



**In Amerika They Call Us Dykes:
Lesbian Lives in the 70s**

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Notes for a Magazine

Arriving at Penn Station in New York City on a Thursday afternoon in October 2010, I was looking forward to the weekend conference sponsored by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) titled *In Amerika They Call Us Dykes: Lesbians in the 70s*. I was meeting my friends Merry Gangemi and Mimi van Ausdall for the conference. We stayed in a spartan (but still pricy!) room across from Penn Station. The conference was everything I had imagined: lively, energetic, celebratory, contentious. I knew that Merry and I had made the right choice in organizing the next issue of *Sinister Wisdom* to capture the energy, ideas, and discussions the conference generated.

Readers interested in knowing more about the conference can access the conference website here: <http://www.70slesbians.org/>, which includes the complete conference schedule of presentations. Readers interested in knowing more about the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies can examine the CLAGS website here: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/clags/>. Merry and I both want to express our enormous appreciation to Sarah Chinn, the Executive Director of CLAGS, the entire conference planning committee, and all of the volunteers and staff who helped to make the conference a great success. As event organizers, Merry and I know that gatherings like this conference don't happen without an extraordinary amount of planning and labor and we salute all involved for a job well done.

Attending the conference and compiling this issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, I've been thinking about these questions: How do we narrate and share history between generations? How can we pass on traditions, ideas, and values to new generations while still giving younger women the space to experiment and formulate their own traditions, ideas, and values? How do we honor the past and think critically about it as a way to refine our strategies for change? How do we honor the past while still celebrating the current achievements and future dreams of women who have already made extraordinary contributions?

Contributors to this issue of *Sinister Wisdom* grapple with these questions and more. I hope you find this issue exciting to read, engaging, and provocative. Working on this issue has been an extraordinary pleasure; I thank all of the writers who have contributed to it and I hope it contributes to a productive and on-going conversation about lesbian herstory and its meaning in our lives today.

* * *

A new volunteer has joined the *Sinister Wisdom* team since the last issue. Robin Blythe joins us as Book Review Editor. If you are interested in reviewing books for *Sinister Wisdom*, email Robin at RobinBlythe@gmail.com.

We are looking for more volunteers. In particular, we need a graphic designer to work with us on a variety of projects. If you are interested, please email me and let me know how you can help.

We have included two new segments at the end of the journal: Letters to the Editor and information about where to find *Sinister Wisdom*. Please write to us and let us know what you think of the journal—we will be selecting and printing letters for every issue.

Finally, consider joining our community distribution network. Merry and I want *Sinister Wisdom* to grow—to reach more readers and engage a larger community for conversations among lesbians. To do that, we invite everyone to become involved in getting copies of the journals into bookstores, other retail establishments, and the hands of lesbians everywhere. We hope you will join us in continuing to build this lesbian cultural institution.

In Sisterhood,

Julie R. Enszer
March 2011

“COME OUT!! JOIN THE SISTERS AND BROTHERS OF THE GAY LIBERATION FRONT”

Fran Winant

That call would be emblazoned on the 1970 poster created by the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) with photographer Peter Hujar for the first gay march forty years ago. Those of us who volunteered to be photographed were told to run up and down a street as though rushing forward in the actual march carrying our entire community with us into a new world of visibility and strength. At the time, coming out was an act of great courage with unknown consequences and those who showed up that day were making a concrete statement of our willingness to risk our lives to bring about gay liberation. The emotion that flowed from us at the dawn of the modern gay movement, illuminating the poster from that moment to the present, was a transporting happiness, an ecstasy of freedom that we ourselves hardly knew we felt in the midst of our struggles. Although we filled the frame of the poster, comparatively few of us were there that day—but in the forty years that followed, hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of our sisters and brothers came out in gay marches all over the world. The old empty street in the poster's background was eventually filled to bursting with wave upon extraordinary wave of joyous faces taking their spark from ours as we, in turn, were the first to carry forward the spark lit in the fires of the Christopher Street Rebellion.

