

Lesbianism as Political Practice:

Reply no.1

Melbourne Lesbian Newsletter

(June 2003): I wrote the first piece below immediately after the 'Women and Labour' conference and sent it to the *Melbourne Lesbian Newsletter* on 20 May 1980. It was published in the August issue, no. 25, along with a (very good) summary of my paper and an article replying to my letter. That article follows my response here, and that is followed by some comments of my own written this year (2003). The final piece is a letter I wrote at the time to the author of the article in response to a letter she must have written me (since vanished).

Denise's response to workshop reactions

I would like to discuss the reactions to my paper, 'Lesbianism as Political Practice', which was delivered at the Women and Labour Conference at Melbourne University. While it could be argued that the appropriate time for such discussion is the open forum which followed the paper, the nature of the discussion which actually took place there seriously limited the scope of the debate. Moreover, my own reactions to the trend of the debate raise issues with wider implications than the sleepless night I spent afterwards, desperately trying to work out what I had done which deserved such vilification. The wider relevance of those issues was indicated to me by the number of women who came up to me and said: 'Aren't you brave?' and by the remark of one participant that her 'stomach was churning' with the tension and hostility in the room.

The first objection to be raised at the time was to my assertion that 'Lesbianism is rarely mentioned at conferences, etc.' In opposition to this, the speaker produced a list of conferences, etc. where lesbianism *had* been discussed, none of which was included in my bibliography. She also accused me of writing 'bad history'.

I agreed with the speaker that my bibliography was deficient, and that I would welcome any suggestions of useful additions. I also pointed out that many of the conferences mentioned by the speaker were set up precisely *because* there was no discussion at the general conferences. Moreover, none of the difficulties and differences had been resolved.

The chief problem (from my point of view) about this objection was the manner in which it was raised. The tone was patronising and destructive. This was no offer of assistance—my request for the useful list of references (which was rattled off too quickly to write down) was ignored. To my mind, this was 'point-scoring' of the worst sort. Moreover, it occurred to me some time later (in the early hours of the next morning), that this paucity of references is not due to want of effort on my part. I have approached at least two people who I heard were collecting archival material and/or writing theses on the history of the WLM [Women's Liberation Movement] in Sydney. In one of these cases, the response was an outright refusal on my third request. In the other, the response was luke-warm. Perhaps I should have followed this up with more energy, but I had gained the impression that this would be unwelcome. Whether or not this paranoid reaction on my part was justified, I don't know. However, I *do* know that my self-esteem is too fragile to survive too many interactions of this kind.

But beyond these considerations, my task was not to present a linear historical account of lesbianism within the WLM of the last ten years. It was, rather, to present the contradictory nature of the phenomenon—on the one hand, the disinclination to talk about the issue within the general framework of feminism; and, on the other hand, the cacophonous conflict it raises when it is discussed. Whatever else may have been unclear in the paper, *that* point was surely obvious.

Several objections which were raised—while not as well-prepared and hence as well-argued as the first one—were equally destructive in their implications. That the theory was 'confused' I had already admitted before I started reading the paper—it was, indeed, one of the reasons why I omitted it. If pressed, I would have gone on to explain *why* I thought so. But the woman who raised this

objection did not tell me why *she* thought it was confused, and again offered no assistance to enable me, perhaps, to overcome my own confusion.

That the paper was 'meaningless' I do *not* agree. But since this epithet seemed to me to be motivated by intense negative emotions which I didn't understand, I also failed to understand what was meant by the term 'meaningless'. I also deny that the paper was 'all lies', since I had at the time of writing it no conscious deliberate intention to deceive anyone.

To sum up what I perceived to be the assumption behind most of the other objections: I deny that my statement—'Lesbianism is the crucial practice of feminism'—is equivalent to the statement, 'Lesbians are the only true feminists'. In order to support that denial, I need to do a lot more work clarifying my theoretical confusions. Suffice it to say for the moment that, while the former statement is an attempt to politicise the personal, the latter succeeds in doing no more than personalising the political. At no point in my argument do I assert anything about the nature, habits or political soundness of individuals who might happen to be lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, asexual, celibate (or anything else for that matter) at any one time. The object towards which my argument is directed is not the classification of individuals at all, but a *debate*—a debate which includes the choices, actions and consciousness of individuals ('practice'), but which is not constrained by any necessity to explain personal idiosyncrasies of behaviour. Something of that sort was involved in my use of the concepts of 'discourse' and 'ideology', but I do not want to go any further into the theoretical issue here.

