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“HOW FAR OUT CAN WE GO?”: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY  
AMERICAN LESBIAN ACTIVISM

LILY MURRAY  
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Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Amira Rose Davis  
Assistant Professor of History, African American Studies, and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality  
Studies  
Thesis Supervisor

Cathleen Cahill  
Associate Professor of History  
Honors Adviser

\* Electronic approvals are on file.

## ABSTRACT

Despite the growth of Queer History over the last two decades, the literature as well as popular representations of queer history have remained overwhelmingly male and white. Information about gay male activism abounds but the same cannot be said about lesbian activism and activism of queer people of color. This thesis analyzes mid to late twentieth-century lesbian feminist activism in order to recover the long history of lesbian organizing and explore the tensions and possibilities within robust lesbian history. Using a feminist and critical lens, this thesis is broken down into three chronological chapters that center on different organizations and methods of activism. By juxtaposing assimilationist tactics used by the homophile movement in the 1950s, with liberal feminist organizations and radical groups of 1970s and 1980s, this thesis tracks the ways in which lesbian activism evolved and how individual lesbians navigated the social and political landscape as organizations offered differing visions of what liberation and equality looked like. Taken together, this thesis recovers overlooked histories of lesbians and offers a fuller picture of queer history in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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### **NOTE ON LANGUAGE**

There have been countless terms for acts and characteristics we would associate with homosexuality. The understandings have differed, though, as there have been changing connections between gender and sex. The term I will be using in these early sections is homophile. The term homophile is the precursor to the word homosexual. The word starts to disappear in the 1960s and 1970s and gay liberation comes in. The term carries nearly the same meaning as the word homosexual.

I use the terms homosexual and homophile interchangeably, and use the word queer to encompass the entire LGBTQ+ community. I use the phrase “the homosexual” and “the lesbian” when talking about the monolithic idea of a homosexual or lesbian.

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## Chapter 1

### Assimilation in Homophile Activism

On July 4th, 1966, a large group of well-dressed individuals gathered outside Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The women donned tailored knee length dresses and men sported collared shirts and ties. At first glance these average looking Americans appeared to be there to celebrate the holiday. Rather, they were there to picket at the annual Reminder Days for homosexual rights. Demonstrating on behalf of homosexual rights, the protestors hoped to bring to the public eye the legal and social issues homosexuals were facing. Carrying signs with non-confrontational and legalistic phrases like “Homosexuals should be judged as individuals” while strictly following a pre-set dress code, they were trying to remain respectable and un-offensive while still fighting for their cause. It was vital to the organizers of the event that through proper dress and actions those present would prove the “normalness and employability of the homosexual community”.<sup>1</sup>

These tactics epitomize the homophile activism of the 1950s and 60s. They were explicitly assimilationist, as they, a minority group, were concerned with fitting into mainstream culture. Focused heavily on legal rights and the respectability of the homosexual, the movement toed the line between assimilation and liberation. Enforcing a strict dress code at the picket was a way to both promote a positive view of the homosexual yet also exclude more marginal queer people, such as butch lesbians and transgender people. These tactics were vital to the groups of

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<sup>1</sup> Alaina Noland, “Reminder Days,” Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia, accessed January 1, 2020, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/reminder-days/>.

the homophile movement, including lesbian group the Daughters of Bilitis, or DOB. Some members of DOB, like Barbara Gittings, were present at the Reminder Days picket. While the group offered to liberate their fellow lesbians, they offered a limited liberation, as they were able to rely on their privilege to access the image of respectability.

### **Homosexuality and Activism of the 1950s**

The 1950s in our collective memory are an age of prosperity and harmony. It remains in popular culture as a time of peaceful domesticity, reinforced through shows like *Leave it to Beaver*. Levittowns and cookie-cutter homes filled with a happy wife and sparkly new appliances became stereotypical images of the fifties. That harmonious view of this era, though, is limited and inaccurate. The homogeneity coincided with a conservative backlash against non-normative groups and brought in a wave of assimilationism that affected marginalized groups most forcefully.<sup>2</sup>

The government officials who perpetrated the witch hunts remind us of this backlash. We recall most frequently the red scare, but communists were not the only suspects of un-American activity. Homosexuals were also subject to inquiry and exclusion from government jobs during the anti-homosexual witch hunts known as the lavender scare. Those who carried out the hunts created a narrative that served the purpose of aligning the homosexual with un-Americanness. To do so they “juxtaposed the “sex perverts” from upstanding Americans who hated communism, detested socialism, and loved Americanism.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Dunak, “Teaching the Many Americas of the 1950s,” *OAH Magazine of History* 26, no. 4 (October 2012): 13–16.

<sup>3</sup> Naoko Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 4 (September 2012): 724.

Because of the stigma around homosexuality, many homosexuals felt isolated, as they resorted to repression to convince others — and sometimes themselves — that they were not homosexuals. Fear of societal and legal consequences caused many to hide their sexuality, pushing away the idea of reaching out to anyone like them: “For many lesbians and gay men in the late 1940s, the cost of being true to their desires was shame and constant fear of exposure.”<sup>4</sup> Lesbian, Marge McDonald, recalled that before knowing where to find a community, she “would drive around the city, feeling so lonely, thinking of all the people like me in this city.” With the culture of institutionalized homophobia and little visibility of homosexuality in the fifties, coming upon such groups could be difficult, and many simply “couldn’t find them.”<sup>5</sup>

Just because the groups were hard to find did not mean that they did not exist. Though hidden from the public eye, these groups were vibrant and vital to homosexuals.<sup>6</sup> As George Chauncey argues in his book *Gay New York*, queer people, specifically gay men, have been gathering in queer spaces since the late nineteenth century. By doing so, they created a “distinctive culture with its own language and customs, its own traditions and folk histories, its own heroes and heroines.”<sup>7</sup> In these communities they could share experiences and tips on dealing with issues they faced in their day to day lives.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), xxxii.

<sup>5</sup> Marge McDonald, “Marge McDonald Enters the Lesbian Community of Columbus, Ohio” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 383.

<sup>6</sup> While the homosexual activity has been happening throughout history, the identity that comes along with such acts is a recent phenomenon, appearing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This means that, though the term “homosexual” has not been used for very long, homosexual acts have been occurring for much longer. Sexual acts were not understood as identity markers, rather acts in which people partook.

<sup>7</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Historian Kristin Esterberg’s work on this subject is particularly important, as she writes about lesbian community creation, and work in that field is lacking. She provides a secondary source vital on analyzing lesbian communities and the life and downfall of DOB.



Throughout his book, Chauncey proves that queer spaces existed and queer people were visible in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. This, though, did not eliminate issues for homosexuals, and many sought refuge in homophile organizations. While a variety of queer communities were available, many people still flocked to homophile organizations to not only meet people but also to organize with them. One of the most basic goals of the homophile movement was to organize and assert “that homosexuals are real human beings.”<sup>9</sup> Upon confirming their existence, they could move further and create new knowledge about the homosexual.

While homosexuals aimed to confirm that they were just like everyone else by sharing their life experiences, they also wanted to rely on a more reputable kind of knowledge. Homophile activists paid special attention to the opinion of experts in different fields, like psychology and psychiatry because they knew that, no matter how hard they tried, some people would simply not listen to the homosexuals. By having the support of experts, they were able to ground their argument in seemingly objective facts. To get the support of experts, though, they knew they needed to present themselves in a serious and reputable manner. They thought that if “a more responsible type of homosexual [became] visible in homophile organizations...there may be fewer psychiatrists naively pronouncing homosexuals sick.”<sup>10</sup> With the help of medical professionals, they desired to convince the general public of their normalcy.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard R. Parlour et al., “The Homophile Movement: Its Impact and Implications,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 6, no. 3 (1967): 217.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 222.

There were a handful of homophile groups using such tactics; Mattachine Society was the first to pop up, coming into action in 1951.<sup>11</sup> It was an organization for homosexual men. As the “nation’s ‘first’ gay rights organization”, its creation played an important part in the timeline of American queer history and activism, but it left much to be desired for lesbians and queer women as it consisted of “predominantly men”.<sup>12</sup> Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian organization, was founded in 1955 to remedy this problem. Founders and partners Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon formed the organization because they, in vain, “had been ‘desperately seeking’ other lesbians for two years, looking for friends.”<sup>13</sup> They wanted to create a space — first physical in their meetings then later intellectual in the membership of their magazine — in which lesbians could meet.

### Lesbian Participation

The founders of Daughters of Bilitis wanted to form a lesbian space that differed from those that already existed, which were full of the lower-class lesbians, those who were less respectable. Bars were the main option for many queer people and the members of DOB wanted nothing to do with that and the lesbians of the “working class bar culture.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, they

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<sup>11</sup> While many of the groups had similar overall purposes and missions, the specific goals and organizations and tactics differed from group to group. Additionally, some groups were catered to homosexual men, and some for homosexual women. Additionally, location affected the politics of the groups, and there was no one universal goal for the groups, they many shared multiple characteristics.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Meeker, “Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2001): 58; Del Martin, “President’s Message” *The Ladder* 1, no. 1 (October 1956): 6.

<sup>13</sup> Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Kristin G. Esterberg, “From Accommodation to Liberation: A Social Movement Analysis of Lesbians in the Homophile Movement,” *Gender and Society*, September 1994, 430.

wanted to create a space in which lesbians could interact, learn, and share ideas and experiences. In the words of founder Del Martin, the group “offers the Lesbian an outlet in meeting others.”<sup>15</sup>

One of their main goals was to elevate the status of the lesbian. To do so, they wanted to “reduce the social boundaries between the lesbian and heterosexual worlds” by eliminating “the differences between lesbians and heterosexual women.”<sup>16</sup> They wanted desperately to distance themselves from the working-class butches and femmes, lesbians who fit into binary masculine and feminine roles, respectively. Their goal was to ensure heterosexual women that “the Lesbian is a woman endowed with all the attributes of any other woman...Her only different lies in her choice of a love partner.”<sup>17</sup> They wanted to prove that there was nothing to fear, that they were just like everybody else.

At the meetings, Martin and Lyon wanted to deal with the tangible problems lesbians faced in their everyday lives: “During these meetings we discussed all the problems we faced as Lesbians, how we managed them in our personal lives, and how we could deal with the public both individually and as a group.”<sup>18</sup> Having such discussions in meetings was beneficial to those who could attend. Martin and Lyon mentioned again and again in their book *Lesbian/Woman* that, in the early years, they knew “practically nothing;” “a few books - that’s all there were” to assist them in learning more about lesbianism<sup>19</sup>. At the DOB meetings, lesbians learned more about themselves and the community; unfortunately, they could only reach a handful of people.

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<sup>15</sup> Del Martin “The Positive Approach,” *The Ladder* 1, no. 2 (November 1956): 9.

<sup>16</sup> Esterberg, “From Accommodation to Liberation,” 430.

<sup>17</sup> Del Martin, “The Positive Approach,” *The Ladder* 1, no. 2 (November 1956): 8.; Esterberg, “From Accommodation to Liberation,” 430.

