Radicalesbians.

¹³ Carolyn Dever, "Obstructive Behavior: Dykes in the Mainstream of Feminist Theory," in *Cross Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance*, ed. Dana Heller (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 21.

¹⁴ Radicalesbians.

¹⁵ Allen, "Political Lesbianism,"¹⁶

position. Its legacy amongst feminists today is generally a negative one, as a result of its politicized approach to lesbianism at odds with current understandings of sexuality. With the separatist ideals of lesbian feminism and its conceptualization of lesbianism as a political choice, the movement is frequently perceived as alternately laughable and outdated. The movement's embrace of lesbian chauvinism and the "man-hating dyke" persona has left it open to caricatured portrayals by modern feminist thinkers.¹⁶

However, these caricatures do not offer an accurate or contextualized understanding of lesbian feminism's history, intentions or arguments. Although most contemporary feminist theorists are critical of the essentializing moves within lesbian feminist rhetoric and some view it as a failed feminist movement, others continue to analyze the impact that the presence of lesbian feminism has had on the mainstream feminist movement. Overall, what these scholars are attempting to do is understand the complex relationship between political lesbianism and feminism. The debates over this question are contentious and multi-faceted, revealing the uncertain position that lesbians held in the advent of second-wave feminism during the early 1970s.

Some authors today have theorized the lesbian feminist movement as a rhetorical failure to establish an alternative feminist identity within the developing women's movement. The Radicalesbians first used the term "woman-identified woman" to describe their construction of the lesbian as the most authentic expression of feminist identity by renouncing the hypocrisy of maintaining heterosexual relationships while pursuing feminist goals and enacting the ultimate resistance to the patriarchal social system. Tate argues, however, that this conceptualization proved itself to be a non-viable

¹⁶ Bonnie Zimmerman, "'Confessions' of a Lesbian Feminist," in *Cross Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance*, ed. Dana Heller (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 157-58; 163.

term of feminist identity.¹⁷ The movement sought to unify lesbians and heterosexual feminists by establishing political lesbianism as an alternative feminist identity available to every woman. However, it ultimately failed when heterosexual women, other lesbians and women of color rejected the lesbian feminist separatist ideology for not fully addressing the issues significant to their lives. Tate asserts that rather than establishing a viable feminist identity, the rhetoric of the lesbian feminist movement instead cultivated the enduring stereotype of the man-hating feminist. Poirot later expounds upon this argument by asserting that, “woman-identification’s ultimate rhetorical failure might not be its expulsion of certain kinds of women (i.e., heterosexual) from feminism, but its commitment to the liberation that *necessarily* entailed a rhetoric of confinement and containment, domesticating women and feminism.”¹⁸ The arguments of Tate and Poirot work together to position lesbian feminism as a failed and exclusionary attempt at constituting a radical new feminist identity.

Other authors are critical of lesbian feminism’s strategy of utilizing a lesbian identity as a privileged signifier within the larger feminist movement. King argues that lesbian feminist rhetoric positioned lesbianism as a political choice, thereby opening up sexuality to critical examination as a potential tool of feminist revolution.¹⁹ Operating as a tangible life change, a lesbian identity became a symbol for the possibility of radical social revolution through the lesbian feminist movement. King asserts that lesbianism was adopted as a “magical sign” within the lesbian feminist movement, meant to signify

¹⁷ Helen Tate, “The ideological effects of a failed constitutive rhetoric: The co-option of the rhetoric of white lesbian feminism,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 28 (2005): 1.

¹⁸ Kristen Poirot, “Domesticating the Liberated Woman: Containment Rhetorics of Second Wave Radical/Lesbian Feminism,” *Gender Studies in Communications* 32 (2009): 263.

¹⁹ Katie King, *Theory in Its Feminist Travels* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1994) 134.

knowledge of heterosexism and homophobia by simple association.²⁰ She frames this as a limiting rhetorical strategy serving to silence diverse perspectives and eliminate the potential for a complex understanding of historically and politically situated lesbian identities.²¹ Proposing that a lesbian identity inherently gives an individual access to a thorough understanding of class oppression and sexual discrimination erases the diverse reality of lesbian identities throughout social history and in relation to the complex history of the feminist movement.