In marked contrast to the attitudes described above (and, in some strange and contradictory way, the reverse side of the *same* coin) was the warmth and acceptance of the loving women I spoke to, and who spoke to me, in small groups and individually both before and after the presentation of the paper and its aftermath. These sweet sisters agreed or disagreed, but were prepared to argue with full awareness that my self-esteem was no less vulnerable than their own. They understood or misunderstood, but waited patiently while I groped for clarification, or alternatively supplied me with their own. Our mutual sympathy,

patience and kindness was yet one more indication to me that the 'revolution' is not some future event, but here and now.

Are we to go the way of those impotent (male) revolutionary movements which fragmented into warring antagonistic factions, wasting their energies and interests in doctrinal squabbles among themselves? And further, *is* the feminist revolution a matter of 'barricades', and who will and will not be with us 'manning' (the patriarchal terminology is deliberate) the guns as we fire on all those who didn't get out of bed in time? Or is the feminist revolution *now*, the processes which we have already evolved, and continue to develop, as we say 'no' to the oppressive institutions we have all experienced in our different personal ways?

And those differences will not go away if we deny that they exist. They can only be rendered harmless by admitting that they are there, and discussing the on-going development of their implications for, and effects on, our common purpose. There may, indeed, be a distinction between 'heterosexism' and 'heterosexuality', but any such distinction can only be worked out by those women who still care enough about their own implication within heterosexuality to expend the effort on the task, For those of us who have never been able to make the distinction, the task is impossible.

Denise Thompson, Leichhardt—20.5.80

A Reply to Denise

In response to Denise Thompson's article on the reactions to her paper 'Lesbianism As Political Practice', presented at the second Women and Labour Conference, I would like to explore my perceptions of those reactions at the conference session within the historical context of recent lesbian feminist struggle.

The conference session on lesbianism, at which Denise's paper was presented, was crowded with over 500 women, most of whom were lesbians. Many lesbians had come to the Conference only to attend that session. The object of the session was presumably for Denise to present some of the ideas in her paper and for that presentation to act as a stimulus and starting point for discussion by those present.

The huge numbers present and the structured lecture theatre venue provided an environment which made wide participation and careful discussion almost impossible and was inherently alienating for audience and speaker alike. It was an environment which was physically beyond the control of participants.

I arrived at the lesbian session angry at some of the contents of the paper. To that anger was added frustration at the environment provided for one of the conference's more important sessions. My anger was fuelled by Denise's opening remarks. She had, she told us, decided (after consultation) not to give a summary of her entire paper, as she felt that we (the audience) would not understand it. Instead, she read the first part relating to her allegation of the neglect of the lesbian issue by the Women's Liberation Movement and some of the possible reasons for this. The inevitable result of this was to focus the session on the question of the accuracy of that allegation, without exploring her basic thesis of the role of "phallogentric sexuality" as a major mechanism of women's oppression and the role of lesbian feminism as an important initial political reaction to that oppression.

Denise has accused me of presenting a "well-prepared, well-argued, patronising, destructive", unhelpful attempt at "point-scoring of the worst kind". My criticism and those of others raised in the session are perceived by her as both unreasonable and threatening to her self-esteem which is no less "vulnerable" than that of other women.

Before explaining what I actually did say, I readily acknowledge that it takes an act of courage to put oneself on the line before an audience (of any size) but I would like to point out that every woman who spoke at that session was exercising such an act of courage. Women who spoke from the floor did not have the advantage of a raised platform or a microphone. We, all of us, put ourselves on the line to the same audience. We, all of us, have self-esteem.

On the other hand, the wide circulation of Denise's response doesn't seem to lay down the same conditions for the preservation of my self-esteem as she rightly claims for her own. I do not know where she has sent this article or where it will be published. The *Lesbian Newsletter* collective has given me the opportunity to reply to one audience. I doubt that I will get a chance to reply to Denise's accusations elsewhere. Also, I'm not sure that the Women's Liberation Movement or the lesbian community is yet capable of collective responsibility for the preservation of our individual self-esteem. As a Radical Feminist I understand that individual self-esteem is an individual responsibility—both in the getting and consolidating processes. An ever-expanding circle of collective responsibility for this is an ideal, but at this stage, rarely more than that.

