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Panel: Competing Narratives about Sexuality and its Social Construction

Coming Out, Coming In and "Be-Coming": Lesbians and the Women's Liberation Movement in New Haven, Connecticut

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On February 28, 1970, 300 women—most of them from the New Haven community—gathered in the Yale Law School auditorium to hear Kate Millet and Naomi Weisstein, who were the keynote speakers at the Free Women Conference. Weisstein concluded her speech with the finale of a play she and other women had written and performed in Chicago a few months earlier.

The play celebrated women's resistance through quotations from women throughout the world and concluded with two witches chanting their solidarity with women fighting for self determination.

> **I am with the woman bleeding to death on the kitchen table of a quack abortionist; I am with the woman answering endless questions of the inquisitive caseworkers; and I am with the caseworkers, whose dreams of making a new social order have long been smothered in the endless bureaucracy, the endless forms, the racism of their superiors.**
>
> **The litany concluded :**
>
> **And where there are women too beaten down to fight, I will be there; and we will take strength together.**

Everywhere; for we will have a new world, a just world, a world without oppression and degradation! [1]

The audience rose to its feet with loud applause lasting several minutes. After everyone resumed their seats, Rita Mae Brown stood up. "Why," she said accusingly, "don't you say you are with the women who love other women?" The audience gasped, but Weisstein defused the tension by agreeing to add women loving women to the litany.[2]

In the afternoon sessions of the conference seven women from the newly-formed lesbian group in New York City, the "Sappho Collective," joined the sexuality workshop (the most popular workshop at the conference, as you might expect) and steered the discussion towards lesbianism, which totally upended the session's agenda.

That evening some of the women who had been at the conferece gathered at a party at Nina and David's house—who were a heterosexual couple active in the New Haven left. According to Virginia Blaisdell, they "got themselves in a little room and … started talking about their gym coaches...and who we had crushes on when we were 12 or 14. And all of a sudden David Adams, assuming his role as the man of the house, announced that the party was over."[3]

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[1] For full litany see Chicago Women's Liberation Union Website http://www.cwluherstory.org/cwlu

[2] Transcript of a group discussion on history of New Haven Women's Liberation October, 1971 in possession of author; letter from Naomi Weisstein to the author, July 22, 1994.

[3] Transcript of group discussion; group interview with Mimi Abramovitz Harriet Cohen and Virginia Blaisdell; The Free Women's Conference occurred before the New York lesbians began calling themselves the Lavender Menace or women identified women. See Rita Mae Brown, *A Plain Brown Rapper*, (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1976.) p. 30.

This story illustrates a process not unique to New Haven; similar events took place throughout the country in the early 1970's. Despite their confrontational style, the Sappho Collective (later called Radicalesbians), self-styled troubadours of lesbian feminism, found a receptive audience among women's liberation activists. And many women, exhilarated by their new-found sense of sisterhood and the transformations in their own lives, responded eagerly to the prospect of deepening their relationships with women.[4]

While some histories of second wave feminism describe these experiences (Ruth Rosen's work does a particularly good job), a more common narrative about lesbians in the women's liberation movement in the historical literature emphasizes the coming out process of closeted lesbians and how they challenged discrimination in the feminist movement.[5]

It describes heterosexual women who became lesbians either as women who had previously repressed their lesbian desires or as "political lesbians" obeying a feminist mandate to eliminate men from their emotional and sexual lives. According to some accounts, one set of women were "genuinely gay" or expressing "a compelling sexual inclination," while the others "embraced homosexuality more out of

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[4] For discussion of Lavender Menace's tactics at women's liberation conferences see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* Minneapolis: Univ. Of Minnesota Press, 1989 pp 213-216.

[5] Ruth Rosen's discussion of lesbianism in the women's liberation movement departs from this narrative by including accounts of previously heterosexual women happily opening themselves to erotic relationships with other women. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, (NY: Viking, 2000) pp 168-172.

conviction than instinct." It is these "political lesbians," who are often charged with "desexualizing" or "sanitizing" lesbianism in order to make it more acceptable.[6] This dichotomy flattens the sexual experience of women's liberation activists and obscures the ways that the women's liberation movement enabled participants to reshape their sexuality.

