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Lesbian feminist politics in Sydney: fighting over meaning

(A paper written for the Lesbian Forum Weekend, Newcastle, NSW, 4-5 December, 1993; and the London Lesbian History Group, 4 February, 1994).

This paper presents my own attempt to understand what was involved in the disagreements during the 1970s over the feminist status of lesbianism. The 'meaning' referred to in the title is, of course, the meaning of lesbianism. The fights revolved around the personal/political dichotomy, whether lesbianism was a matter of individual desire, or whether it was a political choice, challenging male supremacy by contesting the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality for women and by establishing forms of intimacy, love and recognition between women. One could answer that it was both personal desire and political practice. But that was not the way everyone involved felt at the time. Indeed, such was the confusion that it was not even possible to state the problem, much less resolve it.

That was certainly not the way the issues were identified at the time the struggle was at its height. In order to illustrate some of the ways in which lesbianism was addressed here in Sydney in the 1970s, I have taken a case study of two 1974 issues of the Australian feminist journal, *Refractory Girl* (RG). I had been asked to write the chapter on lesbianism for a book celebrating twenty years of publication of RG (published in 1993 as *Refracting Voices*), giving an overview and an evaluation of RG's treatment of lesbianism over the twenty-year period. My initial response was hesitant. I did not think I was the right person to write the chapter. I had never been involved with the journal, and I did not agree with the way lesbianism had been treated in RG. As I put it in the paper I did eventually write:

Refractory Girl does not have a good track record when it comes to lesbianism (although in that, it was not very different from the feminist press and feminism in general). Too often, it failed to acknowledge the existence of lesbianism, much less record the history as it was happening. Issue after issue was produced without a single reference to lesbians, lesbianism, or the agreements and disagreements among feminists about lesbianism, feminism

and sexuality. Although, as one present member of the collective put it: 'You can't print what you don't receive', at the same time there was little attempt on the part of succeeding collectives to solicit lesbian material. On the one occasion when this did happen—Issue No. 5: 'The Lesbian Issue', in 1974—the debate was so confused that it was almost useless as a record of lesbian feminism. (Thompson, 1993: 85)

'Never mind', I was told, 'Just go ahead anyway, and write what you think'. So I did. (As it turned out, the editorial collective of *Refracting Voices* did not like most of what I wrote, which was a textual analysis and critique of what was actually written in the journal. Instead they printed an alternative account by someone who knew some of those who had been involved with the production of the 1974 Lesbian Issue, followed by a short extract from my paper. Since that extract contained what I felt was the most important part of my paper, I accepted the compromise).

It was in the writing of that paper that I finally clarified what had been puzzling me for years about the curious placement of lesbianism within feminism. As I expressed the problem in a paper which I wrote for the 1980 Women and Labour Conference in Melbourne, called 'Lesbianism As Political Practice':

The starting point for this exercise in feminist theory was my own confusion at the status of lesbianism within the women's movement. On the one hand, and at the practical level, it would seem to hold a position of central importance for feminists. Not only did countless numbers of lesbians flock to the women's liberation movement, which provided, for the first time in history, the possibility of a cultural community of women whose primary commitment was to other women rather than to men. But an even greater number [sic] of women whose pre-feminist lives had been lived in conventional relationships with men—as wives/mothers, girlfriends, mistresses—changed their sexual/social orientation from men to women in response to the feminist political critique of their personal situations of social subordination. Moreover, this mass exodus of feminist women from the confining structures of heterosexuality brought into question the institution of heterosexuality in the consciousness of those feminists who, for whatever reason, chose not to change their sexual orientation.