Denise's circulated reaction certainly made an important point with regard to individual survival. However, it also came very close to an argument against critical appraisal of published work. If one presents a paper at a Conference such as the Women and Labour Conference, one must expect criticism and disagreement, particularly if the author appears to show scant regard for the collective self-esteem of lesbian-feminists who have been struggling within the W.L.M.

The point I made in the Conference session was a major objection to Denise's statements that lesbianism 'was rarely acknowledged publicly within feminism' or if acknowledged, was accorded marginal status 'on the level of personal choice'. She states that 'it was rarely listed on the agenda of conferences, rarely, if ever, mentioned in feminist history or theory'. Apparently this is so because at first the women's movement sought to 'avoid outright conflict' and then because the only political response to the alleged divisiveness of the issue was silence.

I enumerated a list of national feminist conferences which I think disprove Denise's claim. These included Mt. Beauty Women's Liberation Conference (1972), Radicalesbian Conference (1972), Feminism/Socialism Conference (1974), Women's Health in a Changing Society Conference (1975), Women and Politics Conference (1975), Women and Madness Conference (1975), AUS women's Conference (1975), Anarchism and Feminism Conference (1975), Sexism in Education Conference (1976), Sexuality Conference (1976), Marxist Feminist Conference (1977), AUS Women's Conference (1977), First Women and Labour Conference (1978), AUS Women's Department Conference (1978). (Also, lesbian-feminists were the initiating and organising force behind the First National Homosexual Conference (1975) and some subsequent National Homosexual Conferences and the National Seminar on Homosexuals in Education (1976)).

I did not give a list of conferences in order to improve a 'deficient' bibliography. My point was a political one—that Denise's claim that the issue of lesbianism has 'rarely been raised' is not true. In the first instance it was raised specifically to provoke 'outright conflict' (by Hobart Women's Action Group at Mt. Beauty 1972) which is often an inevitable consequence of women recognising the breadth of our oppression. It has been raised at almost every national feminist conference since 1972. Contrary to Denise's belief, none were set up to discuss lesbianism 'precisely because there was no discussion at general conferences'—almost all these conferences were general conferences. The one exception—Radicalesbian Conference (1973)—was convened for positive reasons, such as getting lesbian-feminists together to start the process of sorting out the implications of lesbian oppression within the context of women's oppression. (Of course, what is abundantly clear is that there now needs to be a national lesbian feminist conference which allows the time and structure to explore the issues raised by Denise in her paper and many other aspects of lesbian-feminism—history, theory and practice).

As for the claim that lesbianism is 'rarely mentioned in feminist history and theory', this view seems to be based on an assumption that the legitimate development of radical feminist theory takes place within Masters/Doctoral theses and published books on feminism. The nature of radical feminism and of women's lack of access to educational

and material resources dictates that this cannot be so. In this case the bibliography is deficient as it does not refer to the papers of the Radicalesbian Conference, Jocelyn Clarke and the Melbourne Radicalesbian contributions to Jan Mercer's early book *Women in Australian Society*, contributions to the *Lesbian Newsletter* and various Women's Liberation Newsletters, and the Clarke/Bebbington papers at the Socialism/Feminism Conference and the Women's Health in a Changing Society Conference, to name but a few. Denise ignores the writings of US Radical (lesbian) Feminists such as Judy Grahn, Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich and the National Gay Task Force's book *Our Right to Love*. She also entirely ignores the existence of periodicals established with a primary aim of exploring lesbian-feminism such as *Sinister Wisdom*, *Lesbian Tide* and *Conditions*, all of which are available in Australia.

I deny that to raise some of the above points during the conference session was an exercise in patronising and destructive point scoring. My interest in speaking at all was to try to persuade Denise to recognise that lesbian-feminists have been thinking/writing/acting publicly and privately for almost a decade on the issues she raises. By publishing statements denying this, she denies our history and devalues our struggles. She first announced this viewpoint in 1978. In spite of attempts to tell her otherwise, she raises the same claims in 1980. I am not surprised that there are some women's liberationists in Sydney whose anger overflows into attack.

