Annotated Bibliography—Lesbian Feminism

The Formation of Lesbian Feminism: The Creation of a Lesbian Feminist Language and Acceptance of Lesbians in the Women's Movement

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Lesbian feminists prior to their famous entrance into the Second Congress to Unite Women in May 1970. These women are wearing their "lavender menace" shirts under their jackets and carrying "The Woman-Identified Woman." From left to right: Rita Mae Brown, Karla Jay, Arlene Kisner, Lois Hart, and Martha Shelley (Jay.)

Overview:

As the gay and lesbian liberation movement became powerful social tides in the 1960s and 1970s, lesbians found a dilemma internal and external to their homosexual identity. Within the homosexual movement, lesbians had a difficult time identifying with gay men who often saw themselves as being men rather than being homosexuals. Just as they felt oppressed by men, women in the lesbian movement found that this movement did not provide the possibility of one unified political outlet.

To address their concerns, lesbians created a new political ideology called lesbian feminism, which, as the name suggests, acknowledged their bond as women and tied the lesbian liberation movement with the rising women's movement. Lesbian feminists consequently believed that women must break free of males and the male-identified world before they could obtain all the same sexual and political privileges of men.

Lesbian feminists also tried to redefine the word lesbian, so that it classified not only women who were interested in other women, but also heterosexual and bisexual women who were willing to sever their sexual connection from men.

Lesbian feminism was not initially accepted, and this annotated bibliography brings together sources that address the acceptance and formation of this ideology through a particular women's group in the 1970s called the National Organization of Women (NOW). Lesbians were denied acceptance from some of the women's rights groups in the women's movement who saw lesbians' feminist concerns as a threat to their success as a group. This bibliography includes documents detailing the acceptance into the women's movement and examines the first documents that tried to define lesbian feminism. These documents are critical to understanding the concepts and rhetoric that defined the formation of lesbian feminism such as lesbian feminists' stand on sexuality, the redefining of the word lesbian, and the reclusion from what they claimed was a patriarchal society. While lesbian feminism eventually morphed and branched into new identities as all identities in social movements do, this bibliography will give you a context of the formation of lesbian feminism as they legitimized lesbian repression as a feminist concern through lesbian's interpretation and political involvement with women's groups.


This document contains resolutions put forth by seventeen women during the second annual Congress to Unite Women. These women believed that this meeting ignored the complaints of lesbians and therefore asked the Congress to consider four resolutions. The first resolution states, "Be it resolved that Women's Liberation is a lesbian plot." By making this claim, these women were arguing that the women's movement must coexist with lesbians and lesbian women have a powerful say on the ideas confronted in the women's movement. The next resolution asked the congress not to publically deny lesbians involvement in the women's movement. The last two resolutions involve homosexual rights and ask that homosexuality be considered a form of contraception and a topic of sexual education.

As one of the first stands against the injustices of lesbian's in the women's movement, these resolutions represent the consolidated grievances of lesbian feminists. These women's consolidation of their complaints into four resolutions suggests that they wanted to provide a feasible number of resolutions that all women at this congress could address. The introduction to this document explains that the Congress did decide to adopt this set of resolutions. The first two of these resolutions, announcing the role lesbians should play in women's liberation and asking that "lesbian" no longer be assumed an insult are two ideas that other early lesbian feminists are still considered the founding ideas of the lesbian feminist ideology.

In the book Feminist Rhetorical Theories, Foss, Foss, and Griffin analyze the numerous rhetorical questions that society has asked with respect to feminism. Through the stories and opinions of influential feminist writers and advocates. One specific chapter entitled Sally Miller Gearhart focuses on lesbian-feminist rhetoric and its many uses. In this chapter, the authors use many of Gearhart's ideologies as a basis for their own investigation.

The primary ideology that Gearhart defines concerns how feminism is centered on change. Gearhart is quoted saying “Either the future is female, or the future is not” (263). Using this as a base, the authors Foss, Foss, and Griffin proceed to discuss Gearhart's definition of the intrapersonal and interpersonal lesbian and the significance in the difference. Through this and many other examples, the authors personify Gearhart as a leader among women. An example of Gearhart's commitment to feminist lesbians is reflected in her words. "It’s time… that we define ourselves, less in interpersonal terms and begin thinking of ourselves in ways that say who we are, not who our friends/lovers are," represents Gearhart's strong presence in her work. Not only does this statement signify a link to the speaker, it also connects feminist and lesbian rhetoric. Much of the feminist rhetoric is centered on persuasive and ideological views. Persuasiveness is also an important factor in the rhetoric of lesbian movements. While the two do have some in common, lesbian rhetoric also includes participation, action, reform, and re-sourcing. The combination of these rhetors, leads to an overall persuasive presentation of lesbian movements.