<sup>18</sup> Del Martin & Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (Glide Publications: 1972): 221.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

To solve the issue of access to such information, they shared information through a different medium. Shortly after their creation, DOB began publishing their magazine entitled *The Ladder*, enabling them to reach a larger audience than their meetings could. In the first publication, Martin set the tone for the early years, stating that she wanted to "...[challenge] the women...to join [them] in the effort to bring understanding to and about the homosexual minority by adding the feminine voice and viewpoint...."<sup>20</sup> That call to action was grandiose yet conservative, as she utilized gender stereotypes to bring about more “understanding” of the lesbian. Similarly, Martin’s partner and the editor of the magazine, Lyon, promoted education and assimilation. Thus, focusing on respectability and conformity, they were able to cater to the middle-class lesbian.

Along with being respectable, the women for whom the magazine was created were educated and financially stable. In a survey distributed via *The Ladder*, results showed “higher-than-average levels of education, income, and professional occupations among the respondents.”<sup>21</sup> The readers of *The Ladder* and participants in DOB were of the middling classes and the writers and editors of the magazine catered toward such an audience. In doing this, they excluded the women on the fringe; women of color and women without higher education were not welcome.

The assimilationist values of the Daughters of Bilitis were an integral part of the organization. As a 1950s homosexual rights organization, they fought with as much vigor as they saw fit; often, they exhibited this vigor through technical legal battles rather than protests. Being

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<sup>20</sup> Martin & Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman*, 224-225.

<sup>21</sup> Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 49.

too aggressive and militant would put them in the spotlight and separate them from the “normal” heterosexual majority, and it was safer to be in the majority than on the fringe.

Their desire to be a part of the majority was sensible. Being marginal often means being separated and even more vulnerable, thus separatism was not an option for these people: “The atmosphere was ripe with the belief that the best hope for social equality would come with integration rather than from the isolation of groups into a world considered by many middle-class-striving lesbians to be fleeting, dangerous, and alienating.”<sup>22</sup> Opposed to entirely uprooting heterosexism and disrupting the social order, the Daughters of Bilitis focused on finding a way to fit into that social order, making very calculated moves, enabling them to fly under the radar. The goal was not to stand out and rally behind differences but rather to assimilate: “DOB actively promoted a view of the lesbian as average, wholesome, and nonthreatening.”<sup>23</sup> The members of DOB hoped to integrate “the homosexual into society” and they believed that they could do so by following a four-step process.

They elaborated upon this process in their mission statement which they placed on the first page of every issue of *The Ladder*. In it, they stated that DOB was “a women’s organization for the purpose of promoting the integration of the homosexual into society” by supporting the following:

1. Education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological, and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society in all its social, civic and economic implications...
2. Education of the public at large through acceptance first of the individual, leading to an eventual breakdown of erroneous taboos and prejudices...

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 83.

<sup>23</sup> Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 74.

3. Participation in research projects by duly authorized responsible psychologists, sociologists and other such experts directed towards the further knowledge of the homosexual.
4. Investigation of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual, proposal for changes to provide an equitable handling of cases involving this minority group, and promotion of these changes through due process of law in the state legislature.<sup>24</sup>

The first task was to educate the “variant” in order to “enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society in all its social, civic and economic implications.” To get over the expected self-loathing that comes with being a homosexual, a lesbian needed to educate herself; reading about lesbians in poems and short stories allowed her to see herself as a normal, natural woman rather than a “sicko.” DOB stood firm in the idea that, as long as you were able to come to terms with your identity and self, you would be more comfortable with yourself and live a happy life.

Many of the authors featured in *The Ladder* focused on this theme. One particular author, psychologist Alice LaVere, addressed the negative effects that “fear, doubt and worry” have on mental *and* physical health, stating that “people who live under these emotions continually actually effect changes in their chemistry that are among the causes of functional illnesses.” These feelings were not harmless. They were, she believed, “among the most destructive emotions that we experience.”<sup>25</sup> To remedy the dangers of both internal and external homophobia, the author suggested education: “By protecting ourselves through a thorough understanding of our minds and bodies, we are able to prolong our best years, physically and mentally.”<sup>26</sup> By understanding themselves and their identity, homosexuals could begin to live

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<sup>24</sup> *The Ladder* 5, no. 1 (October 1960): 2.

<sup>25</sup> Alice LaVere, “Emotions that Destroy Your Health and Personality.” *The Ladder* 1, no. 4 (January 1957): 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* 3.

happy and safe lives. In this article (and the many others like it) the author offered solace and hope to *The Ladder's* readership across the country.

The second task also focused on education, though it was the education of others rather than the self. The staff of *The Ladder* wanted to share information about the homosexual with the public, as with increased knowledge came understanding; such understanding would theoretically lead to acceptance of the homosexual. Simply highlighting the benefit of public education for the homosexual did not reach all audiences, though, and they knew that. To appeal to those heterosexuals, the homophiles had to explicitly outline why having knowledge about homosexuality would actually benefit them.

One way to convince heterosexuals that they should know about homosexuality was to introduce ways in which such knowledge was relevant in their own lives. Since it may not have been clear to men why lesbianism affected them, an article featured in *The Ladder* highlighted such efforts. The author argued that straight men may accidentally become interested in a lesbian who would not reciprocate feelings, and if the man was simply able to understand and identify the situation, he could avoid embarrassment: "Faced by so many women not likely to respond to his amatory advances, it's not difficult to see that a man's lack of knowledge may have disastrous, even tragic, consequences for him."<sup>27</sup> Since lesbianism affected their pool of available women, it was really an issue that was near and dear to them. Having knowledge of lesbianism could save them awkward encounters and time lost on pursuing uninterested love interests.

The second task, public enlightenment, led into the third, as to carry out their education they would use information that was specifically scientific. Instead of simply informing the

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<sup>27</sup> "MEN Talk about Lesbians," *Ladder* 1, no. 6 (March 1957): 3.

public that homosexuality was socially acceptable, homophile organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis went to great lengths to legitimize their findings. A group concerned with respectability and conformity, they focused on the common assumption that scientific information was true and reliable, and this is evident in the language of the goal. Articulating that they aimed to end “erroneous taboos and prejudices”, they signaled that such negative views of homosexuality were more than just discriminatory; they are factually wrong. To support this, the editors of *The Ladder* paid close attention to scientific discourses on homosexuality and included materials like coverages of panel discussions dealing with issues like the root cause, validity, and legal implications of homosexuality.<sup>28</sup>

Both the third and fourth point focused on researching and gathering factual information about lesbians, but the fourth point specifically dealt with the penal code. The Daughters of Bilitis, and other homophile organizations, were concerned with maintaining respectability and thus chose to fight oppression through the legal system, challenging laws and enlisting lawyers and professionals to fight for homosexuals. They were, in fighting for gay rights, still an activist group, but their approach of working solely through the legal system was still respectable and assimilationist. Instead of protesting or demonstrating, they focused on changing the laws. The editors of *The Ladder* kept their readers up to date with legal information like current cases and issues, and wins and losses for homosexual rights.<sup>29</sup>

DOB’s purpose statement is incredibly rich, offering a wonderful location for analysis. Their first point, the education of the individual, is explicitly assimilationist. By giving the homosexual complete power over their feelings, they were left on their own to combat the

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<sup>28</sup> Sten Russell, “The Searchers Probe: The Homosexual Neurosis” *The Ladder* 1, no. 6 (March 1957).

<sup>29</sup> “ACLU Takes a Stand On Homosexuality” *The Ladder* 1, no. 6 (March 1957): 8-9



negative effects of homophobia. This minimized the effects of external homophobia by stating that, as long as the homosexual knew that their identity was valid, they would be happy and safe, minimizing the everyday struggles of homosexuals.

This also relates to the ability to pass. Those who could pass as straight and assimilate into heterosexual culture with ease would face less discrimination and would indeed be safer. In order for one to assimilate and integrate into society, they needed something that tied them to the majority; for lesbians to integrate into heterosexual society, they had to prove that they were similar to the respectable heterosexual society. To do so, DOB suggested that lesbians adopt “behavior and dress acceptable to society”, as this respectable appearance and disposition would link them to the majority. The goal was, in a sense, to “pass” in many ways: to pass as respectable, to pass as normal, to pass as heterosexual.

Passing did not just have to do with dress and actions. DOB also aimed to “pass” in their organizational tactics. Their core goal was to improve the situation for the homosexual and they worked both with and inside the legal system, a major source of their oppression, to accomplish that goal. The system was not working on their behalf but to appear to be law-abiding and justice-seeking members of society, they staked their claims in the political system.

Just as with the political system, DOB worked with — rather than against — society to accomplish their goals. While they held the belief that “Homosexuals ought not to be discriminated against,” they also thought it was important for them to “learn to cooperate with the whole of society.”<sup>30</sup> Fighting for equal rights was important for the group, but not at the cost of sacrificing their respectability as they thought that they could not have success without having

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<sup>30</sup> *The Ladder* 5, no. 1 (October 1960): 15-16.

the support of the heterosexual majority. Ostracizing the rest of society would not have helped them reach larger audiences, so they aimed to “pass” as civically engaged citizens, even though in many ways they were excluded from and oppressed by that political system.

Such an approach toed the line between hiding homosexuality and celebrating it. Complacency meant legal losses but militancy meant rejection from the respectable majority. For this reason, the Daughters of Bilitis feareded going too far. How could they gain rights if the law-making body despised then? How could they gain respect and acceptance if the rest of society saw them as deviant and sick? They had to play a dangerous game and they treated it with care. To do so, the members and the organization as a whole weighed the impact of their activism, thinking seriously about how the public would receive what they did and said. They were already at a disadvantage, as many people thought they were sick and they lacked legal protections. Therefore, they had to be conscious of their words and actions, resulting in assimilationist tactics.

To call their activism assimilationist is not to diminish members’ work or bravery. Assimilation was a survival tactic, but that does not diminish the fact that it was still rather radical, given the consequences of being out. Identifying these assimilationist tactics is compelling, but a closer look at the organization offers a place for analysis on the reasonings behind these tactics, enabling a deeper analysis of privilege in the organization. Reading the history of DOB’s foundation is one way to read privilege in the situation. The founders of DOB wanted to create an organization which could connect and support lesbians. They did not, though, want to be as out as possible, completely visible to the public. Initially, they served as a support group and wanted to be recognizable only to their target audience: lesbians.

To do this, they had to be creative about the name, using something like “a code or double entendre.”<sup>31</sup> They settled on the name Daughters of Bilitis, a reference to a book of lesbian erotica initially published in the late nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> This illusion allowed them to be both elusive and exclusive, as the name would have been befuddling to most. Thus, with such a name, they were able to control the group’s publicity. The purpose of the group was not explicit in the name and, while they clearly intended to support lesbians, the combination of their name and goals allowed them to fly under the radar, attracting only the attention they wanted to receive.

