An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Lesbianism and Feminism
by Anne Koedt

Female homosexuality is becoming an increasingly important problem. It is believed by some that women are becoming rapidly defeminized as a result of their overt desire for emancipation, and that this "psychic masculinization" of modern women contributes to frigidity.... Some sexologists fear that this defeminization trend may seriously affect the sexual happiness of modern women. They claim it will more than likely influence the susceptibility of many to a homosexual way of thinking and living.

—Frank S. Caprio, M.D.,
Variations in Sexual Behavior

Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice.

—Attributed to Ti-Grace Atkinson

When Gertrude Stein entertained friends, she conversed only with the men and left Alice Toklas the duty of talking with the ladies.

—Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex

Only women can give each other a new sense of self.... We must be available and supportive to one another, [and] give our commitment and our love....

—Radicalesbians, "Woman Identified Woman"

I like her breasts and don’t understand her legs.

—Jill Johnston

Lesbian Baiting

Feminists have been called "lesbian" long before they may have, in fact, considered its application in their personal lives; it has been

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an insult directed at them with escalated regularity ever since they began working politically for women’s liberation. Their reaction to lesbian baiting has been mixed. On the one hand it was clear that feminism was threatening to men, and that men were retaliating with whatever verbal weapons were at hand. But the threat of being called lesbian touched real fears; to the extent that a woman was involved with a man, she feared being considered Unfeminine and Unwomanly, and thus being rejected. There was also the larger threat: the fear of male rejection in general. Since it is through husbands that women gain economic and social security, through male employers that they earn a living, and in general through male power that they survive, to incur the wrath of men is no small matter. Women knew this long before they put it in feminist terms. Thus it is not just vanity and personal idiosyncrasy for women to wish to remain in the good graces of men. It is a practical reflection of reality.

For feminists the main educational value of lesbian baiting has been its exposure of the very clear connection in men’s minds between being “unfeminine” and being independent. Being called unfeminine is a comparatively gentle threat informing you that you are beginning to waver, whereas being called a lesbian is the danger signal—the final warning that you are about to leave the Territory of Womanhood altogether.

Acts of feminine trangression may take different forms. A woman may appear too self-reliant and assertive; she may work politically for women’s rights; she may be too smart for her colleagues; or she may have important close friends who are women. Often women have been called “lesbian” by complete strangers simply because they were sitting in a cafe obviously engrossed in their own conversation and not interested in the men around them. (Curiously enough it is precisely on the most seemingly “feminine” women that men will frequent this kind of abuse, since the purpose is more to scare the women back into “place” than to pinpoint any actual lesbianism.)

The consideration of lesbianism as a personal option grew out of very different reasons. For many feminists there had always been a logical, theoretical connection between the elimination of sex roles and the possibility of loving other women. With some this became a reality when they met a woman they were attracted to. For others,
lesbianism has meant a freedom from male relationships in general, a release from the task of looking for that elusive "special" man who wasn't a male chauvinist. Other feminists saw a love relationship with a woman as a positive thing because they felt other women would not encourage the passivity and submissiveness that they had previously found themselves falling into with men. Most important of all, perhaps, women found that there were other women to love in their own right as persons.

Definitions

With the increased interaction between the gay and women's liberation movements, a heightened consciousness about lesbianism has evolved among feminists—and along with it a corresponding disagreement and confusion as to what exactly it means to be a lesbian. It is clear that more is being implied than the straight dictionary definition of women sleeping with members of their own sex. Some women define it as meaning having sex *exclusively* with women, a more rigid definition than the one commonly used. Other gay women see lesbianism as much more than a defining term for the sex of your bed partner; to them it is a "total life commitment to a life with women" and "an entire system of world view and life living." Indeed, some gay women seek to equate their lesbianism with vanguard radical feminism since, as some of them say, "we rejected men and sex roles long before there even was a women's liberation movement." For the purposes of this discussion the meaning of the word lesbianism is restricted to its simplest definition of "women having sexual relations with women," so that the various "life style" arguments which are sometimes added to the basic definition can be looked at separately.

