

89. • Julie R. Enszler

## ON LESBIAN-FEMINISM AND LESBIAN SEPARATISM: A New Intersectional History (new)

Julie R. Enszler is a scholar and a poet. Her book manuscript, *A Fine Bind*, is a history of lesbian-feminist presses from 1969 until 2009. Her scholarly work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Southern Cultures*, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, *American Periodicals*, *WSQ*, and *Frontiers*. She is the author of two poetry collections, *Sisterhood* and *Hand-made Love*, and she is editor of *Milk & Honey: A Celebration of Jewish Lesbian Poetry* and *Sinister Wisdom*, a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal. She is also a regular book reviewer for the *Lambda Book Report* and *Calyx*. In "On Lesbian-Feminism and Lesbian Separatism: A New Intersectional History," Enszler analyzes the legacy of the lesbian separatist movement.

Have you benefited from an all-woman support group? Received a scholarship reserved exclusively for women or people of color? Does your favorite hair salon serve only women? Have you enjoyed a musical event with all women performers? These opportunities exist because of separatism.

What is separatism? Separatism is a theory and practice in which a group of people, often people who have suffered the effects of structural oppression, create separate spaces, often to achieve revolutionary outcomes. Within political and social movements, oppressed people separate from dominant cultures or colonizing forces for various reasons. Separation provides people with time and space to explore the nature of their oppression with others who share similar experiences and without intrusions from individuals who benefit from structural power. Through separation, oppressed people build strength without having their ideas and experienced invalidated by power structures designed to support systems of domination. In addition, people sometimes experience emotional

and spiritual healing from temporary or permanent withdrawals from oppressive systems.

Many activists use separatism as an organizing strategy for movement building. During the twentieth century, separatism has been a key practice for a variety of political and social movements. For instance, various religious groups have practiced separatism as a way to preserve religious and cultural practices; Malcolm X advocated separatism as a part of his strategy to build the Nation of Islam and to promote liberation and economic independence for African Americans in the United States. During the women's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, lesbians and gay men advocated separating from various groups to work through questions about gender and sexuality. All-women consciousness raising groups provided a forum for women to understand sexism and its effects on their lives. Gay male spaces, whether in urban, suburban, or rural settings, allowed men to explore stigmatized elements of male-male sexuality

and create experiences that celebrated gay men's sexualities.

For a period during the 1970s and 1980s, lesbianism and feminism became interlocking ideologies for various activist formations, expanding on the quip attributed to Ti-Grace Atkinson: "Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice" (Koedt). Lesbian-feminism linked radical sex, gender, and sexuality analyses into a transformative social movement with broad effects on politics, culture, and the material conditions of women's lives. An important element of lesbian-feminist thinking and activism was lesbian separatism. Lesbian separatism, a political philosophy of dedicating one's time and resources only to women, took many forms during the 1970s and 1980s. The projects of lesbian separatism and its philosophy continue to shape the lives of feminists—women and men—today.

A brief history of theorizing about lesbian separatism in conjunction with how women created different separatist practices invites a variety of questions. What does it mean to be a lesbian? Can someone choose to be a lesbian? What are the political implications of sexual orientation? What does it mean to choose to work only with women, or only with lesbians? Where do people stake primary allegiances for political, social, and cultural work? These questions through the lens of lesbian separatism invite new examinations of sex, gender, sexuality, and race.

## EARLY THEORIZING

Lesbian-feminists elaborated ideas about lesbian separatism, including what it means and how it should be practiced throughout the 1970s in a variety of geographic locations, including New York City; Washington, DC; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Seattle, Washington; Oakland, California; and other places. In all of these cities, lesbian separatism emerged as a strategy for women's liberation. For many women, lesbian separatism was an exciting theory and practice, although, like other philosophies, ideas

about lesbian separatism accreted slowly as women thought intensively about what lesbian means and what comprises separatist practices. In other words, lesbian separatism evolved—and continues to evolve—through practical applications.

In 1970, the Radicalesbians, a New York City-based group, issued a statement titled "The Woman-Identified Woman." They called on women to focus on "the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other." This statement is one of the earliest articulations of lesbian separatism. A year later, two women in Ann Arbor, Michigan, calling themselves Revolutionary Lesbians, published a paper named *Spectre*. They advocated separatism in a piece titled, "How to Stop Choking to Death." For these women, patriarchy, or systemic male dominance, caused women to nearly choke to death. The way for lesbians to breathe freely was to separate from men. Thus separatism was how women could "stop choking to death." Revolutionary Lesbians posited that separatism was "working directly only with women."

