

## Lesbianism as political practice: discussion

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**Event details:**

The second Women and Labour conference  
Melbourne University

**Publication Date:**

1980

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/681>

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# Lesbianism as political practice

## (discussion)

(A series of pieces written in response to what happened at the 'Lesbian' session at the second Women and Labour conference in Melbourne in 1980, and to the paper I gave there, 'Lesbianism as political practice')

[Added June 2003: I wrote the first piece below immediately after the 'Women and Labour' conference and sent it to the Melbourne *Lesbian Newsletter* on 20 May 1980. It was published in the August issue, no.25, along with a (very good) summary of my paper and an article replying to my letter. This article is included below after my response, and that is followed by some comments of my own written in 2003. The next piece is a letter I wrote to the author of the article at the time in response to a letter she must have written me (since vanished).

That is followed by two excerpts from an article that appeared in the October 1980 issue of the journal *Refractory Girl* (RG) (Issue 20/21), plus some comments of mine (written in 2003). The next piece is my response at the time, in 1980. I initially thought I might send it to RG, but then I decided not to because I was simply too demoralised. It wasn't finished either, for the same reason, so it ends rather abruptly.

The last three pieces included here are two letters, an apology from a woman who had been a member of the audience at the 'Lesbian' session and my reply, and an article by an anonymous author, published in 'Gay Community News'.]

## ***Denise's response to workshop reactions***

I would like to discuss the reactions to my paper, 'Lesbianism as Political Practice', which was delivered at the Women and Labour Conference at Melbourne University. While it could be argued that the appropriate time for such discussion is the open forum which followed the paper, the nature of the discussion which actually took place there seriously limited the scope of the debate. Moreover, my own reactions to the trend of the debate raise issues with wider implications than the sleepless night I spent afterwards, desperately trying to work out what I had done which deserved such vilification. The wider relevance of those issues was indicated to me by the number of women who came up to me and said: 'Aren't you brave?' and by the remark of one participant that her 'stomach was churning' with the tension and hostility in the room.

The first objection to be raised at the time was to my assertion that 'Lesbianism is rarely mentioned at conferences, etc.' In opposition to this, the speaker produced a list of conferences, etc. where lesbianism *had* been discussed, none of which was included in my bibliography. She also accused me of writing 'bad history'.

I agreed with the speaker that my bibliography was deficient, and that I would welcome any suggestions of useful additions. I also pointed out that many of the conferences mentioned by the speaker were set up precisely *because* there was no discussion at the general conferences. Moreover, none of the difficulties and differences had been resolved.

The chief problem (from my point of view) about this objection was the manner in which it was raised. The tone was patronising and destructive. This was no offer of assistance—my request for the useful list of references (which was rattled off too quickly to write down) was ignored. To my mind, this was 'point-scoring' of the worst sort. Moreover, it occurred to me some time later (in the early hours of the next morning), that this paucity of references is not due to want of effort on my part. I have approached at least two people who I heard were collecting archival material and/or writing theses on the history of the WLM [Women's Liberation Movement] in Sydney. In one of these cases, the response was an outright refusal on my third request. In the other, the response was luke-warm. Perhaps I should have followed this up with more energy, but I had gained the impression that this would be unwelcome. Whether or not this paranoid reaction on my part was justified, I don't

know. However, I *do* know that my self-esteem is too fragile to survive too many interactions of this kind.

But beyond these considerations, my task was not to present a linear historical account of lesbianism within the WLM of the last ten years. It was, rather, to present the contradictory nature of the phenomenon—on the one hand, the disinclination to talk about the issue within the general framework of feminism; and, on the other hand, the cacophonous conflict it raises when it *is* discussed. Whatever else may have been unclear in the paper, *that* point was surely obvious.

Several objections which were raised—while not as well-prepared and hence as well-argued as the first one—were equally destructive in their implications. That the theory was ‘confused’ I had already admitted before I started reading the paper—it was, indeed, one of the reasons why I omitted it. If pressed, I would have gone on to explain *why* I thought so. But the woman who raised this objection did not tell me why *she* thought it was confused, and again offered no assistance to enable me, perhaps, to overcome my own confusion.

That the paper was ‘meaningless’ I do *not* agree. But since this epithet seemed to me to be motivated by intense negative emotions which I didn’t understand, I also failed to understand what was meant by the term ‘meaningless’. I also deny that the paper was ‘all lies’, since I had at the time of writing it no conscious deliberate intention to deceive anyone.

To sum up what I perceived to be the assumption behind most of the other objections: I deny that my statement—‘Lesbianism is the crucial practice of feminism’—is equivalent to the statement, ‘Lesbians are the only true feminists’. In order to support that denial, I need to do a lot more work clarifying my theoretical confusions. Suffice it to say for the moment that, while the former statement is an attempt to politicise the personal, the latter succeeds in doing no more than personalising the political. At no point in my argument do I assert anything about the nature, habits or political soundness of individuals who might happen to be lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, asexual, celibate (or anything else for that matter) at any one time. The object towards which my argument is directed is not the classification of individuals at all, but a *debate*—a debate which includes the choices, actions and consciousness of individuals (‘practice’), but which is not constrained by any necessity to explain personal idiosyncrasies of behaviour. Something of that sort

was involved in my use of the concepts of 'discourse' and 'ideology', but I do not want to go any further into the theoretical issue here.

