

Back to the Land of Exclusion:

A History of Lesbian Separatism, Community, and
Trans Marginalization in the United States, 1970s-2020s

By

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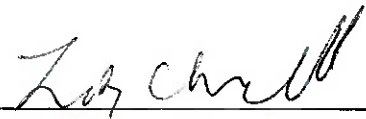
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Abstract

Modern feminist and queer scholars often dismiss lesbian separatism as an antiquated, essentialist practice that serves little purpose for feminists today. Due to the exclusionary nature of the movement, it is easy to understand why. Many individuals and organizations associated with lesbian separatism display anti-queer and anti-trans identity tendencies that receive justified criticism from today's inclusionary perspectives. However, lesbian separatist and feminist communities were prolific in the 1970s and 80s, and they provided crucial space for self-discovery and consciousness-raising. Not only were lesbians creating collectively owned urban businesses, such as coffee shops, bookstores, and record labels, but they also represented a contingent of the back-to-the-land movement, attempting to create rural utopias in places like northwest Arkansas. Those who have written about lesbian separatism often have ties to the movement itself, and they rarely dedicate much analysis to the issues of gender identity within these spaces. Additionally, the scholarly work analyzing this movement does not often extend its analysis beyond the 1980s. Although lesbian separatism was arguably at its height in the 1970s and early 1980s, many organizations and ideologies associated with the movement remained prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s. This period is when we begin to see an increase in discourse about transgender individuals' roles within the movement. Much of the criticism aimed at lesbian separatists comes from internet users in the form of blogs or social media posts. While some article-length essays that analyze trans-exclusionary practices within lesbian organizations have been written, this thesis will bridge the gap between the scholarly work of authors like Dana R. Shugar, Bonnie J. Morris, and others who have documented the history of lesbian separatism with the more recent developments and critiques of the movement. My work argues that while separatism provided crucial space for lesbian women to better understand their identities and

escape societal pressures, issues of race, class, and gender identity caused conflict in many separatist communities that ultimately led to their diminishment in size and scope.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Glossary.....	4
Introduction.....	8
Chapter One: Lesbian Failure or Queer Success: A Historiography of Lesbian Feminist Community.....	12
Chapter Two: Lavender Menace: The Ascendance of Lesbian Feminism and Separatism.....	27
Chapter Three: The Lesbian Lot: Intentional Women’s Communities in Northwest Arkansas...	50
Chapter Four: “I Know You Know”: A History of the Women’s Music Movement.....	77
Chapter Five: Are You Going to Michigan?: Trans Exclusive Radical Feminism and Lesbian Separatism in a Queer World.....	96
Conclusion.....	118
Bibliography.....	123

Glossary

Cisgender (Cis):	Used to describe an individual who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth; i.e. A biological female who identifies as a woman is a cis woman.
Herstory:	A feminist version of the word 'history,' typically used to describe women's history or history from a woman's perspective
Lesbian Feminism:	A version of feminism that claims lesbianism as the ultimate feminist lifestyle/choice
Lesbian Separatism:	A version of lesbian feminism that encourages separation from men/male society; lesbian separatism ranges in extremity
Open land:	A women's land community that invites or encourages outside women to visit
Radical Feminism:	A version of feminism that claims patriarchy as the primary root of all oppression, including homophobia, sexism, racism, classism, etc.

Rural collective/community:	A group of women, often lesbian women, who live together on a rural plot of land; often, the land is owned jointly by members of the community and resources are shared
Trans Exclusive Radical Feminism (TERF):	A version of feminism that excludes transgender women and/or does not believe that transgender women are “real” women
Transgender (Trans):	Used to describe an individual who does not identity with their sex assigned at birth; i.e. A biological male who identifies as a woman is a trans woman. Sometimes, trans individuals will be described as pre-operative or post-operative. A pre-operative trans person is someone who has not undergone gender-affirming surgery while a post-operative trans person is someone who has undergone gender-affirming surgery.
Urban collective/community:	A group of women, often lesbian women, who share resources and/or jointly own a business in a city setting
Womyn, Wimmin, Wymyn:	Variations of the words ‘woman’ and ‘women’ commonly used by lesbian feminists to remove the suffixes ‘man’ and ‘men’

Introduction

While working on a digitization project in 2022, I stumbled across an article from 1993 in the lesbian feminist periodical, *Ozark Feminist Review*, titled, “Spinsterhaven Land.” The article discussed the potential purchase of 91 acres of land in rural Northwest Arkansas, which would be used to create a “retirement ‘haven’ for older and disabled women.”¹ As an undergraduate in History and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, I was intrigued. I did not yet know anything about lesbian feminism or separatism. While I had learned about the Gay Liberation Movement and Second Wave Feminism, recent lesbian history was not on my radar. At the time, I did not know that Spinsterhaven was only one of many attempts to create a lesbian land community.

With my interest piqued, I searched for more information about Spinsterhaven. Were these women still around? Were they living on the land? I found contact information for the group online. After discussing my findings with my mentor and colleagues, I decided to reach out and ask if they were interested in being interviewed. They agreed and what transpired from there would be life changing for me both personally and academically. Within a few short months, I was accompanied by four other students and my mentor, Dr. Lindsey Churchill, to Northwest Arkansas. Most of the interviews were conducted at Spinsterhaven in Fayetteville, a small house and community gathering space they call Elder Tree.

Although we learned that the Spinsterhaven project did not pan out as planned, there was still a strong community of aging lesbian women in the area. Sixteen individuals agreed to participate in oral history interviews and eventually, we interviewed even more individuals with ties to lesbian separatist movements. I found a wealth of community, passion, activism, and hope

¹ “Spinsterhaven Land,” *Ozark Feminist Review* 2, no. 6 (April 1993), 14.

in the stories they told. I also found oppression, fear, death, and ongoing internal conflict. Their stories inspired this project.

Oral history, utilized as a primary source, can provide substantial context for researchers. Rather than speculating on how someone may have reacted to or felt about a specific experience, oral historians can ask directly. Interviewees can fill in gaps of knowledge with their recollections. It is not uncommon for marginalized groups of people to have less written materials that document their history. For these populations, oral history provides a way to preserve otherwise lost, or silenced, history. Scholar Donald A. Ritchie provides an example in his work, *Doing Oral History*. The Federal Writers Project, established during the Depression Era, encouraged writers to interview and document the lives of Americans. During this period, many former enslaved individuals were interviewed about their experiences. However, “most historians dismissed these interviews with ‘aged survivors’ as less reliable than the records kept by slave owners.”² Once historians finally deemed those interviews as useful, however, they accessed an entirely new perspective on American slavery.³ Oral history does, of course, present certain challenges. Memory is not a perfect source, and many interviewees are separated by decades from the experiences they share with historians. However, all sources must be questioned, including written ones. By comparing oral histories with written sources, historians can begin to uncover a more detailed understanding of the past. For the purposes of this thesis and to deepen the conversation, I compare oral history sources with lesbian feminist periodicals.

This thesis will document why and how so many women struck out on their own to create communities, sheltered from patriarchal values. To do so, I examine the movement from a

² Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 352.

³ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 352.

national and regional perspective. I utilize lesbian feminist periodicals from the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, as well as oral history interviews, as primary sources. Oral history interviews are extremely pertinent to my work and provide insight into the specific experiences of individuals who lived through certain historical events. According to the Oral History Association, "oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies."⁴ The process consists of a dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee and aims to collect personal, historical memories. This form of historical inquiry has positives and negatives, as does any other.

Beginning in the 1970s, the lesbian feminist community established a wide network of circulatory newsletters to distribute information across the country and beyond. According to Cait McKinney, there were "at least one hundred periodicals in the United States and Canada that specifically targeted lesbians in the 1970s and '80s."⁵ These periodicals discussed current events relating to the lesbian, feminist, and LGBTQ+ communities, as well as published art, poetry, literature, local and national resources, and academic works. This widespread network of periodicals connected lesbian women, whether they lived in New York City or Fayetteville, Arkansas, to the rest of the movement. Therefore, ideas, events, and organizing strategies were easily shared. The growth of lesbian feminism and separatism would not have been possible without this network of communication. This thesis relies heavily on lesbian feminist periodicals from across the country as well as from specific regions. However, it would not be possible to write about a localized lesbian feminist or separatist community without also analyzing national

⁴ "Oral History: Defined," Oralhistory.org, Oral History Association.

⁵ Cait McKinney, "The Internet that Lesbians Built: Newsletter Networks," 34.

periodicals due to the circulatory nature of ideas. Lesbian women in Northwest Arkansas were reading and responding to lesbian women from the east and west coasts. For this reason, it is necessary to include both national and regional context for the lesbian feminist movement. As argued by Benedict Anderson in his work *Imagined Communities*, the nation is imagined as a sovereign community composed of a limited number of people who feel a sense of connection to each other despite their very real differences. For the lesbian feminist community, connection based on sexual identity overcame separation based on space.

Lesbian separatist theory first emerged in the 1970s. Many lesbian women crucial to the formation of this movement had previously been highly active in Second Wave Feminism, the Gay Liberation Front, the New Left, and Civil Rights. However, they were often ostracized from those movements due to both their gender and their sexuality. This thesis traces the development of lesbian feminist and, later, lesbian separatist theory and practice. I argue that while lesbian separatism provided crucial space for lesbian women to better understand their identities and escape societal pressures, issues of race, class, and gender identity caused conflict in many separatist communities that ultimately led to their diminishment in size and scope. Lesbian separatists, due to their radical feminist roots, viewed patriarchy as the primary root of all oppression; therefore, they often overlooked or even downplayed the impacts of colonialism, racism, classism, and ableism on other minority groups. Additionally, lesbian separatist theory was always rooted in an essentialist understanding of sex and gender. Because these communities did not challenge the fundamental root of patriarchal oppression, the association of sex with specific gender characteristics, they failed to create space that encompassed diverse gender identity. As transgender individuals gained more visibility in the 1990s and early 2000s, many lesbian separatists failed to accommodate changing definitions of womanhood.

Chapter One, “Lesbian Failure or Queer Success: A Historiography of Lesbian Feminist Community,” explores historiographical discourse on the lesbian feminist movement. Beginning with Alice Echols’ *Daring to be Bad*, Shane Phelan’s *Identity Politics*, and Dana Shugar’s *Separatism and Women’s Community*, I analyze the early characterizations of lesbian feminist history. This period of academic research attempted to explain how lesbian feminism emerged from more well-known social movements as well as why there was a marked decline in lesbian and radical feminist community following the mid-1970s. Next, I review the contributions of Arlene Stein and Bonnie J. Morris to the historiographical discourse. Both scholars recognized growing anxiety that lesbian visibility was diminishing; however, Stein argued that lesbian women began to participate more actively in broader LGBT organizations while Morris argued that the rise of queer studies eclipsed the lesbian movement. Finally, I document more recent scholarship that centers on the relationship between queer and lesbian history. This final period of historiography tends to recognize a shift in lesbian organizing while also claiming continuity between lesbian and queer activism. Scholars also interrogate the definition of lesbian as utilized by the lesbian feminist movement, and how that definition left out a large group of women.

Chapter Two, “Lavender Menace: The Ascendancy of Lesbian Feminism and Separatism,” details the emergence of lesbian feminist and separatist communities in the United States. This chapter explores the exclusion faced by many lesbian women in varying movements, particularly Second Wave Feminism and Gay Liberation. In response to that exclusion, lesbian activists coalesced to create a movement that more accurately represented and validated their gender and sexual identities. The publication and distribution of “Woman-Identified Woman” played a key role in establishing lesbian feminist theory, which is detailed in this chapter. Additionally, I explore the history of the lesbian community in Fayetteville, Arkansas and how

lesbian separatist theory impacted different organizations in that region as an example of how lesbian separatism played out in different areas across the country. In particular, I discuss the activism of a group called the Razordykes at the University of Arkansas and how they grappled with lesbian separatist ideas.

Chapter Three, “The Lesbian Lot: Intentional Women’s Communities in Northwest Arkansas,” documents the history of five women’s land communities in Northwest Arkansas through the history of individuals who were active in each community. The first women’s community, Yellowhammer, was founded by Trella Ann Laughlin. After living with multiple different communities, often with men, Trella founded her own in the early 1970s. Through lesbian feminist periodicals and an oral history interview with Trella, I document the process of creating Yellowhammer and the struggles that came with living collectively. Yellowhammer represents the early iterations of lesbian separatist community. Next, I follow the story of Diana Rivers, who founded Sassafras in 1976 and Ozark Land Holding Association (OLHA) in 1981. While Sassafras was an early attempt at creating a collective community, it was largely disorganized and only lasted for a few years. Utilizing what she had learned from Sassafras, Diana was much more successful in her second attempt. OLHA was initiated by a collective of 20 women and featured a detailed contract for those who wished to join. Diana still lives on the OLHA land, which demonstrates the continuing allure of lesbian separatist land community. Arco Iris, founded by Maria Cristina Moroles, is explored next. As the only community specifically for women of color in the area, Maria’s experience reflected the specific challenges that non-white women faced within the lesbian separatist movement. Finally, I document the Spinsterhaven land project, which began as an attempt to create a retirement community for aging and disabled women, primarily lesbian women who did not have families to take care of

them. Although Spinsterhaven was unsuccessful as a retirement community on the land, it morphed into a community gathering space in Fayetteville, Arkansas that still hosts a large population of local lesbian women. Ultimately, Chapter Three analyzes why and how lesbian women created land communities, the struggles they faced in their endeavors, the continued success of some of their projects, and the recent conflicts that have emerged in lesbian separatist spaces.

Chapter Four, “‘I Know You Know’: A History of the Women’s Music Movement,” explores the connection between music and lesbian feminism. As a primary point of connection, the women’s music movement was central to the lesbian feminist community. Gatherings were often scheduled around women’s music artists’ concerts; therefore, this chapter documents the successes and failures of the women’s music movement to gain insight into the wider lesbian feminist scene. Chapter Four begins with a history of women’s music, starting with the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band’s formation in 1970. Then, I dive into the most well-known women’s music company, Olivia Records. While analyzing the importance of women’s music to lesbian feminist and separatist space, this chapter also explores the tensions that arose over lesbian separatism. Women’s music concerts were often sites of contention, primarily due to their strict women-only policy. Issues of racism and transphobia also emerged within these spaces. This chapter represents one aspect of lesbian separatist community and the tensions that developed due to exclusionary policies.

Chapter Five, “Are You Going to Michigan?: Trans Exclusive Radical Feminism and Lesbian Separatism in a Queer World,” turns to the events of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest) and how it brought the tension between lesbian separatism and transgender identity into the public eye. First established in 1976, Michfest became the most popular music

festival in the lesbian feminist community. Anywhere from 2,000 to 8,000 women attended each year to enjoy concerts, workshops, and vendors from across the country. Michfest had a strict women-only policy from the beginning. While many women revered the one-week festival, as it provided them with a safe space to be open about their sexuality without fear of male retribution, many controversies plagued the festival over the years. This chapter discusses the issues of ableism, racism, classism, and transphobia that were raised by attendees, as well as how Michfest organizers responded to each controversy. While attempts were made to accommodate differently abled women, working-class women, and women of color, founder Lisa Vogel was staunchly against allowing transgender women to attend for the entirety of the festival's almost 40-year run. As transgender identities became more visible to and accepted by the broader LGBTQ+ community, Michfest experienced backlash from prominent organizations across the country. This chapter represents the ongoing tensions between trans, queer, and lesbian separatist communities.

In the conclusion, I discuss the forms in which lesbian separatism exists today. The women involved in the Spinsterhaven project are currently dealing with the ramifications of lesbian separatist theory in a world that celebrates, or attempts to celebrate, gender diversity. Paradoxically, certain women who have refused to re-analyze their separatist roots hold similar values as anti-LGBTQ+ conservatives, especially regarding the broader queer community. I document the significance of these values in a modern context and how they contradict the initial intentions of lesbian feminist theory. What happens when a minoritized population begins to attack and undermine a community that is even more vulnerable?

Chapter 1.

Lesbian Failure or Queer Success:

A Historiography of Lesbian Feminist Community

Lesbian feminism came to prominence in the early 1970s, following closely behind the height of Second-Wave Feminism and the Gay Liberation Movement. In response to the ostracization that lesbian women felt from both political movements, a group known as Radicalesbians elaborated on many of their concerns with the essay “Woman-Identified Woman,” which was distributed at the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970, an event hosted by the National Organization for Women (NOW). Within this essay, the Radicalesbians pioneered political lesbianism. They claimed that the truest form of feminism was lesbianism, as lesbians devoted their time and energy to women only, whereas straight women were still inextricably tied to men. Thus, lesbian feminist theory exploded within feminist circles. Groups of women across the country, in areas like New York, Washington, D.C, and Ann Arbor, formed collectives where they participated in consciousness-raising activities and published frequent newsletters. Some groups participated in lesbian separatism by dedicating women-only spaces or even creating land communities where men were not allowed. These women-only spaces provided lesbians with relief from societal pressures, and many conceptualized separatism as a necessary step for feminists to develop their theory away from men. In search of financial independence, lesbian collectives created businesses such as coffee shops, record labels, bookstores, and restaurants. Many of these businesses were collectively owned and operated solely by lesbian women. As lesbian feminist theory spread across the country, collectives popped up in smaller cities, including Oklahoma City, OK and Fayetteville, AR. Although the height of lesbian feminism occurred in the 1970s and 80s, many of these collectives still exist

today. However, conflict over gender, race, and class has caused many lesbian communities to fracture.

Lesbian feminism of the 1970s and 80s presents a unique challenge to historians. The contributions of this national collective have significantly impacted the broader feminist and queer movements intellectually, socially, and politically. However, 1970s lesbian feminism also carries with it reputations of transphobia, racism, and classism. While there is a plethora of established scholarship on second-wave feminism in its broadest iterations, including well-known groups like the National Organization for Women, there has been a dearth of academic work addressing lesbian feminism until recently. Many women who participated in the movement went on to develop successful academic careers, and they have often provided the primary base of scholarly analysis for the movement. Some of these scholars have sounded the alarm bell for what they consider to be the lesbian's exclusion and disappearance from the emerging queer identity. More recent scholarship has challenged the narrative of lesbian invisibility, arguing that although lesbian feminism as it existed in the 1970s is no longer as prevalent, lesbianism as an identity is still alive and well. Similarly to the divide among lesbian feminists that grew out of divergent definitions of "lesbian" and "woman," academics are divided in their analysis of why, how, and the extent to which lesbian feminism has lost its grip on a wide community of women.

Most scholars, however, agree to some extent that the lesbian feminist cause has failed to achieve its full political and social potential. These communities have largely dissolved due to aging, generational divides, internal and external conflict, and a changing political landscape. This historiographical essay will review the ways that different scholars have conceptualized such failures and how historical analysis has shifted over time.

Early Analysis

Analysis of the lesbian feminist movement was first generated in the late 1980s as many scholars believed they had seen a marked decline in the movement's political activism and overall unity. The works written at the end of the twentieth century attempted to explain the fracturing of many communities on the basis of identity conflicts, primarily of race and class. Ideas of success and failure characterize this period of analysis as scholars attempt to define the usefulness of lesbian feminist theory as well as its limitations. Alice Echols, Shane Phelan, and Dana Shugar all trace the movement from the late 1960s through the 1970s. This period of historiographical writing is characterized by a focus on how lesbian feminism emerged from the wider women's liberation movement and radical feminism.

Alice Echols published her book *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* in 1989. Echols locates her work as the second book-length, scholarly study of the women's liberation movement.⁶ Specifically, Echols imagines her book to fill in the gaps left by Sara Evans's book *Personal Politics*, which traced the roots of Second-Wave Feminism to women's activism in and disillusionment with Civil Rights and New Left movements. Where Evans' work left off in 1968 is where Echols picks up the narrative, expanding upon the historiography by including radical and cultural feminism as well as the role of lesbian women in shaping women's liberation. *Daring to be Bad* follows what Echols' terms the "radical feminist movement" from its early beginnings to its height, and finally to its decline. One of the major arguments present within her work is the distinction between radical and cultural feminism. Echols defines radical feminism as a "political movement dedicated to eliminating the sex-class

⁶ Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 5.

system,” while she defines cultural feminism as a “countercultural movement aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female.”⁷ While radical feminists organized politically, led consciousness-raising groups, and critiqued liberal feminists for respectability politics, cultural feminists increasingly eclipsed radical feminists with a focus on separatist, or woman-only, spaces that emphasized the creation of a subcultural community. While Echols recognizes that these cultural feminist spaces were intended to embody “active resistance,” she argues that they instead tended to encourage women to disengage from political activism within the wider culture. Through her analysis of conflict regarding race and class, Leftism vs. feminism, different geographic radical feminist groups, and the emergence of lesbian feminist subcultures, Echols’s work provides a compelling argument for why radical feminism failed to achieve its political potential and how separatist practice came to prominence.

Also published in 1989 was Shane Phelan’s work, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community*, which departs from Echols by introducing political theory and analysis into the discourse. Phelan writes about the lesbian feminist community’s creation, theory, and conflicts through the lens of American liberalism, which she defines as inherently problematic to oppressed groups such as gays and lesbians. “The core of liberalism’s problem has been its metaphysical basis in an abstract individualism that isolates us from one another, both as objects of analysis and as subjects engaged in social intercourse.”⁸ This problem led many movement members of the New Left, Civil Rights, and feminism to reject liberalism. Lesbian feminists in particular felt the strain of liberalism in the pressure they faced to minimize their differences. Even in the women’s movement, Phelan details the strain between lesbian and

⁷ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 6.

⁸ Shane Phelan, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, 5.

straight women, as movement leaders shared “the conventional attitude that lesbianism was a personal issue separate from that of the public status of women.”⁹ However, Phelan argues that in their attempts to redefine and celebrate lesbian identity, lesbian feminists failed to successfully create an alternative to liberalism; radical and lesbian feminist theory claimed sexism as the basis of all other oppression. By doing so, they created a politics of unity that denied individual difference based on other identity categories like race and class. While Echols points to the rise of cultural feminism and separatism as the basis of the movement’s failure, Phelan argues that radical feminist theory itself is problematic. Ultimately, “the failure to date to produce a satisfying theory and program for lesbian action is reflective of the failure of modern political thinking to produce a compelling alternative to liberalism.”¹⁰

Another work that grapples with the early days of lesbian feminism is Dana R. Shugar’s 1995 book *Separatism and Women’s Community*. Shugar provides an inside perspective to the discourse as someone with firsthand experience in women’s separatist spaces. Her book analyzes three sites of lesbian separatism, including theory, historical narrative, and feminist utopian novels to demonstrate the significance and appeal of separatism within lesbian feminist communities. *Separatism and Women’s Community* interrogates lesbian separatist theory to define its impact on the wider feminist community. Shugar details popular works such as Robin Morgan’s book *Sisterhood is Powerful* and the Radicalesbian’s essay “Woman-Identified Woman” to demonstrate how lesbian feminist theory developed over time. She also identifies key historical moments and the creation of utopian novels, such as *The Wanderground*, as evidence of separatism’s hold on the feminist movement. Deviating from Echols, Shugar does

⁹ Phelan, *Identity Politics*, 38.

¹⁰ Phelan, *Identity Politics*, 4.

not emphasize the differences between radical and cultural feminism; she argues that cultural feminism included aspects of radical feminism. Shugar also finds that other scholars' emphasis on essentialism and arguments against separatism's political effectiveness "dismisses or ignores the effects separatism has on a variety of women's lives."¹¹ While her book acknowledges the "instances of racism or classism in separatist discourse," Shugar ultimately argues that many heterosexual and lesbian feminists were, at one point in their life, compelled by separatism.¹² Through imaginative theoretical and literary texts, separatism was and continues to be a crucial part of feminist community.

While this period of historiography represents an understanding of the conflicts present within lesbian feminist communities, it often elides the presence and contributions of women of color and working class women in the movement. Echols's work valorizes radical feminism while dismissing the political effectiveness of cultural feminism; this is problematic for multiple reasons. First, Echols does not address the continuities between radical and cultural feminism; Shugar points out that separatist theory was always present in radical feminism. Second, because she associated cultural feminism with the creation of primarily lesbian subcultures, she seems to offer a critique of the ascendance of lesbianism within 1970s feminism rather than the shift in organizing tactics. While Phelan presents a compelling argument for lesbian feminist community's limitations, she does not explain the continuing allure of said community. Shugar fills in these missing gaps by demonstrating the imaginative potential of separatist theory.

¹¹ Dana R. Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, xii.

¹² Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community*, xiii.

