

## ***Lesbian Ethics Part 4 – Expanding Lesbian communities - Angela C. Wild***

*Lesbian Ethics. Lesbian History Group Event 3/06/2016*

I am going to talk about Lesbian ethics, anti-political lesbians and expanding Lesbian feminist communities.

Because this particular topic has been discussed online in more or less heated debates I want to clarify that my position here is a political one, I am after deconstructing an ideology, not individual women who recognise themselves under that name

I am going to discuss here where the “born this way” narrative is coming from, what it is doing to women who are not “born this way” lesbians, what impact it has on women’s ability to access a political awareness of sexuality and their sexuality, the impact it has on women ability to reach a stage of self determination and the impact it has a the wider movement. And how this particular rhetoric seems to prevent a sense of lesbian feminist community or makes it harder to expand our community.

### **A few definitions:**

**Born this way lesbians** : otherwise known as essential lesbian, natal lesbian...:

That theory defines sexuality is innate, sexuality is sometime defined as a genetic reality or a mix of genetic/ social constructivism.

Women who agree with that narrative say they were lesbians from birth, lesbianism is said to be an essential part of themselves, something that was always in them since birth. These women knew very early they were lesbians and have had very little or no sexual experiences with men.

The issue isn’t that some women say they are born lesbians, but that the only way to be a lesbian, is to be born a lesbian, you cannot become one later in life.

**Political lesbian:** I use the term political lesbian rather than lesbian feminist because it is most of the time misunderstood for meaning "lesbian" and "feminist" As if these two things have nothing to do with one another.

A Political Lesbian is a woman who has chosen to become a lesbian because or thanks to her politics. A woman who has chosen to put women first in all aspects of her life including romantically and sexually.

Political Lesbians define sexuality as socially constructed, it is uncompromisingly anti-essentialist, it comes hand in hand with a political critique of heterosexuality as an institution and defines heterosexuality as politically enforced on all women by violence and a relentless propaganda, to ensure each men has access to women for sexual but also domestic servitude.

Political Lesbian define lesbianism as political act of resistance because it is denying men access to women. It often means that for the women who call themselves Political Lesbians, politics got them to lesbianism, they couldn't have been lesbians without the feminist process.

As sexuality is socially constructed, it can and should be deconstructed, women forced in heterosexuality should be freed from it.

### **History**

The born this way narrative is an ideology that actually comes from the gay men movement. In the 70’s, the gay liberation movement and Lesbian feminists were together challenging that ideology that sexuality is biological.

In the 80’s there was a big return to the biological model to explain homosexuality. It is an argument that is directly drawn from the Victorian sexologists (who were notoriously not very pro women) Homosexuality is according to that model a deviation from the norm (the norm being heterosexuality), a perversion.

In the 80's the gay men's movement makes the strategic decision to argue that homosexuality is innate. The shift is supposed to attract mainstream sympathies on the basis that homosexuals have to be accepted for who they are as they cannot help themselves.

Lesbian feminists at the time disagree and opposed the move because it didn't represent their experience and was anti feminist and counterproductive.

One of the opposition to Political Lesbianism by women who call themselves "actual Lesbians" on the basis that they have been lesbians since very young is that it is appropriating and insulting to Lesbian who have suffered from anti lesbian oppression since they came out. Supposedly, women who came to lesbianism later have not suffered from that oppression because they were straight. If we go back to a critique of compulsory heterosexuality by Adrienne Rich and how she describes the "*pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness*," "*within which women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives.*" we can see that this assumption is completely unfounded.

#### No woman is heterosexual.

The one amongst us who are or have been in heterosexual relationships are the ones who Patriarchy anti lesbian oppression has successfully formatted.

These women have experienced precisely that: Anti Lesbian oppression and Compulsory heterosexuality are one and the same thing and no woman straight or lesbian has ever escaped it. Talking about appropriation in that context is dividing women and prevent us to see our common experience of oppression.

Another anti political lesbian argument that we hear a lot is that Political Lesbians desexualise Lesbianism.

The famous line from the Leeds pamphlet "Love your enemy" that states that "*political lesbianism doesn't mean compulsory sexual activity with women*"

This line has been used and twisted to prove that political lesbians are not real lesbians, because it has been understood to mean political lesbians don't actually have any sexual activity with women and that lesbianism is about holding hands while reading feminist books with women. This is of course ridiculous as political lesbians defines as loving women and putting women first in every way including emotionally and sexually.

The born this way narrative basis the very definition of lesbianism on and ONLY on sexual attraction and sexual activity with women.

That is problematic.