In marked contrast to the attitudes described above (and, in some strange and contradictory way, the reverse side of the *same* coin) was the warmth and acceptance of the loving women I spoke to, and who spoke to me, in small groups and individually both before and after the presentation of the paper and its aftermath. These sweet sisters agreed or disagreed, but were prepared to argue with full awareness that my self-esteem was no less vulnerable than their own. They understood or misunderstood, but waited patiently while I groped for clarification, or alternatively supplied me with their own. Our mutual sympathy, patience and kindness was yet one more indication to me that the 'revolution' is not some future event, but here and now.

Are we to go the way of those impotent (male) revolutionary movements which fragmented into warring antagonistic factions, wasting their energies and interests in doctrinal squabbles among themselves? And further, *is* the feminist revolution a matter of 'barricades', and who will and will not be with us 'manning' (the patriarchal terminology is deliberate) the guns as we fire on all those who didn't get out of bed in time? Or is the feminist revolution *now*, the processes which we have already evolved, and continue to develop, as we say 'no' to the oppressive institutions we have all experienced in our different personal ways?

And those differences will not go away if we deny that they exist. They can only be rendered harmless by admitting that they are there, and discussing the on-going development of their implications for, and effects on, our common purpose. There may, indeed, be a distinction between 'heterosexism' and 'heterosexuality', but any such distinction can only be worked out by those women who still care enough about their own implication within heterosexuality to expend the effort on the task. For those of us who have never been able to make the distinction, the task is impossible.

Denise Thompson, Leichhardt—20.5.80

## ***A Reply to Denise***

In response to Denise Thompson's article on the reactions to her paper 'Lesbianism As Political Practice', presented at the second Women and Labour Conference, I would like to explore my perceptions of those reactions at the conference session within the historical context of recent lesbian-feminist struggle.

The conference session on lesbianism, at which Denise's paper was presented, was crowded with over 500 women, most of whom were lesbians. Many lesbians had come to the Conference only to attend that session. The object of the session was presumably for Denise to present some of the ideas in her paper and for that presentation to act as a stimulus and starting point for discussion by those present.

The huge numbers present and the structured lecture theatre venue provided an environment which made wide participation and careful discussion almost impossible and was inherently alienating for audience and speaker alike. It was an environment which was physically beyond the control of participants.

I arrived at the lesbian session angry at some of the contents of the paper. To that anger was added frustration at the environment provided for one of the conference's more important sessions. My anger was fuelled by Denise's opening remarks. She had, she told us, decided (after consultation) not to give a summary of her entire paper, as she felt that we (the audience) would not understand it. Instead, she read the first part relating to her allegation of the neglect of the lesbian issue by the Women's Liberation Movement and some of the possible reasons for this. The inevitable result of this was to focus the session on the question of the accuracy of that allegation, without exploring her basic thesis of the role of "phallogentric sexuality" as a major mechanism of women's oppression and the role of lesbian-feminism as an important initial political reaction to that oppression.

Denise has accused me of presenting a "well-prepared, well-argued, patronising, destructive", unhelpful attempt at "point-scoring of the worst kind". My criticism and those of others raised in the session are perceived by her as both unreasonable and threatening to her self-esteem which is no less "vulnerable" than that of other women.

Before explaining what I actually did say, I readily acknowledge that it takes an act of courage to put oneself on the line before an audience (of any size) but I would like to point out that every woman who spoke at that session was exercising such an act of courage. Women who spoke from the floor did not have the advantage of a raised platform or a

microphone. We, all of us, put ourselves on the line to the same audience. We, all of us, have self-esteem.

On the other hand, the wide circulation of Denise's response doesn't seem to lay down the same conditions for the preservation of my self-esteem as she rightly claims for her own. I do not know where she has sent this article or where it will be published. The *Lesbian Newsletter* collective has given me the opportunity to reply to one audience. I doubt that I will get a chance to reply to Denise's accusations elsewhere. Also, I'm not sure that the Women's Liberation Movement or the lesbian community is yet capable of collective responsibility for the preservation of our individual self-esteem. As a Radical Feminist I understand that individual self-esteem is an individual responsibility—both in the getting and consolidating processes. An ever expanding circle of collective responsibility for this is an ideal, but at this stage, rarely more than that.

Denise's circulated reaction certainly made an important point with regard to individual survival. However, it also came very close to an argument against critical appraisal of published work. If one presents a paper at a Conference such as the Women and Labour Conference, one must expect criticism and disagreement, particularly if the author appears to show scant regard for the collective self-esteem of lesbian-feminists who have been struggling within the W.L.M.

The point I made in the Conference session was a major objection to Denise's statements that lesbianism 'was rarely acknowledged publicly within feminism' or if acknowledged, was accorded marginal status 'on the level of personal choice. She states that 'it was rarely listed on the agenda of conferences, rarely, if ever, mentioned in feminist history or theory'. Apparently this is so because at first the women's movement sought to 'avoid outright conflict' and then because the only political response to the alleged divisiveness of the issue was silence.