Lesbian Visibility in a Queer World

The 1980s and 1990s saw a dramatic shift in lesbian feminist organizing, as many women became more heavily involved in HIV/AIDS awareness activism and queer and trans identities gained increasing visibility. Academics writing about this shift continued to analyze the early days of the movement while incorporating these new developments. Additionally, the 1990s saw a rise in anxiety regarding lesbian visibility and continuity; younger generations began to reject radical lesbian feminism for modern, more inclusive queer theory and activism. Scholars attempted to explain and document these anxieties through different approaches. While Arlene Stein noted that lesbian community had become more and more fractured, Bonnie J. Morris attempted to explain this fracturing as a consequence of the rise of queer studies.

Arlene Stein voices the concerns of a disappearing lesbian culture and community with her 1992 article “Sisters and Queers: The Decentering of Lesbian Feminism.” Stein approaches the discourse through analysis of 1970s lesbian feminism, ongoing internal conflicts, and the decline of a “hegemonic project” among lesbians. Similarly to Echols, Phelan, and Shugar, Stein finds that the attempt to create a unified theory of oppression proved problematic for diverse people with different racial and class backgrounds. However, Stein introduces multiple new arguments to the picture, including the exclusivity of the lesbian category and the ways that important historical events impacted the movement. “Sisters and Queers” locates the HIV/AIDS crisis as a significant shift in organizing for many lesbian women; previously, lesbian feminist communities had largely separated themselves from “the gay liberation movement that was largely blind to their needs.”¹³ As the HIV/AIDS crisis brought with it waves of rampant

¹³ Arlene Stein, “Sisters and Queers: the decentering of lesbian feminism,” *Socialist Review* 22, no. 1 (01, 1992): 49.

homophobia that impacted both gays and lesbians, many lesbian women joined organizations devoted to LGBT activism and AIDS awareness that brought them into a larger community with gay men. Additionally, the definition of lesbian became increasingly rigid, generating “debates over who would be admitted” to the lesbian feminist community. While “lesbian feminism positioned itself as the expression of the aspirations of *all* women,” not all women were allowed to participate in the movement.¹⁴ For Stein, this contradiction is what led to the fracturing of the community. Although lesbian and gay visibility had increased by the 1990s, many felt that lesbian culture and space was nowhere to be found. Stein’s answer to this confusing paradox is that the “hegemonic logic or center” of 1970s lesbian feminism no longer existed.¹⁵

With her 2016 book, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture*, Bonnie J. Morris becomes one of the first historians to confront the emerging field of queer studies with a lesbian feminist critique. As a so-called “Middle-Timer” of the movement and a historian, Morris offers both a personal and scholarly perspective to the historiographical discourse. Her work details what she sees as a silencing and forgetting of recent lesbian history. Through analysis of the women’s music movement, festival culture, lesbian owned and operated businesses, the Jewish lesbian community, and the ascendance of a “queer” identity, Morris argues that lesbian activism is being dismissed rather than archived. In her introduction, she correctly notes the lack of lesbian history in national textbooks and the abundance of criticism aimed at “older lesbian institutions” for their exclusion of transgender individuals.¹⁶ In response to said criticism, Morris claims that aging lesbians are unfairly characterized as trans-exclusive

¹⁴ Stein, “Sisters and Queers,” 45.

¹⁵ Stein, “Sisters and Queers,” 35.

¹⁶ Bonnie J. Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016, 3.

and, as a result, have lost many women-only spaces crucial to the movement. Although she recognizes a shift in the LGBTQ+ community as natural generational change, Morris argues for the accurate preservation of lesbian feminist history.

This sect of scholarship accurately represents the shift in lesbian feminist community and organizing during the 1980s and 1990s; however, these authors tend to overlook the continuity present in the emergence of queer identities. Stein successfully argues that, due to an increase in visibility and social acceptance, lesbian community no longer serves the purposes it did in the 1970s. Bonnie J. Morris, on the other hand, argues that lesbian identity is falling out of favor. However, she does not provide enough evidence to back up this claim. Rather than accounting for the very real and problematic exclusion of certain marginalized people, particularly women of color and transgender individuals, Morris blames expanding gender categories for the loss of lesbian feminist community. She utilizes language and arguments that are rooted in transphobic ideology throughout her work and does not recognize the contributions of queer and trans people to the 1970s feminist project.

Queer Tensions and Erasure

While previous narratives presented lesbian identity, culture, and community as in decline, more recent scholarship challenges the idea of the “disappearing lesbian.” Rather, these works tend to argue that while lesbian identity has shifted, there is much continuity between lesbian feminist projects of the 1970s and those of today. Many of these scholars have challenged commonly espoused narratives of exclusion, attempting to represent marginalized identities that were present within lesbian feminist communities in a more accurate way. Academics like Finn Enke and Mairead Sullivan attempt to expose the anxieties represented in previous scholarship as regarding a very specific category of lesbian identity: that of the white,

cisgender, politically identified lesbian. Although some of these works continue to reify the divide between lesbianism and queerness, most challenge the narrative that lesbian feminism and queerness are opposed to each other.

Lauron Kehrer documents the decline of the women's music movement in her article "Goldenrod Distribution and the Queer Failure of Women's Music." Through analysis of a particular distribution company in Lansing, Michigan, Kehrer presents the important role that women's music played in creating and sustaining lesbian feminist communities. Her article traces the origins and struggles of Goldenrod Distribution, particularly focusing on the experience of queer and trans-identified individuals in the company. Through an interview with Andy Field, a trans volunteer for Goldenrod, Kehrer demonstrates how aging lesbian institutions can, at times, be hostile to modern queer identity. For Kehrer, this hostility is emblematic of an evolving LGBTQ+ community and a lack of adaptation on behalf of lesbian feminists. She argues that "an increased emphasis on fluid conceptions of gender and sexuality... is at odds with lesbian separatism," and that ultimately, the women's music movement represents a "queer failure."¹⁷ However, "we can read such failures/critiques as successes because they illuminate embedded systems that determine the criteria for failure and success."¹⁸ So while the women's music movement ultimately collapsed due to its exclusion of emerging queer identities, this failure reflects the success of the LGBTQ+ community in allowing for greater acceptance of diverse individuals.

Kristin Esterberg's 2024 article "From Lavender Menace to Queer Nation: The Transformation of Lesbian Identity in the Baby Boom Era" documents how definitions of lesbian

¹⁷ Lauron Kehrer, "Goldenrod Distribution and the Queer Failure of Women's Music," *American Music* 34, no. 2 (2016): 237.

¹⁸ Kehrer, "Goldenrod Distribution," 237-238.

identity were reconceptualized between the 1970s and the 1990s. Emerging into adulthood with socially predominant perceptions of lesbianism as pathological and perverted in an era of radical social movements, baby boom women “helped bring forth radical lesbian-feminist identities” that conceptualized lesbianism as a political choice.¹⁹ Through analysis of lesbian feminist periodicals, Esterberg charts the debate over who has claim to lesbian as an identity category. Although she recognizes that “one can certainly criticize the excesses and rigidity of these early debates... they were important in that they theorized men’s power over women and envisioned a world in which women could live a freer, more egalitarian life.”²⁰ However, Esterberg also notes that conflicts within the lesbian feminist community over race, class, sexuality, and motherhood began to take hold in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In agreement with Stein, she argues that younger baby boom women, who came of age during that time, were impacted by these debates. Additionally, the AIDS crisis pulled many lesbian women into “more radical organizations [that] embraced queer and transgressive identities, with a willingness to create alliances with people of color, transgender and bisexual people, and others...”²¹ All of these factors, and the emergence of young people embracing less rigid gender categories, led to the decline of radical lesbian feminist theory. Esterberg’s work offers another important argument to the discourse, however. While many scholars have noted these changes in the lesbian community as discontinuity, Esterberg argues that, in many ways, new conceptions of lesbianism reflect earlier ones. Just as radical lesbian feminists created a trove of print journalism, younger generations have proliferated their own ideologies and writings on the internet. Additionally, “the rise of queer and

¹⁹ Kristin Esterberg, “From Lavender Menace to Queer Nation: the transformation of lesbian identity in the baby boom era,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (2024), 3.

²⁰ Esterberg, “From Lavender Menace,” 6.

²¹ Esterberg, “From Lavender Menace,” 12.

trans and nonbinary identities in some ways extends the earlier feminist project of exploding gender categories.”²² So while Esterberg finds that generational change has impacted lesbian community, she also finds significant evidence of continuity.

Finn Enke’s article “Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s: Toward a Less Plausible History,” challenges other works that position 1970s feminism as racist and exclusionary. Enke asks how and why narratives of exclusion are highlighted, while the experiences and critiques of “feminists of color, trans and queer people of the same era” are represented separately.²³ They argue that these narratives of exclusion “naturalize the separation of trans from feminism.”²⁴ In citing incidences of trans exclusion without providing the multitude of experiences that trans individuals had with lesbian feminist communities, those individuals become simplified and objectified. Enke’s solution is to review commonly cited moments of exclusion and provide them with more context, particularly from the perspective of the trans individual impacted. Their work reviews how Beth Elliot, a transgender woman, found “a new home and family” in the lesbian organization The Daughters of Bilitis. By revealing the way that Elliot was accepted into this community for years prior to an incident in 1973, when a small but vocal group of women attempted to expel her from a women’s conference in Los Angeles, Enke presents a more nuanced narrative of 1970s feminism. While they recognize the transphobia present within these communities, they also urge academics to highlight “a more complicated set of movements that were thoroughly imbricated with queerness and transness.”²⁵ Ultimately, Enke argues that repeating long-standing narratives of trans exclusivity erases the

²² Esterberg, “From Lavender Menace,” 14.

²³ Finn Enke, “Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s: Toward a Less Plausible History,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (02, 2018):10.

²⁴ Enke, “Collective Memory,” 12.

²⁵ Enke, “Collective Memory,” 26.

contributions of trans individuals to 1970s feminism and positions transness as opposed to feminism.

In their 2022 book *Lesbian Death: Desire and Danger Between Feminist and Queer*, Mairead Sullivan addresses present-day anxieties among scholars regarding the “extinction” of lesbian identity, history, and culture. Sullivan rejects the idea that lesbianism is declining; rather, they argue that these anxieties implicitly acknowledge only one kind of lesbian: the white lesbian of 1970s feminism. While acknowledging that lesbian identity is regarded more cautiously today due to its association with 1970s feminism and trans-exclusionary feminists, Sullivan remains unconvinced that lesbianism is vanishing. Sullivan provides a nuanced analysis of the successes and failures of the movement, claiming “following the lesbian can lead us to some failures of the feminist past but also... many lesbian feminist projects continue to inform world-building and world-changing projects today.”²⁶ While other scholars argue that the emergence of queer studies has eclipsed lesbian history, Sullivan finds that the two coexist. Just as trans-identified individuals participated in the lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s and 80s, lesbian-identified individuals participate in queer communities of today. Sullivan sees lesbian identity existing in a plethora of ways today; what has changed is how lesbian is defined.

These recent works challenge historians to present more nuanced analyses of 1970s lesbian feminism that recognize diverse experiences. Rather than continuing to repeat narratives that characterize this movement as monolithically white and cisgender, Enke and Sullivan bring to light the diverse individuals who both participated in and critiqued lesbian feminist community. Providing a more inclusive picture of who the lesbian feminist was allows for one to

²⁶ Mairead Sullivan, *Lesbian Death: Desire and Danger Between Feminist and Queer*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022, 6.

recognize the continuity between lesbian feminist theory of the 1970s and queer theory of today. However, some of these works could provide more conclusive evidence for their claims. While Kehrer's work identifies the participation of queer and trans individuals in women's music communities, she does not explore the connections between queerness and lesbian feminism; her work could benefit from identifying the continuities that Esterberg demonstrates. Additionally, although she attempts to soften the idea of failure through queer theory, her work still presents a definite distinction between queer and lesbian community that others, like Enke and Sullivan, critique. Esterberg's work ventures to claim continuity between 1970s lesbian feminism and that of queerness today, but she does not adequately explore the participation of queer and trans people in 1970s feminism; utilizing the methods employed by Enke and Kehrer would add context to her arguments.

The discourse on lesbian feminist history has dramatically shifted from Echol's 1989 work that emphasized the differences between radical and cultural feminism. However, all of the scholarship on this movement has argued that the internal tensions of racism, classism, and later, transphobia, were critical in the shift away from lesbian feminist culture, community, and theory. Certain academics, like Bonnie J. Morris, characterize this shift as a forgetting or silencing. Others argue that it represents generational change impacted by significant historical moments and the development of a more inclusive queer theory. While scholars differ in their analyses of why lesbian feminism fell out of favor, all of their works call for more investigation into the relationship between feminism and queerness. The presence of people of color, queer, and trans, individuals in 1970s feminist communities must be further explored to challenge long-standing narratives that discount their existence and contributions to this period.

Chapter Two turns to the formation of lesbian feminist and separatist theory. Beginning with the distribution of “Woman-Identified Woman” in New York and ending with a lesbian community in Fayetteville, Arkansas, lesbian feminism took off across the country in a few short years.

Chapter 2.

Lavender Menace:

The Ascendancy of Lesbian Feminism and Separatism

The 1960s and 70s were rife with social and political unrest throughout the United States. Civil Rights, antiwar, feminist, socialist, and LGBTQ+ activism challenged fundamental national mythologies of the nuclear family and the American dream. While Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs provided governmental assistance to male "breadwinners" across the nation, women, people of color, and the working class brought attention to their plight. In particular, second-wave feminists demanded their rights to bodily autonomy, equal access to the workforce, and freedom from domestic and sexual violence. The most popular of second-wave feminist organizations, the National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966, attracted a variety of feminists. But NOW was not equipped to address the intersectional concerns of all women in the U.S., and the organization's respectability politics often deliberately alienated certain "undesirables" from its ranks in an attempt to appear respectable to broader society. At the same time, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was gaining increasing visibility in its fight for the acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals, following the Stonewall Uprising. However, many lesbians felt that their concerns were not being properly addressed by the predominantly male leadership and membership. Due to the exclusion they faced in other organizations, lesbians began to build and define their politics, culture, and community. Groups like Radicalesbians, The Furies, and others started to conceptualize lesbian feminism and separatism, proclaiming their power and visibility in feminist and gay activist spaces.

Lesbian Exclusion and Strife

NOW co-founder Betty Friedan explicitly begrudged lesbian women.²⁷ In November 1969, NOW hosted the First Congress to United Women, which was intended to invite conversation and provide unity between mainstream and radical feminists. Over 500 women attended the event, but the Daughters of Bilitis, the oldest lesbian organization in the country, was omitted by organizers from the event's list of sponsors.²⁸ In 1970, Betty Friedan was interviewed by *The New York Times Magazine* and referred to lesbians in NOW as a "lavender menace." That same year, Rita Mae Brown, an out lesbian who served as editor for the NOW newsletter, was fired from her position.²⁹

Many feminists of the era were afraid of being portrayed as "man-hating lesbians" and therefore were concerned about associating with lesbian women. The respectability politics of many organizations required feminists to appeal to the dominant culture and to men in power. The politics of respectability is a strategy employed by political organizations in which more controversial or less publicly accepted individuals are excluded. In this case, the visibility of out-lesbians in NOW seemingly threatened second-wave feminists' ability to gain respect from outsiders. However, NOW was not the only feminist organization to explicitly denounce its relationship to lesbianism. Many radical feminist groups, such as Cell 16, also had contentious feelings toward lesbians.

According to scholar Alice Echols, "many radical feminists... dismissed lesbianism as sexual rather than political."³⁰ Lesbians were often seen as hypersexual and exploitative, taking

²⁷ Elyssa Goodman, "How the Lavender Menace Fought for Lesbian Liberation in the 1970s," *Them* (June 2019), <https://www.them.us/story/lavender-menace>.

²⁸ Sarah Dougher, "Sex and Laughter in Women's Music, 1970-77," *Current Musicology* 90 (2010): 35-36.

²⁹ Goodman, "How the Lavender Menace Fought."

³⁰ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 211.

on the roles of men in objectifying other women. A member of the radical feminist group Cell 16, Abby Rockefeller, alluded to this in 1973, saying, “Homosexuality, like the Sexual Revolution, muddles what is the real issue for women by making it appear that women really like sex as much as men – that they just don’t like sex *with* men.”³¹ Cell 16 advocated for members to abstain from sex entirely. For many radical feminists, the sexual revolution was seen as another opportunity for men to take advantage of women’s bodies and enforce sexuality onto them. Because of their dedication to escaping patriarchy-imposed ideologies, feminists often argued that women should disconnect from their relationships with men and focus on themselves. Some women, such as Abby Rockefeller, argued that men’s desire for sex was itself the basis of female oppression. She wrote:

First, let me again assert my belief that the male’s greater need for sex is the reason for their oppression of women. The man’s greater size, the woman’s vulnerability to pregnancy, and her sense of responsibility for the resulting children, made it possible. If women had an equal need for sex there would have been no reason to suppress them as a category.³²

These women’s views of sexuality naturally led to mixed reactions when it came to lesbianism. For those who saw celibacy as the key to women’s empowerment and viewed lesbians as hypersexual, lesbianism was part of the problem. Additionally, although women’s liberation groups were actively unpacking the gender roles they had grown up with, the anti-lesbian sentiment of the dominant culture was still common. In 1970, Judy Grahn related an experience she had in *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, writing, “One night at my regular women’s liberation group meeting, one of the women said, ‘You know, the first night you told us you were

³¹ Abby Rockefeller, “Sex: The Basis of Sexism,” *No More Fun and Games* 6 (May 1973), 31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/community.28041479.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A651ec08b031353b46ee4df30e63b5950&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

³² Rockefeller, “Sex: The Basis of Sexism,” 34.

a lesbian, I sat in terror the rest of the meeting, waiting for you to attack me or something.”³³

Because of their continued ostracization from mainstream and radical activist organizations, lesbians began speaking up for themselves on the national stage in 1970. Meanwhile, they also experienced issues during their involvement with the Gay Liberation Front.

Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was one of multiple queer activist groups created following the Stonewall Uprising. In 1969, the New York City gay bar Stonewall Inn was raided by police. Although this was not an uncommon occurrence for gay businesses in the 50s and 60s, Stonewall patrons decided to fight back. For two weeks, the neighborhood surrounding Stonewall rose up in protest against the discrimination they faced so frequently. Stonewall is commonly cited as a turning point in gay rights. Before the uprising, gay activist groups were primarily composed of gay men, aside from the first lesbian rights organization Daughters of Bilitis, and their activism came in the form of appealing to professionals for accommodation and acceptance rather than taking direct political action. The Homophile Movement, as it was called, was heavily engaged in respectability politics. Members emphasized professional dress and appearance, and transgender and gender non-conforming individuals often did not feel welcome in the movement. After Stonewall, which included multiple transgender leaders such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, LGBTQ+ activism became increasingly visible, political, and direct.³⁴ Prior to Stonewall, around 60 gay and lesbian activist groups existed in the U.S. and Canada; one year after Stonewall, there were between 1500 and 2000 LGBTQ+ activist organizations.³⁵ Lesbian

³³ Judy Grahn, “Lesbians as Bogeywoman,” *Women: A Journal of Liberation* 1, no 4 (Summer 1970), p 36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28046893>.

³⁴ Jim Downs, “The Gay Liberation Movement,” Bill of Rights Institute, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/the-gay-liberation-movement>.

³⁵ “Before Stonewall: The Homophile Movement,” Library of Congress, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://guides.loc.gov/lgbtq-studies/before-stonewall>.

women were increasingly central to many of these organizations, and they often blended feminist and queer activism.

Lesbians Fight Back

For months leading up to their famous protest, a new organization called Radicalesbians coalesced. Coming out of a union between Gay Liberation Front members and Women's Liberationists, Radicalesbians saw themselves at the crux of two distinct types of oppression: homophobia and sexism. Many of these women had previously been part of a group called GLF Women, which described itself as "lesbian activists fighting oppression on two fronts: As homosexuals, we work with our gay brothers to fight oppression based on society's exclusion of individuals who love the same sex. As women, we work with Women's Liberation to fight the oppression of all women."³⁶ However, many GLF Women expressed discontent with the events held by GLF. They felt that they were outnumbered by the gay men who attended, and as a result, they decided to host an all-women's dance. The success of that dance led to many more, and to plan them, GLF Women began meeting weekly. These meetings, originally intended for planning dances, turned into consciousness-raising gatherings reminiscent of those held by Women's Liberation groups. As a result of these meetings, GLF women decided to change their name. Many "felt that they could not affiliate with a male-dominated organization that was in large part sexist." Therefore, a group of women broke off from GLF Women and formed Radicalesbians. Additionally, the foundational manifesto titled "Woman-Identified Woman," was created during these consciousness-raising meetings. Catalyzed by the exclusion they had faced from NOW and other feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations, Radicalesbians members,

³⁶ "GLF Women," *Come Out! a liberation forum for the gay community* 1, no. 7 (1970), 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28035048>.

including Rita Mae Brown and Ellen Broidy, created t-shirts emboldened with the words “Lavender Menace” and took over NOW’s Second Congress to Unite Women.³⁷

On May 1, 1970, just before the Congress’s plenary session, Radicalesbians executed their plan. Surrounded by 300 women, Michela Griffio and Jessica Falstein turned off the lights for a moment. When they were flicked back on, seventeen women donned with the Lavender Menace t-shirts stood in the aisles, holding signs and yelling in proclamation of their lesbian identities. Women from the audience stood up in support of the protest, and the Radicalesbians made their way to the stage. They demanded that the scheduled activities be abandoned to focus on the issue of lesbianism. Despite efforts by NOW organizers to reestablish control of the conference, audience members widely supported Radicalesbians, and they proceeded to engage in a discussion on lesbianism for over two hours. Over the next two days of the conference, Radicalesbians held workshops dedicated to lesbian issues, which were attended by over 200 women. Following the workshops, Radicalesbians presented resolutions to NOW in hopes that their concerns would be addressed. As a result of their actions, NOW passed a resolution in 1971 supporting lesbians and recognizing their oppression as an important cause for feminists.³⁸

Arguably, the most significant aspect of the Lavender Menace protest was the distribution of Radicalesbians’ manifesto “Woman-Identified Woman.” This paper served as the foundation for lesbian feminist politics in the following decades. Within it, Radicalesbians first described the oppression of lesbian women.

Lesbian is a word, the label, the condition that holds women in line. When a woman hears this word tossed her way, she knows she is stepping out of line... Lesbian is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to

³⁷ Radicalesbians, “Radicalesbians,” *Come Out! a liberation forum for the gay community* 1, no. 7 (1970), 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28035048>.

³⁸ Emily Kahn, “Lavender Menace Action at Second Congress to Unite Women,” NYC LGBT Historic Sites, last updated July 2020, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/lavender-menace-action-at-second-congress-to-unite-women/>.

challenge his prerogatives (including that of all women as part of the exchange medium among men), who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs.³⁹

They argued that the lesbian label was utilized as an insult and a warning to women who refused to be dominated or controlled by men in direct response to the exclusion they faced from second-wave feminists who were afraid of being written off as lesbians. Radicalesbians pointed out their commonality with fellow feminists; through the pursuit of equal rights and bodily autonomy, all feminist women defied the gender roles expected of them. Whether her sexual orientation was heterosexual or homosexual, the feminist asserted her independence and therefore posed a threat to male power.

Radicalesbians also detailed the lesbian experience within feminist groups. They called out homophobia within their community, writing:

This dehumanization is expressed when a straight woman learns that a sister is a lesbian; she begins to relate to her lesbian sister as her potential sex object, laying a surrogate male role on the lesbian. This reveals her heterosexual conditioning to make herself into an object when sex is potentially involved in a relationship, and it denies the lesbian her full humanity. For women, especially those in the movement, to perceive their lesbian sisters through this male grid of role definitions is to accept this male cultural conditioning and to oppress their sisters much as they themselves have been oppressed by men.⁴⁰

As evidenced by Judy Grahn's experience in Women's Liberation groups, lesbians were often treated as though they were constantly sexualizing the women around them. Here, Radicalesbians asserted that by casting lesbians in this "surrogate male role" and only relating to them based on their sexuality, straight feminists accepted patriarchal views of sexuality and gender. Radicalesbians also called out the Women's Liberation Movement for avoiding discussions of lesbianism and prioritizing respectability. They claimed that this attempt to remain

³⁹ Radicalesbians, "Woman-Identified Woman," *Know, Inc.* 1970, 2.

⁴⁰ Radicalesbians, "Woman-Identified Woman," 2.

respectable, or even to view lesbianism as an alternative to sexual relationships with men, was to be “male-identified.” Radicalesbians argued that despite their attempts to garner independence, many feminists still internalized the patriarchal values they grew up with.