This control extended past just the name and exposure of the organization. They also wanted to keep a hold on the opinions and messages of the organization. Those in positions of power carefully “chose a path in which they could maintain greater control over the messages distributed as well as the avenues through which such messages could travel.”<sup>33</sup> They had very specific goals, as evident in the group’s purpose, and they had a set of ideals that made clear what they stood for. This way, others could not obscure their intentions as an organization. They aimed not only to control what they said but also how people received what they said. This means they wanted to be able to control how other people (straight middle-class white people) perceived them. Their goal was to assimilate into proper society, and the proper society to which they are referring is the straight, white, middle-class culture.

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<sup>31</sup> Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Marcia M. Gallo, “Daughters of Bilitis,” in *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) History*, ed. Howard Chiang et al., vol. 1 (Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2019), 443–47.

<sup>33</sup> Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 78.

To be able to achieve “respectability”, one must have access to the things of respectability.<sup>34</sup> Members of DOB aimed to “assimilate” into heterosexual society; their ability to assimilate and be “just like” proper society shows a certain amount of privilege. Lower class women and women of color were not as able to assimilate into proper, white, middle-class culture. Respectability is always white, and therefore people of color have a significantly harder time accessing respectability. Additionally, respectability also aligns itself with professionalism, and therefore wealthier, more educated people can more easily access it. Thus, assimilation into society also meant erasing difference and losing the less “civilized” aspects of their identities. To lose those aspects was also to lose participants and members of the group. They had to toe the line of respectability to maintain members but also the support of the majority. Therefore, the assimilationist practices of DOB show that those who were most active were privileged enough to take part in assimilationist practices.<sup>35</sup>

That fine line they toed is exemplified in published opinions on the Homosexual Bill of Rights. The bill would have identified homosexuals as a group worthy of protection. While it may seem obvious for DOB to support a bill that offered protections for homosexuals, the issue was much more complicated than that. On one hand it suggested legal protections of homosexuals, something for which the group fought. On the other hand, though, such a bill isolated homosexuals; it solidified boundaries between the heterosexual and the homosexual, those who needed help and those who did not, those who needed special protections and those

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<sup>34</sup> Respectability politics is a term that comes from Black women’s intellectual history. To avoid racist depictions linked to sexuality, Black men and women adhered closely to proper respectable heterosexual stereotypes. This politic of respectability is a useful tool for marginalized groups, as with it they can assimilate into “proper” white heterosexual culture. In this context, it is useful for queer people, as by adhering to these principles they can avoid discrimination.; Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 11.

who did not. This signaled an inherent difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals, an idea that ran contrary to the group's goal of eradicating the difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

Del Martin's response to, and opinions on, such a bill fit quite well with the group's outlook. Martin, the editor of *The Ladder*, was vehemently opposed to the bill. She saw it not only as "unnecessary" but also as something that would imply a "demanding attitude toward society."<sup>36</sup> While the bill would attempt to protect homosexuals, Martin believed it was the wrong approach. To support such a bill, in her opinion, would be to request special treatment, something that highlighted not only difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals but also an inability of homosexuals to function properly in society without support. Martin's strong opinions were not the only ones voiced in *The Ladder*. While much of *The Ladder's* content was focused on literature, opinion pieces and letters — found in the section entitled "Readers Respond" — also filled the magazine. While the voices of those in power were the loudest, dissenting opinions were also published in the magazine.

Since the founding of the group, dissenting opinions had existed amongst the Daughters. As a relatively new group with little precedent, the women had no other lesbian organizations to base their foundation on and "it was obvious from the beginning that there could be conflicts about the group's purpose and structure."<sup>37</sup> Creating an organization is a daunting task; to create a homophile organization, though, was to create a place in which law enforcement could easily target a group of homosexuals. The founders — and even members — of the group could have lost

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<sup>36</sup> *The Ladder* 5, no 4 (January 1961): 4.

<sup>37</sup> Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 4.

their jobs if knowledge of their participation in the group had gone public. A certain amount of care had to be used to guarantee the safety of each member of the organization.

Their first and longest lasting conflict, though, was a seemingly small issue. They had to decide to what extent they wanted to participate as an activist group. Not everyone came to the same conclusion: “Some only wanted to have a place to socialize with other lesbians; others wanted to mix socializing with social action.”<sup>38</sup> They had to decide for themselves to what extent they wanted to tackle institutions of homophobia. Meeting with other lesbians to form a quiet, respectable community was the safer option. Taking that group into the public to shake things up was the more dangerous option. While the purpose and goals of the Daughters of Bilitis seemed to be clearly assimilationist, the opinions of individuals in the group and those who subscribed to *The Ladder* did not always agree with what the leaders had to say. Such dissenting opinions plagued the organization until its demise.

### **Tensions and Change**

In the early 1960s, DOB experienced a change in leadership. The group took a turn toward militancy. This change was not without problems, and tensions rose between local and national chapters and the East and West coasts.<sup>39</sup> East coast chapters aligned with homophile organizations, while those of the West coast — alongside *The Ladder* — found solidarity in women’s liberation and feminism.<sup>40</sup> Women unhappy with the changes and tensions that plagued the organization had a new opportunity; other groups, focusing on new causes like anti-

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<sup>38</sup> Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Esterberg, “From Accommodation to Liberation,” 433-434.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 437.

war politics, women's liberation, and civil rights gained momentum, and some left to join in such causes. These tensions reached a climax in 1970 when *The Ladder* split from Daughters of Bilitis, cementing the magazine's women's liberationist stance and focus.

Dissenting opinions, while always present, became more evident as time passed. As the social climate was changing, so was the climate of gay rights organizations. The civil rights movement was gaining visibility and moving into the spotlight; feminism was preparing to make its second wave debut. The views of those groups, as compared to those of homophile organizations, were more radical.

The emergence of radical views in other organizations changed the attitude toward activism. There was a switch from assimilation as a source of safety and acceptance to self-identification as a source of power. To be accepted, the homophile organizations characteristic of the fifties felt the need to eradicate difference; as the landscape of activism changed, homosexuals questioned and challenged that belief in conformity. The goal of eradicating difference was evolving to the acceptance of it.

While the group as a whole did not agree with the new acceptance of difference brought about in the latter half of the twentieth century, many Daughters and subscribers found problems in the organization's traditional approach. The letter of one reader, as seen in a "Readers Response" section of a 1960 issue, shows disappointment in the conformity that had plagued the group for so long:

I prefer to see the problem of the lesbian as an aspect of the larger problem of society today: conformity - the neglect of the individualistic impulse that alone leads to creativity and the ultimate enrichment of culture...Perhaps instead of pleading 'Please world, accept us - we're really nice and not a bit different' we

should say, 'Look, world we understand the agony of losing what each of you finds best in yourself and we can help you to be unafraid of your uniqueness!' <sup>41</sup>

She saw their assimilationist goals as stifling and counter-productive. Rather than focusing on how society viewed the homosexual, she cared about what each homosexual had to offer. She acknowledged that putting oneself out to be judged as deviant was intimidating and a very real problem for many. She believed, though, that reaching the end goal of spreading acceptance of “uniqueness” was worth it.

Her sentiment, while specifically in relation to lesbianism, seemed to represent the ideas of late sixties and early seventies activism. Their goal was not to simply to fit in. Gall notes that the conformist attitude of the Daughters of Bilitis were outdated and this was one reason for their downfall, stating that “the demise of DOB as a national organization fit perfectly within and reflected the spirit of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when traditional ways of organizing were rejected in favor of new modes of activism.” <sup>42</sup>

Another reason for their downfall was also tied to other forms of activism. The emerging second wave of feminism was greatly variant in approaches and goals. Liberal feminism, which lined up with DOB's goals, focused on using pre-existing institutions and systems to guarantee women equal treatment. Radical feminism, though, aimed to uproot those institutions entirely. They did not try to work with such institutions, as many saw them as working against them. Radical feminists and lesbians recognized that those organizations were in direct opposition to their identities.

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<sup>41</sup> *The Ladder* 5, no. 2 (November 1960): 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 170.



In the fifties, homophile organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis were the source of information and community for lesbians. As feminism gained popularity, though, it offered an alternative: “As feminist groups provided a fertile soil in which lesbianism could grow, members of lesbian organizations meaning primarily the DOB, started to move toward feminism and away from homophile activism.”<sup>43</sup> The feminist groups offered lesbians who wanted to partake in more organizing a space to do so with like-minded people.

Not only was the activism of the Daughters of Bilitis falling out of style, but their organizational approach was also not up to date with other activist groups of the later twentieth century. An organization so heavily reliant on large scale, national leadership, the Daughters of Bilitis suffered in the time of local action; in the mid-sixties the group struggled to “achieve a balance between its governing board and its activists, between institutional cohesion and local initiative, between the collective and the individual.”<sup>44</sup> Such divisions made it easier for the group to split and for women to join other groups.

## Conclusion

The mid to late twentieth century saw much change in homosexual rights activism; from assimilationist goals of the Daughters of Bilitis to the liberal manifesto of the Radicalesbians, activism took a turn for the radical. The liberal strain of activism was not rooted out, but opportunities to organize in more radical settings became more abundant. Though DOB, with its inability to adapt to the newer forms of activism as a group, splintered and died off in the 1970s,

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<sup>43</sup> Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 229.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 116.

its impact was lasting. Meeker noted the power of *The Ladder*, stating that it “was revered as a small gem of lesbian and feminist expression that had thrived during a time when nothing else like it existed.”<sup>45</sup> Their efforts were not forgotten, and their work could not be ignored by the activists that followed.

Beginning in a time when homosexuality was deviant and, if discovered, could cause one to lose their job, the Daughters had great courage to gather in a group and declare their homosexuality. The organization may not have lasted the turn toward radicalism, but other homosexual rights organizations owe it to the conformist homophile organizations for creating a space in which they could use their radical tactics to fight for homosexual rights.

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<sup>45</sup> Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 197.

## Chapter 2

### Women's Liberation and the Lesbian Question

On July 9, 1978, “in a sea of purple, gold and white banners (reflecting the suffragist colors)”, over one hundred thousand protestors marched on Washington on behalf of an amendment that would make sex-based discrimination unconstitutional. They were marching to pressure Congress to extend the deadline for the state ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment from the previously set impending 1980 deadline.<sup>46</sup> The amendment had passed both the House and Senate but waited upon the ratification of a three-quarter majority of states.<sup>47</sup>

Introduced by Alice Paul in 1923, the Equal Rights Amendment aimed to make discrimination based on sex unconstitutional, at both state and federal levels.<sup>48</sup> The ERA has a long and complex history among feminist groups of the twentieth-century. Prominent feminist organization, NOW (the National Organization for Women), the group who organized the 1978 march on Washington, focused heavily on pushing the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Founded in 1966, NOW supported the ERA because they were concerned with the legal status and protection of women and worked through the “professional”, legal means of activism. Just like DOB, NOW utilized assimilationist tactics in organizing and protesting. They worked *within* the institution to solve problems, collaborating with experts and professionals to make institutional changes. Their salute to the suffragists during their ERA march highlights their commitment to legalistic and rights-based causes. Their fight for the ERA highlights their large

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<sup>46</sup> “History of Marches and Mass Actions,” National Organization for Women, accessed March 24, 2020, <https://now.org/about/history/history-of-marches-and-mass-actions/>.

