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TSEM 102: Towson Students in the Upheaval of the 20th Century

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Final Essay

The Marginalization of Lesbian-Feminism at Towson State College During the 1970s

As a college traditionally dominated by women in the heart of metropolitan Baltimore, Towson's college campus (then called TSC, or Towson State College) was not only a living site for the women's liberation movement; it also bore witness to the gay liberation movement's revitalization, which took place after the Stonewall Riots reinvigorated the cause across the U.S. Naturally, these two movements were bound to interact.

At Towson in the 1970s, lesbians were marginalized such to the extent that they were virtually absent from the mainstream women's liberation movement on-campus. They were pushed to the periphery of the movement due to "lavender menace" anxiety that was circulating in liberal feminist circles at the time, and their isolation out of these spaces was only further exacerbated by the uphill battle being fought by all gay students for their visibility and rightful spot in TSC's community.

1. Initial Reception of the Gay Liberation Movement at TSC (March 1971)

The gay liberation movement initially rides into the campus consciousness on the same wave of 1960's and '70s revolutionary hope that embraced progressive movements before it.

Articles from *The Towerlight*, TSC's school newspaper, that cover gay liberation date back as early as 1971. Reprinted from the Cuyhoga College *Commuter* on p. 10 of *The Towerlight's* March 12 issue is the article, "Homophile groups seek liberation from repression," whose opening paragraph reads:

"Two years ago, the New York police department staged a routine raid on Christopher Street's Stonewall [Inn], a popular homosexual bar in Greenwich Village, and sparked a gay revolution which has shaken the sexual attitudes of an entire society. It was Greenwich Village, often considered the world capitol of homosexuality, which saw the birth of the Gay Liberation Front, the last and most far-reaching of homophile groups."

First, an important piece of context regarding the "routine raid" this article references:

The Stonewall Riots of 1969 are often cited as the most important catalyst not only for the American gay liberation movement, but for the galvanization of gay rights activism worldwide. LGBT patrons of the Stonewall Inn made history at on June 28 at 1:20 a.m. in their resistance against one such raid; a resistance that would serve as the spark that would ignite six days' worth of riots and protests throughout the Village against society's treatment of gay people (Holland).

The riots gave rise to a number of gay activist organizations, including the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), dubbed by the article itself as "*...the most revolutionary of the gay revolutionaries.*" This article relays to TSC the message that the formations of organizations like GLF is likely a portent of the future for their own campus's community, adding that "*Gay lib has also organized many chapters on college campuses throughout the country to work for gay student rights.*"

Further features in this issue of *The Towerlight* seem to reflect a new interest, perhaps even goodwill toward the discussion of gay issues. In "Homosexual discusses the 'gay life' in

society; its morals and implications” (8-9) a *Towerlight* editor interviews an anonymous lesbian. While it is true that sometimes interviews are published with an ulterior motive to support some agenda or slander a group of people, this was certainly not the case here: the editor takes care to say in a preface, “*The following interview is with a female homosexual – a lesbian. She speaks only for herself and not the gay community as a whole,*” a disclaimer the editor probably would not take care to make if they were of ill intent; and it is evident, from the length of the responses, that the interviewer succeeded both in asking questions of substance, and in sitting back to really listen and let the interviewee speak the truths of her experience.

Printed beneath this interview is “Reflections on an evening in the Gay World” (9), an article similarly written with the intent of understanding the gay experience. Instead of an interview, its (anonymous) author documents her experience going out to a gay bar with a lesbian friend, and again, it takes care not to skew its perspective outside the record of observations being made. In this case, the author even writes in a pointed show of support at the end of the article: “*So, the ultimate conclusion to all this is: ‘Gay’ people are just that, people – human beings.*” Both of these articles indicate an openness to the conversation of gay liberation uncommon of the time.

Finally, -- and perhaps most relevant, -- is the article, “Homosexuals are not enemies of the people” (7), a special supplement to the issue. It is, without a doubt, the single most overt page in its show of support for what the budding gay liberation movement is trying to accomplish, asserting that “*We must gain security in ourselves and therefore have respect and feelings for all oppressed people.*” Beyond that, it is an explicit call to allyship between the gay and women’s liberation movements, and the rest of Towson’s campus community:

...[T]here's nothing to say that a homosexual cannot also be a revolutionary. And maybe I'm not injecting some of my prejudice by saying that 'even a homosexual can be a revolutionary.' Quite on the contrary, maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary.

