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“The Woman Identified Woman”: Intersectional Liberation

Background

New left politics of the 1960s catalyzed a host of movements for the liberation of marginalized peoples, including the gay liberation movement, second wave feminist movement, Chicano movement, and more. At the forefront of second wave feminism was Betty Friedan and the National Organization for Women (NOW), a coalition largely motivated by Friedan’s manifesto *The Feminine Mystique*, which highlighted the lack of fulfillment that white, middle-class women felt when confined to domesticity in the post World War II era (Levine 41). At the same time, the homophile movement gave way to the more militant gay liberation movement in response to systemic violence and discrimination against queer citizens.

Despite the radicalism present in both feminism and LGBT activism at the time, the mainstream branches of these movements had limitations and were unable to fully capture the intersectional struggles of lesbian women, who faced sexism within the gay liberation movement and homophobia within Friedan’s organization (Shumsky). “The Woman Identified Woman,” a manifesto published by the lesbian feminist group Radicalesbians, became a revolutionary document that directly confronted the homophobia lesbian women faced within normative feminism, and indicated why this exclusion was problematic to the success of feminism as a whole. The events and motivations surrounding this oppositional manifesto, particularly its distribution during NOW’s Second Congress to Unite Women, contributed to more radical

identity and coalition formation within the feminist movement, and introduced the necessity of inclusive, intersectional feminism, which was furthered in the late 1970s and continues in modern day.

Exclusion in Second Wave Feminism

Homophobia within the women's movement in the 1960s and 70s was rampant and eventually led to the systematic exclusion of lesbian women from mainstream feminist organizing. Particularly, arguments in Betty Friedan's famed feminist manifesto, *The Feminine Mystique*, were grounded in homophobic rhetoric: "Male homosexuals . . . are, no less than the female sex-seekers, Peter Pans, forever childlike, afraid of age, grasping at youth in their continual search for reassurance in some sexual magic" (294). Statements like Friedan's created an infantilizing image of gay men as a means of promoting women's rights, which portrays the overt homophobia present within 1960s liberal feminism. This bigotry was widespread and extended to lesbian women as well, eventually leading to their exclusion from the National Organization for Women. Though NOW was started by a diverse group, including Black feminist Dr. Pauli Murray, many feminists within the organization still believed that participation of lesbian women, who were socially stigmatized as manhaters, would reduce the movement's political effectiveness (Gilmore and Kamisky 96). In fact, Friedan coined the term "lavender menace" in reference to lesbians who were members of NOW; this was one of the many exclusionary sentiments perpetrated by feminists leaders against lesbian women (Orleck 167). Another example is seen in the experience of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, co-founders of the lesbian rights organization the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). Martin and Lyon were denied a couples membership in NOW due to Friedan's homophobia, despite their outspoken activism and advocacy for women's rights (Gilmore and Kaminski 102). Such exclusions necessitated the

creation of more intersectional feminist coalitions, and the establishment of platforms to voice lesbian feminist issues; “The Woman Identified Woman” was one such manifestation that encouraged intersectionality.

A major catalyst for this manifesto was Rita Mae Brown’s forced removal from NOW. Brown was an openly lesbian woman who served as the editor of NOW’s newsletter, and she was fired from her position almost immediately following Friedan’s “lavender menace” statements. Brown later reflected that the hypervisibility of lesbianism within NOW was the primary reason for the exclusion of her and many others: “When Betty Friedan and all of those mounted their anti-gay campaign — well the gay women left, what else could they do? If they didn’t leave, they were being thrown out!” (“Rita Mae Brown: Lesbians Were Booted out of Women’s Movement,” 0:00 - 0:10)

Combating this exclusion, Brown and several other lesbians began forming their own feminist coalitions; lesbian women who were part of the Gay Liberation Front and the Women’s Liberation Movement soon came together to directly confront the homophobia within NOW in an organization known as the Radicalesbians (Shumsky). This group of women crafted “The Woman Identified Woman” as an expression of how their identity as lesbian feminists held political power that, if included as part of a more holistic, intersectional feminist movement, could help eradicate sexist patriarchal constructs.

Implications of “The Woman Identified Woman”

“The Woman Identified Woman” had two major outcomes: a new definition of lesbianism that gave the term political significance, and an establishment of a coalitional relationship between lesbian feminists and liberal feminists.