<sup>47</sup> Linda Czuba Brigance, “Equal Rights Amendment,” in *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements*, ed. Immanuel Ness (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Reference, 2013), 534–38.

<sup>48</sup> Gary L. Anderson and Kathryn G. Herr, eds., “National Organization for Women (NOW),” in *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, vol. 3 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Reference, 2007), 1009–11.

scale, high stakes, and professional approach to activism. Amending the constitution is no small task and requires a breadth of legal knowledge, something they utilized in much of their organizing.

Part of that commitment to legal means of activism meant that they did not concern themselves with other issues they deemed as trivial. Fighting to secure legislation is one thing, and fighting to change ideals and thoughts is another. Lesbianism, therefore, was something they deemed unimportant, tangential, and even dangerous. They excused their homophobia because they believed that the lesbian needed no special treatment. Many did not believe that lesbianism was a feminist issue and without a solidified legal argument to champion their cause was unimportant.

### **National Organization for Women**

Homophobia, both internalized and external, was a clear impetus for the creation of queer spaces; lesbians needed knowledge and access to community in privacy, so groups like DOB and publications like *The Ladder* came into existence. Homophobia was damaging and queer individuals needed such a resource as a way to combat it. Sexism, on the other hand, was a slightly different situation. Womanhood was not something women were hiding in the same way, and identifying other women with whom to communicate was easier. While womanhood and the issues of sexism may seem obvious enough, many women did indeed need that support and source of information. The importance of information and support in women's movement is evident in the success of Betty Friedan's groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*.

Published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* was illuminating for so many women throughout the United States. In her book, Friedan addressed the “problem that has no name” and articulated the struggles of the housewife. The housewife was essentially forced into the domestic sphere, and became trapped, cut off from the world and resources that existed beyond her front door. The woman about whom Friedan wrote was the stereotypical housewife. She was white, middle-class, and cared for the house and family. She was seemingly happy, content to stay home and do what she needed to do to keep her house tidy and husband happy. Friedan pointed out the inaccuracy in this image, as the role was not as easy or ideal as it seemed. It was incredibly isolating, and many women suffered greatly from being stuck in a place void of interaction with the world around her. She was not reaching her full potential, and she was not treated as a full, competent person. The housewife was stifled, but many had no way to articulate that.<sup>49</sup>

Not only did the housewife not have a way to fully come to terms with her struggles, but she was also trying to make sense of it during a time of change and unrest.<sup>50</sup> At this time the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing and thus tensions around race were high. People of color had long been fighting against the racist institutions of power in America and by the 1960s tensions had escalated.<sup>51</sup> Many women found solace during this time of turbulence in Friedan’s words. By reading *The Feminine Mystique* they felt connected to Friedan and the other house-

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Levine, “The Feminine Mystique at Fifty,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 36, no. 2 (August 22, 2015): 41.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 41.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Rubinson, “Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1970,” in *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements*, ed. Immanuel Ness (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Reference, 2013), 371–402.

wives across the country. They were, for the first time, seeing their genuine experiences articulated clearly, and the book was an “overnight bestseller”.<sup>52</sup>

The book not only offered women a clearly articulated view of their situation; it also explored some ways to resolve the issue. At the root of the problem, Friedan believed, was women’s sole role as wives and mothers. Their duties were only domestic: birth children, care for the family, and look after the home. This was not to demean these tasks, as these duties were much more laborious and emotionally intensive than society recognized. Friedan believed that women needed to find purpose outside the domestic sphere, though. This book was incredibly important in the women’s movement, as it defined the movement’s many demands and embodied its slogan: the personal is political.

While Betty Friedan and her groundbreaking book did not single handedly bring the women’s movement into fruition, we must acknowledge the role they both played. In the book women found comfort and an articulation of their experiences. Betty Friedan was not known only for the book though. Her mark on the women’s movement had just begun with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. She was a founder of the second wave feminist group NOW, the National Organization for Women. NOW was one of the biggest players in the women’s movement, at both local and national levels. From the beginning, Betty Friedan was a key player. She vigorously defended women’s legal rights and fought sex discrimination, but she also came with her fair share of controversies.

The National Organization for Women did not just appear out of thin air. Women began to identify that their *personal* issues were indeed *political*. It simply took a push to make something happen. Friedan recalled that “the absolute necessity for a civil rights movement for

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<sup>52</sup> Margaret Henderson, “Betty Friedan (1921-2006),” *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (July 2007): 164.

women had reached such a point of subterranean explosive urgency by 1966, that it only took a few of us to get together to ignite the spark – and it spread like a nuclear-chain reaction.”<sup>53</sup>

Identifying issues was not enough for Friedan — she and the others involved felt that they had to do something bigger than simply acknowledge their situation.<sup>54</sup> Through *the Feminine Mystique* Friedan offered middle-class women a framework through which they could identify their struggles and understand their own issues as political; this was fuel to the fire for so many. The book laid the groundwork and gave name to the shared troubles women faced, but that was not the final step.

To push the struggle further Friedan looked for other people who were fighting for “equal opportunity for women” in different areas. She found individual people, like Pauli Murray, who were fighting for women’s equality, but there was a lack of support at an organizational level, as many groups they feared that they would be “called ‘feminist’” for being outspoken about sexism and discrimination.<sup>55</sup> Friedan identified leaders in the fight for women’s equality, she was less successful in finding organizations that did the same.

While the fight against sex discrimination did not exist in the larger organizational level, individual people and smaller groups were doing this work. As more people became aware of the state of job discrimination against women, Friedan “began getting long-distance phone calls,” including “appeals for pressure and support.” The network of people who were dedicated to fighting against sex discrimination was underground and unseen, but it was there, waiting to act

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<sup>53</sup> Betty Friedan, “How NOW Began,” 1, Women's Liberation Collection, SSC-MS-00408, Box 13, Folder 1, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/459>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 2

and organize. People were looking for a group: “There simply had to be a civil rights organization to speak out for women.”<sup>56</sup>

A handful of women “whose experiences were leading [them] to the same conclusion, met at the Conference of Governors Commissions on the Status of Women, in Washington.” On the second night of the conference, they got together in Friedan’s hotel room to “[explore] the need of a new action organization.”<sup>57</sup> Everyone present “shared the feeling that something immediate and urgent had to be done about the enforcement of Title VII in respect to sex discrimination” and this became the basis of the organization. Convinced of the necessity of such an organization, they committed themselves to organizing for the rights of women. To organize as a group, they needed a name. Friedan “dreamed up N.O.W. on the spur of the moment” and the parties involved approved. With a name and a handful of members — the founders — the organization became legitimate. Word spread and others interested in organizing for women’s equal rights sought out the founders to join the organization.<sup>58</sup>

That night in Friedan’s hotel, the women agreed upon their main purpose: “to take action to bring women all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men.”<sup>59</sup> From the beginning, their attention to “equality” was clear. To be concerned with “equal partnership” was to be concerned with the laws that govern equality. That legal nature of NOW was from then-on a vital part of the organization. With that original statement, their feminism was solidified as liberal feminism, which “proposes the reformation rather than the

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<sup>56</sup> Friedan, “How NOW Began,” 2; Emily Taitz, “Friedan, Betty (1921—),” in *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, ed. Anne Commire, vol. 5 (Detroit, MI: Yorkin Publications, 2002), 788–93.

<sup>57</sup> Friedan, “How NOW Began,” 2.

<sup>58</sup> Friedan, “How NOW Began,” 3; Elizabeth Rhoetter Purdy, “National Organization for Women (NOW),” in *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, ed. Thomas Riggs, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 2013), 714–15.

<sup>59</sup> Friedan, “How NOW Began,” 3.



dismantling of social systems and institutions” that have discriminated against women.<sup>60</sup>

NOW’s liberal feminism was one that validated the systems of power that existed and aimed to work inside them, enforcing their trust in the legal system to do them justice in the end; while they found the legal system flawed, they still worked within it. Not all second wave feminists felt the same way; radical feminists felt less at ease with the existing institutions and aimed for a more radical reorganization of society and its institutions of power and privilege. They identified the patriarchy as the issue at hand rather than institutional sexism, which is what liberal feminists were concerned with.<sup>61</sup>

That tension between radical and liberal feminism was evident in different issues, one of which was lesbianism. Lesbianism had been a place of tension in the organization since the early years. It was something discussed both locally and nationally, in chapter meetings and organization wide publications and national conferences. The trope of feminists as lesbians is not a new one; lesbian baiting has long been a powerful and effective anti-feminist tactic. The insult of “lesbian” stood for much more than a woman who loved women; to anti-feminists the lesbian was subversive, ugly, and manly. She was someone who had defied gender norms and for this was deviant. To be a lesbian was to be unacceptable, and “many women would be reduced to tears if you called them Lesbians.”<sup>62</sup> This anti-lesbian rhetoric was very present in feminist

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<sup>60</sup> Gwendolyn Mikell et al., “Feminism,” in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, vol. 2 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 531–42.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 541.

<sup>62</sup> Judy Klemesrud, “The Lesbian Issue and Women’s Lib,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1970, Dolores Alexander Papers, SSC-MS-00582, Box 10, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/823> Accessed April 11, 2020.

spaces. “The ‘dyke’ label,” the separatist group Radicalesbians stated in a pamphlet, “can be used to frighten a woman into a less militant stand, keep her separate from her sisters...”<sup>63</sup>

Liberal feminists of NOW like Betty Friedan were not concerned *with* lesbianism as a cause; rather they found the issue of lesbianism *to be* concerning. They aimed to ensure that women were equal under the eyes of the law and they did so by fighting for legislation and amendments that could ensure legal protection against sex-based discrimination. They were tackling sexism by fighting specific ways in which it manifested in these women’s everyday lives, like workplace sex- based discrimination. NOW worked to have clear platforms with tangible goals to reach, like the passage of an amendment. Harder to include in their legalistic language were the abstract ideas of sexuality. They did not worry about “bedroom issues”, as such topics were not in their scope of legal causes. Additionally, part of the draw of joining organizations like NOW was the chance to come together in sisterhood and fight for common goals. Those goals would become less common if lesbianism came to the forefront.

Not only did they fight off such causes because it was outside their scope but also because they feared that if they did start to care about such issues they would not be taken seriously. Trivial issues like sexual partners were, to them, not feminist issues. Betty Friedan was “anxious that NOW would be taken over by radicals with their ideology of ‘sexual politics’, and their supposed equation of feminism with lesbianism,” leading her to comment that lesbians were a ‘Lavender Menace’” in the women’s movement, a phrase which a group of lesbians defecting from NOW would later claim as their name.<sup>64</sup> Lesbianism was not simply an issue too trivial

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<sup>63</sup> Pat Maxwell, “‘Menace’ Raised Consciousness & Eyebrows,” *Majority Report*, June 27, 1974, Dolores Alexander Papers, SSC-MS-00582, Box 13, Folder “Rita Mae Brown”, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/823> Accessed April 11, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Margaret Henderson, “Betty Friedan” *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (2007): 163-166.

with which to concern the organization; it was dangerous and menacing, a surefire way to stir up drama and problems.