Although some authors have leveled critiques against the role played by lesbian feminism within the mainstream feminist movement, many analyses present their relationship as a productive one despite evident critiques in which lesbian feminism has acted as a facilitative shaping force. Despite her critique of political lesbianism's appropriation of lesbian identity as a privileged signifier within the feminist movement, King herself asserts the importance of recognizing that the history of the feminist movement exists as a shifting series of discussions, debates and political actions rather than as a clearly defined taxonomy.²² She argues that American feminist theory has been produced by a series of ongoing conversations within the community, defining conversations as "units of political agency and action in theoretical discourse. They often overlap several debates, or may be found in layers over each other within a single debate."²³ These discourses and challenges, such as those that took place between political lesbians and heterosexual feminists, are what help to construct identities and define movements. Given this understanding of feminism's historical development, the

²⁰ Ibid., 124.

²¹ Ibid., 136.

²² Ibid., 56.

²³ Ibid.

relationship between lesbian feminism and mainstream feminism can be understood as a process of fragmenting, creating and re-shaping both lesbian and feminist identities.

In her historical overview of American lesbian life in the twentieth century, Lillian Faderman portrays lesbian feminism as a movement ultimately ending in failure as a result of its idealism and extremism.²⁴ However, she argues that despite its failure to achieve its published goals, the lesbian feminist movement was the source of a variety of benefits for the mainstream feminist movement. Political lesbianism introduced the politics of sexuality into the feminist movement through its process of weaving together the messages of the gay movement and the women's movement.²⁵ Additionally, lesbian feminism served to identify homophobia in the women's movement and sexism in the gay movement, forcing these groups to become receptive to lesbian and feminist ideas respectively.²⁶ Faderman also argue that lesbian feminism played another nuanced role in the development of the mainstream feminist movement. "They [radical lesbian feminists] played a kind of 'bad cop' in a social drama, which then permitted more modern activists lesbians to play the 'good cop' ... Functioning as foils, lesbian-feminists made agitation for simple justice (which was considered outrageously radical at other times) seem tame."²⁷ Faderman's perspective here is that while the movement was not a success in its own right, its presence served to facilitate the development of other mainstream feminist and gay rights movements.

²⁴ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 115-145.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 244-245.

Dever also argues that the existence of political lesbianism ultimately benefitted the feminist movement, although her theoretical approach is somewhat more nuanced.²⁸ She theorizes that lesbian feminism acted as a critical obstruction, helping to shape and define mainstream thought through a process of impeding and redirecting the general flow of feminist thought. Dever argues that while lesbian feminists were not of the mainstream, the mainstream necessarily shaped itself in response to their existence and presence in the feminist consciousness.²⁹ These arguments affirm the idea that while lesbian feminism did not achieve its prescribed goals, it would be inappropriate to simply dismiss or ignore the movement as a failure. Their assertion of sexual politics, and their critique of the institution of heterosexuality were issues that the mainstream was forced to address.

Overall, the existing literature on the relationship between political lesbianism and the feminist movement seems to fall into two camps despite a ubiquitous critique of the actual politics of lesbian feminism. There are those who emphasize the overall failure of the lesbian feminist movement to establish a viable feminist identity while perpetuating exclusionary and chauvinistic attitudes. However, there are other critics who attempt to move beyond the movement's failure to examine the ramifications of lesbian feminism's historical existence. The remainder of this paper will closely examine the ideas and rhetoric of the lesbian feminist movement in order to accomplish two goals. The first will be to reveal and acknowledge the flaws of the lesbian feminist platform as a means of understanding why political lesbianism was not adopted as prevailing tool of feminist intervention. The second will be to assert the significance of political lesbianism

²⁸ Dever, "Obstructive Behavior," 19-41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19; 39.

to the mainstream women's movement in examining the valid critiques of heterosexuality and the dominant feminist movement leveled by lesbian feminist theorists. This approach will integrate the divergent bodies of existing literature by affirming the flaws and failures of the lesbian feminist movement, while at the same time pointing towards the relevance of political lesbianism to mainstream feminism. Political lesbianism's indictment of the institution of heterosexuality as being complicit with patriarchy called for the mainstream feminist movement to reexamine the socially constructed and political nature of sexuality and prompted the incorporation of sexuality into feminist dialogues. Lesbian feminism exists not simply as an isolated and outdated form of feminism, but rather as a dynamic movement with influential critiques whose presence helped to shape the direction of the mainstream feminist movement.