In their book, Gilmore and Kaminski discuss the controversial topic of lesbians and their place in society throughout the ages. The two authors start by mentioning NOW, the first women's activism group, and the political role that they played in passing a resolution centered on the acknowledgment of lesbians' rights and equality, not only in certain states but throughout the nation. This resolution was one of the first of its kind. It worked towards the goal of freeing lesbians and giving them the rights deserved to them, as well as admitting to previous misunderstandings within their own community.

Gilmore and Kaminski support their argument by providing evidence of the actual movements that NOW supported, including gay and lesbian liberation, feminist movements, the Christian rights, and the civil rights movement. Gilmore and Kaminski hope to educate their readers in the many ways that NOW helped to shape feminism and lesbianism. Among many other things, NOW accomplished this change through one of its many resolutions, including the recognition of lesbians within its own community, as well as through the support of lesbian marriage. Through these examples, they suggest that identity formation, such as lesbian feminism, is both crucial to the survival of a movement-based organization and has a positive impact on individuals self-impact.

Barabara Gittings and Kay Tobin Lahusen Miscellany Collection. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

This document is a record of the resolution made by the National Organization of Women when it finally recognized lesbians as active members of NOW. The resolution acknowledged the grievances which the straight members had committed against the lesbian members. This document admits that lesbians not only had to overcome adversity because they were females but also because they were homosexuals. The organization NOW previously had not taken any actions in helping lesbians overcome any of the adversity stated in the resolution; adversities such as equality under the law with married couples, lesbian child custody and tax deductions. NOW also details grievances which cannot be fought for through legislation such as the labeling of lesbians as a disease ridden, incompetent, incomplete women. This resolution acknowledges that NOW had treated lesbians within the organization as “step-sisters”, to be seen and not heard. The organization originally thought that by publicly displaying their acceptance of lesbians that it might somehow hurt their efforts for women's rights, but this document affirms NOW's commitment to resolve any previous grievances and to take a new stand in actively pursuing legislation for lesbians.

This primary document is important in placing context around the lesbian feminism movement. It was not until almost the twenty-first century for the National Organization of Women to accept and actually support lesbians. Lesbians had been excluded from the feminist movement until 1971 when they were finally recognized as being women too. Lesbians faced discrimination from the heterosexual world but also within their female community. This made lesbian activism very difficult, and NOW resolved to help them fight.


This excerpt explores the lesbian feminist identity beginning in the late twentieth century and the growing number of lesbian feminists within the women's movement. Several women's movement organizations embraced the ideologies of lesbianism but hostility remained between homosexual and heterosexual women. By the late twentieth century, heterosexual feminists began to recognize the political issues involving lesbians, and unity immediately followed this fundamentally new acceptance of lesbian values. In addition to a growing acceptance, heterosexual women agreed to view themselves as lesbians.

The lesbian feminist identity changed dramatically as heterosexual women stressed the significance of considering themselves lesbians as opposed to seeing womanhood as their identity. Lesbianism encompassed the plight and struggle of the women and heterosexual women recognized this defining idea. Also, during the late twentieth century, the lesbian feminist identity became more fluid as sexual experimentation was permitted without the worry of betraying lesbian political ideals. The concept of the lesbian feminist identity drastically altered during a period of time when women began to experiment and view lesbianism as a more fluid concept.

Karla Jay, a lesbian activist during the lesbian liberation movement wrote a memoir of her actions during the lesbian movement. The one chapter that was particularly useful to examining lesbian feminism was called "The Lavender Menace," and it Jay details the collective action of the prominent lesbian activists (her and her friends) in writing the document "The Woman Identified Woman." As well she narrates the actions of her and other prominent lesbian feminists as they stood up at the Second Congress to Unite Women and asked the congress to address the grievances of lesbians in the feminist movement.

As Jay explains the reasons in which these lesbians wrote "The Woman Identified Woman," she also incorporates her thoughts on what was effective and what could have been different about the paper from a co-author's standpoint. For example, she expresses her disappointment at the neglect to address the sexual component of lesbianism in "The Women Identified Woman." She argues that while not addressing sexual issues they made a more political argument, but they also helped classify lesbians without the sexuality, which is an inaccurate statement.


This article on "Lesbian Feminism" provides a detailed historical introduction to this political ideology of lesbians who argued for the bond between lesbian and feminist ideology. This article addresses the origins of lesbian feminism in the 1960s and the role that the women's organization, the national organization of woman (NOW), played in creating the conflict between lesbians and non-lesbian feminists.

