

Introduction to lesbian feminism

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Lesbian feminism: introduction

[June-October 2003:] This is an introduction to a series of writings about lesbian feminism.

The earliest paper, 'Homosexuality: The Invisible Alternative', was the first one I ever gave at a feminist (or any other) conference—the first 'Women and Labour' conference, held at Macquarie University in May 1978. I didn't really want to give the paper. I allowed myself to be talked into it by my lover at the time, Sue Sanders. She had excellent reasons for why I should give the paper—I was going to write that postgraduate thesis on lesbianism, I was a budding academic, I was articulate and knowledgeable, I'd done a lot of thinking about the issue, etc. But there were also very good reasons why I shouldn't, reasons that neither of us was fully aware of and hence couldn't admit to—I was terrified, I didn't know what I was talking about, and the topic was an emotional minefield and aroused antagonism every time it was raised, etc., etc.

And the paper was not well received, for reasons which were (and remain) obscure. I was later informed that I had been told at this conference not to keep saying lesbianism had been silenced by the women's movement because it hadn't. (See the debate around my 1980 paper, 'Lesbianism as Political Practice'). But this explanation wasn't very helpful because there were also lesbians saying that feminism *had* silenced lesbianism.

'Lesbianism as Political Practice' was delivered at the next Women and Labour conference (the second), at Melbourne University in May 1980. It was even less well received than the 1978 one. It was the only paper on lesbianism at the conference, and it created an uproar. Women screamed at me and hurled insults, shook their fists, yelled 'lies, lies, lies' and 'meaningless', and generally behaved in a thoroughly

demented fashion. The woman chairing the session suggested the meeting break up into small groups; and another woman tried to divert the flow by pointing out that the audience didn't have to direct everything to me, that instead they could address questions and remarks to each other. But to no avail—the tirade continued as long as the session did. I felt devastated, wondering what I'd done to deserve such treatment. The overwhelming question was—why?

Just as I wasn't sure why the 1978 paper aroused such antagonism, I wasn't sure why this one did either. The reason given—that I kept saying that lesbianism had been silenced by the women's movement and it hadn't—didn't seem adequate to explain such an outpouring of rage and hatred. It might have justified the anger of some women—those who had been working for years to put lesbianism on the feminist agenda. It might seem to diminish their efforts and deny the hard work they had done—'she denies our history and devalues our struggles', as one of my critics put it. But it didn't explain the fierce intensity of the anger; and neither did it explain why there were many lesbians who did think that feminism had silenced lesbianism. (On second thoughts, it didn't really explain the anger either. If someone doesn't know something, the rational response is not to castigate her for not knowing, but to give her the information, isn't it?)

One reason for the reaction might have been the overwhelming importance of lesbianism. There were vital self-esteem and identity issues tied up with it. It was deeply felt, full of intense conflicting passions of hope and loss, of joy and grief, of community and exclusion. It seemed to promise some kind of redemption from the evils of 'patriarchy' and into a peaceful community of women, while at the same time experience was showing that it did no such thing. There was a tremendous need to have that conflict resolved, and the rage was a product of disappointment and frustration because I wasn't doing that.

Or perhaps the crucial issue was the political status of lesbianism. (Mary Daly was attacked in much the same way, or

what felt to me like the same way, the next year, in August 1981, in Sydney. She mentions it briefly in her autobiography—Daly, 1992: 262). Perhaps the conflict between lesbianism as a political challenge to 'patriarchy' and lesbianism as just another sexual preference had already been resolved in favour of the latter, and the anger was a product of frustration at the fact that I was refusing to acknowledge that.

But to return to the reason I was given, my main point was not whether or not lesbianism had been silenced. Rather my main point was, what does lesbianism mean in the context of feminism? I could have included every conference and publication finally listed for me in the August 1980 issue of the Melbourne *Lesbian Newsletter*, and I would still have been none the wiser. It was what was being said about lesbianism I was finding problematic, not whether and how many times it had been discussed. What I saw being silenced was not so much lesbianism as such (although there were many occasions on which it didn't appear when it ought to have, given how important it was in the lives of women I saw around me). What I saw being silenced was its status as politics. I wasn't very interested in lesbianism in a pluralist sense, as just another kind of sexual preference. I wanted to know how it fitted into relations of power, or rather, how it challenged male power. There was some of that around, but there was by no means general agreement. And the political status of lesbianism kept being denied. I wanted to know why.

I think the resistance to accepting that lesbianism was political had, like lesbian feminism itself, both a personal and a political dimension to it. (Notice that I haven't referred to individuals here. I haven't said 'lesbian feminists' or 'those who resisted' it. These were positions, not persons. Each of us could hold one or other of the positions depending on the circumstances, or even both at once). The personal dimension was a feeling that lesbianism was desire, only desire and nothing but desire. It was an abandonment to ecstasy, not a matter of choice and rational decision-making, as implied by calling it a 'politics'. One didn't choose one's sexual orientation or feelings, one was

overcome by them. One could accept them or struggle against them but not manufacture them. Even when sexual orientation changed—and there were women who moved from heterosexual desire to lesbianism under the influence of feminism—it did so without any conscious volition on the woman's part. To call lesbianism 'political' was too cold-blooded, it distorted the felt reality.

The political resistance to seeing lesbianism as political came from the sense that that was not what politics was about. The feeling was that lesbianism was a personal private matter, not a public political one. Although feminism had declared the personal political, and cogently criticised the public/private distinction, there was a strong sense around that what women did in bed wasn't going to influence the structures of power. Of course, this was only common sense, although it did contradict the equally strong sense that lesbianism did challenge structures of male power. It also missed the point behind seeing the political in the personal, i.e. that structures of power were not simply imposed from without, but also embraced by individuals as their own being and reality. Still, the belief in politics as nothing but public activism combined with the sense that lesbianism was nothing but desire to produce an alternative to lesbian feminism. Lesbianism became nothing but a sexual preference, a personality characteristic of certain individuals where politics had no place, either for (lesbian feminism) or against (right-wing moralising).