And yet, on the other hand, this phenomenon which had revolutionised the lives of so many women, which was the direct and immediate response of so

many feminists to the exposure of the realities of women's oppression, was rarely acknowledged publicly within feminism. Or rather, by being acknowledged as no more than a 'valid sexual preference', lesbianism was reduced to the level of personal choice, and accorded a marginal status of minor importance in the wider struggle for women's emancipation. It was rarely listed on the agendas of conferences, rarely, if ever, mentioned in feminist history and theory. The angry protests of lesbian/feminists, newly aware of the political implications of women loving women, were trivialised and patronised into silence by injunctions to concentrate on the 'real' issues of feminism. At the same time, the lesbian/feminist discourse provided no more than outraged demands that the issue not be ignored, and the largely untheorised assertion that the practice of lesbianism was the chief threat to the male supremacist social order to come out of the women's movement of the last ten years. (Thompson, 1980)

This dilemma around the feminist status of lesbianism was initially seen as a 'lesbian/straight split' within feminism. But it became apparent to me fairly early that the split was a lesbian/lesbian one, that it was a disagreement among lesbians about the meaning of lesbianism. In another paper, 'Against the Dividing of Women', I characterised the dilemma thus:

As I experienced this split here in Sydney, it was one within the ranks of lesbian feminism itself. While some lesbian feminists were insisting that lesbianism was central to feminism, other lesbian feminists were objecting that this stance excluded heterosexual women, either from the vanguard of feminism, or from feminism altogether because to acknowledge the importance of lesbianism to feminism would be too threatening to 'ordinary' women, or because lesbianism was 'irrelevant' to 'most' women. It was a lesbian/lesbian split, with radical feminist lesbians on one side insisting that lesbianism was necessary for the feminist revolution, and socialist feminist lesbians on the other worrying about being too threatening to heterosexual women, often referred to as 'most women', or 'the women out there' in 'the Western suburbs' (in the case of Sydney). (Thompson, 1992: 395)

At the time I wrote this in 1992, I was still puzzled about this tendency on the part of some lesbian feminists to leap to the defence of heterosexual women whenever lesbianism was publicly mentioned. In this paper I attributed this position to

socialist feminist lesbians 'worrying about being too threatening to heterosexual women', and also to 'the continuing influence of the heterosexual hegemony'. It had in fact been a consistent theme throughout the 1970s. One of my own experiences of this kind of argument occurred during the discussion after a paper I gave at the first Women and Labour Conference at Macquarie University in 1978. The paper was called (rather unfortunately) 'Homosexuality: The Invisible Alternative?' As I remember it (I can't find a copy of it now) [in UNSWorks], the paper was a discussion of the silencing of debate about 'homosexuality', with particular reference to the absence of debate about lesbianism at the conference. (I also managed to bring Freud into it somewhere). One of the first reactions to the paper was a criticism that I was being unfair to heterosexual feminists. Since I hadn't mentioned heterosexual feminists (although I probably criticised heterosexuality), and since I hadn't asserted that lesbians were the only true feminists, I was completely at a loss to know how to respond to this criticism. My confusion lasted for years.

It wasn't until I was given the opportunity to write about similar criticisms within the pages of *Refractory Girl* nos. 5 and 6 that the dilemma became clear to me. According to Sue Tiffin, author of the alternative paper commissioned by the editors of *Refracting Voices* to replace the one I wrote, Issue no. 5, the 'Lesbian Issue', was produced by a collective 'comprised of heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women' (Tiffin, 1993: 79). Tiffin commented that there was by no means general agreement among the collective members about lesbianism and its relation to the women's movement, nor about what was printed in the issue (p.77). Issue no. 6 was produced as a critical response to Issue no. 5, by the Hobart Women's Action Group (HWAG), all of whom were lesbians. This group had written a paper called, 'Sexism and the Women's Liberation Movement: or, Why Do Straight Sisters Sometimes Cry When They Are Called Lesbians?' This paper was first presented at the Women's Liberation Theory conference at Mount Beauty in Victoria in January 1973, and had already created some heated debate. It was printed in Issue no. 5 of RG.

At no point in the discussion throughout the two issues of the journal did any of the writers support the radical feminist stance. No one came out in favour of the idea that lesbianism, as it was redefined by 'second wave' feminism, challenged male supremacy by challenging heterosexuality and by creating opportunities for women to love women. In fact, from my knowledge of the journal and of those who were involved with it at various times, RG and those who produced it tended towards socialist feminism, and also tended to be antagonistic towards radical feminism

(despite that fact that RG was at one early stage in its career briefly subtitled 'A journal of radical feminist thought'). Instead, the debate in Issue no. 5 revolved around the concept of 'sexism'. This was not the way the question of lesbianism was handled in real life among the women I knew. It was for this reason that I said that RG is almost useless as a record of lesbian feminism. Nonetheless, it provides a good example of the kind of thing radical feminist lesbians were up against.