While the mainstream feminist movement during the early 1970s was mostly reformist in nature, lesbian feminists set their sights on a radical full-scale revolution of social organization. Lesbian feminists were most frequently women who came to identify as lesbians after their involvement with the women's movement rather than lesbians who became involved with feminist politics as a consequence of their marginalized sexual identity.³⁰ They asserted that personal sexuality was not only a site of political involvement but also a means of political change. Lesbianism was conceptualized as a tool for combating male supremacy and enacting equalized power relationships between the sexes.³¹ This position opened up lesbianism as a political choice available to any woman who wished to harmonize the contradictions between her feminist politics and a

³⁰ Celia Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (Bristol, Great Britain: Sage Publications, 1987): 112-13.

³¹ Charlotte Bunch, "Lesbians in Revolt," 8.

heterosexual lifestyle.³² It was conceived of not as a personal choice of sexual orientation but rather as a political decision intending to further the progress of the feminist movement towards a society free of sexual power differentials.

Within the framework of political lesbianism, a lesbian is therefore not defined solely as a woman who pursues sexual and romantic relationships with other women. Instead, a lesbian is conceptualized as a woman who rejects any form of womanhood defined in relation to men and alternately aligns herself entirely with women. The Radicalesbians collective coined the term “woman-identified woman” to summarize this lesbian feminist understanding of the lesbian woman. In their lesbian feminist manifesto they asserted that lesbians are those who, “finally realize that the essence of being a ‘woman’ is to get fucked by men.”³³ Many political lesbians asserted that a fundamental aspect of the definition of womanhood in a society dominated by male supremacy and normative heterosexuality is her social and economic oppression. Political lesbians offered lesbianism as a solution to the outrage felt by many feminists in the face of male supremacy and a patriarchal culture. The Radicalesbians asserted that, “we must be available and supportive to one another, give our commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this movement. Our energies must flow toward our sisters, not backward towards our oppressors.”³⁴ This understanding of the lesbian as a fundamentally political entity serves to differentiate political lesbianism of the 1970s from other lesbian and feminist identities, while at the same time providing the basis for the valuable critiques produced within this theoretical framework.

³² Radicalesbians.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Within a lesbian feminist understanding of a patriarchal society, the feminist decision to become a lesbian does not solely impact the woman who chooses to pursue this lifestyle change. Instead, the lesbian becomes the ultimate tool for undermining male supremacy and eliminating a patriarchal social structure. In “Lesbians In Revolt”, a 1972 essay outlining the politics and ideology of lesbian feminists, Charlotte Bunch asserts that, “lesbianism is a threat to the ideological, political, personal and economic basis of male supremacy.”³⁵ Carlotta Reid, a fellow member of the Washington D.C.-based lesbian feminist collective known as The Furies, elaborated by saying that, “lesbianism is threatening to male social power because it represents the spectre of women united in their own interests. It is threatening to individual male power because it represents the loss of a personal servant, plus an always available sperm receptacle.”³⁶ Throughout lesbian feminist newsletters, manifestos and speeches, these impassioned assertions were elaborated upon to create a more nuanced understanding of the potentially destructive impact of lesbianism on male supremacy. In the lesbian feminist analysis of society, male supremacy is made possible through the social institution of heterosexuality, the adoption of which allots women a variety of privileges while denying them true social power.³⁷ In this understanding, heterosexuality is less of a sexual relationship and more of a mechanism for the maintenance of female oppression.

Underlying these assertions is the idea that lesbianism is not simply an alternative feminist path but rather the ultimate expression of feminist beliefs and an absolute necessity for the continuing progress of the women’s movement. The lesbian feminist

³⁵ Bunch, “Lesbians in Revolt,” 9.

³⁶ Coletta Reid, “Coming Out in the Women’s Movement,” in *Lesbianism and the Women’s Movement*, ed. Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975), 94-95.

³⁷ Rita Mae Brown, “Roxanne Dunbar: how the female heterosexual serves the interests of male supremacy,” *The Furies* (1972) 5.

perspective asserts that feminists who continue to engage in heterosexual relationships not only undermine the work done by feminists to combat male supremacy and to improve the status of women, but are also fundamentally incapable of fully actualizing the vision of an ideal feminist society characterized by equalized power relations between the sexes. The Leeds Revolutionary Feminists collective, a lesbian feminist group based in England, penned a paper arguing for the rejection of heterosexuality by all feminists in which they asserted that, “Men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are the collaborators with the enemy. All good work that our heterosexual feminist sisters do for women is undermined by the counter-revolutionary activity they engage in with men.”³⁸ With men positioned as the architects and perpetrators of male supremacy, political lesbians believed that heterosexual women were limited in their abilities to further the feminist cause. Charlotte Bunch illustrates this point in saying that,

“Those who remain tied to men, individually or in political theory, cannot always put women first. It is not that heterosexual women are evil or do not care about their sisters. It is because the very essence, definition, and nature of heterosexuality is men first... As long as women still benefit from heterosexuality, receive its privileges and security, they will at some point have to betray their sisters.”³⁹

Lesbian feminists truly viewed themselves as the being in the vanguard of the development of the feminist movement. The widespread adoption of lesbian feminism by women represented the next step in the fight for a society free of male supremacy.