Changes in mass consciousness are difficult to quantify. What turned a routine police raid on a Greenwich Village gay bar on June 28, 1969 into a people's uprising against our oppressors with all the fury necessary to launch a revolution? Let's go back to the frightening 1969 world before gay liberation and take a look. As I return, in memory, to the intersection of Christopher Street and Sixth and Greenwich Avenues, a central hub of the village, the first thing I notice is the large number of gay individuals and couples strolling together on a warm night. Unlike straight couples, these do not hold hands or touch, preserving an unreal anonymity for fear of being stared at, jeered at, "found out," or attacked by straights, even arrested or threatened with arrest should their ordinary behavior, simply between themselves, stray in the eyes of the police into forbidden territory. There are always policemen with nightsticks here, and our 1969 evening walk has the feel of prisoners passing before their captors in review.

To complete the ominous atmosphere, the dungeon-like Women's House of Detention, popularly known as the House of D—its site years later transformed into a park—towers gloomily above us. Incarcerated women, mostly women of color, stand at the windows calling sadly, angrily back and forth with female friends and lovers on the street, or shouting

epithets, perhaps at the police, or, in moments of particular defiance, throwing down objects and burning bedding. This area of New York City is supposed to be the center of an upscale residential neighborhood and perennial tourist destination, yet it has the look of a police state gone mad.

The Stonewall is a short block away down Christopher Street. Its patrons, choking on their own suppressed rage while laughing "gaily," viewed the incarcerated women's expressed rage on their trips to the bar. Perhaps it was here that the spark of rebellion was passed from these women to the men of color dressed as women who played a central part in the events at Stonewall and deserve our gratitude. Could it be that the apparently powerless women of the House of D, their bitter gestures striking over and over at the compressed gunpowder of our silence, made the subtle difference that finally lit the explosion of gay liberation at this time and place? Once in progress, the riots, flaunting authority, attracting crowds, feeding on their own momentum, began to resemble images of other protest movements of the 1960s. Gay veterans of militant struggles suddenly imagined them replayed, but now the issue was one that other liberation movements had always managed to ignore—gay liberation.

The possibility of a radical gay group had never existed before Stonewall. It seemed gays could work for others' liberation as long as they didn't admit to being gay. The wall of antigay bigotry was too high for any individual or any small gay rights group to scale. Coming out to yourself meant entering a deadly network of lies and silences inculcated into you from birth. Gays were effectively terrorized. The tiny gay movement was stuck at the same place where individual gays and lesbians were stuck: social accommodation.

To me, the most important thing about the Gay Liberation Front was its energy. The silence was over. GLF had a new message for the world: "We're a mass movement, loud, visible, we're everywhere, we're threatening, we're different, we're not like you, we want to change gender relations and all human relations and become part of a new society we create along with all oppressed peoples—we don't want to live like you." The concept of a mass, activist movement emphasizing visibility and difference was GLF's legacy to our spiritual gay children, all those who would follow us whatever their politics. GLF wasn't simply a leftist diversion in the otherwise smoothly running mainstream of the struggle for gay rights. We brought with us a vital spark, a radical vitality, that had never been there before.

When the GLF women broke off to form Radicalesbians I reluctantly went with them. I felt GLF might ultimately be destroyed by groups splitting off, but I understood that as women we needed to explore our own identities and bond with as well as challenge the women's liberation movement. For a while it seemed many groups were all

functioning at once along with cultural events featuring women's poetry, art, music, film, and theatre. There was so much happening, yet at the same time people were drifting away.

But the power of lesbian and gay liberation crossed the country and the world. Whenever it seems about to fade, it reemerges to be molded by new hands with new force. To paraphrase Lincoln, people may or may not care to remember what was said by the Gay Liberation Front and Radicalesbians forty years ago, our particular brand of discourse about the liberation of all people, but they will hopefully never forget what was done here, even if we are only remembered through LGBTQ people's forming lines thousands long to acquire their marriage certificates, their passports into the ordinary. For the fact that this, too, can happen is part of our gift to the people of the future. The light of freedom that illuminated our faces at the time of the first march continues to shine through all the permutations of politics.