When we have revolutionary conferences, rallies and demonstrations there should be full participation of the gay liberation movement and the women's liberation movement. Some groups might be more revolutionary than others. We shouldn't use the actions of a few to say that they're all reactionary or counterrevolutionary because they're not."

It goes without saying that these sentiments were remarkably ahead of their time; such a direct address not only of the status of gay liberation as it stood with the mainstream heterosexual culture, but of the obstacles present at the intersection of gay and women's liberation indicates that perhaps one can expect Towson's campus to make a fine environment for the progress of both simultaneously.

But before turning back to evidence from Towson's archives, a macroscale overview of the intersection of both movements is warranted.

2. Context: A Brief History of Lesbian-Feminism Throughout the 1970s

During the 1960s, heterosexual feminists were resistant to the open participation of lesbians and the incorporation of lesbian issues into their agenda. The resistance was due to a myriad of reasons, but in any case, the exclusion of lesbians was uniformly reinforced by a growing sentiment that lesbianism would pose a threat to the overall credibility of the women's liberation movement (Weatherband). This culminated during the First Congress to Unite Women in the November of 1969, at which Betty Freidan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* and sitting president of the National Organization for Women (abbr. "NOW") who, incidentally, was

hosting the Congress, referred to the growing visibility of lesbian feminists as the “Lavender Menace.”

Their ostracization at the First Congress would move lesbians to organize and delineate the exact obstacles they faced within the women’s liberation movement, such those identified in “The Woman Identified Woman,” a 1970 manifesto by the Radicalesbians that would later be known as the most culturally significant articulation of these obstacles. This is due in no small part to their actions at the Second Congress later that year, at which the Radicalesbians would attempt to rush the stage and distribute copies of “The Woman Identified Woman”; a show of resistance that would move the Congress, in its final assembly, to pass pro-lesbian resolutions – effectively recognizing lesbians’ place in the greater feminist movement for the first time.

Now, the landscape of second-wave feminism was home to many diverse ideas, but in a general sense, feminists had divided themselves into two general camps by the dawn of the decade, these being the camps of **liberal feminism** (e.g., the politics of NOW) and **radical feminism** (e.g., the politics found in groups like The Redstockings, who organized the famous “No More Miss America!” protests of 1968) (Robin). Whereas liberal feminists preferred a *reactive* approach to their activism, inasmuch that their goals started and ended at simply “fighting against oppression” as those instances of oppression would arise, radical feminists sought an *active* one, in that it they wanted to dismantle the institutions of oppression before they could begin to do the oppressing. In order to accomplish this ambitious goal, radical feminism took great care to analyze the inner workings of the oppression women faced under patriarchy, eventually reasoning out that that patriarchal oppression 1) served as the template upon which all other forms of oppression have historically been based upon, and 2) is directly linked to

women's bodily autonomy, a link that can manifest itself either on the micro scale (e.g., rape, as committed by men against women) or the macro scale (e.g., the passing of anti-abortion laws).

Enter the lesbians. It was immediately clear how compatible radical feminist ideals were with their community, so lesbian feminists wasted no time seeking to incorporate lesbianism into radical feminist politics. To accomplish this, lesbian feminists drew upon a central tenet to feminist philosophy, the notion that "The Personal is Political"¹, in suggesting that perhaps lesbianism was *the most* legitimate way to practice feminist politics; because after all, it erased male oversight as it existed on the sexual (re: the most intimately personal) level.