What follows is adapted from the paper I originally wrote for the 20th anniversary issue of *Refractory Girl*:

The editorial in RG no. 5 clearly spelled out the collective's disagreement with any idea that lesbianism had revolutionary potential for the lives of all women, not just lesbians. The editors acknowledged that lesbianism, in the sense of loving connections between women, was an increasingly important aspect of the women's movement: 'It is clear (they said) that growing numbers of women in the movement are relating to each other more intimately and often sexually'. But that admission came towards the end of the editorial, and was immediately followed by what appeared to be some kind of disclaimer:

But at a theoretical level a great deal of confusion still exists. On the one hand there is joy at the possibility of the eventual disappearance of sex roles and the structures that support them—of people not having to define themselves as straight, camp or bi, but just as freely sexual beings, the utopian promise of polymorphous perversity. And on the other hand we are conscious of the dangers of the imposition of yet another authoritarian solution: the utopia of bisexuality. Our concern to eradicate sexism does not overarch our desire for a diversity of sex preferences (No. 5, p.2).

In other words, the overriding problem was the dividing of people into sexual categories: 'heterosexual', 'homosexual', 'bisexual'. According to the RG editors, it was a good thing that women were 'relating to each other more intimately and often sexually', not, however, because this was a good thing in itself, but because it meant that the strict distinctions between sexual categories were being broken down, and because it was one step closer to what the editors regarded as the truly revolutionary ideal of 'free sexuality'/'polymorphous perversity'. (This latter term was used by

Freud to refer to the sexuality of infancy and childhood, which was characterised by a diversity of erogenous zones other than the genitals, of sexual aims other than orgasm, and of sexual objects other than the conventional heterosexual one. It was a sexuality that had many forms ('polymorphous'), and was 'perverse' because it had not yet coalesced into the norm of adult heterosexuality. It was postulated by some women's and gay liberationists during the early seventies as the ultimate goal of the sexual revolution). On the other hand, the RG editors did not want to be seen to insist that everyone ought to be bisexual. While they objected to placing people into sexual categories, they also wanted to retain those categories as 'a diversity of sexual preferences'. The editors did not resolve the dilemma; nor did they say what the implications were for feminism, for female sexuality, or for the creation of new forms of femaleness outside relations to men.

Moreover, the reluctant admission that lesbianism was relevant to women in general—'women relating to each other more intimately and often sexually'—came after an argument which had already abolished that possibility:

lesbianism [as] the most radical position for a feminist to adopt ... the notion of a lesbian nation, tribal groupings of women giving each other psychic support and working in revolutionary struggle against our oppression *seems inherently sexist*. Excluding men, and, perhaps, heterosexual women, is a form of sexual apartheid (No. 5, p.2—emphasis added).

Lesbian feminism was 'sexist' because it might exclude heterosexual women, and did exclude men. The question of what it was they were excluded from, was not addressed. Although men are excluded from lesbianism, and often from feminism (although not only by lesbian feminists), the distinction between 'heterosexual' and 'lesbian' women was not as hard and fast as this charge of 'sexism' implied. Not only were women discovering within themselves a hitherto unrecognised lesbianism in a strictly sexual sense, lesbianism itself was expanding beyond the genital sexual to include all forms of loving identification between women. In that feminist sense, lesbianism was not at all rigid and exclusive, and hence, not 'sexist'.