I enumerated a list of *national* feminist conferences which I think disprove Denise's claim. These included Mt. Beauty Women's Liberation Conference (1972), Radicalesbian Conference (1972), Feminism/Socialism Conference (1974), Women's Health in a Changing Society Conference (1975), Women and Politics Conference (1975), Women and Madness Conference (1975), AUS women's Conference (1975), Anarchism and Feminism Conference (1975), Sexism in Education Conference (1976), Sexuality Conference (1976), Marxist Feminist Conference (1977), AUS Women's Conference (1977), First Women and Labour Conference (1978), AUS Women's Department Conference (1978). (Also, lesbian-feminists were the initiating and organising force behind the First National Homosexual Conference



(1975) and some subsequent National Homosexual Conferences and the National Seminar on Homosexuals in Education (1976)).

I did not give a list of conferences in order to improve a 'deficient' bibliography. My point was a political one—that Denise's claim that the issue of lesbianism has 'rarely been raised' is not true. In the first instance it was raised specifically to provoke 'outright conflict' (by Hobart Women's Action Group at Mt. Beauty 1972) which is often an inevitable consequence of women recognising the breadth of our oppression. It has been raised at almost every national feminist conference since 1972. Contrary to Denise's belief, none were set up to discuss lesbianism 'precisely *because* there was no discussion at general conferences'—almost all these conferences were general conferences. The one exception—Radicalesbian Conference (1973)—was convened for positive reasons, such as getting lesbian-feminists together to start the process of sorting out the implications of lesbian oppression within the context of women's oppression. (Of course, what is abundantly clear is that there now needs to be a national lesbian feminist conference which allows the time and structure to explore the issues raised by Denise in her paper and many other aspects of lesbian-feminism—history, theory and practice).

As for the claim that lesbianism is 'rarely mentioned in feminist history and theory', this view seems to be based on an assumption that the legitimate development of radical feminist theory takes place within Masters/Doctoral theses and published books on feminism. The nature of radical feminism and of women's lack of access to educational and material resources dictates that this cannot be so. In this case the bibliography is deficient as it does not refer to the papers of the Radicalesbian Conference, Jocelyn Clarke and the Melbourne Radicalesbian contributions to Jan Mercer's early book *Women in Australian Society*, contributions to the Lesbian Newsletter and various Women's Liberation Newsletters, and the Clarke/Bebbington papers at the Socialism/Feminism Conference and the Women's Health in a Changing Society Conference, to name but a few. Denise ignores the writings of US Radical (lesbian) Feminists such as Judy Grahn, Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich and the National Gay Task Force's book *Our Right to Love*. She also entirely ignores the existence of periodicals established with a primary aim of exploring lesbian-feminism such as *Sinister Wisdom*, *Lesbian Tide* and *Conditions*, all of which are available in Australia.

I deny that to raise some of the above points during the conference session was an exercise in patronising and destructive point scoring. My interest in speaking at all was to try to persuade Denise to recognise that lesbian-feminists have been thinking/writing/acting publicly and privately for almost a decade on the issues she raises. By publishing statements denying this,



she denies our history and devalues our struggles. She first announced this viewpoint in 1978. In spite of attempts to tell her otherwise, she raises the same claims in 1980. I am not surprised that there are some women's liberationists in Sydney whose anger overflows into attack.

On the other hand, I have never asserted that the process of working out the implications of lesbian oppression within the context of women's oppression in capitalist patriarchy is a completed task. I do not agree that Denise's view of existing feminist ideology is complete or that the central practice of feminism is a sexual practice but they are subjects for another article. Neither do I agree that we have seen a mass exodus of heterosexual feminists to lesbianism. Not for the negative reason of a reaction to male domination nor because lesbianism (or lesbian-feminism) defeats the enforced femininity of women under patriarchy. But because reclaiming our Selves and our bodies has allowed many women to be the lesbians we really are.

Yes, the feminist revolution has begun and no, it won't be achieved by denying our differences and difficulties. But it has been/is/will be very hard work requiring us to be rigorous and careful and truthful. Denise has done some of that work. I have done some and radical feminists in Melbourne and Australia and all over the world have done/are doing it too. Denise is not the first lesbian-feminist to be crucified (albeit unintentionally) in a public lecture theatre and sadly, she probably won't be the last. But in this struggle we must not only create our future but we need to have respect for our past—the past we participated in and fought for—and a recognition of what we have achieved. And it's not just us—splashing around in the 'second wave' of feminism—but also, understanding, recognition and respect for the women throughout the 20-25 centuries of male rule in this historical aberration we call patriarchy, who resisted/were mutilated/killed in that same struggle.

[LB]

28/7/80

[Comments added June 2003: Three points need to be made in response to this article. The first concerns the issue of 'self-esteem'. In saying that her own self esteem and that of other women at the session was just as much on the line as mine was, [the author] was implying that our situations were comparable. But that was not so. No one else was being screamed at; no one else was being told they were telling lies and that what they had said was meaningless. No one else was the focus of a

splenetic flood of rage and invective that came from nowhere and bore no relation to what I had actually said.

The second point is that what I was subjected to was not criticism in any reasonable sense—it was vilification. [The author] implicitly admitted as much when she used the term ‘crucified’. Quite. So to say I couldn’t take criticism missed the point of what was wrong with that lesbian session.