A rigid distinction between political and personal life fails to recognize the ways these two realms were fused for women's liberation activists. The "political" and the "erotic" were not mutually exclusive categories. I have used interviews from one relatively small community to examine the variety of ways women who claimed a lesbian identity experienced the connections between women's liberation ideas and lesbian desire.

The "coming out" narrative (the process by which a person either discovers, acknowledges or announces that she is a lesbian) obscures the variety of journeys traveled by women who became lesbians in the 1970's. It functions to create a biographical cohesion for individuals and to generate bonds among lesbians, bonds that sometimes frayed as differences surfaced.

"Coming out" accurately describes the journey for **some women** in New Haven, who claimed a lesbian identity through the

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[6] J. Zeitz, "Rejecting the Center: Radical Grassroots Politics in the 1970s: Second Wave Feminism as a Case Study " *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 43 2008 p. 679; Ellen Willis "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," in *The 60's without Apology* ed. by Sohnya Sayres, Anders Stephenson, Stanley Aronowitz and Fredrick Jameson) Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985) p. 104. See also Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960*; Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989) and Shane Phelan *Identity Politics, Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia:Temple University Press, 1989).

women's movement. For others, however, "coming in" or "be-coming" more closely describe their experience.[7]

Coming out, indicating a closet of same sex desire, describes the experience of Joan Malcolm and Christine Pattee. For Joan, claiming a lesbian identity meant reclaiming and validating long buried desires. She had been in a relationship with a woman in high school and college, sought counseling to address what she felt were shameful feelings and had gotten married in New Haven.

> **The personal discussions in her 1969 women's group, she reflected later, "were very threatening to me, because it was stirring up all of this longing to be with women and I felt the more we got into women talking about men as the enemy and feeling sexually oppressed by men the more I thought, 'if they ever knew I was a lesbian they'd hate me' ... I was totally freaked out."**

When women's liberation activists began talking about women loving women as an extension of feminist politics, Joan was able to reclaim her long-repressed lesbian feelings.

> **"I'm very glad that my coming out as an adult happened in a political context, she commented, "because as a teenager being a lesbian was so scary and isolating and shameful; I just felt like I could never have come out again if I hadn't had the political support. I would have been very frustrated." [8]**

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[7] Ruth Rosen quotes Sara Lucia Hoagland's description of the first time she made love with a woman in *Coming Out* p147 as "To this day I wonder why it is not called 'coming home'" Rosen p 171

[8] Interview with Joan Malcolm

Christine Pattee described herself as "head gay" (as opposed to "bed gay"), before lesbianism was discussed in the women's movement—she hadn't actually had a relationship with a woman but was conscious of her attraction to women. Christine shared Joan's feelings of isolation and fear. Recognizing that feminists often felt defensive when they were accused of being a "bunch of dykes," she kept quiet about her own feelings, until women's liberation activists started to talk about erotic relationships among women. She said in 1972 that the first time she participated in one of these discussions started her on "a high which I've been on for over a year now."[9]

Women's liberation activists challenged taboos, barriers and assumptions about what women could and could not do in every facet of their lives. Discussions within the women's movement illuminated for them the limits they had placed on their relationships with women, which were often more emotionally intimate than their relationships with men. In an environment that nurtured personal and political change, some women found a joyful expansion of their sexual and emotional vocabularies.

In New Haven, as elsewhere, heterosexual women's liberation activists developed relationships with each other in a joyful discovery of the possibilities of sexual pleasure with other women. Insead of "coming out," one might say they "came in" to a community supportive of lesbian relationships, or perhaps as Arlene Stein suggests about lesbians in the 1990's developing a "lesbian identity as

[9] Christine Mimichild, "Gay and Straight in the Women's Movement," *Sister* Vol. I #9 March, 1972

a process of self-creation that is both collective and individual, a 'be-coming' rather than a 'coming out.'"[10]

Sandy Harris, for example, had had several relationships with men but was also attracted to women and was thinking and reading about lesbian relationships.

