

81-7.124

Published By:

New England Free Press
60 Union Square
Somerville, Mass. 02143

woman-identified woman

This article, written by New York radicals, first appeared a year ago in Rat.

1970

What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society—perhaps then, but certainly later—cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with 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 feel 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 independent means she can't be a woman—she must be a dyke. That in itself should tell us where women are at. It says as clearly as can be said: women and person are contradictory terms. For a lesbian is not considered a "real woman." And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation—which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a "woman" is to get fucked by men.

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

tions, 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 uptight. They are hostile, evasive, or try to incorporate it into some "broader issue." They would rather not talk about it. If



William M. Dodge (LWS)



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 me, 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 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 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, inauthentic, unreal. He confirms his image of us—of what we have to be in order to be acceptable by him—but not our real selves; he confirms our womanhood—as he defines it, in relation to him—but cannot confirm our personhood, our own selves as absolutes. As long as we are dependent on the male culture for this definition, for this approval, we cannot be free.

The consequence of internalizing this role is an enormous reservoir of self-hate. This is not to say the self-hate is recognized or accepted as such; indeed most women would deny it. It may be

Well On Cornhill

Mr. McLean is a graduate of Phillips Academy at Andover, Mass., and the University of North Carolina. His father heads the Fashion Sewing Circle, which opens next week in Wellesley, Mass., as a center to teach design and couture sewing to women.

William J. Stobbs, board chairman of R.F. Communications, and Mrs. Stobbs have announced the engagement of their daughter, Miss Margaret Stobbs, to Arthur Bernasconi, son of Mr. and Mrs. Jack L. Bernasconi of Cedarhurst, L.I. The wedding is planned for next.

Miss Stobbs is a senior at University of Rochester, where her fiancé expects to receive a Master of Business Administration degree in June. He is an honors graduate of Cornell University.

Mr. Stobbs also is on the faculty of Rochester's Graduate School of Business Administration. The father of the future bridegroom is vice president of Cantor, Fitzgerald & Co., investment bankers in New York and Beverly Hills, Calif.

vanis, and is working for a doctorate at Tulane University in New Orleans, where he is stationed as an enlisted man with the Naval Reserve. He is a member of the American Stock Exchange, the New York Mercantile Exchange and the National Stock Exchange.

a portrait neckline sleeves, is the daughter of Mrs. W. F. Mitten, Bernardville, and C. W. Wils.

Her stepfather, for years an official of hard industries, was by named president of the hard Enterprises, Inc., a new holding company. Her father, a retired commander in the British Navy, is a vice president in charge of international operations for the Kimberly-Clark Corporation.

John Nussle escorted his twin to the altar. She was given in marriage by her father, who owns the Hayloft, an antiquarian bookshop in Cornwall. The bridegroom's father, who is retired, was formerly publisher of The Rome Daily American and a vice president of the Bankers Trust Company.

The bride wore a long-sleeved gown of ivory satin and a floor-length veil of illusion. Her pearl necklace was a wedding gift from her husband, whom she refers to as "Lanny." She carried gardenias.

Mrs. Joan Connelley Field was matron of honor and Miss Jella S. Thorne, sister of the bridegroom, was the bridesmaid.

The ring bearer was Marshall Field Jr., 3-year-old son of the matrons of honor and Mr. Field, publisher of The Chicago Tribune and The Chicago Daily News.

LWS

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 one's self—the self we have gone to such lengths to avoid. And in that mirror we know we cannot really respect and love that which we have been made to be.

As the source of self-hate and the lack of real self are rooted in our male-given identity, we must create a new sense of self. As long as we cling to the idea of "being a woman," we will sense

some conflict with that incipient self, that sense of I, that sense of a whole person. It is very difficult to realize and accept that being "feminine" and being a whole person are irreconcilable. Only women can give 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 towards 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 relationship 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.

RADICALESBIANS



a letter from mary

This open letter is from It Aint Me, Babe. It has been widely reprinted in movement media.

To My Sisters:

We have all said it in our leaflets, to our friends, in our screams in the night: what we want is equal, open loving relationships where each person can see the other as an individual human being not a member of some mythic group where each person loves and wants the other instead of needing her for some quality he does not himself possess. So why when I affirm all this, do you see me with strange eyes; Why when I love my sisters wholly do I make you uneasy; Why, if I talk of my feelings, do you look away or, if you listen, at the end relax as if to say: "Well, I guess you had to do that. . . it's probably very healthy that you brought your secret out into the open. . . but now that's over and we don't, thank God, have to talk about it any more." And after that, every remark I make is filtered through the label "lesbian."

We all realize how terrible it is to be fragmented as women are in this society, split into roles, having secret identities, split mind from body. I know this. I could not stand being torn to pieces trying to love with my body men who could not even hear my voice. And now you tell me that I must do this; Now you tell me my body is to be an organizing tool, winning men away from their contempt of me, a reward for understanding an obscure point in our literature; I may love my sisters with my mind and heart, but my body belongs still to men or to no one; Or you say it belongs to me, but the love I express with it must be limited, by tacit command. "You may 'love' your sister—you may not make love with her. If it really can't be helped, we won't totally shut you out, but of course you understand we can't have you speaking for women's liberation anymore; your feelings are too uniquely your own, too personal. In short, you are the second-class citizens we need to keep us from hitting bottom, to keep us from completely losing men's approval. You are our women; every movement needs some so that it can be political."