The manifesto firstly created a politically subversive definition of lesbianism, denoting

“lesbian” as a resistance to societal heteronormativity. The Radicalesbians argued that gender norms created by expectations within heterosexual relationships were often oppressive towards women, demeaning them as docile sex objects for men; as such, they asserted that lesbianism, which challenged heteronormativity, inherently challenged these sexist gender roles (“The Woman Identified Woman,” 1). The document also explicitly addressed the stigma around lesbianism as a tool “invented by the Man to throw at woman who dares to be his equal” (2), essentially articulating that, in playing into this stigma and excluding lesbians, feminists were upholding their own oppression. The Radicalesbians affirmed that the irrational fear of lesbianism that many feminists had at the time was the result of a divisive tactic perpetrated by men to triangulate queer and heterosexual women against one another: “Affixing the label lesbian not only to a woman who aspires to be a person, but also to any situation of real love, real solidarity, real primacy among women, is a primary form of divisiveness among women: it is the condition which keeps women within the confines of the feminine role, and it is the debunking/scare term that keeps women from forming any primary attachments, groups, or associations among ourselves” (2). In highlighting this triangulation, the Radicalesbians implied the political power of lesbianism: the fact that lesbians, in subverting normative gender roles, became stigmatized and feared by oppressors indicated that lesbianism had the oppositional power to resist sexism. Additionally, through debunking the stigma, the Radicalesbians also defined the possibility of a coalition between liberal feminists and lesbian feminists — one in which woman identification related the two into a more powerful feminist collective. They contended that by forming relationships between one another, and accepting lesbian women’s issues into popular feminism, all feminists would be able to “begin a revolution to end . . . coercive identifications, and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression” (4).

The specific rhetoric used in the manifesto helped build this coalitional relationship by creating a method of common identification for liberal feminists and lesbian feminists — woman identification. “The Woman Identified Woman” began with the assertion “a lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion,” establishing a direct point of commonality between lesbian women and heterosexual women. The writers went on to suggest woman identification as a solution to the inferiority women experienced within 20th century society: “only women can give to each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men” (3). Essentially, the Radicalesbians argued that, in identifying with other women, feminists could experience true liberation by finding a “new sense of self” that existed outside of patriarchal expectations of womanhood. This concept, the cornerstone of their argument, also suggested that the subversive nature of lesbianism — the total rejection of male affiliation and complete acceptance of woman identification — could be the vanguard of the feminist movement if included within it (Samek 407).

By asserting that lesbianism could be an asset rather than a detriment to the feminist movement overall, “The Woman Identified Woman” introduced more radical identification for heterosexual feminists and lesbian feminists alike. Straight feminists could use woman identification to reject the subordinate feminine role defined by heteronormative gender standards through embracing lesbianism within their movement. Furthermore, lesbian women could use woman identification to embrace feminism themselves, as many felt more comfortable identifying as feminists after understanding the platform in “The Woman Identified Woman” and recognizing that mainstream feminism could finally be relevant in addressing the unique issues they faced at the intersection of gender and sexuality (qtd. in Samek 406).

Publicizing “The Woman Identified Woman”

On May 1, 1970, NOW held its Second Congress to Unite Women; notably, all lesbian



women were excluded from presenting as speakers at the event. Here, “The Woman Identified Woman” made its public debut as the Radicalesbians rushed the stage, drawing immediate attention to lesbian women’s issues and the problematic homophobia within NOW (Gilmore and Kaminski 103). This act was known as the “Lavender

Menace,” a reclamation of the slur and a repudiation of NOW’s homophobia by crashing their congress. As pictured, the Radicalesbians satirized the stereotypes of manhating lesbianism with their outfits and posters to destigmatize and redefine what it meant to be a “lesbian”; this tactic was particularly effective, as many attendees found the coup nearly comical and began to pay attention (Galvan 213).

The Lavender Menace had immediate impacts on feminist inclusivity; after the distribution of “The Woman Identified Woman,” 2 days of workshops on lesbian feminist inclusivity were conducted, and the first NOW resolution in support of lesbian women’s rights was passed. Individual NOW chapters also began officially recognizing the double oppression of lesbian women and including them in feminist organizing in the months after (Ruffalo et. al 6).

The following years held considerable gains for queer visibility within the feminist movement as well. In 1973, the NOW Task Force on Sexuality and Lesbianism was established; in 1977, at a women’s conference in Houston, Friedan publicly apologized for her homophobic comments and expressed support for lesbian women within feminism (“National Organization for Women”). As the catalyst these actions, “The Woman Identified Woman” was essentially the foundation for queer inclusion in the feminist movement, a monumental achievement in a

homophobic post-war America (“Interview with David K. Johnson, Author of the Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government”).

Modern Implications

While the Radicalesbians floundered and was eventually disbanded in 1971 (Shumsky), the legacy of “The Woman Identified Woman” remains significant and complex. The strength and bravery of these women gave a voice to lesbian women within feminism, enabling the continuance of lesbian feminist organizing through the 1970s. However, even “The Woman Identified Woman” had limitations, as it centered on the experiences of white women when describing stereotypes of femininity (Langston 160). Groups like the Combahee River Collective and the Black Women’s Agenda, collectives of Black lesbian feminists, built upon the work of the Radicalesbians by highlighting class and race-based issues within feminism as well, and establishing what we know today as “identity politics” (The Combahee River Collective).