She describes herself as "somebody who has some amount of choice, and feminism encouraged me to make the choice to stay with women."[11] When she first got involved with a woman she remembered being astonished the first time she kissed her. "On some level I thought the sky was going to fall—I was terrified—and it just felt nice but it also felt like I had to make a conscious switch to change my sense of what was attractive to female from male."[12]

Taking their relationships with each other seriously in defiance of cultural norms, women gave themselves permission to see each other as lovers. "When I allowed myself to fantasize, "recalled Jennifer Abod, "it seemed possible to love another woman."[13] Increasing numbers of women in women's liberation were turning these fantasies into realities, and this process was somewhat contagious.

Rhea Hirshman had been bored by her relationships with men and, when she met lesbians in women's liberation she thought "oh, that's a good idea." For her the process felt "organic" and "for the most part fun."[14]

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[10] Stein, p. 201; Also see Shane Phelan "(Be)Coming out: Lesbian Identity and Politics" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society Vol. 18 #41 (*June 1, 1993)

[11] Phone interview with Sandy Harris

[12] Phone interview with Sandy Harris

[13] Interview with Joennifer Abod

[14] Interview with Rhea Hirshman, March 1, 2009.

As more and more women developed sexual relationships with each other, **Harriet Cohen**, who had not yet been in a sexual relationship with a woman, began to think "maybe there are just some people who are heterosexual and other people who aren't."

> **Soon, however, she slept with a woman. And changed her mind.[15] "The women's movement gave you permission," she said," but she wondered if she might have had sexual relationships with women earlier, if she "had permission earlier." "We were high on women." Playing guitar in the Women's Liberation Rock Band, Harriet would say to the audience: "people always accuse us of being … man haters; the next time people accuse you of being a man hater what you should do is…" and then she would expose her T-shirt that read "Woman Lover." "You're not a man hater; you're a woman lover."[16]**

In the heady atmosphere of women's liberation Jennifer, Harriet, Sandy and Rhea—and countless other women—changed their sexual desires as a result of conscious decisions. But conscious choice did not make their lesbian relationships less erotic, or their same-sex desire less authentic. One of the crucial contributions of feminist thinking about sexuality was to challenge the mystifications and silence that often made it difficult for women to experience or pursue pleasure; consciously changing one's sexual attraction was for many women, part of this project.

The lesbian experience of women's liberation activists in New Haven suggests alternative ways of thinking about lesbians apart from

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[15] Jennifer Abod in Discussion with Christine Pattee, 1973; Group interview with Virginia Blaisdell Mimi Abramowitz and Harriet Cohen,;

[16] Interview with Harriet Cohen, July 19, 2009.

a dichotomy between "authentic" and "political" lesbians. It emphasizes instead the power of the women's liberation movement to enable women with a range of sexual experiences to reconfirm, reconfigure, or change their sexual desires.

Unfortunately, today virulent anti-queer movements use the idea that sexuality can change as a pretext to exact punitive measures—from prison, to death (as in Uganda and Nigeria), to reparative therapy in the U.S. Increasingly gay rights advocates defensively deploy the notion of an innate, immutable sexual orientation against attacks on the civil rights of queer people.

In this context I'm saying that lesbianism was **contagious** in the 70's, and it was **nurtured** by the ideas and culture of women's liberation. There. I said it. *Oy Veh!!!*

I do believe we need to reclaim this chapter of women's liberation, not only because it's an important part of feminist history but also because it reminds us of the power of social movements to create and expand possibilities for our social, cultural and sexual lives.

But I do also agree with Shane Phelan, who urges us to look at **"**what is at stake in our differing stories; we must examine the consequences of our stories in terms of power and change."[17]

So I'm hoping we can have a discussion about this today.

[17] Phelan p.773.