

# Lesbianism as Political Practice: Two letters and an article

(January 2004): Below are two letters, one an apology from a participant in Lesbian Session at the second Women and Labour Conference, the other my reply. After the letters there is an article from *Gay Community News* (GCN).

## Two letters

26 May 1980

Dear Denise,

Having re-read your paper, I wish to apologise for the harshness of my retort in the 'Lesbian' session, at the Women and Labour Conference.

I view your effort as genuine, and one of integrity—however much of lesbian involvement within the women's movement, has been left out.

Clearly you weren't lying—you were unaware—2 very different factors. By the time that session took place—I'd had it. Tired from my work in Qld, frustrated by the conference, and quite desperate in my own personal life: all leading to impatience and anger. I was cross with myself for not writing a paper and speaking up more (especially on the question of women and domestic labour). However, both these activities would have required more energy and strength than I can presently muster.

I do hope you accept my apology.

7 June 1980

Dear [...],

Thanks so much for your letter. Of course, I accept your apology. It was, anyway, unnecessary. I was so busy bending over backwards not to add to the threat and aggression in the hall, that I hardly took in what you had said. When I remembered some time later, I took it as symptomatic of the general feeling at the meeting.

I have enclosed with this letter the account I wrote the next day of what I thought was involved. I've sent it to the Sydney W.L. Newsletter, and to the convenors of the Conference who have offered to send it to the Melbourne Newsletter and the L.A.G. Newsletter. [One of the organisers] has also given a copy to [the woman who chaired the session] with whom I had a long talk at the pub after the session.

Lesbianism as Political Practice, 2 letters, 1 article - *Denise Thompson*

You and Laurie may be right when you accuse me of writing 'bad history'. But, you see, I'm not writing 'history' at all, at least, not in any sense which implies a simple chronicle of events. I am interested in the issues that have been raised, and the extent to which they have been resolved. I am still unconvinced that the 2 major issues have been resolved: i.e. the importance of lesbianism to feminism, and the reason why it arouses such threat reactions when it is raised, I would be interested in your view of what I thought was an adequate, if brief, summing up of the debate. Is there, for example, anything I have left out?

What it is that I am writing I find somewhat difficult to characterise. The short description is 'theory', but the common meaning of that term implies a non-involved intellectualism which in my case is very far from the truth. For me personally, theory is a defence-mechanism for coping with the pain. It's an abstraction and a standing-back from what has actually happened, a distancing from the rage of emotions, to understand and explain instead of being overwhelmed. It's something like somebody or other's description of poetry: 'emotion remembered in tranquility'. But I can't write poetry, or paint pictures, or do any of the other things that women are starting to realise we can do to structure our world. I can only do what I can do, even if I am unclear about what that is.

You see, I think that the antagonism in that hall was not generated by any particular individual or individuals, but was a reaction to the subject-matter of the paper, together with the way in which I tackle the issue. (I'm starting to get anxious again, but I'll plow on regardless). Lesbianism is the centre of our world-taken-for-granted. In theorising about rape, abortion, marital violence, economic dependence and deprivation, we can demonstrate to our hearts' content exactly how we are fucked over by men—and there's no sign yet we're going to run out of concrete examples. But in theorising about lesbianism we are looking at ourselves, and the 'patriarchy' in our own ineradicable heads. The conflict, when it has arisen in my experience, is among lesbians ourselves. Heterosexual women may indeed be threatened by an implication that their feminism is deficient (and I want to reiterate yet once again that that is not an implication I accept). But they stay away/involves themselves in other issues/ignore it or forget about it. They have no need to return to the centre—there are so many other things to be done. But we are held together by every human tie, and cannot escape.

Which brings me to the second point. 'Theory' is, first and foremost, critique, and

Lesbianism as Political Practice, 2 letters, 1 article - *Denise Thompson*

excludes, as far as possible, unquestioning acceptance. But that critique is not, cannot come, from the outside, from the 'objective stance' of the non-involved observer. It is self-critique, and can only come from the committed participant if any sense at all is to be made of what has happened. And we must understand what has happened, in order to go on from there.

Well, I guess that isn't very comprehensible either, but the anxiety's got too strong to go on. Thanks once again for your letter.

Denise

(June 2003): I very much doubt this correspondent wanted to know all that.

## **Lesbians at Women and Labour**

Among the comments heard during and after the 'Theory—Lesbianism' session of the Women and Labour Conference were 'terrible', 'ghastly', 'never again', 'terrific', 'opened my eyes', 'raised things I had never thought about', 'the worst ever', 'potentially violent', 'great', 'load of bullshit'.