This is an important source because it highlights a few of the important leaders and documents in this movement. This site describes the reactions to Betty Friedan, the president of NOW in 1966 when she called the lesbian a "lavender menace" and a nuisance to the feminist cause. As well, this site includes references of the collective lesbian work "the Woman Identified Woman" one of the first documents describing lesbian feminism (cited in this bibliography). Another important document this site mentions is the publication of Quest: A Feminist Quarterly, which was started by Charlotte Bunch and Rita Mae Brown. This quarterly was published from 1974 to 1984 and is an important resource that illustrates the dynamic nature of lesbian feminism, especially in its changing views of the word "lesbian" and its sexual connotation.

The last aspect of this site that makes it valuable is its discussion of the evolution of the lesbian feminism ideology into two groups, the lesbian separatism and cultural lesbianism. Most other sources describe the importance of lesbians taking on feminism, but fail to mention the evolution of lesbian feminism into these two distinct branches. The evolution of lesbian feminism is evidence that there was a distinct rhetoric and ideology of lesbian feminists in the beginning of the movement that was different than the rhetoric used during lesbian separatism and cultural lesbianism.


In this review, Meyer is able to captivate the feelings behind Cheshire Calhoun's novel Feminism, the Family, and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement, a book that targets the hidden lives of lesbians and gays who wished to marry and adopt children of their own. Meyer argues that the primary source of Calhoun's ideals focus on the role of marriage and family within a gay or lesbian relationship. She continues to suggest that Calhoun can identify with the separation of spheres, both public and private, as well as disclosing that these spheres are the exact reason as to why lesbian and gay individuals are being displaced. Furthermore, Meyer disputes that Calhoun's ideology is based upon the civil rights that lesbians and gays do not have, and how to fight for these rights. She also touches upon many other important points that Calhoun brings up to support her thesis, such as gender, sexuality, and family. Through identification of familial ties, Meyer is accusing Calhoun of being close minded due to the fact that Calhoun only believes that gay and lesbian relationships lack marriage and families. Meyer suggests that this is not the case and continues to discuss it further in her research.

Meyer's review of Calhoun's book depicts the struggle that lesbians and gays faced with regards to marriage and child adoption. These troubles are an important part of the lesbian movement and its ties to the feminist movement. The lesbian movement was a great advocate of inter-gender marriage and adoption, for it tried many a time to get congress to pass laws permitting this adjoining. Feminist movements were also affected by this segregation, for they believed that any women should be able to mother a child, not matter whether she was straight, lesbian, or trans-sexual. The lesbian and feminist movements encouraged the passing of such laws and therefore Calhoun's ideas are an important aspect to lesbian acceptance as a whole.

O'Leary, Jean. Sexual Preference Work Shop Guide". #7321 Box 2.9. Jean O'leary Paper Collection."Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

This booklet, distributed for the International Women's Year convention, establishes a logical background for why lesbian issues are also women's issues. This work shop guide stands as an educational tool that was used to show how women and lesbians face similar discrimination. In a question and answer format, this guide tries to appeal to both men and women. For men, for example, the author calls men to join the cause of the lesbian feminism and be open to change. At the same time, the author also blames men as the culprit of constructing females who are afraid to defy societal norms, consequently calling women to break free of the constraints of men.
If you compare this document, published sometime after 1975, to the following document, you can see the importance of "the Woman Identified Woman" in establishing a lesbian feminist language. Specific diction in this workshop guide, such as an explicit mention that every woman should be a "woman-identified woman" proves that the Radicalesbians had created a set of terms that continued to be used for at least another decade.


This document was created by a group of lesbian feminists, referring to themselves as Radicalesbians, who hoped to stress the importance of women pulling away from a male identified society and gaining power by relating to other women. This document is important as it establishes the lesbian feminist as someone who goes against the male controlled society in which everyone is defined as people by a set of rigid sex roles. Instead, these women argue for the evolvement of a "woman identified woman," a female who does not identify herself with a certain sexual orientation, but instead gains empowerment by relating to other women with the things common to all women.

This document is also significant because these authors attempt to redefine the word lesbian. For example at the beginning of the document, the Radicalesbians reflect, "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion." Later in the document, the Radicalesbians acknowledge that the word lesbian is, "a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal." The Radicalesbians argue that "lesbian" merely refers to a woman trying to break away from male identified society, but because of this men have made the word "lesbian" as an insult to any woman who would dare step out of gender determined role.

"The Woman identified woman" is important to the formation of the lesbian feminist ideology because it established the belief that to gain equal rights women must step out of male created sex roles. As well, this document establishes the connection of certain rhetoric to the lesbian feminist cause such as the concept of a patriarchal society and redefinition of lesbian as oppressed woman.


