

THE WOMAN-IDENTIFIED WOMAN

by
Radicalesbians

from RAT

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 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 herself. 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 analyse 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 the 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 invested 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

1
 My head aches.
 I love you.
 How can you talk this way?
 Afternoon light
 falls gently in the parlor
 you are groping --
 the language is wrong.
 Why don't you speak
 Welsh/Swahili/ Gaelic/ Navajo?
 You serve the man
 drinks and dinner
 then sit on his lap
 and ask for a revolution --
 just a little one
 for being such a nice girl.
 A plastic flower
 grows out of my navel.
 You are afraid
 of what he will think of you.
 I am afraid of you
 when you talk like this.
 You are ashamed of me.
 You don't have nice friends.
 I'm not a nice friend.
 The honor system
 sets its teeth in me.
 I can't talk to you
 I am failing us
 again.

3
 I am not a lady
 I live in an elevator
 in a big department store America.
 "Your floor, lady?"
 "I don't have a floor,
 I live in the elevator."
 "You can't just live in
 an elevator."
 They all say that
 except for the man from Time
 Magazine
 who acted very cool.
 We stop and let people into
 dresses, better dresses, beauty,
 and on the top floor,
 home furnishings and then
 the credit office, suddenly stark
 and no nonsense this is it.
 At each floor I look out
 at the ladies quietly becoming
 ladies and I say "huh"
 reflectively.
 My hair is long and wild
 full of little twigs and cockle-
 burrs.
 I visit the floors only for water.
 I make my own food
 from the berries and frightened
 rabbits --
 I pray forgive me brother as I
 eat --
 that grow wild in the elevator.
 Once every three months,
 solstice andequinox,
 a cop comes and clubs me a little.
 The man from Time says
 I articulate my generation something
 wobble squeezy squiggle pop pop
 Yesterday pausing at childrens
 I saw another lady
 take off all her clothes
 and go to live in #7.
 We are waiting to fill
 all thirteen.

2
 I used to get very big,
 I used to be in rooms full
 of strangers
 and questions made me into
 China and Russia and Cuba
 ten thousand teenage-draft
 resisters
 the history of the Communist
 Party
 a lone terrorist in Oakland
 the entire black population
 and Marx and Engels;
 I got so big
 there were miles
 from my mouth to your ear.
 Today,
 in my small natural body,
 I sit and learn --
 my woman's body
 like yours
 target on any street,
 taken from me
 at the age of twelve
 like Venezuelan oil
 with the same explanation
 You are ignorant
 let me show you
 then sold back drop by drop
 in pink-frosted bottles
 by tiny merchants with big
 shadows
 sitting behind the screens
 of Oz
 and buying armies
 with the profits.
 I watch a woman dare
 I dare to watch a woman
 we dare to raise our voices
 smash the bottles
 learn.
 Watch me learn to dare
 my arms and legs feel
 awkward --
 we came to ask your help.

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 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 towards exploring intimate relationships with other women: the fear of 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., deny any fundamental challenge to the basis of the female role.

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 draw 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 views us as relative beings who exist not for ourselves, but for the servicing, maintenance and comfort of men. 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, in-authentic, unreal. He confirms his image of us -- of what we have to be in order to be

acceptable to 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 consequences 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, 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 oneself -- 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 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 backwards toward our oppressors. As long as women's liberation tries to free women without facing the basic heterosexual structure that binds us in one-to-one relationships with our own oppressors, tremendous energies will continue to flow into trying to straighten up each particular relationship with a man, 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.

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Jeannie Owen needs \$200 to return from Africa. A year ago she was active in Bloomington WL and in the first child care center. Now, after some trouble with her husband and actions by the government of Ghana, she is in a bad situation. If each of us gave a dollar, we could soon send her plane fare home. Send your contribution for her to:

*Diane Dohoney
c/o WL House
414 N. Park*

YELLOW CAB DISCRIMINATES

The Yellow Cab Company refuses to hire women drivers, according to Bridget McArdle. Bridget read in the IDS last week that Yellow Cab needed full-time night drivers. She went to their office to apply and was told, "Sorry, we don't hire women." When asked why, they answered that Bloomington is a rough town at night. Bridget told them she didn't care about that, but they ignored her and added that they didn't have "facilities" for women. Bridget is now working with Student Legal Aid to bring legal pressure against Yellow Cab.

