

Rethinking Lesbian Separatism as a Vibrant Political Theory and Feminist Practice

by Julie R. Enszer

Lesbian separatism is a vibrant political theory and feminist practice, except that it is rarely recognized in histories of feminisms or in schematics that attempt to map the strands of feminist theories and the influences of feminist thinking. In fact, in contemporary feminisms, lesbian separatism is an ideology that feminists mock and ridicule. Whether planned as a central relearn for feminisms's alleged failure during the 1980s or as an unrealistic, utopian vision, lesbian separatism is a maligned social and cultural formation inside and outside of feminism.

My interest is in rethinking lesbian separatism; I resituate lesbian separatism from a pariah-like social location to one where lesbian separatism is a vibrant political theory and feminist practice. Though, in fact, my first argument is that lesbian separatism actually is not an ideology, but rather a feminist process, a method for living in the world. I map this approach to lesbian separatism through a reading of key historical texts, primarily circulated in lesbian print culture, that articulate the formation of lesbian separatism. Then, I consider four sites of activism where lesbian separatism was and is a crucial component of the actor's theoretical orientation. From these four instantiations of lesbian separatism, I demonstrate the economic and cultural investments of lesbian separatism to situate its investments in larger visionary feminist projects.

Roots of Lesbian Separatism

The 1970 statement, “The Woman Identified Woman,” by Radicalesbians provides a nascent definition for separatism. Radicalesbians called on women to focus on “the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution.” This action was a strategy for women to discover their authentic selves, which had been obscured by patriarchy. In 1971, Revolutionary Lesbians, based in Ann

Arbor, MI advocated separatism in a short piece titled, “How to Stop Choking to Death,” published in the newspaper *Spectre*. Revolutionary Lesbians, a group striving for “a non-exploitive communist society,” defined separatism as “working directly only with women.”

In January 1972, *The Furies: lesbian/feminist monthly* hit the streets of Washington, DC. In the front page manifesto, written by Ginny Berson, the Furies declared,

We are angry because we are oppressed by male supremacy. We have been fucked over all our lives by a system which is based on the domination of men over women, which defines male as good and female as only as good as the man you are with. It is a system in which heterosexuality is rigidly enforced and Lesbianism rigidly suppressed. It is a system which has further divided us by class, race, and nationality.¹

Speaking on behalf of the Furies, Berson expressed a number of iconoclastic views in this opening salvo: lesbianism as a necessary choice for feminists, the failure of the “straight women's movement” and the “male left” to address lesbian issues, and the necessity for lesbians to develop a “common politic” of “Lesbianism as a political issue.”

The Furies were twelve women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight. Part communal living cooperative, part consciousness-raising group, part revolutionary cell for radical feminism, The Furies were a vital force in feminism and extraordinarily influential, in part because of the newspaper that they published for eighteen months in 1972 and 1973. The Furies used their own living and working community as a site for experimentation; they analyzes oppression and worked to develop a vision for broader social change. Anne Valk accurately describes the Furies playing “a pivotal role in bringing attention to lesbians’ presence in the women's movement and legitimizing lesbian feminism as a political issue” (Valk, 153).² The Furies also articulated lesbian separatism as a vibrant political theory and feminist practice. Through their living and

¹ Ginny Berson, “The Story of the Furies,” *The Furies: lesbian/feminist monthly* 1.1 (January 1972): 1.

² Anne Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

working arrangement and the regular reports they wrote on it, The Furies promulgated the idea of lesbian separatism.

One apex of the theory of lesbian feminism is the 1988 publication of *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology* by Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Julia Penelope. Hoagland and Penelope gather nearly 600 pages of arguments about lesbian separatism, including a boisterous refutation of lesbian separatism as prima facie racist. For Hoagland and Penelope, lesbian separatism is a materialist practice for a variety of feminist, lesbian, and lesbian-feminist groups. Rather than a rigid ideology as it becomes the imaginary of feminist historians, for separatists, including Hoagland and Penelope, separatism less ideology and more process: a mode of prioritizing women and lesbians in one's life and work. Hoagland and Penelope write, "Separatism is a chosen response, separatists having taken cognizance of our environment, an affirmation of what we hold valuable to our selves. Separatism is a challenge to what counts as fact and the beginning of the creation of new value." From as early as The Furies, lesbian separatism was a process for living and thinking about the world that lesbians embraced during the 1970s and 1980s for further experimentations.

Four Experimentations with Lesbian Separatism

Experimentations with lesbian separatism proliferated during the 1970s and 1980s. Two significant lesbian separatist projects stem directly from The Furies. Members of the Furies founded both Olivia Records, a music production company, and Women in Distribution, a book distribution company. Both originally based in Washington, DC, and founded in the mid-1970s, Olivia Records and Women in Distribution centrally concerned themselves with how revolutionary feminism could provide economic opportunities for open lesbians.