The writers of the editorial did not define what they meant by 'sexism'. They were presumably relying on the definition given in the 'Sexism and the Women's Liberation Movement' article by the Hobart Women's Action Group (HWAG), who defined 'sexism' thus:

A sexist society is not necessarily a patriarchal society—it could equally well be a matriarchy or a society in which the sexes have equal power and influence providing that their spheres of action are different and enforced as different. In a radical feminist critique of society, sex is the principle by which society is organized, which precedes all other organizing principles, i.e. power, wealth, status, etc. Patriarchy is not a precondition of sexism. Sexism means organizing people according to sex and sexual behaviour, and attributing various behaviour, personality and status traits to people on the basis of sex. Without sexism, patriarchy is deprived of its organizing principle and of its ideology of consent. Sexism then is sufficient basis for patriarchy but does not necessarily lead to it. In other words, sexism is a way of structuring society; patriarchy and matriarchy point out who get the goodies at any particular time. Unlike capitalism, it doesn't tell us both how society is structured and who benefits from it, only how it is structured (No. 5, p.30).

'Sexism', on this definition, meant nothing more than the existence of mutually exclusive categories of people based on their sex or sexuality. It was a deliberately apolitical definition, that is, it explicitly deleted any reference to male domination. Although 'sexism' could mean the domination of women by men, it could also mean the domination of men by women. It also need not imply domination at all, according to the HWAG, since it referred only to the division into sexes and sexualities. It was not necessary for one sex or sexuality to dominate for a society to be 'sexist'; it was sufficient for the divisions to exist.

There was, however, an unacknowledged irony in this reliance by the RG editors on the HWAG's definition of 'sexism'. While the RG editors (some of whom were lesbians) accused lesbians of 'sexism' for excluding men and heterosexual women, the lesbians of the HWAG accused (heterosexual) Women's Liberation of 'sexism' for excluding lesbians. (No. 5, pp.32-3) The irony was compounded when the HWAG, in their role as editors of RG Issue no.6, criticised Issue no. 5 for 'simplif[ying] and distort[ing] concepts like sexism rather than discussing them'. (No. 6, p.2) The editors of Issue no. 6 did not appear to realise that it was their own definition of 'sexism' they were criticising. They pointed out that, although it might be theoretically possible to have forms of sexism which were 'power-neutral' in that they were divisions of roles and personality without subordination, or even to have a 'matriarchal' form of sexism where women ruled men, in actual fact, they said, *'the only sexism that we know is sexism in its patriarchal manifestation'* (emphasis in the

original). However, although they criticised what they called 'the a-political concept of sexism', they also tended to give it some credence as a theoretical construct (in contrast, presumably, to the practicalities of feminist politics). On the one hand, they said:

To talk solely about "sexism" rather than "patriarchal sexism" mystifies sexism as it exists in our society. It may infer [sic] that other sorts of sexism (power-neutral, matriarchal) are more-than-theoretically possible (ibid.).

And yet they went on to say:

This is not to say that sexism means the "institutionalised subordination of women to men" [quoting from an article by Dennis Altman in *Gay Liberation Newsletter* No. 6], but to say that *that* manifestation of sexism is the only form that it is relevant to discuss in this society. It is a purely theoretical construct to talk at present of sexism except in its patriarchal form (No.6, p.2-3).

The writers did not discuss why the theoretical concept of 'sexism' should be retained if it was of no use for feminist politics, and even undermined the feminist insight into the subordination of women by men. Neither did they see any problem with retaining the notion of a theoretical 'sexism' which did not exist 'in this society'. If it did not exist in the here and now, where then did it exist? Why retain it if it didn't exist? The reader is left wondering why the writers did not define 'sexism' solely in terms of male domination, and leave it at that. I suspect the reason is that they wanted to present themselves as disinterested seekers after truth, as real academics who were an intellectual cut above those naïve radical feminists who entirely missed the complexities in their simple-minded insistence that the problem was men.

Another aspect of the struggle to define the meaning of lesbianism was illustrated by one of the articles in Issue no. 5, 'Mythmaking in the Women's Movement' by Lesley Lynch. Lynch's purpose in writing the article, she said, was to make an intervention into the debates surrounding what she called the 'lesbian-bisexual-heterosexual divisions and hostilities' in the women's movement. In fact, what Lynch's article reveals is that the 'divisions and hostilities' were among lesbians. Although the antagonisms ostensibly revolved around lesbianism versus heterosexuality (and sometimes bisexuality), the debates were actually about antagonistic positions on lesbianism, all occupied by lesbians. Lynch herself seemed not fully aware of this,

although the information is there in her article. Some lesbians would accuse the women's movement of 'sexism' for excluding lesbians. Other lesbians would accuse the accusers of 'sexism' for maintaining rigid distinctions between the sexual categories. Others would be lesbians within the women's movement who were doing the excluding of lesbianism from conference programmes. Still others were lesbians who had been in the women's movement for some time and who reacted with contemptuous impatience whenever another lesbian asserted or implied that the movement did not provide a place for lesbians.