I think that the first thing to do is to define radical feminism: To me it means the advocacy of the total elimination of sex roles. A radical feminist, then, is one who believes in this and works politically toward that end.* Basic to the position of radical feminism is the concept that biology is not destiny, and that male and female roles are learned—indeed that they are male political constructs that serve to ensure power and superior status for men. Thus the bio-

* She does not by this definition live a life untouched by sex roles; there are no "liberated" women in that sense.
logical male is the oppressor not by virtue of his male biology, but by virtue of his rationalizing his supremacy on the basis of that biological difference. The argument that “man is the enemy” is then true only insofar as the man adopts the male supremacy role.

What then is the relationship between lesbianism and radical feminism? Taking even the most minimal definitions of lesbianism and feminism, you can find one major point of agreement: biology does not determine sex roles. Thus, since roles are learned there is nothing inherently “masculine” or “feminine” in behavior.

Beyond these basic assumptions, however, there are important differences. Radical feminism naturally incorporates the notion of lesbianism†—but with strict reservations. Mainly I think that many radical feminists have resented the whole baggage of assumed implications that some gay women have tagged onto lesbianism. It has been presented too often as a package deal where if you accepted the idea of lesbianism, you would necessarily also have to accept a whole gay position which frequently runs contrary to radical feminism.

The following are some of the points of disagreement:

Homosexuality as “Sick” or “Healthy”

The agreement that there is nothing innately sick about persons having sex with someone of their own sex does not mean that therefore all gay behavior is healthy in feminist terms. A lesbian acting like a man or a gay man acting like a woman is not necessarily sicker than heterosexuals acting out the same roles; but it is not healthy. All role playing is sick, be it “simulated” or “authentic” according to society’s terms.

The fact that there has occurred a role transfer, and that now it is being acted out by the “wrong” sex, does not change the nature of what is being acted out. A male homosexual who dresses up with make-up, makes catty remarks about other women, worries excessively about boy friend approval, and in general displays the insecurity and helplessness that have been the symptoms of women’s oppression, is as far away from being the full person he could be as

† Reform feminism which envisions only an “equal partnership with men” clearly has in mind improved male-female relationships, not new possibilities for loving and relating sexually to women as well.
the woman acting out that same role. The point is that they are, in a sense, both in drag.

On the other hand, two lesbians who have chosen not to fall into imitative roles, but are instead exploring the positive aspects of both "masculine" and "feminine" behavior beyond roles—forming something new and equal in the process—would in my opinion probably be healthy.

**Gay as Radical Feminist Vanguard**

One position advanced by some lesbians is the idea that lesbians are the vanguard of the women's movement because 1) they broke with sex roles before there even was a feminist movement, and 2) they have no need for men at all. (Somehow they are the revolution.) The following is one example of this position:

Feel the real glow that comes from "our" sisterhood. We can teach you something about being gentle and kind for we never felt competitive. Remember WE long before YOU have known discontent with male society and WE long before YOU knew and appreciated the full potential of everything female. . . . It is WE who say welcome to you, long blind and oppressed sisters, we have been fighting against male supremacy for a long time, join US! We are not intimidated by relational differences, for we have never felt mortgaged by society.²

Several points seem to be ignored with this kind of argument. For one, there is a confusion of a personal with a political solution. Sex roles and male supremacy will not go away simply by women becoming lesbians. It will take a great deal of sophisticated political muscle and collective energy for women to eliminate sexism. So at best a lesbian relationship can give a woman more happiness and freedom in her private life (assuming both women are not playing roles). But a radical feminist is not just one who tries to live the good non-sexist life at home; she is one who is working politically in society to destroy the institutions of sexism.

Another assumption implicit in the argument of "lesbian-as-the-vanguard-feminist" is that having balked at one aspect of sexism—namely, exclusive heterosexuality—they are therefore radical feminists. *Any* woman who defies her role—be it refusing to be a mother, wanting to be a biochemist, or simply refusing to cater to a man's ego—is defying the sex role system. It is an act of rebellion.
In the case of lesbianism, the act of rebellion often has earned the woman severe social ostracism. However, it becomes radical only if it is then placed in the context of wanting to destroy the system as a whole, that is, destroying the sex role system as opposed to just rejecting men. Indeed, there can be reformism within lesbianism too; when a lesbian says “I have nothing against men; I just don’t want to be involved with them,” she is really describing an accommodation within the sexist system even though she has performed the rebellious act of violating that system by being a lesbian. It is also in this context that a statement like “feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice” is erroneous. For not only is the sex of a woman’s lover insufficient information to infer radical feminism, but there is also the false implication that to have no men in your personal life means you are therefore living the life of fighting for radical feminist change.