This argument proved more than adequate at validating lesbians as radical feminists; in fact, it was so persuasive that lesbians were to be espoused as the "vanguard" of radical feminist theory from 1970 up until 1975 at the latest (the year lesbian-feminism would experience its second "identity shift"). It fostered the inception of **lesbian-feminist collectives**, a phrase used to describe self-sustaining communities of women and lesbians; as well as **lesbian separatism**, the political theory behind the lesbian-feminist collective lifestyle. The idea was that if women severed ties with men down to the communal (re: personal) level, not only would they as *individuals* be able to achieve self-realization free from the confines of patriarchy; but perhaps the very structures they were removing themselves from, those that upheld patriarchy, would get shaken up, too (or at the very least, have their integrity questioned). The most high-profile name attached to lesbian separatism was that of The Furies Collective (est. 1971), a vocal lesbian-feminist collective of women who, according to Myers, "*believed that every woman must 'come out' as a woman-identified woman or be subjected to male supremacy in all of its economic,*

¹ See 1969 essay, "The Personal is Political"; a watershed text for the women's lib movement written by Carol Hanisch, a radical feminist and one of the minds behind 1968's "No More Miss America!" protests.

personal, and political implications” (167). They published a radical newspaper (also titled *The Furies*) 1971 to 1973, a first-time projection of lesbian voices across the United States. Their platform also meant that they would receive the brunt of punishment and strawman-ification from critics of radical feminism: for example, in the accusation that they were **female chauvinists** (an inversion of the term “male chauvinism” denoting the superiority of men/men’s ways and inferiority of women/women’s ways). (Myers)

The Furies Collective disbanded in 1972, an event which Weatherband describes as connected to “[the] more insular and isolated experience” that separatism had encouraged in their lives. Whether this was truly causation or mere correlation, their dissolution would prove a portent of the future for the way lesbians had been participating politically in the movement. Echols cites 1975 as the point past which “...radical feminism began to flounder,” as far as its longevity and efficiency were perceived. Instead, **cultural feminism** begins to take form in its place, which she describes as being characterized by the creation of a “female counterculture” instead of a political means to an end “[in] opposing male supremacy”. Mary Daly, a self-described radical lesbian feminist of the time, articulates this shift in attitude rather succinctly in her book, *Beyond God the Father* (1973):

“What is happening is an emergence of woman-consciousness such as has never before taken place. It is unimaginative and out of touch with what is happening in the woman's movement to assume that the becoming of women will simply mean uncritical acceptance of structures, beliefs, symbols, norms, and patterns of behavior that have been given priority by society under male

domination, Rather, this becoming will act as catalyst for radical change in our culture.... What is at stake is a real leap in human evolution, initiated by women."²

Much like the anti-establishment countercultural revolution of the 1960s, cultural feminism quickly transcended its origin in politics: a whole new genre of music, women's music, manifested as an extension of consciousness-raising efforts made by groups like the Redstockings, for instance (Matthews); and key participants in cultural feminism (such as Mary Daly herself) employed their experiences in literature and academia.

Needless to say, throughout the 1970s, lesbian feminists were an active agent in shaping the direction, discussions, and legacy of the women's liberation movement. The question is, would lesbian feminism then surface as a visible sect of feminist activity on campus, or would it be pushed to the periphery?

3.1. Fanfare Without Follow-Through: The Post-Stonewall Dismissal of Gay Lib at Towson

To answer that question, a check-in on the general state of the gay liberation movement at TSC is warranted.

Unfortunately, conducting this check-in is a difficult task. There is a massive archival dead zone, between 1973 and 1978, of further *Towerlight* gay lib movement coverage at TSC. The last we hear before the outage comes from p. 5 of March 16, 1973's issue, in an article titled, "Gay Liberation hits TSC campus" (Michael Young). It announces the formation of the Gay Student Alliance (GSA), the first attempt at creating a union for gay students:

² These quotes from Mary Daly and Alice Echols are written as they appear in Kathy Rudy's "Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory."

“The Gay Student Alliance is a newly formed (and as yet unrecognized) campus organization which recognizes as its particular concern the special needs and interests of gay students. “

This is a hopeful note, but the GSA never did get officially recognized by SGA; thus, it fell apart later that year (Knox).

It takes five whole years for another attempt to be made. In 1978 the Gay People’s Alliance (GPA) is founded, and this time, SGA votes in favor of its recognition – *unanimously!* (*TTL* 5/5/1978, p. 1 and p. 5). This is a huge win for the progress of the movement, and especially considering the gaping void in the archives up until this point, this seems to allude to a perhaps thriving gay liberation movement on campus.