Finally, Radicalesbians came to their solution: being “woman-identified.” Rather than attempting to gain respect through relationships with and to men, they argued, “Until women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status.”⁴¹ In other words, Radicalesbians argued that lesbianism was the ultimate act of feminism. With this essay, they flipped the previous narrative on its head. Lesbians were no longer serving in a surrogate male role; rather, straight women were the ones flirting with patriarchy. Lesbians spent their time, love, and energy on other women; straight women were inextricably tied to men. This argument rested at the heart of “Woman-Identified Woman,” and it laid the foundation for lesbian feminist theory to sweep across the nation in the following decade.

“Woman-Identified Woman” had a profound impact on second-wave feminism and lesbianism. Before its publication and distribution, many feminists viewed lesbianism simply as a sexual preference not requiring their attention. However, after “Woman-Identified Woman,” lesbians gained tremendous visibility in the feminist community, and lesbianism was reconceptualized as a political act. While most modern-day queer scholars conceptualize sexuality as a predisposition, something one is born with and cannot change, Radicalesbians posited the idea that lesbianism was a political choice to only relate to and expend energy on other women. Lesbians were re-defined from sexually perverse to paragons of feminism. As

⁴¹ Radicalesbians, “Woman-Identified Woman,” 2-3.

Mary Damon noted in 1970, “The accusation of being a movement of lesbians will always be powerful if we cannot say, ‘Being a lesbian is good.’ Nothing short of that will suffice as an answer.”⁴² Radicalesbians’ manifesto attempted to do just that, to proclaim lesbianism as a powerful choice. “Woman-Identified Woman” birthed lesbian feminism, and in its wake lesbians across the country fought for their right to feel safe and affirmed. Urban lesbian collectives sprang up in areas from Washington, D.C. to Oklahoma City to Los Angeles. Newspapers, newsletters, and journals devoted to discussing lesbian feminism proliferated. Pandora’s box was opened, and the lesbian community’s energy came flooding out.

Theorizing Lesbian Separatism

The seemingly natural next step for some lesbian feminists was to theorize and participate in what would be known as lesbian separatism. However, not all participants agreed on what lesbian feminism and separatism meant. For the next several decades, lesbian women proved time and time again that their politics fluctuated across time, region, organization, and individual. As with every activist movement, a broad spectrum of political and personal beliefs permeated the lesbian community. While some women argued for complete separation from men through the establishment of women-only spaces and living communities, others advocated for less militant practices. Because of these differing beliefs, lesbian feminists participated in an array of organizations with widely varying missions and practices, which oftentimes led to contentious relationships. Additionally, women from across the nation formulated their own versions of separatist theory that they often published in lesbian-feminist periodicals.

⁴² Mary Damon, “Open Letter to the Women’s Movement,” *Women: A Journal of Liberation* 1, no. 4, (Summer 1970), 40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28046893?seq=2>.

One result of these varying degrees of separatism was the formation of a group called Revolutionary Lesbians. In 1971, a group of women located in Ann Arbor, Michigan split off from a local chapter of Radicalesbians and formed Revolutionary Lesbians. They began publishing *Spectre: Paper of Revolutionary Lesbians*, and in their second issue, included a widely circulated article titled, “How to Stop Choking to Death or: Separatism.”⁴³ Within this essay, the group defined separatism, saying,

We see separatism as working directly only with women... All our energy and time is spent with women and working on things which will further our liberation. To us, separatism has meant that no new relationships with men are formed and that there is a changing – a slow withering away of old male friendships (living friendships demand time and energy).⁴⁴

In defense of separatism, the essay argued that women were forced to define themselves through relationships with men or to be “male-identified” in the words of Radicalesbians. Because of this, women were not allowed to discover their independent identities or who they would be if not surrounded by and bound to men. Revolutionary Lesbians posited that a woman could only truly know herself if she disconnected from men and surrounded herself with women. They cited previous experiences in groups of “mixed” company, claiming that, “The women are usually afraid at first of telling the men that we really do feel more comfortable and are able to communicate better with other women. But eventually the women always decide to separate into all women’s groups.”⁴⁵ Although the paper does not identify any specific instances, it can be assumed that the creation of GLF Women and eventually Radicalesbians is one example of this phenomenon.

⁴³ Revolutionary Lesbians, “How to Stop Choking to Death or: Separatism,” *Spectre: Paper of Revolutionary Lesbians* 1, no. 2 (1971), 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28045145>.

⁴⁴ Revolutionary Lesbians, “How to Stop Choking to Death,” 2.

⁴⁵ Revolutionary Lesbians, “How to Stop Choking to Death,” 2.

Revolutionary Lesbians lamented women's perpetual roles as the caretakers of men, claiming, "All the men seemed to care about was keeping 'their' women. They said, 'If we have to change, then YOU have to help us.'"⁴⁶ But the Revolutionary Lesbians were fed up with helping men, and they argued that only men could truly help other men, just as only women could help other women. The essay ended with the proclamation that "Separatism is not a necessity only for women – it is a necessity for men."⁴⁷ In order to truly solve sexism, the Revolutionary Lesbians argued that men must turn inward and analyze their own behaviors.

"How to Stop Choking to Death or: Separatism" took Radicalesbians's arguments a step further. While "Woman-Identified Woman" established the primacy of lesbian relationships, Revolutionary Lesbians called for a more complete separation from men. Rather than simply having no sexual or romantic relationships with men, they left little to no room for platonic or familial relationships either. "True" separatists, in their estimation, would not foster new connections with men and would allow their old ones to "wither away."

Another significant work that established and circulated lesbian separatist theory was Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation*. Originally partially published in segments by *The Village Voice* in 1970, 1971, and 1972, and then published in its full form by Simon and Schuster in 1973, her work provided a personal account of her experiences with the feminist movement. *Lesbian Nation* included her journey to coming out as a lesbian and recognizing the importance of centering her life around women. Her work became well-known as one of the first book-length attempts at defining lesbian separatist theory. The name of the work itself, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, established the viability and popularity of such a concept.

⁴⁶ Revolutionary Lesbians, "How to Stop Choking to Death," 2.

⁴⁷ Revolutionary Lesbians, "How to Stop Choking to Death," 2.

Johnston began her book with reflections on her life pre-feminist and lesbian consciousness. She wrote about her marriage to a man and the two children she had with him before realizing her true identity. She also detailed a sentiment found in nearly all lesbian feminist texts: disillusionment with Leftist male activists. She frequently referenced infamous playwright and radical feminist, Valerie Solanas, who wrote the controversial *SCUM Manifesto* in 1967. *SCUM*, which stood for “Society for Cutting up Men,” espoused in dark satire and extremity the ideology that many lesbian feminists would come to appreciate in the following years. In the introduction, Solanas wrote, “Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.”⁴⁸ *SCUM* declared men to be incomplete women, who in the pursuit of accounting for their inadequacy, became the root of society’s problems. Although Solanas’ work called for measures that were ultimately much more extreme than most lesbian separatists’ would end up endorsing, her work was a foundational text for the beginning of a new movement. In 1968, Solanas attempted to assassinate Andy Warhol by shooting him in his studio. She confessed to her crime only hours after it was committed, and she served a prison sentence of three years. The nature of *SCUM* and the actions of Solanas led to the polarization of her work, which her publishers capitalized on by officially publishing *The SCUM Manifesto* later that year. Although her actions were condemnable and outrageous, *SCUM* represented the anger flowing through many women who felt oppressed and abused at the hands of patriarchy. Many feminists found undeniable truths in her work, and Johnston was moved enough by *SCUM* to frequently cite it in her book.

⁴⁸ Valerie Solanas, *The SCUM Manifesto*, Great Britain: The Olympia Press, 1968, 3.

In one instance, Johnston directly quoted Solanas, writing “Again our folk hero Solanis was very advanced saying in 1967 ‘... in the case of the ‘hippie’ – he’s way out, Man! – all the way out to the cow pasture where he can fuck and breed undisturbed...’”⁴⁹ Here, she demonstrated the idea among lesbian feminists that rather than being allies in a fight against patriarchy and oppression, male Leftists were just as misogynistic as those on the right.

Johnston also wrote about the collision of the feminist movement and gay liberation, mentioning the powerful influence of “Woman-Identified Woman” and its impacts on feminism. In her earlier years, she claimed that she did not know any lesbians, as demonstrated by her chapter “There Wasn’t a Dyke in the Land.” However, by the late 1960s, she began to find representation of her own identity; she witnessed the world changing as lesbians gained more visibility. In the conclusion of her work, Johnston emphasized her vision for the future of lesbian feminists. She wrote, “The word [lesbian] is now a generic term signifying activism and resistance and the envisioned goal of a woman committed state... The essence of the new political definition is peer grouping. Women and men are not peers and many people seriously doubt whether we ever were...”⁵⁰ Johnston ultimately called for the creation of women-centered communities, and for all women to realize their potential as lesbians.

Lesbian Nation functioned as a consciousness-raising text for many lesbian feminists and continued to define lesbian separatism in the decades following its publication. What made Johnston’s work unique was her life experience before identifying as a lesbian. Because she had previously married a man, other women questioning their sexuality, whether married or not, could relate to her. Johnston provided representation to those women who came out later in life.

⁴⁹ Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973, 40.

⁵⁰ Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*, 278.

The lack of lesbian representation in her early life also demonstrated the social changes that occurred over recent years. Although it may not have been common to be an out and proud lesbian in 1960, Johnston proclaimed that the time had come for those dissatisfied with patriarchy and heterosexuality to embrace lesbianism.

The Furies also played a key role in establishing lesbian separatist theory. In 1971, a group of women established a collective called The Furies in Washington, D.C., and they became one of the most well-known and influential of the early lesbian separatist collectives. The group was composed of twelve women, including Rita Mae Brown, ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-eight. All twelve women identified as lesbian and lived collectively in a house at SE 219 11th Street in D.C, which is now on the National Register of Historic Places due to the historical significance of The Furies' residency there. Regarding their name, The Furies cited a story in Greek mythology, in which three goddesses attempted to punish Orestes for murdering his mother. They claimed that, "We call our paper The FURIES because we are also angry. We are angry because we are oppressed by male supremacy."⁵¹ The Furies remained staunchly firm in their view of lesbianism as a political act, and they believed that all feminists needed to become lesbians before they could truly fight patriarchy. In an interview with *Radio Free Women*, one member related the reasons for their origins.

I guess part of it came from our feeling that lesbianism is very important to the women's movement. When we were all in the women's movement before and were lesbians, we hadn't really developed any kind of analysis of what was the importance of lesbianism to the freedom and liberation of women. One of the reasons we wanted to start the newspaper was to develop that analysis and try to understand more clearly why lesbianism was so important to women freeing themselves.⁵²

⁵¹ Ginny Berson, "The Furies," *The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly* 1, no. 1 (January 1972), 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28037130>.

⁵²Radio Free Women, "The Furies," *Lesbian Herstory Archives AudioVisual Collections*, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/items/show/984>.

They advocated for all lesbians to disband from the “straight women’s movement,” and to create their own lesbian feminist movement. In the introductory essay of their paper, also called *The Furies*, Ginny Berson wrote, “Lesbianism is not a matter of sexual preference, but rather one of political choice which every woman must make if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy.”⁵³

Although The Furies were practicing separatists, they were not oblivious to some of the tensions that arose from the practice. In 1972, member Charlotte Bunch discussed the issue of separatism, proclaiming its necessity, pointing out its flaws, and attempting to formulate a strategy for future organizing. She claimed that “Women turned to separatist groups... for several important reasons: to escape the debilitating effects of being with one’s oppressor;... to build pride and self-dependence;... and to build a political ideology and strategy more quickly with those who share certain oppressions and/or ideological positions.”⁵⁴ Although she was a firm believer in separatism as a significant strategy, Bunch also pointed out that it often led to a fracturing of the wider movement. She noted that some women used separatism as an excuse to recede into their groups and cease their activism in wider communities. Despite these issues, Bunch still believed that with more unity among separatists and recognition that the ultimate goal of separatist activism should be for all people to work together for a better society.

In addition to discussing heterosexuality, The Furies also theorized about bisexuality. Member Loretta Ulmschneider published an article titled “Bisexuality” in the March/April 1973 edition of their newspaper, where she laid out the reasons why, under the lesbian separatist

⁵³ Ginny Berson, “The Furies,” 1.

⁵⁴ Charlotte Bunch, “Perseverance Furthers: Separatism and Our Future,” *The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly* 1, no. 7 (Fall 1972), 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28037136>.

framework, the bisexual woman “supports rather than threatens male power.”⁵⁵ Rather than choosing to divert all her energy from men, Ulmschneider believed that the bisexual woman was still gaining social approval, power, and financial security through her relationship to men while also “gain[ing] strengths from her woman lover.”⁵⁶ She argued that this caused tension for both the bisexual woman and her female lover, while also reinforcing patriarchal power. Although The Furies did recognize “the bisexuality of human nature” and that their movement sought to “have a society where no particular sexuality is enforced,” they believed that first women must completely refrain from relating to men.⁵⁷

Ultimately, The Furies established a strategy for eliminating patriarchy. They took the idea from “Woman-Identified Woman” that lesbianism was a political act of feminism and attempted to theorize a revolution. If all women chose to only love and relate to other women, then men would no longer have control over them. Women might no longer simply be wives relegated to homely and motherly duties. Men could learn how to take care of themselves, how to respect the roles that women had been placed in for centuries, and finally, how to reform their own patterns of patriarchal behavior. This plan, however, would only work if all, or most, women participated in the revolution. Lesbian separatism left no room for varied sexuality; heterosexuality and bisexuality undermined the cause. Women had to prove that they did not need men as much as men needed them.

Of course, revolution does not come easily, and the utopian concept of all women rejecting male partners is outlandish, at best. Although their intentions may have been noble,

⁵⁵ Loretta Ulmschneider, “Bisexuality,” *The Furies* 2, no. 2 (March-April 1973): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28037138>, 2.

⁵⁶ Ulmschneider, “Bisexuality,” 2.

⁵⁷ Ulmschneider, “Bisexuality,” 2.

lesbian separatists criticized and ostracized other women in the same way that they had been criticized by straight women. They also did not consider intersectional identities; by assuming that patriarchy was the primary oppression from which all others originated, lesbian separatists delegitimized experiences of racism, classism, ableism, and all other oppressions.

The Furies disbanded in 1973, and many members moved on to other lesbian community projects. Lesbian separatism, however, continued to proliferate across the country, largely due to the heavy lifting of *The Furies* newspaper. Not all organizations were as radical as The Furies; lesbian separatism existed on a spectrum, and each group that subscribed to the theory did so in their own way. As evidence of the impact of this movement throughout the nation, a community in the deeply religious and politically conservative South flourished.

Separatism in the Fayetteville Community

In 1972, the Association of Women Students (AWS) at the University of Arkansas, located in Fayetteville, AR, received \$500 of funding from the Student Government. The AWS utilized this funding to create a Women's Center. Originally, the Center operated out of the campus's Presbyterian church. In 1973, it moved to a house near campus. For the next few years, the Fayetteville Women's Center housed several women's collectives and provided a gathering space for both straight and lesbian women, students and non-students.⁵⁸ The many successes and eventual closure of the Women's Center was emblematic of the feminist and lesbian community in Fayetteville at the time and reflected wider trends of the national lesbian separatist movement.

⁵⁸Anna M. Zajicek, Allyn Lord, and Lori Holyfield. "The Emergence and First Years of a Grassroots Women's Movement in Northwest Arkansas, 1970-1980," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2003): 153–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40023231>.

Over fifty women attended the Women's Center's first meeting in late 1972.⁵⁹ From then on, smaller collectives sprang out of the wider group. "Problem Pregnancy" was the Women's Center's very first collective, and it provided resources and counseling for women seeking out abortion. Others included a group dedicated to passing the Equal Rights Amendment, a Women's Health Collective, Women's Sports, and a Committee on the Environment. Two of the most consequential collectives were the Lesbian Rap Group, later renamed the Razordykes, and the Feminist Press Collective.⁶⁰

Lesbians who frequented the Women's Center created the Lesbian Rap Group to conduct regular consciousness-raising meetings where they could discuss issues particular to their experiences. According to member Lydia Walker, a 66-year-old lesbian woman, during an interview I helped conduct in July of 2022, the group was "the first LGBT group of any kind in Northwest Arkansas."⁶¹ During their first meeting, somewhere between six and eight members sat in a circle and took turns telling their coming out stories. Lydia relates comically that by the end of their second meeting, they "had run out of things to share." The women then changed their name to the Razordykes, a play on the university mascot "Razorbacks," and asked for direct funding from the Student Senate. Because they expected to be denied, they planned to write a consciousness-raising letter to the student newspaper "about how oppressed gay and lesbian people were." To their surprise, however, the Student Senate approved a budget of \$300. Emboldened, the group gave educational presentations about lesbianism to classes across the university in Psychology, Sociology, and Women's Studies departments. Lydia remembers, "It

⁵⁹ "Crisis at the Women's Center," *Hard Labor* 4, no. 6 (November-December 1978): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28038182>.

⁶⁰ Zajicek, Lord, and Holyfield. "The Emergence and First Years of a Grassroots Women's Movement," 160.

⁶¹ Lydia Walker, Oral history interview by Mikele Smith, July 2022.

was rough, if you can imagine. This was a very dangerous time to be gay, and very difficult. And we go in the class, and usually the first thing you're met head-on with [is] hostility... people asking the most difficult questions they could think of." Still, many of the women loved going into classrooms as it offered them a chance to change the social perception of their community.

The Women's Center hosted general meetings once every month, and women from both the university and the wider Fayetteville community often attended. As scholars Zajicek, Lord, and Holyfield note, "tensions often arose as discussions focused on the need to create and maintain women-only organizations and or/communities."⁶² Rural areas surrounding Fayetteville were home to many back-to-the-land lesbian separatist communities (see Chapter Three), and often the women who lived in those communities would travel to the city to attend Women's Center meetings. As those women were much more strict about their separatism, they made it known that they did not want to interact with straight or bisexual women, and certainly not men. "At times, these debates led to demands that straight women leave the Women's Center and its collectives. Many university and community women active at the center opposed these demands, however, and they were never carried out."⁶³

This tension was also evident in the newspaper published by the Feminist Press Collective, *Hard Labor*. After hearing complaints and concerns from community members about an upcoming "wimmin-only" concert featuring Teresa Trull, a prominent lesbian feminist musician, *Hard Labor* editors reprinted an article from the Olivia Records Collective called "Why Women Only Concerts?" The article explained their intentions to foster women's culture

⁶² Zajicek, Lord, and Holyfield. "The Emergence and First Years of a Grassroots Women's Movement," 161.

⁶³ Zajicek, Lord, and Holyfield. "The Emergence and First Years of a Grassroots Women's Movement," 162.

and provide “the most open, unoppressive, liberating evening possible.”⁶⁴ The presence of men, in their estimation, would “negatively alter the dynamic of woman-space” because they represented patriarchal oppression and may trigger traumatic memories for the women in attendance.⁶⁵ In addition, the editors of *Hard Labor* published their own article inviting members of the community to send letters expressing their opinions on the matter of women-only events.

In the August/September 1977 edition of the paper, multiple letters to the editor were published in response. Cecilia Seay and Julia Orman sent a letter that denounced the practice of having women-only events, writing,

Having a women-only concert is a throwback to the women’s movement of the late 60’s, which emphasized anger and separatism. The movement in the beginning was a reaction to male oppression, but the time for merely ‘reacting’ is in the past... Outside the rarified atmosphere of a university campus the working class women and housewives are turned off by anger and separatism when they are the very ones the movement needs to reach in order to accomplish virtually anything. The concert, by alienating men, justified the exclusion with out-of-date anger.⁶⁶

Seay and Orman were not the only ones frustrated by the concert. Nancy Edelman also wrote to the paper, claiming that she felt “condemned, not affirmed, simply because I choose to relate to men as friends and lovers.”⁶⁷ However, another woman wrote to the paper proclaiming the positive impact the concert had on her as a lesbian. Reiterating lesbian separatist ideology established by Radicalesbians and The Furies, she found the concert to validate her identity and culture. She also affirmed her belief in lesbianism as “a political reality that is womyn-identified

⁶⁴ Olivia Records Collective, “Why Women Only Concerts?” *Hard Labor* 3, no. 2 (May 1977): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28038174>.

⁶⁵ Oliva Records Collective, “Why Women Only Concerts?” 1.

⁶⁶ Cecilia Seay and Julie Orman, “Letters to Hard Labor,” *Hard Labor* 3, no. 3 (August-September 1977): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28038175>.

⁶⁷ Nancy Edelman, “Letters to Hard Labor,” *Hard Labor* 3, no. 3 (August-September 1977): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28038175>.

and that means putting wimmin first on all levels... the creation of our own culture is essential to the feminist movement.”⁶⁸ Clearly, straight women and lesbian women within the Women’s Center did not agree on all matters, and conflict was not uncommon.

More concerning issues arose for lesbian members of the Women’s Center, particularly the Razordykes, in 1978. According to Lydia Walker, the collective planned to host a spring cotillion before another campus group disrupted one of their meetings.

There had been some [right-wing] groups who had risen up on campus.. They came one day and just plopped themselves down in the middle of one of our Razordyke meetings... These women, of course, wanted to disrupt our activities, and the upshot is somebody got a hold of one of our spring cotillion fliers and sent it to the wife of one of the state legislators of Arkansas.⁶⁹

Lydia claims that the legislator “went into a fury” and contacted the University of Arkansas in an attempt to prevent funds from “being spent on perverted activities.” Administration called multiple meetings with members of the Razordykes and asked the group to change their name. Eventually, the entire Women’s Center was implicated in the scandal, and within a few months, the Student Senate froze their funding. The university officially claimed that it was being defunded because there were too many non-student members; however, members claim that it was due to pressure from the state’s political figures. Ultimately, the Women’s Center closed down.⁷⁰

Fayetteville’s lesbian community did not only stem from organizations at the University of Arkansas. Many other spaces were also available to lesbian women and feminists. In 1975, a Rape Crisis project was created; although it was heavily tied to the university’s Women’s Center

⁶⁸ Sister Purple, “Letters to Hard Labor,” *Hard Labor* 3, no. 3 (August-September 1977): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28038175>.

⁶⁹ Lydia Walker, Oral history interview by Mikele Smith, July 2022.

⁷⁰ Lydia Walker, Oral history interview by Mikele Smith, July 2022, and “Crisis at the Women’s Center,” *Hard Labor*, 5.

in its early iteration, in 1982 the project received grants from the Arkansas Department of Health and the Ozark Guidance Center and became incorporated as Northwest Arkansas Rape Crisis (NWARC). Many lesbian women worked or volunteered for the NWARC providing advocacy to survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence.⁷¹ Fayetteville was also home to a feminist bookstore called A Room of Her Own, a women's pottery collective called Calabash, and the Ozark Womyn's Trucking Collective, which employed and trained many lesbian women in the trucking industry.⁷²

Despite the largely unaccepting, and often hostile, social and political climate of Arkansas in the 1970s, the lesbian community in Fayetteville flourished. The success of multiple different organizations in the area demonstrated that lesbian separatism was strong even in the most conservative of states. In fact, it could be argued that those states fostered the strongest lesbian communities due to the necessity of camaraderie in the face of oppression. However, tension was ever-present as lesbian women attempted to negotiate their own identity, culture, and space. Not only were they fighting a hostile patriarchal society, but conflict also often came from within.

Catalyzed to action by the exclusion and isolation they had faced for decades in radical and liberal activist groups, lesbians began to theorize their own versions of feminism in the early 1970s. Lesbian separatism's trajectory tended to go in two directions after the early 1970s. Staunch separatists tended to gravitate towards rural communes, while less strict separatists often created urban community centers, bookstores, coffee shops, and other collectively owned lesbian businesses. Lesbian-created periodicals continued to circulate heavily amongst the community

⁷¹ Zajicek, Lord, and Holyfield. "The Emergence and First Years of a Grassroots Women's Movement," 167-168.

⁷² Zajicek, Lord, and Holyfield. "The Emergence and First Years of a Grassroots Women's Movement," 166.

for the next few decades. Many lesbian activists leaned into exclusion by separating themselves and their theory from the wider women's and gay liberation movements. Others had one foot in both worlds, maintaining their relationships with heterosexual feminists and gay men while also building the lesbian community. While some lesbian activists criticized mainstream feminism for neglecting issues of identity, sexuality, race, and class, lesbian separatist spaces were not exempt from similar issues. In the decades following the distribution of "Woman-Identified Woman," rifts formed in the lesbian separatist community over what makes one a "woman."

