

## Notes for a Magazine

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Elana Dykewomon

### Our bodies are the flags

In this issue there are three “notes from the editor” — mine, Jamie’s and Sauda’s. At the end of two of our editorial meetings Jamie, Sauda, SJ, Laura, Cath, Julia, Karyn and I talked about the ways we experience and perceive our own bodies (literally and metaphorically), and the anti-lesbian/lesbian-feminist backlash. We found the idea of a lesbian body to be a kind of labyrinth — a series of chambers in which it is difficult to find our way, though we can hear her heartbeat through the walls. That several of us wanted to follow that heartbeat in separate directions seemed useful — our different perspectives give some clues to the complexity of “the lesbian body.” While all our notes are editorial comment, they are meant not as group consensus but as our own voices.

For me, this started as such a clear idea: to reclaim lesbian identity. We, lesbians, will get to say who we are and who we are not. Politically, sexually, emotionally, within our communities. We will have space to discuss owning ourselves.

I’ve been wanting to do this issue for a year or two, in part to explore how we understand “lesbianism” in the present, in part to respond to attacks on lesbian identity. I believe the ideas that lesbians can sleep with men, that faggots can call themselves dykes and dykes can avail themselves of male privileges by calling themselves faggots, that men can be women and women who pass do it because they’re simply “playing with gender” — are meant to divide and destroy us, to drive us literally out of our own minds.

But I feel already driven out. Or more like I’m driving a car with no brakes down a side road in the mountains and it keeps picking up speed. I don’t know how to contain myself and make a nice, neat, clear argument. I have to finish ten books first, reread everything that came out in the last twenty years, find out exactly what deconstruction and essentialism mean. How am I going to do that, edit the magazine, go to work and have a life?



But I've got to try. I understand lesbians' claim to own ourselves (well, it's a stance more than a reality) as heroic<sup>1</sup>. Our minds, our bodies, our labor, our sex, our heritages are constant staging grounds for war. Vastly out-powered on every front, we manage to survive and, for moments, thrive.

Owning ourselves is, after all, no small feat. That lesbians are different from "women"<sup>2</sup> means something. Consider, for a minute, women's bodies: women have been owned for centuries. This isn't just some old-fashioned out-of-date political conceit — it's why the abortion rights fight is so ugly, why fundamentalism is surging across the globe. The appropriation of female labor — including reproductive labor — is the cornerstone of social organization in the world we know. The resurgence of "family values" is the brother-movement to the ethnic "cleansing" movements we're seeing worldwide. These movements are a strategic reestablishment of hierarchical male power that positions individual men to rule and fight for rulership and resources. But in order for men to do this, women have to be kept in line.

Men create ideas about what woman are in order to control them. These ideas vary from culture to culture, but their use is the same: to isolate females, to control their reproductive functions, to use their physical labor to support and enrich males, to keep females out of public spheres as much as possible — certainly out of positions of power. Those who think "real progress" is being made might consider that in the United States, a 6% woman membership in the Senate is hailed as "revolutionary."

The "ideas" about women — sometimes called the "construction of women as a class"<sup>3</sup> — work so well because they're so individualized, and because women are so isolated from each other. A good woman is a jewel; a bad woman courts disaster. A woman has the power to be "good" or "bad" — her rewards in life will reflect her choice. Which is, interestingly enough, a choice

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<sup>1</sup> While I have had the good fortune to always perceive womyn as "heroic," I refer here to Marilyn Murphy's essay "The Lesbian as Hero" (in *Are You Girls Traveling Alone?*, Los Angeles: Clothespin Fever Press, 1991), a wonderful encouragement to take our ordinary bravery seriously.

<sup>2</sup> Definition appears to be 9/10ths of the problem. For the purpose of this article, I use the word "female" to mean someone born with a vagina and a womb, and "woman" to mean all cultural/economic images created as trappings for that female. The same for males/men, although it's males who create the images of men to, literally, suit themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Monique Wittig was the first lesbian I know to use this phrase.



about how she uses her body. But both choices, "good" and "bad," belong to men, because men make these images and police their enforcement (often conscripting women to police for them).