In this article, the history of the lesbian feminist movement is given ranging from lesbian feminist organizing to criticism and conflict within the feminist movement. Women of the mid-twentieth century who formed same-sex friendships or relationships believed in and fought for women's rights and empowerment. This belief in women's equality led to lesbian's active participation in feminist groups such as the National Organization for Women. Conflict arose within NOW between heterosexual feminists who believed that recognition of lesbianism within the organization would diminish its political hold and lesbian feminists that supported the lesbians' protests. In 1969, NOW passed a resolution that identified lesbians' rights as women's rights, but this bold, new declaration was not enough to halt all criticism of lesbians within the feminist movement.

Oftentimes lesbian feminists felt alienated within the feminist movement, and as a result, many felt discouraged and outraged. Lesbians faced criticism and were charged with reproducing discrimination by women of the feminist movement that were older or young, working-class, of color, or radical activists. Additionally, lesbian feminist were accused of being anti-sex which meant that critics believed sex between men and women could be empowering for women and not the foundation of women's low status as several lesbian feminists believed. The lesbian feminist movement emerged as a result of sexism and homophobia within the homosexual community and the women's movement. This controversial movement still maintains influence in society such as new perspectives on the male figure and the idea of sexuality and gender, but criticism and opponents are continuously present within any social movement. It is up to the social activists to bring attention to their cause and fight for the lesbian feminist movement.


This excerpt explores the National Organization for Women and its impact on the lesbian feminist movement. NOW often embraced minority groups during the feminist movement and to this day, minority women constitute 30 percent of NOW's leadership. Although minority groups were supposedly accepted during the mid to late twentieth century, racism and classism remained difficult to overlook in the lesbian feminist movement. Black women's rights were of little concern to white women of the time and classism was inevitable as Betty Friedan, president of NOW, continued to speak to audiences of financially comfortable women of the middle class. Friedan's book, Fountain of Age, is directed towards relatively well-to-do older women as opposed to poor older women of ill health. In addition to racism and classism, heterosexism was a major issue of controversy within NOW.

Leaders of NOW remained divided in their view of acceptance of lesbians into the feminist movement. For example, Friedan believed that complete acceptance and recognition of gay rights would further distance the general public from women's rights causes. On the other hand, her predecessor, Arlein Hernandez, fully supported the role of lesbians within the feminist movement. She was disgusted and embarrassed by Friedan's inability to entirely support the lesbian movement. Hernandez was met with criticism, however, as fellow members of the feminist movement believed that gay rights was not a women's issue. Radical members countered with the belief that lesbians would know more than anyone what a real women's issue was because they placed women at the center of their worlds. Today, NOW believes is equality and the personal choice of men and women. Although lesbian feminism has remained a controversial issue, NOW currently supports lesbianism as a personal sexual preference as opposed to a political proclamation of the way to achieve women's empowerment and liberation.
Valerie Taylor wrote this speech in the early nineteen seventies when lesbian and feminist rights were the forefront of publicity. Taylor stands behind the idea of women taking up both the lesbian and feminist cause because as a woman it is her duty. Taylor stresses that the segregation of the lesbian movement and the feminist movement cannot stand any longer. It was the job of every woman to become aware of the issues not only for women but also for lesbians—who after all are women too. Taylor cites the chronology of the lesbian movement: less than forty years ago lesbians were not accepted by society but there were women willing to fight. However, lesbians are now more accepted and there are not enough women willing to fight for their cause. Taylor calls for a combination of the lesbian and feminist movements because its unity will strengthen both causes and allow for more progress.

This primary source is crucial for the understanding of Lesbian Feminism. Valerie Taylor was a very progressive author in the twentieth century. She worked for Lesbian rights through her many speeches, books, stories and essays. This speech in particular empowers women to desire change necessary to facilitate progress in the Lesbian Feminism movement. This speech also signifies that there was a distinct separation of the lesbian and feminism movements; this separation was one which needed to be immediately abolished or both movements would fall. Taylor is important because she was a well known author and her ethos was powerful enough that women valued her message.


An Interview with Valerie Taylor by Irene Wolt, was published in The Lesbian Review of Books in 1998. This chapter is a direct interview that the writer had with Valeria Taylor. It reflects upon her past and present writing experiences, including how she got into the habit of writing. The entire chapter tells the story of Valerie Taylor's life, including the novels she wrote, the difficulties she faced, and the uproars she caused. Valerie Taylor has been known as a great lesbian writer for decades. Her work, whether it be directed at gay and lesbian relationships or not, is always exceptionally written. The context of her books ranges from heterosexual love stories to scandalous lesbian-feminist socialism. This wide spectrum of writing has made Valerie Taylor one of the few memorable lesbian-feminist writers of her time.

Understanding leaders and their persona is important to understanding the force behind a social movement. Since Valerie Taylor was a leader in the lesbian movement and also an author of another speech in this bibliography, this interview will be crucial to connect her writings with her personal self.