But a disheartening development is on the horizon: as the next fall semester arrives, the GPA’s first-ever proposed budget of \$84 is rejected by the SGA (*Towerlight* 11/10/1978, p. 1 and p. 6) after elections bring about a change in leadership on the Board. Left without the funds needed to hold basic club operations, the union is again forced to disband.

Unfortunately, while lesbians in feminism are certainly making waves in women’s lib across the country, there are still hurdles that gay liberation activists have not yet cleared at TSC. It is with this awareness in mind we should turn back toward campus feminism.

3.1. Early 1970s: “Lavender Menace” Fear Permeates the Rhetoric of Feminist Defenses

Despite its bustling feminist community, there did exist an air of harsh scrutiny toward women’s liberation on TSC’s campus. Documented instances of this, as found in *The Towerlight*, are related in that the critics are all (unsurprisingly) men, and in that these critics can all call to mind a very particular strawman for the movement along the lines of:

“The radical bra-burners and men haters that gave the movement its initial impetus have given way, hopefully, to level-headed thinkers...” – Ward Smith’s “A cause polluted by fanatics” (Towerlight February 18, 1972 p. 10)

“Radical bra-burners” references a myth attached to the Redstockings, the group behind the “No More Miss America!” protests of 1968. The target of ridicule, then, is pretty clearly radical feminists; and given the year, lesbians are somewhat inseparable from the imagery of what radical feminism looks like right now.

The overt implication of lesbians in this stereotype would not appear first in a critic’s words on feminism, but rather, the words of one of its defendants:

“The Women’s Liberation movement has been castigated, attacked, and branded as a group of ‘bra-burning dykes.’ (...)

“Women’s liberation is concerned with the individual, not just the woman. It is concerned with humanism – not simply ‘womanism.’ People involved with the movement desire to guarantee each individual the freedom to do as he pleases, regardless of traditional modes of existence.”

–Brenda Gilhooly’s “Concerned with humanism”, p. 10 of Feb 18, 1972’s Towerlight

This, to me, reads as a very clear re-enactment of the “credibility threat” fears surrounding lesbianism in the late 1960s and early ‘70s; doubly so when considering that by now, The Furies Collective have a platform and are in the public eye. Much of the marginalization of lesbians in feminism seems to perpetuate itself upon a hyper-awareness of public perception; therefore, it would check out for Gilhooly to reframe feminism as “humanism” in order to appeal to skeptics and critics if she, too, was concerned in that way. In

preserving the image of the feminist movement, it was deemed necessary, by heterosexual liberal feminists, to establish common ground between defendant and accuser: that “nobody is trying to just *disregard men.*” Lesbians – both in a superficial sense, and in the sense that 1972 is the year of The Furies, and the height of lesbian separatism – are regarded as the epitome of, “*disregards men.*” Thus, in liberal feminists’ attempts to concede some ground for the sake of argument, lesbians get thrown under the bus. What results is the marginalization of one of the single most influential groups in the entire women’s lib movement, to the point of near erasure.

3.3. Late 1970s: “MZZZ Rich” Close Analysis and Closing Thoughts

Good, specific references to either gay and women’s lib as they interacted or lesbian-feminism as a phenomenon itself were unfortunately very hard to come by in my research. However, I did find one particularly (ahem,) rich source of analysis in “MZZZ Rich,” a Letter to the Editor featured in May 5, 1978’s *Towerlight*. So let me preface this excerpt with the awareness that, in conducting a close reading of this letter, I hope not to draw a conclusion that simply dismisses the massive time gap between this and the only other *Towerlight* article that is explicitly relevant to my thesis (that other article being 1971’s “Homosexuals are not enemies of the people”); but rather, one that is enriched by it: because, as a general student newspaper that covers everything from updates on social justice movements to the outcome of last week’s home game, *The Towerlight* is perhaps the most accurate litmus test for the mainstream campus consciousness that one could ever hope for; and if anything, this massive void in the record reinforces how silenced lesbians were in the feminist movement.