Women in Distribution operated from 1974 until 1979. With revenues of about \$120,000 a year in 1977 and 1978, WinD proved the viability of a secondary market for women's literary production and provided employment for Helaine Harris and Cynthia Gair, the two owners and operators of the business. Though WinD did not define itself as a separatist business, WinD did work "directly only with women." Moreover, the

lesbian separatist values formulated initially in *The Furies* and extended at WinD continue to inform Harris's work at Daedalus Books, the company that she has built over the past thirty years.

Olivia Records produced women's music, beginning with albums by Meg Christian and Cris Williamson; Williamson's album, “The Changer and the Changed,” went on to become one of the best-selling independently-produced records of all time. In addition to producing and releasing albums, Olivia produced concerts, an apex being a 1984 concert with Williamson and Christian at Carnegie Hall. Olivia Records continues to operate today as a lesbian entertainment and travel company. Olivia Records was an important site of working out the ideas and values of lesbian separatism during the 1980s—what audience restrictions could be maintained and still have a viable production company? What happens when there are not women with the needed expertise to produce music? In addition, Olivia Records created economic opportunity for women musicians, music producers, and an array of other women. In relationship to these two businesses, Women in Distribution and Olivia Records, separatism was a mode of economic engagement that supported lesbians to make a living at least resisting patriarchy, if not outside of it.

From 1979 through 1984, Elana Dykewomon and Dolphin Waletzky operated a small, lesbian separatist distribution company called Diaspora Distribution. Based in Coos Bay, Oregon, Diaspora distributed materials by and for lesbians only; Waletzky described it as “the first and only and ever. . . in the existence of the world and galaxies that we know of.” During its six years of operation, Diaspora distributed about a dozen items, including two books that Diaspora published, Dykewomon's collection of poetry, *Fragments from Lesbos*, and a book about incest by Judy Freespirit; a novel by lesbian novelist Jess Wells; hand-spun, wool menstrual pads, pillowcases, and audio tapes.

The distinction between ideology and process is crucial in relationship to Diaspora. Diaspora said that they only distributed products to lesbians, but the challenge of course is how do you know? Earlier, Dykewomon had this same discussion with the women at Persephone Press who handled distribution of her book, *They Will*

Know Me By My Teeth. The idea of only selling to lesbians presented real, material challenges to Persephone during the 1970s and to Diaspora in the 1980s. Both Dykewomon and Waletzky recall being righteous about the issue of selling to only lesbians but not knowing how to enforce it. Generally, we understand statements like “selling only to lesbians” as ideology, as firm and fixed ideas, but if we regard them as a process, then the understanding of the work is radically different. The intention was to find ways to sell only to lesbians, to prioritize working with lesbians. Waletzky remembers, Diaspora “was making and acknowledging a culture for lesbians that would be accessible to lesbians. And would encourage them to create more of that culture and spread it out.” Both Waletzky and Dykewomon wanted to create “a sanctuary” to “nourish people” not “to let them just be escaping from but to create something new and feel safe in the process.” The generative ideas of lesbian separatism is the narrative that is lost from contemporary accounts of lesbian separatism. When we consider lesbian separatism as ideology it generates conflicts and irreconcilable challenges, but when we understand it as process, it generates utopian possibilities that even if not achieved are transformative of the field of the possible for lesbians.

Finally, a few words about separatism and *Sinister Wisdom*. Harriet Desmoines and Catherine Nicholson situated *Sinister Wisdom* as a separatist project in their first “Notes for a Magazine.” They wrote, “We’d become lesbian separatists because no other political position satisfied. But that left us with scattered beginnings of a culture and no viable strategies.” They envisioned *Sinister Wisdom* as playing a crucial role in the project of developing a culture and promoting viable transformative strategies for lesbian separatists. The second editors of *Sinister Wisdom*, Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff, struggled with separatism. Rich wrote an extended consideration of separatism in 1981 in her “Notes for a Magazine,” considering especially the view of the Combahee River Collective that separatism was a racist ideology and examining the philosophy writing of Marilyn Frye and the political organizing work of Vicky Gabriner. Rich ultimately elides the question, “What does separatism mean,” and concludes, “how and when and with what kinds of conscious identity it [separatism] is practiced, and to what

degree any act of separation is more than an act of withdrawing from difference with whose pain we can choose not to engage.”³ Yet for subsequent editors of *Sinister Wisdom*, separatism continued to have important meaning. Elana Dykewomon and Fran Day carved the journal as a space for only lesbians. *Sinister Wisdom* continues to publish today; I am the current editor and publisher. Thus, I have some particular investments in thinking about separatism. Am I a separatist as an editor of the journal? Is separatism what allowed the journal to continue to operate now for nearly 40 years? Does separatism have a space outside of the past? Is it viable today? My answers to these questions are only partial. What I do know is that lesbian separatism, particularly with its focus on economic empowerment for lesbians, is a vital way of thinking about the world and it continues to influence me in positive and transformative ways.

³ Adrienne Rich, “Notes for a Magazine: what does separatism mean?” *Sinister Wisdom* 18 (1981): 90.