In introducing greater intersectionality to the feminist movement, “The Woman Identified Woman” forged a great legacy; today, true feminism encompasses the broader issues of all women, with a recognition of race, class, ability, and sexuality (Snyder 175). This transition, from 60s feminism that addressed white, middle-class issues, is one that was largely catalyzed by the Radicalesbians and “The Woman Identified Woman” — and these powerful women and their powerful words ought to be credited with it.

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Appendix (Main Primary Source)

The Woman Identified Woman

By the Radicalesbians

What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society - perhaps then, but certainly later - cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with her self. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society — the female role. The turmoil she experiences tends to induce guilt proportional to the degree to which she feels she is not meeting social expectations, and/or eventually drives her to question and analyze what the rest of her society more or less accepts. She is forced to evolve her own life pattern, often living much of her life alone, learning usually much earlier than her “straight” (heterosexual) sisters about the essential aloneness of life (which the myth of marriage obscures) and about the reality of illusions. To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. For she is caught somewhere between accepting society's view of her — in which case she cannot accept herself — and coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and necessary for it to do so. Those of us who work that through find ourselves on the other side of a tortuous journey through a night that may have been decades long. The perspective gained from that journey, the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women, is something to be shared with all women - because we are all women.

It should first be understood that lesbianism, like male homosexuality, is a category of behavior possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy. Those sex roles dehumanize women by defining us as a supportive/serving caste in relation to the master caste of men, and emotionally cripple men by demanding that they be alienated from their own bodies and emotions in order to perform their economic/political/military functions effectively. Homosexuality is a by-product of a particular way of setting up roles (or approved patterns of behavior) on the basis of sex; as such it is an inauthentic (not consonant with “reality”) category. In a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear.

But lesbianism is also different from male homosexuality, and serves a different function in the society. “Dyke” is a different kind of put-down from “faggot,” although both imply you are not playing your socially assigned sex role. . . are not therefore a “real woman” or a “real man.” The grudging admiration felt for the tomboy, and the queasiness felt around a sissy boy point to the same thing: the contempt in which women-or those who play a female role-are held. And the investment in keeping women in that contemptuous role is very great. Lesbian is a word, the label, the condition that holds women in line. When a woman hears this word tossed her way, she knows she is stepping out of line. She knows that she has crossed the terrible boundary of her sex role. She recoils, she protests, she reshapes her actions to gain approval. Lesbian is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives (including that of all women as part of the exchange medium among men), who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs. To have the label applied to people active in women's liberation is just the most recent instance of a long history; older women will recall that not so long ago, any woman who was successful, independent, not orienting her whole life about a man, would hear this word. For in this sexist society, for a woman to be independent means she can't be a woman — she must be a dyke. That in itself should tell us where women are at. It says as clearly as can be said: women and person are contradictory terms. For a lesbian is not considered a “real woman.” And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation — which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a “woman” is to get fucked by men.

“Lesbian” is one of the sexual categories by which men have divided up humanity. While all women are dehumanized as sex objects, as the objects of men they are given certain compensations: identification with his power, his ego, his status, his protection (from other males), feeling like a “real woman,” finding social acceptance by adhering to her role, etc. Should a woman confront herself by confronting another woman, there are fewer rationalizations, fewer buffers by which to avoid the stark horror of her dehumanized condition.

Herein we find the overriding fear of many women toward being used as a sexual object by a woman, which not only will bring her no male-connected compensations, but also will reveal the void which is woman's real situation. This dehumanization is expressed when a straight woman learns that a sister is a lesbian; she begins to relate to her lesbian sister as her potential sex object, laying a surrogate male role on the lesbian. This reveals her heterosexual conditioning to make herself into an object when sex is potentially involved in a relationship, and it denies the lesbian her full humanity. For women, especially those in the movement, to perceive their lesbian sisters through this male grid of role definitions is to accept this male cultural conditioning and to oppress their sisters much as they themselves have been oppressed by men. Are we going to continue the male classification system of defining all females in sexual relation to some other category of people? Affixing the label lesbian not only to a woman who aspires to be a person,

but also to any situation of real love, real solidarity, real primacy among women, is a primary form of divisiveness among women: it is the condition which keeps women within the confines of the feminine role, and it is the debunking/scare term that keeps women from forming any primary attachments, groups, or associations among ourselves.