The following chapter examines five lesbian separatist land communities in rural Northwest Arkansas. I will analyze how and why lesbian women decided to move "back to the land" and carve out space for women-only.

Chapter 3.

The Lesbian Lot:

Intentional Women's Communities in Northwest Arkansas

The 1960s and 70s hosted a re-emergence of back-to-the-land movements across multiple social groups. The New Left, a young generation of liberal activists, coalesced in response to Cold War society. These activists participated in “various protest movements, such as Civil Rights, the Free Speech Movement, and the anti-war movement.”⁷³ However, as the 1960s wore on, a rift formed between two camps of the New Left. One group was more heavily involved in political protest while the other “turned to individually focused cultural reformation and would eventually go back to the land.”⁷⁴ Commonly referred to as hippies, these New Left members participated in a “dropping out” of society; they created subcultural communities that allowed them to practice collective living and disengage from the rest of the country. In many ways, lesbian separatist groups followed in their footsteps, and often even found their own beginnings within hippie communities. While other lesbian feminists and separatists continued to participate in political protest and public activism, “land dykes” dropped out of society to formulate their own culture.

As is the case with many social movements, women who practiced lesbian separatism did so to varying degrees. Back-to-the-land women tended to represent the most extreme degree of separatism. However, just like in other forms of separatist practice, lesbian land communities were confronted with never-ending conflicts over race, class, and gender identity. This chapter will explore the trajectory of five lesbian/women's land communities based in Northwest

⁷³ Jonathan A. Bowdler, “The Countercultural Back-to-the-Land Movement,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 2021, 96.

⁷⁴ Bowdler, “The Countercultural Back-to-the-Land Movement,” 97.

Arkansas, including Yellowhammer, Sassafras, Arco Iris, Ozark Land Holding Association, and Spinsterhaven, through the herstories of multiple different women who were integral to their founding. Each of these stories elucidate the motivations for and complicated processes of creating and sustaining an intentional community. All five of these communities represent the different struggles that lesbian land groups experienced as well as the creative ways that those problems were addressed. While some of these collectives only lasted for a few years, others continue to host lesbian women today.

Trella Ann Laughlin and Yellowhammer

“I don’t want to be nice. I want to be free.”

Trella Ann Laughlin was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1937, and by her own words, was “born and bred to be a racist, white-supremacist, religious bigot.”⁷⁵ She was raised by her family’s caretaker, a Black woman named Daisy Rudd. According to Trella’s wife, Marie Howard, Daisy was “the first of many women she loved.”⁷⁶ In an attempt to escape her stuffy, racist hometown, Trella went to college at Baylor University in Waco, Texas and then to graduate school at Stanford. She became an avid participant in the women’s movement and, while in Austin, Texas, played in an all-girls country western band.⁷⁷ Throughout her twenties and thirties, she explored her identity as a lesbian woman.

In 1968, Trella traveled to Turkey to teach for the University of Maryland’s Overseas Division. There, she met her future wife, Marie. Two years later, she returned to the U.S. and

⁷⁵ Trella Ann Laughlin, Oral History Interview with Lindsey Churchill, July 9, 2022, UCO Herland Archives.

⁷⁶ Marie Howard, “Trella Ann Laughlin,” July 27, 2022, *Eureka Springs Independent*, <http://eureka.news/trella-ann-laughlin-july-20-2022/>, accessed February 16, 2025.

⁷⁷ Anna M. Zajicek, Allyn Lord, and Lori Holyfield, “The Emergence and First Years of a Grassroots Women’s Movement in Northwest Arkansas, 1970-1980,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2003): 157, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40023231>.

lived in multiple places across the South. While in Austin, she heard from some of her friends about communal living in Arkansas. Her and her then partner, Patricia Jackson, moved out to the land in 1971. They called the community the “Doobie Plantation,” and it was comprised of both men and women. There, the women learned how to share resources and live communally. However, Trella recalled that “we didn’t have any money, and we couldn’t live with them because the men ran everything. They always ran everything. And I fought with them, because I’m not a nice person. I don’t want to be nice. I want to be free.”⁷⁸ When the men on Doobie Plantation asked them to leave, Trella and Patricia moved to another land on 600 acres in Van Buren County.

After *Ms.* Magazine featured their land in an article, women from all over the country showed up to visit. They shared resources among themselves and visitors, and meanwhile, Trella and one of the other women, Linda Evans, “traveled all over Northwest Arkansas speaking to church, civic, and land groups about the dangers of 2,4,5-T.”⁷⁹ Unfortunately, however, many of the women involved in the land decided to leave after experiencing harassment from locals, who berated them verbally and even burned their tents.⁸⁰

Trella and Patricia moved to Eureka Springs for a time; they worked at the New Orleans Hotel as housekeepers. Then they moved to Fayetteville, where they lived in Mulberry House, a gay collective for both men and women. When Trella inherited money from a war bond her grandmother left her, she decided to buy 80 acres near Fayetteville, Arkansas, which she described as “nothing but rocks.”⁸¹ She placed an ad in *Lesbian Connection*, a popular lesbian

⁷⁸ Trella Laughlin, Oral History Interview with Lindsey Churchill, 2022.

⁷⁹ Zajicek, Lord, and Holifield, “Emergence” 157.

⁸⁰ Zajicek, Lord, and Holifield, “Emergence,” 157.

⁸¹ Trella Laughlin interviewed by Mason Funk, July 7, 2017, The Outwords Archive, <https://theoutwordsarchive.org/interview/laughlin-trella-ann/>.

periodical, calling for other women to join her. Although it is not certain that the following advertisement from the September 1976 edition of *Lesbian Connection* is the same one placed by Trella, it is significant in demonstrating the kind of land many women at the time were trying to create.

WOMEN ON LAND has secured 80 acres of land in northwest Arkansas as a beginning for a women's land trust. We are investigating and researching the details of how to form a land trust. We believe a land trust is a way each woman involved with this land can have equal access and responsibility to land to the feminist community. The concept of a land trust can take care of legal trips and power trips... There is much to be worked out, but we want you to know that no woman will get ripped off after putting in her time, energy, work, or money. It is difficult to review all the research and energy into laws, qualifying to fit their rules, and at the same time, trying to build a new culture, but we have to use their laws for some measure of protection against them.

We will live only with dykes. We wish to relate to female children only – male children would be too sexist an influence on a developing women's environment.

We want to stress farming on this land to raise food to feed the women on the land and support sisters in the cities.

There are no buildings on the land, just 80 acres of beautiful trees, a waterfall, a creek, and lots of painful bugs.

We need to share the responsibility for getting money to pay off the land, for gathering tools, building materials, seed, horse, windmill. We are open to any woman who wants to relate to this land whether she wants to stay full-time, work for the summer, camp and work, spend the weekend, or stay here on the way cross country. We do want to emphasize the need to work.

When you write, describe yourself, your politics, what you can offer and why you want to come. (No dogs please.) Send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Women on Land...⁸²

Trella's experience reflected that of many others who turned to lesbian separatism as some point in their lives. Often, these women were politically active, sometimes participating in the wider countercultural movement and moving back-to-the-land in mixed communities or simply advocating for Civil Rights, anti-capitalist policies, or women's liberation in urban areas. But working with men was not always easy. Often, women felt that they had no power in the

⁸² "Women on Land," *Lesbian Connection* 2, no. 5 (September 1, 1976): 13, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.28039168>.

counterculture because men always dominated them. Eventually, many of those women decided to focus on themselves. For some, that meant carving out space wholly separate from male-dominated society.

Lesbian separatism, it turned out, was not easy either. As the advertisement from *Lesbian Connection* demonstrates, lesbian land collectives faced many contentious questions. Would men be allowed on the land under any circumstances? What about male children? Should land be owned in common? If so, how should members be vetted, and should they buy in? What are the logistics of creating a land trust? How should money be raised, and how should it be shared? Once a land trust had been created, how would members make decisions about the land? Would visitors be welcome? If so, what role would they play in maintaining the land? Answering these difficult questions often proved to be the death of a community. Lesbian separatists had to pave their own way, and often it led them back to city life.

The land that Trella bought came to be known as Yellowhammer farm, named after the Yellowhammer woodpecker. Problems abounded. Yellowhammer lacked money, running water, electricity, and patience. For the first few years, women lived in tents throughout the seasons. They used a campfire to cook and an old, falling apart fireplace for hot water.⁸³ Despite research into the process, the women were never successful in creating a land trust. After the ad was posted in *Lesbian Connection*, word spread, and many women visited. Trella recalled some of the issues that followed visitors.

Women had read about us, and so they all came to visit, which we thought was wonderful, except we got tired of picking up their garbage and their trash and their beer cans and their fast-food wrappers. They didn't have the consciousness that you have to live collectively on the land. You have to learn how to love your mother and honor your mother.⁸⁴

⁸³ Trella Laughlin, "Overcoming Our Issues in Lesbian Community," *Ozark Feminist Review* 6, no. 3 (1996): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28042398>.

⁸⁴ Trella Laughlin, Oral History Interview with Lindsey Churchill, 2022.

On top of dealing with less than considerate visitors, the women had to figure out how to divvy up funds. Trella described Yellowhammer as, “an experiment in trying to eliminate money as a major factor in community.”⁸⁵ Because the goal was to live collectively, sharing and distributing resources as necessary, the women had endless meetings in which they would vote on everything. One memorable moment for Laughlin was when one woman, a New Yorker, asked for money to buy cigarettes. The women voted no, and she replied, “I’m going to smoke. Give me the money for the cigarettes.” And with that, the other women gave in.⁸⁶

Living collectively is bound to cause tension, especially when money is tight. Trella emphasized the impact that negative criticism had on the group’s dynamic. “Too often, the criticism had a little venom in it... There was a lot of anger, and I don’t blame a working-class woman for being angry at middle class women at all.” Class issues were common in land groups, and anger often reared its head during meetings.

Despite the plethora of struggles, Trella also learned a lot from her Yellowhammer experiment. Eventually, the women built a house to live in out of wood so hard that they had to hand drill holes to get the nails in. After the roof they made from 2 by 4’s caved in, the women covered the roof with plastic. “We looked like a package out in the middle of the rock field... I don’t know how we survived.”⁸⁷ The most significant lesson of Yellowhammer, however, was how women could do anything they set their minds to. “Women found we could do it; we could do anything. We could build, we could do plumbing... we could grow a garden even on rocks.”

Ultimately, Trella sold the land in 1980 after most women had returned to the city and her partner, Patricia, broke up with her. She distributed the money from the land to each of the

⁸⁵ Trella Laughlin interviewed by Mason Funk, 2017.

⁸⁶ Trella Laughlin interviewed by Mason Funk, 2017.

⁸⁷ Trella Laughlin interviewed by Mason Funk, 2017.

women in the collective and donated the rest to women's causes. Trella would go on to become a documentarian of revolutionaries around the world, such as Nicaragua, Cuba, and El Salvador. Her network was called "Let the People Speak," and was featured on the Austin Community Channel in Texas.⁸⁸

In her later life, Trella moved to Eureka Springs, Arkansas with her wife Marie Howard. She was an activist until the very end of her life, writing pieces for the local newspaper. Two weeks after I had the privilege of meeting Trella, she passed away due to complications from COVID-19. She was 85 years old, and her wife found this question on her computer: "How does one write the entire story of an 85-year-old know-it-all uppity Southern dyke? With difficulty."⁸⁹

Diana Rivers, Sassafras, and Ozark Land Holding Association

"I put up with more shit from women that I ever did from men or would have."

Diana Rivers is one of the most influential women in creating and sustaining intentional communities in Northwest Arkansas. As of 2022, Diana identified herself as bisexual, though she has been instrumental in creating lesbian community since the 1970s.

My focus has been on community. That was my focus before I came out as a lesbian. My husband and I lived in a community, our children grew up in that community. And so, community has been my touchstone. I was a very un-parented child. My father was out of my life probably before I was three. And my mother was not a mother... It was a very un-loving house. So I think I kept looking for community as family.

Rivers was born in New York City on October 17, 1931. While attending Cooper Union art school at age eighteen, she met fellow artist Robert Folley, and the two married. Together,

⁸⁸ Howard, "Trella Ann Laughlin," 2022.

⁸⁹ Howard, "Trella Ann Laughlin," 2022.

they left school to travel to Europe for their art.⁹⁰ Diana and Robert had their first son in Paris.

Rivers recalls her experience, saying,

We were young artists trying to see the art, which our art here originates in Europe, so we were there, and we hadn't planned on being pregnant... My experience as a young woman was to have a baby in France and then we bought a motorcycle and traveled through Europe with a baby strapped to me.⁹¹

Eventually, the three returned to New York and moved into Diana's first intentional community, Gate Hill Cooperative. Gate Hill, also known as "The Land," was a community of artists located in Stony Point, New York. The Land hosted men, women, and children, and residents would pay monthly rent to help pay off the initial mortgage and maintenance. Each house in the collective had an open-door policy, and the community collectively raised the children.⁹² Diana reflects on her time at Gate Hill fondly. "We all had our own houses, but we owned the land in common. And it was mostly an artist and musician community, so I had a lot in common with the people who were living there. I loved being in community. To me, it was a thrill."

By 1970, Rivers and Folley had three sons and decided to divorce, after which Diana described herself as being "very promiscuous for a while. It's like my body, and I'll do what I please with it. I probably made a lot of unwise decisions that I lived through."⁹³ After the divorce, Diana camped across the country, visiting communities in New Mexico, Oregon, California, and finally settling in Arkansas. With an inheritance she received from a wealthy family member, she purchased 500 acres in Newton County and founded a "mixed" community,

⁹⁰ Judith Blazer, "Diana Rivers, 1931-," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, last updated November 14, 2024, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/diana-rivers-6514/>.

⁹¹ Diana Rivers, Oral History Interview with Skyler Donnell, July 10, 2022, UCO Herland Archives.

⁹² Robert Brum, "Back to 'The Land': Rockland's Legendary Gate Hill Cooperative Turns 70," Hudson Valley News, October 16, 2020, accessed December 17, 2024, <https://hudsonvalley.town.news/g/nanuet-ny/n/276095/back-land-rocklands-legendary-community-turns-70>.

⁹³ Diana Rivers, Oral History Interview with Skyler Donnell, 2022.

composed of both men and women, called Sassafras.⁹⁴ The land was undeveloped, located in the mountains, and featured no electricity or running water.⁹⁵

As second wave and then lesbian feminism spread across the country through periodicals, novels, art, and businesses, more and more women became dissatisfied with their situations. “There was this wave of change coming from both coasts, radical woman change. Finally, it got to Arkansas and was very exciting, and at the same time awful.”⁹⁶ Soon, the women of Sassafras began identifying as feminist, and then as lesbian. Meanwhile, Diana’s first son passed away, and she left the land to tend to family matters. By the time she got back, the women of Sassafras demanded the men leave so they could create a women’s community. Diana, as the owner of the land, had to make the final decision. She ultimately decided to adhere to the other women’s wishes, and the men were instructed to leave.⁹⁷

Rivers described her years at Sassafras as sometimes wonderful and often contentious. After it became an all-women’s community, members split into two collectives. The Blue Creek Tribe and the Lesperadoes lived in separate houses, and soon they devolved into conflict. As with other women’s collectives, issues of race, class, and sexuality were frequently the cause of such tension. According to Diana,

Women went at each other... Like nobody was perfect enough. And I think sometimes in the political correctness, we forgot about humanness. We forgot about, hey, we're here together because we love each other, not because we're going to make each other perfect. So a whole lot of that went on. I mean, I've said I put up with more shit from women than I ever did from men or would have.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ María Cristina Moroles and Lauri Umansky, *Águila: The Vision, Life, Death, and Rebirth of a Two-Spirit Shaman in the Ozark Mountains*, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2024, 55.

⁹⁵ Merrill Mushroom, “Arkansas Land and the Legacy of Sassafras,” *Sinister Wisdom* 98 (Fall 2015): 36, <https://slfaherstoryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Arkansas-Land-and-the-Legacy-of-Sassafras.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Diana Rivers, Oral History Interview with Skyler Donnell, 2022.

⁹⁷ Mushroom, “Arkansas Land,” 36-37.

⁹⁸ Diana Rivers, Oral History Interview with Skyler Donnell, 2022.

Due to increasing conflict at Sassafras, only a few members still lived on the land full-time by 1980. In 1979, some of the original land was given to a group of women-of-color who created a new community called Arco Iris (see below). Diana left Sassafras in 1980, and by 2000 all the land had been deeded to Arco Iris's nonprofit.⁹⁹

However, Rivers had not given up on her dream of community. In 1981, she, along with nineteen other women, founded the Ozark Land Holding Association (OLHA). The name, according to Diana, was “deliberately ambiguous to keep locals in the dark about the organization's intentions: to create a community for lesbians.”¹⁰⁰ At first, it was difficult for the group to decide where to settle. Diana explained that “for a lot of women, this was the chunk of money they had to put into land. If this wasn't the right place, they were going to lose everything.”¹⁰¹ But Diana felt that she had found the perfect land. She visited a plot about twenty miles outside of Fayetteville and met with the woman currently living there, Maud. Although Maud did not own the property, she was invested in OLHA buying it because she believed that the other people interested would turn it into a junk yard. Eventually, Rivers was able to convince the other women that this was the right choice. She put down \$30,000 of her inheritance towards the \$100,000 price, and the land was theirs. Each of the other nineteen women bought in with \$5,000.¹⁰²

This time, Diana was motivated to create a community that addressed the issues she had previously experienced in collective living. To do so, members drafted up a contract that detailed

⁹⁹ Mushroom, “Arkansas Land,” 40-41.

¹⁰⁰ Jordan Gass-Poore, “Lesbian-only ‘intentional community’ outlasts others,” *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, August 31, 2015, <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2015/aug/31/lesbian-only-intentional-community-outl-1/>.

¹⁰¹ Diana Rivers, Oral History Interview with Skyler Donnell, 2022.

¹⁰² William H. Pruden, “Ozark Land Holding Association,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed February 12, 2025, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/ozark-land-holding-association-5383/>.

common land, private land, the maximum number of members, ecological agreements, visitor policies, and management of the property and collective.

The OLHA contract stipulated that it would consist of twenty women in total. Each woman would buy in to the collective with \$5,000. As of 1983, members were responsible for paying monthly fees of \$39 towards the cost of the land, \$19 towards reimbursing Diana's down payment and closing costs, and \$9 to use and maintain the common land. In total, members paid \$67 every month to the collective whether they lived on the land or not. In return, they each received a five-acre plot of the total 241 acres which they could use as they saw fit. However, they were only allowed to host one additional resident; visitors had to be invited by a member and approved of by the collective. The contract explicitly stated that, "This land is not to be considered open land."¹⁰³ It also contained a stipulation for the sale of membership. If a woman decided to sell her land, the collective held final say in who could buy it.¹⁰⁴

All land not held under private contract was considered common. Members had the right to use and enjoy common land, which included "gardens, pastures, woods, buildings, wells, and a pond located thereon, also springs and creeks wherever located, whether on common or exclusively used land, also shared roads..."¹⁰⁵ Members were also subject to ecological agreements intended to protect the environment and "all our sister creatures."¹⁰⁶ Electricity was restricted to a designated area. Hunting, poisons, commercial development, petro-chemicals, herbicides, and pesticides were all forbidden. Members were responsible for maintenance of their private land.

¹⁰³ Joyce Cheney, ed., *Lesbian Land*, Minneapolis: Word Weavers, 1985, 94.

¹⁰⁴ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 93-95.

¹⁰⁵ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 95.

One particularly important part of the contract was the “management” clause. It stated that “Governance of common land shall be by consensus minus one of the members.”¹⁰⁷ This form of management maintained across many different issues. If a member wanted to bring a bulldozer to the land, she must run it by the rest of the collective. One of the first challenges that the collective faced was figuring out how to divide up the land into five-acre plots for each member. In a 1983 interview with Lee Lanning and Nett Hart, published in Joyce Cheney’s *Lesbian Land*, Diana stated “That was a period of time when women got very scared. Some women felt there was this land rush going on, and they were working and busy with kids and couldn’t come out and search the land.”¹⁰⁸ In response to that issue, the women came together and figured out a plan that worked for everyone. Each member was given three weeks to find their plot, and at the end of the three weeks it would be theirs. “It is possible to take quite different viewpoints and find something that will satisfy.”¹⁰⁹

Diana and the other founding members created these stipulations to address previous issues in collective living. At Sassafras, for example, members could come and go as they pleased. They were not required to buy-in, and visitors abounded. According to Diana, this created a less cohesive community.

I think OLHA was always a much more settled community. We had a bunch of ideas about it. Everybody had their own five acres. Sassafras was always sort of a hippie community, and there was this constant coming and going. And to me, there was never stability. We did lots of wonderful things, including acid trips together and all kinds of stuff. [We had] a beautiful creek with big swimming holes. That was a wonderful experience, but it never felt like settled community, never felt like we could hold this... Could we go on for ten years? No. And OLHA in the beginning was people who said they wanted to be in community. Of course, that didn’t turn out to be true either.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 94.

¹⁰⁸ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 89.

¹⁰⁹ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 89.

¹¹⁰ Diana Rivers, Oral History Interview with Skyler Donnell, 2022.

OLHA was explicitly women's land from the beginning. Although members had varying definitions of separatism, most of them considered themselves to be part of the practice. One member interviewed in 1983 stated that, "We're all separatists, to a degree." Another member responded in agreement, "Or we wouldn't be here. I don't know if those boundaries mean anything anymore, but we did choose land with that in mind."¹¹¹ Many of the original members continued to work in Fayetteville while living on the land. Some of them were members of the Women's Trucking Collective; others were teachers and nurses. Some of them had previously participated in Sassafras with Diana, and many had collective living experience.

The demographic of members was one concern of Diana and others involved in the collective. Because of the buy-in costs, they were concerned that membership was not accessible to lower- and working-class women. One member stated, "I would like to figure out some way so that working class wimmin can continue to buy in. I wouldn't be comfortable living here with all middle class wimmin."¹¹² Whether the group ever figured out how to make membership more readily available remains unseen. Another important consideration was that the entire membership was, at that time, composed of white women. "Race balance is a little out of the question as the area is mainly white... I would also like to see wimmin of color here, but I don't want to put anyone into the position of being a token woman of color so I don't know how that would ever work."¹¹³ As with many lesbian separatist communities, OLHA was predominantly white and middle class. The story of Arco Iris and María Cristina Moroles elaborates on many of the reasons that women of color did not feel comfortable with living amongst primarily white women.

¹¹¹ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 92.

¹¹² Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 91.

¹¹³ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 91.

Although Diana claimed that OLHA did not ultimately turn out the way she intended, it was much more successful than Sassafras. As of 2025, Diana still lives on the land with multiple other women. With the help of friend and member Nancy Vaughn as well as other local craftswomen, Diana's house was built in the mid 80's. Although OLHA only had twelve members in 2015 (two of whom were original members), the collective is actively looking for more women to join.¹¹⁴ Now a ninety-three-year-old woman, Diana is still living out her dream of community, and her legacy has profoundly impacted Northwest Arkansas's history.

María Cristina Moroles and Arco Iris

“We need to feel like we have the time and space amongst ourselves and our sisters of color to find ourselves amidst this white patriarchal society.”

María Cristina Moroles was born October 17, 1953, exactly twenty-two years after Diana, in Corpus Christi, Texas. Moroles identifies as a two-spirit woman and has both Mexican and Indigenous American ancestry. Her childhood was rife with struggle. She was frequently the target of racist violence at school. When she was twelve, Moroles was sexually assaulted and became pregnant. After giving her child up for adoption, María ran away from home and eventually ended up in foster care. After a series of different foster placements, María began living on the streets of Dallas. She married David Paige at age fifteen. By seventeen, the two had a daughter. In her memoir, María discusses seeing visions of a mountain. Eventually, she found that mountain, which she believed called to her through dreams sent by her ancestors, in Arkansas.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Gass-Poore, “Lesbian-only ‘intentional community’ outlasts others,” 2015.

¹¹⁵ Moroles, *Águila*, 1-50.

David, María, and their daughter moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas in 1973 after María's friends told her about an open land community called Sassafras. The three of them visited Sassafras shortly after arriving in Fayetteville, but María describes the encounter as less than friendly. "Finally, one of them looked our way, unsmiling: 'Who are you? What are you doing here?'"¹¹⁶ Despite being invited by friends from the land, who were not currently there but encouraged María to visit, she did not feel welcome. She would not visit Sassafras again for over a year.