A World Wide Conspiracy of Radical Lesbians: *Ain't I a Woman?* and Lesbian Feminism in the 1970s

Agatha Beins

In June 1970 women became acquainted with a new image of Sojourner Truth. In this striking graphic Truth's left arm dominates, its fist as large as her head, raised to reach almost the top right edge of the page and framing the often-reproduced text of the speech attributed to her from the 1851 Akron, Ohio, Women's Rights Convention. This first issue of *Ain't I a Woman?* declared itself to be a newspaper that emerged out of a "need to increase communication between sisters in the Mid-West."¹ Initially, the group publishing it called itself "Publications Collective of the Iowa City Women's Liberation Front,"² but by the tenth issue they were "a collective of 10 women functioning either as a front for a world wide conspiracy of Radical Lesbians or the house cornfield of the Women's Movement."³ The shift in the group's identification reflects the group's shifting composition, which is elaborated in a series of reflections titled "Finding Direction" offered by the group in their second year of publication. The first piece in the series describes the collective's shift from a group in which lesbians were the minority to a group that is "almost all gay" and explains it as "a result of: 1) three new members being gay, 2) three members realizing they were gay or choosing against their heterosexual relationships, and 3) two straight women having to move away from Iowa City because of job location changes of males they related to. This evolution has been slow and natural and never occurred as a result of internal problems or gay/straight disagreements."⁴ In this series, however, sexuality is not the most prominent issue the group grapples with. Instead, the theme of class—specifically middle-classness and women's liberation—appears to be at least of equal, if not more, concern.

The way in which lesbianism is made visible in *Ain't I a Woman?* merits a closer look, for, unlike other feminist collectives, this editorial collective's public declarations of lesbianism are not accompanied by a

¹ "Editorial," *Ain't I a Woman?* June 26, 1970, p. 2. Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY. In order to reflect the content of periodicals as it appeared in the publication I retain the original capitalization, punctuation, and emphases in my quotations throughout the article. Additionally, all citations of *Ain't I a Woman?* (except for those from the first issue) are based on archival research I did at the Iowa Women's Archives at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

² *Ain't I a Woman?* September 11, 1970, p. 3.

³ *Ain't I a Woman?* December 11, 1970, p. 10.

⁴ "Where We've Come From," *Ain't I a Woman?* October 15, 1971, p. 2.

similar labeling of the purpose and content of *Ain't I a Woman?*⁵ There is never an explicit statement identifying the periodical as a lesbian-feminist one. In contrast, just below the name of their eponymous periodical, the Furies (a Washington, DC, collective) added the phrase “lesbian/feminist monthly” and introduced readers to the publication through a manifesto-esque essay by Charlotte Bunch titled “Lesbians in Revolt: Male Supremacy Quakes and Quivers.” *Amazon Quarterly* offers the subtitle *A Lesbian Feminist Arts Journal*, and the editors of *Atalanta* prominently list it as the newsletter of the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (they write in their “About Us” statement that frequently appeared in the newsletter, “ALFA welcomes all lesbians to relate to us and become part of us in whatever way you can”). Considering the openness with which some periodicals of the 1970s allied their feminism with lesbianism, I wondered about the relationship between identity and content, between the personal and the political, for the Iowa City collective. I wondered specifically, Do lesbians produce lesbian publications? As provocative as this question has been for me, rather than attempt to provide a definitive answer I want to explore instead how *Ain't I a Woman?* let us rethink the intersections of lesbianism and feminism.

Early in their publishing run, the editors of *Ain't I a Woman?* reflect on the paper's politics and purpose:

After three issues of *Ain't I a Woman?* the publications collective decided it was time for self-criticism. The politics reflected in the paper have been less than we hoped they would be but, because we have been so busy learning the technical end of publishing a newspaper we had not taken the time to discuss the political meaning behind the articles we've written and published. We then discovered we really didn't know where each other's heads were at so we went off together to talk about class, the media, The Red Women's Detachment's position on the Gay Liberation Front, the relationship of Women's Liberation to the Third World, and what it means to live in the heart of the monster.