The notion that lesbians have no need for men at all also needs clarification. First of all, since we are all women living in a male society, we do in fact depend regularly upon men for many crucial things, even if we do not choose to have men in our personal relationships. It is for this reason that one woman alone will not be fully liberated until all women are liberated. However, taking the statement to mean having no need for men in personal relationships (which can be an important achievement for women, since one should obviously want the person, not the man), one must still ask the question: has the male role been discarded? Thus again the crucial point is not the sex of your bed partner but the sex role of your bed partner.

**Gay Movement as a Civil Rights Movement**

The organized gay movement seeks to protect the freedom of any homosexual, no matter what her or his individual style of homosexuality may be. This means protection of the transvestite, the queen, the “butch” lesbian, the couple that wants a marriage license, or the homosexual who may prefer no particular role. They are all united on one thing: the right to have sex with someone of one’s own sex (i.e., “freedom of sexual preference”).

As is clear from the wide range of homosexual behavior, not all modes necessarily reflect a dislike for sex roles *per se*. Nor was the
choice necessarily made deliberately. The boy who grew up trained as a girl, or the girl who was somehow socialized more toward the male role, did not in their childhood choose to reverse sex roles. Each was saddled with a role (as were we all) and had to make the best of it in a society that scorned such an occurrence. Merle Miller in an article in the *New York Times* (January 17, 1971), where he “came out” as a homosexual, said: “Gay is good, Gay is proud. Well, yes, I suppose. If I had been given a choice (but who is?), I would prefer to be straight.” His point was not that gay is sick but rather that he did not choose his gayness. And, furthermore, had he been trained heterosexually, society would have been a great deal easier on him. Which is a very understandable sentiment given the cruelty and discrimination that is practiced against homosexuals. In such cases the bravery and rebelliousness is to be found rather in the ability to act out homosexuality in spite of social abuse.

In uniting to change oppressive laws, electing officials who will work toward these ends, and changing social attitudes which are discriminatory against homosexuals, the gay movement is addressing itself to its civil rights. It is my feeling that the gay liberation issue is in fact a civil rights issue (as opposed to a radical issue) because it is united around the secondary issue of “freedom of sexual preference.” Whereas in fact the real root of anti-homosexuality is sexism. That is, the radical gay person would have to be a feminist. This tracing of the roots of gay oppression to sexism is also expressed in Radicalesbian’s “Woman Identified Woman”:

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. . . . 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.

**Bisexuality**

One position taken by some lesbians is that bisexuality is a cop-out. This is usually argued in terms like “until all heterosexuals go gay, we are going to remain homosexual,” or “lesbianism is more than having sex with women; it is a whole life style and commitment to women. Bisexuality is a sign of not being able to leave men and be free. We are _women_- (not _men_-) identified women.”
The first position mentioned is an apparently tactical argument (though it has also been used by some, I think, to dismiss the discussion of bisexuality altogether by safely pushing it off into the Millennium), and makes the case for politically identifying yourself with the most discriminated against elements—even though you might really believe in bisexuality.*

Taking that argument at face value (and I don’t completely), I think it is a dangerous thing to advocate politically. For by, in effect, promoting exclusive homosexuality, they lend political support to the notion that it does matter what the sex of your partner may be. While I recognize the absolute necessity for the gay movement to concentrate on the freedom of people to sleep with members of their own sex (since it is here that discrimination exists), it must at the same time always be referred back to its larger, radical perspective: that it is oppressive for that very question even to be asked. As a matter of fact, if “freedom of sexual preference” is the demand, the solution obviously must be a bisexuality where the question becomes irrelevant.