The organization's status on lesbians did not please everybody. Many saw it as counterproductive for women's rights and that it seemed as though "the Lesbian issue...[had] been hidden away like a demented child ever since the women's liberation movement came into being in 1966."<sup>65</sup> Ti-Grace Atkinson, lesbian and member of NOW, resigned in 1968 due to her disagreements with the way the organization was progressing and dealing with things like lesbianism. In her resignation letter, which was addressed to "each member in the NOW – New York chapter, and on the NOW National Board of Directors", she included this passage, bringing to light NOW's conservative approach to dealing with certain contentious issues:

I accepted NOW's politics for so long because I thought they were evolving, and that I was just further along on the spectrum) but Thursday night it struck me that the NOW position and my own views are also inconsistent: NOW advocated a hierarchy of "offices", i.e. of privilege, i.e. of power, and thus, necessarily, of the abridgment of the rights of others. The issue of inequality of treatment if, I think, the most basic issue in the problem of women.<sup>66</sup>

She went on to critique NOW for dealing poorly with class issues, or failing to deal with them entirely. Class issues were essential to her feminism but clearly not an important part of NOW. She made the claim that NOW could not continue ignoring class issues because she believed that "if feminists are to get any of the places, we are all trying to get to, they will have to take on class distinctions and break them down." The problem, she said, was that "NOW is not about to take on the class problem."

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<sup>65</sup> Klemesrud, "The Lesbian Issue and Women's Lib."

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Ti-Grace Atkinson to NOW, October 21, 1968, Dolores Alexander Papers, SSC-MS-00582, Box 10, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.  
<https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/823> Accessed April 11, 2020.

One very public — and famous — protest occurred in 1970 at the Congress to Unite Women in New York City. There, members of the Lavender Menace, the group of lesbians who defected from NOW, "[stormed] the stage...and insisted that lesbians' rights were women's rights." <sup>67</sup> Tensions over their protest and the larger argument at hand are evident in the recorded responses. One of the women in the crowd stated that the women protesting were "acting like men" and that they should have gone about it a different way. In response, a participant simply stated that "lesbians have been brushed aside and ignored by the women's movement. We have tried to work thru the planning sessions and have gotten fucked over." <sup>68</sup> They were no longer playing nice. They had been ignored and beaten down and they were not going to play games and use proper means of voicing their opinions; they took matters into their own hands, which these feminists read as "acting like men". The lesbians' refusal to work within the pre-defined confines of gender separated them from their straight feminist compatriots. The lesbians' opponents were using rhetoric of lesbian-baiting, sexist and homophobic language meant to separate feminists from lesbians by establishing lesbian actions as non-normative, further highlighting liberal feminism's close ties to a binary understanding of gender.

Conference attendees, homosexual and heterosexual alike, overwhelmingly recalled the moment positively. Though some disapproved of the lesbians' actions and left, a majority stayed on and were moved to look inward and learn. Members of the audience "took turns coming from the seats, and from the front to discuss their feelings about lesbianism — their fears, their joy,

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<sup>67</sup> Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski, "A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Feminist Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization," *Journal of the History of Sexuality; Austin* 16, no. 1 (January 2007): 95-113,150.

<sup>68</sup> Maxwell, "Menace" Raised Consciousness & Eyebrows"

their doubts, their hopes.”<sup>69</sup> They took the time to learn and share, exactly what the lesbians who protested wanted.

The lesbians who stormed the stage at the Congress to Unite Women in New York made statements about lesbianism that shifted current ideas. They claimed that lesbianism was a political choice, one that allowed for "personhood outside male role distinctions," and was therefore a heightened form of feminist activism because it offered women a way to escape the control of men.<sup>70</sup> These women also challenged heterosexual women and all those afraid of being labelled a lesbian. They told them that being afraid of such a label meant that they were "controlled by male culture", held in place, too afraid of the power to discredit them with sexism and homophobic language.<sup>71</sup>

The end of the sixties was a time for change between lesbian and feminist activism. Liberal feminist groups like NOW evolved and so did their approach to lesbianism, but other more radical groups also came into the picture. Radical activists in liberal spaces found themselves "radical feminist, gay liberationist, and lesbian separatist groups".<sup>72</sup> Unhappy with how it was dealing with lesbian issues, they left. One such person was Rita Mae Brown, former editor of New York NOW's newsletter.<sup>73</sup>

Multiple things of the late 1960s affected NOW's approach.<sup>74</sup> Firstly, the Stonewall riots of 1969 made more visible the rising tensions for homosexuals in America and brought into the

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<sup>69</sup> Maxwell, "Menace" Raised Consciousness & Eyebrows"

<sup>70</sup> Clark Pomerleau, "Empowering Members, Not Overpowering Them: The National Organization for Women, Calls for Lesbian Inclusion, and California Influence, 1960s–1980s," *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 7 (July 30, 2010): 842–61.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 847.

<sup>72</sup> Gilmore and Kaminski, "A Part and Apart." 103.

<sup>73</sup> Alice Echols, "Radicalesbians," in *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History in America*, ed. Marc Stein, vol. 3 (Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), 10–12.

<sup>74</sup> Pomerleau, "Empowering Members, Not Overpowering Them," 844.

spotlight the issues and subsequent responses from the queer community. The Gay Liberation Front, known as GLF, was such a response. Founded in 1969 after the riots, they acknowledged the heteropatriarchy as the oppressor and, as their name suggested, hoped for liberation/sexual liberation.<sup>75</sup>

Queer groups like the GLF impacted the landscape of activism and subsequently the activism of NOW. While lesbianism had been a place of tension in the organization, the group moved to include it in its agenda. It took a while to get to the platform of the national chapter, though, and it was possible only because of those fighting on a smaller scale; the inclusion of fighting for lesbian rights was not the doing of the top officials, but "rather...the result of a collective effort initiated by rank-and-file members." LA NOW passed a resolution in 1969, California followed suit and 1970, and the next year it moved up to the Western Regional Conference.<sup>76</sup> While Betty Friedan had vehemently opposed including the lesbian question, it made its way into her organization. In a pamphlet entitled "Lesbian Rights: A Women's Issue, A Feminist Issue, a NOW Issue" they stated that "since 1971, NOW has recognized lesbian rights as a feminist issue and as a high priority issue on its agenda." Through the usage of "strongly worded national policy" the organization began to support both "legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual preference" and the "repeal of any laws that criminalize sexual activity between consenting adults in private."<sup>77</sup> The Lesbian question became a part of the platform through legalistic and liberal language.

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<sup>75</sup> Andrew J. Brown, "Gay Liberation Front," in *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) History*, ed. Howard Chiang et al., vol. 2 (Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2019), 590–94.

<sup>76</sup> Gilmore and Kaminski, "A Part and Apart," 107.

<sup>77</sup> NOW, "Lesbian Rights: A Women's Issue, A Feminist Issue, a NOW Issue," 1980, Homosexuality/LGBT Collection, SSC-MS-00395, Box 3, Folder 9, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/457> Accessed April 11, 2020.

While NOW passed the lesbian resolution 1971, members on both the local and national level struggled with how lesbian rights and feminism do — and do not — work together.<sup>78</sup> Their proposals and legal loyalties did not speak to eradicating homophobia in the movement or even the group. They were invested in the legal status of lesbians and defending them from things like discrimination and criminalization. They did not state, though, that they wanted to ensure that the feminist movement — or even NOW — would rid itself of its internalized — and even at time blatant — homophobia.

How did NOW move from not formally acknowledging lesbianism at all and informally rejecting it to making it one of their core issues? They found a way to incorporate it into their liberal organization framework. They were able to acknowledge lesbianism as an issue by stating that homophobia and its consequential exclusion of lesbians held back *all* women. Through the pamphlet, the authors claimed that helping the lesbian is really just helping all women, by stating that “in order to secure the rights of ALL women, we must rid our society of the fears, prejudices and laws that prevent ANY woman from realizing her full human potential.”<sup>79</sup> By pitching it as an issue that affects every woman, they could adopt it as a core issue and by invoking the language of sisterhood and universal experiences they could bring homosexual and heterosexual women together for the cause.

They were also able to speak about lesbianism in a way that mirrored discussions around pro-choice discussions about women’s bodies. In discussions around abortion and birth control, NOW spoke broadly about the need for women to have control and have autonomy over their own bodies. They extended that choice rhetoric to sexuality and lesbianism. In the pamphlet they

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<sup>78</sup> Gilmore and Kaminski, “A Part and Apart.” 100.

<sup>79</sup> NOW, “Lesbian Rights.”

connected lesbianism to the larger choice conversation, stating that “fundamental to the struggle for equality for all women is the right of each woman to control her own body.”<sup>80</sup> As an organization, NOW was already having conversations around control of the body and was therefore able to add lesbianism to their platform since it fit neatly inside their pre-existing arguments.

### **Women-identified-women and political lesbianism**

The passing of the lesbian resolution in 1971 cemented lesbianism as an issue included in NOW’s platform nationally. By then, though, many women in NOW had had enough of the group’s liberal anti-lesbian politics. In 1970 one group of radical women disenchanted with NOW left and created their own organization. First known by the name Lavender Menace, they made their debut by storming the previously mentioned 1970 Congress to Unite Women to bring forward the lesbian issue to the conference of feminists. They dug deeper into the politics of lesbianism, portraying the lesbian not simply as a homosexual, but rather as “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.”<sup>81</sup> Shortly after their debut they rebranded as the Radicalesbians, a simple but straightforward name signifying their goals and focus as a group.

That rage was only one part of the woman-identified-woman’s motivations. The Radicalesbians argued that part of the radical nature of the woman-identified-woman was the act of listening to and honoring lived experiences and one’s own feelings, as they stated that she, the

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<sup>80</sup> NOW, “Lesbian Rights.”

<sup>81</sup> Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” 1970, 81, Women’s Liberation Collection, SSC-MS-00408, Box 18, Folder 3, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/459>.



woman-identified-woman, “acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being...”<sup>82</sup> They believed that, by identifying both *with* and *as* a woman, they believed that she stepped outside the restrictive gender binary which allowed for less restricted identity and experience.

That radical acceptance and support of lesbianism was not universal outside queer spaces like that of the Radicalesbians. Many people, including other women and feminists, found issues with lesbians. Feminists and lesbians stepped outside their prescribed roles, as they both subverted feminine stereotypes. Internalized homophobia and a fear of lesbian baiting, though, drove feminists to reject the lesbian. The woman-identified-woman understood and acknowledged these fears but also saw how, in doing so, feminists were falling prey to the power of patriarchal oppression, as “lesbian is the word, the label, the condition that holds women in line.” The word served as a signal to the recipient of the phrase that “she is stepping out of line.”