Later in the editorial they write:

⁵ *Ain't I a Woman?* was not unique in the lack of an explicit identification with lesbianism. Kate Adams observes that *off our backs* and *It Ain't Me, Babe*, similar to *Ain't I a Woman?*, did not claim a lesbian-feminist moniker although lesbians contributed to their production in ways that were comparable to the production of more explicitly lesbian-feminist ones such as *Lavendar Woman* and *Lesbian Tide*, published in Chicago and Los Angeles respectively (1998, 122).

Many of the subjects that we have been discussing in *Ain't I a Woman?*⁶ were never dealt with by the male left. The politics of lesbianism has been historically ignored by radical groups until Gay Liberation Front and now Women's Liberation. It takes a long time to obtain a correct analysis, if that is ever possible. We have discussed Lesbianism as a personal solution, because we haven't known how to begin to formulate a theory on its place in the revolution.⁶

Like many women who have been and are active in feminism, *Ain't I a Woman?*'s editorial collective grappled with impact of one's personal identity, life, and experiences on one's political projects. The newspaper's editors demonstrate through their actions and analyses that indeed one's daily life is intimately intertwined with politics on local, regional, and national scales. Throughout the paper, sexuality is given critical attention through editorials, essays from local women, poetry, announcements about lesbian feminist publications, and reprints from other periodicals. However, before the conference *In Amerika They Call Us Dykes*, organized by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in October 2010, pushed me to look at this newspaper for a panel I was a part of, I had categorized *Ain't I a Woman?* as one of the many exciting general-issue women's liberation periodicals published in the 1970s. I did not read it as a specifically or even predominantly lesbian feminist newspaper.

Although I am not yet sure that *Ain't I a Woman?* is in fact a lesbian-feminist publication, I want to offer several thoughts about why I had developed this blindness and also to suggest why it may elude a lesbian-feminist appellation. First, I want to list some of the collective's self-descriptions, the first two of which I listed at the start of this essay:

Ain't I a Woman? is published by the Publications Collective of the Iowa City Women's Liberation Front. We are a group of 10 women.

A collective of 10 women functioning either as a front for a world-wide conspiracy of Radical Lesbians or the house cornfield of the Women's Movement.

We are a collective of eight women functioning as a world-wide conspiracy of Radical Lesbians the Angry Independent Amazon Women.⁷

A collective of 8 (plus one travelling sympathizer) functioning as a world-wide conspiracy of Radical Lesbians.⁸

⁶ Editorial, *Ain't I a Woman?* August 21, 1970, p. 2.

⁷ *Ain't I a Woman?* March 12, 1971, p. 12.

In addition to the recurrence of the group's identification as lesbians, what is highlighted through these phrases is the concept of the collective. A dominant theme in the U.S. women's liberation movement, collectivity was not just a descriptive label but became symbolic of a specifically feminist political praxis characterized, among other things, by horizontal relationships, decision making through consensus, skill sharing and job rotation, and sisterhood. Notably, for part of the paper's lifespan the editors were not just a publishing collective but also were a living collective, sharing the same house and commingling their living and publication spaces. Throughout this lifespan, the group wrestled with the manifestation and effects of their specific group dynamics, for it is something that they never quite find peace with. In addition to publishing analyses about collectivity by women from Grinnell, Iowa, and Minneapolis, the *Ain't I a Woman?*⁸ collective discuss their philosophies on living and working collectively, and they express concern about the race and class privileges that enable and sustain their feminism and the publication of *Ain't I a Woman?*

The collective writes, for example,

We are women who see working together as women, loving and living together as women to hold primary importance. And to that end we feel it necessary to deal with our class differences. . . . [Middle class women] say “women find themselves in many different roles with many different problems” but refuse to see that women find themselves in many different classes and therefore have different problems. To admit this most women would have to identify with their class which is to admit their own role in oppressing other women. This is hard and painful to do but the only way to begin struggling with sisterhood on any real level.⁹

In another editorial the group worries that *Ain't I a Woman?* “will be a middle class paper, read by middle class women.”¹⁰ Although present and important—indicated by the phrase “loving and living together as women” and by the collective's self-labeling as lesbian—sexuality is not a concern to the extent that other identity categories are. This is not to say that, regarding lesbianism, the publishing collective faced no internal dilemmas or challenges from the broader community; however, I do want to suggest that controversy and uncertainty claim energy and attention,

⁸ *Ain't I a Woman?* January 7, 1972, p. 12.