She herself was making a reasonable point, i.e. I was insufficiently aware of what had been done in the name of lesbianism within feminism. But it didn’t negate my argument. In the first place, on at least two of the occasions she mentioned—the 1972 Mt Beauty Women’s Liberation conference and the 1978 Women and Labour conference—the discussion of lesbianism centrally revolved around the issue of its silencing within feminism. In the case of the Mt Beauty conference, as Laurie herself pointed out, raising the lesbian issue was meant to ‘provoke’; and what it was meant to provoke was the silence. In the case of the 1978 conference, the only paper on lesbianism was mine, written in response to a complaint of silencing. But in the second place, if there had been so many discussions about lesbianism, why was there still this sense that lesbianism was being silenced? I wasn’t the only one saying so, there were many other lesbians saying it too.

The third point is that, although [the author] was right when she denied that raising the points she did was patronising, the way she raised them was. She seemed to think that anger was a perfectly reasonable reaction, vide her remark to the effect that she was ‘not surprised that there are some women’s liberationists in Sydney whose anger overflows into attack’. Really? Wouldn’t the giving of information be a more rational response to the lack of it? Why the anger?]

## A letter

2.9.1980

Dear [L],

Thank you for your letter, and the reply to my article. My first response was to be conciliatory—yes, you're right and I'm wrong. However, that is no way to establish a dialogue, so I'm going to answer your main points.

In the first place, you are of course right in your assertion that I had not mentioned many (most?) of the occasions on which lesbianism was discussed. I can understand that you are angry that I appeared to be so dismissive of the hard work and effort that you and others have put into organising and publicising the issue of lesbianism. However, my purpose was not to supply a comprehensive list of discussions on lesbianism—if one wasn't *there* when it was discussed, how does one get access to the discussions?—but to state briefly an argument which I still assert has not been resolved. Or rather, has been resolved unsatisfactorily in one of 2 ways: either with Jill Johnston's argument, or with the small-l liberal valid sexual preference argument. The former is unsatisfactory in that it contains the implication that lesbians are better feminists than heterosexual women. (And if I was 'told' anything at the first W. & L. Conference, I thought that I was 'told' not to say *that*). The latter is unsatisfactory because it is obvious that lesbianism is far more central to feminism than the permission to fuck whomever you please. As the H.W.A.G. said at the 1973 Mt Beauty Conference and reported in *Refractory Girl*, Lesbian Issue: 'the lesbian issue is not a private one, but exists at the core of the women's issue'. But in what *way* is it the core? That question had still not been resolved at the time I gave my much lamented (by me, mainly) [1978] paper at Macquarie. After all, you yourself expressed dissatisfaction with the level of discussion at the 1973 Minto Conference. Did the situation change between 1973 and 1978? If so, no one told me.

Further, given that I had not supplied an adequate list of discussions on lesbianism, I somewhat overstated the case I made out for the 'silence' with which the issue has been greeted within feminism. Nevertheless, to break the 'silence' by asserting that we *have* been silenced, and by outraged demands that we *not* be silenced any longer, supports my argument and does not refute it.

I decided to give the paper at Melbourne, despite what had happened at Macquarie, because I felt (I still feel) that I had resolved the issue. [Added September 2003: I can't imagine now why I thought that, last paragraph (see below) notwithstanding.] I regret not giving the theory, but I allowed myself to be persuaded of its difficulty because I myself was unsatisfied with it. I hadn't done enough work on it to make it completely my own, so that it was, not so much confused, as derivative. I regret even more not giving the argument that I had worked out, which appeared mainly in the last paragraph. It was meant to be the main part of the paper. But I wrote and re-wrote the paper so many times, and finally got into such a muddle with the tangents I went off on, that it became only a small part of the paper, rather than the main thesis it was meant to be.

My point about your 'point-scoring' referred not so much to *what* you said, as the way you said it. It could have been done another way. The paper had already been criticised that day by other women who, because they were talking to me face-to-face, felt no obligation to hurl angry accusations at me. The way you presented that first question set the tone of antagonism for the rest of the session (although it did not, of course, cause it—it would have happened anyway).

As for 'self-esteem'—I do not agree that it is an individual problem. It would appear that we can be very supportive of each other's self-esteem when we are obviously low in it—when we are timid, self-effacing or frightened. But once we set ourselves up by giving the appearance of competence, we seem to be fair game to be cut down to size. (It was stupid of me not to have got down from the platform and eschewed that bloody microphone. I *did* try, with the first speaker—after you—to make the conversation general. I should have insisted but I was not feeling very assertive). The points about 'self-esteem' I was making in my article were two: (1) what on earth made anyone believe that I, or anyone else in that kind of situation, could cope with attacks like that? and (2) as the reason why I, cravenly, did not insistently follow up the approaches I had already made towards women I thought could give me help and information. And a last point about bolstering each other's 'self-esteem': ideals are not ends towards which we are striving, but on-going structuring of processes within which we work constantly. And it would be lovely if I *were* to be the last woman to be 'crucified' at a women's conference.