Other lesbians of course have written papers and books on the way these things work — I think of Marilyn Frye and Monique Wittig in particular. But the point is: a lesbian is in opposition to a "woman" by her very being<sup>4</sup>. Of course we have to work on men's terms to make a living, but even so we mostly rent our bodies out. A lesbian body is, theoretically, a body that no man owns.

Which may be why so many folks are out to "bend" the definition of a lesbian out of recognition. If the word lesbian loses its power and meaning, but the distribution of wealth, resources and opportunity remains overall the same, who benefits? In the midst of the *San Francisco Bay Times'* current "gender debates," Caryatis Cardea wrote: "If a woman who sleeps with both females and males is a lesbian; and, if a man who submits to surgical procedure to bring his body in line with his acceptance of sex role stereotypes, is a lesbian; and if a straight woman whose spiritual bond is with other females is a lesbian, then what is a female-born-female who loves only other females? Soon there will be no logical answer to that question."<sup>5</sup>

Every gay paper is filled with these "gender debates." It's the '90s — you are me and she is he and we are all together (okay, so the Beatles did it 20 years ago, that only means they were ahead of their time, not that we're just following an old groove, right?). Transsexual men<sup>6</sup> and their friends call lesbians hate-mongers, fascists and "essentialists" for not opening every lesbian and women's organization to them. It's in vogue for everyone to be a bi-sexual (the "natural" human state, which, oddly enough, makes lesbianism "unnatural" all over again).

Of course there's a pivotal point in these arguments: what are women and men? If a woman is the sum of her clothing and man-

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<sup>4</sup> I doubt the majority of lesbians would agree with me, still I think this is so. It's what makes being a lesbian scary. It's why heterosexuals wish us to be invisible and why so many of us go to such great lengths to convince them we're "just like them."

<sup>5</sup> *San Francisco Bay Times*, Vol. 14, No. 5, Dec. 3 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Because I refuse to consider them females or lesbians doesn't imply I have no compassion for them (although heaven forbid a lesbian shouldn't have compassion for everyone) — I just would appreciate their claiming their own identity rather than appropriating lesbians'.



nerisms, then a man can become one, and the line so often read in lesbian personals, "must look like a woman" would make sense. This is a very confusing and tricky set of logical propositions.

Here's the problem: if I claim that there is no such thing as "a woman" or as "the feminine" then I am claiming that a male or female's attempt to be a "feminine woman" is an exercise in illusion (at best).

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you believe there is a "feminine principle" — some cosmic archetypal yin-thing that transcends culture, because it's found everywhere<sup>7</sup>. But if the "feminine" and "masculine" exist, that is, have an actual beingness in the universe independent of human beings — well that would suppose some grander design than I'm willing to admit. I have to go back and base my knowledge on what I can perceive<sup>8</sup>.

But in saying there is no "feminine" beyond culture, attitude, psychologically manufactured "psyche," I don't deny what's in front of me: there are females and males. So what is female must be the actual body. Then I end up saying: a female is a female born in a female body, who has had to deal in some way with her reproductive cycle and the appropriation of her body by males. If I understand this right, this makes me an essentialist (actually I think it makes me a "materialist" in the old political language) because I appear to be claiming biology is destiny.

I sigh, then, and say, ok, biology is destiny because men have done this to us. Haven't you gone to K-mart lately? Who do you think makes girls' and boys' toys all pink and blue? Being female is like being a Jew, or short — it's a fact — but what it "means" is determined by culture, history, institutionalized power. No matter how clearly (or not) I perceive those things, I have few choices but to play my part or denounce it. Biology *becomes* destiny seems more like it.