Meanwhile, David's struggles with alcoholism were progressively getting worse. María decided that he needed to return to Dallas to prevent endangering her or their daughter. After he left, she was trained at the local women's trucking collective where she became employed. While she was on the road every other week, her daughter stayed at Moon House, "a safe house for children... taking care of lesbian workers' children overnight."¹¹⁷

María was trepidatious about visiting Sassafras again. Her status as a working-class woman of color made her feel alienated from the other members.

A number of women in the trucking collective and other lesbian collectives in town spent time in Sassafras. All of them white, most of them middle-class, they had swung hard toward separatism, rejecting anything connected to 'the patriarchy': men, male children, male gods, straight women, bisexual women, 'feminine' styles of hair and clothing.¹¹⁸

However, her friend and coworker, Shiner, encouraged her to return to the land and give it another chance. According to Shiner, it had changed significantly since the last time she had visited. By then, as discussed above, Sassafras was an all-women's community.

Due to Shiner's urging, María decided to visit again, this time with her friend Leona. Once again, she was greeted less than enthusiastically. After being stopped at the gate and

¹¹⁶ Moroles, *Águila*, 51.

¹¹⁷ Moroles, *Águila*, 53.

¹¹⁸ Moroles, *Águila*, 54.

grudgingly allowed to pass, María and Leona walked around. They were only acknowledged by one woman, Berry, before they left.

Many women roamed about, none greeting us. Some went topless. Some wore only a breechcloth and a belt. Several, I noted, had knives tucked into their belts. A few wore beaded, feathered headbands and moccasins... But other than the switching out of the long-haired men for a bunch of short-haired women, I could not see all that much change. As Leona and I—two Indian women, one short, one tall; one dark-skinned, one light; both with long, straight black hair, and both saddened by the spectacle—trudged back toward our truck, a sturdy woman with close-cropped white-blond hair approached us. ‘My name is Berry,’ she said. She had a strong German accent. ‘I saw you here the last time you came. You belong here. You do belong here. Don’t go away.’¹¹⁹

Berry told María about unoccupied land within the 500 acres owned by Diana Rivers and Sassafras, encouraging her to think about settling there. “My heart opened a crack,” María noted, as she returned to Fayetteville.¹²⁰

María’s struggles with Sassafras were indicative of deeper, widespread currents in the lesbian separatist movement. Many women of color were critical of lesbian separatist practices and theory, particularly because it often downplayed race and class oppression. The reason that most lesbian separatist collectives were primarily white may have been because women of color had more in common with working class and non-white men. In 1977, a group of Black feminists called the Combahee River Collective, located in Boston, released a political statement that addressed these concerns. They stated,

We often find it difficult to separate race and class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously... We reject the stance of Lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se — ie., their biological maleness— that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must

¹¹⁹ Moroles, *Águila*, 55-56.

¹²⁰ Moroles, *Águila*, 56.

also question whether Lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.¹²¹

For these women, claiming sex as the root of all other oppression was inaccurate. Lesbian separatism left behind other people who were also negatively impacted by patriarchy, imperialism, racism, and capitalism. According to theorist and scholar bell hooks, “Anti-male sentiments alienated many poor and working-class women, particularly non-white women, from feminist movement. Their life experiences had shown them that they have more in common with men of their race and/or class group than bourgeois white women.”¹²² Maria may or may not have felt similar sentiments when visiting Sassafras; on what ground could she relate to middle-class white women who had no understanding of her race and class struggles?

Within a few weeks of Maria’s visit to Sassafras, Hepatitis A spread through her community in Fayetteville through contaminated food. The women who contracted the virus were often sent to Sassafras to recover. For a time, Moroles was the only uninfected driver within the trucking collective. After working non-stop for multiple weeks, however, María passed out in her home, having contracted the virus unknowingly. Her then partner, Shiner, took her to Sassafras against her objections.

María grew extremely sick. She describes in her memoir taking on a yellowish hue and being urged by the other women to go to the hospital. Due to previous traumatic experiences, she refused to go. Her partner, Shiner, was so distressed that she had to leave Sassafras, afraid of watching her loved one die. As a deeply spiritual person, María describes seeing Santa María, an “older Indian woman with long white braids,” as she lay on what was assumed to be her death

¹²¹ *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. United States, 2015, Web Archive, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151/>.

¹²² bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*, Boston: South End Press, 1984, 68.

bed.¹²³ Santa María assured her that she would not die, and that she must “look toward the north [and] reclaim that land.”¹²⁴

Upon recovering, María set to work. She sold most of her belongings and began the move to Cave Mountain with help from her daughter and a couple of pack horses she bought. Her friend Leona and partner Shiner eventually moved in with her, first living in a pup tent and then a teepee that they built together. Women from across the country stayed with them for days at a time, primarily women from Latina, Indigenous, Black, lesbian, and alternative backgrounds. But María was not satisfied until she procured a deed to the land. To begin the process, she set up a meeting with the Sassafras women to ask for autonomy over and ownership of her land. Although Diana, technically the owner of the land, voted against the idea, the other women voted yes. The majority won out, and Diana agreed. For a year, María waited for Diana to bring a deed. When she finally did, María took it to Fayetteville’s free legal clinic, where she was informed that it would not hold up in court. The clinic drew up a new deed for her, which she took to each individual member of Sassafras for a signature. Although “she had tried to get around it,” Diana signed the deed, and María officially founded her own community.¹²⁵ It was named Arco Iris, which means rainbow in Spanish, and was open to all women and children of color.

In 1985, María was interviewed for Joyce Cheney’s collection *Lesbian Land*, in which she described Arco Iris as “a spiritual community for womyn and children of color. We consider Arco Iris a shelter for womyn and children, and a survival place for us to relearn many skills and lost traditions of our earth peoples.”¹²⁶ By then, the traditions and structures of Arco Iris had been established. The women living there adhered to Native American traditions through respect

¹²³ Moroles, *Águila*, 58.

¹²⁴ Moroles, *Águila*, 59.

¹²⁵ Moroles, *Águila*, 70.

¹²⁶ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 30.

of all living things. Tobacco was used as a spiritual tool, while abuse of drugs and alcohol was forbidden on the land. Hard work provided a meditative medicine, as did herbal, traditional remedies. In 1985, María and her family lived in a passive solar house, utilized a well they had built for water, and had plans to buy a windmill to help with pumping water. The women raised chickens as well as two horses, and planned on getting rabbits, goats, and sheep for weaving. The community's goal was to be completely self-sustaining.¹²⁷

When asked why she felt the need to create a community for women of color, María emphasized her and other women's experiences in white society.

We feel that we must have this freedom to be self-determined because throughout our lives we have lived in a white European society. We have been brought up that way. We have been programmed that way in schools and everywhere we have been... The racism is the problem. Even though white womyn are working on their racism, there are generations of problems that they have to go through in order to overcome them... We need to feel like we have the time and space amongst ourselves and our sisters of color to find ourselves amidst this white patriarchal society.¹²⁸

Similarly to other women's land communities, María felt that isolation from wider society allowed women the space to find themselves. While she did not identify herself or her land as lesbian separatist, her reasoning mirrored that of lesbian separatist ideology. After decades of exposure to sexism, racism, classism, and all the structures of Western society, women like María felt the need to create their own pockets of safety. There, they could reevaluate their identities outside of the wider culture. Without constantly feeling pressure from those who held power over them, whether that be white men or women, back-to-the-land women could find themselves on their own terms.

¹²⁷ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 30-33.

¹²⁸ Cheney, *Lesbian Land*, 36-37.

María, now known as Águila, still lives on Arco Iris. Today, the land is called Sanctuario Arco Iris and is a non-profit. Setting aside their differences, Diana Rivers and María met in 2000 to discuss the land that had once belonged to the women of Sassafras. After Diana started Ozark Land Holding Association, she no longer had need for the land. She donated the remaining 400 acres to create the Wild Magnolia Land Trust, which now “offer[s] a healing, safe space for [the indigenous] community to connect with nature.”¹²⁹ María serves as the founder and president of the organization, with her daughter as the treasurer. According to María,

People still travel up our steep three-mile dirt road to La Clínica for help and healing. They come to our lodges, our medicine Ceremonies, and our annual Caminata. They attend our workshops and retreats on environmental education, sustainable living, Indigenous cultures, herbal healing, and more. They join our joyful celebrations and our mournful moments. Young people, most of them LGBTQI2S, spend weeks or months here as interns and apprentices, learning by doing, taking in the wisdom of our people in a simple and harmonious way. And still, women and children of color and displaced Indigenous peoples find their way here in times of need. Sanctuario Arco Iris remains a sanctuary, a refuge, a place of renewal and rebirth.¹³⁰

Arco Iris enjoys a status that many women’s land communities can no longer claim. It is still standing, with its original founder still on the land, and it serves people from all walks of life.¹³¹

Jo, Carla, and Spinsterhaven

“We had a world we wanted to live in, and we had to create it. That’s basically what we did.”

In 1977, a young lesbian feminist from New York, Carla, visited a high school friend who was living on a “landdyke” community in New England. In an oral history interview on July 8, 2022, she reflected, “I saw these strong beautiful women, and they were building a house, and so

¹²⁹ “Arco Iris Earth Care Project,” accessed December 19, 2024, <https://www.arcoirisearthcareproject.com/about>.

¹³⁰ Moroles, *Águila*, 154.

¹³¹ To learn more about the life of María Cristina Moroles, see her memoir *Águila: The Vision, Life, Death, and Rebirth of a Two-Spirit Shaman in the Ozark Mountains*.

I joined in.”¹³² After a short period of time, Carla and her friend decided to “travel together, visit women’s communities across the country, and find one that [they] wanted to live in.”¹³³ The pair found communities through the lesbian record company Olivia Records.¹³⁴ “We got a list of their distributors in various towns, and we would go and call the person and say, ‘Can you tell us where we can sleep on a floor somewhere.’”¹³⁵ In 1978, Carla made it to Arkansas, where she explored various land communities in the area.

Shortly after arriving in Fayetteville, Carla met her partner, Jo.¹³⁶ Jo had moved to Fayetteville in 1976 and was involved in the Women’s Center and the Razordykes at the University of Arkansas (see chapter two). Both Jo and Carla were heavily involved in the women’s community in Northwest Arkansas. Jo worked for the rape crisis center while Carla taught public school. Although Carla had lived on various land communities, the two were more skeptical of lesbian separatism than many of their peers; they wanted to have children and knew that it was a possibility that they would have a boy. Regardless, they attended early meetings for a new land community called Spinsterhaven.

Spinsterhaven was first proposed in April 1988 as a group of women gathered for the annual Women’s Retreat at Fort Smith. According to Allyn Lord, who was involved in many of the discussions surrounding Spinsterhaven, “It was talking about women, lesbians especially, but not all, who don’t have a family or at least a biological family, who maybe don’t have a lot of money. When you hit old age, whenever that may be, how are you going to take care of yourself?

¹³² Carla, Oral History Interview with Maya Fitch, July 8, 2022, UCO Herland Archives.

¹³³ Carla, Oral History Interview with Maya Fitch, 2022.

¹³⁴ See chapter four for more on Olivia Records.

¹³⁵ Carla, Oral History Interview with Maya Fitch, 2022.

¹³⁶ At the time that Jo and Carla met, Jo identified as a lesbian woman. As of the past ten years, Jo identifies as queer and uses they/them pronouns. To respect Jo’s identity, I will refer to them as they currently identify.

Who is going to help you?”¹³⁷ Many women in the lesbian community were concerned about aging; oftentimes, they did not have children or partners to take care of them. They may have been estranged from their biological families. They were concerned at the prospect of living in a retirement home that did not understand their identity. Carla noted that, “Nobody wanted to think about getting old in a nursing home surrounded by people that weren't like you.”¹³⁸ Naturally, the lesbian community came to a solution that was familiar to them: a land collective.

The original vision for Spinsterhaven was to create both a rural and an urban haven on the land and in Little Rock, AR. Each would be open to women over the age of 40 and disabled women. In 1990, Spinsterhaven published a mission statement in *Up and Coming*, a local lesbian feminist publication. It stated, “The mission of Spinsterhaven is to create and maintain nurturing community homes for aging women and women with disabilities, and to promote the physical, cultural, and spiritual well-being of women.”

Fundraising began almost immediately. Benefits were held frequently in Fayetteville and Little Rock. In collaboration with the Women’s Project of Little Rock, members applied for grants to fund the project. The group received non-profit status in 1991.¹³⁹ In 1992, Lesbian Natural Resources, a non-profit dedicated to supporting lesbian land communities, awarded Spinsterhaven \$15,000 for a down payment.¹⁴⁰ According to the updates published in *Ozark Feminist Review* over the years, it seems like members considered multiple different land purchases. In 1993, the group considered purchasing a portion of 1,043 acres in Huntsville,

¹³⁷ Allyn Lord, Oral History Interview with Emma Stewart, July 9, 2022, UCO Herland Archives.

¹³⁸ Carla, Oral History Interview with Maya Fitch, 2022.

¹³⁹ “Spinsterhaven: Who are we, why are we, where are we?” *Ozark Feminist Review* 1, no. 5 (October 1, 1991): 7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28042366>.

¹⁴⁰ Lida Simpson, “Women’s Land/Spinsterhaven Land Search,” *Ozark Feminist Review* 2, no. 4 (January 1, 1993): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28042377>.

Arkansas for \$249,000.¹⁴¹ Later that year, Spinsterhaven examined a 91-acre plot that featured a functioning, energy-efficient house.¹⁴² Finally, in February 1994, Spinsterhaven purchased 43 acres of land in Madison County.

The next steps for Spinsterhaven proved difficult. Not only did they need to clean up and develop the land, but they also had to figure out who would live on it and what that process would entail. Initially, the board posited a model that emulated the Ozark Land Holding Association contract. “Each membership would sell for \$5,000 and entitle the member to the exclusive use of 10 acres of land. [The] actual title would be held in the name of the association.”¹⁴³ Upon the death of a member, their land would be transferred back to the community. However, finding people interested in and able to purchase membership was not easy.

Spinsterhaven held multiple “work days” on the land, where they encouraged women from the community to come out and help to develop the land. In August 1994, they posted an advertisement in *Ozark Feminist Review* for a caretaker. “Spinsterhaven is searching for a caretaker, or two, to live on the land, at least until it gets cold. The woman selected must be a strong supporter of the SPH mission, have experience living in the country, and bring her own self-contained shelter.”¹⁴⁴ In exchange for her labor, the caretaker would be able to live for free on the land. Spinsterhaven purchased a trailer in 1994, remodeled it, and moved in a caretaker in 1996. They continued to develop the land over the course of the next few years, but no more than one woman ever lived on the land at a time.

¹⁴¹ Simpson, “Women’s Land/Spinsterhaven Land Search,” *Ozark Feminist Review*, 4.

¹⁴² “Spinsterhaven Land,” *Ozark Feminist Review* 2, no. 6 (May 1, 1993): 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28042379>.

¹⁴³ Simpson, “Women’s Land/Spinsterhaven Land Search,” *Ozark Feminist Review*, 4.

¹⁴⁴ “Spinsterhaven Seeks Caretaker,” *Ozark Feminist Review* 3, no. 7 (August 1, 1994): 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28042385>.

Despite posting advertisements in national lesbian feminist publications, such as *Sinister Wisdom*, Spinsterhaven did not receive the interest they anticipated. According to Carla, “It was actually a really bad idea, but we didn’t know that at the time. We were pretty excited about it.”¹⁴⁵ Because Carla and Jo wanted to have children, they ultimately ceased their involvement with the land project when conversations arose about whether men or boys would be allowed on the land. “We wanted to have kids, and we might have a boy, and we wanted to love that boy. We wanted everybody to love that boy, so we kind of stopped being involved at that point.”¹⁴⁶ Jo also reflected on the naivety of Spinsterhaven, stating, “This was a lot of women in their 20s and 30s who had no idea what it was going to be like to be elderly and retire 50 or 60 miles from the nearest medical facility. It was really not a good idea at all, but none of us knew it because we were all young and healthy.”¹⁴⁷

After little success in attracting more women to the land, Spinsterhaven decided to sell their 43 acres in 2014. With the proceeds, they were able to purchase a house in Fayetteville and create a new community center called Elder Tree. Although the initial vision for Spinsterhaven did not pan out, Elder Tree now serves as a community gathering place for women, primarily older lesbians, in Arkansas. The house hosts women’s dances, potlucks, fundraisers, concerts, and game nights. It also provides low-cost, short-term housing for women.

Jo and Carla had two kids in the late 1980s, one girl and one boy. Jo shared, “We used anonymous donors and did it all ourselves... The only thing we couldn’t do was have both of our names on the birth certificate, because that was illegal at the time.” As of 2025, Carla serves on the board of Elder Tree while Jo has completely cut ties with the organization. For Carla,

¹⁴⁵ Carla, Oral History Interview with Maya Fitch, July 8, 2022, UCO Herland Archives.

¹⁴⁶ Carla, Oral History Interview with Maya Fitch, 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Jo, Oral History Interview with Maya Fitch, July 8, 2022, UCO Herland Archives.

Spinsterhaven and Elder Tree have provided a space where she can be authentically herself. But for Jo, who now identifies as queer and uses they/them pronouns, Elder Tree is no longer a safe, affirming place. “I’m not a member of Elder Tree and the reason is because they allow [an] anti-trans group to meet here... Elder Tree has a reputation in Northwest Arkansas of being a conservative bunch of very old, white, trans-exclusive lesbians.”¹⁴⁸ The trajectory of many lesbian separatist communities is reflected in the outcome of Spinsterhaven and Elder Tree. For some, lesbian separatist organizations still provide important community space; for others, they remain rooted in outdated and oppressive ideologies.

Each land collective in Northwest Arkansas faced unique challenges and operated on different missions for lesbian community. They also each reflected the period and political theory that influenced them. Yellowhammer and Sassafras, the earliest attempts at creating separatist communities in the area, were less structured and therefore less sustainable. As “open” women’s land, they hosted women from across the country who were not well-versed in living on the land. Their communities never really settled down into a solid base of permanent residents. Additionally, Yellowhammer and Sassafras attempted to govern by consensus, which led to ongoing conflict between differing perspectives. The women involved in those collectives often had no previous experience living communally. For these reasons, both communities dissolved after only a few years.

Arco Iris was also quite unorganized in its early days. However, it was founded by one woman who had a vision of what her community should look like. Her dedication to that vision and her determination to make it happen created a sustainable community that served a particularly oppressed group of people: women and children of color. Although Maria Christina

¹⁴⁸ Jo, Oral History Interview with Maya Fitch, 2022.

Moroles encountered numerous struggles in her journey, she was ultimately successful. It may be that her life experiences as a working class, Two-Spirit woman of color helped her to create a community that was more welcoming to all different kinds of women. Today, Maria's legacy continues helping people through her non-profit Sanctuario Arco Iris.

Ozark Land Holding Association was a much more organized attempt at lesbian separatism. At that point, Diana Rivers was already an old hand in collective living. The contract that she and other members created proved instrumental in making OLHA a sustainable community. However, as time wore on, Diana witnessed many original members move on. The barriers of membership, as well as the lack of women of color on the land, likely diminished the collective's appeal and accessibility to other women. Today, OLHA is actively searching for more women to join their collective. However, younger women are often less interested in lesbian separatist communities that maintain roots in trans and male-exclusive ideology.

According to some of the individuals involved in creating the collective, Spinsterhaven was doomed from the start. Developing a large tract of land miles away from civilization proved a tremendously difficult task. Additionally, Spinsterhaven never received the level of interest that its founders anticipated. It was not feasible for aging and disabled women to retire without access to a nearby medical facility, and certainly not without significant resources and a large community on the land. Although Spinsterhaven never really worked as a separatist retirement community, it fared better as a community center based in a large city. Still, the legacy of lesbian separatist theory has alienated many young queer and trans individuals from involvement with Elder Tree.

In the 1970s, 80s, and into the 90s, Northwest Arkansas provided large areas of undeveloped land for lesbian separatist women to put their ideology into practice. Despite a

hostile, conservative political climate, many lesbian women were successful in establishing networks of community. However, collective living often proved contentious. Lesbian separatist theory did not account for the nuances of race, class, and gender identity. This was demonstrated in the recurrent struggles that women faced on and off the land. As time wore on, queer and feminist theory continued to evolve. Many women who came of age during second-wave feminism and the Gay Liberation Movement were not prepared to accommodate emerging identities, particularly transgender and queer identities.

Chapter four examines another important aspect of the lesbian separatist movement: women's music. Although the women's music movement provided national representation of lesbian identity and created safe space for lesbian women to express themselves with one another, the movement experienced many of the same issues that plagued urban and rural lesbian collectives.

Chapter 4.

“I Know You Know”:

A History of the Women’s Music Movement

In the early 1970s, women across the country began to discover lesbianism through song. While the rest of the world continued to shun lesbian and gay identities, a few groundbreaking woman musicians were proclaiming their love for other women with heartfelt lyricism and folk-style guitar backings. As an integral part of the lesbian feminist community, the women’s music movement came to prominence in the early 1970s as a way for lesbian women to create and consume music for and by lesbians. Women’s music concerts were one of the only spaces where many women felt free to openly express their sexuality. This artistic movement was not just about music; it was about creating jobs, safe space, and community for lesbians across the nation. The women’s music movement was emblematic of and essential to the wider lesbian community and therefore was plagued with the ever-present issues of conflict and exclusion. While music provided crucial space for lesbian women to better understand their identities and escape societal judgment, issues of race, class, and gender identity caused conflict that ultimately led to a fracturing of the wider movement.

Early Days of The Women’s Music Movement

In 1970, the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band (CWLRB) sprung out of the continually developing Chicago Women’s Liberation Union (CWLU). The CWLU was a group of socialist-feminist women working through direct action, such as the abortion service known as “Jane,” towards “changing the lives of all women and building a new society in which all people

will have the opportunity to develop their full potential.”¹⁴⁹ Naomi Weisstein, the founder of CWLRB, was living in Chicago, an ardent member of the CWLU, and working at Loyola University as a professor of psychology and neuroscience. Weisstein had picked up on the significance of rock music in popular culture, but she also noticed that “it was sooo misogynist!... These were vicious boy bands: the guitarists stood with their legs spread wide, pretending to fuck their guitars, while they sang about how stupid and weak-minded girls were, and how they were good for nothing but sex – often, rape.”¹⁵⁰ So Weisstein, who was trained in classical and jazz music, decided to form her own rock band.

The first meeting of the band took place in Weisstein’s living room and was originally composed of six instrumentalists and eleven vocalists. However, after their first performance, a few of the singers left the band; for CWLRB, it was not uncommon for band members to fluctuate over the years. Although Weisstein describes the early days of the band as less than musically pleasing, audiences ate up their performances. The goal of the band was, naturally, to “get so good that soon we would saturate the air waves, inundating teenage girls – inundating all women – with a new kind of pop musical culture – hilarious, joyful, playful, and taking no shit from no one.”¹⁵¹ The band attracted an audience that was largely comprised of feminists and lesbians due to its anti-male violence stance, feminist background, and mimicry of male-rock bands. Although CWLRB’s stint together only lasted until 1973, primarily due to internal conflict between members, their impact was significant. Their songs, such as “Mountain Moving Day,” “Don’t Need That Doctor,” and “Papa Don’t Lay That Shit On Me,” and their success

¹⁴⁹ “Our Mission,” Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Herstory Project, last updated 2022, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://www.cwluherstory.org/our-mission>.

¹⁵⁰ Naomi Weisstein, “The Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band, 1970-1973,” *New Politics* 15, no. 1 (Summer, 2014): 34, <https://libproxy.uco.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/chicago-womens-liberation-rock-band-1970-1973/docview/1550798855/se-2>.

¹⁵¹ Weisstein, “The Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band,” 34.

demonstrated the demand for feminist music. CWLRB paved the way for other feminist and lesbian artists to make their debut in the male-dominated music industry. As scholar Kate Grover eloquently put it, “The Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band was not only the first to position rock music and performance as tools of feminist activism, it also attempted a gargantuan feat: complete overhaul of what was a uniquely patriarchal rock culture.”¹⁵² In their footsteps, the women’s music movement would completely alter feminist and lesbian communities.