The treatment I received at the 1980 Women and Labour conference didn't happen to me again, at least not in person. I did experience something similar about 10 years later from the editors of a UK magazine, the *Lesbian Information Service Newsletter* (see 'Anti-Intellectualism at the Lesbian Conference'—on UNSWorks), but that wasn't face-to-face.

One consequence of the 1980 conference in Melbourne was that I didn't give a paper at a feminist conference for another eight years, in 1988. (It was called 'The "Sex/Gender" Distinction', and I presented it at the Women In Philosophy

Conference at Sydney University and at the SAANZ conference at the Australian National University. It was published as 'The "Sex/Gender" Distinction: A Reconsideration' in *Australian Feminist Studies* no.10, Summer, pp.23-31). The reason I stopped offering papers for presentation was not because of the way I was treated in 1980, or not only because of the way I was treated. The main reason was because no one seemed to know what I was talking about, and if no one knew what I was talking about, there didn't seem to be much point in saying anything. (It would seem, though, that I did give a paper at a gay conference, in 1981, called 'The Role of Sexuality in Capitalist Patriarchy'). However, I subsequently wrote and presented quite a lot of papers, some of which are included on NSWorks.

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems to me that we (it wasn't only me) were wrong about lesbianism, although not because political lesbianism was defeated when lesbianism subsequently became just another sexual preference. Political defeat doesn't make something wrong, just as victory doesn't make something right. We were wrong because we failed to take our own analysis seriously enough.

We correctly perceived the power and centrality of sex to women's oppression. But we made the mistake of thinking (or more accurately, feeling) that turning sexual desire away from men and towards women was what was needed for a women's revolution. In doing so, we failed to follow through on our own insights about why sex was so important, and hence retained male supremacy's own over-valuation of sexuality as central to human existence.

We treated sex as something like a natural right to which everyone ought to have access, like food, clothing and shelter. But if sex is implicated in domination, it cannot be a right in any immediate sense. What needs to happen first is an exposure of the ways in which sex participates in domination, so that the sex which is defended as that to which everyone has a right has been divested of its dominating aspects. Of

course, we thought we had done that—no penis, after all. But the rise to prominence of libertarianism and lesbian sadomasochism showed that we hadn't. So there was a lot more work to be done on analysing sexuality. I tried to do some of that work (especially in *Reading between the Lines*), and so did Sheila Jeffreys, Andrea Dworkin, Catharine McKinnon (among others) and the anti-pornography movement (all of whom got thoroughly vilified for their pains). But at this time, we were far too uncritical of lesbian sexuality.

We were probably wrong to see lesbian feminism as a way of life, too. It was a politics, not a lifestyle, and one can't live politics all the time. It was pretty inevitable that lesbianism would settle down into a lifestyle asking for nothing more radical than liberal tolerance. It's a pity, though, that the political status of lesbianism was so howled down in feminist circles, because it did raise important questions about the meaning of sexuality in women's lives.

I got something else wrong as well—the optimism, the belief that if something's wrong it can be fixed. I no longer believe that. In fact, I'm not entirely sure I believed it then. Part of my confusion at the time was an unease with this kind of belief in an organised political solidarity that will challenge (much less overthrow) the structures of domination. I can see more clearly now that there is no revolutionary constituency that is going to save the human race from itself. There is no longer a proletariat, nor is there a lesbian feminism, and there never was in any sense that threatened the powers-that-be. The forces of domination are more powerful than ever before, as they greedily amass obscene accumulations of wealth in the hands of a few ruthless men outside any regulatory framework, while their minions dismantle the welfare state which, paltry though it was, was at least some recognition that the system created losers as well as winners. That doesn't mean that nothing can be done to impede the headlong race to disaster. Clearly, people are doing things all the time to counter domination—otherwise the human race would have ceased to exist long ago. It simply means there's no identifiable

constituency, no, not even women (pace Ariel Salleh and other feminist standpoint theorists—Salleh, 1997).

So what did I get right? I was right to insist on the importance of lesbianism as a political question. That was certainly happening at the time and needed to be documented. Political lesbianism was superseded by a libertarianism that fits more comfortably into the consumerist ethos of domination, but it remains a politics nonetheless. It needed to be acknowledged, in however brief, transient and clumsy a fashion. I was right to insist on the importance and centrality of sexuality to relations of power. It still is and will remain so as long as pornography, prostitution and the sexual abuse of children (and of course, women) continue.

References

- Daly, Mary** (1992) *Outercourse: The Bedazzling Voyage*
Melbourne: Spinifex Press
- Salleh, Ariel** (1997) *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* London and New York: Zed Books

The following papers are on UNSWorks. I have also included on UNSWorks some of the published reactions to my efforts to theorise lesbian feminism:

- Homosexuality: the invisible alternative (1978)
- Lesbianism as political practice (1980)
- The third Women and Labour conference (1982)
- Anti-intellectualism at the lesbian conference (1989)
- Theory and its difficulties (1990)
- Impressions of the lesbian conference (1991)
- Rules, Principles, Policies, Standards and Guidelines: Do We Need Them? (1991)
- A Discussion of the problem of horizontal hostility (1993)
- Lesbian feminist politics in Sydney: fighting over meaning (1993)
- On pornography (1997)
- Lesbian politics (2004)