On the question of where else I have circulated my 'accusations'—the Sydney W. L. Newsletter did not print it, on the grounds that it was 'too long and too difficult to

understand'. Anyway, since I didn't mention your name, I don't think the article can be called an 'accusation'. My purpose was to describe in as few words as possible the feeling of the session. Why such things happen, I don't know, although I have a number of theories (which I won't elaborate here).

Since writing the above, I have had a long, fairly drunken-on-both-sides, talk with [G., author of the apology dated 26 May 1980. See the first of the 'Two letters' below]. Her major objection, it seemed to me, was that the paper was 'eclectic', and that I left myself open to attack from a number of directions, and not just on the grounds of 'bad history'. That the paper was 'eclectic' I most emphatically deny, since that term implies a form of intellectual pluralism I certainly do not subscribe to. That 'I left myself open', I admit, and I will continue to do so, since I don't find any one theorist sufficient for my purposes, not even Marx, and certainly not Freud. However, I cannot claim to be the originator of the ideas I use, and feel obliged to reference them, even if their true originators would turn in their graves.

I would like some dialogue about my basic thesis. But I feel it still needs a lot of work, and at the moment I'm flat out writing the Homosexuality and Discrimination Report for the Anti-Discrimination Board and do not have the time. Nevertheless, I hope the lines of communication remain open. I'll be in Melbourne for the gays and Socialism Conference in April next year (much better than letters).

All the best,

Denise

[Added September 2003: In fact, I was not to see her again until the Lesbian Conference in Adelaide in January 1989. (See: 'Anti-intellectualism at the Lesbian Conference'—in UNSWorks), where she was one of my staunchest defenders.]

## **'Refractory Girl'—The 1980 Women & Labour Conference: A Discussion**

[p.27] The Refractory Girl collective decided to produce a group response to the Women and Labour Conference held in May 1980 in Melbourne, which all but one of us attended ... Producing our response to the conference proved very difficult. We held a group discussion and taped it. Most of us experienced this discussing as expressing a broad and optimistic consensus about the function of such conferences. However, when the transcript of the discussion was produced, we became all too aware of our confusions and differences. A large amount of our enthusiasm appeared to have been solely generated by the large numbers of women and the generally high atmosphere of the conference. Beneath this superficial reaction it was clear that some of us were worried about the increasing prevalence of apolitical papers, and the structure of this hybrid conference. A smaller group then prepared a summary of the issues discussed. What appears below is that summary of the discussion, interspersed with selected comments from the transcript.

We hope by this method to give RG readers an indication of at least some of our reactions to the Conference, in order both to give people who didn't attend the Conference some idea of its character and impact, and to stimulate further reflection on, and discussion of, the significance of the Women and Labour conference for Australian Feminists generally ...

[pp.28-9] All of those from the RG collective who went to the Lesbianism session agreed that it was a terrible session.

**L.L.** *I think a few things have to be said about self-conscious, and pretentious and obfuscating, pulling in, of theory which most didn't understand ... And it's really unfortunate that it happened in the lesbian session because one of the things that came out of this conference was the **incredible** confusion about what the Women's Movement's own history vis a vis the lesbian issue has been.*

*It was confused in 2 ways. One, because there's this new band of radical lesbians, who believe that they've brought the lesbian issue to the women's movement, beginning in 1978 when they attacked the organisers of the Womens Day March because of their supposed hiding of the lesbian issue. And they continue to claim that the women's movement has not even looked at lesbianism prior to 1978. And as people such as [LB] said with some degree of desperation at that session 'Look may I mention these 12 conferences beginning in ...'.*

*People can just get angry about the historical inaccuracy of it and the arrogance. So that's one confusion.*

*The other problem is the attempt to push an undigested theory. But the worst aspect was, when pushed by 'we don't understand what you're saying' or 'it doesn't make any sense', the answer was, and I think I quote 'Well I'm afraid I can't explain it without going into high theory and you won't understand me'. And I was pleased somebody got up and said 'It's nothing to do with your theory being sophisticated, it's to do with your theories being very very confused'. But that was an **appalling** session. Given that the impetus behind that session was to claim that Women's Liberation conferences and Women's Liberation audiences **still can't cope** with lesbians I think it was probably very important and in terms of the tension between the Women's Liberation type of conferences and the more academic ones I'm sure that session's going to have provoked a great deal of ill will ... And it was packed. 1000 odd people or more. Somebody got up and said '95% of these women are lesbians. Nobody queried it. (hysterical laughter) Also, some of the lady post-graduates who had given their straight empiricist papers were sitting there ... (hysteria) Well if this was to be their first step I'm afraid if they've got any sense they'll run (hysteria) back to their marriages for at least another generation (hysteria) (elisions in the original).*

[p.30] the bias of papers away from sexuality, 'personal' issues, issue raising, general theory, and [from] Left-wing political perspectives, imply changes for the **organisation** of the Conference in future. Further, we feel feminists concerned about all these things—and in this we include ourselves—should make a greater effort to offer papers along these lines at future conferences. If they are not, future Women and Labour Conferences could become important venues for a bland mixture of concern for women's studies [p.29—'very worthy in itself but having some worrying implications'] and career opportunities for women. 'Feminism' could well be appropriated by those whose radical intent poses no threat to patriarchal, capitalist society.