Prior to the formation of the legendary lesbian record label Olivia Records, CWLRB was not the only group to proclaim feminism and lesbianism through music. Maxine Feldman’s song “Angry Atthis” was released in 1972, although it was originally written and performed a few months prior to the Stonewall Uprising of 1969. As the title suggests, Feldman was angry. She had previously been denied bookings at Boston coffeehouses, presumably due to her identity and the lesbian/feminist content in her songs.¹⁵³ “Angry Atthis” expressed her frustration with having to keep her relationships secret, being forced to lie about her sexuality, and generally being afraid to live authentically. The song opens with the lines, “I hate not being able/To hold my lover's hand/Cept under some dimly lit table/Afraid of being who I am.”¹⁵⁴ Feldman’s single has been considered the first “out” lesbian song officially recorded and released.¹⁵⁵ Shortly thereafter, Alix Dobkin’s album *Lavender Jane Loves Women* came out. Featuring sixteen tracks, *Lavender Jane* was the first full-length album produced, performed, and released by a

¹⁵² Kate Grover, “Rocking the Revolution: The Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band and the Politics of Feminist Rock and Roll,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 46, no. 2 (Jan 2021): 509, <https://libproxy.uco.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=147453351&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁵³ Jamie Anderson, “Maxine Feldman, 1945-2007,” Jewish Women’s Archive, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://jwa.org/weremember/feldman-maxine>.

¹⁵⁴ “Maxine Feldman: Angry Atthis,” Lyrics Translate, Accessed April 30, 2024, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/maxine-feldman-angry-atthis-lyrics.html>.

¹⁵⁵ Jamie Anderson, “Maxine Feldman, 1945-2007,” Jewish Women’s Archive, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://jwa.org/weremember/feldman-maxine>.

lesbian. In contrast to Maxine Feldman, who enjoyed playing for diverse audiences, Dobkin became a separatist around 1973 and began playing at women-only concerts. In a 1978 article, titled “So You Want To Produce A Concert For Women Only,” Dobkin wrote,

Performing for men makes me sick to my stomach and this is not good for my show. Furthermore, the presence of even one man distracts everyone’s attention, which is also bad for my show. Women cannot fully or completely communicate with each other with a male present, and my work depends upon communication between women.¹⁵⁶

Although not all lesbian feminist musical artists were as militant as Dobkin in regards to separatism, lesbian separatist ideology was a significant feature of the women’s music movement.

Origins of Olivia Records, the Women’s Music Movement’s Giant

Similarly to CWLRB, Feldman, and Dobkin, a few women from a lesbian separatist collective in Washington, D.C., along with some of their friends, decided in 1973 to cultivate community and further their activism through the music industry. Ginny Berson and Meg Christian, two of the five founding members of Olivia Records, were first members of The Furies. The lesbian separatist collective included 12 lesbian women living communally who were instrumental in establishing lesbian feminist and separatist politics. One day in 1972, Berson and Christian met Judy Dlugacz, a previous member of the Ann Arbor Radicalesbians who, along with some other women, had just moved to the D.C. area.¹⁵⁷ As members of The Furies and Ann Arbor Radicalesbians continued to meet and discuss, they decided they “wanted

¹⁵⁶ Alix Dobkin, “So You Want To Produce A Concert For Women Only,” *Lesbian Connection* 3, no. 7 (Feb 1978): 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28039180>.

¹⁵⁷ Judy Dlugacz, “If It Weren’t For The Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records,” *Hot Wire: The Journal of Women’s Music and Culture* 4, no. 3 (July 1988): 28, https://www.hotwirejournal.com/hw_v4_n3.html.

to find a way to do an institution that was politically conscious, one that would be able to pay people so that we wouldn't be constantly burning out on volunteer labor."¹⁵⁸

Multiple ideas were floated around for what kind of business to create. In an interview with scholar Bonnie Morris, Cris Williamson recalled that at one point the group considered starting a restaurant. However, Williamson comically noted that, "Nobody could cook!" and she instead suggested that they develop a women's record company.¹⁵⁹ Williamson was introduced to the group after Meg Christian discovered her debut album and began performing covers of her songs. While Williamson was on tour, she was scheduled to play at Georgetown University, and Christian encouraged her own audiences to attend with her. Williamson was surprised at the size and enthusiasm of the crowd, who knew all of the lyrics to her songs. Following her show, Christian and Berson conducted an interview with Williamson on the radio show "Sophie's Parlor," and it was then that Williamson told them they should start a record company.¹⁶⁰

Meg Christian presented the idea to a group of ten women, and everyone felt it was perfect. Next, the group decided on the name Olivia, inspired by Dorothy Bussy's novel *Olivia: by Olivia*, a lesbian love story from 1949.¹⁶¹ For the first half of 1973, those same ten women created the Olivia Records corporation and began structuring the company. In her article celebrating the 15th year anniversary of Olivia, Dlugacz emphasized that "We had no money – we knew nothing about the recording industry – and we knew less about business. So it was perfect to go ahead, because we knew exactly not what we were doing."¹⁶² That naivety,

¹⁵⁸ Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music," 28.

¹⁵⁹ Bonnie J. Morris, "Olivia Records: The Production of a Movement," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19 (2015): 293, <https://www-tandfonline-com.libproxy.uco.edu/doi/epdf/10.1080/10894160.2015.1026699?needAccess=true>.

¹⁶⁰ Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music," 28-29.

¹⁶¹ Morris, "Olivia Records," 294.

¹⁶² Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music," 29.

combined with determination, propelled Olivia's founding members to move to Los Angeles and live collectively in a house that doubled as their office. To raise funds for their first album, Meg Christian recorded a single and went on tour, spreading the word about Olivia and their mission. The single sold 5,000 copies through both mail order and at Christian's shows. With those funds, Olivia Records released their first album, *I Know You Know* by Meg Christian, in 1974.

According to Dlugacz,

We honestly thought that within the album's life we would sell 5,000 copies. And wouldn't that be terrific. But within the first few *months* those 5,000 copies were gone. We probably sold 10-12,000 copies the first year, and have ultimately sold maybe 75,000-80,000 copies of *I Know You Know*.¹⁶³

With the funds raised from Christian's album, Olivia recorded Cris Williamson's *The Changer and The Changed*, and it was released in 1975. *The Changer* sold around 40-50,000 copies per year for a while after it was released, and by 1988 it had sold 250,000 copies.¹⁶⁴

Olivia Records' first few albums, along with the tour Women on Wheels featuring Meg Christian, Margie Adam, and Holly Near, propelled the company into success. Olivia was advertised in a variety of lesbian and feminist periodicals, including *Tell-a-Woman* and *Paid My Dues*, as a "group of lesbian feminists [who] are starting a record company to produce records of music by women."¹⁶⁵ As more women came to learn about Olivia, more attended their concerts and bought their albums. Lesbians across the nation rejoiced over the explicitly lesbian content of artists like Meg Christian and Cris Williamson; finally, they were seeing themselves represented in music. Women's concerts were likened to utopia; these were spaces where women did not have to hide themselves. However, the excitement of a new avenue of community-

¹⁶³ Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music," 29.

¹⁶⁴ Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music," 29.

¹⁶⁵ "Olivia Records," *Tell-a-Woman* 1, no. 5 (April 1974): 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28045590>.

building, the political significance of women's music, and the variety of lesbian and feminist ideologies throughout the community led to conflict that would plague not only Olivia, but the entire lesbian community.

Independence, Community, and Sanctuary: The Significance of the Women's Music Movement

Women's music as a genre was purposefully ambiguous. While the movement was generally created and supported by lesbian women, it was also intended to be a means of reaching audiences unaware of the lesbian feminist movement and pulling them in. Theorists of lesbian feminism viewed lesbianism as a matter of choice available to all feminists.¹⁶⁶ Many of them had grown up without knowing that life could exist outside of the nuclear family; when they realized that they did not have to rely on a man to survive in the world, and instead they could join a community of women supporting one another and fighting for their rights, they knew that they needed to get the word out to others. Music was one avenue of doing so.

Women's music was also broadly titled because it was about fighting against male domination in the music industry. Therefore, companies like Olivia Records worked to pass along knowledge of sound production and engineering to other women. In the second edition of *Paid My Dues*, a quarterly journal dedicated to women's music, Olivia released a statement relating their commitment to women.

We are a group of lesbian/feminists who understand the need for women's music – music that speaks from all our experiences and towards all our thoughts and emotions. We intend to provide large numbers of women with access to the recording industry... We believe that women must become as independent as possible from the male-supremacist economic system, and in order to do that we must provide jobs for each other at living wages.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Revolutionary Lesbians, "How To Stop Choking To Death, or: Separatism," *Spectre: Paper of Revolutionary Lesbians* 1, no. 2 (1971), 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28045145>.

¹⁶⁷ "Olivia," *Paid My Dues* 1, no. 2 (May 1974): 18, <https://queermusicheritage.com/pmd1-2.html>.

So while women's music was meant for all women to enjoy and benefit from, it was particularly significant for lesbian women.

The ambiguity of women's music allowed some discretion among closeted lesbians. In record stores traversed by lesbians looking for affirming music, it was pertinent that they could simply peruse the catalog of "women's music" without risking their safety or discretion. For those who were not open about their identity, this ambiguity was crucial to their participation in the movement.¹⁶⁸ Closeted lesbians could even mail-order their favorite albums without being questioned by family members. In reflection on her experience with the women's music movement, Kathy Rudy notes "I spent every available penny I had on those records. Through the mail, I found my way into a lesbian community and a lesbian identity."¹⁶⁹ Prior to being exposed to women's music, many women did not understand or recognize their lesbianism. Introduction to the alternative sexuality often came through music, empowering more and more women to recognize themselves in the songs of others.

In addition to gaining affirmation or even clarity of their identity, lesbians also connected to a wider community through women's music. Bonnie Morris noted in her article "Anyone Can Be a Lesbian," "As the women's music network gradually developed a following throughout the United States, it became an important way for lesbians to identify one another and to come out. Simply owning the right albums signified membership in the tribe."¹⁷⁰ Gatherings, such as concerts and women's dances, were often based around women's music. These spaces, which

¹⁶⁸ Lauron Kehrer, "Goldenrod Distribution and the Queer Failure of Women's Music," *American Music* 34, no. 2 (2016): 221, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.34.2.0218>.

¹⁶⁹ Kathy Rudy, "Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1(2001): 194, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178457>.

¹⁷⁰ Bonnie J. Morris, "Anyone Can Be A Lesbian," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 5 no. 4 (2001): 110, https://doi.org/10.1300/J155v05n04_04.

were often “women-only” events, allowed lesbian women to freely express their sexuality without fear of repercussions. Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, National Women’s Music Festival, and other annual festivals provided frequent gatherings of lesbian women from all over the nation, bringing together people from all different backgrounds and allowing connections to form between lesbians of different regions. The Herland Sister Resources (HSR), a women’s collective in Oklahoma City composed of both lesbian and straight women, was one of many organizations that structured events around a shared love for women’s music. In a 1986 edition of HSR’s newsletter *Herland Voice*, a letter to the editor proclaimed,

Through HSR, which provides a women's bookstore, semi-annual retreats to Walden-like ponds, occasional workshops, periodic big-name women's music concerts, monthly coffeehouses, a publication, a forum for new musical and literary talent, and much, much more, a real women's community is developing.¹⁷¹

HSR also sold women’s music records at its bookstore, and the semi-annual retreats always featured music, sometimes from local musicians like Peggy Johnson, and sometimes from national musicians like Nancy Day. Nearly every issue of *Herland Voice*, if not all, mentioned an upcoming women’s music concert or festival. The organization of lesbian and feminist community hinged on the success of women’s music.

Another important aspect of women’s music was the opportunity it provided to women for financial independence. In 1974, Terry Grant moved to Lansing, Michigan, where she lived in a house with four other lesbian women and was first introduced to women’s music through the album *I Know You Know* by Meg Christian. Understanding the significance of proudly and explicitly lesbian music, Grant “decided to work to make this music more easily available to

¹⁷¹ Peggy J. Durham, “Letters to the editor,” *Herland Voice* 2, no. 7 (1986): 2, https://shareok.org/bitstream/handle/11244/52220/HerlandVoice-1986-07-v2-no07_ocr.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

other women.”¹⁷² Grant reached out to Olivia Records prior to one of Christian’s Lansing concerts, and the company sent her a box of albums to sell during the show. Although Grant offered to return the leftover records, Olivia instructed her to keep them and continue selling them as a regional distributor. Eventually, Grant established her own company Goldenrod Distribution and helped form the collective known as Women’s Independent Label Distributors (WILD). According to scholar Lauron Kehrer, WILD was instrumental in “determining what was considered women’s music and whose music was distributed.”¹⁷³ For WILD, if the music was not lesbian or feminist oriented, it was not women’s music.¹⁷⁴

Like Grant, many other women found jobs in the women’s music industry. In an article reflecting on her own experiences within the lesbian feminist movement, Kathy Rudy writes about the impacts that working at a women’s music distribution company, Ladyslipper, had on her financial independence. After being introduced to prominent artist Holly Near’s music by a coworker in a community health center, Rudy was instantly attracted to the alternative political and sexual messages she found. From Near, Kathy Rudy was able to find Olivia Records and the Ladyslipper catalog, which she writes was, “the most comprehensive clearinghouse for women’s (read lesbian) music.”¹⁷⁵ She decided in 1980 to pursue her dream of immersing herself in the movement, writing to Ladyslipper that she would work for minimum wage and moving to Durham, North Carolina from Detroit that spring. One of the largest motivating factors for Rudy at the time was the economic empowerment that a position with Ladyslipper would provide her. She wrote,

¹⁷² Lauron Kehrer, “Goldenrod Distribution and the Queer Failure of Women’s Music,” *American Music* 34, no. 2 (2016): 221, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.34.2.0218>.

¹⁷³ Kehrer, “Goldenrod Distribution,” 222-223.

¹⁷⁴ Kehrer, “Goldenrod Distribution,” 221-223.

¹⁷⁵ Rudy, “Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory,” 194.

Although I could not have named it then, bound up with my nascent lesbianism was the desire to pursue the career and economic independence I so value now... where most girls in my high school and college classes married quickly and settled down primarily on their husband's income, I knew, even then, that I needed to develop marketable skills to survive.¹⁷⁶

Kathy Rudy was one of many women who achieved economic independence, through the women's music movement, in a society that so frequently made them dependent upon men to survive.

Women's music also provided a political platform for lesbian feminists. In 1977, Anita Bryant, former beauty pageant queen, singer, and spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission, launched a campaign against Miami-Dade County, Florida legislation that prevented discrimination based on sexual orientation in regard to housing and employment. Bryant asserted that, by giving civil rights to gay identifying individuals, her rights as a parent were being violated. According to scholar Gillian Frank, Bryant declared that, "'God gave mothers the divine right to reproduce and a divine commission to protect our children, in our homes, business, and especially our schools.' Children, homes, and schools were endangered, she later asserted, because 'homosexuals cannot reproduce—so they must recruit.'"¹⁷⁷ Bryant's campaign came to be known as "Save Our Children," and after successfully repealing the Miami-Dade County legislation, she took to the national stage.

In response, Olivia Records decided to release an album titled *Lesbian Concentrate*, a cheeky reference to Bryant's association with orange juice. On the cover was an image of an orange juice can that read "Lesbian Concentrate: A Lesbiananthology 100% Undiluted." The

¹⁷⁶ Rudy, "Lesbian Separatism," 194-195.

¹⁷⁷ Gillian Frank, "'The Civil Rights of Parents': Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant's Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1 (January 2013): 127, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23322037>.

record featured eleven different artists and thirteen diverse tracks, some of which included “Leaping Lesbians,” “Woman-Loving Woman,” and “A History of Lesbianism.” Advertisements for the album were featured in a plethora of lesbian and feminist periodicals, including *The Lesbian Tide*. Accompanying an image of the record, as well as instructions on how to order it and what songs it included, were the words, “We’ve had it with your brand, Anita.”¹⁷⁸ Additionally, some of the proceeds from sales of the record were designated to go to the Lesbian Mothers’ National Defense Fund, an organization that aided lesbian women in maintaining custody of their children.

However, some lesbian feminists were dissatisfied with Olivia’s politics, and not just in regards to *Lesbian Concentrate*. Olivia Records and other women’s music artists were frequently criticized for a lack of visibility of women of color, for being too strict or not strict enough in women-only policies, and for exclusion or inclusion of the transgender community.

Conflict in Women’s Music

Most lesbians who participated in women-only spaces and the women’s music movement were white women.¹⁷⁹ However, Black lesbians and musicians were also prominent in both the audience and on the stage. Scholar Bonnie Morris has noted that it was not uncommon for white audience members of women’s music venues to meet messages about racism “more appreciatively” from white performers than from Black performers. One particular point of contention was in regards to Black artists’ use of gospel music in their songs; ardent separatists were uncomfortable with references to a male, capital Him, god. Although it is clear why members of the queer community do not meet representations of Christianity with open arms,

¹⁷⁸ “Lesbian Concentrate,” *The Lesbian Tide* 7, no. 1 (1977): 7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28039279>.

¹⁷⁹ Morris, “Olivia Records,” 304.

white audiences clearly did not respect the cultural significance of gospel music for Black performers.¹⁸⁰

Dianne Davidson, an artist signed to Olivia Records, got herself into hot water after an interview with *Sojourner* and comments she made at the 1989 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. In the April 1989 edition of *Sojourner*, Noelle Hanrahan's interview with Dianne Davidson included a section discussing Davidson's childhood caretaker Hattie Ruth Simon, whom she dedicated her album *Breaking All the Rules* to. According to the article, Davidson

credits Simon with helping her adjust to a home atmosphere that didn't feel natural to her. Simon was black, Davidson white. Davidson believes that their relationship was a spiritual encounter. 'It wasn't like any other relationship I have ever had. It will make me sound crazy, but I do believe in reincarnation, and that I was not white in a previous lifetime, and that in order to make the transition I was given somebody who could help.'¹⁸¹

In response to Davidson's statements, Joanna Kadi submitted a letter to the editor titled, "Racism in the Women's Community," expressing her dismay. She noted that Davidson's comments made light of the experiences of Black women in the U.S., who were forced to care for "their oppressors children" during slavery, and who now, without equal access to the workforce, often continue to do so.¹⁸² Kadi went on to address Davidson's claim that she was "not white" in her previous life, claiming that, "If you see me running down the street at 60 miles an hour tearing my hair out and screaming at the top of my lungs, it is probably because I have heard yet another white woman using the 'I-was-a-woman-of-color-in-my-previous-lifetime' line as an excuse for doing nothing about racism."¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Morris, "Anyone Can Be a Lesbian," 101.

¹⁸¹ Noelle Hanrahan, "Dianne Davidson: Southern, Feminist, and Proud," *Sojourner* 14, no. 8 (April 1989): 35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28044990>.

¹⁸² Joanna Kadi, "Racism in the Women's Community," *Sojourner* 14, no. 10 (June 1989): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28044992>.

¹⁸³ Kadi, "Racism in the Women's Community," 6.

Sojourner allowed Davidson to respond to Kadi's letter, and Davidson doubled down on her previous statements, going so far as to call Kadi a bigot for assuming that Davidson was racist.¹⁸⁴ Following this debacle, Davidson continued to receive backlash after introducing one of her songs at the 1989 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival by saying, "'Every white family in the South with a little bit of money would hire a Black woman to raise their children. It was the smartest thing my parents ever did.'"¹⁸⁵ In Chicago, a group of white women banded together to form Chicago Lesbians Emerging Against Racism (CLEAR) in response to the ongoing controversy. Davidson was scheduled to perform at Mountain Moving Coffeehouse, a women-only event space in Chicago, on October 28th. CLEAR decided to boycott her show, and multiple women of color spoke about the impacts of her comments prior to her performance. Black lesbian poet Vernita Gray was one of those women, stating, "'I think that when we ignore other people's pain, it's very hurtful. I'd like to say to Mountain Moving Coffeehouse, and to Olivia Records, and to Dianne Davidson, that tonight's performance is a real slap in the face to many Black women.'"¹⁸⁶ According to the *WomaNews* article covering the performance and the boycott, the president of Olivia Records Judy Dlugacz refused to denounce Davidson's comments. Seemingly, aside from the boycott in Chicago, Davidson's career in women's music continued without question. This incident demonstrates the tension among white women and women of color within the movement and shows that issues of racism were prevalent.

Another point of contention emerged over the nature of women-only spaces. Some lesbian feminists remained strictly separatist, believing that men should not be allowed to attend

¹⁸⁴ Dianne Davidson, "Dianne Davidson responds," *Sojourner* 14, no. 10 (June 1989): 7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28044992>.

¹⁸⁵ Jorjet Harper, "Romanticizing Racism.," *WomaNews* 11, no. 1 (1990): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28046722>.

¹⁸⁶ Harper, "Romanticizing Racism," 1.

any women's music events. Others felt that this alienated straight women, many of whom were just coming to terms with their own feminist identity. On the fifteenth anniversary of Olivia Records, Judy Dlugacz wrote about the backlash she and other collective members faced in regards to women-only policies. "We were promoting women-only events, and getting a lot of flak for it. Many people didn't understand why we would do such a thing... Within our own communities they were saying, 'Why shouldn't this be open to everyone? What are we doing – trying to exclude people?'"¹⁸⁷ However, when Olivia held concerts that were open to everyone, they also received criticism. In Dlugacz's words, "We couldn't win."¹⁸⁸ As previously discussed, women-only space was a very important part of lesbian feminist culture; it allowed women to create sub communities outside of the patriarchal value system. However, not everyone agreed on who exactly should be excluded from these spaces; discourse on not only men, but also male children and the transgender community was prevalent.

Many festivals and concerts restricted mothers from bringing their male children, effectively alienating them from attendance. Lesbian separatists viewed all men as oppressive, and this was often extended to young boys. Some festival organizers, such as Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, used an age limit in regard to admission of male children. In an open letter to Michigan organizers, a group of women expressed their frustration at not being allowed to bring male children over the age of six to the festival. In addition to claiming that the policy was discriminatory against mothers, especially those who could not afford child care, the letter claimed that, "Children are not our enemies, and if we do not make them our allies, we are

¹⁸⁷ Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music," 30.

¹⁸⁸ Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music," 30.

fighting a one-generational battle; a battle which in no way can be called feminist.”¹⁸⁹ However, many separatists believed that it was necessary to exclude male children in order to maintain safe space for women and girls.

Discourse surrounding transgender individuals was especially brutal in lesbian feminist circles. In 1974, Olivia Records found itself in need of a new sound engineer. They found Sandy Stone, a woman with impressive credentials who had previously been an engineer for Jimi Hendrix, The Byrds, Crosby & Stills, and Van Morrison, among others. According to Dlugacz, “It seemed like yet again lightning had struck and we had found the perfect engineer.”¹⁹⁰ Stone was welcomed into the Olivia collective, living and working among the other members. However, Dlugacz received a call one day from another woman involved in women’s music who warned her that Stone was a “transsexual.”¹⁹¹ At the time, Dlugacz did not even know what the word meant, and she called up a friend for more information. After discussing the matter with the rest of the collective, Olivia decided that Stone’s identity was not an issue because she had given up her male privilege and was willing to share her knowledge with other women.¹⁹²

However, word got out that Olivia had hired a transgender individual. In 1976, a group of women contacted Olivia to set up a meeting to “talk about the trans issue.” According to Stone, in an interview on the podcast *LGBTQ&A*, Olivia collective members went into the meeting naively, expecting an open dialogue. However, Stone explained that a woman from Chicago

got up to introduce the meeting, and she made, perfectly deadpan, a long opening speech about how, of course, we all knew trans women were really men, and they were really rapists, and they really destroyed women’s community, and, actually, everyone knew

¹⁸⁹ Laura Carstenson et al., “An Open Letter to the Michigan Women’s Music Festival Collective,” *New Women’s Times* 4, no. 7 (August 1978): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28041308>.

¹⁹⁰ Dlugacz, “If It Weren’t For The Music,” 30.

¹⁹¹ It is important to note that, at the time, transsexual was the word used to describe an individual who had transitioned from one gender to another; today, transgender is more commonplace and considered to be more accurate and respectful. For the purposes of this paper, I will use “transgender” unless directly quoting.

¹⁹² Dlugacz, “If It Weren’t For The Music,” 30-31.

how they had no place in women's community, and of course we should be driving them out, and on and on like that.¹⁹³

After Stone responded, "This is bullshit," the entire group erupted in chaos. Women started standing on chairs and tables, screaming at Olivia and Stone. Nothing productive came out of the meeting, and Olivia members have since noted that some of the offending women reached out later to apologize for their behavior.¹⁹⁴ Following the disastrous meeting, Olivia released a statement in 1977 defending Stone's position at the company. In it, they discussed Stone as a lesbian woman who faced all the oppression accompanying those identities. They claimed, "'As to why we did not immediately bring this issue to the attention of the national women's community, we have to say that to us, Sandy Stone is a person, not an issue.'"¹⁹⁵ Olivia even went on to pay for Stone's gender reconstruction surgery.