On the other hand, I have never asserted that the process of working out the implications of lesbian oppression within the context of women's oppression in capitalist patriarchy is a completed task. I do not agree that Denise's view of existing feminist ideology is complete or that the central practice of feminism is a sexual practice but they are subjects for another article. Neither do I agree that we have seen a mass exodus of heterosexual feminist to lesbianism. Not for the negative reason of a reaction to male domination nor because lesbianism (or lesbian-feminism) defeats the enforced femininity of women under patriarchy. But because reclaiming our Selves and our bodies has allowed many women to be the lesbians we really are.

Yes, the feminist revolution has begun and no, it won't be achieved by denying our

differences and difficulties. But it has been/is/will be very hard work requiring us to be rigorous and careful and truthful. Denise has done some of that work. I have done some and radical feminists in Melbourne and Australia and all over the world have done/are doing it too. Denise is not the first lesbian-feminist to be crucified (albeit unintentionally) in a public lecture theatre and sadly, she probably won't be the last. But in this struggle we must not only create our future but we need to have respect for our past—the past we participated in and fought for—and a recognition of what we have achieved. And it's not just us—splashing around in the 'second wave' of feminism—but also, understanding, recognition and respect for the women throughout the 20-25 centuries of male rule in this historical aberration we call patriarchy, who resisted/were mutilated/killed in that same struggle.

Laurie Bebbington

28/7/80

Comments

(June 2003): Three points need to be made in response to this article. The first concerns the issue of 'self-esteem'. In saying that her own self-esteem and that of other women at the session was just as much on the line as mine was, the author was implying that our situations were comparable. But that was not so. No one else was being screamed at; no one else was being told they were telling lies and that what they had said was meaningless. No one else was the focus of a splenetic flood of rage and invective that came from nowhere and bore no relation to what I had actually said.

The second point is that what I was subjected to was not criticism in any reasonable sense—it was vilification. The author implicitly admitted as much when she used the term 'crucified'. Quite. So to say I couldn't take criticism missed the point of what was wrong with that lesbian session. (The author herself was making a reasonable point, i.e. I was insufficiently aware of what had been done in the name of lesbianism within feminism. But it didn't negate my argument. In the first place, on at least two of the occasions she mentioned—the 1972 Mt Beauty Women's Liberation conference and the 1978 Women and Labour conference—the discussion of lesbianism centrally revolved around the issue of its silencing within feminism. In the case of the Mt Beauty conference, as the author herself pointed out, raising the lesbian issue was meant to 'provoke'; and what it was meant to provoke was the silence. In the case of the 1978 conference, the only paper on lesbianism was *mine*, written in response to a complaint of silencing. But in the second place, if there had been so many discussions about lesbianism, why was there still this sense that lesbianism was being silenced? I wasn't the only one saying so, there were many other lesbians saying it too).

The third point is that, although the author was right when she denied that raising the points she did was patronising, the way she raised them was. She seemed to think that anger was a perfectly reasonable reaction, vide her remark to the effect that she was 'not surprised that there are some women's liberationists in Sydney whose anger overflows into attack'. Really? Wouldn't the giving of information be a more rational response to the lack of it? Why the anger?

A letter

2.9.1980

Dear L.,

Thank you for your letter, and the reply to my article. My first response was to be conciliatory—yes, you're right and I'm wrong. However, that is no way to establish a dialogue, so I'm going to answer your main points.

In the first place, you are of course right in your assertion that I had not mentioned many (most?) of the occasions on which lesbianism was discussed. I can understand that you are angry that I appeared to be so dismissive of the hard work and effort that you and others have put into organising and publicising the issue of lesbianism. However, my purpose was not to supply a comprehensive list of discussions on lesbianism—if one wasn't *there* when it was discussed, how does one get access to the discussions?—but to state briefly an argument which I still assert has not been resolved. Or rather, has been resolved unsatisfactorily in one of 2 ways: either with Jill Johnston's argument, or with the small-l liberal valid sexual preference argument. The former is unsatisfactory in that it contains the implication that lesbians are better feminist than heterosexual women. (And if I was 'told' anything at the first W. & L. Conference, I thought that I was 'told' not to say *that*). The latter is unsatisfactory because it is obvious that lesbianism is far more central to feminism than the permission to fuck whomever you please. As the H.W.A.G. said at the 1973 Mt Beauty Conference and reported in *Refractory Girl*, Lesbian Issue: 'the lesbian issue is not a private one, but exists at the core of the women's issue'. But in what *way* is it the core? That question had still not been resolved at the time I gave my much lamented (by me, mainly) paper at Macquarie. After all, you yourself expressed dissatisfaction with the level of discussion at the 1973 Minto Conference. Did the situation change between 1973 and 1978? If so, no one told me.