[Added June 2003: A couple of points need to be made, that I didn't make at the time in my reply below. The first is the breathtaking arrogance of this account. The 'lady post-graduates' gibe and the collective's regret that they didn't give any papers and that the problems



would have been solved if they had, were typical of the whole piece. It's no wonder they interpreted me as being arrogant—it was a clear case of projection. The other point, and this applies to [LB]'s reply as well, concerns the remarkable possessiveness about knowledge displayed by my critics. They were all saying that they knew things I didn't know and that, because I didn't know them, I should shut up. Not one of them offered to give me any information, even when I approached them individually and in person. The knowledge was theirs alone and they weren't going to share it, at least, not with me.]

## ***A reply to 'The 1980 Women and Labour Conference: a discussion'***

As the author of that (presumably) 'terrible' paper delivered at the '*appalling*' session on lesbianism at the Melbourne Women and Labour Conference this year, I would like to comment on and extend the brief remarks made by [L.L.] in the *Refractory Girl* Collective's discussion on the Conference, printed in issue no.20/21. Let me first list the points on which the collective and I are in agreement. I agree that the session was 'terrible', but for somewhat different reasons than those put forward by the collective. (See below). I agree also that the theory I presented in my paper was 'undigested'—a term which far more accurately describes my own feelings about it than the term I actually used at the time, i.e. 'confused'. Moreover, as far as my memory serves me, [LL] quoted me fairly accurately (as far as she went), except that I said 'heavy' theory, not 'high' theory.

There our points of agreement end.

The reason why I thought the sessions was so 'terrible' was because I was on the receiving end of a vituperative attack such as I had not experienced since the 1978 women and Labour Conference at Macquarie University (of which more later). The mood of the session was set by the first questioner (LB), although the manner in which the question was put did not *cause* the subsequent fracas—it merely exemplified it. I must hasten to add (because [LB] has since suggested that I can't take criticism) that I am not objecting to *what* [LB] said—I am simply questioning the

*way* in which she said it. It could have been done another way, without the anger and recrimination she directed towards me. She didn't appear to me to be making her point about the '10 (not 12) conferences beginning in ...', in *desperation*, but in a righteous fury aimed at putting me in my place and telling me just where I got off,

As for the question of theory—unassimilated, regurgitated or defecated though it might be—I would like to fill in the lead up to my comment: 'To answer that I would have to go into heavy theory, and you wouldn't understand me'. I had said right at the beginning of the session that I had already spoken about the paper to a number of women that morning. They had advised me not to go ahead with the theoretical part of the paper as it was too difficult for them to understand, and they were sure that most of the people at the session wouldn't understand it either. I fell in with that suggestion, not because I thought that I would be talking to a bunch of semi-literates who had never had a thought in their lives, but for the reason that I didn't think I had done enough work on it to make it comprehensible to anyone at all. The fault was mine, and I said so. Hence, far from being the arrogant shit that [LL]'s comment made me out to be (note the significance of the switch to 'high' theory), I was actually suffering from my usual bout of low self-esteem (nor unjustified on this occasion, I'm prepared to admit).

I would like now to come to the point that both [L.L.]'s comments in the *Refractory Girl* discussion, and [LB]'s objections at the Conference, were designed to tell me. Both of them have interpreted me as saying that lesbianism has not been discussed within the feminism of the last ten years—a fair enough interpretation given the way I compressed the argument to fit into a limited space, and that I hadn't sufficiently elucidated the point I *was* making. (Although, given that I *did* say that when lesbianism *was* brought up it aroused more sound and fury than any other issue, I obviously wasn't imposing a total silence). In opposition to that assertion of mine, [LB] listed the (ten) conferences referred to above as evidence that lesbianism *had* been discussed. Both [L.L.] and [LB] appear to be of the opinion that my assertion about the feminist silence on the issue of lesbianism was due to my ignorance of the occasions on which it had been discussed, and a consequence of my late arrival on the feminist scene (1978). [LL], for example, refers to 'this new band of radical lesbians' who first appeared on the scene in 1978, and particularly those who objected to the omission of any mention of lesbian demands from the 1978 Women's Day manifesto (of whom I wasn't one). [LB], in her response at the session, made a remark to the effect that 'all these conferences happened *before* 1978'.

Up to a point, this is correct. I do not know of all the occasions on which the issue was discussed; and it wasn't until 1978 that I was in a position to start going to conferences, meetings, etc. However, my paper in 1978 wasn't the first, the last, or the only time puzzlement was expressed at the exclusion (or omission) of lesbianism from an occasion on which feminist issues were being discussed. As far back as the Mount Beauty Feminist Theory Conference in Hobart in 1973, the Hobart Women's Action Group expressed their displeasure at its omission in no uncertain terms. This is one of the conferences which [LB] cited as part of her refutation of my assertion. But since that HWAG paper was, in part, a demand that lesbianism not be excluded from a conference on feminist theory (at least, as it was reported in *Refractory Girl* no.5, the 'Lesbian Issue'), I can only feel that it supports my assertion, rather than refutes it.