But not everyone in the lesbian feminist community felt satisfied with Olivia's defense of Stone. As Dlugacz notes, "A number of outspoken individuals in the community were incredibly cruel. There were groups like *Dyke Magazine* that did all sorts of strange and bizarre articles on transsexuality. Some women were saying that transsexuals were infiltrating the women's/lesbians' movement."¹⁹⁶ Indeed, in the November 1977 edition of *Lesbian Connection*, Candace Margulies wrote an open letter to Olivia expressing her thoughts on the Stone situation. She claimed that Olivia's employment of Stone was a betrayal of the community, and that Stone's decision to join the collective constituted an invasion. Throughout the article, Margulies

¹⁹³ Jeffrey Masters, "Sandy Stone: From Lesbian Separatist to Trans History," March 12, 2024, in *LGBTQ&A*, produced by Jeffrey Masters, podcast, MP3 audio, 18:51, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/sandy-stone-from-lesbian-separatist-to-trans-history/id1151561226?i=1000648890534>.

¹⁹⁴ Felix Moore, "How a feminist, lesbian music collective powerfully defended trans rights in 1970s Los Angeles," *PinkNews*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/04/24/sandy-stone-olivia-records-trans-rights-los-angeles/>.

¹⁹⁵ Moore, "How a feminist, lesbian music collective powerfully defended trans rights."

¹⁹⁶ Dlugacz, "If It Weren't For The Music," 31.

continuously misgendered Stone and stated that, “Bringing a transsexual into Olivia keeps you and me one step further from ourselves. I am terribly disappointed to realize that even lesbians... cannot see the precious and crucial difference between women and transsexuals.”¹⁹⁷ In later editions of *Lesbian Connection*, other readers sent in letters supporting or denouncing Margulies’ sentiment. At one point, Janice Raymond sent a copy of a chapter of her dissertation, “The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male,” to Olivia. The chapter included a section denouncing Stone’s position with the company.¹⁹⁸ Raymond would go on to publish her dissertation as a book, and she has continued to speak out against the transgender community since.

After a group called Gorgons threatened violence against Stone and showed up with weapons to a Seattle show, Stone decided to leave the collective. Although the members of Olivia remained supportive of her role there, Stone knew that the backlash against Olivia would not cease as long as she stayed. Since her time with Olivia Records, Stone has gone on to become a pioneering scholar of trans studies, publishing her essay “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto.” There is currently an ongoing documentary project, called *Girl Island*, to document her life and contributions to the field.¹⁹⁹

Stone is not the only trans individual who experienced discrimination and vitriol from the lesbian separatist community. The question surrounding trans-exclusion came to a head at the renowned Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival in the early 1990s, when a trans woman was

¹⁹⁷ Candace Margulies, “An Open Letter to Olivia Records,” *Lesbian Connection* 3, no. 5 (November 1977): 3-4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28039177>.

¹⁹⁸ Moore, “How a feminist, lesbian music collective powerfully defended trans rights.”

¹⁹⁹ “Girl Island: The Sandy Stone Story,” *Girl Island*, Accessed May 5, 2024, <https://girlislandfilm.com/>.

forcibly removed from the festival grounds. Ultimately, the trans issue would continue to cause a rift among lesbian communities for decades to come.

Conclusion

In order to carve out space for out and proud lesbian identity, groups of women across the nation banded together to create and support the women's music movement. In these spaces, lesbians and feminists alike felt safe enough to be themselves and finally saw themselves represented by popular performers. Women's music brought together large numbers of diverse women in a space where they could find common ground. The women's music movement played a significant role in expanding and perpetuating lesbian feminist culture. However, the women who participated in the movement did not always agree on who should be invited in or left out. Because of this conflict, a rift, one that would only continue to grow over the years, began to form between lesbian feminists themselves as well as between them and the rest of the queer movement. When the separatist community felt that their ideologies were being betrayed, they stopped at nothing to make their discontent heard. While the lesbian feminist culture started out to escape a society that discriminated against women who were different, many participants of the culture perpetuated that same discrimination against others who did not fit neatly into their predetermined categories.

Chapter Five analyzes the development of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the most popular women-only music festival of its era. While Michigan was a highlight of the community, it experienced a plethora of controversies over its many years. The next chapter explains why Michfest ultimately came to an end.

Chapter 5.

Are You Going to Michigan?:

Trans Exclusive Radical Feminism and Lesbian Separatism in a Queer World

For one week every year from 1976 until 2015, anywhere from three thousand to ten thousand women gathered under the August sun on hundreds of acres for the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Michfest). All kinds of women traversed the grounds, excited to attend countless intensive workshops on topics ranging from "lesbian parenting" to "beginning belly dancing." Dozens of popular lesbian and feminist artists, such as Holly Near and the Indigo Girls, performed on one of multiple stages throughout the week. Founded in 1976 by Lisa Vogel, Michfest was the most popular festival in lesbian culture. Countless women continue to recollect the peace and community that they felt for that one relished week in the woods among thousands of other lesbians. Michfest served as a place of transformation for many lesbians who finally experienced an escape from patriarchal society. Scholar Bonnie J. Morris has described Michfest as "an entire city run by and for lesbian feminists. Utopia revealed. And Eden—built by Eves." However, after nearly 40 years of Michfest and despite continuous enthusiasm, founder Lisa Vogel announced on April 21, 2015 that the upcoming festival would be the last.

The closure of Michfest represents significant changes in the lesbian separatist movement. While lesbian separatist theory was always based upon an essentialist understanding of men and women, the growth of queer and trans advocacy and visibility in the 1980s and 90s shed light on how said theory contributed to anti-trans sentiment among many lesbian separatists. The controversy surrounding Michfest's women-born-women only policy fundamentally altered lesbian separatists' relationship with the wider LGBTQ+ community. This chapter will explore

the significance of Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the protests it elicited, and the ongoing legacy of lesbian separatism in the twenty-first century.

The Early Days of Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

According to Lisa Vogel, the idea to create Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was not her own, "even though the idea did come out of my mouth during a stoned trip in the back of a cargo van full of lesbians as we drove from Boston back home to Mt. Pleasant, Michigan."²⁰⁰ To her, she was simply a conduit of the will of the goddess. As a nineteen-year-old radical lesbian woman who enjoyed attending women's music festivals with her friends, Vogel decided it would be better to host one of their own than "smash ourselves into the back of a borrowed cargo van for 1,500 miles."²⁰¹ With the audacity and naivety required to execute such a venture, Vogel and her friends were the ones for the job. They put their working-class, hippie roots to work in planning a women-only festival without any funding. Through yard sales, innovative advertising, and the lesbian feminist music network, the first festival took place in 1976. Although it was chaotic, over 1,000 women showed up.

Initially, Vogel had no plans of putting on the festival again. The stress and hard work that went into the first one seemed to be enough. But women from across the country sent letters to the organizers inquiring about the next festival. "Our resolve to never try that Festival again was softening, and as for me—completely covered in patriarchal hostility at the job I had fought so hard to get—I needed sisterhood now more than ever."²⁰² So the women began searching for an area to host the event. They found 160 acres for rent by an "aged-out hippie from Oceana

²⁰⁰ Lisa Vogel, *We Can Live Like This: A Memoir of Culture*, Berkeley: BillieBooks, 2024, 36.

²⁰¹ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 37.

²⁰² Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 25.

County” who was willing to work with them. According to Vogel, she visited the sheriff’s office in the nearby town of Hesperia to let them know about the event. When she arrived, the sheriff already knew about her, and he handed her a newspaper article titled, “2,000 Lesbians to Converge on Oceana County,” which claimed that the women at the previous festival had “lure[d] men into [the] campground, and then beat them up.”²⁰³ A few weeks later, just days before the festival was set to start, the sheriff showed up on the land and informed Vogel that the FBI had warned him about a group of motorcycle gang members planning to show up and assault the lesbians in attendance. Vogel and the sheriff decided it would be necessary to set up checkpoints on the roads leading to the festival land and only allow women to enter. From that year on, Vogel and the other festival organizers worked closely with the local police department to ensure the safety of attendees.²⁰⁴

Approximately 3,500 women attended Michfest in 1977. From eight AM until five PM every day for the week of August 22, workshops were held for attendees. An open mic was available to musicians not on the official schedule, and food was provided by the Michfest collective. Evenings were filled with concerts from popular lesbian and feminist musicians, including Alix Dobkin, Margie Adam, Therese Edell, Maxine Feldman, Kay Gardner, and others.²⁰⁵ Although the festival went well for attendees, money quickly became an issue for organizers.

In the Fall 1977 edition of *Paid My Dues*, a popular women’s music periodical, Michfest organizers published a letter about their financial situation. According to the letter, multiple checks for ticket purchases bounced back. Additionally, organizers accused the women who

²⁰³ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 26.

²⁰⁴ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 28-30.

²⁰⁵ Lori Schroeder, “Hysteria in Hesperia,” *Paid My Dues* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1977): 18, <https://www.queermusicheritage.com/pmd2-1b.html>.

worked at the registration table of stealing ticket proceeds. Organizers urged women who attended but did not pay, or paid a reduced rate, to send additional money to the collective. They also included a financial statement detailing the costs of the festival, a total of \$46,111, and the total that was made through ticket sales, \$46,712. Left with only \$600 to split between organizers and to pay for the 1978 festival, Michfest was still in a tight spot financially.²⁰⁶

In spite of the financial issues, the festival continued. Until 1982, the festival was operated by the We Want the Music Collective (WWTMC). According to Lisa Vogel, typically the collective was composed of between three to seven members. However, Vogel felt that she and her sister Kristie were consistently taking on the brunt of the work. “After five years of shouldering most of the responsibility and 100% of the loan risk, we had decided we had to get real.”²⁰⁷ The collective dissolved, and Lisa and Kristie purchased a square mile of land, 651 acres, with multiple personal loans and donations from festival attendees. In 1983, Lisa and Kristie dissolved their partnership. In 1985, Lisa went into business with Barbara Price. The land was held in both of their names until 1995, when Lisa took sole responsibility for the land.²⁰⁸

Attendance skyrocketed in 1982; the first festival on the recently purchased land hosted around 8,000 women. That year, ticket prices were \$68 for the full four days, and they included meals and access to both stages. However, the rise in attendance and the logistics of organizing new land created a chaotic environment. According to Lisa Vogel, “The bursting size of the 1982 Festival, compounded by searing logistical problems at every corner, destabilized everything and

²⁰⁶ The Womyn of We Want the Music Collective, “Michigan Organizers’ OPEN LETTER & FINANCIAL STATEMENT,” *Paid My Dues* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1977): 19, <https://www.queermusicheritage.com/pmd2-1b.html>.

²⁰⁷ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 70.

²⁰⁸ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 70-74.

everyone.”²⁰⁹ Issues continued to arise every year for Vogel, whether it be low attendance or poor accessibility to women of diverse experiences.

Michfest attendees did not keep their complaints to themselves. Following the third festival in 1978, four individuals published open letters to festival organizers in *Lesbian Connection* regarding the new “no male children” policy. One woman from Bloomington, Indiana wrote,

Once again the organizers of the Music Festival... are acting in a discriminatory manner. The first year there was childcare, and mothers were told to use their own discretion about bringing their older male children. So some mothers didn’t go; others went and left their children at home. The second year of the Festival there was a very neutral-sounding policy of ‘live and let live’ where mothers could bring their male children, but that each campsite could have the choice to exclude boy children or not. This time more mothers had to stay home because they were uncomfortable with this policy and felt that they would be on tenterhooks the entire weekend worrying about what might happen if their 7-year-old son stumbled into a hostile campsite... This year the oppression is more blatant, and there is no mincing of words. There is also a new discriminatory twist with one of the performers opening her concert to: ‘Lesbians and womyn children only.’²¹⁰

The other letters emphasized similar sentiments; A group of women from New Orleans wrote a letter emphasizing the importance of including both boys and girls in women’s culture. They wrote, “If they do not experience acceptance in our cultural events and have the opportunity to learn with us the joys of a matriarchal experience, then we, in effect, are pushing them toward a reactionary position, causing them to seek their acceptance in the patriarchy.” Many women felt that Michfest was oppressing them as mothers rather than helping them raise their sons to be respectful, non-patriarchal men. To address these concerns, Michfest created Brother Sun for

²⁰⁹ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 88.

²¹⁰ “Comments on Music Festival’s Boy Children Policy,” *Lesbian Connection* 4, no. 4 (October 1978), 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28039185>.

Boys by 1984, a separate campsite near the festival that provided childcare for boy children between the ages of five and twelve.²¹¹

Another prominent issue, particularly following the 1982 festival, was accessibility for differently abled women. After attending the festival, Connie Panzarino published a letter in *WomaNews* about her experience, stating, “Why was I asked at the gate, as I sat in my wheelchair in my special van, if I could walk! My answers to such insulting questions must have gotten passing grades because I was deemed eligible to camp in the isolated, ‘special,’ segregated area for disabled women.”²¹² Panzarino elucidated her issues with utilizing the bathroom, getting around the festival grounds, and attending concerts. She pointed out that Michfest was, in fact, not accessible, and she called out Lisa and Kristie Vogel for what she described as a misuse of power.

Lisa reflected on the shortcomings of the festival regarding accessibility in her memoir. “The huge increase in disabled womyn attending that 7th Festival-combined with the new, much larger site-was a logistical nightmare for the sisters who had come to the Land. They trusted that they were included, that it would be a safer space...”²¹³ Yet festival organizers were not prepared. They had selected a separate location for disabled women to camp, only to find out that it was referred to by attendees as “The Hill” or “Crip Mountain.” Over the years, Lisa did her best to improve accessibility. Following the 1982 festival, she and Kristie set up a fund for donations specifically dedicated to making the land more accessible.²¹⁴ They established the

²¹¹ “9th Annual Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival Better Than Ever!” *Up and Coming* (June 1984), 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28045994>.

²¹² Connie Panzarino, “A space divided,” *WomaNews* 3, no. 9 (October 1982), 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28046652>.

²¹³ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 91.

²¹⁴ Kristie A. Vogel, “LETTERS: We Want the Music Cooperative,” *New Women’s Times* 9, no. 6 (June 1983), 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28041382>.

Disabled Access Resource Team (DART) and gradually purchased four buses with wheelchair accessibility, which they named Doris, Demming, Dottie, and Dusty. In 1983, Michfest built a wooden wheel-way and used cut up strips of carpet to create paths to all the central areas of the festival, which replaced the previously used snow fencing. Electricity was doubled to accommodate medical devices. Programs were translated into Braille and guide ropes were installed for women with vision impairment. Eventually, approximately a mile of black top was installed to better accommodate wheelchairs. Lisa Vogel reflected on the period when the festival was working to improve accessibility, stating,

I realized that the relatively easy part of the work in committing to a community inclusive of disabled sisters was dealing with the physical solutions like carpet paths, electricity, or helping put up someone's tent. The more challenging commitment was being willing to listen and experience firsthand someone's anger about what they had to deal with in the world. What they had to deal with to be in community at Festival... This was the real work. This was real life.²¹⁵

Although DART was never a perfect solution to accessibility issues at the festival, it became a hub of workshops and festival culture over the years. It was also a testament to the festival's commitment to creating a safe and welcoming environment.

Another significant aspect of Michfest was the space dedicated to women of color. Lisa Vogel was approached by two attendees and festival workers, Amoja Three Rivers and Blanche Jackson, with a proposal for a women-of-color-only space. Initially, Lisa denied their request; instead, she offered "a co-coordinating position at the Community Center" and the use of "a section of the Community Center Tent for womyn of color."²¹⁶ The two agreed, and in 1984 they occupied a corner of the Community Center Tent, where women of color gathered "full of joy to be together."²¹⁷ The following year, Vogel provided them with their own tent and separate space.

²¹⁵ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 95-96.

²¹⁶ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 237.

²¹⁷ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 239.

According to her, “It was revolutionary on the Land for womyn of color, for white womyn, and for the relationships we have with each other. Its presence and importance called more womyn of color to the Land, and with it, the call for racial awareness in our growing community spread.”²¹⁸

Others were not satisfied with the festival’s treatment of women of color. An article in *WomaNews* stated, “The organizers of Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival claim to be anti-racist. They know there are very few Womyn of Color that come to their festival (under 3%) but how much do they share their privilege with Womyn of Color[?] They sometimes hire token Womyn of Color that maintain their status quo.”²¹⁹ Some women were upset about the lack of representation for different racial categories; while there were three work-study positions available to women of color, there were five groups represented at the festival, including Black, Asian, Native American, and Middle Eastern. “After four years of putting out educational leaflets about Armenian womyn on the information table, a staff member still thought I was an Arab woman. She had never bothered to read the leaflets or come to any of my workshops on how to include the diversity of Middle Eastern Womyn in Womyn of Color spaces.”²²⁰ So while Michfest made attempts to provide an inclusive space for everyone, women continued to point out its flaws over the years.

Although Michigan was largely attended by white, abled women, organizers seemed to take criticism into account when preparing for each year’s festival. Organizers admitted to their own naivety in creating a space for all types of women. Conflict was a recurrent part of the festival’s framework. Until 1991, Michfest was largely successful in addressing issues and

²¹⁸ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 240.

²¹⁹ “A Tokenist Ideology,” *WomaNews* 10, no. 7 (July-August 1989), 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28046719>.

²²⁰ “A ‘Respectful’ Space,” *WomaNews* 10, no. 7 (July-August 1989), 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28046719>.

providing the necessary resources for an inclusive community, as evidenced by its continued success over multiple decades. However, the controversy of 1991 would ultimately break Michfest's track record and, subsequently, lead to its closure.

“Womyn-born-womyn only”

Nancy Jean Burkholder attended Michfest for the first time in 1990, five years after coming out as a transgender lesbian woman. Prior to her transition, Nancy was “always on the fringes, afraid to take part cuz taking part in community meant to me that I’d have to share my true self, a totally unthinkable proposition until I embraced sex reassignment.”²²¹ After transitioning, Nancy found community in lesbian feminist circles. Her experience at Michfest in 1990 was so impactful that she was “so enthusiastic and wanting to contribute to that community” the following year.²²² Yet, her experience in 1991 was cut short.

At the time, Nancy was attending school at the University of New Hampshire-Manchester studying American Sign Language.²²³ She and her friend, Laura Ervin, decided to travel 1,050 miles from Stow, Massachusetts to Michfest. After arriving early Monday morning, the two volunteered for work shifts, helping other women shuttle their belongings to their desired campsites. Burkholder noted, “I felt a sense of pride in my work; welcoming the women, helping them with their gear, and answering their questions.”²²⁴ After a hard day of work, Nancy and Laura waited at the main gate for another friend to arrive from Grand Rapids. They arrived at the gate at 9:30pm; after finding out that their friend was delayed, they waited at a campfire with

²²¹ Nancy Jean Burkholder, “Post Script: August 1993,” *TransSisters* 2 (November/December 1993), 4, https://transreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-05-23_5ec935e84503c_TransSisters2.pdf.

²²² Burkholder, “Post Script,” *TransSisters*, 4.

²²³ Nancy Jean Burkholder, “A kinder and gentler festival?” *Gay Community News*

²²⁴ Nancy Jean Burkholder, “A Kinder, Gentler Festival?” *TransSisters* 2 (November/December 1993), 4, https://transreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-05-23_5ec935e84503c_TransSisters2.pdf.

several other attendees. Once the bus arrived, Laura went to find their friend while Nancy waited near the fire pit. As she waited, she was approached by two women, Chris Coyote and Del Kelleher. According to Nancy,

Chris said that she needed to speak with me regarding a serious and difficult matter. Sensing her urgency I suggested we move away from the women near the fire pit in order to talk privately. Chris said that the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was a woman-only event and she wanted to know if I were a man. I replied that I was a woman and I showed her my New Hampshire picture ID driver's license. Then she asked me if I were a transsexual. I asked her what was the point of her questioning and she replied that transsexuals were not permitted to attend the festival. She said that MWMF policy was that the festival was open to 'natural womyn-born-womyn' only. I replied that nowhere in any festival literature or the program guide was that policy stated... When I pointed out that there were other transsexuals on the land [Del] acknowledged that this was true. Then she added, 'We haven't caught them yet, but we did catch you.'²²⁵

Nancy was taken aback at the other women's questioning; she was particularly disturbed by the lack of transparency regarding the festival's policy, the gender policing that took place, and the justification for excluding transgender individuals.

Burkholder's prior experience at the festival had in no way indicated that she was unwelcome. Additionally, she was unaware of the 'policy' preventing trans women from attending. Shortly after her expulsion, Burkholder wrote in an article published in *Gay Community News*, "Apparently, there is a covert policy to exclude transsexuals that is not in any festival literature, advertisements or program guides."²²⁶ Her frustration with the secret 'womyn-born-womyn' policy was explicit and understandable. Despite Lisa Vogel and Barbara Price's insistence that the policy had always existed, it was not explicitly stated on promotional materials for the festival.²²⁷ While Vogel and Price claimed that they had always made the policy

²²⁵ Burkholder, "A Kinder, Gentler Festival?" *TransSisters*, 4.

²²⁶ Burkholder, "A kinder and gentler festival?" *Gay Community News* 19, no. 8 (September 1991), 4, <https://archive.org/details/gaycommunitynews1908gayc/page/4/mode/2up>.

²²⁷ Lisa Vogel and Barbara Price, "Festival womyn speak out," *Gay Community News* 19, no. 18 (November 1991), 4, <https://archive.org/details/gaycommunitynews1918gayc/page/4/mode/2up>.

clear when asked, Burkholder was not aware that she must call the organizers to double check her eligibility, especially after attending without a problem in 1990. Nancy claimed, “The festival producer’s unwillingness to put their policy in writing, while at the same time reserving their options to enforce their secret policy on innocent and unsuspecting festival participants is unethical.”²²⁸ In their response to Burkholder’s letter in *Gay Community News*, Lisa and Barbara recognized that, “the circumstances at this year’s Festival may have been a result of a lack of current public information on this policy.”²²⁹ However, research by scholar Sarah Cooper indicates that there was no explicit mention of the policy in successive promotional materials.²³⁰ If Michfest’s producers were invested in maintaining a women-born-women policy, why would they not make said policy clear? It seems that they were unwilling to have public records of such a policy.

Additionally, Burkholder and other invested attendees wrote about the implications of gender policing on the wider festival community. At the time she was expelled from Michfest, Nancy had already undergone gender-affirming surgery and was legally a woman according to the state of New Hampshire, as her driver’s license confirmed. When Chris and Del questioned her gender identity, she even offered to submit to a genital examination to confirm her status as a woman. When she asked one of the women to “produce proof to substantiate her insinuations that I was a transsexual,” they proceeded to tell Nancy that they had the power to expel anyone regardless of the cause. The fact that Nancy was, indeed, a transgender woman was not a provable fact without access to her medical and legal records. A woman named Flowing, who claimed to witness Nancy’s removal from Michfest, insinuated that “campers hanging out with

²²⁸ Burkholder, “A kinder and gentler festival?” *Gay Community News*, 4.

²²⁹ Vogel and Price, “Festival womyn speak out,” *Gay Community News*, 4.

²³⁰ Sarah Cooper, “Tracing womyn-born-womyn & trans-exclusion: Into the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival archive,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 29, no. 1 (May 2024), 64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2024.2354656>.

[her] became uncomfortable and convinced [she] was a man.”²³¹²³² If Flowing was correct about the reasons for Nancy’s removal, the implications were significant. Any participant who seemed too masculine could also be subject to removal. Flowing also notes that, “There are wimmin at the festival that deny all gender expectations in terms of body hair, body shape, voice, and mannerism.”²³³ It was certainly not uncommon for lesbian women to present in a masculine manner; after all, lesbian feminists were known for challenging gender roles imposed upon them by patriarchal standards. Despite this, many lesbian feminists proved unwilling to recognize the validity of a transgender woman’s identity, despite the very similar ways that she was challenging sex norms. Davina Ann Gabriel, another invested commentator on Nancy’s expulsion, eloquently connected the situation with biological determinism. Gabriel wrote,

This kind of prejudicial attitude is firmly rooted in the patriarchal assumption of biological determinism, which dictates that ‘anatomy is destiny’... In regard to gays and lesbians, biological determinism has dictated that sexual activity that is non-procreative in nature is inherently unnatural and perverse. In fact, assumptions of biological determinism provide the very bedrock for the existence of patriarchy.²³⁴

By denying Nancy’s womanhood, Michfest organizers appealed to patriarchal assumptions and, in effect, undermined their own politics. Cisgender defenders of Nancy were worried that they may be next on the chopping block. One woman, Linda Huxtable, wrote in to *Gay Community News* with her concerns.