In Chicago, Vernita Gray, an African American lesbian, recalls, "Lesbian separatism was really springing up in that era. . . . I called myself a separatist. . . . I felt and feel to this day that it's important for women to have power. That's so important because once you take and claim your own power it's very difficult for people to oppress you" (Baim and Keehnen 62). If the Revolutionary Lesbians defined separatism as "working directly with only women," Gray captures its significance: claiming power.

In Washington, DC, a group of women who called themselves "The Furies" began experimenting with implementing the ideas of lesbian separatism in their political and personal lives. They lived collectively and reported on their living experiences in their newspaper, *The Furies*. The Furies believed that women could choose to be lesbians—and that by making the choice to be lesbians, women rejected heteropatriarchy. The Furies theorized that heterosexuality put women in too much close contact with male oppressors, whereas being a lesbian

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was "a choice for women and against oppression" (Reid 6). The Furies discovered, however, that the choice for women and against oppression was only a beginning. Many more choices followed. Members of the collective debated about the nature of personal property. For example, they wondered, could people in the collective own anything individually, or was everything community property? What about toothbrushes? Could they be owned individually? Members of The Furies also debated how to organize their lives together: How often should they meet formally? What types of outside jobs should they work? It was a fertile environment for thinking explicitly about how to live lesbian-feminist principles and articulate values of lesbian separatism. The Furies collective eventually folded, but it made important contributions to theorizing about lesbian separatism—and through the newspaper, The Furies spread the ideas of lesbian separatism widely.

In Seattle, lesbian separatists published a manifesto titled *Lesbian Separatism: An Amazon Analysis* (1973). These women believed that lesbian separatism was the only viable ideology to "destroy patriarchy and male supremacy and build an egalitarian matriarchal society" (Amazon 43). They imagined that by dismantling patriarchy, women would replace it with a society based on the investment of power in women, a matriarchy, and that this change from men to women would create more equality. The Seattle women conceived separatism as "long term struggles with racism, classism, ageism, etc" (Amazon 43). Central to all of the early theorizing about lesbian separatism is the idea that lesbian separatist practices should address centrally issues of women of color. Lesbian separatists imagined it as an ideology that could simultaneously address homophobia, sexism, and racism.

## SEPARATIST PRACTICES

In spite of the fact that early theorizing about separatism considered challenging racism, as well

as sexism, homophobia, and classism, as central to the project, some women of color and white women criticize lesbian separatism as only for white women. One of the most significant criticisms of separatism came in 1977 from an iconic statement by the Combahee River Collective. In the section "What We Believe" of the Combahee River Collective Statement, members of the collective write, "Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand" (Moraga and Anzaldúa 213). The collective continues, "[W]e reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children" (Moraga and Anzaldúa 214). Many skirmishes around lesbian separatism centered on men of color and commitments to addressing racism through bigender coalitions. In addition, the role of male children in separatist communities, events, and organizations was hotly debated. These debates occurred in a variety of lesbian and feminist communities with different valences and shades of meaning.

The critique of lesbian separatism by the Combahee River Collective does not diminish the significance of separatist practices for lesbians of color. Separatist projects that center women of color were a vital component of feminism during the 1980s. Lesbians of color organized conferences and gatherings like the first black lesbian conference held in October 1980 at the San Francisco Women's Building and published journals like *Azalea* (1977–1983), based in New York City, and *Onyx* (1982–1984) and *Aché* (1989–1993), both based in the San Francisco Bay area. These projects were part of a vibrant network of lesbian-feminist and lesbian separatist projects during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Women built a variety of different organizations and activist projects that embodied and experimented with theories about lesbian separatism. Lesbian separatism inspired the creation of feminist record company Olivia Records, as well

as feminist publishers like Diana Press, Daughters Publishing Company, Inc., and the Women's Press Collective; print shops like Tower Press in New York City and Sojourner Press in Atlanta, Georgia; book distributors like Women in Distribution and Diaspora Distribution; innumerable coffee houses in communities across the United States; and entertainment companies like We Want the Music, the producer of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. The Womyn of Color tent at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival operated as a space for generating and nurturing projects by, for, and about lesbians of color.