Further, given that I had not supplied an adequate list of discussions on lesbianism, I somewhat overstated the case I made out for the 'silence' with which the issue has been greeted within feminism. Nevertheless, to break the 'silence' by asserting that we have been silenced, and by outraged demands that

we not be silenced any longer, supports my argument and does not refute it.

I decided to give the paper at Melbourne, despite what had happened at Macquarie, because I felt (I still feel) that I had resolved the issue. [Added September 2003: I can't imagine now why I thought that, last paragraph (see below) notwithstanding.] I regret not giving the theory, but I allowed myself to be persuaded of its difficulty because I myself was unsatisfied with it. I hadn't done enough work on it to make it completely my own, so that it was, not so much confused, as derivative. I regret even more not giving the argument that I had worked out, which appeared mainly in the last paragraph. It was meant to be the main part of the paper. But I wrote and re-wrote the paper so many times, and finally got into such a muddle with the tangents I went off on, that it became only a small part of the paper, rather than the main thesis it was meant to be.

My point about your 'point-scoring' referred not so much to what you said, as the way you said it. It could have been done another way. The paper had already been criticised that day by other women who, because they were talking to me face-to-face, felt no obligation to hurl angry accusations at me. The way you presented that first question set the tone of antagonism for the rest of the session (although it did not, of course, cause it—it would have happened anyway).

As for 'self-esteem'—I do not agree that it is an individual problem. It would appear that we can be very supportive of each other's self-esteem when we are obviously low in it—when we are timid, self-effacing or frightened. But once we set ourselves up by giving the appearance of competence, we seem to be fair game to be cut down to size. (It was stupid of me not to have got down from the platform and eschewed that bloody microphone. I *did* try, with the first speaker—after you—to make the conversation general. I should have insisted but I was not feeling very assertive). The points about 'self-esteem' I was making in my article were two: (1) what on earth made anyone believe that I, or anyone else in that kind of situation, could cope with attacks like that? and (2) as the reason why I, cravenly, did not insistently follow up the approaches I had already made towards women I thought could give me help and information. And a last point

about bolstering each other's 'self-esteem': ideals are not ends towards which we are striving, but on-going structuring of processes within which we work constantly. And it would be lovely if I were to be the last woman to be 'crucified' at a women's conference.

On the question of where else I have circulated my 'accusations'—the Sydney W. L. Newsletter did not print it, on the grounds that it was 'too long and too difficult to understand'. Anyway, since I didn't mention your name, I don't think the article can be called an 'accusation'. My purpose was to describe in as few words as possible the feeling of the session. Why such things happen, I don't know, although I have a number of theories (which I won't elaborate here).

Since writing the above, I have had a long, fairly drunken-on-both-sides, talk with [G., author of the apology dated 26 May 1980. See 'Two letters and an article']. Her major objection, it seemed to me, was that the paper was 'eclectic', and that I left myself open to attack from a number of directions, and not just on the grounds of 'bad history'. That the paper was 'eclectic' I most emphatically deny, since that term implies a form of intellectual pluralism I certainly do not subscribe to. That 'I left myself open', I admit, and I will continue to do so, since I don't find any one theorist sufficient for my purposes, not even Marx, and certainly not Freud. However, I cannot claim to be the originator of the ideas I use, and feel obliged to reference them, even if their true originators would turn in their graves.

I would like some dialogue about my basic thesis. But I feel it still needs a lot of work, and at the moment I'm flat out writing the Homosexuality and Discrimination Report for the Anti-Discrimination Board and do not have the time. Nevertheless, I hope the lines of communication remain open. I'll be in Melbourne for the gays and Socialism Conference in April next year (much better than letters).

All the best,

Denise

(September 2003): In fact, I was not to see L. again until the Lesbian Conference in Adelaide in January 1989, where she was one of my staunchest defenders.