³⁸ Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), 66.

³⁹ Bunch, “Lesbians in Revolt,” 9.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing aspects of the politics of lesbian feminism to the modern reader is what is often interpreted as an attitude of lesbian chauvinism. “Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice,” was an often-utilized slogan, which now serves to epitomize the lesbian feminist attitude privileging lesbianism as the fully developed embodiment of feminist theory.⁴⁰ This statement points quite concretely to the ways in which lesbian feminist theory privileged a lesbian identity within the feminist community. By regarding a lesbian lifestyle as the full implementation of feminist ideology, lesbians were elevated within this framework as politically and historically more advanced than heterosexual feminists. Although lesbian feminists established their politics as a means of eliminating social stratification, the nature of their politics necessarily established a feminist hierarchy with their own politics inherently established at the head.

This suggestion that lesbians were at the frontline of the feminist movement struck those outside the movement as being alternately superior and dismissive. Letters written in response to the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists’ paper on political lesbianism highlight this attitude as an alienating aspect of the lesbian feminist platform. One woman wrote that the principles of political lesbianism assumed that, “women *ought* to experience sexual penetration by a man as a humiliation, an act of counter-revolutionary class-collaboration etc; and if they don’t experience that, they are deluded.”⁴¹ In claiming that lesbian feminists represented the next step in the development of the feminist movement, they inherently limited the extent to which they could even potentially be criticized. Those women who did not share their feelings or disagreed with their politics

⁴⁰ King, *Theory*, 125.

⁴¹ Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 14.

were positioned as still existing under patriarchal control and being in need of liberation through an embrace of lesbian feminist politics.

These attitudes of lesbian chauvinism and superiority ultimately contributed to the failure of the movement by actively excluding potential allies and devotees. In an article written for the *Furies* newsletter, Sharon Deevy proclaims that, “there is no middle ground and no individual solution. If you, or I, choose not to change, we choose against a women’s revolution and against ourselves.”⁴² The movement rejected women who wished to maintain heterosexual relationships and offered no compromise; even bisexuality was discouraged within the movement.⁴³ The woman-identified woman ideology of the lesbian feminist movement sought to fully appreciate women’s value without the degradation seen to naturally occur with the involvement of male oppressors. However, this approach to elevating the status of women is contingent not only on a primary valuation of women, but also a necessary devaluation of men. The movement did not appeal to the interests of women of color in offering lesbianism as a means of understanding all forms of racial and class oppression and eliminating the avenues for a contextualized analysis of these experiences. Although some lesbians did choose to include themselves in the lesbian feminist movement, many were disturbed by the methods of political lesbianism and were alienated by the primarily political definition of their sexual orientation.⁴⁴

The fundamentally political conceptualization of lesbian identity was another contributing factor to the ultimate failure of lesbian feminism. The lesbian feminist

⁴² Sharon Deevy, “Such a Nice Girl...,” *The Furies* (1972): 2.

⁴³ Loretta Ulmschneider, “Bisexuality,” in *Lesbianism and the Women’s Movement*, ed. Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975), 94-95.

⁴⁴ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 213.

perspective understood lesbianism as both a political stance and a tool of feminist intervention, but sexual relations were addressed only as a secondary issue. Ti-Grace Atkinson theorized lesbians as existing in a liminal space between the male and female classes, offering a buffer between these groups in the struggle for sexual equality.⁴⁵ She argues that, “lesbianism is to feminism what the Communist Party was to the trade-union movement. Tactically, any feminist should fight to the death for lesbianism because of its strategic importance.”⁴⁶ Lesbianism here is approached not as a sexual identity but as a political tactic to be utilized in order to achieve feminist goals. Political lesbians therefore made no reference to sexual desire in their understanding of lesbianism. In her comprehensive study of the social construction of a variety of lesbian identities, Celia Kitzinger asserts that, “the great achievement of the radical feminist lesbian account of lesbian identity is to alienate and disturb proponents of all other lesbian identities. This hostility is derived from the fact that this account of lesbian identity fails to explain and justify lesbianism in terms familiar and acceptable to the dominant order.”⁴⁷ The movement had developed a definition of sexual politics that failed to incorporate actual sex or sexual relationships, and in many ways this definition was simply unpalatable to those outside of the movement.