This latter reaction was nicely illustrated by Lynch's description of one such occasion at the Women's Commission in Sydney in 1973:

At one stage a woman prefaced a statement by announcing to the meeting that she was a lesbian. The manner in which she did this—to me she seemed tense and defiant—suggested she felt the audience would be possibly hostile to or embarrassed by her statement ... I thought [this] might ... have been another manifestation of how W.L. had said so little publicly on the issue of lesbianism ... Whatever the reason, I felt she had misjudged the likely attitude of that particular gathering, but even as I was pondering the implication of her apparent lack of ease, there was a reaction to her statement that was ... extraordinary ... A lesbian, prominent within W.L., an organizer of the commission, who had reputedly attacked the one anti-lesbian comment that had been made during the planning sessions, and who had "come out" publicly in a similarly tense and dramatic fashion only 18 months before, threw in a contemptuous "so what?". (No. 5, p.37)

Lynch was obviously (and quite rightly) shocked at what she called this 'gratuitous, nasty interjection':

It seemed to me the only point of such a belittling interjection was to indicate the speaker was old hat—implying that liberated women had got over all that drama about this lesbianism ages ago. Many of them have ... but to judge and contemptuously reject someone's position because you think others have been there before, is dangerously intolerant (ibid.)

She went on to discuss some possible reasons for the reaction:

Maybe an explanation, if not a justification, of these reactions could be that people like the interjector, who have put a great deal of energy and emotional commitment into confronting, personally and openly within the movement, their lesbianism and people's reactions to it, would feel patronised and insulted by a lesbian whose attitude could be seen as implying she was doing something that hadn't been done before, and that it was going to be something of a strain for the audience to cope with it.

... I do think [the interjector's reaction] reflects an attitude among significant groups of W.L. people, which is, if not sexist, certainly elitist and intolerant. They have put a lot of energy into getting rid of their personal hangups about being lesbian. They and the heterosexual women with whom they closely interact in their W.L. circles have established social groups in which large advances have been made towards the utopian situation where classifications based on sexual preferences are irrelevant. For them, this problem has been solved—oppression as lesbians no longer exists for them, and so they don't see their lesbianism as something that particularly needs talking about. This is a fair enough, if rather insular, position—everyone is free to choose her priorities for action. What is not fair enough is the expectation ... that everyone else should be in this position. Quite apart from the understandable reaction against gross accusations of anti-lesbian attitudes, there does seem to be an impatience with anyone who still wants to discuss in public forums the particular difficulties lesbians may feel in relating to the W.L. movement—sometimes there is almost the implication that they are dividing women over spurious issues (*ibid.*)

Lynch concluded her article by surmising that it was 'this sort of attitude' which was

at least part of the reason W.L. has so little publicised the intensive analysis of the role of lesbians that was—and still is in some groups—a consistent feature of discussions, and why so little has been said publicly about the way a large number of lesbians exist uninhibitedly within W.L., or about how this open interaction between lesbians and heterosexual women in W.L. has led, amongst other things, to a significant number of women altering their self identification from heterosexual to lesbian (No. 5, pp.37-8).

From my own experience, I can agree with Lynch's analysis of the motivations of those involved in the incidents she describes. But it does not go far enough. The mutually antagonistic positions being played out in these incidents revolved around the question of what was to be the status accorded lesbianism within the women's movement—whether lesbianism was a *personal* sexual preference, or whether it was a *political* stance. These positions were usually held by distinct and separate groups of lesbians, although the same woman could at one point insist on the political nature of lesbianism, while at another time or in another context contemptuously dismiss the same position being put forward by someone else (as the above story demonstrated). The political/personal dichotomy warred in each of us. (Lynch herself was to engage in her own form of contemptuous dismissal within the pages of RG, remarkably similar to the one she deplored in this article, in her reaction to my paper, 'Lesbianism As Political Practice' (in UNSWorks), presented at the Lesbian Session at the 1980 Women and Labour Conference at Melbourne University. See: RG Nos. 20-21, pp.28-9).