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Lesbian feminists identified that fear of labels like “lesbian” and “dyke” as lesbian-baiting. The Radicalesbians, acknowledging the damaging nature and subsequent fear-mongering powers of such labels, stated that such feminists “have in most cases gone to great lengths to avoid discussion and confrontation with the issue of lesbianism.”<sup>84</sup> In the movement, as in NOW, many feminists tried to keep the issue out of feminism, not only because some didn’t see it as a feminist issue, but also because some saw it as too controversial and damaging to feminism’s image.

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<sup>82</sup> Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” 81.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 82.

While it was a contentious topic amongst feminist circles, many lesbians thought it was the key to dealing with issues of oppression for lesbians and feminists alike. That is where lesbian feminism comes into play. The Radicalesbians, alongside the Furies, are considered among the first lesbian feminist organizations.<sup>85</sup> They believed that seriously addressing lesbianism as not only an issue but also a viable option was the only way for the women's movement to succeed. As long as the women in the movement feared the label of lesbian, they would never be fully liberated:

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 primary to anything other than man and family – then to that extent she is controlled by the male culture.<sup>86</sup>

Aiming to criticize the lesbian exclusion they were seeing in the movement, they called out the feminists who fell victim to lesbian baiting. To fear the label "lesbian" was to be under the power of "male culture", the exact thing they were organizing to end.

The Furies, a lesbian separatist group, were the perfect foil to NOW. The lesbianism of the Furies was separatist for inherently political reasons; they claimed that they were "separatists who do not work with men, straight or gay, because men are not working to end male supremacy."<sup>87</sup> Lesbian separatism was the only way to truly fight for women and practice feminism; as the word "separatist" implies, they believed that they needed to completely separate from men, romantically, socially, and spatially. Their lesbianism extended into all aspects of life

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<sup>85</sup> Stephanie Gilmore and Anne Collinson, "Lesbian Feminism," in *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History in America*, ed. Marc Stein, vol. 2 (Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), 162–67.

<sup>86</sup> Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," 82

<sup>87</sup> Joan E. Biren et. al., "Editorial: Motive Comes Out!" *Motive* 32, no. 1 (1972): 1. Homosexuality/LGBT Collection, SSC-MS-00395, Box 4, Folder 2, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/457> Accessed April 11, 2020

and did not just stay in the bedroom. To these separatists, “lesbianism...is a political choice.” It was not something that needed to be kept quiet, as assimilationism urged, but rather something that should be shared. To them, it was a choice, something active, something one can control.

An important part of this identity was about with whom you associate, socially and romantically. They excluded men from all of the relationships, not just romantic, “because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance”<sup>88</sup> Lesbianism was not just political because it is a “radical” choice. It was political because *all* relationships are political. With whom you chose to associate was inherently political, as there are power dynamics present in all relationships. To be complacent in a heterosexual relationship was to be complacent in the oppression of women and their lower status.

Lesbian separatists argued that heterosexuality not only aided in oppressing women but also tied them to men. Two such women, Rita Mae Brown and Charlotte Bunch, believed that “heterosexuality separates women from each other; it makes women define themselves through men.” They viewed heterosexuality as inherently flawed, completely incompatible with the goal of ending male supremacy, and therefore saw the issues that lesbians and feminists were trying to deal with as one in the same.<sup>89</sup> To them, both their issues and those of feminists were rooted in male supremacy, and they believed that they all had to fight for each other in order to be truly successful: “Lesbians must become feminists and fight against woman oppression, just as feminists must become lesbians if they hope to end male supremacy.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Bunch, Brown, “What Every Lesbian Should Know,” 4.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 4.

While lesbianism was an important political tactic, it was also relevant on a more personal level. To these radical women, lesbianism served as a lifeline, enabling them to connect on a deeper level across differences. These lesbians believed that in order for feminists to truly connect and relate to other women they had to not only understand others but also themselves. Such introspection was difficult, and even painful, as it required deeply looking inward and addressing uncomfortable truths. The Radicalesbians believed that “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 control another woman is finally to confront one’s self – the self we have gone to such lengths to avoid.”<sup>91</sup> Upon looking deeper, they could find deep-seated issues and feelings.

That introspection, while painful, was an important step in progress. Unless you fully look inward, you cannot accept yourself. That awareness is necessary for a greater feminist consciousness. Male dominated society leaves no room for women to think critically about their lives. There is no space for them to share with others their experiences. Sexist messages of women’s roles permeate society and affect women’s self-esteem greatly. Thus, to understand why feminism is necessary, they need to reflect upon their own positions. This is not supported in male dominated spaces. Only together can women “find, reinforce, and validate our authentic selves.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” 83.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 84.

### **Different Strains of Activism**

As has been noted, lesbianism did not have one singular meaning for feminist and lesbian organizations, and their activisms therefore did not take a singular form either. The liberal tactics of DOB lived on through liberal feminist groups like NOW but more radical groups like the Radicalesbians had an entirely different approach. DOB, an assimilationist group, wanted to claim similarity with heterosexuals and men and gain their trust. They wanted to work with those people, those who were oppressing them, in order to create change. Thus, they were working in the system that was oppressing them. NOW's activism emerged from that respectable and liberal tradition. They worked within oppressive structures to enact change from the inside. Radical lesbians, on the other hand, refused to work within the system and identify and associate with those who were oppressing. They did not believe that a broken system could help them, and thus they wanted to overhaul it. DOB laid the groundwork for respectable liberal activism and NOW followed suit. Radical groups strayed from that tradition and forged their own path. All of these groups (eventually) acknowledged lesbianism as cause for which to fight. Thus, lesbian activism existed on a wide spectrum of political ideologies, including liberal and radical activism and the space in-between.

One clear difference liberal and radical approaches to organizing and understanding of lesbianism is the element of difference. The radical and separatist lesbians of the early 1970s found heterosexuality to be oppressive and aimed to highlight their lesbianism, not hide it. They were not "just like" other women and they wanted that to be known. That was an important part of their organizing platform, as they believed their commitment to lesbianism enhanced their political agenda, leading them to have a truly radical and inclusive feminism inaccessible to those still engaging with men. They were women-identified-women and their lesbianism was

essential to their personal and political selves. Liberal organizations, on the other hand, tried to eliminate differences and claim solidarity with straight women. NOW, in order to accept lesbianism as a legitimate part of their platform, added it to their larger framework of control, arguing that supporting lesbianism as a valid sexuality meant more broadly supporting *all* women in their right to bodily autonomy. It was just like other issues, they argued, and they fought against the radical claims of the political powers of lesbianism.

That difference in opinion on the political power of lesbianism was also a key tension between the two groups and liberal and radical groups generally. NOW, in their early stages, found lesbianism to be disruptive to their own political agenda but apolitical in nature due to its irrelevance in the context to their own activism. While NOW became more accepting of lesbianism over time, they did so in a passive way, adding lesbianism to one of their existing platforms about women's bodily autonomy, therefore ignoring the political possibilities that the women-identified-women and radical lesbian separatists identified. Their identity had much more to do with the people with whom they associated and interacted, not just the gender of the person with whom they slept.

The issue of respectability and familial tendencies differed among these organizations. The women-identified-women “[rejected] the nuclear family as the basic unit of production and consumption in capitalistic society” found inherent issue with the heterosexist society, and was unwilling to work in such an institution of power.<sup>93</sup> NOW, on the other hand, worked directly with(in) paternalistic and homophobic institutions of power, like the legal system, to enact

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<sup>93</sup> Bunch, Brown, “What Every Lesbian Should Know”, 6.

change. Lesbian separatists — as their name suggests — wanted to entirely separate themselves from those institutions of power.

### **Conclusion**

The activism of NOW and the Radicalesbians differed greatly. Their juxtaposition highlights the traditional differences between liberal and radical feminists. They epitomize two traditional camps of feminist thought and the particular ideological differences between them. While they differed in beliefs and tactics, they both shared certain shortcomings. Something both groups failed to acknowledge properly was race and how it worked with gender to create compounding oppression. While both groups claimed to be working toward ending oppressions, neither group was thinking very critically about race.

Both groups lacked an understanding of intersectionality and interlocking systems of oppression. This informed their feminisms and activism and thus they were both overwhelmingly white organizations. This problem was so much larger than these two organizations, and was a point of great contention and tension in both the lesbian and feminist movements. While their issues were excluded from the mainstream movement, women of color did not fall into the background but rather fought to have their voices heard. In groups across the spectrum of political ideology, women of color identified and fought for their needs.

### Chapter 3

#### **Black Feminist Thought: An Intersectional Solution**

In 1977, over 2000 delegates attended the National Women's Conference in Houston. Described as a "rainbow of women," the group included delegates from a wide range of racial, ethnic, social, economic, and sexual identities and backgrounds.<sup>94</sup> The goal of the conference was to achieve unity among the women's movement, something much needed after the tumultuous past decade of women's activism. Because of that focus on diversity and inclusion, the conference is remembered as a "major victory" for feminism.<sup>95</sup> Recollections of the event are utopic, and while it is dangerous to remember something so idealistically, they did indeed do something right: ensure that women of color were represented in the delegates. The exclusion of women of color in feminism, alongside lesbians, was one of the things that contributed to the tumultuous nature of the movement.

Ensuring diverse representation is easier said than done. Those at the top found that diversifying the delegate pool was a delicate process. There were tensions about the roles of quotas in ensuring the diversity. Theoretically it is uncontroversial to support an inclusivity and diversity, but putting it to practice is a different story entirely. The tension between theory and practice gets to the root of the problems women of color faced in these feminist spaces: the many things that excluded women of color from these spaces in the first place. Many power structures have acted together to create the specific socio-political situation for Black women. One way to understand that is through the lens of intersectionality.

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<sup>94</sup> Doreen Mattingly and Jessica Nare, "'A Rainbow of Women': Diversity and Unity at the 1977 U.S. International Women's Year Conference" 26, no. 2 (2014): 89.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 89.



Legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in the late 1980s to describe the double discrimination with which Black women have dealt and continue to deal with in their everyday lives. She did this because she saw a lack of attention paid to the specific discrimination Black women faced, as their oppression was categorized simply as either racism or sexism. This, Crenshaw believed, did not cut it, and there was something more going on. She thought that that idea of discrimination was too limited and believed that Black women “experience discrimination as Black women — not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.”<sup>96</sup>

Intersectionality centers Black women, rooting the analysis of discrimination in a complex understanding of race and gender. When addressing the discrimination Black women face, a more critical and inclusive approach is required, thus demanding a broadened understanding of oppression. It involves altering both feminist and anti-racist discussions. Crenshaw stated that “for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating "women's experience" or "the Black experience" into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast.”<sup>97</sup> This mode of thought more broadly focused on the larger strategies to liberation that harkened back to the philosophies of groups like the Radicalesbians, who expanded their understanding of oppression to be rooted in sexism and patriarchy; Crenshaw expanded upon that further, adding a more critical understanding of interlocking oppressions.