I am prepared to admit that lesbianism *has* been discussed on many more occasions than I was aware of, and I would welcome any useful additions to my somewhat deficient knowledge of what has actually happened. However, at least three points need to be made in order to defend myself against the harsher aspects of the criticism I have been subjected to. The first is that I did make some attempts to gain access to that information. Since very little is available in published form, that involves gaining access to the networks of women who partook in those debates and discussions. For whatever reason, I have not been able to do this. After my much lamented (by me mainly) paper at the first Women and Labour Conference in 1978, I found myself 'persona non grata' in those circles. I have since learned (from [LB]) that that was because I was '*told*' at that conference that lesbianism had not been ignored by the women's movement, and I was to stop saying it had. I was never, at any stage, offered help to amend my fault, despite a number of attempts on my part to do so.

The second point is that, whatever was said at those discussions, it did not answer the question of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism. If those discussions did not clear up that central point, then, in effect if not in woman hours expended, the debate was effectively silenced. It is that question towards which my paper was directed, and I thought that I had suggested at least one answer.

Which brings me to the third point: I said (at least I thought I did) far more than the points I have been taken up on in both the Women and Labour Conference papers, particularly the second one. The fact that nothing else was taken up and used as a

basis for criticism leads me to one of two conclusions: either I am saying nothing of any moment at all; or what I am saying needs so much development and extension that it may not be worth the effort, given that I have to support myself in the meantime. (And I am, thank heaven, too busy at the moment to make a choice between those two alternatives).

It is somewhat egocentric of me to single out my own special interests from the welter of criticism which that discussion by the *Refractory Girl* collective was. At least I wasn't named. What must those women who were identified by name be feeling at the savage demolition of their work? What sins had they committed that they should be so summarily dismissed from consideration? What is so heinous about empirical investigations delving into the minutiae of women's suppressed history? And what is so dastardly about struggling with theoretical concepts which won't fit?

## ***Two letters***

26 May 1980

Dear Denise,

Having re-read your paper, I wish to apologise for the harshness of my retort in the ‘Lesbian’ session, at the Women and Labour Conference.

I view your effort as genuine, and one of integrity—however much of lesbian involvement within the women’s movement, has been left out.

Clearly you weren’t lying—you were unaware—2 very different factors. By the time that session took place—I’d had it. Tired from my work in Qld, frustrated by the conference, and quite desperate in my own personal life: all leading to impatience and anger. I was cross with myself for not writing a paper and speaking up more (especially on the question of women and domestic labour). However, both these activities would have required more energy and strength than I can presently muster.

I do hope you accept my apology.

7 June 1980

Dear [...],

Thanks so much for your letter. Of course, I accept your apology. It was, anyway, unnecessary. I was so busy bending over backwards not to add to the threat and aggression in the hall, that I hardly took in what you had said. When I remembered some time later, I took it as symptomatic of the general feeling at the meeting.

I have enclosed with this letter the account I wrote the next day of what I thought was involved. I’ve sent it to the Sydney W.L. Newsletter, and to the convenors of the Conference who have offered to send it to the Melbourne Newsletter and the L.A.G. Newsletter [see above]. [One of the organisers] has also given a copy to [the woman who chaired the session] with whom I had a long talk at the pub after the session.

You and [LB] may be right when you accuse me of writing ‘bad history’. But, you see, I’m not writing ‘history’ at all, at least, not in any sense which implies a simple chronicle of events. I am interested in the issues that have been raised, and

the extent to which they have been resolved. I am still unconvinced that the 2 major issues *have* been resolved: i.e. the importance of lesbianism to feminism, and the reason why it arouses such threat reactions when it is raised. I would be interested in your view of what I thought was an adequate, if brief, summing up of the debate. Is there, for example, anything I have left out?

What it is that I *am* writing I find somewhat difficult to characterise. The short description is 'theory', but the common meaning of that term implies a non-involved intellectualism which in my case is very far from the truth. For me personally, theory is a defence-mechanism for coping with the pain. It's an abstraction and a standing-back from what has actually happened, a distancing from the rage of emotions, to understand and explain instead of being overwhelmed. It's something like somebody or other's description of poetry: 'emotion remembered in tranquillity'. But I can't write poetry, or paint pictures, or do any of the other things that women are starting to realise we can do to structure our world. I can only do what I *can* do, even if I am unclear about what that is.

You see, I think that the antagonism in that hall was not generated by any particular individual or individuals, but was a reaction to the subject-matter of the paper, together with the way in which I tackle the issue. (I'm starting to get anxious again, but I'll plough on regardless). Lesbianism is the centre of our world-taken-for-granted. In theorising about rape, abortion, marital violence, economic dependence and deprivation, we can demonstrate to our hearts' content exactly how we are fucked over by men—and there's no sign yet we're going to run out of concrete examples. But in theorising about lesbianism we are looking at ourselves, and the 'patriarchy' in our own ineradicable heads. The conflict, when it has arisen in my experience, is among lesbians ourselves. Heterosexual women may indeed be threatened by an implication that their feminism is deficient (and I want to reiterate yet once again that that is *not* an implication I accept). But they stay away/involves themselves in other issues/ignore it or forget about it. They have no need to return to the centre—there are so many other things to be done. But we are held together by every human tie, and cannot escape.