That being said, here is the letter:

“To the Editor:

Adrienne Rich is handicapped by her limited, demented vision of the world. James said, (I think) to see life plainly and to see it whole is the office of the artist [sic.]. When one believes, as Rich does, that gender is morality, that male is bad and female good, that the world is bad because it is run by men, I shake my head, and I find it quite obvious why her work has declined to the sorry state it is now in. She cannot see life plainly, or whole.

Militant feminism increasingly leans toward segregationism, and as a supposed Socialist, MZZZ Rich should take Eugen Debbs’ words to heart, delivered from his jail cell under charges of organizing workers (1920)—‘all the worker, all the oppressed need fear is to be divided against themselves. For the people, once united, can never be defeated.’

So MZZZ Rich, as poets are the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’ (they are) it is a crime against the offices of the poet, and a crime against the people that you continue so publicly in your dementia. Il Passionara (spelled wrong, I think) [sic.], also said- ‘All Mankind consists of brothers and sisters.’

Ciesielski” – May 5, 1978’s The Towerlight, p. 3

This letter is listed under the heading, “Attacks on female chauvinism.” There are several points of interest to cover here, so the deconstruction of each individually is warranted.

Regarding the subject of the letter: who is this “Adrienne Rich” person, anyway? Informed by a background in civil rights and anti-war advocacy, Adrienne Rich was a critically acclaimed poet and a prominent figure in both the women’s and gay liberation movements of the 1970s. Ciesielski is unclear as to whether this letter addresses a specific publication or statement made by Rich, but we can make some educated guesses: *Diving into the Wreck* was published two

years ago in '76, for instance, a book of poems for which she won a National Book Award that was controversial for its unkind depictions of men. This gap of data may not even matter at all when in accounting for the fact that she is a native of Baltimore, MD (Hall and Motion 00:30-00:35). At the time of this letter's publication, it is safe to say that Rich was something of a relevant local celebrity. Her goings-on, therefore, -- both professional and personal -- would have certainly made local headlines in and around the area of TSC's liberal college community, and so any number of non-professional stories with Rich's name on them could have inspired the penning of this particular letter.

Next, what are we to make of these accusations of "female chauvinism"? While the Furies, whose critics coined the phrase, are just outside the scope of relevancy for 1978, the term did not fall completely out of use with their dissolution, or even with the transition out of radical feminism into cultural feminism. So, on what grounds was Ciesielski trying to use it to describe Rich? Well, Adrienne Rich came out as a lesbian the year she published *Diving into the Wreck*, and her essays were among some of the most influential in deconstructing women's oppression under patriarchy. Like her poetry, the harsh edge of her writing spared no mercy when in addressing men; however, her essays were more so just blunt and unapologetic in delivery; whereas in her literature, she tended to depict male characters in a way some felt was influenced by a reflexive bias against men (Schudel).

Which brings us to Ciesielski's remarks on "militant feminism" and "segregationism." This, to me, is where the disconnect between the mainstream public and feminism *as it is regarded in the presence of lesbians* shines through. Remember, it is 1978 in this letter; by this point in history, lesbian separatism is not considered a valid or effective means of political

action, neither by the mainstream public nor lesbian feminists themselves. Ciesielski might be misguided in accusing Rich of segregationism, in this regard, because at this point lesbian separatism is now a *byproduct* of a new counterculture of woman-empowerment, not an enforced separation of groups by any means. In other words, Adrienne Rich was likely just... minding her business, living with her wife.

Ciesielski's misunderstandings of the inner workings of lesbian feminist discourse cannot be faulted; unfortunately, throughout the 1970s lesbians faced heavy marginalization in mainstream feminist circles, reinforced not only by every utterance of the word "dyke," but also in the uncompromising silence of straight feminists when it comes to lesbian issues; and their erasure was compounded not only by the overt rejection faced by the GSA, but also in the hollow promise of community that the GPA got to know for less than a semester.

One can only hope, for the future of social change as it will continue to manifest at TU and all over the world, that intersectional voices are taken not as an additive of a revolution but are heard as being constitutive to it. As was printed in *The Towerlight* on March 12, 1971: "*We must gain security in ourselves and therefore have respect and feelings for all oppressed people,*" if we hope to pursue a perspective that can encompass all realities.

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