

January 29, 2015

The Erasure of Lesbians

By Alix Dobkin and Sally Tatnall

When, towards the end of the last century, the historic force of feminist consciousness met the primeval juggernaut of Lesbian attraction, it fueled the explosive Second Wave. These invisible historic forces sparked and fueled our declaration of war on patriarchy.

Since they never paid attention to us, the patriarchy wasn't looking when that fateful meeting occurred, when we Lesbians - the "army of lovers (that) cannot fail" - first claimed our identity loudly, proudly and unabashedly.

The women's liberation movement was just what Lesbians needed to make their place. Consciousness raising sessions revealed the oppressive structure all women faced. Feminists recognized and named patriarchy, the rule of men, as the creator of hierarchy that would determine all social values. For the first time, all isms were linked. As Audre Lorde once said, "there is no hierarchy of oppression".

Lesbians took on leadership in creating women's culture, theory, feminist book stores, rape crisis centers, battered women's shelters, abortion clinics, access for Deaf and hard-of-hearing womyn through sign language at entertainment and meetings. Women's land groups were formed, women challenged male religion, women became lawyers and doctors and ran for office. Many of these women were Lesbians. Unfortunately straight women were being accused of being Lesbian and pressure to eliminate Lesbian involvement was the result. However Lesbians had been engaged. We had the energy, the theory, the brains, and the passion for women's liberation like no other. Women's lib then became a slur.

Seeing the success of the second wave, the university became involved to limit the passion that had been ignited. Women' studies was born to beckon women fueled with ideas of liberation. However, the academy was not interested in true liberation, they were interested in selling a course. So they only used the most liberal texts. The thinking that spurred the action

was conveniently left out of the curriculum. Women's rage was tempered. Analysis of patriarchy was watered down. You can't have that radical thinking in an institution of the patriarchy.

Little time passed before the idea of a course solely for women was challenged. The result was to make a course of other left-out people to gain consumers. Queer studies was born. Classes about women's studies focusing on authors who had something to say were included. For the most part the academy began turning out degrees that meant you could teach a women's studies course, but very few activists emerged. Women's rage had been contained.

But oh no, men who didn't qualify for this slot of left-out people began to complain. Where was their course? Where were their concerns being dealt with? Voilà...gender studies was born. The final nail in the coffin of women as distinct was hammered in. Now students were concerning themselves with the variety of sexes available to them. Who belonged to each group was discussed at length and the clouding of groups began. Who were women? Who were men? Sex designation became a choice. Somehow the connection to what the patriarchy says you have to be got lost. The demand that the patriarchy makes for how you will look, how you will present yourself and who you will love got lost. It was not a fight against the patriarchy anymore. It was a fight against women.

Before we knew it, postmodern deconstructionists began gutting the meaning out of the very notion of "identity," especially when it came to women and the power structures that keep us subservient. Our identity suddenly became subjective, "fluid" and "performed" rather than a power source from a unique tradition and location in the universe. "Gender" replaced women in the academy and "queer" disappeared Lesbians in the community. It's only become worse since. Some women loving women even say they hate the word Lesbian.

We are on the defensive once again, now having to declare ourselves "female born" or "women born" or even "cis" women to identify ourselves because apparently anyone can collude with the medical/pharmaceutical industry, declare himself a woman, and find acceptance as such almost everywhere. Except for a few Lesbian/feminist holdouts, transsexuals have leaped forward on the civil rights agenda and become the latest cause of the LGBTQ community, often to the detriment of Lesbians.

The last stronghold (Lesbian) that did not need male approval for their identity was smashed. Not needing male approval is something the patriarchy will not allow.

It is unclear why the LGB organizations, formerly concerned about the oppression of same gender loving people and the right to choose who you would love, would take on a choice that had nothing to do with sex or love. Sexual preference would no longer be the concern and gender identity would be dominant. Trans support people are very clear that trans is a choice of gender, not of sexual preference. Trans women wanting to be Lesbians confirm their heterosexuality.

Blatant evidence of our erasure is the largest gathering of LGBT people anywhere, Creating Change, the 5-day conference produced by the NGLTF*, with its all-day intensives, its 300 workshops, and its hospitality suites. In 2013, it had no all-day series for Lesbians, no hospitality suite for Lesbians, and only 3 workshops specifically for Lesbians. And even though there have been many complaints from Lesbians, there is no intention to change this movement.

Lesbians being ignored is nothing new, and in spite of many complaints by Lesbians to community leaders over many years, we see no improvement or intention to improve. The latest absurdity is the decision at Mount Holyoke College (once an upper crust college for women) to stop producing The Vagina Monologues (by Eve Ensler) because all women don't have vaginas.

However the last chapter has not yet been written, and we trust that if anyone can reclaim our female core and re-ground our female-based culture, it would be an army of ex-lovers who cannot fail, and that would be us!

*National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, now billed on its website as National LGBTQ Task Force and often referred to as "The Task Force".

(Although Sally and Alix are the co-directors of Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, this article reflects their personal opinion and does not represent OLOC. Both the national steering committee of OLOC and the membership of OLOC are deeply divided, which prevents consensus on this issue.)

SALLY TATNALL

Sally Tatnall is a life long activist working to combat racism, sexism, and classism. She is active locally with anti racism work. She works at a local abortion clinic she helped start in the 70s, and attends activities for Lesbians over 50 where she raises feminist issues because some Lesbians are not feminists. She works to preserve women-only space for women born women and has lived to see too many of the organizations she started in the 70s disappear.

ALIX DOBKIN (alixdobkin.com)

After a folksinging career in the 1960's, ALIX DOBKIN became a feminist, fell in love with a woman, and produced the groundbreaking 1973 "Lavender Jane Loves Women." Six albums and one songbook later, 2009 Lambda Literary Award finalist, *"MY RED BLOOD: A Memoir of Growing Up Communist, Coming Onto the Greenwich Village Folk Scene, and Coming Out in the Feminist Movement"* was published.