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<sup>96</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1: 31.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

Intersectionality does more than just address the issues of Black women. When applied, the framework addresses the complex realities of discrimination in a more general sense. Crenshaw stated, “with Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis.”<sup>98</sup> With this framework we can not only make sense of discrimination against Black women but also discrimination and power structures on a broader level.

### **Critiques of Women’s Liberation**

While Crenshaw did not coin the term intersectionality until the 1980s, Black feminist thinkers were acknowledging the specific interlocking oppression that they faced in their daily lives long before then. They were especially aware of this oppression in activist spaces, as none addressed their issues accurately.<sup>99</sup> White feminists claimed sisterhood and the shared oppression among all women. Radical lesbian separatists claimed the possibility of some kind of universalism; if straight women would simply reject heterosexuality then they could have worked in tandem to defeat the main nemeses: sexism and the patriarchy. These universalizations, while seemingly uplifting and aiding in community building, are incredibly limited and exclusive, as they do little more than nod to race and the complexities. Black women

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<sup>98</sup> Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” 140.

<sup>99</sup> John Hartwell Moore, ed., “Black Feminism in the United States,” in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, vol. 1 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008), 198–200.

disagreed with white feminism, as those complexities were central to their understandings and responses to oppression.

In our popular memory of women's activism, white women take center stage. We remember women like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan and they become the image of the movement. Women of color were there, organizing the whole time, often going unseen or simply forgotten after the fact. One such woman was Florynce "Flo" Kennedy.<sup>100</sup> While we do not remember her name alongside the other key players, she was vital. Author Cherie Randolph claims that "during the late 1960s and 1970s, Kennedy was the most well-known Black feminist in the country."<sup>101</sup> Kennedy was a key player in second wave feminism but she is forgotten, excluded from our popular memory of the movement, never mentioned in the short, or even long, list of influential activists. Randolph further notes that the "erasure of her critical role speaks to the ways in which feminist literature has failed to see black women as progenitors of contemporary feminism."<sup>102</sup> Her exclusion from the narrative speaks not only of the failure to craft a truly correct and inclusive narrative but also of the discrimination that has existed and continues to exist in activist spaces.

An analysis of Kennedy also offers a look into the intersection between Black power and feminist movements. Though thought of as entirely separate, or even at odds, Kennedy worked in both spheres simultaneously and "grounded her critiques of sexism within the Black Power

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<sup>100</sup> Barbara Morgan, "Kennedy, Florynce (1916–2000)," in *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, ed. Anne Commire, vol. 8 (Detroit, MI: Yorkin Publications, 2002), 569–70.

<sup>101</sup> Sherie Randolph, "'Women's Liberation or . . . Black Liberation, You're Fighting the Same Enemies' *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, 223.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 223.

movement's radical criticism of racism and empire."<sup>103</sup> She worked with, and inside, organizations like NOW, to bridge the gap between the movements.<sup>104</sup>

Toni Morrison, Black feminist and author, echoed Kennedy's thoughts on the exclusion and racism of feminist movements. She identified the respectability politics of early twentieth century feminism that bled into the second wave, claiming that the movement was elitist and therefore "not paying much attention to the problems of most black women, which are not in getting into the labor force but in being upgraded in it."<sup>105</sup> Morrison addressed main differences between the goals of women's liberation and what Black women really needed. Black women of women's liberation were not fighting to enter the workforce; they were fighting for better jobs, safer jobs, more protected jobs.

Similar tensions between white and Black feminism existed regarding birth control and abortion. According to Linda La Rue, white women decided when was best and most convenient to have children; Black women had to decide if they were able to. The "choice" is not the same among those two groups.<sup>106</sup> White feminism, in this and many instances, approached the issue differently. This disparity can be seen as an issue relating to power structures. One common critique of women's liberation was that they, in trying to overcome the issue of sexism, were reinforcing a variation of that power structure. Morrison reflected upon that by stating that "feminists talk of liberation while somebody's nice black grandmother shoulders the daily responsibility of child rearing and floor mopping and the liberated one comes home to examine the housekeeping, correct it, and be entertained by the children."<sup>107</sup> She calls out a place of

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<sup>103</sup> Randolph, "Women's Liberation or . . . Black Liberation, You're Fighting the Same Enemies," 226.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 233.

<sup>105</sup> Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," *The New York Times*, August 22, 1971.

<sup>106</sup> Linda La Rue, "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 7 (1970): 36-42.

<sup>107</sup> Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib."

tension in women's liberation. Those (upper class white) women fighting for their rights were also the ones employing Black women as maids and domestic workers. The white women, by exploiting Black women, were able to go off and enter the workforce, or let go of some of their “female” responsibilities. This was a perpetuation of the power structures that kept Black women down.

Because of this, many Black women felt ostracized from the movement: "As the women's movement came of age and acquired political power, it alienated black women and caused them to form alternative feminist responses."<sup>108</sup> Neither the Black nor women's liberation movements were working for them. Morrison agreed with this, saying that Black women were “not convinced that Women's Lib serves their best interest or that it can cope with the uniqueness of their experience, which is itself an alienating factor.”<sup>109</sup>

Some had even more scathing opinions of women's liberation, believing that it reaped the benefits without doing any of the real work: "It is possible that women's liberation has developed a sudden attachment to the black liberation movement as a ploy to share the attention that it has taken blacks 400 years to generate."<sup>110</sup> By leaning on the work in organizing done by Black Americans, white women put in little work to receive much reward.

Another place of contention in feminism for Black women was in white women claiming the commonality of womanhood. Many Black women believed that there was no way to truly compare the hardships faced by Black and white women, that "any attempt to analogize black oppression with the plight of the American white woman has the validity of comparing the neck

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<sup>108</sup> Tracey A Fitzgerald, *The National Council of Negro Women and the Feminist Movement, 1935-1975* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1985), 55.

<sup>109</sup> Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib.”

<sup>110</sup> La Rue, “The Black Movement and Women's Liberation,” 37.

of the hanging man with the hands of an amateur mountain climber with rope burns."<sup>111</sup> Some thought that their issues as Black women were drastically different from those of white women, and any attempt to find commonality was offensive and inaccurate.

On the other hand, some Black women were supportive of and attracted to women's liberation for a variety of reasons. Many Black women acknowledged that mainstream feminism did not fully address their issues and therefore moved to create their own Black feminist spaces. For example, Francis Beal, who was active in the civil rights movement in SNCC and NCNW, formed an organization which would later become the Third World Women's Alliance.<sup>112</sup>

Writer Mary Ann Weathers was complimentary of women's liberation. She believed that "Women's Liberation should be considered as a strategy for an eventual tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men, and children. We are now speaking of real revolution (armed). "<sup>113</sup> The civil rights movement was not a revolution. To truly become a revolution, a movement cannot fight for one kind of equality, grounding itself in hierarchies of race or gender. She viewed it as more expansive and inclusive than civil rights:

The potential for such a movement [women's liberation] is boundless. Where as in the past only certain type Black people have been attracted to the movement — younger people, radicals, and militants. The very poor, the middle class, older people and women have not become aware or have not been able to translate their awareness into action. Women's liberation offers such a channel for these energies.<sup>114</sup>

The Black liberation movement had something to learn from women's liberation. Women's liberation attracted a wide variety of people, something Black liberation did not do.

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<sup>111</sup> La Rue, "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation," 40.

<sup>112</sup> Fitzgerald 55-56

<sup>113</sup> Mary Ann Weathers, "An Argument For Black Women's Liberation As a Revolutionary Force," *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* 1, no. 2 (February 1969).

<sup>114</sup> Weathers, "An Argument For Black Women's Liberation As a Revolutionary Force."

Weathers went as far to disagree with many other Black feminist voices, believing that finding commonality among women as oppressed people was powerful. Part of advancing the position of Black women was coalition building. If able to find commonality among groups of oppressed people, she believed that Black women would "be in a position soon of having to hook up with the rest of the oppressed peoples of the world who are involved in liberation just as we are, and we had better be ready to act."<sup>115</sup> She highlighted the importance and process of coalition building and finding common ground across differences. By finding commonality among women, they "can begin to talk to other women with this common factor and start building links with them and thereby build and transform the revolutionary force we are now beginning to amass."<sup>116</sup>

Even Morrison and La Rue, who had critiqued the movement, did have some positive comments. Morrison stated, at the end of her critique of women's liberation, that they may have been correct in their connection of women's rights to human rights. "They see," she said, "perhaps, something real: women talking about human rights rather than sexual rights — something other than a family quarrel, and the air is shivery with possibilities."<sup>117</sup> La Rue agreed that they were doing something right in regards to the frame and central tenants of their fight. If one could learn something from women's liberation, she said it would be "that roles are not ascribed and inherent, but adopted and interchangeable."<sup>118</sup>

At the core of many of these differences is the concept of commonality. Would it be beneficial to expand membership of groups and movements? Are there things to be learned from

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<sup>115</sup> Weathers, "An Argument For Black Women's Liberation As a Revolutionary Force."

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib."

<sup>118</sup> La Rue, "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation."

including others, or does that eliminate the problems specific to those that experience multiple oppressions simultaneously? The root of the problem was loyalty. Many fighting for Black liberation found Black women fighting for their own liberation to be betrayal. A part of the civil rights movement was centered around returning manhood and masculinity to the Black man. For some, that was the primary goal, as they thought that Blacks could not be free until Black men had power equivalent to that of white men. Then, with their power, they could lift Blacks up.

Many disagreed with that idea and Weathers, who had criticized Black rights movements, was one of them. "It is really disgusting to hear Black women talk about giving Black men their manhood -- or allowing them to get it," she said. "This is degrading to other Black women and thoroughly insulting to Black men (or at least it should be)."<sup>119</sup> A part of the civil rights movement narrative was defending Black manhood: allowing the Black man to rise up, taking a seat next to the white man in regards to power. Many focused on Black manhood, and therefore enforced a gendered hierarchy. In that circumstance, both Black men and Black women were fighting for the Black man. There was a clear loyalty to race over gender, and many were shocked and offended by those who tried to work for gender over race, or both simultaneously.

Toni Morrison expanded upon that idea, adding that it was not just divisive for Black women to be fighting for their rights as women as well. She went as far to say that Black men would have viewed Black women gaining rights as women as counterproductive for Black men: "The consensus among blacks is that their first liberation has not been realized; unspoken is the conviction of black men that any more aggressiveness and "freedom" for black women would be intolerable, not to say counterrevolutionary."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Weathers, "An Argument For Black Women's Liberation As a Revolutionary Force."

<sup>120</sup> Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib."