Hence, the split within feminism around lesbianism was not a lesbian/heterosexual one (at least, not in Sydney), but a split among lesbians about the political status of lesbianism. It was able to be defined as a lesbian/heterosexual one, because to insist on the political nature of lesbianism does have negative implications for female heterosexuality. That may or may not have led to a lesbian/heterosexual split, with lesbian feminists insisting that they were the only consistent feminists because they refused to relate sexually to men, and heterosexual feminists rejecting this disparagement of their feminist commitment. But in my experience, it did not. Heterosexual feminists tended on the whole to be too ambivalent about their heterosexual desire to defend it outright. Lynch's experience appeared to tally with mine. She reported that the only time she heard the claim that 'the only honest life style for a feminist is that of the radical lesbian commune dweller', it was from a heterosexual feminist (No. 5, p.34, 38n2).

The lesbians who rushed to the defence of heterosexual women were actually defending interests of their own. The defence of heterosexual women was a plausible and convenient cover-up for a deeper agenda. It was plausible because defending someone else's interests looks more like political activism than defending interests of one's own; and it was convenient because what was being covered up felt too intimate and personal to qualify as 'politics'. But although the claim that lesbianism is a political challenge to male dominance does bring into question female

heterosexual desire, it also brings into question lesbian desire *as* desire. It implies that lesbianism is a rational, willed, conscious choice, rather than a spontaneous emotional attachment which is not under anyone's control. Those lesbians who were resisting defining lesbianism as political were defending the reality of their own feelings. Although they were explicitly defending the feminist credentials of heterosexual feminists, i.e. of someone else, they were actually defending their own sense that lesbianism was pure sexual desire, as 'natural' as heterosexual desire, an erotic investment in women which was not under the control of the conscious political will. And in this they were entirely correct. It is not possible to decide rationally to be a lesbian and then become one (as the women who tried and failed found out). Where they were mistaken was in their belief that the political will and sexual desire are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, for many of us, the feminist realisation that our lives were structured by male domination, that we were kept from each other and divided amongst ourselves, and that heterosexuality was centrally involved in that, was so overwhelming that it even transformed desire.

As things stand at the moment, the fights are over. The heat has long vanished from the debate, and so has the debate itself. And yet the quandary for heterosexual feminists remains. Heterosexual desire is still in a sense antithetical to a feminist commitment—women can be feminist despite their heterosexual desire but not because of it. (See the 'Heterosexuality' issue of *Feminism and Psychology* 2(3), October 1992, especially pp.419-64, for the reactions of a number of heterosexual feminists on being asked to discuss their heterosexuality in relation to their feminism). What has changed, at least as far as the hegemonic public face of feminism is concerned, is the definition of lesbianism. No longer is lesbianism defined as a challenge to the institution of heterosexuality as a primary mechanism for the maintenance of male supremacy (except among radical feminists). 'Lesbians' have become just another category of women, with their own special interests, their own claims for 'civil rights' and 'anti-discrimination'. Publicly, the confusion generated by the personal/political dichotomy has been resolved in favour of the personal, and by obliterating the politics. 'Lesbianism' within feminism these days has become nothing more than an individual 'sexual preference', of no relevance to or interest for (dare I say it) 'normal' women. The debate has faded away because the conflict has been resolved, in favour of conformity with the dominant mores of individualism, and against the radical political challenge that lesbian feminism originally provoked. The male supremacist status quo has recuperated from the onslaught of lesbian feminism. Heterosexuality

remains 'natural' and the only form of intimate adult relationship permitted to women.

And yet, we are still here, and still arriving, those women so bowled over by our feminist insights that we revolutionised our desire.

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