The irony of it all is that I probably would never have discovered my homosexuality without women's liberation. You have helped to create what you now despise or fear: the incarnation of the sisterhood which was to be a lovely ideal, a sentiment of pure girlhood. Why does my body, which you claim should not be alienated from me, make my love for my sisters suddenly something furtive, something lower, something which is somehow wrong; Would that be too much of a separation from straight society, from men?

But weren't these the questions we asked ourselves when we first thought of a woman's movement and we were afraid of taking ourselves, our feelings, our oppression seriously; Or do you think that I will attack or seduce you, that loving other women somehow makes me a man or one of those "oversexed niggers and queers?"

The accusation of being a movement of lesbians will always be powerful if we cannot say, "Being a lesbian is good." Nothing short of that will suffice as an answer.

This wasn't meant to be totally bitter, because at least some of how you feel, after all, I was brought up to feel. After all, I was brought up to be a heterosexual too. My mother never even men-

And all this was after I had been in Women's Liberation for nine or ten months. Before Women's Liberation, I had always conveniently disappeared after a relatively short time with a guy, as soon as I realized that they couldn't even see through the games I was playing or that they only wanted a particular one of my roles. But I had learned: Men are people too. If you wish them to be honest, love them as friends. Wow, had I learned. I was honest and loving and I was rapidly being torn into shreds.

After a couple of months of this I was beginning to believe that celibacy forever was the only thing that would save whatever was left of me, which was not much. And then I found myself loving another woman. And I was scared, so

derness and sensitivity are not myths. I've learned to be more easily affectionate and open with myself. I don't have to hate myself for the fact of being a woman, for being the opposite of all I was taught to love and for being unable to communicate with the people I'm supposed to love. Because I love another person, and many other people who are women, I love these people for who they are and I can love them because they can see me and hear me, as I can see them and hear them. I don't have to fight to keep from hating men, because I don't hate them. I no longer have to resent them for my need of them and I am much freer to see them as people instead of tormentors/lovers, and most of all, judges of my validity. Not having that particular resentment gives me more strength to fight against male supremacy as an institution. A desperate need is hostile, resentful. It drains our energy and keeps us from knowing what we want. To want another person as a whole individual whom one likes rather than to need someone as the representative of a valuable group or the possessor of things one wishes one had, is to affirm self love and to begin to really love other people. It also means that as men learn they are not needed for their maleness, but instead wanted if and only if they are nice people, they might have to learn to be nice people. If we swear undying loyalty and heterosexuality, they may never learn. Power is not given up unless it is obviously hollow and self-destructive. As long as women do not accept as a real alternative, as a real personal possibility, the end of sexual relationships with men, that power is strengthened and we are trapped into negativism. Affirmation of a new reality is making that kind of power irrelevant; it is speaking in new voices, now words; it is liberation from the categories and myths we have learned.

It's really hard to write process, because you end up speaking of ends as well as means and you can sound really visionary. I know homosexual relationships can get messed up by the dominant culture, by being repressed, by playing man-and-woman. I have a thousand million hang ups left, but the important thing is that I would have even more than that if I weren't a lesbian. Women's Liberation needs lesbianism. Lesbians need women's liberation. We are all sisters.

My love for my sister, for my sisters, was and is good and beautiful. I don't see how it can be ignored if women are to talk about liberation. This does not mean we all have to leap into bed with each other, now or ever. It does mean we can't make homosexuality the one thing we won't talk about honestly. It means we must really accept such love as a positive good, which I think we can do by dealing honestly with our feelings about it and each other. We can't afford to be afraid of these feelings or of our sisters.

Love,
Mary



tioned homosexuals until the other day, when she spoke of them the way the Sunday sermons used to speak of lepers. I didn't even know they were possible until I was in college. I can remember the terrible desperation I felt when I began to realize that I wasn't going to be able to communicate with men. My immediate reaction was to go out and get screwed by the first guy that came along. I worked terribly hard on that relationship; I guess I felt it was my last chance. I explained myself hour after hour, sometimes articulately, sometimes incoherently, but always with kindness and sweet reason. I was driving myself crazy trying to love someone who wanted a Woman, not me. I began to avoid him, not to be home after I had told him to come over, to sleep with him to shut him up, to be silent out of exhaustion, to take tranquilizers and do yoga for hours to relax. And I couldn't even see how much more I hated him for making me hate another person.

I was scared that I might have said nothing if she had not let me know she loved me. What I was afraid of was not social ostracism or the power of the name lesbian, because I already thought homosexuality was necessary to our liberation. I was simply afraid to find out that this too was a fraud and be left with nothing. But somehow my love was greater than my fear. I was clumsy and ignorant of how to make love to another woman, but the first time we slept together I did not mind being these things. I had never felt so completely joyous. I was one individual whole person and she was a different individual whole person and we were loving without trying to obliterate that integrity through possession or control. I was no longer an outside observer watching my body go through the motions. My mind was with my body was with my heart.

I've learned so many things from my loving. I've learned that mutual ten-