Which brings me to the second point. 'Theory' is, first and foremost, critique, and excludes, as far as possible, unquestioning acceptance. But that critique is not,

*cannot* come, from the outside, from the ‘objective stance’ of the non-involved observer. It is *self*-critique, and can only come from the committed participant if any sense at all is to be made of what has happened. And we must understand what has happened, in order to go on from there.

Well, I guess that isn’t very comprehensible either, but the anxiety’s got too strong to go on. Thanks once again for your letter.

Denise

[Added June 2003: I very much doubt that this correspondent wanted to hear all that.]

### ***An article: Lesbians at Women and Labour (anon)***

Among the comments heard during and after the ‘Theory—Lesbianism’ session of the Women and Labour Conference were ‘terrible’, ‘ghastly’, ‘never again’, ‘terrific’, ‘opened my eyes’, ‘raised things I had never thought about’, ‘the worst ever’, ‘potentially violent’, ‘great’, ‘load of bullshit’.

Over two thousand people (women and men) registered for the Conference held at the University of Melbourne from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> May; and more than 400 of them (all women) attended the Theory session on the last day, the only Conference session to discuss the issue of lesbianism in depth.

The Conference as a whole was polite, friendly, tolerant, academic, and on occasions, bland and dull. The lesbianism session (like some of the others which dealt with sexuality) seemed to have strayed out of some other conference: it was divided, emotional, anything but dull. Perhaps, as one woman said, it was also more honest and meaningful.

The session began with Denise Thompson, a lesbian feminist from Sydney, presenting her paper, ‘Lesbianism as Political Practice’. (The paper is in the *Second Women and Labour Conference Papers 1980*, 2 vols., available from the Conference Convenors, Department of History, La Trobe University).



She said that despite the ‘mass exodus of feminists from heterosexuality’, the history of the ‘lesbian issue’ in the women’s movement was largely a history of silences. The issue was seldom discussed, and no adequate theory of lesbianism as feminist political practice had been developed.

Denise Thompson rejected what she called the Gay Liberation or ‘valid lifestyle’ theory of lesbianism as not being sufficiently radical, and said that her position was closer to that of Charlotte Bunch. ‘Lesbianism is a threat to the ideological, political, personal and economic basis of male supremacy ... heterosexuality is crucial to maintaining male supremacy’.

(This notion of lesbianism as a threat to men received support from an unexpected quarter later in the evening when three middle-aged men repeatedly hassled two women from the Conference in a nearby hotel. The basis of their attacks was that the women, who were quietly sitting at the next table, were lesbian lovers, and not real women. Ironically, the women were not lovers but chance acquaintances.)

If lesbianism is subversive of the patriarchy, and heterosexuality supports the patriarchy, should not all feminists become lesbians? No, Denise Thompson said, but lesbianism should be the ‘discourse’, the ‘single revolutionary practice of feminist consciousness’.

The audience seemed to divide into three groups where the paper was concerned: those who had not read it; those who had read it and not understood it; and those who had read it, understood it and disagreed with it. Some of the first speakers from the floor questioned Denise’s account of the history of the lesbian issue in the women’s movement. Lesbianism *had* been discussed time and time again, they said. Did she want the movement to forget its own history and deny all the work which had been done? And was an artificial distinction to be made between ‘old’ and ‘new’ lesbians, those who have thought ‘from birth’ that they are lesbians, and those who became lesbians after involvement in the women’s movement? Was there not something political about every lesbian’s choice of women? The women’s movement had not made women into lesbians, it had given them permission to be lesbians.

These first exchanges raised the central theme of the discussion, a theme which was often obscured in the polemics which followed—What is the nature of the political choice to be a lesbian? Is the choice political? Is it even a *choice*?

Another major theme of the discussion was the way in which we as lesbian feminists remain influenced by patriarchal values, even when we have no direct contact with men. Dominance, aggression and 'either/or' thinking persist in our relationships.

As if in illustration of this point, the debate was bitter, and on a number of occasions took the form of personal attacks and accusations. 'I tell myself', said the chairperson, Jocelyn Clarke, 'that there's all this lesbian energy here, it only has to be channelled'. 'We need theory, not energy!' shouted someone. But theory was hard to find. A woman said afterwards, 'They're not making the personal political, they're making the political personal'. Then she checked herself, 'What am I saying? They?'

At one stage the formal structure of the meeting became an issue. Did the women want to break into small groups? No. The chairperson pointed out that it was difficult to have an informal discussion with so many people in a lecture theatre. Denise Thompson only spoke once in the second half of the session, but remained at the microphone, visibly shaken by the personal attacks on her.

The discussion seemed to have a hypnotic effect. Very few women left. About thirty women spoke, the rest sat there, shocked or fascinated, as if waiting for something else to happen. Perhaps for many of them it was enough to hear the word 'lesbian' discussed freely in public, and to be in the company of other lesbians.

A frustrating session finished on an appropriately freaky note. The last speaker was apparently a right-wing Christian, and she told over three hundred lesbians (not all the four hundred were lesbians) that she knew two women who were 'like that', she knew what caused 'it', 'it' led to VD and so on.

Most of the women leaving the theatre after the meeting seemed angry, upset or confused, but the talk went on. After other Conference sessions women had walked off, planning the next session or the next meal; after this one they stayed together, arguing, explaining, planning action. (GCN June 1980, pp.9-10)