In 1981, the iconic book *This Bridge Called My Back* helped to articulate the identity formation of women of color, linking various nonwhite identities under one rubric. *This Bridge* circulated widely in feminist communities. Persephone Press, a publishing company owned and operated by two white women, one gentile and one Jewish, originally published *This Bridge*. When Persephone Press went out of business, a new publishing company spearheaded by women of color, including Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cherrie Moraga, hattie gosset, and others, took over *This Bridge*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press became one of the most influential feminist publishers of the 1980s and 1990s, bringing to feminist readers many influential books and pamphlets. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press published only books by women of color and emphasized the control of all aspects of the material production of the books by women of color. For instance, in the second edition of *This Bridge*, published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, the authors wrote that this edition was "conceived of and produced entirely by women of color." *This Bridge* not only elaborated the identity formation of woman of color by ensuring that the material production of the book was done by women of color and benefitted women of color, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press expressed solidarity with separatist ideas and demonstrated their significance to lesbians of color.

In addition to cultural production organizations, lesbian separatism inspired land communities where women bought large land tracts, some to create sustainable farms and others to create retreats for women and vacation destinations. Land communities inspired publications like *Country Women* and *Maize* where lesbian separatists shared information about rural and country life. Two land communities in the south were explicitly for women of color: Maat Dompim in Buckingham County, Virginia, founded by Blanche Jackson and Amoja Three Rivers, and Arco Iris, in Arkansas, founded by Águila (Maria Christina Moroles) and her lover. Lesbian separatism as a theory animated many women to imagine remaking the world in a variety of realms—cultural, economic, social, and political. The vision translated into material practices was of women controlling their own lives and building their own communities.

## PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS

While the ideas of women's autonomy and lesbian solidarity seem commonsense, critics often attack lesbian separatism. Why? What does lesbian and feminist separatism challenge in the world? What benefits accrue to different people and power structures in dismantling separate spaces and attacking organizations that promote lesbian and feminist separatism?

One of the things that characterized developing theories about lesbian separatism is the idea that sexual orientation is something that women can choose. This notion may seem an anathema in current conversations about sexual orientation where popular views of sexual orientation see it as innate and immutable—including Lady Gaga's popular anthem "Born This Way." Yet seeing sexual orientation as neither innate nor immutable opens possibilities for various people. What benefits can you imagine for the ability to choose or change one's sexual orientation?

Finally, the Combahee River Collective was itself a formation of only women, which, in spite of the critique of separatism, may be seen as a separatist formation. Does a group need to explicitly identify as lesbian separatist? Or is the behavior of being a group of only women or only lesbians enough in and of itself to carry the label separatist? What are the stakes in naming a group, organization, or political practice as lesbian separatist?

The project of social transformation, political revolutions, and reforms require multiple strategies to achieve visions that activists imagine. Separatism is one strategy that appeals to activists at different historical moments. What benefits from separatism do you see? What benefits can you imagine? Where might separatist strategies serve people today? What limits might separatism encounter today in social movements? In addition to analyzing how separatism might operate in the world today based on this brief history, think about the key values that lesbian separatists sought to enact in their work. What are your underlying values? How do you express them on a daily basis? What communities have your primary allegiance? How do you express those allegiances? In addition to the spaces and opportunities that lesbian separatism creates for women—and men—today, one legacy of lesbian separatism is a commitment to examination of the

material conditions of women's lives. By making your values and allegiances transparent through daily action, your life honors the values of lesbian separatists.

## EXPLORE MORE

Interested in learning more about how lesbian separatists saw the world around them and organized their work? Here are a few resources to explore:

- Hoagland, Sarah Lucia, and Julia Penelope. *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*. Onlywomen Press, 1988.
- "The Woman-Identified Woman." *Radicalesbians*, Know, 1970, [library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc\\_wlms01011/](http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlms01011/).
- All of the issues of *The Furies* are available online at the *Rainbow History Project*: [rainbowhistory.omeka.net/items/browse?tags=furies&page=1](http://rainbowhistory.omeka.net/items/browse?tags=furies&page=1).
- An interview with Barbara Smith, the publisher of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and a member of the Combahee River Collective, at [www.makers.com/barbara-smith](http://www.makers.com/barbara-smith).
- Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1981, 1983; SUNY-Albany Press, 2015).

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- Baim, Tracy, and Owen Keehnen. *Vernita Gray: From Woodstock to the White House*. Prairie Avenue Productions, 2014.
- Koedt, Anne. "Lesbianism and Feminism." *Chicago Women's Liberation Union Herstory Website Archive*, 1971. [The www.cwluherstory.org/lesbianism-and-feminism.html](http://www.cwluherstory.org/lesbianism-and-feminism.html).

- Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa. *This Bridge Called My Back*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983.
- Reid, Coletta. "Ideology: Guide to Action." *The Furies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1972, p. 6.