

## talking it out in new york city: is the sexual political?

On my way to the "Lesbian/Feminist Dialogue" held in New York last month, I saw two female friends walk up to the door of MacMillan Theater, where the conference was originally to be held, and read the sign redirecting them to Earl Hall, the new location on the Columbia University Campus. They cut across a lawn and went up the steps into the building. Shortly afterwards, I saw a woman part from her male friend and go up the steps too. The reunion of these two feminist constituencies was what "Lesbian / Feminist Dialogue: Is the Sexual Political?" was about. Already, at 10:00, jokes about movement time notwithstanding, there was standing room only in the hall.

The origins of the conference were somewhat hazy. Most people I talked to didn't know who had organized it. The leaflet which came to the off our backs office named no sponsor, but Jill Johnston, columnist/lesbian for the *Village Voice*, had announced the conference in her column of Dec. 14, 1972 and claimed responsibility for its inception -- over vodka and orange juice-- along with a couple of "columbia women." Group auspices were evidently provided by Lesbian Activists at Barnard, a group officially registered at the College Activities Office. A poster in the ladies' room of Earl Hall listed the group as sponsor. Graffiti in the stalls of the same washroom advised "Be a Lesbian, you'll be happier" and "Stereo is better than mono."

### one movement

Jill admitted in her column that the meeting had caused "instant widespread agitation and dissatisfaction since the entire dyke community coast to coast was not invited." According to Jill, the purpose of the meeting was to organize. "The intention," she says in her column, "seems suspect in these situations. That is, who intended what, and by what prerogative, and for whom, and on whose behalf." Perhaps all this is an indication of the trend away from the strict separatist lesbian-feminist seen in D.C. Recently a well-known local lesbian feminist was heard to say that after being a lesbian feminist separatist for 2 years, she has decided it doesn't work. For Jill goes on to say: "It was impossible for lesbians to remain stranded between the Homosexual movement and Feminism. We now assert Lesbian/Feminism as one indissoluble movement."

Although the meeting for the most part acted out this conciliatory mood, some dissonant notes were struck. A hand-out read: "It is essential that it be understood by all women that the views that might be expressed here by Lesbians are not the views of all lesbians." Criticisms of the conference included: the absence of heterosexism workshop; the absence of announced childcare (two or three children were present in the audience); failure to distribute the flyers announcing the workshop at places other than college campuses and women's centers; and the printing of the leaflet only in English, thus excluding Latin women. The hand-out demanded an apology from the "perpetrators of this reactionary, elitist event." When one of the speakers Jan Peterson, talked about the divisions within the women's movement and how "sad and ironic" it was that straight women had become discredited as feminists because they sleep with men, a woman in the audience said loudly "Well, I suppose so, I suppose so."

The morning session was divided into presentation of two papers, followed by audience participation, presentation of two more papers, and again audience participation. The afternoon was devoted to workshops: dialogue workshops and topic workshops. The atmosphere was indeed a bit scholarly, but it was strongly feminist and geared to unity.

Florence Rush, the first I heard speak, outlined her version of the origin of woman oppression and spoke in a "Parable of Mothers and Daughters" of conflict within the women's movement:

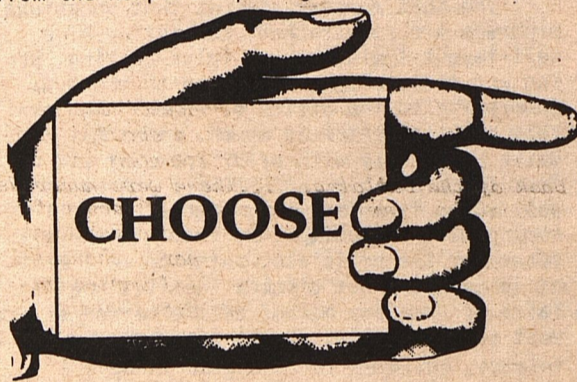
The mothers and daughters have suffered long enough at each others' hands. as

have all women. So if the mothers and daughters do not agree, let them not agree but let them leave each other to find her own way. And if women do not agree, let them not agree and if they must, let them also leave each other. And the strength of women will be in each of us and from our variety will come our feminist thinking and all the old ways will be challenged and all the old concepts will be redefined and from our difference, variety, and feminism will come our strength and with this strength we will battle our only oppressor--men!

"The world out there is the problem," said Jan Peterson, who followed Florence on the platform. She saw the conference as a chance to substitute dialogue for confrontation politics. She accused the media and certain "women's leaders" of not wanting the women's movement to be identified as gay. Behind the whole sexuality split is that the potency of women is being questioned. "Women shouldn't deny other women their potency."

Women were encouraged to "label" themselves when they registered for the conference and were given slips of paper and pins for doing so. Jan said she couldn't pick a label, because, though she had come into the women's movement male-identified, now everybody was turning her on.

Moderator, B.J. Michaelson opened the platform to audience opinion and the hand-out from the nonparticipating lesbians was read.



A woman read "Women Who Love Men Hate Them" for poet Rita Mae Brown, who couldn't attend the conference. The idea that love is a panacea is ingrained in us, but "no man could live up to that concept, and probably no woman either." Although lesbians have the reputation for man-hating, the wildest man-haters are heterosexuals. Rita says that man-hating is a problem. Two possible ways of dealing with it are a consolidation of lesbian and gay male interests and coalition with radical heterosexual men who see sexism as their fight. ("Women Who Love Men Hate Them" was published in the Fall, 1972, *Furies*, p. 14-15).

The next woman to speak retorted that "you don't fuck the enemy." "Thank the goddess I came out with a woman," she said, "instead of with a fucking prick."

### variety

As audience participation continued, opinions ranged from admonitions to those discontented with the conference to "do other things" and "not make the conference people feel bad" to the idea that the paper of the "dyke separatists" was a tactical place, rather than an ideological place and lesbians were the conscience of the women's movement.

Jill Johnston, one of the scheduled speakers, said "we are hot shit, but do we want to just go on saying we're hot shit or do you want more of us?" "Who you sleep with most is yourself," she reminded. We are a fugitive band and we can't isolate ourselves from women in the middle and women in transition.

Ruth Simpson, a past president of Daughters of Bilitis, an "old" lesbian group, said that disrupters will always be with us. She herself hated the word "dyke," which she said means a "nasty butch." She advised lesbians to stop role-playing and disrupting. A young-

er woman answered that when she and her woman lover walked on the street, she wore a button that said "dyke," because men cannot call you dyke when you yourself take the word.

Jackie Early, a black poet, read a poem about the police murder of two black students at Southern University in Baton Rouge, La. Addressing herself to white mothers, she said "Check yourself, woman, what is your worth?" "Did you buy him a gun when he was one?" A mother should raise her son "a vegetarian, a peaceful man."

Next a woman named Barbara warned that despite the much publicized and long delayed commitment of the National Organization for Women to acknowledge gay issues, lesbians in high positions in NOW were still keeping quiet and no task force had been formed, as promised.

Natalie Shifflet, whose label said "woman" said she spoke because no straight women had spoken. She said she lived with a man who was "helpful and supportive."

Gloria Steinem, of Ms. fame, had arrived late wearing a babushka. Although she was not a scheduled speaker, she was asked to speak. She had worried about the motivations of those who had asked her to speak being the same as those of the men who sell dog food on TV, she said. But we have to trust each other. She commended the lesbians in the audience for tremendous generosity of spirit, after what they had suffered in the women's movement in New York. "If they pick off the lesbians, next they will pick off the bad mothers, and the divorced women. Pretty soon there will be nobody left to unite with" was her message to the gathering.

After a lunch break, the "first tier" dialogue workshops were held. The facilitator in the group I attended used the device of the label to get the group communicating, which I thought was a bit artificial. She herself was not wearing a label, because she felt that identifying herself as a lesbian narrowed her friendships and because women's experience cannot be codified.

## YOUR-OWN-LABEL

I can be honest without using the word "lesbian," she said. Her advice about relating to women outside the women's movement is worth repeating: Talk about loves, don't talk about the issues of women's liberation. She is a teacher in a public girls high school where "girls who come on butch, don't stay in the school," and there is little she can do to help them and yet keep her position.

Topic workshops included workshops on age-ism, how men keep women apart, trust between women, dealing with anger, oppression within the women's movement, women loving women, coming out, the revolutionary woman, a and black attitudes toward feminism.

I attended the workshop on asexuality led by Barbara Getz. According to Barbara, asexuality is an orientation that regards a partner as nonessential to sex and sex as nonessential to a satisfying relationship. ("The Asexual Manifesto" can be obtained from New York Radical Feminists, P.O. Box 621, Old Chelsea Station, New York 10011).

The conference drew a whole constellation of women's movement stars. In addition to Jill Johnston, in chevrons, and Gloria Steinem, Barbara Love, author of "Sappho Was A Right on Woman," Grace Atkinson, who now calls Joe Columbo "Sister," and Kate Millet were spotted.

The New York straight press didn't think the conference was a story. Maybe it wasn't for the male everydailies, but for women who survived the sexuality splits within the movement, an attempt to unify with allowance for sexual variety was an historic occasion. Why didn't someone think to rent a hall in Seneca Falls?

by frances chapman