Over two thousand people (women and men) registered for the Conference held at the University of Melbourne from the 17th to 19th May; and more than 400 of them (all women) attended the Theory session on the last day, the only Conference session to discuss the issue of lesbianism in depth.

The Conference as a whole was polite, friendly, tolerant, academic, and on occasions, bland and dull. The lesbianism session (like some of the others which dealt with sexuality) seemed to have strayed out of some other conference: it was divided, emotional, anything but dull. Perhaps, as one woman said, it was also more honest and meaningful.

The session began with Denise Thompson, a lesbian feminist from Sydney, presenting her paper, 'Lesbianism as Political Practice'. (The paper is in the *Second Women and Labour Conference Papers 1980*, 2 vols., available from the Conference Convenors, Department of History, La Trobe University).

She said that despite the 'mass exodus of feminist from heterosexuality', the history of the 'lesbian issue' in the women's movement was largely a history of silences. The issue was seldom discussed, and no adequate theory of lesbianism as feminist political practice had been developed.

Denise Thompson rejected what she called the Gay Liberation or 'valid lifestyle' theory of lesbianism as not being sufficiently radical, and said that her position was closer to that of Charlotte Bunch. 'Lesbianism is a threat to the ideological, political, personal and economic basis of male supremacy ... heterosexuality is crucial to maintaining male supremacy'.

(This notion of lesbianism as a threat to men received support from an unexpected quarter later in the evening when three middle-aged men repeatedly hassled two women from the Conference in a nearby hotel. The basis of their attacks was that the women, who were quietly sitting at the next table, were lesbian lovers, and not real women. Ironically, the women were not lovers but chance acquaintances.)

If lesbianism is subversive of the patriarchy, and heterosexuality supports the patriarchy, should not all feminists become lesbians? No, Denise Thompson said, but lesbianism should be the 'discourse', the 'single revolutionary practice of feminist consciousness'.

The audience seemed to divide into three groups where the paper was concerned: those who had not read it; those who had read it and not understood it; and those who had read it, understood it and disagreed with it. Some of the first speakers from the floor questioned Denise's account of the history of

Lesbianism as Political Practice, 2 letters, 1 article - *Denise Thompson*

the lesbian issue in the women's movement. Lesbianism *had* been discussed time and time again, they said. Did she want the movement to forget its own history and deny all the work which had been done? And was an artificial distinction to be made between 'old' and 'new' lesbians, those who have thought 'from birth' that they are lesbians, and those who became lesbians after involvement in the women's movement? Was there not something political about every lesbian's choice of women? The women's movement had not made women into lesbians, it had given them permission to be lesbians.

These first exchanges raised the central theme of the discussion, a theme which was often obscured in the polemics which followed—What is the nature of the political choice to be a lesbian? Is the choice political? Is it even a *choice*?

Another major theme of the discussion was the way in which we as lesbian feminists remain influenced by patriarchal values, even when we have no direct contact with men. Dominance, aggression and 'either/or' thinking persist in our relationships.

As if in illustration of this point, the debate was bitter, and on a number of occasions took the form of personal attacks and accusations. 'I tell myself', said the chairperson, Jocelyn Clarke, 'that there's all this lesbian energy here, it only has to be channelled'. 'We need theory, not energy!' shouted someone. But theory was hard to find. A woman said afterwards, 'They're not making the personal political, they're making the political personal'. Then she checked herself, 'What am I saying? They?'

At one stage the formal structure of the meeting became an issue. Did the women want to break into small groups? No. The chairperson pointed out that it was difficult to have an informal discussion with so many people in a lecture theatre. Denise Thompson only spoke once in the second half of the session, but remained at the microphone, visibly shaken by the personal attacks on her.

The discussion seemed to have a hypnotic effect. Very few women left. About thirty women spoke, the rest sat there, shocked or fascinated, as if waiting for something else to happen. Perhaps for many of them it was enough to hear the word 'lesbian' discussed freely in public, and to be in the company of other lesbians.

A frustrating session finished on an appropriately freaky note. The last speaker was apparently a right-wing Christian, and she told over three hundred lesbians (not all the four hundred were lesbians) that she knew two women who were 'like that', she knew what caused 'it', 'it' led to VD and so on.

Most of the women leaving the theatre after the meeting seemed angry, upset or confused, but the talk went on. After other Conference sessions women had walked off, planning the next session or the next meal; after this one they stayed together, arguing, explaining, planning action.

(GCN June 1980: 9-10)