⁹ “So Far Our Analysis Labels Common to All Women What Is Common Only to Middle-Class Women” *Ain't I a Woman?* July 30, 1971, p. 8-9.

¹⁰ Editorial, *Ain't I a Woman?* October 15, 1971, p. 3.

and within the editorial collective sexuality is not significantly associated with either. The lack of struggle around their lesbian identification, therefore, shaped the content of the periodical. *Ain't I a Woman?*² is neither a defense of nor a promotion of lesbianism, nor do the editors appear to face challenges and obstacles within the group in relation to sexuality.

It is worth noting that for the collective lesbianism and feminism appear to have an unquestioned and inextricable connection and, based on the content of the paper, the Iowa City collective is able to find a consistency between their identity as lesbians and their political practices. That is, their experience of the group's shift to a lesbian collective (as I describe early in this essay), was "slow and natural and never occurred as a result of internal problems or gay/straight disagreements." A study by Jo Reger helps me think through this transition and, in turn, the kind of discussions of lesbianism and gayness in *Ain't I a Woman?* Reger looks at feminist groups on two different college campuses, one that faces a relatively hostile, antifeminist climate and one that experiences more support from the campus and community. Not surprisingly, the former group develops a stronger, more visible feminist identity, for identity, in addition to being a product of what one believes to be true about the world and supports as valid political goals, is importantly an effect of how one sees oneself in opposition to others.

Through Reger, it is possible to understand that the group does not need to defend itself or struggle with what has more broadly been termed the "gay/straight split" that marked the U.S. women's liberation movement. In other words, because the editors could integrate being lesbian with being feminist in a relatively seamless manner—the personal aligned with the political, the individual with the collective, the identity with the practice—sexuality was not a topic that the group felt the need to wrestle with in the same way they wrestled with issues around class and race. In an early editorial they write, "We are sure of two things; (1) that we need nothing short of a revolution to end the oppression of poor women (2) that the subjects we deal with (day care, lesbianism, karate, etc.) are not middle class by nature but in our failure to see them in revolutionary terms, in relationship to all women, in relationship to class and race."¹¹ Combine this with the fact that the editors did not see sexuality as their primary site of resistance and for the articulation of their politics:

Basing a revolution solely on the end to your own group's oppression is, we feel, incorrect. We may be more personally concerned with gayness than race, for instance,

¹¹ Editorial, *Ain't I a Woman?* August 21, 1970, p. 2.

because it's a gut issue in the group; but basing a whole analysis on gayness is narrow and unrealistic.

Because we are gay women we give weight to the issue of lesbianism in our paper, of course. Gayness and class, economic oppression, health concerns, survival tactics for women alone, etc.-- all of these concern us too. They are important, immediate problems that involve us all and should be dealt with, because we live in this society and will have to continue to do so for a long time to come.¹²

The lack of tension around sexuality coupled with the group's struggles with their own class and race identities as well as with their work on local political projects (establishing free, twenty-four-hour daycare consistently occupied the energy and attention of the larger Iowa City Women's Liberation Front) is reflected in the paper's particular expression of lesbian feminism.

Yes: an expression of lesbian feminism, despite the fact that nowhere do the editors assert the character of *Ain't I a Woman?* to be lesbian feminist. In fact, they specifically describe it as "a movement paper," which suggests that they are writing about feminism and for feminists and not specifically about lesbians or for lesbians. An editorial lets readers know:

We are a collective of nine women who put out AIAW. What the paper is and how it changes is a reflection of what the nine of us are, collectively and individually, how we change and what is affecting us. We never had any set, easily verbalized purpose for the paper, nor did we have any particular audience in mind. We are all in the women's movement so, in a sense, we write a movement paper because we write about ourselves and our concerns. . . . We think it is important to write about and analyze our struggles *at the place we are now*; to communicate this to all women who read AIAW, as well as making things clearer to ourselves.¹³

Such a statement helps me conclude that the point(s) of origin of a publication is significant in shaping its character, for the paper did not begin as an explicitly lesbian-feminist one (as did *The Furies* and *Atalanta*), and the editors never identify it as such. Considering the politics of origins, Adams writes that "pouring energy into building lesbian-feminist publishing institutions was often the cause of, or resulted in, fractious

¹² "Self-Criticism and Direction" *Ain't I a Woman?* February 11, 1972, p. 8.