### Moving Beyond Critique: The Activisms by Black Lesbians

Morrison and many other Black women had many critiques of white activism. They were not just partaking in critiques though. They were, in many different ways, partaking in their own activism. In addition to doing activism in their own non-white spaces, they were also contributing to a long history of Black feminist thought. Black feminist scholars were writing their own theory and adding to their own academic discourse on issues of oppressions. Black feminist thinker and scholar, Patricia Hill Collins, highlighted the distinctiveness of Black feminist thought, stating that “Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted, African-American women’s intellectual tradition.”<sup>121</sup>

A distinguishing factor in Black feminist thought is its separation from white feminism. Feminist thought often gets lumped together under an assumed white American umbrella, which does a disservice to Black feminist thought and silences Black feminist thinkers. Adrienne Rich, lesbian, feminist, and author, wrote on and questioned the universality of womanhood. She addressed the complications in assuming universal sisterhood and called out the problematic white approach which ignores race. Addressing her fellow feminists, she called upon them to “understand that the intellectual roots of this feminist theory are not white liberalism or white Euro-American feminism, but the analyses of Afro-American experience.”<sup>122</sup>

The distinctive nature of Black feminist thought is not just Black opposition to white activism or Black theories but rather also about Black direct action. Collins states that “This

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<sup>121</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 2000), 2-3.

<sup>122</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Note Toward a Politics of Location,” in *The Essential Feminist Reader* (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2007), 384.

dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, constitutes the politics of U.S. Black feminist thought.”<sup>123</sup>

One such example of Black feminist thought in activism and writing is the Combahee River Collective. The collective was a group of Black lesbians in Boston. The organization was the first of its kind and it “was thus at the forefront of establishing the parameters of a new politics of black feminism.”<sup>124</sup> They released their influential Combahee River Collective statement in 1977, a text not only note-worthy for critiquing white (lesbian) feminist activism but also outlining the tenets and possibilities of Black (lesbian) feminist activism.

The Combahee River Collective was unique and therefore had few other organizations to pull from for inspiration. They had to work from the ground up and thus began their statement by defining what their goals were and what kind of organization they would be:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.<sup>125</sup>

In those two sentences they made explicit for whom they were fighting and whose issues were at the forefront in their organization. Though focusing on abstract ideas like overlapping “systems of oppression”, their intent was clear: they meant to support those who were not receiving support elsewhere. They dealt not only with tangible issues, like those at the forefront in liberal

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<sup>123</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 3.

<sup>124</sup> Nicole Fares, “Combahee River Collective,” in *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) History*, ed. Howard Chiang et al., vol. 1 (Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2019), 390–94.

<sup>125</sup> Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement: The Combahee River Collective,” *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 70, no. 8 (1979): 29.

feminism, but grappled with complex issues, thus forcing those interested in their goals to think deeply and critically on their own.

It was important for them to outline how intentional they were in defining their ideology, tactics, and associations. They stated that their work was grounded in “Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation.”<sup>126</sup> Right off the bat the group acknowledged that their work was focused on a very specific experience: that of Black women. Unlike those that came before, like white women in women’s liberation, they were not claiming to ground their movement in sisterhood which would tie people together across gender and race lines. They were, though, addressing common experiences Black women faced, as Collins stated, “being Black and female in the United States continues to expose African-American women to certain common experiences.”<sup>127</sup> They intentionally invoked the work of Black women before them and focused on these experiences, quoting them as their ideological basis.

They grounded their work in Black feminist thought because white feminist thought had not been inclusive enough to cover or even touch upon issues they face. Failing to address the racial issues involved in their oppression, the overwhelmingly white women’s liberation movement was not welcoming to Black women. Similarly, movements for Black liberation were not critically addressing the specific experiences of women, and they too fell flat. It was out of this context of exclusion and disappointment that Black feminist thought was born. They articulated that “it was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>127</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 23.

politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of black and white men.”<sup>128</sup>

That awareness, while obviously present in their statement, was not inherently easy to come to. The double oppression of race and gender is not easy to articulate, hidden in plain sight. They pointed to the countless Black women who came before them, laid the groundwork, and worked to understand the specific experience of racism and sexism with which Black women have dealt. It was in this context that these Black women believed in coming together of shared experiences, as they stated that “we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression.”<sup>129</sup>

While they believed in coming together over lived experiences and commonalities, they did not condone the separatist actions of white lesbians. White lesbians could come together because of their collective decision to remove men from their lives. They did this because they believed that patriarchy was at the root of their problems. The Combahee River Collective did not agree with that. Their concerns as Black lesbians extended beyond just gendered concerns, as they were trying to deal with multiple institutions of power

That understanding of complex origins of oppression laid the groundwork for their movement, but they took the analysis further to explicitly name yet another perpetrator of their oppression: capitalism. They believed that “the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.” This is yet another way the Combahee identified the complex origins of oppression.

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<sup>128</sup> Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement”, 30.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 30.

White lesbians did not go as far to say any of this. Combahee was wary of adopting anti-capitalist acts blindly without acknowledging the other interlocking systems of oppression, though. They stated that “we are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation.”<sup>130</sup> They were, at every level, critical of institutions of power but self-critical of their own organizing and activism

The specific oppressions with which Black women had to grapple that the Combahee River Collective outlined would be coined as intersectionality twenty years later by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw, in her foundational text on intersectionality stated that “Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes.”<sup>131</sup>

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.<sup>132</sup>

This parallels what Combahee outline long before Crenshaw put a word to it, proving their radical and critical nature.

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<sup>130</sup> Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” 32.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 32.

## Conclusion

Centering Black women did not mean solving issues that only Black women faced. On the contrary, it meant – and still means – addressing a wide range of oppressions which affect a breadth of people. By centering Black women in the conversation just like the Combahee River Collective, we see the complexities of oppressions, and get a richer understanding of how they work together to oppress a variety of people, not just Black women. Looking at Black women's experiences still offers a rich insight into larger institutional problems. In reflecting on the lasting impact of the Combahee River Collective, author Taylor points to our country's current issues and states that “looking at the condition of Black women reveals the utter inadequacy of what qualifies as social welfare in the United States today.”<sup>133</sup>

While the Combahee River Collective focused on the specific experiences of Black women and lesbians, their reach extended much further than the spaces they occupied. Their radical and self-described socialist position greatly affected and contributed to the radical and revolutionary left.<sup>134</sup> Their ideas about overlapping oppressions included more than just race and gender and speak to oppression in many ways. The Combahee River Collective and their transformative statement continue to radicalize activists and influence different strains of activism, not just strictly socialist. One such place we can see this is in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

Alicia Garza, a founding activist of the BLM movement, has highlighted the impact that Combahee and the writings of other radical queer women of color had on her current political

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<sup>133</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective,” *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 70, no. 8 (January 2019): 20–28.

<sup>134</sup> Taylor, “Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective,” 21.

self. As she began to identify the impacts of patriarchal oppression and sexism in Black spaces, she realized how ingrained patriarchy was in all spaces, including the activist spaces she occupied. While the Combahee River Collective released their influential statement almost half a century ago, their words are timeless, and Garza leaned upon them for support when dealing with such patriarchal issues, noting “I think for me Combahee and their work was my cushion and a balm to soothe dynamics that were so troubling and didn’t feel like they were going away.”<sup>135</sup>

She further invoked the words and activism of Combahee when trying to tackle sexism and patriarchy in the BLM movement and other Black activist spaces. She recalled that “what Combahee makes me think about now is that that was such a powerful statement of unity and clarity about what brings us together, even though we don’t all live the same life. That’s the next step our movement has to make.”<sup>136</sup> A group formed long ago assisted in the trajectory of a group like BLM, because their politics are radical and timeless.

Indeed, Combahee offers a model of radical activism that is still well positioned to teach current and future generations of activists. They broke out of assimilationist, racist, sexist, and classist movements to carve out their own space in both theory and activism. While often exclusive and confined, lesbian organizers such as DOB, NOW, and the Radicalesbians, began the fight, and laid the foundation that Combahee would build off, break from, and expand. Combahee called the shortcomings of those organizations to the attention of the larger arena of women’s activism. Knowing their precarious position, Combahee acknowledged the work they had to put in because no one else would: “As black feminists and lesbians we know that we have

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<sup>135</sup> “How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective,” accessed April 20, 2020.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.”

Their enduring words of desperation and their persistent determination in the face of oppression continue to serve as a call for a more radical activism for all who are disadvantaged and marginalized. DOB, NOW, Radicalesbians all offered different tactics of how lesbians should organize for their rights, but it was Combahee who most exemplified-and continues to offer- a inclusive and compelling vision of “how to get free”.



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**ACADEMIC VITA**  
Lily Murray – she/her/hers

**EDUCATION**

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**The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA | Class of 2020**

- BA History & BA Women's, Gender, Sexuality Studies
- Schreyer Scholar, Schreyer Honors College
- Dean's List, Fall 2016 — Present

**EXPERIENCE AND EMPLOYMENT**

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**Student Outreach and Engagement Intern | Penn State University Libraries, University Park, PA | Fall 2018 — May 2020**

- Collaborate with library colleagues to create programming
  - Curate both digital and physical display of Special Collections materials focusing on local queer history
  - Organize Wikipedia Edit-a-thons to diversify editors and subjects of Wikipedia pages using a variety of library resources
- Collaborate with student organizations to provide outreach programming such as book clubs and zine workshops
- Support Collection Development in the library
  - Assist in selecting materials for the Zine Collection in Special Collections, focusing on activism related materials
  - Develop the Leisure Reading collection by selecting new materials on a monthly basis, focusing on independently published books and diverse authors and themes
- Create and maintain displays for the Leisure Reading and Viewing collections

**Children's Department Intern | Northland Public Library, Pittsburgh, PA | May 2018 — August 2018**

- Assisted in the planning and executing of programming
- Completed a variety of tasks and everyday work, including assisting patrons at the reference desk and facilitating the daily summer readings activities
- Learned processes for other library departments

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#### **Erickson Discovery Grant | Summer 2019**

- Supports undergraduate engagement to complete original research
- Award used to support archival research for senior honors thesis

#### **Mimi Barash Coppersmith Endowed Scholarship | Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Spring 2019 and Spring 2020**

- Recognizes superior academic records and outstanding academic success

#### **Whitaker Award | Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Spring 2018**

- Recognizes excellence of academic work, service, and leadership both within and outside of the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

#### **Phi Alpha Theta National History Honor Society, Member | Spring 2018 Inductee**

### **PRESENTATIONS**

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- Murray, L. (2020, April) *Archival Research as a Model for Exploratory Research*. Poster session presented at the Undergraduate Research Exhibition, Penn State University.
- Murray, L. (2020, March) *How can we study the history of lesbian activism to move toward a more radical and inclusive feminism?* Lightning Talk presented at "Moments of Change: A Century of Women's Activism" Launch Event, Penn State Liberal Arts, Penn State University.
- Murray, L. (2019, November) *WGSS Wikipedia Edit-a-thon: Tackling the Gender Gap*. Poster session presented at the NWSA Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA.
- Murray, L. & Fargo, H. (2019, June) *Organizing a student-driven Wikipedia Edit-a-thon*. Poster session presented at the ALA Annual Conference & Exhibition, Washington, D.C

### **COMMITTEES**

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- Women's Activism Steering Committee for the College of the Liberal Arts, January 2020 — May 2020
- Student Representative for Dean Search Committee Penn State University Libraries, January 2020 — May 2020