Political lesbians argue that lesbianism is more than just about sexuality. It is about culture, politics, building communities, sisterhood, revolution etc. Sexuality is one part of that.

Because political lesbianism has by definition a political analysis of sexuality, we get named anti sex by anti feminist men. Why would women who call themselves feminist use the same argument as our oppressors?

One of the way non political lesbian justify being more lesbian than political lesbians is by saying they "lust after women's bodies since they were teenagers".

It is one of the effect of basing ones definition of lesbianism on men's culture and men's values, then we have the incredible situation where women who objectify other women get to be more of a lesbian than women who actually made the decision to love women in a non objectifying way.

Political lesbianism rejects the definition of lesbianism as women's right to objectify and prey sexually on other women. This is what men do. It is misogyny.

The point of saying "Lesbianism doesn't mean compulsory sexual activity with women" is obvious. No woman is sexual all of the time, women don't walk around in a constant state of sexual heat. Further more women are constantly assumed to be straight whether they are having a relationship or not, one do not loose ones sexuality if we do not have a sexual activity at one point of our life! Does a lesbian who has broken up with her lover stop being a lesbian? As Ann Tagonist asked Do older lesbian who do not have sex anymore stop being lesbians?

Very ironically I have read recently that political lesbianism's view of sexuality is creating a hierarchy amongst lesbians. The idea is that political lesbians would be more worthy lesbians than the born this way lesbian.

In my opinion, political lesbianism is the most women inclusive movement within feminism. It argues every women is shaped and oppressed by hetero-patriarchy, and that it is possible for every women to fight that conditioning and escape what patriarchy has build us and name us for.

The idea of an essential sexuality on the other hand is an invention of patriarchy. That some women are innately straight and some other women (a minority) are innately lesbians both serve the patriarchy.

Arguing that some women are innately heterosexual mean these women are biologically determined to be sexually used by men. This is deeply misogynistic and anti feminist idea.

Ironically the hierarchy of lesbian does exist and is an invention of the anti political lesbian propaganda and lesbians who are not feminists.

In that model, lesbians are judged to be more or less worthy according to how much contact they have had with men. It is nothing more than a cult of purity and how women are deemed as unworthy if they ve ever been touched by a penis

Typically it goes like this:

"GoldStar Butch / Butch Lesbian / Fem lesbian / ex het lesbians / heterosexual women"

In this model women who have had any kind of sexual activity with men are called sells outs, traitors and collaborators.

In contradiction to that, political lesbians acknowledge that women have been coerced to be heterosexual in the first place and recognise that heterosexuality is the core of the oppression of women. The closer to men the more in danger.

Blaming women for their oppression is anti feminist.

It is not surprising that some of the opponent to political lesbianism are stating "lesbianism is not a threat to patriarchy."

- Indeed if ones definition of lesbianism is male centred it is not a threat to patriarchy.
- If ones definition of lesbianism is condemning women to a lifetime of heterosexuality, it is not a threat to patriarchy.
- If ones definition of lesbianism is that of an elitist club one can only access by being born into, it is not a threat to patriarchy.

- If one's definition of lesbianism is about blaming women for their oppression it is not a threat to patriarchy.

A Lesbianism which is part of a conservative patriarchal gay movement isn't threatening because it argues homosexuality is innate and cannot be promoted.

Political Lesbians argue that Lesbianism can be promoted and indeed it should be.

Surely conservative male government officials were feeling threatened enough by lesbianism when they passed Section 28.

Why else would they push a law forbidding the promotion of homosexuality and pretend families (read Lesbian mothers) in primary and secondary education? This followed a time in the mid 1980's when Lesbian feminism had been at its height, challenging compulsory heterosexuality in the mainstream in London local government.

To conclude, the born this way / anti political Lesbian narrative, has become stronger and stronger over the decades. Women used to choose lesbianism more in the 80's, now it's harder and harder for women to challenge their heterosexual conditioning because the world lesbian is locked to define the ones who knew they were lesbians since they were born.

The born this way anti political lesbian argues that women who were once straight should never call themselves lesbians if they became lesbians later in life as a result of their political awareness. It's a political problem for women who are looking for their way out of heterosexuality and are pushed out of lesbianism and bullied to call themselves "celibate" or "Female exclusive bisexual", forever outsider to the wider lesbian community.

As a woman who was once straight and who survived heterosexuality I am grateful I once heard one didn't have to be born a lesbian to become one. I am grateful I had sisters around me who had walked this path before and told me it was possible.

As we are trying to free ourselves from men's sexuality and colonisation over our bodies and minds, as we are trying to redefine desire, love relationships while the whole wide world tell us it is impossible to do so, it would be good to have the support from our sisters.

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