Addendum: Sharon Biedenbender was also refused a job there. She filled out a form for the Office of Economic Opportunity and says they're coming down to investigate soon.

by Margaret Trowe

In the past few months complaints have been heard from a number of sources about the women who live in the WL House. These complaints fall into three categories: 1) that we are not friendly enough to women who come to the house--both newcomers and women already involved in Women's Liberation; 2) that we are not committed enough to action in the movement--that we aren't willing to work; and 3) that we are hostile toward men and condescending to women who are involved with men. It is implied in each complaint that we have an inordinate amount of power and influence in the WL movement because we live at the WL House.

I think it would help clear things if we talked about our reactions to the complaints and our feelings about the house and the movement. First, it is quite true that we aren't always paragons of hospitality and sisterly warmth when people come to the house. This is to be expected, I think, since we have lives outside of WL--jobs, classes, meetings, friends, fun, hassles--as well as work within the movement. We are often very kind and attentive to visitors, but there are, of course, many times when we are busy and harried. There is an easy solution to this problem: if support groups send one or two women to sit in the living room in the afternoons and evenings they could talk to people who come in (and study, read, knit, or write articles in the meantime). In this way we would be relieved of the burden of constant hospitality, and other women would have a chance to talk to the people who call and visit the house. It's a rewarding thing to do if you don't have to do it from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m., seven days a week.

The second complaint, that we are not willing to work in the movement, is simply not true. The telephone rings an average of 30 times a day, and we take care of all incoming calls. Of course, we can't personally give help to everyone who requests it, but we use the membership list to find others who might be able to work on projects. We also take messages, locate literature, give out information on such things as abortion counselling and pregnancy tests, and arrange speaking engagements. We keep the downstairs in order (vacuum, empty ashtrays, etc.) and supply coffee and

snacks to women who want it. We pay the mortgage payments, and usually we pay all the utilities and phone bills. We supply soap, toilet paper, and a clean bathroom. In addition, we work in support and action groups, (press, literature cooperative, newsletter, women's studies, speaker's bureau etc.) and we frequently supply transportation to people who need it. We welcome out of town visitors who come to attend meetings (NUC, abortion counselling) or just to learn about Bloomington Women's Liberation. We invite interested women to dinner. In short, we do a lot. We can't do everything, of course, but we don't have to and shouldn't because we're just part of a big group of women.

The third complaint, that we are hostile toward men and that we express an air of superiority toward women who are involved with men, leads me to ask this question: why is it so important what ideas the women in the house express, since we are merely four members who live there. We are not the representatives of WL, nor are we the only women responsible for the image of WL. Members, please remember this: we don't pretend to be in a position of authority by virtue of our residence in the house. We not a monolithic power elite. We are just four women like you. We have four different personalities and four different attitudes toward men, socialism, lesbianism, support groups, orange juice, teach-ins, music, children, and working in the yard. We don't claim that our views on men are more valid than your views, but we don't feel we have to defend our views or apologize. The concern over our opinions arises from the fact that we appear to be WL. We don't want to be in that position. We want you all to come to the house, your house, and contribute to "Public relations."

We believe that Women's Liberation is much more than we four who happen to live at the house at this time. It is a large group, a growing group of women who have varied interests and opinions but who share a concern for women's rights and dignity. We must be tolerant of each other, and we must share the work. The house is a community center for women. It should be maintained and staffed by the whole membership. We ask that you remember that we are human beings, not 18-hour a day hostesses. We are, like you, sometimes tired, busy, or irritable.

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It should first be understood that lesbianism, like male homosexuality, is a category of behaviour 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 behaviour) 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.

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“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 towards 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 for women's liberation, and the most crucial aspect of the acceptability is to deny lesbianism--i.e., 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

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