¹³ "Who We Are: Carol, Trudy, Linda, Dale, Pat, Jeanne, Vickie, Ann," *Ain't I a Woman?* April 30, 1971, p. 2.

debate about lesbian separatism, among lesbians themselves as well as between lesbians and the larger feminist movement” (1998, 133). In other words, like collective identity, the formation of a paper can be understood as based both on what the editors desire and want to achieve and also on what they are reacting to. So if there is a strong community division between straight-identified and lesbian-identified women or if a group finds itself in a particularly hostile social/political climate, then it is likely that sexuality will be made visible in a way that responds to and reflects that context.

Consequently, *Ain't I a Woman?*'s feminism and politics do not become visible as a particular manifestation of lesbian feminism because moments of origin often come to stand in for the entire trajectory of a paper, both in contemporary and historical accounts. My initial assumptions about *Ain't I a Woman?* (based on reading three issues of the paper, including the first one, published during the first year) reproduced this narrative. Histories of U.S. feminism similarly characterize the publication, often adding it to a list of general women's liberation periodicals from different cities in the United States or using it as an example of such “movement papers.”¹⁴

Returning, then, to the question, Do lesbian feminists produce lesbian-feminist publications? The answer must of course be “yes” and “no.” Perhaps on the surface unsatisfying, this conclusion nonetheless encourages me to think differently about identity politics. While drawing clear connections between their identity and their politics the editors of *Ain't I a Woman?* also demonstrate that a clear sense of identity need not necessarily be realized in a particular way through a periodical. Charlotte Bunch's declaration that “the development of Lesbian-feminist politics as the basis for the liberation of women is our top priority. In our society, which defines all people and institutions for the benefit of the rich, white male, the Lesbian is in revolt. In revolt because she defines herself in terms of women and rejects the male definitions of how she should feel, act, look, and live” are the first sentences of her essay that appears in the first issue of *The Furies*, setting both a tone and readers' expectations for future content

¹⁴ There are some exceptions. Alice Echols lists *Ain't I a Woman?* as a lesbian-feminist paper, along with *Lesbian Tide*, *Spectre*, and *Lavender Woman*, writing that *Ain't I a Woman?* “was run by a lesbian collective for a while” (2003, 348n118), and Kyra Pearson describes the periodical as a “newspaper of lesbian feminism” (1999, 158; see also 159). Echols bases her description on the lesbian identity of the editors—a fairly straightforward correlation reflecting identity politics—and Pearson offers no further information about what makes *Ain't I a Woman?* lesbian feminist, leaving it up to readers to come to their own conclusions.

in the periodical.¹⁵ *Ain't I a Woman?* allows us to see that the manifestation of a lesbian-feminist identity will not always be so explicit. My hope is not only that we then read more closely to excavate the “lesbian” in the periodical but that we make space for sexuality in discussions of race, class, and imperialism. Just as issues connected to lesbianism are never only about sexuality, issues such as collective working and living, the Vietnam War, daycare, and the imminent revolution are part of women’s complex articulations of their lesbian-feminism.

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¹⁵ Charlotte Bunch, “Lesbians in Revolt: Male Supremacy Quakes and Quivers,” *The Furies* January 1972, p. 8. The Digital Scriptorium, Special Collections Library, Duke University, April 1997. <http://SCRIPTORIUM.LIB.DUKE.EDU/wlm/furies/>.

In Amerika They Call Us Dykes: Lesbian Lives in the 70s

Work from the October 2010 Conference
sponsored by the
Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies
(CLAGS)
in New York City

Featuring Work by:
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Evelyn Torton Beck
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Madeline Davis
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