Ultimately, it is important to understand the exact nature of the flaws that emerged within lesbian feminist politics in order to more firmly grasp its historical impact within the movement. The lesbian chauvinism inherent in the construction of a principle of universal lesbian separatism as the only means of feminist progress operated as an exclusionary mechanism, while the political definition of lesbianism failed to

⁴⁵ Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Link Books, 1974), 138-139.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁷ Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, 118-19.

appeal to the larger feminist population. The critiques leveled against political lesbianism hold purchase under scrutiny, but equally point towards sites where successes within the lesbian feminist movement might be revealed. While the methods and chosen tools of intervention in the lesbian feminist movement contributed to its failure, the social critiques motivating these interventions remain sound. The lesbian feminist movement's indictment of heterosexuality as a normative social institution complicit with the maintenance of male supremacy called for the mainstream feminist movement to reexamine the political nature of sexuality and prompted the incorporation of sexuality into feminist dialogues. Although the methods of the lesbian feminist movement were ultimately unsuccessful, lesbian feminism exists not simply as an isolated and outdated form of feminism, but rather as a dynamic movement with influential critiques helping to shape the flow of the larger women's movement.

Lesbian feminist assertions of the political nature of sexuality took place within the context of the historical alienation of lesbians by both the gay rights movement and the women's movement. Where other lesbian groups sought acceptance into existing movements by highlighting commonalities and emphasizing lesbian normalcy, lesbian feminism asserted lesbians as a distinct group with valuable interests, perspectives and purposes within the feminist movement. Charlotte Bunch acknowledged that, "One week of pretending will show you why the life of a lesbian is not the same as that of a straight woman. This does not necessarily make lesbians better or worse than feminists, but it does make our perspective on male society different."⁴⁸ Furthermore, their politics and rhetoric demanded an acknowledgement of the unique oppressions and needs of lesbians. While previous lesbian groups had countered accusations of lesbianism as a mental

⁴⁸ Charlotte Bunch, "Learning from Lesbian Separatism," *Ms.* (1976), 100.

illness or social maladjustment by emphasizing ways in which they were “just like” other feminist women, lesbian feminist discussion sought to reveal the ways in which lesbians were prevented from accessing the class and economic benefits inherent in a heterosexual lifestyle. Coletta Reid writes that,

“As I tried to live as an open lesbian I began to see the privileges I had taken for granted when married. My husband had been able to make more money than my lover and I together... My husband had taken the car; I was unable to get a loan for another one. I had no credit as it was all in my husband’s name. Landlords wanted to rent houses to families; I had to pretend I was straight to get a job.”⁴⁹

Lesbian feminists such as Reid began calling attention to the tangible economic, social and class benefits denied to women who did not enter into a sexual relationship with a man in the early 1970s. By renouncing heterosexuality, lesbians were indeed renouncing a great number of systemic benefits. In analyzing the unique social position and perspective of lesbian women, they addressed sexuality as an institution bestowing privileges upon heterosexual women and denying them to all others.

Additionally, lesbian feminist women became the harshest critics of the homophobic attitudes within the mainstream feminist movement. These women wrote of the negative reception they received as lesbian women among their heterosexual feminist peers, coming to feel excluded and unwelcome within the women’s movement. In her essay “Coming Out in the Women’s Movement”, Coletta Reid writes that after becoming a lesbian in the early 1970s, “one woman expressed misgivings about me or my friends being around her daughter since I had become a lesbian. She evidently thought I would

⁴⁹ Reid, “Coming Out in the Women’s Movement,” 96.

molest her precious little [child]; she had no similar qualms about my being around her son when I was heterosexual.”⁵⁰ This offers one small example of the existence of homophobia within the feminist movement during the rise of lesbian feminism, outside of feminism’s general anxiety over the public perception of visible lesbians within the movement. By challenging the idea that lesbians needed to persuade heterosexual feminists to grant them entrance into their movement, lesbian feminists challenged the heterosexual privilege that permitted the exercise of open homophobia within the women’s movement.