I think in fact that the reason why bisexuality has been considered such an unpopular word by most gays is not to be found primarily in the arguments just discussed, but rather in gay adherence to a kind of fierce homosexual counter-definition which has developed. That is, a counter identity—a “life style” and “world view”—has been created around the fact of their homosexuality. This identity is so strong sometimes that to even advocate or predict bisexuality is considered “genocide.” The following is an example: In a response to a statement by Dotson Rader that “as bisexuality is increasingly accepted as the norm, the position of the homosexual qua homosexual will fade,” one gay response was that “The homosexual, like the Jew, is offered the choice between integration or the gas chamber.”

It is not with the actual gay counterculture that I want to quarrel; I think it is a very understandable reaction to an intolerable exclusion of homosexuals from society. To be denied the ordinary benefits and interaction of other people, to be stripped of your identity by a society that recognizes you as valid only if your role and your biology are “properly” matched—to be thus denied must of course

* See for example A Gay Manifesto by Carl Wittman (Gay Flames Pamphlet No. 9).
result in a new resolution of identity. Since gays have been rejected on the basis of their homosexuality, it is not surprising that homosexuality has become the core of the new identity.

The disagreement with feminism comes rather in an attempt to make a revolutionary political position out of this adjustment. The often heard complaint from feminists that “we are being defined once again by whom we sleep with” is correct, I think. The lesson to be learned from a feminist analysis of sex roles is that there is no behavior implied from our biology beyond, as Wilma Scott Heide has noted, the role of sperm donor and wet nurse. A woman has historically been defined, on the basis of biology, as incomplete without a man. Feminists have rejected this notion, and must equally reject any new definition which offers a woman her identity by virtue of the fact that she may love or sleep with other women.

It is for this reason, also, that I disagree with the Radicalesbian concept of the “woman-identified-woman.” For we ought not to be “identified” on the basis of whom we have relationships with. And there is a confusion in such a term; it seems to mix up the biological woman with the political woman. I think the often used feminist definition of “woman-identified” as meaning having identified with the female role in society is more useful; it refers to a specific political phenomenon of internalization. So far as finding a term which describes women’s solidarity or sisterhood on the basis of our common oppression, the term is feminism. Beyond that, what is left is the biological female—an autonomous being who gains her identity by virtue of her own achievements and characteristics, not by virtue of whom she has a love relationship with.

Once we begin to discuss persons as persons (a word which doesn’t ask the sex of an individual), even the word “bisexuality” may eventually be dropped, since implicit in its use is still an eagerness to inform you that it is both sexes. Perhaps we will finally return to a simpler word like “sexuality,” where the relevant information is simply “sex among persons.”

If you don’t sleep with women . . .

If you are a feminist who is not sleeping with a woman you may risk hearing any of the following accusations: “You’re oppressing me if you don’t sleep with women”; “You’re not a radical feminist if you don’t sleep with women”; or “You don’t love women if you
don’t sleep with them.” I have even seen a woman’s argument about an entirely different aspect of feminism be dismissed by some lesbians because she was not having sexual relations with women. Leaving aside for a minute the motives for making such accusations, there is an outrageous thing going on here strictly in terms of pressuring women about their personal lives.

This perversion of “the personal is the political” argument, it must be noted, was not invented by those gay women who may be using it now; the women’s movement has had sporadic waves of personal attacks on women—always in the guise of radicalism (and usually by a very small minority of women). I have seen women being told they could not be trusted as feminists because they wore miniskirts, because they were married (in one group quotas were set lest the group’s quality be lowered by “unliberated women”), or because they wanted to have children. This rejection of women who are not living the “liberated life” has predictably now come to include rejection on the basis of the “unliberated” sex life.

The original genius of the phrase “the personal is political” was that it opened up the area of women’s private lives to political analysis. Before that, the isolation of women from each other had been accomplished by labeling a woman’s experience “personal.” Women had thus been kept from seeing their common condition as women and their common oppression by men.

However, opening up women’s experience to political analysis has also resulted in a misuse of the phrase. While it is true that there are political implications in everything a woman qua woman experiences, it is not therefore true that a woman’s life is the political property of the women’s movement. And it seems to me to show a disrespect for another woman to presume that it is any group’s (or individual’s) prerogative to pass revolutionary judgment on the progress of her life.