Many of us, who perceive men as destroying the world, are reluctant to give up the old dichotomies: men war, women nurture. We can argue forever (and seem to be) about whether it's being born with a womb or being socially constructed that makes

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<sup>7</sup> I can't help but stay in the argument: just because you *see* it everywhere doesn't mean it *exists* everywhere, does it? Pink tinted glass does not a pink world make. And, if you claim that constants are found in the psyche instead of the body, doesn't that also make you an "essentialist"?

<sup>8</sup> I realize this is shorthand for a thousand years of philosophy into what constitutes being, but I've only got six pages here.



us “women” without being able to come to a final answer. But the more we understand attributes (self-reliance, adventurousness, curiosity, domesticity) as options instead of innate qualities, the more choices we have as individuals. Lesbians tend to choose from the full range of available attributes (and occasionally invent some of our own). That doesn’t mean we don’t know where we live — all of us must choose, at some point, whether or not to cast our lots with the “women.”<sup>9</sup> Individual choice alone does nothing to change power structures. Men can (and do) call themselves sensitive and understanding in order to maintain their power in new social climates<sup>10</sup> (Chevron cares).

Queer Nation has picked up the idea that women and men are “created” and given it a popular spin: get behind the fluidity of identity, don’t be a rigid role-monger, don’t cling to your label like a reactionary to a life-boat, be flexible. It’s an attractive idea. So attractive that you’d think somebody would have thought of it before the late ’80s....

As many womyn, particularly womyn of color<sup>11</sup>, have noted, the more you have power, the more you don’t use “labels” to define yourself (you don’t see a lot of Rockefellers in the midst of these debates). It’s the use of the “label” that states: I have to assert my own identity. All of us who have to consciously name ourselves have, at some point, been uncomfortable with this (if for no other reason than that someone we don’t like can claim the same label).

But you can’t change power structures by simply proclaiming these “roles” (gender, class, race) culturally constructed, and therefore bourgeois baggage. Sure, roles are absurd — and they exist for reasons. “Deconstructing” them without challenging the power of those who make them necessary doesn’t accomplish anything — it’s only playing dress-up with fancy words.

This idea — everything is fluid, we can change the world by blowing straight people’s minds, we can overcome our origins — is nothing new. European and American cultures have a long “bohemian” tradition, and gender-bending has, in fact, been around since at least Shakespearean times. It’s a parlor game the

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<sup>9</sup> I know I said lesbian are in opposition to “women” by our very being. By “casting our lots” I mean we have to choose, politically, whose side we’re on.

<sup>10</sup> While we like to think that these “new climates” are the result of liberation movements, I tend to think they are more the result of capitalism’s having to soft-peddle its message in order to expand the market base.

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking particularly of the work of Gloria Anzaldúa.



privileged play, and they let some of us "others" in so the game doesn't seem rigged. It doesn't go to the root. And along the way it accomplishes the power structure's dirty work: it makes it look like we can "transcend" who we are and all become "human." Race and class become things we can shed — and should try to. Womyn-only space is invaded and neutralized.

Which is why it seems to me so important for us to do the work of claiming ourselves. Our own bodies, our pride in them. As often as we have to.

our bodies are the flags that advance our causes  
 age race culture size ability  
 lesbian womyn lesbian  
 creased into the cloth  
 a permanent seam  
 flapping in the evening chemical breeze

SJ remembers: I was a child and saw  
 survivors' numbers tattooed on their arms  
 my aunt said: cover it up shame cover it up safety cover it up  
 do you want them to see?

Sauda says  
 the darker we are  
 the more we represent the unknown  
 the thing which others are afraid of  
 and are embarrassed to see us carry  
 along with our daily lives  
 and Karyn says, they don't just mean:  
 oh you're still here, Indian  
 they mean: aren't you dead yet?

and Cath says  
 if I let myself feel or hear the names they call me on the street  
 I'd never leave my house  
 the brand has always been on the flesh  
 so obvious  
 we have to turn our eyes away  
 while we distract ourselves  
 get through the week  
 our bodies bear witness