Within the second wave’s reinvigoration of the women’s movement in the early 1970s, sexuality was often treated as a personal matter irrelevant to larger feminist goals. Lesbians were understood simply as a subgroup of women who were uniting with other women under a common female identity to fight for women’s rights. However, many of the causes deemed to be the important women’s issues by the feminist movement were uniquely heterosexual in character. Lesbians were seen as having little to offer to a women’s movement fighting for abortion rights, access to birth control, and affordable childcare.⁵¹ Political lesbians subverted these effacing attitudes by asserting lesbians as having access to a distinct feminist identity with its own political significance and purposes. In an article responding to a published critique of lesbian feminist ideology, a writer for the *Furies* newsletter says that the critic, “attempts to smash Lesbianism by treating it as a personal luxury rather than dealing with it as a political ideology... Her thesis that lesbianism is a simple personal choice is a cover to avoid recognizing the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

⁵¹ Allen, “Political Lesbianism,” 18.

political implications of lesbianism.”⁵² By constructing lesbianism as a fundamentally political identity, the lesbian feminist movement asserted the relevance of a lesbian identity within the feminist movement and proposed a dynamic of mutual interests between the two groups.

In addition to establishing the political relevance of lesbian identity within the feminist movement, lesbian feminist rhetoric also served to provide an enduring critique of heterosexuality as a social institution serving to perpetuate a patriarchal social system. Charlotte Bunch asserts that, “the heart of the woman-identified-woman statement and of all lesbian-feminist politics is the recognition that, in a male-supremacist society, heterosexuality is a political institution,” and that, “Heterosexism depends on the idea that heterosexuality is both the only natural and the superior form of human sexuality, thus providing the ideological support to male supremacy.”⁵³ Lesbian feminist politics therefore did not simply critique heterosexual relations, but rather the status of heterosexuality as a normative and compulsive social institution. They argued that a heterosexual orientation was laden with various privileges, such as social acceptance and economic benefits, in order encourage women to choose heterosexuality despite its function as a social institution stripping them of power and fueling the system of patriarchy.⁵⁴ However, heterosexuality was conceived not only as a means of exploitation for heterosexual women but also as a point of oppression for lesbian women. Charlotte Bunch writes that, “we [lesbian separatists] were less concerned about an individual woman’s personal choice than about the institution of heterosexuality; less concerned

⁵² Brown, “Roxanne Dunbar,” 5.

⁵³ Bunch, “Learning from Lesbian Separatism,” 99.

⁵⁴ The Purple November Staff, “The Normative Status of Heterosexuality,” in *Lesbianism and the Women’s Movement*, ed. Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975), 79-83.

with sex-roles than with sex-power.”⁵⁵ The underlying ideology of lesbian feminism was therefore less concerned with inflating the status of lesbians than deconstructing heterosexuality as a normative institution enforced for all women. By choosing lesbianism, they were breaking down barriers and challenging heterosexual power in the feminist movement as well as in society in general.

The publication of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists paper outlining lesbian feminist ideology incited such dramatic discussion and public input that the letters written in response to the paper were gathered into a volume published by the OnlyWomen Press in the early 1980s. These letters offer insight into the discussion prompted by the dissemination of lesbian feminist ideas throughout the women’s movement. Some women offered challenges to the idea that participation in heterosexual relationships renders women unable to participate in a feminist reshaping of society. One woman writes that, “I understand perfectly why I *should* feel angry about women “collaborating” with men and therefore shoring up patriarchy; but I don’t feel I can turn round and tell my heterosexual friends they’re “wrong”... I feel that a lot of heterosexual feminists have spent – and are spending – a lot of energy trying to work out their situation.”⁵⁶ Others critiqued the idea of lesbianism as the only means of gaining insight into the oppressive nature of the institution of heterosexuality, such as another woman who wrote,

“I know a bit about heterosexual privilege and the advantages I have as a heterosexual woman... I’ve seen how insensitive heterosexual women can be to lesbians – the constant pressure to see who a woman sleeps with as her own business private, the ways in which many of us refuse to truly consider whether

⁵⁵ Bunch, “Learning from Lesbian Separatism,” 61.