Women in the movement have in most cases gone to great lengths to avoid discussion and confrontation with the issue of lesbianism. It puts people up-tight. They are hostile, evasive, or try to incorporate it into some “broader issue.” They would rather not talk about it. If they have to, they try to dismiss it as a “lavender herring.” But it is no side issue. It is absolutely essential to the success and fulfillment of the women's liberation movement that this issue be dealt with. As long as the label “dyke” can be used to frighten women into a less militant stand, keep her separate from her sisters, keep her from giving primacy to anything other than men and family — then to that extent she is controlled by the male culture. Until women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status. As long as male acceptability is primary-both to individual women and to the movement as a whole-the term lesbian will be used effectively against women. Insofar as women want only more privileges within the system, they do not want to antagonize male power. They instead seek acceptability for women's liberation, and the most crucial aspect of the acceptability is to deny lesbianism — i. e., to deny any fundamental challenge to the basis of the female.

It should also be said that some younger, more radical women have honestly begun to discuss lesbianism, but so far it has been primarily as a sexual “alternative” to men. This, however, is still giving primacy to men, both because the idea of relating more completely to women occurs as a negative reaction to men, and because the lesbian relationship is being characterized simply by sex, which is divisive and sexist. On one level, which is both personal and political, women may withdraw emotional and sexual energies from men, and work out various alternatives for those energies in their own lives. On a different political/psychological level, it must be understood that what is crucial is that women begin disengaging from male-defined response patterns. In the privacy of our own psyches, we must cut those cords to the core. For irrespective of where our love and sexual energies flow, if we are male-identified in our heads, we cannot realize our autonomy as human beings.

But why is it that women have related to and through men? By virtue of having been brought up in a male society, we have internalized the male culture's definition of ourselves. That definition consigns us to sexual and family functions, and excludes us from defining and shaping the terms of our lives. In exchange for our psychic servicing and for performing society's non-profit-making functions, the man confers on us just one thing: the slave status which makes us legitimate in the eyes of the society in which we live. This is called “femininity” or “being a real woman” in our cultural lingo. We are authentic, legitimate, real to the extent that we are the

property of some man whose name we bear. To be a woman who belongs to no man is to be invisible, pathetic, inauthentic, unreal. He confirms his image of us - of what we have to be in order to be acceptable by him - but not our real selves; he confirms our womanhood-as he defines it, in relation to him- but cannot confirm our personhood, our own selves as absolutes. As long as we are dependent on the male culture for this definition. For this approval, we cannot be free.

The consequence of internalizing this role is an enormous reservoir of self-hate. This is not to say the self-hate is recognized or accepted as such; indeed most women would deny it. It may be experienced as discomfort with her role, as feeling empty, as numbness, as restlessness, as a paralyzing anxiety at the center. Alternatively, it may be expressed in shrill defensiveness of the glory and destiny of her role. But it does exist, often beneath the edge of her consciousness, poisoning her existence, keeping her alienated from herself, her own needs, and rendering her a stranger to other women. They try to escape by identifying with the oppressor, living through him, gaining status and identity from his ego, his power, his accomplishments. And by not identifying with other "empty vessels" like themselves. Women resist relating on all levels to other women who will reflect their own oppression, their own secondary status, their own self-hate. For to confront another woman is finally to confront one's self — the self we have gone to such lengths to avoid. And in that mirror we know we cannot really respect and love that which we have been made to be.

As the source of self-hate and the lack of real self are rooted in our male-given identity, we must create a new sense of self. As long as we cling to the idea of "being a woman," we will sense some conflict with that incipient self, that sense of I, that sense of a whole person. It is very difficult to realize and accept that being "feminine" and being a whole person are irreconcilable. Only women can give to each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men. This consciousness is the revolutionary force from which all else will follow, for ours is an organic revolution. For this we must be available and supportive to one another, give our commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this movement. Our energies must flow toward our sisters, not backward toward our oppressors. As long as woman's liberation tries to free women without facing the basic heterosexual structure that binds us in one-to-one relationship with our oppressors, tremendous energies will continue to flow into trying to straighten up each particular relationship with a man, into finding how to get better sex, how to turn his head around-into trying to make the "new man" out of him, in the delusion that this will allow us to be the "new woman. " This obviously splits our energies and commitments, leaving us unable to be committed to the construction of the new patterns which will liberate us.

It is 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. Together we must find, reinforce, and validate our authentic selves. As we do this, we confirm in each other that struggling, incipient sense of pride and strength, the divisive barriers begin to melt, we feel this growing solidarity with our sisters. We see ourselves as prime, find our centers inside of ourselves. We find receding the sense of alienation, of being cut off, of being behind a locked window, of being unable to get out what we know is inside. We feel a real-ness, feel at last we are coinciding with ourselves. With that real self, with that consciousness, we begin a revolution to end the imposition of all coercive identifications, and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression.