

LESBIAN PULP FICTION AND COMMUNITY FORMATION: 1950-1969

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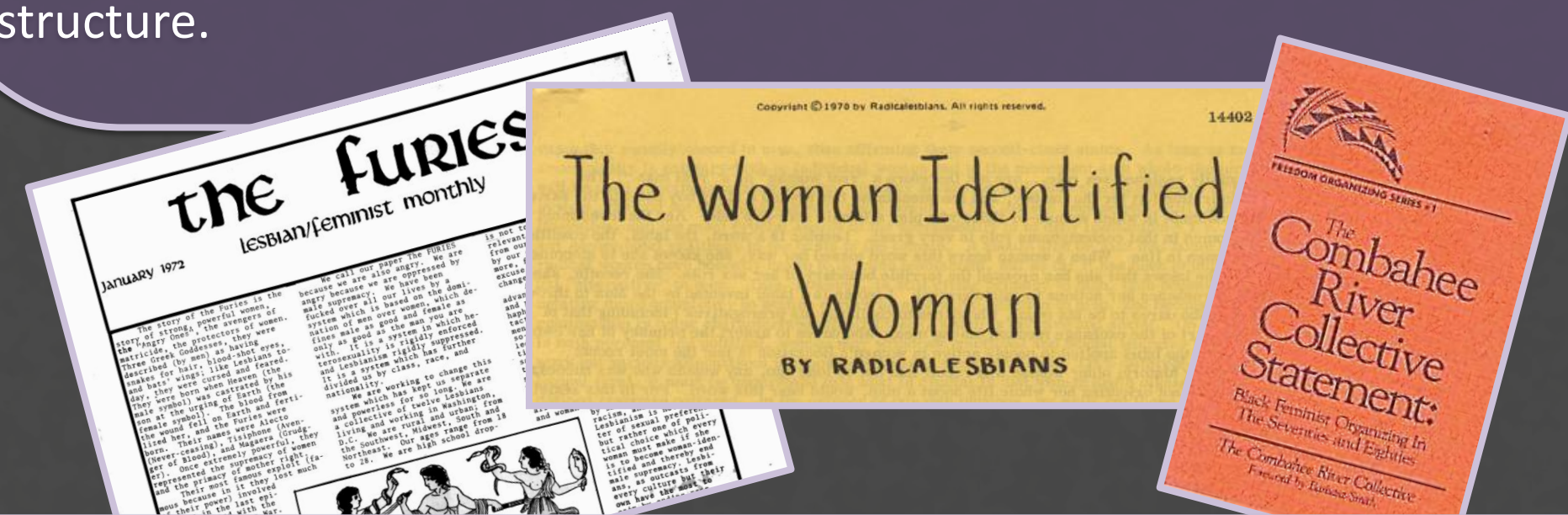


UTILISING A SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

On its own, mainstream sociological thought is inadequate because there is an implicit denial of the lesbian community as a *community*.

Though foundational to the formation of Sociology, the theories of Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel are inadequate when describing that which lies outside of normative concepts of gender. An overall focus on the heteropatriarchal family in sociological study, in addition to the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis (Millet 1970) on the sociological schools in the United States, leads to heterosexual definitions of community.

Post-1900 sociological definitions of community become gender-dependent when conceived of mainstream (or male stream) sociological thought. For an examination of lesbian community, a view focused on the image of the 1950s nuclear family would lead to warped interpretations of community structure.



LEFT: 1972 Newsletter by The Furies. Courtesy of Outhistory.org | CENTRE: 1970 Pamphlet 'The Woman Identified Woman' by Radicalesbians. Courtesy of David M. Rubenstein Library, Duke University. | RIGHT: Cohambee River Collective Statement 1977 Courtesy of BlackPast.org

GROUPS FORMED AFTER 1960

Radicalesbians (1970-1971): published 'The Woman Identified Woman' 1970. They argued that women (and lesbians) needed to free themselves through looking within the self, and not through internalised male culture.

The Furies (1971-1973): lesbian feminists participating in communal living and worked together. Dissolved due to difficulties in applying political theory to personal lives.

Redstockings (1969 – Present): radical feminist group. Believe women are an oppressed class; regardless of racial background. Believe male supremacy was the root of all forms of oppression. Women do not need to change, but men do.

Cohambee River Collective (1974-1980): Formed partially in response to white feminist groups placing gender oppression 'above' racial oppression. Their manifesto, 'A Black Feminist Statement', notes their dedication to working against 'racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression.'

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Various images of *The Ladder*: lesbian periodical published from 1956-1972. Courtesy of The GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

THE DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS (DOB)

The DOB formed in 1955 and published *The Ladder*. Historically grouped with male homophile organisations, including the Mattachine Society and One, Inc., the DOB initially sought integrationist strategies, minimising the publicly perceived difference between lesbians and straight women, before allying 'with the militant segment of the homophile movement' in the 1960s (Esterberg 1994, pp.426-427). In the context of homosexual and communist persecution of the McCarthy Era (Esterberg 1994 and Schultz 2001) it was perhaps necessary for the DOB to '[sacrifice] lesbian sexuality to protect its members' (Schultz 2001, p.385). While the actions of Homophile organisations seem lack-lustre in comparison to their successors in the gay civil rights movement, groups like the DOB and their publications show substantial proof of community formation around a readership.

COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

Adrienne Rich's oft-mentioned article 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980) highlights the dire need for feminist theorists to incorporate lesbian experience in their attempts to question and counter-act patriarchy. 'Compulsory heterosexuality' not only creates bias within mainstream (or 'malestream') sociology, but also inflects feminist theory that questions it. Just as mainstream sociological theory has a history of ignoring feminist theory (Chafetz, 1997), so too does feminist theory have a history of ignoring or misappropriating lesbian experience.



LEFT: Bantam, 1953 cover of *The Price of Salt*. Art by Barye Phillips. Written by Patricia Highsmith under pseudonym, 'Claire Morgan.' | CENTRE: Gold Medal, 1952 cover of *Spring Fire*. Art by Barye Phillips. Written by Marijane Meaker under pseudonym, 'Vin Packer.' | RIGHT: Gold Medal, 1962 cover of *Beebo Brinker*. Art by Robert McGinnis. Written by Ann Bannon. Scans taken from *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulpfiction 1949-1969* (1999) by Jaye Zimet.

CONCLUSIONS

The definition of community need not adhere to the confines of geographical space. Epistolary contact and mass-produced publication allowed individuals (lesbians) to be part of a community; though physically separated, print culture allowed for emotionally fulfilling connections between lesbians to be formed. Through the theories of feminist groups in the 1970s, community has come to mean: a network of individuals who provide emotional guidance and support for others; a group that helps the individual feel less isolated and alone in the face of adversity. This community operates on notions of equality and egalitarian relationships. Using this definition, I will be able to conduct further textual analysis of the portrayal of lesbian community and the characterization of lesbian identity in my primary texts; I will be able to investigate the function of space (or lack of space) in lesbian pulp fiction and other lesbian narratives disseminated in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s.