⁵⁶ Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 17.

all men are potential rapists, the ways in which we crawl and conciliate, not just with ‘our’ men but with many others.”⁵⁷

She also elaborates on the feeling of alienation cultivated within the lesbian feminist rhetoric by saying that there is, “a feeling that I’m not a proper feminist and don’t deserve liberating because I’m not behaving properly.”⁵⁸ Some women sought to defend lesbian feminist rhetoric and argue for its position within feminist discussion, such as one lesbian feminist who wrote that, “we must be able to support each other in working out our ideas, and these change. We need a balance between being clear and being allowed to say what we believe, and being tolerant and patient. There is a fine line between saying things strongly, and imposing beliefs on others.”⁵⁹

Overall, these letters reveal that the politics of lesbian feminism were not simply ignored or baldly rejected by the mainstream feminist movement, even if ultimately lesbian feminist politics were not incorporated into dominant feminist interventions. The letters express a desire to respond to the assertions of lesbian feminism in a way that indicates a shaping of the future direction of the feminist movement. One woman writes that the response of feminist women to the paper published by the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, “seems to raise some crucial questions on the direction the WLM [Women’s Liberation Movement] is taking.”⁶⁰ Another feminist woman used her critiques of lesbian feminism to address what she would like to see instead from the feminist movement in saying that, “I want a feeling of pulling together – not pulling each other to pieces. I want to understand better how we as women can support each other, but

⁵⁷ Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 19.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 15.

also how we as women oppress each other.”⁶¹ These responses provide a concrete example of the discussion that was taking place among feminist women in the early 1970s. These discussions addressed and critiqued the central tenets of lesbian feminism, thereby shaping dominant feminist thinking in response to political lesbianism without necessarily adopting it as a primary feminist intervention.

The passionate voices on either side of the issues raised by political lesbianism demonstrate that their movement was neither wholly condemned nor revered, representing the existence of an ongoing and unresolved discussion amongst heterosexual feminists, lesbians, and lesbian feminists. In the foreword to the collection, the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists write:

“[W]e were asked to put the paper in WIRES [England-based WLM newsletter] because it sparked off discussion, and women at the conference wanted other women to join in with the original paper available to them. If it had sunk like a stone, it wouldn’t have received any wider distribution... Because it appeared in WIRES, it was seen as a finished product, which was never intended. We were moving towards an analysis of how heterosexuality is central to women’s oppression. The debate that followed made us look back at the paper again and again, and our own discussions benefitted from the feedback.”⁶²

Similarly, a member of the Furies collective reflects on the impact of her time spent as a lesbian feminist by saying that, “most women in that group have continued to be involved in the development of feminist theory, communications, economics and cultural strategies... It was a time that allowed us to develop both political insights and concrete

⁶¹ Ibid., 16.

⁶² Ibid., 66.

projects that now aid women's survival and strength."⁶³ These voices from lesbian feminists at the outset of their movement illustrate political lesbianism as being something more significant than an isolated or failed social movement. Instead, they reveal lesbian feminism as being an important point of discussion and a developing force for those who subscribed to their politics as well as for those who challenged their ideology.

The lesbian feminist movement certainly did not achieve the lesbian utopia its founding members prescribed in the early writings of the Radicalesbians or within the Furies newsletters. However, the existence of this radical strategy served as a force reshaping how the feminist movement addressed lesbianism while at the same time sparking vital discussion surrounding the institution of patriarchy. The legacy of this discourse can be found in later theorists such as bell hooks and Adrienne Rich. Critiques of lesbian feminist politics are echoed in hooks's analysis of the feminist movement of the early 1980s, which is launched from an examination of the man-as-enemy politics of radical feminism⁶⁴. Conversely, Rich's theories of compulsory heterosexuality and of a lesbian continuum incorporate politicized approaches to lesbian identity and heterosexuality⁶⁵. Ultimately, it is important to recognize that, as Allen notes, "political lesbianism can be read simply as a *stance*: it is a posture that intends to be noticed, that intends to challenge, that will inevitably have certain effects both for those who adopt it and those who attempt to work 'around' it."⁶⁶ Radical lesbian feminist rhetoric challenged the direction of the dominant feminist movement, forcing it to address

⁶³ Charlotte Bunch, "Learning From Lesbian Separatism," 101.

⁶⁴ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Brooklyn, New York: South End Press, 1984).

⁶⁵ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5(1980).

⁶⁶ Allen, "Political Lesbianism," 32.

unexpected questions and engage with unanticipated discussions. While a critical understanding of lesbian feminism and its failures is important, it is equally as important to appreciate the role played by the very presence of lesbian feminism in the overall development of the feminist movement.

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