I am a ‘womyn born womyn,’ identified as female at birth, raised as female and possessed of a potentially fertile female reproductive system. Yet I have on several occasions been perceived as a male-to-female transsexual. If I had been at the Michigan Women’s Music Festival and been approached by festival security as Nancy was, I would

²³¹ Flowing, “Safe, wimmin-only space is precious,” *Gay Community News* 19, no. 11 (September 1991), 4, <https://archive.org/details/gaycommunitynews1911gayc/page/4/mode/2up?q=michigan>.

²³² Flowing’s letter has been edited to replace the pronouns ‘he’ with ‘she’ to respect the identity of Nancy Burkholder; however, Flowing continuously referred to Nancy as a man and with male pronouns throughout her letter.

²³³ Flowing, “Safe, wimmin-only space,” *Gay Community News*, 4.

²³⁴ Davina Ann Gabriel, “Patriarchal assumptions,” *Gay Community News* 19, no. 16 (November 1991), 4, <https://archive.org/details/gaycommunitynews1916gayc/page/4/mode/2up>.

have had exactly the same resources she had to prove her gender: my legal identification and my genitals. Would the festival security personnel have evicted me ‘with respect and dignity’ in order to restore the “feeling of safety” to women who perceived me as being a ‘surgically altered man?’ Would they evict me from the festival based not on my actions but rather on my appearance, my voice, my personal style? Such a judgmental, rules-based action seems to come directly from the hierarchical social model we as feminists are trying to live without... Although I support others’ rights to have a women-born-as-women-only space if they so desire (and if they clearly label it as such), I feel compelled to point out that for me and many others, such a space is not and cannot be safe space. Too many of us wonder who will be excluded next from such “safe” space: lesbian-identified bisexual women, women who have seriously considered female-to-male reassignment, butch dykes who are sometimes mistaken for men....?²³⁵

Huxtable illustrated the issues with policing gender at Michfest. As a woman who was assigned female at birth, yet was often mistaken for a transgender woman, Huxtable could have just as easily been removed from the festival. In fact, any woman who presented outside of femininity could experience the same treatment.

Burkholder was also perturbed by the reasoning for her expulsion. “The festival security women told me that the reason for their secret policy is ‘for the protection of the transsexuals and women on the land.’”²³⁶ Yet Burkholder could not recall a single negative interaction from her five-day stay at the 1990 festival nor from her experience at the 1991 festival prior to her removal. She had interacted with hundreds of women and participated fully in all the festival events, including concerts and workshops, without any trouble. Nancy felt that the policy was not enforced for the protection of trans or cis women at all. Rather, she believed that the policy was implemented to “protect oppressors from experiencing and owning their discomfort and... to justify their actions against the oppressed.”²³⁷ Burkholder would go on to investigate the opinion of Michfest attendees on the issue of trans exclusion the following year.

²³⁵ Linda Huxtable, “Sincerely troubled,” *Gay Community News* 19, no. 15 (October 1991), 5, <https://archive.org/details/gaycommunitynews1915gayc/page/4/mode/2up?q=michigan+womyn%5C%27s>.

²³⁶ Burkholder, “A kinder and gentler festival?” *Gay Community News*, 4.

²³⁷ Burkholder, “A kinder and gentler festival?” *Gay Community News*, 4.

Michfest organizers' response to the controversy was short and unapologetic. "We would like to clarify our policy and explain the circumstances which brought it to light this last August. In the simplest of terms, the Michigan Festival is and always has been an event for womyn, and this continues to be defined as womyn-born-womyn."²³⁸ While there was a small, yet vocal, minority of women made aware of and upset about Nancy's expulsion, Lisa Vogel and Barbara Price continued to operate under business as usual in preparation for the next year's events. As opposed to previous issues, including the need for a women-of-color space or better accessibility for differently abled women, Michfest did not attempt to accommodate transgender women. Organizers also seemed to keep the issue under wraps; rather than releasing a statement to all attendees, they only responded to criticism in *Gay Community News*. Therefore, only a small audience remained aware of the transgender policy.

Trans Activism at Michfest

The year after Nancy's expulsion, Davina Ann Gabriel, a transgender woman highly invested in trans-inclusion, decided to attend Michfest to prove two things: "not only could [the trans-exclusive policy] not be effectively enforced, but that there is, in fact, no rational justification for its existence."²³⁹ She was accompanied by three cisgender women, including Janis Walworth, Irene Walworth, and Brandy Sinco. Davina planned to lay low for most of the festival and then come out as trans at Janis's workshop "Confronting Transphobia: Transsexuals in Our Community?", which was scheduled on the day of her departure. Despite her anxiety leading up to the festival over the possibility of being expelled, Davina was successful in

²³⁸ Vogel and Price, "Festival womyn speak out," *Gay Community News*, 4.

²³⁹ Davina Ann Gabriel, "Mission to Michigan," *TransSisters* 2 (November/December 1993), 8, https://ia801208.us.archive.org/23/items/transsistersjour00unse_0/transsistersjour00unse_0.pdf.

obtaining entrance to Michfest. She spent four days at the festival without incident. Although some women at one of the trans workshops “expressed opposition to the idea of allowing transsexual womyn to attend the festival... the overwhelming majority expressed unqualified support for allowing them to do so.”²⁴⁰ Davina noted that many women that she talked to were not aware of the trans-exclusionary policy, and most of them seemed opposed to it. According to her, “The most encouraging sentiment that I heard expressed throughout the day was the admission by some womyn that they do in fact have very transphobic feelings, but that they recognize them as a form of prejudice, and wanted to be able to overcome them.”²⁴¹ Davina was inspired, and surprised, by the overwhelming support she received at the festival.

However, not everyone was quite as accepting. While working at the literature table, which handed out informational pamphlets on transgender issues, a survey regarding trans-inclusion at the festival, and free buttons labeled “Where’s Nancy?”, Davina was approached by popular lesbian feminist musician Alix Dobkin. Dobkin was well-known in the lesbian community for being staunchly separatist and anti-male, as well as for siding with Michfest on their trans-exclusionary policy. After looking over the display and taking one of the surveys, Dobkin noticed the “Where’s Nancy?” button, “to which she very tersely replied, ‘Nancy is where *he* belongs,’ then walked off to her workshop.”²⁴² Alix went on to state in her workshop that, “The transsexual issue had originally come up fifteen years earlier, and that the policy had been established then, but now that the issue seemed to be coming up again that it was necessary to reiterate that policy.”²⁴³

²⁴⁰ Gabriel, “Mission to Michigan,” *TransSisters*, 10.

²⁴¹ Gabriel, “Mission to Michigan,” *TransSisters*, 10.

²⁴² Gabriel, “Mission to Michigan,” *TransSisters*, 10.

²⁴³ Gabriel, “Mission to Michigan,” *TransSisters*, 11.

Despite this encounter, Davina went forward with her plan. The following morning, she came out as trans at Janis's workshop. "Out of the approximately twenty womyn there, only two expressed that they were uncomfortable with me being there. All of the other[s] expressed that they were very glad I was there..."²⁴⁴ Davina and her friends departed the festival that afternoon without incident, surprised and excited about the overwhelmingly positive experience.

Additionally, the four women had distributed surveys to over six hundred individuals while they were there. Although Davina recognized that "this was not an entirely random sample," seventy-three percent of respondents "favored allowing post-operative MTF transsexuals to attend the festival, twenty-three percent were opposed, and four percent were undecided."²⁴⁵ Based upon her experience and the survey results, it seemed that a great majority of festival attendees were opposed to excluding transgender women from Michfest. Yet the policy remained intact.

Camp Trans

In 1993, Nancy Burkholder returned to Michfest, accompanied by three other trans women and multiple cis women. They planned to distribute literature on transgenderism and host workshops for attendees. However, they were swiftly expelled from the festival. Nancy and the others decided to set up camp "across from the main gate in the woods of the National Park."²⁴⁶ There, they conducted the workshops they had planned; over 75 women attended, and more than 200 women visited to show their support. Thus, according to Emi Koyama, "Camp Trans was born."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Gabriel, "Mission to Michigan," *TransSisters*, 11.

²⁴⁵ Gabriel, "Mission to Michigan," *TransSisters*, 12.

²⁴⁶ Emi Koyama, Handbook, 8.

²⁴⁷ Koyama, Handbook, 8.

Camp Trans was an event held in tandem with Michfest; it served as a protest to the ‘womyn-born-womyn’ policy and as an alternative option for those who felt unwelcome but still wanted to be in community with others. 1994 was the first official year of Camp Trans; it was organized by Nancy Burkholder, Rica Fredrickson, Davina Anne Gabriel, Wendi Kaiser, Janis Walworth, and Riki Wilchins. In an article about the event, Janis Walworth included a statement on the plan for the 1994 festival.

We have decided that the focus of our protest will be conducted outside the festival, across from the main gate this year; however, one or more of us might also enter the festival. In addition to distributing literature to festival participants and seeking to enlist their support in our efforts, a number of workshops on a variety of topics will be conducted at our campsite. We are also very pleased that Leslie Feinberg has agreed to join us in our protest and to conduct several workshops for us, as well as to conduct readings from her novel *Stone Butch Blues* and book signings.²⁴⁸

The article called for other trans and allied women to consider attending, as well as for donations to the protest. By this point, it was clear to protestors that Michfest organizers had no intention of changing their admissions policy. By camping across from the gates, these women believed they could make an impact. Through distribution of educational materials, they hoped to encourage Michfest attendees to rally against the anti-trans policy. Janis made clear the significance of Camp Trans, stating, “The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is, quite simply, the frontline in the struggle against the exclusion of transsexual womyn within the lesbian/feminist community.”²⁴⁹ These women envisioned their battle against Michfest as something larger; they fought for trans-inclusion in lesbian communities nationwide.

The 1994 festival was a success according to Davina. Camp Trans set up across the main gates and distributed fliers to Michfest attendees as they drove up to the gate. According to her

²⁴⁸ Janis Walworth, “Protest Against Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival’s Exclusionary Policy Will Continue This Year,” *TransSisters* 5 (Summer 1994), 11, https://archive.org/details/transsistersjou1994unse_1/page/10/mode/2up.

²⁴⁹ Walworth, “Protest Against Michigan,” *TransSisters*, 11.

article in *TransSisters*, Davina received an overwhelming amount of support from the women she interacted with. The protest featured a schedule of events, including workshops led by writer and activist Leslie Feinberg, popular for her book *Stone Butch Blues*, as well as community meetings. Michfest attendees often streamed back and forth between the two events, mingling with and showing support to the transgender activists.

The most controversial action of Camp Trans that year was the entrance of multiple trans individuals to the festival on Saturday, August 13th. Riki Wilchins, Davina Anne Gabriel, and multiple other trans women were accompanied by The Lesbian Avengers, a group of lesbian activists from New York, into Michfest. Despite the trans-exclusionary policy, they were able to obtain entrance. After purchasing their tickets, the group was joined by approximately fifty other women on their way to a workshop. Davina felt that “they were experiencing... lesbian herstory in the making.”²⁵⁰ After lingering for the rest of the day, the group marched through the Michfest dining hall on their way back to Camp Trans. Shortly after their triumph at the festival, Camp Trans packed up and headed home.

Despite their seemingly successful trip, Michigan organizer Lisa Vogel confirmed that the trans-exclusionary policy would not change in the coming years. Although Camp Trans attempted to reconvene in 1995, conflict between activists emerged. Davina Anne Gabriel, creator of the publication *TransSisters* and longtime protestor of Michfest’s exclusionary policy, wrote an article expressing her discomfort with advocating for the inclusion of pre-operative trans women. Other Camp Trans activists believed it was discriminatory, or elitist, to continue to

²⁵⁰ Davina Anne Gabriel, “Mission to Michigan III: Barbarians at the Gate,” *TransSisters* 7 (Winter 1995), 21, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/m039k4946>.

exclude specific populations of trans women.²⁵¹ Ultimately, the 1995 protest was only attended by three women.²⁵² Protests stagnated for the next few years.

Camp Trans was revived as Son of Camp Trans in 1999 by a group called Transsexual Menace, led by Rikki Wilchins. Wilchins is a transgender individual who became an activist for the community in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Their work with Camp Trans catapulted their career as an advocate for gender diversity and acceptance.²⁵³ The Michfest protests continued each year, gaining more and more public visibility as time went on. One individual sent out a call for boycotts on the bands that performed at Michfest in 1999.²⁵⁴ Protestors differed on their approaches; some felt it was more effective to enter the festival and discuss trans inclusion with attendees while others believed they should boycott the festival entirely. The members and organizers of Son of Camp Trans fluctuated year to year, but the protest did not lose momentum. Lisa Vogel, by then the sole producer of Michfest, continued to double down on the trans-exclusionary policy.

The turning point for Michigan Womyn's Music Festival occurred when, in 2014, the advocacy group Equality Michigan (EQMI) created a petition calling for Michfest to end the trans-exclusionary policy; until then, EQMI encouraged a boycott of the festival. Many well-known LGBTQ+ organizations signed the petition in a short amount of time, including the Human Rights Campaign, Equality Federation, *The TransAdvocate*, the LGBTQ+ Task Force,

²⁵¹ Davina Anne Gabriel, "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss," *TransSisters* 9 (Summer 1995), 22, https://dn720502.ca.archive.org/0/items/transsistersjou1995unse_1/transsistersjou1995unse_1.pdf.

²⁵² Koyama, "Handbook," 8.

²⁵³ Richard Gilbert-Cross, "Riki Wilchins," The Outwords Archive, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://theoutwordsarchive.org/interview/riki-wilchins/>.

²⁵⁴ Koyama, "Handbook," 33.

and the National Center for Lesbian Rights.²⁵⁵ Additionally, performers such as the Indigo Girls and actress Lea DeLaria canceled their upcoming appearances at the festival.

Lisa Vogel discussed the impact of the petition in her memoir. “The boycotting of this lesbian space... was for many of us the final nail in the coffin of hope that womon-identified lesbians were represented under their rainbow flag.”²⁵⁶ Largely due to the boycotts, Vogel could not see a financial way forward for Michfest after its 40th anniversary without an increase in ticket prices and less programming. Because she felt uncomfortable charging more for less, Vogel decided that the 2015 festival would be the last.²⁵⁷ Although many of the organizations who initially signed the petition withdrew their signatures under the hopes that Vogel would sit down to discuss the trans issue, upsetting many of the trans activists who had devoted years of their time to protesting the WBW policy, the closure of the festival made those meetings pointless. It seemed that Vogel was intent on maintaining her policy until the very end, even if that meant prematurely ending her 40-year project.

Many women felt deeply saddened by Vogel’s decision. Some had grown up attending the festival; others felt comfortable expressing themselves for the first time at Michfest. The reason for its closure begs the question: would the festival have continued to thrive if it had allowed trans women? Certainly, a larger portion of individuals would have attended, major performers like the Indigo Girls would not have pulled out, and national LGBTQ+ organizations would not have supported a boycott. Although it is impossible to know what the financial and social position of Michfest would look like without a WBW policy, it seems that Vogel’s project would at least have been more successful.

²⁵⁵ Autumn Sandeen, “TransAdvocate Suspending Its Michfest Petition Signature,” *The TransAdvocate*, April 12, 2015, https://www.transadvocate.com/transadvocate-suspending-its-michfest-petition-signature_n_15098.htm.

²⁵⁶ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 354.

²⁵⁷ Vogel, *We Can Live Like This*, 358-359.

So why did Vogel hold so tightly to her initial policy? Lesbian separatist theory, which initiated the desire and political reasoning for woman-only (primarily lesbian-only) space, could not accommodate emerging queer identities. Because lesbian separatism was based upon an essentialist understanding of men and women that marries them, based upon their assigned sex at birth, to certain characteristics, there was no room for gender transition. According to many lesbian separatists, individuals born as male could never understand, relate to, or achieve the same status as those born as female. This logic often led to transphobic viewpoints. Certain feminist scholars, such as Janice Raymond and Mary Daly, went to extreme lengths to discredit transgender identity.²⁵⁸ Although Vogel has long claimed that the WBW policy was not a policy at all, but an intention, her endorsement of exclusion and the language she utilized invalidated trans women as “real” women.

Some have asked why trans activists were so fixated on Michfest; why, instead, did they not focus their energy on supporting trans-inclusive spaces? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand the significance of lesbian community to many trans women. Nancy Burkholder’s story is evidence that lesbian feminist space was not always hostile to the trans community. In fact, Nancy was one of many who first felt supported by lesbian feminists.²⁵⁹ By protesting Michfest’s policy, trans activists felt that they were making a stand for transgender individuals in lesbian community across the country. Rikki Wilchins reflected on the significance of the Michigan protests in her memoir, stating,

First, it marked the first time transgender activists had coordinated and pulled-off a complex political event on the national level. Second, although trans-exclusive policies would sputter on for another 10-15 years, it was the beginning of the end of them in women’s spaces... And, third, all of this was because trans issues were moving beyond

²⁵⁸ See Janice Raymond’s book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*.

²⁵⁹ See chapter four for another example of trans women’s relationship to the lesbian community.

transgender people, attracting broad-based support from within the women's community itself...²⁶⁰

Ultimately, Michigan represented more than a weeklong festival in the woods. To the Camp Trans activists, it represented the future of trans rights.

Although Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was an extraordinary example of the capability and devotion of lesbian feminist and separatist space, it was not without its problems. As with other lesbian separatist ventures, issues of race, class, and disability caused tension among participants. Yet, the organizers' desire to continue to adapt to the needs of attendees kept the festival going through even the toughest conflicts. The establishment of a space for women of color, as well as the infrastructure built to accommodate differently abled women, evidenced that Lisa Vogel and her supporters could effectively respond to criticism. However, when it came to the needs of transgender women, they were unwilling to change. As trans discrimination became more publicly recognized, Michfest was put on display for failing to adapt. In the end, the same political theory that created the festival led to its decline.

²⁶⁰ Rikki Wilchins, *TRANS/gressive: How Transgender Activists Took on Gay Rights, Feminism, the Media, & Congress... and Won!*, 39.

Conclusion

The lesbian separatist movement played a crucial role in creating space for lesbian women to proclaim their identity and make their concerns a priority within both feminist and LGBTQ+ circles. Women from across the country successfully established a countercultural movement through lesbian feminist periodicals, businesses, urban community spaces, music, and land collectives. The movement provided community, solidarity, financial opportunity, and stability for thousands of lesbian women which, in an otherwise unaccepting and discriminatory setting, they would not experience elsewhere.

However, as with any movement, tensions arose over a diversity of life experiences, including motherhood, race, class, ability, and gender identity. The primacy of sexism within lesbian feminist theory proved problematic for women of color, working class women, and transgender women; the intersectional issues that these women faced were often overlooked. Although racism and classism became common sites of discussion within the lesbian feminist and separatist communities, transphobia presented a challenge that has yet to be overcome. Lesbian separatist theory's inability to grapple with modern queer identities has ultimately diminished its appeal. Although lesbian separatist communities continue to exist across the country, their numbers are dwindling.

My entry point to this thesis was the group of women who founded Spinsterhaven, and later Elder Tree, in Northwest Arkansas. As of 2025, multiple original members have distanced themselves from the organization due to their stance on transgender identity. Two of the individuals that participated in oral history interviews no longer identify as women; one identifies as trans-masculine and the other identifies as nonbinary. However, they do not feel welcome to continue participating in Elder Tree events.

In 2017, two women associated with Elder Tree proposed a workshop to the Goddess Festival in Fayetteville, Arkansas titled “How Transgender Politics Harms Women and Undermines the Women’s Liberation Movement,” which condemned the transgender community, claiming that the “transgender movement promot[es] primarily the interests of males.”²⁶¹ Although the workshop was denied by the Goddess Festival, these women continued to organize against the trans community. They instead presented a workshop on Bonnie J. Morris’s book, *The Disappearing L*, but continued to spread their anti-trans rhetoric. During the workshop, they formed a group called Lesbians and Feminists Rise Up (LAF Rise Up). The group meets regularly to discuss Ruth Barrett’s book *Female Erasure: What You Need to Know About Gender Politics’ War on Women, the Female Sex and Human Rights*.²⁶²

Many of the individuals who participated in oral history interviews at the Elder Tree house informed me that they had not renewed their membership because this anti-trans group was allowed to hold their meetings at Elder Tree. Unfortunately, this is an issue that has created a seemingly insurmountable divide in the Fayetteville lesbian community.

Meanwhile, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and legislation is on the rise throughout the United States. As of April 4, 2025, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was tracking a total of 563 anti-LGBTQ bills in the country. These bills include banning gender-affirming care, preventing the use of chosen pronouns in public schools, censoring curriculum, banning trans children from participating in school sports, and more.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Jeanne Neath, Paula Mariedaughter, and Susan Wiseheart, “Transgender Politics Harms Women Workshop,” XX Amazons: Ending Patriarchy, Re-Creating the Female-Centered World, Accessed April 10, 2025, <https://xxamazons.org/transgender-politics-harms-women-workshop/>.

²⁶² Jeanne Neath, Paula Mariedaughter, and Susan Wiseheart, “Lesbians and Feminists Rise Up,” XX Amazons: Ending Patriarchy, Re-Creating the Female-Centered World, Accessed April 10, 2025, <https://xxamazons.org/story-of-the-goddess-festival/>.

²⁶³ “The ACLU is tracking 563 Anti-LGBTQ bills in the U.S.,” American Civil Liberties Union, Accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2025>.

While individual states have been proposing and passing these bills, President Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign ran on the promise to increase discriminatory LGBTQ+ policies on the federal scale. Since his inauguration only three months ago, he has followed through on that promise. On January 20, 2025, Trump issued an executive order (EO) titled, "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government." Borrowing language from trans exclusive radical feminists, such as Lesbians and Feminists Rise Up, the EO states, "Efforts to eradicate the biological reality of sex fundamentally attack women by depriving them of their dignity, safety, and well-being."²⁶⁴ The EO effectively forces transgender individuals to only use bathrooms according to their sex assigned at birth on federal property, prevents them from obtaining federal identity documents with the correct gender identity, halts federal funding for "content that is deemed to be promoting 'gender ideology,'" allows for housing discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, and more.²⁶⁵ Trump's presidency will undoubtedly invite broader discrimination against the queer community, both legally and socially.

While lesbian separatists and conservatives who promote anti-trans rhetoric often do so under the guise of protecting biological women, anti-trans policies and sentiment harm biological women. A particular controversy at the 2024 Olympics illustrates this point well. Imane Khelif is an Algerian boxer; she won the gold medal in 66kg women's boxing competition at the Paris Olympics, despite facing harassment and discrimination. Khelif is a cisgender woman; she was

²⁶⁴ "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government," The White House, January 20, 2025, Accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>.

²⁶⁵ Brandon Wolf, "Background On Trump Day One Executive Orders Impacting The LGBTQ+ Community," Human Rights Campaign, January 22, 2025, Accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/background-on-trump-day-one-executive-orders-impacting-the-lgbtq-community>.

assigned female at birth and has lived her entire life as a woman. Yet, after she defeated the Italian boxer Angela Carini in 46 seconds during a preliminary match, people online began accusing her of being a transgender woman. The International Boxing Association (IBA), which is no longer recognized by the International Olympics Committee, perpetuated the myth that Khelif was trans. Suddenly, she was facing a global audience participating in speculation over her gender identity; her appearance, voice, and body were put on the international stage and subjected to interrogation.²⁶⁶

It should not matter whether Imane Khelif is transgender or not, but in this instance, it does. Now, not only are trans individuals facing harm from legal, social, and political means, but so are cisgender women. The attack on transgender people will not stop there; without acceptance for gender diversity, cisgender people will also be subject to gender policing. Women have already experienced centuries of subjugation, and transphobia is just one more avenue of oppression.

Now, more than ever, it is crucial for LGBTQ+ people, women, people of color, and other minoritized communities to stand in solidarity with one another. Lesbian separatists must adapt to accommodate queer identities to continue to serve as an effective, worthwhile community. Otherwise, the LGBTQ+ community will not stand a chance against increasingly discriminatory political regimes and policies. As the next generation of queer people grows up and begins to take on the fight against oppression, they are unlikely to buy into ideology that recycles hatred and misinformation against transgender people. Unless lesbian separatist theory changes, the communities that supported women-owned businesses and land collectives will no longer be

²⁶⁶ Greg Beacham, “Who is Imane Khelif? Algerian boxer facing gender outcry had modest success before Olympics,” *AP News*, August 2, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/olympics-2024-imane-khelif-boxing-paris-2eb07d442ffb29a61e09911884dcdaa9>.

sustainable. If groups like the Ozark Land Holding Association wish to pass on their legacy to the next generation, they must unequivocally support the modern queer community.

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