There is a further point: Even the most radical feminist is not the liberated woman. We are all crawling out of femininity into a new sense of personhood. Only a woman herself may decide what her next step is going to be. I do not think women have a political obligation to the movement to change; they should do so only if they see it in their own self-interest. If the women’s movement believes that feminism is in women’s self-interest, then the task at hand is to make it understood through shared insights, analysis, and
experience. That is, feminism is an offering, not a directive, and one therefore enters a woman’s private life at her invitation only. Thus a statement like “you don’t love women if you don’t sleep with them” must above all be dismissed on the grounds that it is confusing the right to discuss feminism with the right to, uninvited, discuss a woman’s private life and make political judgments about it.

However, taking the issue presented in the above accusation (outside of its guilt-provoking personal context*), there are several points to consider. One element of truth is that some women are unable to relate sexually to other women because of a strong self-hatred for themselves as women (and therefore all women). But there may also be many other reasons. A woman may not be interested in sleeping with anyone—a freedom women are granted even less often than the right to sleep with other women. She may not have met a woman she’s attracted to. Or she may be involved with a man whom she likes as a person, without this necessarily being a rejection of women. It should also be noted that the women who suffer from strong self-hatred may not necessarily find it impossible to relate sexually to women. They may instead find that taking the male part in a lesbian relationship will symbolically remove them from their feminine role. Such a woman then may become one who “balls” women so as not to be one.

All in all, as has been noted earlier, there is no magic that makes lesbianism proof positive of any high feminist motives. Rather, what the woman brings to her relationship as far as relinquishing sex roles will, I think, determine her ultimate attitude about really loving other women.

Conclusion

Homosexuality, with its obvious scorn for the “rules” of biology, challenges a cornerstone of sexist ideology and consequently makes most men nervous. There is at this time less fear of female homosexuality than of male homosexuality, possibly because men still feel secure that isolated lesbian examples will not tempt most women away from their prescribed feminine roles, and perhaps also because

* Regarding motives: provoking guilt is a tactic not so much for informing as it is for controlling others.
lesbianism is frequently seen by men as something erotic (it seems, alas, we can still remain sex objects in men's eyes even when making love to each other).

With male homosexuality, however, men (and thus male society) are more personally threatened. The precise irony of male supremacy is that it is a system rationalized on the basis of biology but actualized through socialization. Deviants who inadvertently were socialized differently, or who chose differently, are thus a threat to the premise that biology is destiny. Thus, to have another man break rank is to threaten all men's group-supremacy status. Also, for a man to leave the "superior" group is to go down—that is, become "inferior" or "feminine." Frequently male homosexuals may touch on the unspoken fears in many men that they are not powerful and "manly" enough to fulfill their supremacy destiny, and the gay male thus becomes the symbol of total male "failure." Still other men display a robust camaraderie (à la Mailer) where "buggering" a fellow male obviously means that one would have to play woman, and good fellowship wouldn't allow another man such degradation.

To understand men's fear of homosexuality, then, is above all to understand men's fear of losing their place of power in society with women. And to hold that power, men must preserve both the "absoluteness" of their ideology and the group unity of their members.

It must be kept in mind that while homosexuality does contain an implicit threat to sexist ideology, it is, at best, only a small part of the whole fight to bring down the sex role system. (Indeed, if the gay movement were to be seen as only the demand for the right of making role transfers within society, for example, it would work against feminism by supporting a reformed version of the sex role system.)

Thus it is only in the most radical interpretation that lesbianism becomes an organic part of the larger feminist fight. In this context it joins the multitude of other rebellions women have been making against their prescribed role—be it in work, in law, or in personal relationships. As with all such rebellions, they are only personal accommodations to living in a sexist society unless they are understood politically and fought for collectively. The larger political truth is still that we are women living in a male society where men have the power and we don't; that our "female role" is a creation
that is nothing more than a male political expediency for maintaining that power; and that until the women's movement alters these ancient political facts we cannot speak of being free collectively or individually.

Footnotes

1 Anon., *Vortex*, Lawrence, Kansas.